

FROM MAN, ALL ANIMALS RUN

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Rachel collapsed like an animal drained from a relentless chase by a hunter's pack of hounds. Despite her extreme weariness she could not sleep. This was the first time all day she had been alone and relatively safe from the Organ Squad. Until this instant she had not had a chance to think about what was happening to her. Her actions, from the moment she found herself running through the back alley behind her home, had been dictated by pure instinct. Only now, resting and out of sight, grave thoughts of her current predicament began to sift into her jumbled consciousness.

Rachel sat up with her arms closely snuggled against her torso in an attempt to subdue her shivering. Her clothes were soaking wet. She looked down around her and realized that she was sitting in a puddle of dirty water. Her jumper would never dry if she stayed in the same spot, so she began to look around for a drier surface.

The deserted warehouse was filthy and damp, but for the moment it was a good hiding place. This was her new home, at least until she regained enough strength to keep moving again. Rachel suspected that if she stayed in one place too long, the Organ Squad would eventually locate her with their scanners. Still, she was safe for a little while. An old wooden crate beneath an empty shelf in the far corner of the building presented a much more suitable resting place than her puddle, so she crawled inside, closed her eyes and slept.

* * *

"Happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear Rachel . . ."

"How old is she now, mother?"

"Be quiet Andrew, you are interrupting . . . happy birthday to you."

"How old are you now, how old are you now . . . OUCH! What did you do that for, mother?"

"You know why. It's your sister's birthday and we don't ruin it by mentioning her age. Now stop pestering your mother with questions and go get Rachel's present from my room."

"Rachel's this, Rachel's that! Why is it always about Rachel? I wish I was a donor, too!"

"NO ANDREW! I don't ever want to hear you say that again, you hear me?! NEVER!"

"Fine, fine, don't get so excited, I only meant . . ."

"That's enough, now go on and fetch the present."

* * *

The Squad! Gotta' run, gotta' hide! Oh, it's only a rat. The rude awakening from her dream had left her breathless, but the sudden rush of terror had already passed. Rachel gave her surroundings a quick glance. She must have been asleep for quite some time, since she could already see the dim light of dawn peering through the tiny windows near the ceiling. Her stomach growled as she got up and stretched her sore body. She had not eaten anything since her birthday muffin and the hunger was making itself very painfully known.

She desperately needed to find food. That meant leaving the safety of her shelter and risking discovery. Maybe she could last a few more days, but eventually she would have to venture out. Now seemed as good a time as any, but first she needed a disguise. Rachel began to rummage through the various piles of junk scattered about the place. A blanket, a hammer, an old paper, a pair of shoes with the soles coming off at the tips. It appeared that she was not the first person to seek shelter here. Still, nothing useful in this pile. A rain poncho, a bucket, and ... perfect, workman's overalls. Rachel grabbed her new clothes and began to undress. She was quite happy to get rid of her still soaking wet blood-red jumper, its color a dead give away, hastily depositing it at the bottom of a pile of plastic waste containers. Having shoved the jumper out of sight Rachel slipped into her new overalls, grabbed the poncho, and headed for the window least visible from the alley. She proceeded to climb on top of a convenient stack of crates and through the opening.

The warehouse was quite dim and it took a moment for Rachel's vision to adjust to the new light level. It was still early, but the air was already thick with smog and heat. The stench of garbage from the alleys floated up to the sky offending even the few remaining birds nestled at the roof cornices. Visibility was a bit better than usual. The haze did not seriously alter the color of the enormous ad-vid on the roof of the warehouse, only dull its imagery. "Come and spend your vacation in Alaska," it blared. "With your own bungalow and comfortable temperatures, summer is a breeze. So leave your breather at home and journey to Alaska, the land of cleaner air and cooler climates."

Rachel did not know where to begin. She knew she had to find some food, but it seemed more important to her first to feel around for information on her own disappearance. Was it publicized or did they cover it up, fearing an embarrassing attack from the media. After all, if the Organ Squad would begin to lose its image of high necessity and extreme efficiency, they might fall prey to the budget cuts that had swept all levels of government and terminated all public services long before Rachel was born.

Rachel carefully scanned her vicinity, noticing the Daily News sign flashing irregularly in a window of a little convenience store. It was just the kind of place she was hoping to find. She tightened the hood of her rain cloak as far as it would go giving herself a protective shadow from strangers' glances at her face and proceeded across the street.

Once in the store, the newsstand was not hard to find. It appeared to be the main attraction of the establishment. The stale doughnuts and various sticky buns with flies hovering above them could hardly compete with the colorful graphics of the advertisements scrolling over the dozens of screens of the disposable readers.

Rachel walked over to the stand and picked one up. Quickly, she began to scan through the news sections. No photos of her anywhere. Relieved, not finding a single blurb about her disappearance, Rachel replaced the reader on the stand and quietly proceeded to wander around the shelves. She was not going to attempt to steal anything, but with a dozen other people in the store she aimed to slip out through the back unnoticed. Rachel knew that a small storeowner could not afford frequent garbage collection and would probably have a temporary storage place in the back for expired food products.

Without any trouble she was able to sneak her way past the clerk and into the alley. Her suspicion was correct, but to her dismay the garbage must have been collected recently because the food box was empty.

