

SCORCHED EARTH

by

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WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT THE HUNGRY PLANET

"Michelle Marquis tells a powerful tale of survival and desperation. Reading *The Hungry Planet* takes you through the fears and desires of two people scarred by the decisions they made in life...

"But, for those willing read with an open mind, [*The*] *Hungry Planet* will be a book that moves the heart and stirs the soul."

Two Lips Reviews

Dedication

To all those who long for a better future

The engine sounded sick, like a primitive beast coughing out its last few breaths before dying. It also didn't help that the road was so damn bad it was barely drivable. Everywhere they went in this hellhole of a city the roads were full of potholes and broken pavement. Ruth heard Zoey give the vehicle a little more gas as she worked to keep the car from stalling. The brakes squealed loudly as they pulled up in front of the Handi-Mart. The noise was murder on the ears, pure metal on metal and it set Ruth's teeth on edge.

Ruth pulled out some binoculars and scanned up and down the trash-strewn street for any sign of trouble. A few pages of yellow phone book paper floated past on a northward wind. *Thank God no dogs in sight. At least that's good.* She lowered them and tried to get a gut sense for any sign of danger. She felt nothing, but she knew from experience that was usually a bad sign.

Glancing around the car, she wondered if the other two women were up for this. Zoey, a twenty-something African American woman, volunteered to be their driver today. It didn't surprise Ruth she wanted to drive since—with her trait for sickle cell anemia—Zoey had the most to lose out of all of them on this mission. One body scan from a copperhead and

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she'd be smoked on the spot. At least as their driver, she had a good chance of getting away if the group ran into trouble.

Jazz was today's second volunteer. She was a moody, smart, Hispanic woman with a hard attitude and a lot of ghosts in her closet. Most of the time she wore her black hair in a tight braid that ran halfway down her back. Jazz had that quiet fury that told anyone the minute they met her that something very bad had happened to her and she was never going to let it happen again.

Ruth took a deep breath and fingered the button on her radio. "Anything, Bonnie?"

The radio crackled. "Nothing," Bonnie replied, her voice partially garbled by static. "Some stray dogs in the area but no large packs. Just keep your radio close."

Dogs were the common slang for men. But the term didn't apply to every man, only those who'd checked their humanity at the door after the strike. Most of the time they roamed alone but sometimes they packed together. At the last government census two years ago, men outnumbered women on the planet ten to one. One of the women at the bunker had started calling them dogs and the nickname stuck because that's what they were, stray dogs looking for a bone.

Their prey of choice was women. Sometimes they hunted alone, other times in packs. They were always dangerous not only because they could take a woman as a sex slave if they got their hands on one, but because if a pack of them got a woman, she'd be servicing them all.

Not a happy prospect for any female.

"Will do," Ruth said. She clipped the radio to her utility belt and grabbed the silver door handle. Pulling it all the way out she shoved her boot into the center of the car door and pushed with all her strength. The hinge groaned and the door popped open. "Ready, Jazz?" she said, glancing at the other woman as she slid across the seat to exit.

Jazz held up some bolt cutters and winked. Her dark eyes were intense. "Ready," she replied. They both exited the car and froze, listening for any movement.

Ruth stared up at the sky and felt her tension rise. Some thick, dark, orange clouds moved across the sun and the temperature went down about ten degrees. *Just like that.* After five years the weather was just starting to stabilize from months of devastating floods and unpredictable droughts. Ruth could hardly believe all this destruction came from just one meteor strike. But at least there were signs things were starting to get better. Sometimes the clouds would part and a hint of blue sky would peak through. It was a good thing too because it was hard enough to survive on this scorched earth without also having to deal with the constant violent weather.

Another relentless headache was the government's gene police—the copperheads. Technically they were men too but they had a very different agenda. Bred from embryos in carefully monitored labs, these biological monsters killed everything impure they came in contact with. Men—women—none of it mattered to a copperhead. If a person had a genetic flaw they'd shoot them down like a rabid coon in the street. Ruth wanted to hate them for it but they were only doing what they'd been bred and trained to do. For them it was natural selection. But over the past two years, things had been changing and Ruth suspected it was because of the scarcity of women. Copperheads were much less likely to shoot first if a woman was involved. Now they asked lots of stupid questions before wasting one.

All of it was just plain crazy.

She heard Jazz swear in Spanish as she walked up to the heavily chained front doors of the Handi-Mart. "What's the matter?" Ruth asked.

"Fuckers have a least three chains on this thing, man," Jazz said, grabbing the chain and flinging it down in disgust.

"Just do the best you can," Ruth said. She was starting to feel that old nausea creeping into her belly. *This is taking way too long. We should abort.*

The car finally stalled and Zoey pumped the gas and turned the key several times trying to get it restarted. It cranked but refused to turn over. Ruth leaned in the passenger window. "Take it easy, Zoe," she said. "Don't flood it. We're okay, just take your time."

Zoey nodded and took a breath so deep it lifted her shoulders. She looked so young against Ruth's forty-two years. *She's still just a kid. I should have insisted on someone older.* Then Zoey resumed trying to get the engine started.

Ruth came over to see how Jazz was doing with the chains. She'd cut away the first two and was busy working on the third. "I almost got it," she said between clenched teeth.

Ruth's radio crackled and she grabbed it off her hip. Bonnie said something but it was heavily garbled and Ruth couldn't make out a word. Jazz stopped working on the chain and fixed Ruth with her dark brown eyes. Ruth depressed the button. "Repeat, Bonnie," she said. "I didn't hear a word you just said."

"I said I have movement!" Bonnie's voice barked in a broken message.

Zoey, who hadn't heard Bonnie's message, finally got the car started. She leaned across the driver's seat and shouted, "I got it!" out the window.

"Shut the *fuck* up, Zoey!" Jazz said, moving closer to Ruth to hear what Bonnie was saying. Zoey scowled as if she'd just drank a glass full of vinegar. She got out of the car and stood next to the open driver's door. She opened her mouth to answer Jazz but Ruth held her hand up for silence. Zoey closed her mouth and glared at them.

"How many are there, Bonnie?" Ruth asked as the sickness in her belly grew. "Are we dealing with dogs or a copperhead?"

"It's one person," Bonnie said. More static. "He's armed to the gills. This thing's got to be a copperhead."

This time Zoey heard the message and her face went slack with terror. Ruth walked toward the car to talk the young woman down from her panic, but it was too late. Somewhere not too far off, a killer was coming to put a bullet in Zoey's brain and she only had seconds to get away. Jumping back into the car, Zoey did what Ruth feared she'd do.

She gunned the engine and took off down the street.

Jazz raced into the middle of the road as if she could will the car to return, her fists clenched at her sides. "I can't believe this, man! The little girl just took off!"

"She just panicked," Ruth said, forcing herself not to lose hope. "She'll be back."

"Back, my ass!" Jazz shouted. "She's gone!"

A second of sunlight bled through the clouds above. Then the copperhead rounded the corner and parked only a few yards from them. He kept his engine running and it had the heavy, brutal sound of a big block V8. The car was an unmarked beat-up black coupe with red flashing lights on top. Two curved exhaust pipes lay just behind the driver's door looking like silver animal ribs.

The driver's door opened and the copperhead emerged. Like all the others of his kind, he was dressed in black combat pants, black boots and an olive green t-shirt. His thick arms strained the sleeves of his t-shirt. He was muscular, combat thick and tall, probably about six-five with a body that looked like it was carved from solid rock. Ruth tried to see his eyes, but they were completely hidden by dark sunglasses. He wore his dark brown hair short, and had a hard wickedness to his face that made her throat tighten. Strapped to both legs were two holstered ionic blasters. The copperhead smiled and Ruth heard Jazz swear in Spanish.

"Candy," the copperhead whispered in a deadly, seductive tone. He started walking toward them and Ruth caught Jazz making a sudden move for her own blaster.

Ruth glared at her. "Don't," she murmured. Killing a copperhead would only put the androids on their ass, and that was the last thing they needed.

Jazz seethed but didn't pull her weapon. "We're not your fucking *candy*, freak."

Ruth could see the copperhead getting anxious, his right hand twitchy, wanting to pull his weapon but he held back. *Where the hell is Zoey?* "What do you want?" Ruth said to him. "We've been scanned already. We're clean."

The copperhead took another step forward and Ruth prayed Jazz would keep her cool. "Not by me," he said. His voice was harsh and commanding, made all the more intimidating by its low, rumbling bass.

Ruth sensed Jazz about to open her mouth and say something nasty but she glared at the other woman and shook her head indicating quiet. Ruth knew exactly how to handle a copperhead. She'd served with enough of them during the Third World War to know what their weaknesses were. She stepped forward. "You can scan me if you want," she said.

For a moment, the copperhead seemed to change his mind about challenging them. He hesitated. Then he took off his sunglasses and fixed her with those chilling altered eyes. From behind blue eyes, his pupils flashed a reddish-orange, like an animal caught by surprise by a flash bulb. Those shiny computer chips embedded in his eyes were a dead giveaway and how these killers got their street name. He also had a small black barcode on his right cheekbone which Ruth knew to be an inventory number from the lab that had bred him.

The copperhead was edgy, nervous but eager to get close to a woman. His lust was so raw it had substance, reminding her of a cat rubbing against her leg. He is a man, just like all the rest. Lucky for me, he's a virgin and not too sure what to do with that big, troublesome thing busting out of his pants. After a brief pause, he stalked up for the scan stopping very close to Ruth. She fixed her gaze on his chest and waited for that old familiar burn.

The scan began slowly.

Dry heat touched her skin, starting from the top of her head and running like fingertips down her face and body. It didn't hurt but it was unpleasant and she fought the urge to move or complain. It went much faster if she stayed still. Within seconds it was over.

The copperhead had had his fun. Now it was her turn to mess with him.

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"I think you'd better search me," she said, stretching her torso and daring to look him in the eye. "You can't be too careful."

The copperhead froze, his tongue coming out to caress his lower lip. "Would you like that?" he said.

Ruth smiled, glancing down at the obvious erection in his pants. "I'd just *love* that. Would you like me to turn around and put my hands against the wall?"

A screech of tires pierced the quiet and Ruth was relieved to see Zoey return. *No getting your rocks off today, copperhead. I'm afraid you're gonna have to jerk off in a corner.* Zoey rounded the corner so hard Ruth was sure she was going to blow a tire. Zoey pulled up and Jazz scrambled in through the open passenger window yelling for Ruth to get in.

Ruth looked up at the copperhead. It would be too easy for him to grab her and keep her from escaping but he didn't. His pupils shone at her but his demeanor betrayed nothing. She knew he was hot for her, but like all the other copperheads, he wasn't quite sure what to do about it. *Poor thing.* For a moment, Ruth felt a deep sense of pity for this man the government had raised, trained, and unleashed upon the world. But the feeling didn't last long. A second later, she too was jumping into the getaway car and speeding off to the bunker and freedom.

Bill Jackal went back over and leaned against his car watching the women drive off. His desire was a painful, feral thing that tore through his loins making his dick so hard he thought it would break off. Too bad their rescue hadn't come half an hour later. If it had, he might have been able to put his hands on their strong, sexy leader.

He closed his eyes for a moment imagining what those soft female curves might have felt like. Pushing his mind further, he could almost feel his mouth claiming hers and his blood immediately became fire in his veins. A light groan escaped his throat. Fucking sweet candy lips and a snug wet pussy. Having that woman would be heaven on earth. His desire grew painful, pounding hot blood into his aching cock until he fought to push his fantasies to the back of his mind.

It took over twenty minutes of slow breathing for Jackal to calm down.

Finally he climbed into the car and sat staring at the data screen he'd brought up with his mental remote during her scan. The database identified her as Ruth Corbin. Her picture and bio made him want to hammer her all the more. Decorated war veteran, certified special weapons expert, and in later years, undercover agent.

According to the file, she had been one of the government's prize operatives until a comet blazed out of the sky one night and changed the atmosphere. After that there was no government to work for so Ruth and several other female operatives went rogue. Now she was like him, a wandering elite government has-been with too many skills and twice as many demons.

Jackal wanted her though, he wanted her *bad*. He'd never met a woman who could charm him that fast. Usually they were too panicked by him, but not this one. She was one cool bitch and she made his dick harder than he'd been in years. Too bad he hadn't had a chance to scan the Hispanic chick. She might have revealed an interesting history too.

He stared out the grimy widow and spotted a few men cruising the streets on motorcycles looking for anything they could scavenge. Although after the comet there had been fewer mouths to feed, food had become scarcer in recent years. Everyone was forced to hunt constantly for something to eat. Even he and the other copperheads were running out of supplies in the warehouses. Rumors were flying that Central Command, the place where Jackal and the other copperheads got their orders, was finally collapsing. He guessed that made his job obsolete, but he and the others kept killing because it cut down on the competition for women.

Women. In all the fighting and dying that came about since the comet hit, women became even scarcer than food. Men were killing each other over any woman they could find. Some women chose to commit suicide rather than be raped and held captive by the male gangs. The birth rate dropped to staggering levels and the human race was about to fade out. That's when the government stopped their gene cleansing program and ordered the copperheads to inventory any women they found but *not* for captivity. If a woman was found to have a genetic problem, she was to be taken to Central Command for purification then released. That was all. On the streets, women were to be protected at all costs. The only problem was someone forgot to tell the ladies and they still treated the copperheads as enemies whenever they ran into them.

Jackal watched the men driving around trying this door and that. They didn't look like they were hunting food, more likely they were hunting women. Luckily they still hadn't seen him. He smiled. *Time to wake them up. Maybe a little violence will purge my sexual frustration.*

Closing the driver's door, Jackal hit the siren and stepped on the accelerator. The men immediately broke off in different directions gunning their engines to escape. After years of killing, Jackal could usually single out the ones who'd be easier to pick off. Felons, crazies, and other degenerates were first on his list and the data center had picked a nice target for him. Scanning the group, Jackal found the one he was looking for.

The man was dirtier than the others and rode a dirt bike without a helmet. He was unshaven with long, greasy hair and his clothes looked like he'd just picked them out of a dumpster. Jackal glanced at the data stream rolling across his computer. It indicated the target was wanted for felony rape and sodomy. *Just a nice, sweet guy.*

Jackal chased him through a few side streets and into a narrow alley finally cornering the man. The felon got off his bike, his eyes darting as he searched for a place to run.

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Jackal pulled out his blaster and pointed it at the man's head. "Don't even blink," he snarled. The man stopped moving but Jackal knew it was only temporary. If the felon didn't want to die, he'd have to bolt. Jackal was about to start the scan to confirm the felon's identity when the man rushed him.

Advancing on his would-be attacker before the biker could tackle him, Jackal fired three pulses into the man's skull. The felon collapsed on the ground, his head smoking from the blast strikes. The semisweet stench of burnt flesh perfumed the air. Jackal scanned the felon where he laid, his heart pounding so hard it drummed a fierce rhythm in his skull. He returned to the car and sent a signal out for body disposal. The disposal android shouldn't take too long and then Jackal would be free to go out and hunt down the others. The only thing left to do was wait and think pleasant thoughts about his new flame, Ruth.

The sedan rumbled into the underground garage speeding so fast its undercarriage scraped the cement as it passed over the ramp. It pulled to a stop and the brakes screamed in protest. Ruth slouched in her seat knowing that—for a while at least—they were safe. Everyone eased out of the car like their bones were made of fine china.

The second she was out of the vehicle, Jazz lunged at Zoey. "Fucking coward!" Jazz snarled, grabbing the black girl by the neck and cocking her fist back to punch her.

Ruth came up behind Jazz and grabbed her arm before she could swing. "Jazz don't!" she shouted, restraining the furious woman. "She was scared," Ruth said, trying to diffuse Jazz's anger. "She made a mistake. The important thing is she came back for us."

Jazz continued to struggle against Ruth, a few thin strands of black hair working free from her tight braid. Zoey's lip curled in contempt, "Fuck you, *Jazz*!" she screamed. "You got some fucking nerve judging me! What's the worst that can happen to *you* if the copperhead gets you? A rape? Big deal! I guaran-fucking-tee you he's not gonna snuff you for a genetic flaw!" Reaching over Ruth, Zoey slapped Jazz across the face hard enough that Jazz broke her grip on Zoey's neck.