The sun's burning rays were becoming increasingly more intense making the air unbearably thick. Rachel realized that she could not survive breathing this air for long. The only way of getting around in such levels of ozone, without suffering permanent lung damage, was by dropping in and out of buildings for cover, carefully avoiding outdoor exposure for more than a brief interval. The other option of course was to purchase a breather, but currently it was not a viable one.

Rachel's wandering through the city streets and snooping in the back alleys proved scarcely profitable. She was able to find half a loaf of stale but edible bread and a half empty cup of cold-cheap coffee. It wasn't even real coffee, just a synthetic brew. But that was to be expected, no one in their right mind would carelessly discard a cup of the real stuff.

The day was approaching early afternoon and was at its hottest. It was no longer safe to stay outside for any length of time, so Rachel decided to head back to her warehouse. Since she had limited her search for food to the immediate area around her shelter, it only took her thirty minutes of short hops to return to safety.

Upon reaching the warehouse, she found the window she climbed out of earlier that morning. It was open, as she had left it. However, one of the crates she had used as a stepping stool was pushed aside. Some one had been there.

Rachel felt the surge of panic run through her veins. Her heart raced so fast that she could hardly breathe. The thought of an intruder or a possible discovery set her mind into frenzy. What to do? She could run and face the peril of the afternoon air outside. Without a shelter, however, she would not last long in the day's heat. Rachel calmed herself and decided that she could not simply abandon her safe-haven. Better to stay and to investigate the intrusion. After all, the crate could have simply shifted and fallen.

The air was as musty as before and the dust floating in the rays of sunlight leaching through the windows created a hazy atmosphere. Nothing appeared to have been disturbed outside of the crate. Maybe the crate *did* simply shift. It was conceivable, since the ground was slippery and wet and Rachel had not really checked the crate for steadiness when she had used it before.

Rachel sighed with relief and proceeded to her sleeping corner, intent on eating. She perched herself up on the shelf under which she had spent the night and reached down to bring up her blanket when a hand emerged from beneath it and grabbed her by the wrist.

She was so startled that her lungs could not produce enough air to scream. She looked down at the extended hand, silent and bewildered. The hand moved, revealing a connection to a young male hiding beneath the blanket.

"Don't scream," said the stranger, "they might find us."

Rachel nodded her head in agreement and pulled her hand away. The newcomer appeared startled, but considerably less so than at first. He was a young boy not quite at the age of donation, but quickly approaching it. His eyes were extremely agitated and abnormally alert. Having lost his grip on Rachel's wrist, he proceeded to stare at her with fearful intensity, with only occasional breaks in his gaze to throw quick darting glances around the warehouse. It was almost as if he was expecting an ambush from behind.

After a moment passed, which seemed like an eternity to Rachel, she decided to speak. "Who are you and what are you doing in my warehouse?!" She spoke with determination despite the knots of fear and hesitation binding her gut.

The boy glared at her with anger uttering, "Your warehouse? I've been staying here for over a week now."

"Then where were you last night?" Rachel persisted.

"None of your business! Besides it wasn't safe, so I couldn't return," the boy replied with the tone of an impertinent youngster defending his conduct to a questioning adult. Despite his rudeness, Rachel felt sorry for the rogue. He appeared lost and alone, just like her. She decided to reach out to him.

With as gentle a voice as she could muster, Rachel spoke, "My name is Rachel, I am a runner. What's yours?"

With his eyes lowered and all spunk instantly dissipated, the boy answered, “I don’t know, I don’t have a name.”

“How odd,” Rachel replied, instantly wishing she hadn’t said it. She noticed how the youth sunk further into his dejected state. “You know what, since I am going to have to call you something, why don’t we pick a name for you?”

“That sounds dumb,” the boy replied with hurt in his voice.

“No really, think about it. How many people are lucky enough to pick their own name, instead of being stuck with the one given to them by their paren . . . I mean just given to them?”

The boy looked up reluctantly and said, “Do you know any good names?”

“Sure, how about Jason?”

The boy frowned, “OK, fine, we’ll pick another one. Let’s see, you look like . . . a Stuart or Jacob or . . .”

“Stop!” yelled the youth, “I don’t like any of them.”

“Well, what did they call you in the crèche?” Rachel exclaimed impatiently.

“How did you know?” The boy appeared angry and frightened at the same time. “Are you on the Organ Squad?”

“No, don’t worry about who I am. I am not a threat to you.”

“Then how did you know?”

“It was a lucky guess, that’s all,” Rachel replied as gently as possible. “There aren’t many people out there without names besides crèchelings.”

“CK275,” the boy whispered quietly.

“What’s CK275?” Rachel asked cautiously.

“My ID number.” The boy looked at his feet. “It’s what they called me.”

Rachel noticed the boy’s uncomfortable expression and gently replied with a smile, “Well in that case I am going to call you CK. It’s not much, but it’s your own.”

“It doesn’t really matter.” CK replied with an unexpected nonchalantness in his voice.

“Why not, you need a name that I can call you,” responded Rachel.

“I have an ID number. You can use it like everyone else,” insisted CK with minimal signs of emotion.