"You won't need to wait for the copperheads, Zoe," Jazz snarled. "Because I'm going to rip you're fucking heart out right here!"

Ruth slammed the palm of her hand into Jazz's chest sending her stumbling backward. Jazz clutched her chest gasping for air. Then Ruth turned on Zoey who held up her hands in surrender. "That's enough out of *both* of you! Nothing happened; we got out alive, and that's all that matters."

Jazz rubbed her chest as she glared bitter hate at Ruth.

"Are we done with this?" Ruth said, preparing herself for another physical round.

"Yeah," Jazz said, sulking off. "We're done."

Zoey kept a hard gaze on Jazz and spit on the ground where the Hispanic woman had been standing. "I'm done too," she said finally.

Ruth let out a tense breath. Climbing into the car, she reached under the dashboard and grabbed the small video disk that recorded the whole mission they'd just returned from. She came out and held it up to the dim overhead lights. Rainbow light reflected off the shiny silver surface. *Good, it doesn't look scratched.*

"Zoey, why don't you stay with me?" she said, heading inside.

Zoey fell into step behind her. "You're not mad at me, are you, Ruth?" she asked, sounding very young.

"Let's just say I'm disappointed in you," Ruth replied.

"I'm sorry, but you know why I did it, right? You know why I ran?"

Ruth stopped and looked at Zoey. "I know why. But, Zoey, I don't want you to volunteer for these assignments an-

ymore. There are copperheads everywhere and sooner or later, one's going to catch up with you."

Zoey's pretty mouth turned down into an angry frown. She folded her arms. "I just got scared, that's all. It won't happen again."

"Damn right," Ruth said. "Because you're not going out again."

"Ruth, you can't be serious!"

"I'm very serious. This was your last run for a while. Don't even ask next time. Got it?"

"Yeah," Zoey said in a knife-edge tone. "I see how it is. I got it."

* * * *

The control room was cool for a change and Ruth loved the way the air conditioning felt on her skin. She walked up to the main terminal peeling off her jacket. A smell of old coffee lingered in the air. She glanced at Liz lounging in a swivel chair watching the surveillance cameras. Liz was a tall, lanky woman with baby-blue eyes and a nasty sense of humor. She had also been an agent with Ruth when the world came unglued.

"I take it Bobbi fixed the air units," Ruth said.

Liz smiled lazily. "The woman's a master mechanic. Feels like heaven, doesn't it?"

Ruth nodded her head and smiled. "I'm taking over monitor one," she said, popping the video disk in and settling back to watch.

Monitor one filled with gray snow then an image appeared. It was grainy at first but then gradually got clearer. Ruth punched in a few commands and isolated the picture un-

til all she had on screen was the copperhead they'd encountered.

Liz whistled and sat up. "Who the hell is that monster?"

"A copperhead," Ruth said. She pointed at the screen. "Watch his eyes." They flashed an eerie reddish orange and Liz rolled her chair back a few inches.

"Man oh man," Liz said. "That is one big boy."

Ruth stared at the man on the screen and froze the image when she had a good frame. "Yes he is."

"He must have scared the shit out of Jazz," Liz said softly. She traced the man's outline on the monitor with her index finger. Then she glanced around as if she'd been overhead. Satisfied no one was eavesdropping, she returned her attention to the screen.

"You know it," Ruth said. "She practically jumped Zoey for taking off with the car at the sight of him."

Liz stared at her. "Zoey left you?"

Ruth shook her head in dismissal. She was sorry she'd brought it up. "We took care of it. She's young; she just panicked."

"If Zoey gets that spooked, she shouldn't be going out at all," Liz said, frowning.

Ruth punched in a few more commands and waited for the computer to ID the picture. A small box in the right-hand corner of monitor one began flashing different faces as the system worked. "Well, that's what we ended up deciding," Ruth said. "She's grounded for a little while at least." Suddenly the computer made a match and chirped.

Ruth brought up the data screen and patted her jacket for her glasses. She found them and put them on to read. "Bill Jackal," she read out loud. "Disposition: outlaw." Ruth took

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her glasses off and leaned back in her chair. That's all she needed. An outlaw copperhead who knew her and her girls by sight. She twirled her glasses by the earpiece.

"That can't be right," Liz said. "That's got to be a decoy file. If he was a real outlaw, an android disposal unit would have toasted him by now. Central Command is very strict with their inventory."

Ruth grunted her agreement and put her glasses back in her jacket.

"Too bad he identified you guys. What are you going to do about that?" Liz said.

Ruth replaced her glasses and sighed. "I'm going to have to find some way to take him out of commission." She gestured to the video monitor with the copperhead on it. "Circulate this info, will you, Liz? I'm gonna go check on Jazz."

Jackal pulled his cruiser up to the storefront the women had been trying to access before he'd come up on them. He got out slowly, taking time to scan up and down the street for any sign of attack. Keeping his hand on his blaster, he walked up to the chains on the door and examined the lock. Of the three chains on the handle, only one still remained intact. The world had been in chaos so long, few places still had locks on the doors. Not only did this store have chains and a lock but the mechanism was shiny indicating it had seen a lot of use lately.

Jackal moved back and studied the building. Along the right-hand side was a fire ladder leading to the roof. He climbed up and stepped onto the roof gently so as not to alert anyone inside the store. Straight ahead was a large metal door. As Jackal approached, he noticed it was propped open. At waist level, a tiny plastic string ran from the handle to someplace behind the door. *Booby trapped*.

Blinking twice, Jackal cleared his vision and let the chip in his head take over. From behind the door the mechanism grew detailed and a diagram flashed clear in his mind. Pulling a large knife from his boot, he cut the string at precisely the right point rendering the trap useless. He holstered his knife and pushed the door open.

Almost immediately he heard men's voices.

"We could have had some pussy in here! All we gotta do is take off the chain!" one of them shouted, his voice raspy from some throat infection.

"Yeah, that's a great fucking idea, Ron. Then why don't we send out an invitation to every copperhead in the city to drop in for a visit!" another raged back.

Jackal moved down the stairs pulling his blaster from its holster with the utmost care. The computer chip in his head was going crazy, feeding him information about the men's vital signs. He reached the bottom step and moved up to a scratched plastic sheet that served as a door. From beyond it, he could see two men. They were both in their mid-thirties like himself and armed.

Taking a slow, steady breath to calm his murderous fire, Jackal scanned them. Both were diseased and both had records. Then he moved into the room.

He loved this moment. The moment when a man realized that he'd already lived the best of his life only seconds before. Both men heard him and jumped to their feet. Jackal even let one of them get off a shot, but then he fired, blowing both of them into small gory chunks. The room echoed with the discharge of his blaster.

And then it was over.

Jackal went over to the folding card table the men had been at and sat down. He pulled his transmitter from his pocket and hit the code for disposal. Then he replaced it in his pocket and waited.

The inferno series android came within minutes. He was an African American hulking giant, built more like a combat unit than disposal. He was dressed in the black uniform they were famous for: high collar; gold buttons; tall boots. The android moved through the room as quiet as a phantom, his pale amber eyes taking in all the pieces of flesh littering the floor. He fixed those cold eyes on Jackal and said, "You'd better stand back for this."

There was no accent, nor anything mechanical in his voice to give away what he was. The only thing that told Jackal he was a machine was his eyes. The android could have been any black man, from any part of the country. He would have easily fit into a Chicago law firm or a gang bar in south central L.A. That's how universal his look was.

Jackal got up from the table and walked around behind the android. With the precision of a surgeon's scalpel, the robot let loose a stream of yellow fire that burned each mound of flesh it found until nothing was left but a small pile of gray ash. Then it left as silently as it had appeared and Jackal was alone again.

Alone except for his memory of Ruth.

In the vacant quiet of the storeroom, Jackal recalled every detail he could about her. Weightiness filled his balls and his dick hardened again. What he wouldn't give to sink his throbbing cock into her slick, yielding flesh. He knew from her file she was local. Maybe he'd run into her again. In fact, he was sure he would and next time, she wouldn't get away so easy.

Zoey entered the meeting room feeling like the first sick leper to arrive at a hospital colony. All the meeting regulars were there: Ruth; Jazz and Bonnie and they were all watching her like she was some kind of kid who'd wandered in through the wrong door. *I wonder why they want me here. I thought Ruth said I wasn't going out again.*

There were plenty of seats but Zoey decided to stand. "You asked me to come?" she said to Ruth.

Ruth pushed out a chair with her foot. It grated along the tile making Zoey wince. "Yeah, Zoey. Why don't you have a seat?"

Zoey glanced at Jazz who was staring down at the table chipping some paint off with her fingernail. "No, I'd rather stand," she said.

"It makes me nervous when you stand," Jazz complained, draping her black hair behind her ears. Zoey was surprised to see Jazz wearing it loose. The Hispanic woman was usually so uptight about looking feminine she almost never wore her hair down. Jazz looked up making hard eye contact with Zoey.

"Well that sounds an awful lot like your problem, Jazz," Zoey shot back.

Ruth held her hand up. "That's enough bickering. Zoey can stand if she wants to. Now let's get on with it."

Zoey waved her hand in the air to get everyone's attention. "Can I ask a question?" she said before Ruth had a chance to say anything.

"Yeah, what?" Ruth said.

"Why am I here? I thought I wasn't going on any more missions."

"Because we need you for another run. We don't have anyone else who can keep the car running and you're a good driver," Ruth said.

Jazz lowered her lids and shrugged. "You weren't my choice."

"Not one more word, Jazz!" Ruth said in that I'm-not-taking-any-more-crap tone.

Bonnie studied a map taped to the table and changed the subject. "Where's the hit?"

"Same place," Ruth said, opening up her own soiled, torn map. "The Handi-Mart is the only place close that probably had tons of canned food still inside."

"How are we gonna keep little girl here from taking off and leaving us?" Jazz said, gesturing to Zoey.

Zoey felt her belly twist in anger. She pushed off from the wall and took a few aggressive steps forward. "You want to take this outside, Jazz? 'Cuz I'd sure love to kick your bigmouthed ass."

Jazz stood up, knocking her chair over and jabbed her finger at Zoey. "Anytime, little girl! You just say the word. I'm ready to put you down right now!"

Ruth jumped to her feet. "No one's going to fight anyone! I know everyone is stressed and hungry but this solves nothing! Jazz, you need to stop baiting Zoey. She and I have talked about what happened and I'm sure it won't happen again. Right, Zoey?"

Zoey nodded without taking her eyes off Jazz.

"Okay then," Ruth said. "Now let's arm up and go shopping."

* * * *

Jazz grabbed the cut chains on the Handi-Mart door and looked up at Ruth. "Someone's in there," she said.

"Didn't you cut through them the other day?" Ruth asked.

"Not all of them. There was still one left when the copperhead showed up," Jazz replied.

Ruth squeezed the pillowcases in her hand and thought about calling the whole mission off. Zoey was sitting in the parked car which idled loudly at the curb sounding so rough it might just stall at any moment. *What choice do I have? We need the food.* "We're going in anyway," Ruth said.

Jazz pulled out her blaster pointing the muzzle at the air. She watched Ruth and waited for further instructions. Ruth came over to the vehicle and leaned into the open passenger window. "I need you to come with us, Zoey," she said.

The younger woman's eyes widened. "What about the car?"

"Turn it off and take the key out of the ignition," Ruth said. "Come on."

Zoey turned off the car and stepped out of the vehicle. She slammed the door to show her displeasure and came over to stand by the entrance. She didn't say anything, but Ruth could feel how pissed she was from the nasty looks she was shooting at her and Jazz. She pulled out a small snub-nosed blaster and stood on the opposite side of Jazz.

"Everybody ready?" Jazz said with a mischievous grin. Without waiting for a response, she pushed the glass door open and crept inside. Unlike most of the shops they'd raided, this one looked relatively untouched. Most of the cans were on the shelves and the back cashier counter was still almost full of cigarettes. Jazz moved into the room first, crouching and advancing with slow careful steps. She gestured to Ruth for some pillowcases and Ruth tossed them to her. Jazz positioned herself by an aisle and started throwing cans in without even looking at them.

Ruth moved deeper into the shop keeping her blaster trained on the back doorway. Passing through, she came into a stockroom with several boxes piled against the walls and a gray folding card table in the center. As she came closer to the table, she noticed a large black burn mark on the ground. She rubbed at it with the toe of her boot but the mark was charred in deep. Nearby she caught sight of some dried blood smeared on the cement floor.

Ruth heard someone come down the back steps and trained her weapon on a clear plastic sheet covering the rear entrance. Two skinny-looking men came in. *Just what I need, fucking dogs.* Both looked like they hadn't shaved in days and each had a crude club in one hand.

"Hello, pretty," one of them croaked.

Ruth backed away from them right into the main shop. "Zoey! We've got dogs here. You need to get the car started and *wait*." She heard Zoey race out of the store and Jazz was only a few seconds behind her. Ruth continued to back toward the front door with her weapon trained on the two men. Their advance was slow but determined, shifting their clubs

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from one hand to another to unnerve her. One of them struck a bottle of wine shattering it. Ruth flinched.

"Back off or I'll fry your fucking heads off," she ordered.

"Why?" the shorter of the two said. "All we want to do is be friendly."

Ruth backed out the front door then made a dash for the car. She scrambled in through the window and immediately pointed her blaster out the window but the men hadn't come through the door after her.

"You okay?" Zoey asked.

"Yeah," Ruth said unable to believe her luck. "They were harmless enough."

Jazz scoffed. "No fucking man is harmless. But at least we got plenty of food," she said, smiling and holding up a pillowcase of bulging cans.

"Great," Ruth said. "Now let's get out of here before our luck runs out."

Ruth sat at the conference room table with two empty cans of beef and barley soup in front of her. She reached down and unbuttoned her pants, not because they were tight, but just to make herself more comfortable. Lifting up her boots, she placed them on the edge of the table. She watched Jazz sitting across from her with her head back and her eyes closed.

"I've been thinking of getting us some help," Ruth said, wondering if Jazz was too asleep to hear her.

"What kind of help?" Jazz said without looking up.

"I've been thinking of grabbing a copperhead," Ruth said.

Now she had Jazz's full attention. "Are you fucking crazy, Ruthie? Those lab freaks are not *pets*. You can't just go out and kidnap one and expect him to behave."

"I can handle a copperhead. I used to serve with them during the war and I know how they think. I'll keep him separate from the women and give him all the sex he wants. He'll be fine."

"You think you can control one of those *things* with sex?" Jazz said incredulously.

"I think I can control Bill Jackal with sex," Ruth corrected.

Jazz stood up and paced. She grabbed a thick handful of her dark hair and pulled it into a ponytail. "What do we need a copperhead for anyway? We're doing great on our own."

"Well, for one thing it would be helpful to have another person fly the helicopter besides only me. With him piloting, I could be free to lead a team into some of these other buildings we haven't yet been able to access."

"What makes you think he won't leave us there like the little girl did?" Jazz asked.

"Because copperheads are trained for combat from the moment they're taken from their embryonic tubes. Armed conflict is all they know. They work best when things are at their worst," Ruth said.

Jazz shuddered and wrapped her arms around her waist. "I can't believe you, man. How come you don't get the creeps thinking of that government monster touching you?"

Ruth sighed. Jazz might be heterosexual but she'd never been able to let a man touch her since the rape over three years ago, especially not a copperhead. "They're just men, Jazz. There's nothing *unnatural* about them. They can't help being bred to kill; that's something the government did to them. Underneath they're just like us."

Jazz squeezed herself and blinked a few times as if awakening from a bad dream. "He probably doesn't know one end of a woman from another," she said thoughtfully.

"That's okay," Ruth said, smiling. "I'll just have to teach him. I'm sure he won't mind that. He has the instinct. All I have to do it wake it up."

"You sound like you're looking forward to this."

"It's been a very long time. Maybe I am," Ruth said.

The Golden Monarch Theater was one of the only preserved buildings in the inner city. Done in art deco style, the theater could easily accommodate over a thousand people. One of Jackal's favorite spots was the curved glass and chrome popcorn stand in the lobby. All around the stand were heavy drapes in varying shades of silver, gray and turquoise. Even now, in a state of decay, it could still inspire and impress.

Jackal loved it here. Even though he was too young to remember the theater the way it used to be when it was in operation. Sometimes when he closed his eyes, he could still feel the happy echoes of patrons long gone. When Jackal wasn't hunting for criminals, he came into the theater to eat his meals. Every once in a while another man would show up, catch that infernal red-orange glint in his eyes, and quickly rush off. Even if they scanned genetically inferior, Jackal would always let them go. He might be a killer most of the time, but his meal breaks were his own.

Jackal sat up on the counter in the main lobby and pulled out a package of military rations. He tore the wrapper, wiped his hands on his pants, and took a generous bite. Unholstering his blaster, he placed it on the counter next to him. Although there weren't many people around, there were plenty of small packs of wandering men who'd like nothing better than

to take out a copperhead. Because of that, Jackal was always alert to what was going on around him.

He popped the rest of the protein bar into his mouth and tossed the wrapper on the floor. Chewing the last of his food, he suddenly froze. The hairs on his forearms stood up on end and he swallowed. Someone was in here watching him. He picked up his blaster as quietly as he could.

"You don't need that," a woman's voice said from somewhere off to his left. She sounded familiar. He knew her from somewhere. "I just want to talk to you," she said. Her voice was smooth and rich like warm milk.

She rounded the corner wearing green combat pants and a gray t-shirt that hugged her large breasts. Her round face was pale but lovely with full pink lips, dark green eyes and thick dark hair. She was also heavily armed. A faint scent of sweet jasmine filled the air. The chip in his head went nuts, spitting out information on her concealed weapons faster than he could absorb it. Then the chip fed him her identity but he already knew it. One name escaped his lips, "Ruth."

"And you're Bill Jackal," she said.

Jackal sat there stunned by her lush sexiness. Every muscle in his body stiffened and a light sweat broke out on his temples and upper lip. He'd never had a personal conversation with a woman before and he had no idea what to say. He put the blaster down so he wouldn't startle her. "What do you want?" he managed awkwardly.

"I have a deal for you," she said in a tone soft and sweet like cake.

"I'm listening," he said. Who was he kidding? If she'd asked him to murder the leader of Central Command, he'd do

it. He'd do anything to taste those lips and feel that curvy body against his.

"How would you feel about a partnership? You join us and help me hunt for food and I'll give you all the sex you want," she said as if she were offering him a piece of gum. He stopped himself from saying yes too fast. There had to be a catch. There was always a catch. Jackal had never had sex before. He'd read about it, imagined it, masturbated like a fiend pretending to have it, but never actually experienced the real thing. In fact, he'd never even been this close to a woman before. A bead of sweat trickled down the side of his face.

"I've got a job to do," he replied but even he could hear the tremor in his voice. *She's got me. She knows I won't say no.*

"You can still do your job," she said. "The only rule will be that you can't bother any of the other girls, only me. And you can't kill any of them either, no matter what your scanner says."

"I don't kill women anymore. Central Command changed that directive so you don't have to worry about that."

"Well that's even better," she said with a private smile. "The only difference between joining us and what you're doing now is that you'll just be doing your job while helping me do mine. So what do you say?"

Jackal smiled. "When do I get my part of the deal? Now?" "After we complete the first mission. I want to make sure

you're worth it."

"Oh," Jackal said, jumping down off the counter and advancing on her. "I'm worth it all right."

Ruth didn't retreat from him. A little intimidated by her, he stopped only a foot away. "Then prove it," she said. "Let's you and I go get some groceries."

"What, now?" Jackal said.

"You want sex; I want food for my girls. It's a simple exchange," she said.

He grunted his agreement. "Did you have someplace special in mind?" he asked.

"The Foodland warehouse on Sumner and Grant," Ruth replied.

That wasn't too far. "My car's right outside," he said. He jumped down from the counter and headed for the door.

Ruth didn't follow. *Now what the fuck?* He stopped, turned around, and stared at her. She was making him so hot he ran his hand over his erection once to give himself a thrill.

"Do you know how to fly a helicopter?" she asked.

What is this? A joke? "Yeah," he said not sure where this conversation was going. "Why? Don't tell me you have one." Ruth smiled and gave him a wink. "It's on the roof."

Ruth led Jackal to the roof and showed him her A500 Mongoose helicopter. He walked forward staring at it with his mouth slightly open. She knew he'd be impressed. The A500 was one of the most agile and capable combat helicopters to date. It hadn't been easy getting her hands on one.

Jackal was quiet for several minutes as he walked around the aircraft touching the aluminum frame like it was a mirage. "How the hell did you get a Mongoose?" he asked.

"I called in some favors a few years ago, just before Central Command collapsed its military operations. They wanted to make sure me and my ladies survived, so they gave one up," she said.

"Incredible," he whispered.

"Want to take it for a spin?" she said with a smile. Ruth knew he wouldn't be able to resist. The Mongoose was one sweet ride.

Jackal threw his stuff inside the cockpit and climbed into the pilot seat. Ruth climbed in behind him, taking her position in the gunner's cockpit situated just up and to the rear of the pilot's. Ruth put her headset on and watched the red multifunctional display come to life. An excited charge electrified her blood and she couldn't wait to take off.

"Can you hear me, Ruth?" Jackal said into his headset.

"Loud and clear. Show me what you can do, copperhead," she replied.

Jackal piloted the aircraft off the roof and into the air. Ruth felt a strong sense of familiarity, like coming home after being gone for months. It had been much too long since she'd been able to ride in the gunner's seat and it felt damn good. Jackal was a skilled pilot, even if he was a little rusty. He flew through the tall buildings and over rooftops with complete ease, even doing some reconnaissance on a few dog gangs they flew over.

After several impressive maneuvers, Jackal said, "Where did you want to go again?"

"The Foodland warehouse. You know it?"

"Yeah," he said. "We're almost there."

They passed next to an obelisk tower that used to be part of city hall. Ruth's guts tightened, and for a moment she was nostalgic for the world the way it used to be. But in the distance she spotted the huge block building of Foodland and she focused on the mission at hand. If they could pull this shopping trip off, the bunker would have enough food for a few weeks. Well worth it for the minor price of sleeping with Jackal.

Jackal landed right near the roof access door. It was exactly the spot Ruth would have chosen. He cut the engine and climbed out. The heavy Mongoose blades rotated to a slow stop. Ruth pulled two large canvas backpacks from the helicopter and handed one to him.

Jackal took it and checked the power charge on his blaster.

"Ready?" she asked.

He looked her in the eye and she spotted that eerie orange flash of the chips beyond his black pupils. "Yeah," he said, looking mean and hungry.

"Good. Let's go," she said, heading for the door that would lead them down into the warehouse.

* * * *

The warehouse had everything Ruth could want for herself and the other women. There were boxes and boxes of canned food, dry goods like beans and rice, over-the-counter medications, and clothes. Jackal stood at ground level and stared up at the stacked boxes. Ruth rushed past him with two of the oversized backpacks. She tore into one of the boxes and started stuffing things into the bags.

Something felt wrong about this place. It was too pristine—too cared for. Jackal knew someone was here hiding. "Easy there, Ruth," he said, feeling the small hairs on his arms standing on end. He couldn't shake the sensation they were being watched in the crosshairs of a rifle. He lifted his head and was sure he heard someone's footsteps nearby. The chip in his head identified it as a lone man but couldn't tell if the man had friends nearby. Ruth was on her knees ignoring him, stuffing food into the packs like it was going to disappear at any moment. He stepped on the pack's opening to stop her and heard her swear.

"Get off the pack, Jackal," she said, glaring up at him.

He touched his index finger to his lips and she immediately stood up, leaving the food where it was. She unholstered her blaster and Jackal slipped into the shadows. The man would probably not come out shooting if he thought Ruth was alone.

"Who's there?" she called out, sounding sweet and virginal. Jackal couldn't help it, her tone made him stone-hard all over again. *God how I want to nail that chick.*

The man came out from a row of cleaning supplies outfitted in a military dress uniform. His hair was long and thinning and he wore the expression of someone who had lost his mind a very long time ago. He tilted his head to the side and gave her a crooked smile. "Who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Ruth. I'm just here to get some food. I'll be gone in a minute," she replied.

While she had the man distracted, Jackal ran his bio through the Central Command computer. He came back as a war vet, missing in action for the last ten years. Then new information replaced the old, changing the missing in action time to two years before changing back again.

Jackal scowled. The bio was flawed just like all the old database info he'd collected lately. Central Command was starting to show its problems in the form of data corruption. The scan revealed the old man wasn't armed so Jackal moved cautiously out of the shadows.

The man squinted at Jackal and hissed. "Fucking copperhead!" he shouted. "You and your kind are what's wrong with this dying world!"

Jackal hated talk like that. It pissed him off and made him homicidal. He raised his weapon to shoot the crazy bastard when Ruth put her hand over his and gently pushed his blaster down until it was pointed at the ground. "Don't kill him," she said in a velvet tone. "He hasn't done anything. He's just lost his mind. Let him be."

Jackal wasn't used to anyone telling him to do anything. He stood there for a moment, unsure. Then deciding she was

probably right, he holstered his blaster. He comforted himself by admiring Ruth's round hips and plump ass. *Soon my mouth will be buried in that hot, fresh pussy.*

The idiot officer just watched as they loaded both packs and hoisted them up on their backs. As they made their way back up the narrow stairs, Jackal glanced back at the soldier. The officer was watching them, looking lost and confused, and when Jackal studied the man's eyes, he noticed they were tearing up.

Don't go, they seemed to say. Don't go and leave me to my madness. The man raised a hand and waved.

"He's crying," Jackal said.

"Just ignore him. As soon as we're gone, he'll forget we were ever here," Ruth said.

Jackal jogged to the steps to keep up with Ruth. "I don't know why you wouldn't let me kill him," he complained. "If it were me stuck here going nuts, I think I would prefer to die."

After they flew back to the bunker and unloaded the Mongoose, Ruth brought Jackal down to where he'd be staying. His room was a converted machine shop connected to the bunker by a security door and a short corridor. It was spacious, had lots of equipment for him to tinker with, and plenty of privacy.

She watched him as he scanned the room and wondered if he liked it. Jackal was a very hard man to read. But then she thought he probably didn't care if they put him in a metal bucket with a hole on top, as long as he got his end of the bargain.

After several minutes of silence, Jackal turned around and said, "So when do we get to the sex?"

Ruth grinned. She knew he'd be eager. Copperheads didn't grow up the way everyone else did. They didn't have families and girlfriends, or anything like that. Their schools were military training camps. They were born in a lab and trained to fight all their lives. As a result, they turned into a strange mixture of perfect killers who were emotional cripples. They didn't fit with the androids they worked with and couldn't relate to the humans who surrounded them.

But Ruth had seen one of her mentors, Lilly Fox, bring one around. It had taken time and patience but she'd done it and he ended up being the best protector for their group Ruth had ever seen. That was one thing about a copperhead; once they were turned human again, they were fiercely loyal until they died. *Oh, Lilly, I wish you were still here now. I miss you so.*

"We can have sex right now. But first there are some ground rules," Ruth said.

Jackal turned and watched her. "I need you to cut your continuous cyberfeed to Command Central. Even though I don't think they'd care, I don't want some government official getting his jollies watching us through your eyes," she said. "Next, I want you to promise me that you won't bother any of the other women. Many of them have never dealt with a man who wasn't abusing them and they are scared shitless. Some have even been raped a few times. You deal only with me unless one of them talks to you first, understood?"

Jackal nodded slowly.

"Last, I want you to promise you will do exactly as I say during sex. If you start getting too aggressive, I'll put a stop to it and there won't be any more. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Jackal said. "I understand."

Ruth took a deep breath and blew it out through puckered lips. She hadn't been this nervous in years. "Where do you want it?"

Jackal moved closer and gestured to the wall. "Face the wall please," he said.

Ruth wasn't surprised by his request. It took a copperhead a while to get comfortable with regular flesh-to-flesh contact. It helped them cut down on sensory overload if they didn't have to look a person in the eye. She went over and faced the wall, placing her hands against it as if she was going to be searched. A knot of fear tightened in her gut and her lips felt very dry.

Jackal walked up behind her, his breath coming so fast she could feel it against the back of her neck. She waited as tension built in her shoulders and sweat broke out on her palms. Jackal glided his hand under her shirt sliding it along her belly. After a few short strokes, he stopped and let it rest there. Ruth felt the heat from his body as his chest drew closer to her back. He leaned his hips into her, placing his erection against her ass cheek.

When he spoke, his tone was fierce and carried a slight tremor. "You feel that, bitch?" he rasped.

Ruth blinked a few times, struggling not to panic. "Yes," she whispered, pushing her hips back and moving them back and forth across his hard-on.

"You want my cock inside you?"

"Oh yes, Jackal," she said softly. "Please."

He moved his lips against her ear and licked the delicate shell. A delightful shudder rolled down her neck all the way to her sex. Ruth reached down and positioned her hand over his which still rested on her belly. She guided it up under her shirt to her right breast.

That got things going.

Jackal squeezed her breast softly then pinched the nipple. It grew stiff under his touch and he rolled it between his fingers until Ruth let out a tiny gasp of delight. Knowing how desperately hungry he was, she unfastened her pants and slid them down to her ankles. A strange carnal terror tickled the base of her skull as his hand caressed its way down to her pussy. It wasn't that she thought he would hurt her, but he could, and he was capable of anything.

He moved his hand between her thighs and paused. Then his fingers explored the plump outer lips of her pussy pushing deeper into the dark moist channel inside her.

"You feel like fucking heaven to me," he said in a voice thick with passion. His fingers continued to explore her, stroking here, probing there. Ruth felt the hard knot in her belly loosen and was starting to enjoy it. Jackal's touch was surprisingly light and, after several minutes, she was able to let her guard down a little. Jackal buried his face in the back of her neck and she knew without looking he was trying hard to calm down.

A moment later, there was the insistent push of his cock against her, hard and probing, forcing its way in. With her excitement growing, Ruth reached down and helped Jackal inside her by grabbing the thick shaft and holding it at the threshold of her pussy. Then he was all the way inside her, filling her up. She pressed her face into the wall and opened her mouth in a silent cry of pleasure.

Jackal let out a deep, beastly sound that brought goose bumps to her flesh. "How does that feel, you beautiful, hot bitch?" he growled into her shoulder. "You like that?" he said, pumping his cock into her with hard, demanding strokes.

Ruth's sex became a blistering furnace of lust. "It feels good," she whispered, closing her eyes, "so good."

Jackal hammered his cock into her several times, sending plumes of pleasure up from her pussy, throughout her womb. Ruth groaned his name and pushed her hips back into him.

"I'm not going to last," he said, disappointed.

"Don't stop yet, I'm coming. Go faster," she said as sweat trickled down her face.

Jackal's thrusts were so forceful he bumped her off the ground with each stroke. Ruth's climax rolled up from her pussy, through her belly and exploded up her spine. "That's it!" she cried. "That's it, that's it!"

Whispering sexy threats in her ear, Jackal emptied his balls into her hungry cunt. He kept his dick inside her waiting for it to grow soft and slip out. Ruth waited, enjoying the intimacy until he eased out of her. Then she turned around, smiled at him and said, "That was fantastic."

"I want more," he said.

Ruth pulled up her pants and fastened them. She'd love to but she needed to keep Jackal motivated. "After the next mission," she said.

His features darkened. "Fuck that," he said, leaning in to kiss her.

Ruth touched the muzzle of her blaster against his groin. "Later," she said in her best no-nonsense tone. "You get more after the next mission, just like I said."

Jackal held up his hands in surrender and gave her an evil smile. "You're the boss."

"And don't you forget it," she replied.

It was early morning and Jazz entered the watch room still bleary-eyed from sleep. She stopped at the coffee maker which looked like it had been on all night. Lifting the pot, she frowned at the brown sludge on the bottom. She turned to Liz who was watching her intently. She was anxious to be relieved so she could get some sleep after being up all night.

Jazz held up the coffeepot. "You ever believe in turning things off?"

Liz shrugged. "Don't look at me. I don't drink coffee. It must be left over from someone else."

"That's just great," Jazz mumbled, going over to the sink to scrub out the coffee sludge.

"Are you officially on watch?" Liz said hopefully.