“But I’m not everyone else,” Rachel exclaimed. “I am your friend and I won’t refer to you by an impersonal number.”

“Suit yourself,” grumbled CK.

Feeling frustrated, but determined Rachel inquired, “Haven’t you ever had a friend before?”

CK no longer appeared in control. With a quivering voice and attempting to look away he replied, “Yes, but they got to him too.” Rachel realized that she touched upon an incident in CK’s past that was best left alone. It obviously left him fearful of others. Despite all that baggage she desperately wanted CK to trust her.

“Look,” Rachel continued, “I can’t promise that we’ll always stay clear of the Squad. God knows I don’t want to get caught any more than you do, but I can promise you that I’ll never betray you. I think it’s important for us to watch out for each other’s sanity. Sure it’s easier finding shelter and food for one person than two, but neither you, nor I can stay alone forever. It’s against our *human* nature, despite what they want us to believe”

CK looked uncertain as he listened to Rachel. “How can I trust you?” He asked with a desperate need for reassurance in his voice.

“By trusting yourself, your feelings,” Rachel replied. “We need each other,” she went on. She paused for a moment as CK looked up at her and then with gentle determination continued, “I’ll take care of you and you’ll watch out for me.”

“Call me CK,” he answered and extended his hand. Rachel took it and got off the shelf. They laid out their blankets on the floor underneath the shelf and went to sleep.

* * *

The sun rose over the mountains, electrifying the treetops with a bright yellow glow. The deep blue sky hung over the forest, enveloping it like a soft motherly blanket. The birds could be heard for miles, chirping in excitement at the arrival of spring. Rachel and her mother were out walking, picking flowers and weaving them into beautiful wreaths to decorate the house. Rachel could not believe how peaceful it was, no motors running, no street cars hustling to get people to their destinations or destinies, of dull, automated lives. It was too good to be true, almost unreal, yet she did not question her situation. She didn’t care how it came about, only that it existed.

“Rachel, look!” her mother shouted from a distance. “Look what I found!”

Rachel ran to her mother and to her delight found herself surrounded by numerous bushes bursting with berries. They were very low bushes, only ankle high, but the little dark berries seemed endless in sight.

“Are they safe to eat?” asked Rachel.

“I think so,” answered her mother with a puzzled look on her face.

“What is it?”

“I am not sure, but it is the strangest thing. These are wild blueberries. I haven’t seen them for years. I didn’t really think they existed anymore.”

“Is that all Mother?” Rachel replied with a sigh of relief.

“Well, it’s just really strange. I’ve never heard of wild blueberries being in season in May. They are supposed to be flowers now.”

“Really?” Rachel exclaimed. “Why worry about such unnecessary things. Maybe they are magical and suddenly appeared while we weren’t looking,” she whimsically added.

Rachel’s mother lightly frowned at her daughter’s sarcastic humor and said, “Then we’d better pick them fast before they vanish back into thin air.”

Rachel and her mother proceeded to run around the blueberry patch, laughing and playfully collecting the berries into the folds of their skirts, holding them up as make shift baskets. “Rachel dear, maybe you should call your brother. He might enjoy this too.”

“Yes Mother,” Rachel replied and turned around to run for the house with the invitation to her brother to participate in this blueberry-picking orgy. She stepped over the berries with great care, avoiding crushing the luscious fruit and its bearers, without looking ahead. Once she cleared the patch Rachel looked up and opened her mouth to yell out to her brother, but to her dismay the house was not there. In its place was a burned down field, completely seared to the ground. Not even a shell of the house was left standing. Rachel screamed and ran back, but neither the forest nor the patch was visible. The same black scorched earth extended as far as she could see. It was unbelievable. How could this happen so quickly? She didn’t see a fire, not even smoke. And what about her family?

Rachel started to panic as a loud noise ensued, consuming her. It was like a deep hysterical laughter, sadistic in its nature. It was not the laugh of enjoyment or pleasure. It was an overwhelming roar of psychotic expression. She could not stand it much longer. She tried to run, but her legs would not

move. The ground around her began to spin as she slowly lost her balance, falling. It was not a sudden fall, but a slow, gradual descent to the ground. Just before she felt the soil beneath her, Rachel lost consciousness.

* * *

It was dark and damp and the only noise to be heard was the sound of the streetcars rattling outside. Rachel awoke in cold sweat and out of breath. CK was snuggled besides her, breathing rhythmically the rhythm of sleep. It was only a dream, or was it? It seemed so real, but it did not seem possible. She looked down at CK and sighed. Now she had two of them to take care of. She knew that she could always leave him if it became necessary, but the possibility left a dull ache in her gut. After she worked so hard on gaining his trust, it would be terribly cruel to betray it. He was so young and helpless. Besides, she felt lonely and could certainly use a companion.

CK was nothing like her brother. He was much more subdued yet alert, always ready to run. She smiled to herself, thinking about his reaction when she guessed where he was from. To think, her, a soldier from the Squad! Rachel mused on this thought for a while, and fell back asleep.