Jazz grabbed a wire scrub pad and cleaned out the pot. Then she dried it off on a floral kitchen towel nearby. "Yeah," she said. "Anything interesting happen last night?"

Liz shook her head. "Just a few lone men sniffing around for food. I left some cans out back for them."

Jazz frowned. "You shouldn't do that. It only encourages them to keep coming around."

"I just feel bad for them. Starving to death is a horrible way to die."

"So is being knifed," Jazz quibbled.

Liz got up and stretched. "Ever the optimist, Jazz." She grabbed her bottle of water off the counter and walked out.

Jazz made a new pot of coffee and took her seat at the monitors. She ran through each camera carefully, scanning each area around the bunker to make sure no one was trying to find a way in. Just as she had finished checking the last sector, the coffee gurgled letting her know it was ready.

She got up from her chair and poured herself a cup. Opening several cabinets, she realized there was neither powered creamer nor sweetener. *Just typical for this place. Everything is hard to get, especially sugar.*

Luckily she had been able to get her hands on some vegetable seeds and was hopeful she could grow a garden. Jazz remembered her mother telling her about planting gardens in the spring time before the comet had ruined the soil. Working on this special project made her feel closer to her mom in so many ways. Sadness came over Jazz when she thought of her mother. She died of cancer way too young. Well, it cheered her that at least a few women in the bunker shared an interest in her pet project.

She panned one of the cameras over to where she'd set up her garden and was shocked to see a man crouched in the soil doing *something*. Without thinking of the danger, she put down her coffee, grabbed her blaster and raced out to confront him.

* * * *

"Who the hell are you?" she said, pointing the blaster at the man's head. He dusted the dirt off his hands and stood up, studying her with dark brown eyes. His light brown skin was warmed by a golden hue and Jazz pegged him immediately as a Latino like herself. His eyes fell to the blaster. "I was just looking at your garden. You know nothing is going to grow in this soil, right?"

Jazz glared at him. *What the heck does he know about it?* "Something might grow," she insisted.

He smiled and shook his head as if she'd made a silly joke. "No way. Your top soil is all eroded. But if you're serious about growing your own food, there is much better earth up north."

"How do you know so much about this stuff?"

"I grew up on a farm. I was working on one when the comet hit and everything fell apart." He stared down at the ground and pushed some dirt around with his toe. "I think the planet is healing, but not here."

"I don't believe you worked on a farm," she said, glancing down at a few wilting brown sprouts sticking out of the ground. "You look too young to remember the comet."

"I was forty when it happened and now I'm forty-five. Believe me, I'm older than I look."

"If everything is so wonderful up north, why are you down here?" she asked, lowering her blaster.

"I came back here to look for my brother, but I'm starting to think he must be dead," the man replied. "I'm sorry if I scared you and good luck with your garden."

Jazz watched him walk off through the garbage strewn street. "What's your name?" she called after him.

"Carlos," he said, turning to walk backwards so he could keep talking to her. "What's yours?"

"Jasmina," she said. "Maybe I'll see you around?"

He smiled. "I'm sure you will, Jasmina. In the meantime, stay safe."

Jazz crouched by two backpacks full of food and lifted a few boxes of pancake mix out. She couldn't believe what a great haul this was. It was better than any they'd had in weeks. She stood watching Ruth put everything in the walk-in storage cages. "You got all this with the help of the copperhead?" Jazz asked.

"That's right," Ruth said, checking the expiration dates. Even though most of the stuff they picked up was expired, Ruth marked the can with a black 'x' to remind the person eating it to check for smell and taste.

"Did you have sex with him?" Jazz asked. She tried not to cringe when she said it.

"Yeah, I did," Ruth said with a shrug. "He wasn't bad. All he needs is a little time to get used to it. You know how those copperheads are about being touched," Ruth said.

Jazz fell silent. Every time she talked about sex that horrible memory came back. It crept into her mind and poisoned her thoughts until it ruined her whole day. *The rape.* It had been before she'd found Ruth and the others. She'd been scrounging around after the war, trying to survive on whatever she could find when she was captured by three Hispanic men. They held her captive for over a year, forcing her to pleasure them if she wanted to eat. By the time she'd managed

to escape them, she never wanted another man to touch her ever again.

Then there was Ruth. Jazz knew from the rumors that Ruth had been raped before too but it didn't stop her from enjoying men. In fact, nothing ever stopped Ruth from anything she wanted to do. Not the killing, or the constant danger, or the hunger.

"Some of the women say you were raped once," Jazz ventured.

"All of us here have been raped at some time or another Jazz," Ruth said, tossing the empty pack aside and stepping back to survey the shelves. She dusted her hands off on her shirt.

"Well then, how come it doesn't bother you letting that copperhead fuck you?" Jazz asked.

Ruth turned around and gave her a sober look. "Because the copperhead is a victim of this horrible world, just like we are. He's not a rapist; he's just a soldier corrupted into a product the government wanted. Besides, I'm hoping the sex will help him."

"Help him how?"

"By helping him recover his humanity. Maybe if he can learn to be touched, he can find his way back to the human race," Ruth said.

"It's too late for that. They're too far gone," Jazz said, taking a seat on a five-gallon drum of cooking oil.

"You're wrong, Jazz," Ruth said. "I've seen it happen."

Jazz just laughed once and shook her head. A copperhead was little more than a machine, just like the androids. Everyone knew they couldn't *feel* anything.

Ruth leaned against the cage. "Listen," she said. "Why don't you come with me and talk to him? You'll see he's not the monster you think he is."

Jazz shook her head. The last thing she wanted was to get close to that government freak. "Maybe some other time, Ruthie, okay?"

"Sure, Jazz," Ruth said, getting back to work. "Some other time."

* * * *

Jackal was asleep when someone came bounding into his room. Operating on instinct alone, he pulled his weapon and pointed it at the door. Ruth smiled at him and walked over to the side of the bed. Jackal lowered his blaster.

"You should know better than to come in here like that," he said, annoyed. He flopped back down on the bed and covered his eyes with his forearm.

Ruth was unfazed. She tossed a can of clam chowder on the bed next to him. "You're so grumpy after sex," she teased. "And to think I brought you dinner and everything."

Jackal picked up the can and inspected it. "Thanks." He put it down and stared at her, amazed at the powerful effect she had on him. His cock stiffened and all he could think about was the sex they'd had. He only regretted it hadn't lasted longer, but next time it would. He patted the bed next to him. "Why don't you come to bed? I'll show you how grateful I am."

Ruth shook her head and gave him a dazzling smile. "Oh no, tiger," she said. "I need you to fly us back to the warehouse so we can go shopping again."

Jackal sat up and scowled. "We just went shopping yesterday."

Ruth grabbed his pants from the back of a chair and threw them at him. "We have lots of hungry mouths to feed." She frowned playfully. "I hope you're not growing tired of our deal," she said.

"No," he said. "I'm just not used to watching out for anyone but myself." He sat up and peeled the top off his can of soup. Taking a metal spoon out of his pants pocket, he wiped it on his shirt and dug in.

Ruth folded her arms and waited.

After he finished, he tossed the can in the trash and pulled on his clothes. He joined Ruth at the door and placed his hand on her arm before she could walk out. She glanced at it but didn't move to shrug it off.

"So let me understand how this works. Every time I help you get food, we fuck. Is that right?"

"Yeah," Ruth said. "That's right."

"And how often do we go out?"

"About every day or so. Why?"

"I'm just planning ahead," he said with an amused glint in his eye.

"Any more questions?" she asked.

"Not yet," he said, slipping past her and heading off to fire up the 'copter. He couldn't wait to get back and get rewarded all over again.

The Mongoose made a whole new world of scavenging possible. Buildings previously inaccessible because of destroyed entrances or doors fused shut, could now be entered from the roof. It was safer to climb in from the top than bust in from the bottom because they always had the element of surprise.

This morning Ruth had dragged Jackal out of bed and made him fly out to a three-story grocery store on the outskirts of the city. The place was rumored to be full of restaurant-style canned goods and Ruth had been dying to get there and check it out. Now she finally had her chance.

She climbed out of the 'copter and glanced up to check the weather. The sky was gun-metal gray and dark angry clouds moved swiftly across the sun. She shrugged off the feeling of doom that crept into her shoulders.

Jazz and Zoey climbed out with grim faces, like they were heading for a public execution. "Liz said there's going to be an electrical storm," Jazz complained, checking her weapon to make sure the safety was off.

Zoey chewed her lip and folded her arms. Her lovely dark skin looked dry and tight. Ruth almost let her stay with the Mongoose. Unfortunately she knew they needed everyone if they were to make this shopping trip a real success. Ruth reached down and checked the channel on her radio. "I'm on three," she said. Jazz and Zoey put their radios on the same frequency.

Jazz looked at Jackal. "Are you two staying with the 'copter?"

"Yeah," Ruth said. "You both have been on lots of shopping trips. I think you can do this one on your own. Let me know when the packs are full and Jackal and I will come down to help you carry them."

Jazz nodded, but there were more frown lines around her mouth. "Come on, Zoey," she said, heading for the door.

Zoey glanced at Jackal and Ruth. "What if we run into trouble?"

"Then you give me a shout on the radio," Ruth said.

"What if you don't get there in time?" Zoey persisted.

"Then you'll be dead," Jackal replied without a hint of humor.

Zoey glared at him and walked off to join Jazz. Soon they'd disappeared down the steps of the store and Ruth and Jackal were alone.

He tossed his head in the direction where the two women had gone. "They depend on you for everything?"

"Pretty much," she said.

"I'm surprised you allow that."

"What do you mean?" Ruth asked.

"I mean that it's very inefficient to have all the women count on you for every shopping trip. What if something happened to you? How the hell would they survive?" he said.

"They'd be fine without me."

Jackal grinned and leaned against the Mongoose. "How do you know? You never let them do anything for themselves."

"I'm letting them do this trip by themselves," she said.

"Not really. You're right here to get them out," he countered.

Ruth fell into a brooding silence. Jackal wasn't telling her anything she hadn't been thinking herself. It was true; she had taken on the role of their leader and the role had just stuck. And it was a burden to have everything on her shoulders. She made a mental note to give Jazz and Zoey more responsibility in the future. "So how do you like life in captivity?" she joked, changing the subject.

He ran his gaze up and down her body and Ruth's neck grew warm. She loved that lupine stare he had. "I seem to be adapting."

"I'm glad you decided to join us. I missed having a man around," she said, kicking some white roof rocks around with her toe.

Jackal smiled then let it fade. The change in his demeanor was so sudden Ruth thought he might be having a stroke. He stared at her with those shiny orange pupils and his lips moved, but Ruth heard nothing.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"An android disposal unit just came into the store," he said.

Ruth grabbed her radio and depressed the button. "Jazz, Zoey, someone's entered the building. Where are you?"

The radio crackled. "I'm on the second-floor landing," Jazz said. "And I can see our visitor. It's an android and man, he is one big mother."

"Where's Zoey?" Ruth said, rushing for the door that would take her down into the store.

"She was over by the canned fruit on the first floor—" Jazz swore in Spanish. The radio hissed with static and then cut out for a moment. Then Jazz came back on. "It's too late for her, Ruthie," she said, her voice jumping as if she were running. "The android's got her."

Ruth pulled out her blaster and checked the charge. Jackal grabbed her hand that held the weapon and stopped her in her tracks. She whirled on him furious. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?" she yelled.

"You can't seriously be thinking of starting a shootout with an android, are you?"

"I'm not going to leave Zoey here, Jackal," she seethed.

"Don't be crazy with your life, Ruth," Jackal said in a matter-of-fact tone that made her insane. "That robot's not going to hurt her. All he wants is to use her for bait. When he's done catching his mark, he'll let her go."

Jazz came rushing up the stairs out of breath holding two of the full packs. "He's got her, man! It happened so fast, there was nothing I could do."

Ruth tensed but hesitated.

"They're gone already, Ruthie," Jazz said, reading her leader's thoughts. "And we'd better get out of here too. I saw three dogs coming in just as the android was dragging Zoey out."

Jackal touched Ruth's arm. "There's nothing we can do right now," he said. "We have to leave."

Ruth reluctantly grabbed one of Jazz's packs and rushed toward the Mongoose. Every step she took felt like a betrayal. She wanted to stay and save Zoey but she knew it was suicide.

Her only consolation was knowing that Jackal was right. The android didn't want to hurt Zoey, he just needed some bait to get his mark. Ruth only hoped that when the robot was done with her, he'd let Zoey go unharmed.

The android held Zoey by the arm with a grip that felt like it was going to crush bone. With razors in her belly, she watched Ruth and the others give her one last pitying look from the 'copter window as they took off into the air from the roof. *I'm dead meat and they know it. Why should they stay and risk getting killed too? I'm on my own.* She turned on the machine holding her and drove her fist toward his face. He effortlessly grabbed her fist in mid-swing and held it in his own enormous hand.

From a gorgeous black face, the android stared down at her with eyes the color of the setting sun. Handsome didn't even touch just how *hot* this man was. His skin was the color of milk chocolate and had the radiant glow of vitality and health. His hair was cut short and neatly groomed, and he had a trim sculptured goatee framing his full luscious lips. The android was tall too, standing at least six foot six, and it took Zoey a few seconds to find her courage again.

I've got to get away from this machine before he kills me. Using all of her one hundred forty pounds as leverage, she pulled her arm hard trying to break free of his grip. When that didn't work, she kicked at him, even going so far as to try and kick him in the balls. He knocked her foot away and glared down at her. I guess he has something in his groin to protect after all.

"Let me go!" she screamed, still fighting him.

"Stop," he barked in a voice that was heavy, deep and demanding.

"I haven't done anything wrong! You're holding me for no reason!"

He glanced off and scanned the aisles as if sensing someone coming. "You've broken into a restricted area," he said coolly. "I have the right to detain you." Then after a few seconds of her resistance, he shook her like a disobedient child. "Be silent."

Zoey stopped fighting and listened. She could hear footfalls getting closer to them. *Got to be dogs.*

She smelled the faint aroma of smoke and stared up at the android. A weak stream of gray smoke was coming from his nose as if he'd just taken a puff of a cigarette, but she knew what that was. He was one of the most terrifying of the disposal units: an Inferno series. She knew from the meetings they'd had back at the bunker that this series could turn a human body to ash in a matter of seconds. Zoey swallowed the lump in her throat.

Gunfire exploded around them and the android pulled her against his chest and shielded her body with his own. Zoey let out a small scream. Then the shooting stopped and the android raised his head and blew a river of fire across the store in the direction that the gunfire had come from. Great plumes of red flame licked at the shelves igniting boxes of cereal and canvas bags of rice. For a moment Zoey couldn't breathe from the intense heat, then the android stopped. A furious fire engulfed the aisles and the android began dragging Zoey to the alley exit.

It occurred to Zoey that if the android had wanted to kill her, he'd had more than a million opportunities. But the fact he'd chosen not to, indicated she must have value as bait.

Outside the air was warm and sooty from the fire. She turned on the android and said, "I demand that you let me go."

A slight grin played at the corner of his mouth. "No," he said.

"And why the hell not?"

"Because I need you for something," he replied.

"Like what?"

He sidestepped the question by asking, "Are you injured from the fire?"

Zoey paused for a moment, annoyed. She looked down her body. Everything looked fine to her. "I'm okay."

"Good," he said, grabbing her arm again to drag her a few feet. She dug in her heels until finally he stopped and stared down at her. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Damn right," she said furious. "Why won't you release me? I want to know exactly what your plans are."

"I plan to use you as bait to lure a serial killer," he said, sounding almost bored. "Then I'm going to fry him."

"A serial killer?" she asked. She was getting very spooked now. *Is this android crazy? He must be if he thinks I'm going to sit* back and calmly let him use me to catch his serial killer.

"That's right."

"Can't you use someone else?"

"No," he said. "You're exactly the kind of woman he'd choose for his victim, young and pretty."

Zoey had never thought of herself as pretty. She was strangely flattered he thought so. Hanging out with an android

might be kind of cool. It certainly would be different. "You sure you can keep me safe, android?"

The robot grinned evilly. "My name is Ogun and I *know* I can."