It was still early, when Rachel awoke again. CK was still sleeping. So she got up carefully, avoiding waking him up with her movement. She realized that it had been a while since she had bathed and decided to look out back for possible collected rainwater. She made her way outside through her usual window, and looked around. There were several plastic containers discarded in the alley. Rachel carefully peaked inside the first one, fearful of finding a rat or something worse. No critters found there, just rainwater. The pail was much too heavy to drag through the window, so the bathing would have to take place outside. She decided to go back inside to look for some rags that could be used as washcloths.

Rachel crawled swiftly through the window and jumped to the floor, bypassing the crates. The motion of getting in and out of the warehouse had become familiar to her, like part of a routine, home-life. She remembered seeing a number of old rags near the shelf where they slept. As she bent down to fetch them, her gaze fell on still sleeping CK. His filthy little face was at peace, with the exception of the occasional movement of his lower lip, providing a necessary escape for a particularly heavy breath.

“I bet he could really use a good washing as well,” Rachel thought to herself. “Poor CK looks like he hasn’t bathed in a month.” With that thought in mind, she reached down and gently shook his right shoulder. “Come on, sleepy head. Wake up.”

With a heavy reluctance, CK opened his eyes, one at a time, and stretched his arms out over his head. “What’s going on?” he sleepily pronounced.

“Come on, I have a surprise for you,” Rachel responded. Without waiting for any further comments from CK, she grabbed a few rags and his arm and hustled to the window.

“Voilà!” CK heard Rachel exclaim with pride as he found himself staring down a rather large pail of water.

“So, what’s this for?” CK proclaimed in an unsuccessful attempt at feigning ignorance.

“It’s our bath silly,” Rachel replied with a frown. “You are the first one up. If it really bothers you I’ll turn around.”

“You have got to be kidding me,” CK stated with an exaggerated air of astonishment. “I am not getting inside that thing!”

“Of course I can’t force you, but if you are going to hang around me, you have to stay clean.” Rachel reached out her hand with a rag. “Here use this as a washcloth,” she commanded.

Giving in, but with a last attempt at impertinence CK mumbled, “Do you think it’s safe?”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” Rachel replied. It had occurred to her that with all the acid rainfall they usually experienced, bathing in rainwater might not be the safest thing to do, but she expected it was better than not washing at all. She looked at CK gently and asked, “Do you want me to turn around?”

“Not necessary,” answered CK, “I am almost finished.” His entire bathing experience consisted of a quick wipe with a damp cloth on his face, neck and hands. “Your turn.”

Rachel gave up arguing with him. “Why don’t you see what you can find us for breakfast while I take my bath,” she stated reproachfully. CK nodded in agreement and staggered off into a neighboring alley.

Rachel looked around making sure that no one could watch her and carefully got out of her overalls. The brisk morning air made her shudder a bit. She picked up a rag and reached in to wet it. While looking down the pail, she caught her own reflection in the water. Rachel had not seen herself in a mirror in over a week. She looked quite frazzled, her hair messed up and tangled in knots and dirty grease marks all over her body. Still, she had a nice shape to her. She had been so caught up in retaining her childhood that she did not notice how much she had grown in the last year. Although she was quite thin, her body did have the curves of a woman. She was no longer a little girl. Rachel looked down at her breasts, nipples hardened by the cold air. She noticed how full they were. As she admired them, sudden embarrassment came over her and she blushed all over. Angry with herself for this silly distraction, Rachel proceeded to quickly and firmly scrub herself down, almost wishing to erase these signs of womanhood.

As she relaxed and concentrated on getting the grease off her feet, Rachel began to hum a tune her mother used to sing to her. The whole washing experience became enjoyable. The water felt refreshing on her skin and she began to feel playful. She hummed and scrubbed and splashed without noticing the unwanted eyes peering at her from around the corner.

* * *

It felt good to roam about freely. It was still quite early in the day, so the air was passable. Not many people ventured out to the streets of this neighborhood in the morning, so CK did not feel threatened. As mornings went, this was a particularly pleasant one. The smog was patchy and he could actually see blue spots of sky interwoven with the brownish-gray cover. Each blue space had its own unique shape, which intrigued CK’s imagination. As he stared skyward, the shapes took on distinct forms drawing CK into a guessing game. A doughnut, an animal, a hat It was wonderful to be playful and carefree. He sat down on a stoop and continued to stare dreamily upwards, oblivious to his surrounding, the food search abandoned and forgotten. A chair, a house, a terminal, a face, yes, a boy’s face. How familiar it seemed.

* * *

“CK275, KT400, OD100 report to the nourishment center,” announced the loud speaker. As the computerized voice continued to list numbers and assignments, CK proceeded to his. In an atmosphere of total unison and harmony, CK275 behind OD100 marched in perfect step, hands extended to receive their food supplements. No sounds to be heard, not a word uttered. No allowance for conversation. As they sat down, stiff and stern, and began consuming their food, CK looked to his right and winked momentarily at OD100. Message received.

“Isn’t it great to be outside Buddy,” CK spoke to OD100 as they stood outside the compound looking up at the sky.

“You know we’re taking quite a risk being out here Buddy,” replied OD100. “But I think it’s worth it.”

“Look up, look at all these blue shapes. Aren’t they amazing!?” continued CK. “I bet that’s what the real sky looks like above the smog.

“Yeah, wouldn’t it be great to be up there among the blue, like birds or roamers,” OD100 spoke with excitement. “I heard they get to spend whole days up there.” It was heaven, dreaming, chatting and forgetting, a real adventure of the mind, an escape.

A loud, piercing siren sounded. The boys jumped up in fright and ran inside. “I’m going to miss you Buddy,” said OD100 as they prepared to split up inside the compound. “I heard rumors that they were harvesting C’s next month.”

CK felt scared and angry as they parted, then he turned around and yelled, “You know of course, they don’t really exist!”

“Who don’t exist?” OD100 yelled back nervously.

“Roamers,” replied CK as he turned back and ran until his forehead slammed into the chest of a Squad soldier, knocking himself to the ground.

* * *

With his eyes opened CK lay on the ground panting. What a nightmare. The memories haunted him even in his dreams. The heat reminded him that he had little time left to collect food, so he jumped to his feet and hustled out of the alley.

“What a morning, huh! At least these crèche donors are not that tough to find.” The voice nearly knocked CK off his feet as he came to a halt, frozen in place before turning the corner. Two Squad soldiers were approaching less than ten meters away.

“We should probably split up Jake. There’s a deserted warehouse that could be a hideout near here. I think I’ll go check it out,” the other replied.

“But Harry,” Jake yelled to his partner, “Don’t forget to check in at lunch. I don’t feel like spending the whole day searching for this kid if you already got him.” Jake continued to dawdle where he was, while Harry turned the corner nearly spotting CK, and headed for the warehouse.

CK felt panic rushing at him with the speed of a Squad cruiser in high pursuit. He knew he had to warn Rachel, but he couldn’t leave without being spotted and Jake was taking forever to get going. “It’s a wonder these guys keep their spotless reputation of efficiency,” CK mumbled to himself. Finally Jake was gone and CK rushed to the warehouse, hoping it was not too late.

* * *

“What a slum!” Harry thought as he approached the warehouse. “Only animals and rejects could possibly live here.” As Harry continued his search with disgust, he heard a faint humming, like a girl’s voice, and the sounds of splashing water. He got closer to the wall and peered around the corner. It was no animal!

* * *

Clean or not, Rachel was ready to quit. The icy-cold water stopped feeling exhilarating a while ago, and began to have a numbing effect on her skin. Shivering and wet, she picked up a large rag intended for use as a towel and began to dry off.

“Who’s there?” she cried, startled by the sound of someone tripping over garbage pails. Rachel scrambled in vain to cover her nakedness with the insufficient rag before the intruder came into view. “Oh, no! This is it!” she thought in panic, as a young man in an Organ Squad uniform appeared from around the corner. She did not attempt to run away as the young officer approached her, staring intensely, while she accepted her predicament like an animal caught in a trap it can’t escape. The officer came close to her, gazing straight into her eyes the entire time. The next moment of silence felt like an eternity to Rachel. “What is he doing? What does he want from me, now that I am caught?” Thought Rachel, afraid to utter a word.

“I am sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you,” spoke the officer, as he turned around, obviously embarrassed. “Please proceed, I won’t turn around until you let me.”

Rachel felt confused. Was he toying with her? “I understand why you are here, but please don’t be so cruel,” she spoke with hurt and anger. “There is no need for civility when we both know you don’t mean it.”

“Look, I understand your embarrassment, but I really didn’t mean to upset you,” replied the officer, with a sincerely apologetic tone. “I am sorry for having stared, but I didn’t expect to find you here, and well, you are so beautiful. You took me by surprise, that’s all.”

“He doesn’t know who I am!” Rachel thought in astonishment. Not knowing how to proceed, she quickly pulled her clothes on. She couldn’t run, that would give her away. She had to carry on as if she was just a regular person, and maybe he would go away. “Well, you surprised me, too,” she replied, then in a sudden attempt at daringness she added, “Now that you’ve completely invaded my privacy, I’d appreciate it if you left me alone and went about your business.” Rachel was astonished by her own boldness. She never realized that she had that kind of fire inside her.

“I am terribly sorry, but I’ve already apologized,” the officer replied with frustration, “but what were you doing bathing in the street anyhow?”

“That is none of your business,” Rachel answered curtly. “Besides, not all of us have cushy jobs that pay well.” She felt that last remark was overboard, but it was too late. The officer swung around in anger, looked her straight in the eyes and sternly responded,

“That was uncalled-for! My job has its risks and sacrifices.” She noticed the look in his eyes as he spoke those last words. For a moment she imagined that this was a human being with feelings and not some brainwashed soldier.

“I thought you said you wouldn’t turn around until I allowed it,” she said coyly.

“I’m sorry,” replied the officer gently, as he began to turn back around.

“That’s all right. I am dressed now.” Rachel stopped him by touching his shoulder and quickly retracting her hand with embarrassment, blushing. She no longer felt the angst of fear, instead she felt shy and self-conscious. No trace of her earlier guile remained. Rachel found herself staring down at her feet, not knowing how to proceed next.

“We really shouldn’t stay out here much longer without protective gear,” said the officer, “I don’t mean to offend you, but do you have a place to stay?” he continued with a gentle tone.

“No, not really,” she replied, continuing to stare at her feet.