Jackal had been watching Ruth for over two hours. She rushed around the indoor basketball court by herself, faking out opponents and tossing an impressive number of baskets. Ruth may have been in her early forties but she had the energy of a twenty year old. She played like her life depended on it, or rather, someone else's life. He knew she was tortured by the loss of Zoey and blamed herself. This was how she'd chosen to burn off the agony of that capture, by playing her heart out. He could just picture the twists and turns her mind was making as she rushed around the court, trying to think of some way to free her friend.

Jackal didn't offer any words of advice or encouragement. He just sat in the shadows watching her make basket after basket enjoying the athletic grace of her limbs. If she knew he was there, she didn't let on.

He got up and stalked closer, taking a seat on a nearby bench. She ignored him. "Does this help?" he asked her after a moment of silence.

"It helps me," she replied, dribbling the ball in a wide arch and throwing it in the basket. It deflected off the backboard, cleared the hoop and hit the court, bouncing a few times. Then it rolled over to him. He put his boot on the ball to stop it from rolling away. "You play very well."

"How would you know? I'm not playing against anyone but myself."

Jackal playfully knocked the ball from one boot to another. "I can tell by the way you move."

Ruth worked to catch her breath and put her hands on her hips. "You play?"

"No," he said. "I know the rules but I've never played. The labs taught the theory of games, but rarely demonstrated an exercise that didn't have something to do with killing."

She came over and sat next to him. The rich, warm scent of her sweat filled his senses and his hunger for her blazed to life. He closed his eyes and remembered the taste and scent of her flesh and a desperate longing tore at his brain. He needed to be with her again.

"That life must have sucked," she said.

He looked at her and grinned. "Compared to what?"

Ruth smiled and it brightened the room. She shook her head. "You're really a weird one, copperhead."

Jackal licked his lips. "I need to fuck you Ruth," he said.

"I'm not in the mood," she said. There was a hint of anger in her but he suspected it had little to do with him.

"We had a deal."

Ruth stood up and glared at him. "Fuck your deal. One of my girls has been captured, Jackal. Don't you get that?"

"She's in good hands."

"What? She's in the hands of a fire-breathing android. How is that in good hands?" Ruth raged.

"I can have him bring her to a meeting place," Jackal offered.

"Can you convince him to let her go?"

"No," he said. "But at least you will be ablet to talk to her."

Ruth folded her arms, the muscles in her shoulders flexing. "And if you do this little favor for me, I have to fuck you. Is that it?"

Jackal stood up and pushed his anger deep into his soul. "This originally was *your* idea, not mine. If you want me to hit the streets again, just say the word."

Her features softened and she rubbed the back of her neck. Somewhere inside the bunker, a heated argument was starting up. It sounded like Jazz and someone else. "I'm sorry. This isn't about you. I'm just having a bad day. I'd really appreciate it if you could arrange a meeting. Then at least I could make sure that Zoey is alright."

Jackal felt the tension drain from his gut. "Let me contact the android and see what I can arrange."

* * * *

"Before you get your hopes up, you should know that I can summon an android disposal unit," Jackal said as they exited his squad car near a deserted repair station, "but I can't guarantee the android who took Zoey will be the one to show up."

Ruth leaned her belly against the car and rested her forearms on the roof. "I understand. Just try."

Jackal ducked into his car and punched a series of buttons on his transmitter. Then he leaned against the car to wait.

"That's all there is?" Ruth said,

"Did you want me to do a rain dance?"

Ruth smiled in spite of her mood. "No, that won't be necessary." After a brief pause, she asked, "How long before they usually show up?"

"Minutes," Jackal said, gesturing toward the street. Stalking up the road like some mechanized war machine from years gone by was the android. Ruth instinctively stepped back from the car and placed her hand on her blaster. The thing was a massive juggernaut created to look like an African American male with chilling, glowing amber eyes. He was an impressive piece of machinery but the one thing he had that made Ruth's breath catch in her throat was Zoey. The young woman jogged along behind the behemoth like the two had been friends forever. Ruth almost felt foolish for worrying about her.

When the android and Zoey were only a few feet away, they stopped. Ruth let out a tense sigh. "Are you alright, Zoey?"

Zoey grinned, glancing up at the machine next to her. "Sure," she said as if it were a forgone conclusion. "I have an excellent bodyguard."

"We were all so worried about you," Ruth said.

"I was worried about me too, but things are working out. Ogun here," she said, gesturing to the android, "has been doing a great job of looking out for me."

"So you want to stay with him?" Ruth asked.

Zoey looked up at the towering monster who folded his arms across his chest. "Yeah," she said, grinning. "He and I have a lot of work to do. We're going to catch a serial killer."

Ruth stared at her friend and shook her head slowly. Then she glanced back at Jackal who was walking up to join the conversation.

"I take it there is no disposal," Ogun said to Jackal.

"No," Jackal confessed. "Ruth just wanted to make sure the woman you stole was alright." He turned to Ruth. "Are you satisfied?"

Ruth smiled at Zoey. "Yes," she replied. She stared up at Ogun and couldn't believe anyone would *want* to be with him. "Good luck with finding your serial killer, Zoey," she said. "Oh, and good luck with your new *friend*."

Zoey glanced at Jackal and gave Ruth a private wink. "You too, Ruth. And thanks for worrying about me."

Ruth rode along in the car with Jackal staring out the window. She felt better about Zoey and was relieved the woman was alright, but now she felt guilty about Jackal. He'd been as good as his word and done everything she'd asked of him but when he had asked her for sex, she had refused him. In her mind, that was inexcusable.

"I'm sorry about how I acted earlier," she said, watching all the crumbling buildings go past.

He was so quiet she looked over at him. In the dim light of the car interior, he was mysteriously handsome. The only thing marring his good looks was that digital inventory tattoo under his right eye. The lean planes of his face gave him a rugged, savage appearance that aroused something primal inside her. Without warning her emotions grew raw, chafing at the long buried wounds of her life and all she wanted was to be in his arms.

"I'm not sure what that means," he replied.

"You know," she said awkwardly. "I'm sorry I didn't have sex with you when you asked."

Jackal stared at her, the evil copper glint of the computer chip flashing once then disappearing again in the black pools of his pupils. "That's okay."

"Would you like it now?" she asked.

Jackal chuckled and pulled the car into a deserted neighborhood. He parked along the curb and killed the engine. Stretching his arm across the back of her seat, he studied her with a strange mixture of amusement and desire.

Ruth nodded stiffly and shifted around on the seat until her back was to him. She raised her hips and unbuttoned her pants slowing sliding them down her buttocks.

"Wait," he said.

Keeping her grip on her pants, she sat back down and sighed. What does he want now? "How do you want it?" she asked.

Jackal leaned across the seat and grabbed her chin. With gentle force, he pulled her face toward his and she realized he was going to kiss her. Then his lips touched hers and Ruth was terrified by the rush of passion that consumed her heart. She kissed him back, pressing her lips into his as if he were her last salvation before death. The kiss was warmth, need and loving kindness all wrapped into one. It mesmerized her and made her feel like a woman again. She broke contact by leaning back in her seat.

"No one said anything about kissing," she said. "I thought you wanted straight sex."

His eyes were laughing, mocking her. "You asked me how I wanted it," he said, moving closer so he could kiss her again. "Well, this is how I want it." Then he placed his hand behind her head and pulled her into a blistering lip lock that generated so much heat, she started to sweat. Never in her life had a man kissed her like that and *meant* it.

Ruth felt the tiny threads that held her together loosening and her hands started shaking. She turned her head to the side and broke the kiss. "This isn't want I want," she complained. "This is too intense."

Jackal was barely listening to her. He lifted his black t-shirt off his muscled chest and snaked his thick arms around her. His body gave off a very arousing, thick animal scent. Placing his hand on her throat, he caressed her skin with his fingertips. "Kiss me," he demanded.

Ruth was breaking down quickly and was at a complete loss as to what to do. *I can't fall in love with him. He cannot return those emotions.*

"Ruth," he growled, clutching her tight and coming down to claim her mouth with his own. She struggled against him, turning her head from side to side so he couldn't connect with her lips.

"Stop it!" she shouted. "Straight sex—okay, Jackal? That's all or I'm getting the fuck out of this car!"

Without missing a beat, he brutally yanked her pants and underwear off. Ruth twisted under him opening her legs to allow him to access her. *Yes, that's right, sex only.* He unzipped his jeans and released his erection. Grabbing the shaft, he immersed it into her silky flesh and stopped moving.

Ruth wriggled her hips. "What is it?" she said in a breathy whisper.

He stared down at her face, running the back of his fingers along her cheek. It was a quiet, intimate gesture that tore open her soul all over again. She was about to protest, to tell him to get on with the fucking when he leaned down to kiss her again. An avalanche of joy and sorrow filled her chest and for a split second, Ruth didn't dare breathe.

"Kiss me," he said so quietly she almost missed it.

Ruth lifted her hands and ran them into his thick, dark hair. Their lips met and pure sorcery was born. All those years of fear, pain and suffering melted away and became...meaningless. All that mattered, all that held significance was this moment with this wonderful man. The kiss was more meaningful than his cock still buried in her, it was a road map back to normal and Ruth felt like life was finally coming around after a long hibernation.

Then he placed his hands on her buttocks and started thrusting into her. His passion was like a freed animal, it exploded from the depths of him in a series of lusty frantic thrusts that brought her to several desperate orgasms. And when he couldn't hold himself back anymore, he followed her into that satisfying oblivion of ecstasy and release.

The inventory room was a large locked space located in the sublevel of the bunker. Ruth put off bringing Jackal here until she felt sure enough about his temperament to trust him with every last weapon they had. There were new era blasters that could shoot a target over fifty feet away, and old age submachine guns. Everything one could think of for the modern arsenal. Ruth stepped into the room, locking the door behind Jackal.

He moved around the room like a dog exploring a new home: cautious but curious about everything. His eyes swept the weapons and she knew he could ID every one. It was a chilling thought. Jackal glanced at her and said, "Where did you get all this stuff?"

"I've collected it over the years," she said. "What do you think?"

"Very nice. Do you have an inventory list?" he asked.

"No because I'm the only one, other than you, who knows how to handle the types of weapons in the room. I'm always so busy out looking for food, I haven't had a chance to make a list. I was hoping..." she let the sentence drop.

Jack studied her, waiting for her to finish. The black numbers on his cheekbone looked darker than before, making him appear more threatening.

"I was hoping," she continued, "that you could inventory all this and teach the other women how to use them. You know, in case something happens to me."

Jackal took down a Slimline Decimator and admired its sleek design. An icy fear frosted over Ruth's heart. *Will he turn on me?*

He looked over at her and seemed to read her thoughts. "You're a little jumpy," he said, putting the weapon back where he found it.

"Trust doesn't come easy for me," she said.

"Me either," he said with a grin.

She felt a little foolish for thinking he might kill her. If he'd wanted to do that, he'd already had plenty of opportunities.

Jackal folded his arms and leaned against some crates. "There's something about you that bothers me."

"What's that?" she asked, thinking everything about him bothered her.

"Why didn't you move to the Domed City when the world went to shit? You were guaranteed access because you're a veteran. Why live hand to mouth like this?"

Ruth shrugged her shoulders to force some of the muscles to loosen. She took a seat on a gray folding chair. "I didn't go because I met Jazz, Zoey, and a group of women who needed me to help them survive. How could I turn my back on them and leave them to the dogs that roamed the streets? I guess I just felt a sense of responsibility for them."

"Did you ever think about leaving?" he asked.

"Sure, but when it came right down to it, I just couldn't go." $% \label{eq:couldn} % \label{eq:couldn} % \label{eq:couldn}$

He nodded and started walking along the aisles of weapon boxes. A few paces in and he disappeared behind some aisles only to reemerge from another. Finally he stopped and said, "I tried to leave after the first time I had you."

Ruth sighed deeply. It hurt to know sex with her was that forgettable. "What stopped you? The prospect of not getting any more?"

"No," he said thoughtfully. "I finally *felt* something when I was with you. It was the first time in my life I actually felt anything that strong for anyone. Being with you made me part of the human race again. Up until then, I'd only been a casual observer."

"That's great," she said, hoping he'd change the subject. Since there was nothing but pain in her recent past, she hated discussing her feelings.

"Why don't you want to kiss me?" he asked, slowly walking toward her.

Ruth stiffened. "Because it's too intimate for our relationship. What we have is strictly business."

"That's not what I taste on your lips," he said.

"Okay. You've had sex with me twice and now suddenly you know everything about me. Is that right?" she said, annoyed.

He stopped advancing on her and smiled. "I'll do the inventory and the training. But I want kisses for it."

Ruth got up from the chair and gave him the spare key to the arsenal. "Of course you do."

"I want you in my bed tonight," he said, slipping the key into his pocket.

Ruth gave him her coolest stare. "I can't. I have a staff meeting."

"All night long?"

"Well...it might go late. I'm not sure."

"That's bullshit, Ruth. I'll expect you tonight."

"Fine. Tonight," she said, not liking the commanding tone of his voice. "But just in case I get delayed, don't wait up."

Jackal picked a long empty boulevard for this morning's shooting practice. He pulled up in his black squad car with Ruth, Jazz, and Liz, and an arsenal of weapons in the trunk. They all piled out with binoculars in hand scanning the street for any unwanted observers. There was no sign of life anywhere. Jackal opened the trunk and took out a Siren Pulse Rifle, a Zombie Rapid Fire Blaster, and pair of ionic blasters with special power boost capabilities.

Liz came over and smiled down at the weapons with appreciation. "Now that's what I call armed," she said.

Jazz hung back apparently uncomfortable with being this close to a copperhead. Jackal ignored her. He had more important things at hand. He gestured for Ruth to come over and help him with one of the ionic blasters. "You know how to charge this, right?"

"Sure do," Ruth chirped. She grabbed one, squeezed the rubber grip and examined it. "I didn't even remember we had some of these beauties in the storage room." Pumping the prime button on the barrel, Ruth let the charger power up until its high-pitched whine stopped, indicating it was ready to fire.

Jackal finished getting the other weapons ready. When the Pulse Rifle was armed, he put the safety on. "Jazz," he said. "You're first."

The Hispanic woman stood there with her arms folded. "I'd rather go last."

Ruth came over to her friend. "What's the problem?"

Jazz shook her head. "I just can't get used to him, man," she said, staring at Jackal. "I can't help but feel that he knows everything about me."

"Like what exactly? Are you talking about the rape?" Ruth asked.

"No. He doesn't scare me like that," Jazz said. "He scares me because he could tell me right now when I'm going to die."

Ruth squinted at her. "Are you shitting me?"

"I never told you everything about my mother. My mom died of cancer and I've been having...pains," Jazz said.

"Why didn't you say something before? Have you been to the clinic?" Ruth asked, getting nervous.

"No," Jazz said. "I've been too afraid to go."

"Jazz!" Ruth shouted, upset.

Jackal stalked up to them. "What's going on?"

"Jazz is afraid she might have cancer," Ruth said. There was a streak of tension in her voice Jackal hadn't heard before. She was obviously afraid for her friend's health.

"Let me scan you," Jackal said to Jazz.

Her dark eyes darted back and forth. She both wanted him to and didn't want him to. "What will happen if you find something? Are you going to kill me?"

"No," Jackal said. "But the scan will be uncomfortable."

Liz joined the group. "If you think something's wrong, you need to let him scan you, Jazz."

"Okay," Jazz said, casting a wary look at Jackal. "What do you want me to do?"

"Just hold very still," he said. Ruth and Liz moved away from their friend so they wouldn't interfere with the scan. Jackal focused his mind and started the program. His gaze began at Jazz's head and worked its way down her face and neck. The woman was uncomfortable but held still.

Jackal forced his gaze deep, penetrating her rib cage and her heart. Jazz leaned her head back and gasped, her body trembling under the intense heat the scan generated. He went lower, searching her intestines and womb. Then he found it, a small polyp in her uterus. Pushing the scan as deep into the tissue as he could, he penetrated the growth and found it to be benign. He swept the rest of her body and found nothing unusual.

Jazz stood there staring at him with terror in her eyes. Jackal rotated his neck from side to side to loosen the muscles. "You're healthy. The only thing I could find was a small polyp in your uterus. It's benign."

Ruth sighed with relief. "Thank God."

"You know, copperhead, I didn't like you when I first met you," Jazz said. "But I guess you're alright."