“Why don’t you come with me,” he invited. Rachel felt nervous and indecisive. The soldier reached out his hand to her chin and gently lifted it, looking directly into her eyes as he spoke, “I promise no harm will come to you while you are with me.”

Not knowing why, Rachel agreed with a quiet, “Yes,” unable to object to his penetrating gaze. She cautiously placed her hand in his, as he reached out and pulled her in his direction, walking away from her secret shelter.

“You know, it just occurred to me,” the officer started, “I don’t even know your name. It wouldn’t be right for me to bring a total stranger into my home,” he continued smilingly.

“Stranger than you think,” Rachel thought to herself and then added out loud, “I don’t know yours either.”

“Harry, now it’s your turn,” he insisted.

Rachel tried to think of an alias, but her mind felt unresponsive. Before she could stop herself she blurted out, “Rachel.”

“That’s a beautiful name,” Harry replied, unfazed by the information. “Come on Rachel, let me take you home.”

* * *

“Oh, no, it’s too late,” thought CK as he saw Rachel being pulled away by Harry. It seemed strange that she wasn’t shackled, not even a weapon pointed in her direction. “She’s lost her mind,” thought CK as he watched Harry put his arm around Rachel. “What is she getting herself into?” He knew he had to stop her, but getting to her without detection would be difficult if not impossible. He could follow them from a distance to discover where Harry lived, but going into a Squad officer’s home, that was suicide. He would have to wait for another opportunity but he couldn’t wait long. It was only a matter of time before she was identified.

* * *

The smooth sensation of satin against her skin was a luxury Rachel had never known before. She woke up stretching with pleasure like a cat feeling the satisfying restfulness in every muscle of her body. Rachel had not slept this soundly for a long time, odd considering technically she was in the enemy’s camp. She sat up and looked around the bedroom. It was very masculine but not without comforts. Besides the satin sheets little gadgets of ease and convenience were visible all over. From the news screen to the automated laundry hamper, it was obvious that the resident of this abode was no beggar.

Rachel got up and walked to the reflection screen. Her proximity triggered the automated voice, “State your viewing preference please.” She did not expect this behavior from what appeared to be a high-tech mirror and stood still. “Default activated,” the view screen announced as her front view appeared. Rachel looked at herself with admiration. Did she look different, now that she was a *real* woman?

After observing herself in the screen, Rachel began to feel foolish and looked around for her clothes. She remembered leaving them on what she thought was a chair, but it had been dark and she had been preoccupied at the time. Her overalls were nowhere in sight. They were probably discarded by the auto hamper as an article of clothing beyond redemption, but there was a beautiful silk robe laid out on the bed for her.

“How thoughtful and sweet,” Rachel thought, not at all what she expected from a Squad officer. She had almost forgotten that fact. Last night seemed so magical, like someone else’s dream, that reality simply evaporated from her mind, leaving her all confused. Here was a man who passionately protested his love for her and was gentler and more caring than anyone had ever been to her, yet if only he knew what she really was! Would he love her then? And even if he didn’t what choice did she have, to run away, exposed and hunted for the rest of her life until caught and harvested? That was no way to live. No, best she stayed with Harry. Besides, he probably wouldn’t turn her in. She felt that he really loved her and she him. She knew it was probably naive to feel that way after one night, but it was a special night and at least in her mind, they really connected. She could almost feel his soul when he touched her.

Even with her emotions being as strong as they were, Rachel felt a need for self-reassurance. Harry did not have to find out. But if he did, he could not possibly bring to destruction the mother of his future child. Feeling mildly reassured, Rachel slipped into the robe and gently ran out of the room looking for her lover.

“Does my love feel up to breakfast?” said a sweet voice coming from a man in his shorts standing across the kitchen. Harry was doing something fancy with some eggs and tomatoes. It wasn’t clear to Rachel what it was, but she was quite hungry and would gladly eat anything offered to her.

“Yes, I am hungry,” she answered staring with amazement as Harry flipped the egg and tomato pancake, landing it perfectly on a plate.

“Haven’t you ever seen an omelet?” Harry inquired with a laugh. Before Rachel could answer he grabbed her with both arms and brought her body close to his. “I don’t care if you never did or saw anything before in your life. You are beautiful and I love you.” He proceeded to give her a big kiss and seated her at the kitchen table. “Here, I think you’ll enjoy this,” Harry announced as he put the plate with the omelet in front of Rachel. She dug her fork in and cautiously put a piece in her mouth. The rich moist substance slid on her tongue, melting on the way down to her throat. It was quite wonderful and to her surprise most filling — breakfast of the gods.

“So, how do you like it?” Harry asked her with a smile.

“It’s wonderful,” Rachel answered, trying to smile back with her mouth full. Looking pleased, Harry came over and took her left hand, squeezing it with affection and reassurance. Things could not have been better.

* * *

It seemed hopeless. CK had been camping out near Harry’s house for nearly a month now with no opportunity to contact Rachel. Food was nearly impossible to gather in such close proximity to the Squad people. They were coming and going out of the building on a regular basis. No surprise there, of course, since it was a popular Squad residence. It was surprising, down right amazing, actually, that Rachel had not yet been discovered. The chances of no one recognizing her were phenomenal. Of course another possibility occurred to CK. It was not unreasonable to assume that she had been found out and had betrayed him, waiting for him to show up in this perfect little trap.