Jackal smiled bitterly. The only person's opinion that mattered to him was Ruth's, and now he was a hero. "Great. Can we get back to the weapons practice?"

Everyone resumed their positions and picked up a weapon to test fire down the street. Ruth stood off to the side leaning against the car. Jackal moved up next to her and placed his lips up against her ear. "Did I do good?" he asked.

She grinned at him. "You did very good."

"Can I have a kiss?"

Ruth boldly cupped his balls, squeezed them and gave him a heated kiss. Then she stopped to go take her turn to fire a weapon. Jackal watched the smooth easy movement of her hips and rubbed the outside of his pants. Ruth didn't know it yet, but tonight was going to be one long night.

* * * *

It was well after midnight when she arrived. Jackal could hear her moving through the darkness of his room, advancing slowly, cautiously, hoping he would stay asleep so she wouldn't have to face him. He opened his eyes and saw her with his infrared vision. Her image was crystal clear and he watched her lovely mouth dip into a frown when she realized he'd spotted her.

"I've been waiting a long time for you," he said, pulling the blankets back in invitation.

"I thought you'd be asleep," she replied.

"I was. You're noisier than an avalanche."

"At least you haven't lost your sense of humor," she said, unbuttoning her pants and sliding them off. She left them on the floor and came over to sit on the edge of the bed. His desire, no—need for her was pushing him to be aggressive but he held himself in check. Grabbing the hem of her t-shirt, she peeled it off her torso letting her plump breasts free.

Jackal looped his arm around her waist and pulled her down onto the bed. Since they'd started having sex everything had changed for him. Where once there was a cold emptiness in his soul, now there was a constant fire. And that fire burned much hotter when Ruth was around. He wanted to learn every last secret she had, he wanted to decipher her like

a forbidden code, and he needed to unravel her until he reached the basic core of her being.

He kissed her and felt her cold stiffness resisting him in that passive-aggressive way of hers. He stopped and pulled back but kept his arms around her. "Are you sorry you struck this deal?"

"No," she said. But in her voice was a tiny ribbon of suffering.

Jackal ran his hand down her body, pausing to caress her heavy breasts. Then he ventured further until he reached her vaginal lips. She parted her legs for him. Within those folds, her truth was laid bare. She was slick with arousal and a dark, untamed part of his brain savaged him with need. He pushed her back onto the bed and climbed up on top of her, nestling his hips between her thighs.

"Do you like it when I fuck you?" he said, his voice ragged from lust.

Ruth looked deep into his eyes and smiled. "Yes, Jackal," she said softly. "I love it when you fuck me."

Something within him shattered like broken glass. Taking the shaft of his cock, he seated it inside her, pushing through the moist walls of her pussy until he couldn't go any deeper. Ruth gasped and arched her back, lifting her hips as he drove his cock in and out of her. Gone was the wall she'd been so careful to keep between them. Now she was his, as completely as if they were man and wife.

* * * *

For Jackal, love flooded in on a river of pain. It emerged from a heartache buried inside him that had never known the light of day until today. His profound loneliness had been such a part of his being that he hadn't even known it was destroying him. But then Ruth came into his life and she became his life.

Watching Ruth sleep next to him brought everything to the surface in rippling waves of affection. Reaching out he delicately toyed with a curl in her bangs. He wanted her with a desire he'd never felt for anyone or anything. She was the only beam of light in an otherwise dark and destructive existence. She brought lightness to his soul that he never again wanted to live without.

Ruth stirred and opened her eyes, smiling at him. "Good morning," she whispered.

Jackal replied the only way he could that truly had meaning. He placed his lips against hers and kissed her, letting his heart flow with love. Ruth stiffened at first then surrendered, kissing him back and scooting closer. Stretching out, she wrapped her arms around him. He broke the kiss and cradled her face in his hands. She blinked, surprised by his unexpected tenderness.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No," he said. "Everything is right for once."

She closed her eyes and nuzzled his cheek. "You say the nicest things."

"I love you, Ruth," he said.

Ruth opened her eyes in surprise and stared at him. "Wow. I wasn't expecting that one."

"I'm not kidding. I mean it."

Burying her face in his neck, she said, "God I wish I didn't, but I love you too, Jackal."

Ruth sat on a countertop in the large commercial kitchen eating a can of chili. As with most of the things she ate, she wolfed it down without really tasting it. It was an old habit that came from never knowing when the next crisis would come knocking on her door. If she didn't eat fast, she probably wouldn't get to finish whatever it was she was enjoying. Jackal, on the other hand, took his time with everything. He ate slow, savoring every morsel as if it was his last. He was like that with sex too. He seemed to savor every sensation, every kiss, and every orgasm. That was one of the things she liked most about him, he never seemed panicked or rushed.

Jackal stood near her with a can of spam taking great care to cut off bite-sized pieces with the edge of his fork. She watched the muscles in his jaw work as he chewed and swallowed, clearing his palate completely before putting another piece of meat in his mouth.

Jazz came in keeping her nervous gaze on Jackal as if he was going to jump on her at any moment. "Can I talk to you about something?" Jazz asked Ruth.

Ruth glanced at Jackal. "Sure. Go ahead."

Jazz frowned. She'd apparently been hoping Jackal would leave them alone. "We took in two ladies last night who said there was a hospital on Vine and Redwood. They said the place was untouched except for a few mutants living in the basement. Maybe we should go by and grab us some supplies. We sure could use some more medicine for the clinic."

Ruth finished the last of her chili and placed the can on the counter next to her. "You know that hospital?" she asked Jackal.

He cut another small piece of spam off and slipped it into his mouth. He chewed once, then paused and said, "Yeah." His jaw worked a few more times and he swallowed. "That's a bad place, Ruth. Those mutants are very unpredictable."

"But is there still medicine there?" she asked.

Jackal glanced from Jazz to Ruth. His face was grim. "As far as I know."

Ruth jumped down and dusted her hands off on her pants. "Then we're going."

"Me too?" Jazz asked.

"No, just me and Jackal," Ruth said.

Jazz glared at Jackal as if this was his decision. "Why won't you take me with you?"

Ruth touched her friend's shoulder. "Because if something happens to me, I need to you to take care of these people. Will you promise me that you'll do so?"

Jazz let her shoulders slump and nodded. Then she looked up as if something had just occurred to her. "There's something else those women said," she said, now addressing both Ruth and Jackal. "They said there's talk of a new colony just north of here. It has clean water and they've just grown their first crops. Anyone is welcome. The women were on their way there when they almost got captured by a group of dogs."

"Who's running this colony?"

"They didn't know but if they're right, this could be a new beginning for all of us," Jazz said.

Ruth glanced at Jackal to see if he had any additional information to share. He finished off his meal and tossed the can in the trash. "The only safe colony I know of is the Domed City."

"Well," Ruth said, feeling that old fear rear its ugly head. "We're going to need to check it out before we pack up everything and take off to someplace that *might* be a new colony."

"But, Ruth, if it's *true*!" Jazz said, her eyes sparkling with joy.

"I really hope it is, but first we need to get some of that medicine. Then when Jackal and I come back, we'll see about planning a trip up there. But I'm not promising anything."

Jazz fell into a brooding silence.

"When are we going to the hospital?" Jackal said, breaking the tense silence.

"Right now," Ruth said as she checked the charge on her blaster. "Coming?" she tossed over her shoulder as she headed for the door.

Jackal jumped off the counter and headed out behind her.

Built in the 1930s, Gordon Memorial Hospital had begun its life as a mental asylum and it certainly looked the part. Its imposing stone façade was originally crimson brick but was now weathered to a more earthy brown. The windows were smaller than most modern hospitals and Jackal felt a little claustrophobic just thinking about going inside.

Keeping a close watch for roaming gangs, Jackal coasted his patrol car around the rear and parked by the emergency entrance. The double glass doors were shattered but most of the interior looked well preserved. He looked over at Ruth who was staring at the entrance, frowning. He didn't blame her. He wasn't too keen on going in himself.

He stepped out of the car and placed his hand on the blaster holstered to his hip. Behind him, he heard Ruth getting out of the car. She moved up next to him.

"It's probably best if we stick together," Jackal said, hoping she didn't notice the edge in his voice.

She nodded. "Can you switch to infrared vision on demand? I think its pretty dark in there."

Jackal switched his mental protocol and his sight changed to a display with much clearer images. Reaching down to his holster, he pulled his blaster and kept it pointed at the ground. Inside his head, his sensors were going nuts, indicating there were people inside. Not a lot, but enough to trip his motion alarm. "I have movement," he said.

They walked through the entrance, their boots crushing broken glass underfoot. "Is the movement close?" Ruth asked.

"No," Jackal said. "Just stay alert."

Ruth rushed to the main counter and crouched low keeping her weapon at the ready. Jackal kept his back to the wall, maintaining the perfect position to cover her if he needed to. After a few seconds of hearing nothing, he moved to another position in the hall. Although there was no electricity, the hospital was fairly well lit with daylight spilling in through the windows.

Ruth rushed up next to him, her weapon pointed at the ceiling. "Where do they keep the drugs in this place?"

"Most keep them by the nurses' station," he said, crawling along with his back against the wall. "I think I see one up ahead."

Remembering her training, Ruth took up an excellent position to cover Jackal as he crept into the station. It was an oval area surrounded by counters but not a lot of places to seek cover. Jackal felt very exposed here and hurriedly pulled open drawers and cabinets looking for a key to the medication room located to the rear of the station.

"I saw something," Ruth said, crouching low and pointing her weapon in the direction of a dark corridor.

Jackal stepped up his search. He pulled out chairs, ransacked desks, until finally he opened a cabinet that had several keys with labels. He busied himself looking for the right one when he heard someone running. A second later he heard one pulse from a blaster and came around to see Ruth still crouched and watching. The stench of burnt flesh oozed into the air.

"What did you shoot?" he asked.

She pointed toward the dark corridor. "Someone was running at me and I think he had a knife."

Jackal scanned the hall and could clearly make out the body of a large man lying on his belly. He wore a green surgical mask and in his right hand he held a scalpel.

"Can you see him?" she asked.

"Yeah," Jackal said, feeling the tiny hairs on the back of his neck stand up. "You got him, Ruth. Hopefully there aren't any more."

"Did you find the key?" she asked, not taking her eyes off the corridor.

Without answering her, Jackal ran for the door and tried the key in the lock. The door opened stiffly, making an eerie creaking sound. He entered and suddenly realized he didn't have a clue what to take. Grabbing a nearby plastic bin, he opened the locked glass cabinets and just started throwing everything he could into it.

Another blast sounded from outside.

"You okay, Ruth?" he called, still scooping everything he could into the bin he held under his arm.

"For now but you'd better hurry up because we are definitely not alone!" she called back.

Using his free arm, Jackal raked the rest of the meds in and raced out the door. Then he saw them.

He'd heard stories of mutants but he'd never seen them up close. They were terrifyingly deformed with misshapen noses and lips, and eyes as dull as sand. Most were dressed in hospital garb; some in gowns, others in lab coats, more in scrubs. Their faces were twisted into a type of insane glee and none were afraid of the blasters he and Ruth pointed at them. As they advanced from the darkened corridor in a mob, Jackal fired off a few warning shots to give Ruth time to get out of the spot she was in.

It didn't do any good.

Realizing that the mutants were too far gone to care about being shot, Ruth bolted from her cover and tore over to where Jackal was. Facing their advancing enemy, Jackal and Ruth backed toward the emergency entrance, firing their weapons. But their attackers either didn't care about dying or didn't understand it because no matter how many of them fell, they just kept on coming.

Ruth and Jackal bolted for the door. Once out in the street they ran for the car. Jackal tossed the medication bin into the trunk and threw the keys to Ruth. "You drive!" he shouted.

Ruth didn't hesitate. Jumping through the open driver's window, she started the squad car and flung the passenger door open for Jackal. He threw himself inside with such force he thought he'd broken his collar bone. "Shit!" he snarled as he struggled to sit up in his seat. Ruth gunned the engine and a sudden sensation of speed sent him sprawling halfway into the rear of the car.

He glanced out the back window and watched the last of the mutants slow to a jog and give up their pursuit. "Good driving," he said, clawing his way back into his seat.

Ruth scowled. "Not good enough I'm afraid," she said. "Put your seatbelt on."

Jackal buckled himself in and Ruth slammed on the brakes. A mutant who'd been hanging onto the roof tumbled

down over the hood and fell in front of the car. Ruth slammed the car into reverse and stomped the accelerator leaving the creature behind before he could climb up on the car again.

Jackal smiled at her. "Like I said. Good driving."

The victim couldn't have been more than twenty. She lay in the alley like a discarded doll, her neck twisted in an unnatural angle. Her brown eyes were glass, open and staring at a cruel dying world that no longer made any sense. Zoey had seen death before, starvation, beatings and stabbings, but this was more disturbing because of its senselessness. Why would anyone want to kill a woman when they were so scarce?

Ogun crouched by the body, his huge hands exploring the injured neck. His glowing amber eyes were distant—processing the crime—so eerie they reminded her of ghosts haunting an empty house. "Her body is still warm," he said. "This happened recently."

Zoey scanned the alley looking for any hint to where the murderer might have gone. There was a broken window behind a green dumpster. "Maybe he went through there," she offered.

Ogun stood and walked over to the window. He stood before it, studying the damage and nodded. "Yes," he said finally. "I think you're right." He continued down the alley looking for a door.

She hated to admit it to herself, but Zoey loved being with the handsome android. He never spoke down to her—in fact he rarely spoke at all—but he often listened to what she

had to say. He was also very protective, always keeping an eye out for danger, which she found incredibly sexy. It was kind of like walking around with a lion by her side. Unlike when she lived with the other women at the bunker, she never felt like a child when she was with him. And, best of all, she had a renewed sense of purpose as she helped him find this asshole serial killer.

Zoey heard a loud metallic creak and glanced up to see Ogun prying a service door open. She jogged to catch up with him and followed him into the gloomy back room. The space smelled horrible, like rotting food and moldy water. Zoey breathed through her mouth in order to avoid the stench. Just ahead of her, Ogun's massive frame led the way, tossing heavy furniture out of his way with ease. She winced as a wooden desk crashed into the wall, smashing several drawers.

"He's close," Ogun said without turning around. He was like a dog on a scent, moving faster and faster as he closed in on his query.

"You're making so much noise, I'd be surprised if he's still here," she said.

Ogun stopped, turned around and stared at her. He seemed genuinely surprised, as if the thought of scaring the killer off never occurred to him. Zoey shrugged as if to say she was sorry for doubting him.

Then he was off again, entering an old office with boarded-up windows. It looked like someone had been here all night. On the floor was a soiled mattress with a blue blanket rumpled on top. There were a few empty bags of chips, one can of vegetable soup, and a disposable razor. The whole room stank like stale sweat and body odor.

"Guess our friend doesn't like to bathe very often," she said.

Ogun went to an open window and stuck his head out. "He was here recently," he said. "He'll be back."

"Why don't we stop by in the morning and pay him a surprise visit?" Zoey said.

"I think that's a good idea," Ogun said. Then he looked her up and down. "Are you hungry?"

Zoey smiled. "Starving."

"Let's go and find you something to eat," he said.

"What about you?" she asked. "Don't you have to recharge or something?"

Ogun laughed and it was a deep, warm baritone. "No."

"Oh, so where are we going to eat?"

"The government has set up a communal soup kitchen only a few blocks from here. We can get you a hot meal there."

Jackal sat in a dark corner of the room and quieted his mind. It had been weeks since he'd contacted Central Command and he knew they'd have tons of questions for him. With an unexpected jolt of light, the connection to the main terminal was made and information poured into his head. A sudden headache seized him and his right eye twitched. Data streamed in without hesitation, giving him updates on local criminals, rare communication from some senior officer Jackal had never met, and forecast reports. The latter was the most interesting since it told him the earth's atmosphere was getting better.

That was good news for everyone.

The headache faded and Jackal set about searching for data on the farming colony Jazz had told them about. Much to his chagrin, Central Command had very little. The only information he could get was there were now two official safe zones. One was the Domed City and the other was a place classified as New Eden. He tried to access the personal files but there was nothing. Ever since the last earthquake, many of the more powerful systems had been buggy and unreliable.