“Rachel wouldn’t do that to me, not unless she was tortured or drugged,” thought CK, gory images of her ordeal surfacing on his mind. “Damn it Rachel, where are you?” He cried to himself in a whisper as doubt about her loyalty began to seep into his mind. Angry at his own inability to trust, CK began to shake. Should he stay or should he abandon her. He couldn’t give up on her yet. He couldn’t give up on himself. He had to wait.

CK wasn't sure, but it was quite possible that he had averaged only a handful of sustenance every three to four days. He couldn't hold out much longer like this. Plus on top of it all, daily shelter from the elements was sparse and for the most part inadequate. Still he decided to wait one more week, before he'd be forced to look for another shelter.

* * *

"Alaska is our nation's only remaining natural preserve. Housing over 100,000 transplanted animal species it is even better known for its air quality. The dense forests and the colder climate shield its inhabitants from as much as 50% of the harmful pollutants that are so prevalent in the rest of our great nation. Rangers stationed in the area have been known to lead healthy lives well into their 50's before the first signs of imminent organ failure develop."

"Sounds too good to be real," Rachel thought to herself with a sigh, putting down the magazine. Maybe some day when she was married to Harry, he would take her on a tour of Alaska. "I bet poor CK couldn't even imagine the beauty of the wild." It made her sad to think of CK, who was probably either caught by now or half starved fending for himself. Guilty or not, Rachel couldn't bring herself to feel responsible. She was finally happy for the first time in her adult life. She couldn't give up everything to go off looking for a fugitive and risk her own discovery. No, she hadn't revealed her real identity to Harry yet, but she felt sure that it wouldn't matter any more. Rachel shook her head in an attempt to shake off these weighty feelings and picked up the magazine again.

"This beautiful mass of natural wonders is as protected to the fullest extent of our laws from extraneous pollution and development. It would require a constitutional amendment to allow any production or land development in Alaska. Still, it is not impossible. Even today there are numerous lobbies working hard to facilitate this change."

"There's no end to human greed," Rachel thought to herself with anger. Still she didn't believe it could actually happen. It didn't make sense to destroy or even tamper with the only remaining monument to Earth's natural past.

"For you my dear," a cheerful voice declared as a satin rose landed in her lap.

Rachel looked up at Harry smiling down at her gleefully. "What's the occasion?" She responded in a similar tone.

"Why, it's our first monthiversary," Harry replied. His celebratory manner made her realize this would be a great time to share her news with him.

"I have something important to tell you," Rachel said with her eyes firmly focused on his. Happy and excited she continued, "We are going to have a baby." Rachel's statement came as a surprise even to her. She had intended to say a few words in preparation, but her own enthusiasm threw the information out into the open.

"You mean you didn't . . . I mean you didn't the whole time?" Harry stuttered in shock and confusion.

"Didn't what?" Rachel replied even more confused than Harry appeared. "What was I supposed to do?" She continued, suddenly with the fear of having done something wrong added to her confusion. She looked up at Harry with tears in her eyes in search of support.

Struck by a bolt of realization, unexpectedly and violently Harry rushed over to Rachel and picked her up yelling, "It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter at all!" They both began to laugh, him madly and Rachel nervously, as he swung her around landing her on her feet directly in front of him. "I am really

happy Rachel, really happy!” Rachel didn’t know whether to cry or continue laughing. The hysterical energy in Harry’s voice both frightened her and filled her with excitement.

“Of course we have to celebrate tonight,” Harry continued madly, “but for now I have been saving a bottle of real wine for just such an occasion. Wait here while I go fetch it.” He seemed genuinely excited as he ran into the kitchen. Consumed by laughter and tears, Rachel felt true elation in their shared joy and real hope for the future.

* * *

The throbbing in her head kept Rachel weary and in bed until mid-day. Harry had already left for work hours ago. She could vaguely recall him telling her about an important new assignment he was being offered. This new assignment would not commence until the completion of his last search at his present station. Harry did not know the identity of his search subject, but it didn’t concern him. No donor had actually given him much trouble in the past. She was excited for his success, but with reservation. After all, Harry’s promotion would come at the cost of some poor donor’s life.

* * *

The next evening Harry came home with a grim countenance, looking extremely pale. Concerned by this change Rachel inquired if something was wrong. He handed her his reader and replied, “Here’s my last assignment.” Nervously Rachel examined the documents, discovering in shock, a dossier filled with every detail of her existence up until the point she had run away from home. Fearful and lost for words she looked up at Harry. “When were you going to tell me?” he asked with anger, at least finally showing emotion.

“I was afraid to tell you Harry, at first anyway. It didn’t seem to matter after a while.” She thought for a moment and continued, “I was going to tell you before we got married. I just didn’t have the strength yet.”

Still furious Harry went on, “I guess that ends everything, doesn’t it. It’s a good thing I found out this soon.” Suddenly boiling mad, he ran up to Rachel grabbing both of her arms and yelled, “You could have cost me everything you fool!” Then calmer, he continued, “At least if I turn you in now, not all will be lost.”