Jackal opened his eyes, cutting off the communication. That alone told him the old order was crumbling. In the old days he never would have been able to do that. They would have brought him back into line with a brain zap and called him in. But the only thing he got now for his disobedience was deafening silence on the nets.

Cold isolation gripped him. It was hard facing the fact that everything he'd ever known was crumbling around him. He ran his fingers into his hair, raking it back from his forehead. All his life he'd been raised and trained to work exclusively for Central Command. It was all he'd ever known. While other men were exploring the joys of sex and sports, Jackal was training how to kill with his bare hands.

Unable to face the truth, he got up and paced the room. He wanted to run but knew there was nowhere to go. The truth was all around him, everywhere he looked. The sterile, controlled world he had been a part of was dying and he was going to have to find some way to stay relevant.

His thoughts quickly turned to Ruth. She was in him like a narcotic. He more than loved her; he worshiped her. She was what kept him sane and it ran much deeper than just sex. Being with her, being a part of her, and being buried inside her was all he ever wanted. He wished for a life where they could just be a man and a woman and not the fucking saviors of all these broken, tired people.

Pacing the room he looked for any type of distraction. Picking up two small knives, he threw one of them at a dartboard on the wall hitting the bull's eye perfectly. His skill saddened him. He was the perfect killer but he didn't know how to love a woman. That's what Central Command had taken from him that he could never figure out. They had taken his humanity.

There was a soft knock on the door and Ruth entered. She held a bottle of red wine in her right hand and had two plastic cups in her left. She held the bottle up and smiled. "I don't drink much but I thought you might like one."

He sat down on a weapons chest and toyed with the other knife. "That would be great."

Ruth uncorked the bottle and poured him a small cup. She walked over and handed it to him. He put the knife down next to him and took the wine. Jackal sipped it and said, "Not bad."

She sat on the floor in front of him and crossed her legs. She took a drink and placed the cup in front of her. "What's wrong, aside from the obvious?"

"The truth?" he asked.

She stretched her legs out. "I think I can take it."

"I feel like you're holding back from me, like a disease you don't want to catch."

Ruth rolled her neck on her shoulders. "That's not it, Jackal. I've just known a lot of pain and I'm cautious."

"What kind of pain?" he asked, tossing back the rest of his wine.

"I lost my husband during the war. That kind of pain," she said.

Jackal was quiet for a long time. Then he said, "I'm more attached to you than I want to be."

Ruth watched him with eyes that sparkled like green jewels. She got up off the floor and knelt in front of him, running her hands over his thighs. Her hands trailed up his hips, belly and chest until they ran into his hair. She pulled him down and claimed his mouth in a wild, heated kiss. Jackal kissed her back, pushing his lips into hers and crushing her body into him. He never got tired of being close to her and he

wanted this moment to last. He wanted all their moments together to last.

She nuzzled his neck and whispered, "I think I like your attachment to me."

"I don't," he replied flatly.

Ruth leaned back from him and studied his face. Her brow wrinkled. "So why don't you leave?"

"Because you've ruined me," he said. "If I had to go out there again without ever coming home to you..." He squinted off at the door as if a dark future was waiting right there in the flesh. "Well, let's just say my end wouldn't be a hard decision to make."

Ruth placed her fingers over his lips. "Jackal, don't ever talk like that, okay? Now are you going to talk all night or are we going to make love?"

Ruth had loved a few men in her life but her feelings for Jackal were unmatched. He lay down on the bed and pulled her on top of him, running his fingers through her hair. Staring down into his eyes, she caught the glimmer of copper light within his pupil and wondered if Central Command was still trying to give him orders.

She softly kissed him on the side of his mouth. "Does Central Command still send you assignments?"

Jackal ran a finger along her cheekbone and down her nose. "Sometimes, but I never check my messages anymore."

"Aren't you afraid they might come looking for you?"

"No." He moved his lips up to trace her jaw. "No. They don't have the resources anymore. I've been ignoring them for a while now and they haven't even sent a reprimand. I think the messages are just spit out at random by the struggling mainframes. No one at Central Command is keeping track of anything anymore. Everyone's too busy just trying to survive."

Ruth smiled sadly. "Even us."

Jackal slid his tongue into the curl of Ruth's ear, sending ripples of delight down her neck. "Maybe we should think about checking out that colony, New Eden," he whispered.

Ruth ran her hands up his chest and tried to quell the unease that swirled inside her. *He and Jazz are right. We need to go and check it out. Maybe it is the lifeline we've all been looking for.* "The truth is I'm afraid it's a dog trap. I couldn't survive without my freedom, Jackal."

He played with a lock of her hair. "You know I would die before I let anything like that happen to you."

She smiled and nuzzled his neck. "That's very noble of you, but I'm trying to keep us *all* out of danger."

"What you're trying to do is impossible, Ruth," he said. "You can't eliminate all risk from your life or anyone else's. It's noble to try, but don't give up the possibility of a future just because you think it might be a trap." He stroked his hands up and down her back as she rested her weight on top of him. "If you're that spooked about it, why not just let me go alone?"

She propped herself up and stared down at him. "Because I don't want to miss you."

He stared at her. It was a long, penetrating stare that brought goose bumps to her flesh. Then he pulled her down into a devastating kiss. Her heart filled her chest with an aching longing. Jackal was tearing down every defense she put up to keep from getting too close to him and she loved him for it. His tongue moved past her lips and caressed hers, igniting her passion to a whole new high.

Ruth gave up on control and wrestled him out of his clothes. She kissed and explored every part of his stunning body, making sure to linger by his inner thighs. She teased the skin near his balls with her tongue, tracing small circles around his scrotum. Jackal groaned her name and thrust his hips into the air. She took her time teasing him, sucking his

testicles, and eventually making her way to his thick, stiff penis. After a few moments sucking and licking it, he pulled her up and laid her on the bed on her belly. Taking several pillows, he propped her hips up and opened her labia.

He took his time pleasuring her, nibbling and teasing, driving her as insane with lust as she'd done to him. Then he penetrated her, shoving his cock into her and pounding out a hard, steady rhythm. Each stroke of his magnificent rod was another lesson in passion. Her climaxes were desperate, punishing things that robbed her mind of reason and her lungs of breath.

Ruth never wanted it to end.

Spent and damp from exhaustion, they lay entangled in each other's arms watching the ceiling fan move in its slow easy rotation.

"Do you think about him a lot?" Jackal asked her out of the blue.

"Who?" she said, straining her neck to look at him. "My dead husband?"

"Yes."

"Sometimes. Why? Does that make you jealous?" she asked.

He ran his fingertips along her neck and was quiet for a time. "I don't know. I guess not."

She let out a laugh. "Don't be jealous. He's been dead and buried a long time."

"I just want you to love me as much as you did him," Jackal said.

Ruth's eyes started to sting. "Oh, Jackal," she said with much more emotion than she'd intended. "I love you much, much more."

Jackal didn't say a word. All he did was squeeze her tighter.

Growing up in the labs, life had been completely structured and predictable. There simply were no surprises. Everything he did, from the moment he got up, was dictated. Get up, eat, weapons practice, attend school until three, then more weapons practice. Over the years of indoctrination, Jackal had internalized this schedule and more or less adhered to it even now at the bunker, which prided itself on not having any structure at all.

But with Ruth spending more time with him, he'd gotten off his rigid schedule so he could spend time alone with her in the mornings. Just like now. He had his arms around her, and her breasts against his chest, unable to believe the intensity of emotion he felt for her. This must be what romantic love was, this intense, giddy emotion that left him breathless and wanting more. How could he describe to anyone what this felt like? Every day they spent together his emotions grew stronger and more intense.

Looking down into her sleeping face, he tried to memorize all her unique features. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever laid eyes on, even if his experience with other women was limited due to their scarcity. Unable to resist, he moved his lips over her long lashes and softly kissed her eye-

lids. A tender smiled curved her lips and she looked up at him. "You're up early," she said.

He grunted his agreement. "Tell me again that you love me," he said.

"I love you," she said, running her hands up his muscular arms.

"I love you too," he said, the words sounding strange and foreign to his own ears.

Ruth blinked at him. "You're very affectionate today."

"I wanted to tell you how I felt."

She responded by curling up tighter against him. Suddenly her radio crackled. Liz's voice came over the garbled connection. "Ruth? Can you come outside for a minute? I have something to show you."

Ruth groaned and grabbed the unit. "I'll be right there."

The earth was still contaminated. Ruth crouched next to Liz watching as she pulled a skinny, black carrot out of the ground. It had been like this for over two years now. Plant some test crops, assign a few women to take care of them, wait and watch. Then the inevitable disappointment. Ruth was so crestfallen she could barely contain her despair. She took the carrot from Liz and stood up. She felt sorry for the poor thing and almost regretted they'd even tried to grow food in this poisoned soil.

She sensed Jackal come over and stand behind her. She didn't have to tell him what she was holding, he knew. He'd probably known what would happen even as they planted the seeds. But Ruth had to try; finding life had become something of an obsession.

He took the carrot from her and tossed it on the other ruined vegetables sticking out of the ground like weeds. Liz wandered off, shaking her head at Jazz who'd planted the garden and tried so hard to make life out of so much death. A few other women walked away like mourners from a gravesite.

"We have to go and check out New Eden," Jackal said, standing close enough to Ruth so he wouldn't be overhead by the others.

Ruth forced her disappointment down into the dark place in her soul where she kept such things and stared up at the amber sky. She remembered a time when the sky was blue and not always overcast with dark orange clouds. She sighed deeply. "I just don't know…"

"Well, I do," he said. "This place is death, Ruth. We're all going to die here if we don't get out, or at least try."

She gestured helplessly at the ruined crops. "How can you believe that a place like New Eden exists? What makes you think that everything isn't like this?"

"Maybe it is, but what have we got to lose?"

"Don't be so narcissistic to think these people won't find a way to survive without you."

She glared at him. *Is that why I'm so reluctant?* Ruth thought back to Zoey. Had she babied the young woman too much? Perhaps she had. Zoey seemed to be thriving out on her own. "I think I'm just afraid of losing control."

"You don't have control," he said. "None of us do."

She grinned and leaned against the bunker's brick wall. "I mean, I like the *illusion* of control."

Jackal folded his arms and watched Jazz wander off, disappearing back into the bunker. She was the most devastated by the ruined crops. She'd tended them so carefully it almost didn't seem fair. Ruth studied Jackal and knew he was thinking this was no way for anyone to live. "We have to try, Ruth," he said.

Ruth held up her hands in surrender. She had to start getting out of her comfort zone or pretty soon she wouldn't want to go out at all. She tossed up her hands in surrender. "Okay," she said. "I assume we're taking your car."

"It's got the biggest trunk to store supplies." He took her by the hand and kissed her on the forehead. "Don't worry so much. Just think of it as a honeymoon road trip."

* * * *

"Who's going to be in charge when you leave?" Liz said as they all sat around the meeting table discussing her departure to New Eden.

Ruth glanced at Jazz. "I was thinking Jazz would be able to hold things together while I'm gone. She's good with weapons and knows the scavenging routine. She'd be the most stable choice."

Everyone was silent for a few tense seconds while they digested the possibility. Then Liz piped up and said, "I think she'll be fine." The others nodded in agreement and Jazz beamed. The vote of confidence was exactly what she needed.

Ruth tossed her head at Jackal who sat in a corner with his boots propped up. "Jackal has already trained a number of you on blasters and he's completed the inventory on the weapons' room. You are more than prepared to defend yourselves if anything should happen. Any other questions?"

"When will you be back?" Jazz asked.

"As soon as we can. Jackal guesses it should take a little over a week," Ruth replied. "Anybody else?" No one said a word but they were all fidgeting. Everyone was nervous. "All right then," she said. "Then I guess we'll see you all when we get back."

The Bohemian was one of the grandest hotels in the city. The lobby alone was as large as an emperor's throne room and most of the modern design furniture was still in good shape. Even in its current state of neglect it still inspired awe and respect with its crystal cut light fixtures, oriental design rug, and smooth polished wall paneling. Just being here made Zoey feel like she was invading a king's tomb.

"What are we doing here?" she asked Ogun as he stalked ahead of her.

He turned around, looking past her to sweep the room for danger. When he was satisfied, he said, "I thought you might enjoy sleeping in a bed for a change."

She put her hands on her hips and eyed him up and down. "Are you talking about one bed or two?" she asked. Not that she minded sleeping in a bed with this drop-dead gorgeous android, she just wanted to clarify what the expectations were up front.

A private grin played at the edge of Ogun's mouth. "One bed."

Zoey wasn't a virgin, but sleeping with an android seemed a little kinky to her. "Can I do anything I want to you?"

"Anything," he said.

She smiled and strolled over to the stairs. "Okay then," she said. "Let's go."

* * * *

Ogun's body was a masterpiece of masculine form. He took his clothes off slowly, carefully letting her take in every square inch of him. His arms were huge thick slabs of muscle marbled with bulging veins. His chest was massive and powerful, swollen from his torso as it blended into the knotted muscles of his ribs and gut. But his cock was perhaps the most impressive muscle of all, standing erect and proud, an impressive twelve inches and shockingly plump.

"May I touch it?" Zoey asked, staring longingly at his penis.

He walked up and stopped right in front of her. "Please do."

Zoey extended her hand and wrapped it around the swollen shaft. It almost seemed to grow larger in her hand. She squeezed it and felt liquid lust fill her pussy.

Ogun reached out and slid Zoey's t-shirt off. It came away from her breasts snugly, making them bounce as he pulled it free. Her nipples peaked, becoming more sensitive to touch.

Zoey climbed up over Ogun's massive body. "There's only one thing I want," she said in a husky whisper.

"What's that?" he asked, running his hands up her spine.

"I don't want you to touch me. I just want to touch you. Agreed?"

Ogun nodded his agreement but she could tell he was confused.

Zoey ran her hands over every magnificent part of his frame. She paused at his nipples, dragging her fingers over the hard pebbles. Then she placed her mouth over one and suckled. Ogun reacted by gasping and slightly thrusting his hips up. Zoey leaned back on her haunches and smiled. "What a good boy you are. Let's see how long you can keep your promise."

Zoey had a wonderful time torturing Ogun with every dirty trick she could think of. She tickled his balls with her tongue so long she thought he was going to lose his load several times. But the android held up well and, true to his word, didn't put a hand on her. After almost an hour of teasing him, she grinned and said, "Would you like to fuck me now?"

"Oh yes," he said, his voice dark and sexual like a purring lion.

"Then what are you waiting for?" she asked, lying back on the bed.

Ogun moved between her legs and buried his tongue into her pussy. He plunged it in deeply, using it as a cock substitute and sending Zoey into spasms of unbridled lust. Placing his hands under her buttocks, he parted her vaginal lips with his thumbs and pushed her over the edge of passion. Zoey screamed, thrusting her hips up to meet his relentless mouth, coming over and over again until she thought she would pass out if he didn't stop.

"Ogun," she panted when he'd finally given her a small break. "Please, let me rest for just a few minutes."

He ignored her pleas. Lifting her legs high, he slipped into her slick channel and took her like a mating bull. Zoey climaxed immediately, straining to get more of his luscious cock inside her. Never had anything felt as great as this. Zoey wasn't sure what this new step in their relationship meant,

but she was sure of one thing: no mortal man would ever be able to match her android lover.

Ruth hung her head out the window, enjoying the wind as it tousled her hair. It had been a long time since she'd gotten out of the city and there was a definite feeling of liberation watching the buildings grow smaller in the side mirror. Jackal sat next to her looking desperately sexy in blue jeans and a brown t-shirt. Ruth was surprised he had decided not to wear his uniform but she suspected he was trying to distance himself from his past, just like she was. Out here, through the rubble of the suburbs and the duty roads, they were people again, not rats scrounging around trying to survive the end of the world.

Reclining in the seat, she stole glances at Jackal as he drove, trying to decide what it was about him that turned her on. His sexiness was a mysterious blend of ruthless danger and hidden vulnerability. Despite his deadly outward demeanor and appearance, he was accessible. But most of the other women didn't look past what he was. *Copperhead.* The very name made her tremble with dread. Yes, even now.

But as much as it shamed her to admit, it was that undercurrent of evil that attracted her. Her gaze roamed past his dark sunglasses, down the hard plane of his unshaven cheek to the clean, rugged line of his jaw. Jackal was also an impressively muscular man with heavy arms and a broad barrel chest. He must have sensed her watching him, because he glanced at her and a tiny grin curved his lips.

They passed an old service station and Jackal made a uturn in the road to go back. He pulled up under the shade of the Quick Shop's canopy and got out of the car. Ruth tilted her sunglasses down and looked at him as he opened her door and waited.

"What?" she asked, feeling her pussy grow wet.

"Get out," he replied in a hard, devilish tone.

Ruth got out and he manhandled her against the vehicle. "Hey!" she said, putting up a feeble fight. Jackal pinned her body to the car and gave her a long, sinful kiss. She kissed him back, reveling in the hot dark oath his lips promised her. His hands ran down her body, caressing, finding any excuse to remove an item of clothing. "Wait," she said, stopping him from pulling her shirt off.

Jackal continued branding her throat with devouring kisses. "What's wrong?"

"We're out in the open here," she protested. "Anyone driving by can see us."

He continued his insistent pull on her shirt. "No one's going to drive past here. We've been on the road for two hours and haven't seen a soul."

Ruth guessed he was right. She let go of her shirt and let him lift it off her. One of his hands slid into her jeans and underwear, dipping into the soft petals of her labia. She gasped and leaned her head back in blissful abandon. Jackal pulled his hand out and moved his fingers up to his nose. He inhaled her scent then licked her essence off his fingers.

"Fucking beautiful," he murmured. "I'm gonna hammer that pussy hard, bitch," he snarled.

The term made her bristle but she let it go. Jackal didn't mean anything by it. This was a sex game he sometimes liked to play, and the truth be told, she liked it when he was nasty. Besides, he was making her so damn hot she was about to come without him even touching her.

"Hold your tits up so I can lick them," he ordered.

Ruth's hands started to tremble as a fierce lust fired her womb. Taking her two large breasts into her hands, she held them up. Jackal stuffed one then the other into his mouth, mauling them with his lips and tongue. His powerful hands took both breasts from her and massaged them as he worked. Wild pleasure rippled from her nipples, down her belly, and tickled her sex. Jackal took his time, teasing and mauling her breasts until Ruth was so wet her underwear was slick with her juices.

Jackal tugged on her jeans. "Off," he barked, his voice heavy with lust.

Ruth kicked off her shoes and slipped out of her jeans and panties. The second Jackal touched her pussy he groaned as if he was in pain. "You're so wet," he said in a desperate whisper. "Open it up for me."

Now frantic for him to enter her, Ruth opened her legs, resting her buttocks against the car. Reaching down, she opened her flesh and closed her eyes. She felt the gentle pressure of his cock at the threshold of her sex. Jackal crushed her body against his and moved his mouth up by her ear. "You want it, bitch?"

Ruth was panting now, aching for him. "Yes, Jackal, I want it."

"Here it comes," he said as he eased his dick inside her slick pussy. He pushed relentlessly until he was buried completely inside her. "You like that?"

Ruth pushed her face into his neck. The scent of his sweat and musk drove her insane. "Yes, Jackal," she whispered. "I love that."

"You want it harder?"

"Yes," she moaned, barely recognizing her own voice.

Jackal thrust quickly, awakening a riveting pleasure within the secret confines of her flesh. She whined his name.

"More?" he snarled.

"Yes," she said, definitely on the verge of something mind-blowing. "More."

Grabbing her around the waist, he pumped into her like a jackhammer, pumping so hard he was lifting her partially off the ground. Then it came over her, a raging, punishing ecstasy that robbed her lungs of breath and her mind of thought. In those blissful seconds, she was nothing but a well-played instrument at the hands of a master. All she could do was surrender to the delirium and cry out his name.

Jackal's head was cradled in her neck, licking the sweat off her skin as he pummeled her into oblivion. "You are mine, Ruth," he said. "Mine. Say it."

Ruth didn't object, she couldn't. "Yes, Jackal," she said as another climax took her will away. "I'm yours. Always."

The diner looked deserted. Ruth spotted it along the highway in the middle of nowhere, nestled between two healthy looking oak trees. They were the only live trees Ruth had seen in years. Touching Jackal's arm, she'd gestured for them to pull over and Jackal had nodded his agreement.

Pulling up in front, Ruth felt a film of sweat begin on her upper lip. Jackal pulled out his blaster and charged it. She glanced at him. He looked cool, detached, deadly; exactly what she didn't want to convey if anyone was here. She put her hand over the weapon and Jackal looked up at her. "Don't flash that around yet," she said.

"Someone's in there," he said. "My sensors are off the charts."

"I know," she said, smiling gently at him. "We just don't want to spook them. Can you keep your sunglasses on so they can't see your eyes right away?"

Frown lines wrinkled the sides of his mouth but he nod-ded.

Ruth opened her door and stepped outside. There was a soft breeze here and she closed her eyes for a moment to enjoy it. They approached the diner slowly, watching for any sign of life.

The diner door flung open and an older woman in a white t-shirt and brown jeans glared at them. She was pointing a double-barreled shotgun at them. "What the hell do you want?"

Jackal held his hands up but not so high he couldn't reach his weapon if he needed to. Ruth gave the woman her warmest smile. "We're just here looking for food."

The woman squinted at Jackal. "Why are you traveling with a copperhead?"

Ruth looked at Jackal surprised, as if this was a revelation to her too. "He's a friend. How did you know he was a copperhead?"

"I can see, ya know," the woman barked. "Those copper eyes flash even through those dark glasses." Jackal took the glasses off and the woman took a few cautious steps back. "Don't you scan me, you bastard."

"I'm not a hunter any more, lady," he said, trying to reassure her that he meant her no harm.

Ruth held her hands up. "We're only here looking for food, really. We don't mean you any harm."

The woman lowered her weapon. "My name's Rose and this is the Wild Rose Diner."

"I'm Ruth and this is Bill Jackal. We just call him Jackal for short."

Rose snorted at Jackal. "Suits him." She turned her back on them and headed back inside. "Might as well come on in out of the heat," she said, holding the door open for them.

They followed her inside and Jackal glanced out the window. He felt safe enough here but he always liked to know what was going on around him.

To his amazement the woman had live chickens out back. She also had a cow and a few goats. In contrast to the few dogs and rats he'd seen in the city, these animals looked healthy and well cared for.

Rose chatted at him and Ruth about all kinds of things while she gathered up some eggs and brought them inside. She cooked them both some scrambled eggs with a small piece of bread and cheese, and a glass of milk. Jackal couldn't remember tasting anything so good. Then Rose moved on to the subject of New Eden.

"Sure," she said with a smile that revealed two missing teeth. "I trade with them all the time. They're only about two miles from here."

"Is the colony run by men or women?" Ruth asked, her voice betraying her excitement.

"It's run by a man who calls himself Rick, but it's a mixed community. There are men, women, and even some children there," Rose said.

Jackal watched Ruth's face light up, but he remained skeptical. "Are you sure the women are free?"

Rose shrugged. "Sure they are. They've never tried to keep me there. They're not like those crazy city boys. These people live their lives in peace, raising crops and livestock. As far as I can tell, everyone there helps everyone else."

Ruth touched his hand. "It's still early. Let's go check it out."

Jackal squinted out the window at the lush green leaves on the two oak trees. Maybe this was a chance for a new beginning. "Alright," he said, still a little edgy. "But we're not spending the night there. Agreed?"

Ruth got up off her stool and kissed him. "Agreed."

The drive to New Eden took only a few minutes but once they got there, neither she nor the Jackal could get up the nerve to get out. From the road where they'd parked, they could see row upon row of crops and small farmhouses spaced very far apart. Still, after so long in the dangerous, filthy city it looked like utopia.

"Well," Ruth said finally, "We should go talk to them." Jackal slumped in his seat. "You go ahead. I'll wait here." "What for?"

"Because if any body tries to keep you, I can still bust you out," he said.

She took a deep breath. "Good thinking." Ruth got out of the car, glanced back once at Jackal, and began walking the long dirt road to one of the farmhouses.

* * * *

Rick was an older man than Ruth expected, probably somewhere close to sixty. He had a wrinkled tan face and snow-white hair. He looked like he'd been working outside all his life. "How many women did you say live in your bunker?" he asked as they walked through some rows of young corn.

"Twenty," she said.

He nodded. "This would be a good place for them."

"Would they be free to come and go as they pleased?"

Rick gave her a strange look. "Of course. But we do have one big rule and that is if you want to eat here, you have to share in the work." He was thoughtful for a moment then added, "We have a few young men here who would probably welcome the new additions."

Ruth smiled then she said, "How is it you've been able to grow crops here when the city soil is useless?"

In response, Rick crouched down and picked up some soil. He held it out to her and she took it, examining the dark moist dirt. "Because the earth is a good mother, Ruth," he said as his eyes grew glassy, "and she has forgiven us."

Ruth placed the soil against her nose and smelled it. Gone was the pungent scent of rot and dust. This soil smelled like life.

She stood up and tossed the earth back. "Thanks for everything, Rick. My women and I will be back."

Rick tossed his head at the car in the distance. "What about your friend?"

"He'll come around," she said. "He just needs some persuasion."

The hotel lobby was solemn and shrouded in dusty morning light. Zoey sat in one of the paisley wing chairs pretending to sleep as Ogun watched from an employee side room. There was someone else in the lobby too. Someone watching Zoey for any sign that she wasn't alone. Someone who wanted to kill her just for the thrill of it. They were finally going to catch and put an end to the city's only living serial killer.

Ogun hated using her for bait but there was no other way the killer would reveal himself. He knew the android was hunting him and that sooner or later his time would run out. Perhaps in some sick, strange way the killer welcomed death. Maybe that's why he was toying with taking such a huge risk in watching Zoey. He may not have known who she was, but she must have looked suspicious sitting all by herself without even a blaster in her lap.

But Ogun knew the drive to kill would be strong and the killer probably hadn't been able to find another victim in a week. For a serial killer like this one, that was an eternity. That's how Ogun knew he had him; he would go for Zoey; he would be compelled to.

For her part Zoey was the perfect decoy. She was vulnerable and quiet, giving off an innocent sexiness. Ogun even found his own thoughts wandering to replays of their love-

making. He couldn't wait for this to be over so he could smooth his hands over her glowing cocoa skin. His tongue came out and caressed his lips, remembering the ripe taste of her full lips. His desire for her grew more insistent as a demanding erection grew in his pants.

A sound touched his ear and he squinted out the small oval window to catch the source. The killer had come out of hiding, moving toward Zoey's chair with an electrical cord wrapped around each fist. A stinging cloud of smoke rose from Ogun's nose as he placed his hand over the door handle and went into the lobby.

The second Zoey spotted Ogun, she jumped from her chair and turned around. She spotted the killer a second later and uttered a small cry of surprise.

"Get behind me," Ogun commanded as he advanced on his prey. Running his gaze down the killer, he identified him as Ace Knoll, a man with a long list of prior crimes he probably had never served time for.

Ace stood there in silent shock. Like most criminals, he'd thought he was much smarter than he was, and that had been his undoing.

Zoey rushed behind Ogun but kept her distance from the android. She'd seen what his fire could do. Ace turned and bolted for a hallway off to his right but it was too late. Ogun opened his mouth and expelled a basketball-sized fireball that hit Ace squarely in the back. The man screamed as the fireball set fire to his clothes.

Zoey put her hands over her ears. "I know he deserves it, Ogun," she said, "but please don't let him suffer."

Ogun was now directly over the hysterical killer. He glanced back at Zoey who had turned her back and covered

her ears. Then he opened his mouth and torched Ace Knoll into a pile of ashes.

He escorted Zoey outside and away from the burning building. She was afraid and shaking but was recovering well. Zoey was a tough girl. They stood at a distance and watched as the hotel turned into an impressive inferno. "Congratulations on getting your killer."

"Thank you for your help," he said, not taking his eyes from the blaze.

She was quiet for a moment. The she said, "What do we do now?"

Ogun looked at her, searching her face to see what she expected him to say. "Now we take you back to your bunker."

"And what happens to you?"

"I'll stay and hunt in the city," he said.

"But barely anyone lives in the city anymore."

"I know."

"Why don't you come with me?" she asked, her lovely face illuminated by the nearby flames.

"Won't the other women object to that?" he asked.

"No, I don't think so. You're not a threat to them. Not like some of the other men are," she said. "Come on, we'll go talk to Ruth. She's got the coolest head in the bunch; I'm sure she'll let you stay with us."

The meeting with the women went better than Ruth expected. Everyone was excited about the move to New Eden, but not all decided to go. Jazz wasn't comfortable with the thought of leaving the bunker and going someplace where she would be cohabiting with men. *Some old scars run too deep.*

Ruth leaned against the conference table as everyone rushed out to pack what they could. "You sure you want to stay here?" she asked Jazz.

Jazz smiled sadly and nodded. "Yeah. At least for now anyway. Who knows, maybe someday soon I'll change my mind." She hugged Ruth tight. "I wish you all the luck in the world, Ruthie. Most of us wouldn't have survived without you."

Ruth pushed back from Jazz. "You could have. You never needed me."

"I needed you to keep my sanity," she said. "You made me realize that the rape wasn't the end of the world, and I could move past it."

Heavy boots thumped into the room. Ruth and Jazz glanced up to see Zoey enter followed by her colossal android lover. Jazz instinctively took a step back. Zoey gestured to the man. "This is Ogun," she said, "and we want to go with you to New Eden."

Ruth and Jazz exchanged surprised glances. "Won't his command be looking for him?"

"They're all gone," he said. "They disbanded months ago because of the famine."

"Are you sure you'll be happy in a farming community, Ogun?" Ruth asked.

He reached out and took Zoey's hand. It was a shocking but touching gesture. Who would have thought androids had feelings?

"I'll be happy anywhere Zoey is."

"Okay then," Ruth said. "Let's get everyone packed up to go." She looked one last time at her friend Jazz. "You can come and join us anytime, Jazz."

Jazz grinned and followed them out. "I know, Ruthie, and thanks."

Epilogue

New Eden, one year later...

"Well?" Ruth said.

Jackal dipped his spoon into the soup and lifted another mouthful to his lips. The delicious flavor burst in his mouth and he closed his eyes to savor it. Who would have thought he'd like homemade chicken noodle soup? He grunted at her to indicate he liked it but his mouth was full.

Ruth threw her hands in the air. "What does that mean?" He swallowed. "It's good."

"Just good?"

Jackal pushed his chair back from the table and pulled her into his lap. "It's fantastic."

She wiped his lips with a napkin and kissed him. "It took me two hours to get it right."

He laughed at her. "I'm sure the first batch was as good as the last."

Ruth ran her hands though his hair and stared into those strange copper pupils. "I love you, Jackal," she said, feeling as though her heart was going to burst with joy.

He kissed her deeply, squeezing her against him in a crushing display of affection. He trailed hot kisses down the side of her mouth and along her cheek. "I love you too, honey."

"Ruthie! Ruthie!" a child's voice cried from outside. "Someone's coming and they say they know you."

Ruth jumped off Jackal's lap and threw the cottage door open. One of the neighbor boys came running up, pointing at the road. There, only a few yards away, was Jazz, some Hispanic man Ruth didn't recognize, and the few other women who'd stayed at the bunker last year.

Ruth ran over to the car and hugged her friend and the others. "Have you come to stay?" she asked breathlessly.

Jazz gave her the warmest smile she'd ever seen. "No," she said, as tears welled up in her eyes. "I just came to show you something."

Two of the women opened the trunk and pulled out a crate of fresh vegetables. They looked as good as what Ruth and the others at New Eden had been growing. Ruth picked up a bright orange carrot so thick she could barely get her hand around it. "Where did you get this stuff?" she asked.

Jazz glanced at the handsome Hispanic man next to her and took his hand. Ruth was stunned to see her friend finally touching a man after all this time. "My friend Carlos here helped me, but we all did the work. I swear the first carrot to grow right was like a miracle, Ruthie. Everyone at the bunker had a party and we *laughed* for the first time in a long time. The earth is coming back, my friend. After all this time, the earth is finally coming back."

Ruth wiped away a few happy tears. She looked over at the neighbor children running and playing in a homemade playground. "I never had any doubt, Jazz."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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