Dismayed and in disbelief Rachel pleaded, “You know what they’ll do to me and our baby. They’ll harvest us both. Yes, harvest – a nice little euphemism for murder. If you bring me in, you will kill your own baby!”

Harry replied with a taunt of an angry child, “You should have thought of that first, before running away.”

Rachel was furious, “It took two of us to create this life. The responsibility of sustaining it falls on you as well!” Harry looked guiltily at his feet, but did not say a word. “Responsibility, HAH! I can’t believe we are talking about it with such magnanimous words. What about love and life? You said you loved me, that you’d give your life for me. Were those just words? And what about your child? Would you sacrifice its life for money?”

“It isn’t about money!” Harry jumped in. “It’s about duty. It’s about who I am.”

“And who are you Harry? Are you not a human being? Are we not alike in that respect? We both have feelings and a will to live.”

“Yes, but you are a donor and I am a Squad officer.”

“Fancy words for predator and prey.”

“It’s more complicated than that. It’s about our loyalty, our dignity. It’s about survival.”

“Dignity!” Rachel spoke with sarcasm, “There’s no dignity in dying for my organs. You might have taken some obscure oath of allegiance to your precious Organ Squad, but no one *ever* asked me about what I wanted. No one ever gave *me* a choice.”

“But, I am what I am. I can’t simply . . . you can’t ask me to overlook . . . I don’t know.” Harry dropped down in a chair, confused and dejected. “You don’t understand,” he continued with tears choking his voice, “I am the Squad, not just part of it, it’s part of me. It’s most of me. I have to do what they tell me. I can’t refuse.”

Like an animal about to submit to its fate Rachel replied, “Well, then I guess that’s it. I can’t fight you and the Squad all neatly bound up in one package.” She sat down in a chair opposite his, quiet and motionless, resigned to the worst. They sat in silence for hours. With her heavy predicament weighing upon her, Rachel felt stunned. Unable to grieve, feel fear, or any emotion, she simply withdrew into the emptiness inside her, almost in a state of shock.

It was beginning to get dark, but they continued to sit quietly with Harry emitting an occasional sigh. Finally, when it got so dark that they were hardly visible Harry stood up, walked over to Rachel, dropped on his knees in front of her and began to cry. “I am so sorry Rachel,” he sobbed, “I am so sorry!” Yanked out of her comatose state, Rachel reached out to him, shaking with tears. Looking into her eyes Harry declared, “It will be all right. I’ll keep you safe. I’ll hide you forever!”

His exclamations, loud and startling in the previous silence thrashed Rachel’s nerves. To calm him down, she cradled his head in her lap and whispered, “It’s OK, it’s OK, don’t worry, it’s OK,” repeatedly. They were safe now. She was out of danger.

Rachel couldn’t sleep that night. Lying awake with Harry’s arms around her left her feeling cold and uncertain. “I AM THE SQUAD!” rang inside her head. She couldn’t get the words out of her mind. How could she compete with that? Impossible. As much as she tried to convince herself to the contrary, she knew that sooner or later Harry would turn her in. It was not that he didn’t love her enough to save her. It was his love for himself that was overshadowed by the Squad. They possessed his every thought, every cell. When he spoke, it was in part on their behalf. When he made love to her, they were never alone. The Squad controlled all his impulses. As difficult as it seemed she knew what she had to do.

* * *

It was still dark when Rachel snuck out of Harry’s apartment. She only took one change of clothes and as much food and water as she could stuff inside her backpack. She didn’t know exactly how she would find him, but she was determined to take CK with her. The risks were high, and her chances of success were miniscule, but she had to try and make a life for herself and a future for CK and her unborn child. It was as if the maternal instincts aroused by her pregnancy gave Rachel strength and determination, enabling her to take charge of their lives.

Rachel walked as quietly as she could, carefully crossing the street, avoiding the eyes of vehicles cruising the night. She couldn’t avoid being seen by the floaters, but they were too high up to pay much notice to strangers lurking in the streets. However, she did have to escape the notice of ground transports, ready to cash in on spotters’ fees. Some, for lack of better entertainment, made a sport out of spotting runaway souls like her. As she approached the sidewalk, a shadowy movement startled her. When she looked closer, Rachel noticed someone or something scurrying into the alley. Her instincts

propelled her towards the wall. Standing with her back tightly against it, Rachel very carefully peaked around the corner. “STOP!” she screamed, as a hand holding a blunt object came down hard, stopping a few millimeters from her head.

“Rachel?” The voice said. “Rachel, is that you?”

“CK!” She yelled with a whisper, recognizing her street brother. “I am so glad I found you!” With the last phrase she proceeded to give him a big hug. Overjoyed, CK hugged her back, holding tight, afraid to let go.

“I was about to give up waiting for you.” He sounded weak, and that worried Rachel.

“You don’t sound so good,” she declared, examining his appearance the best she could in the dark. “What happened to you?”

“It’s a long story, but needless to say, I haven’t eaten that much in the past month or so.” CK spoke with a wry smile on his face, despite the fact that he could barely stand in his weakened state.

“Well, come on then,” Rachel declared decidedly, “let’s find some shelter where I can feed you.”

“I think I know of a place,” responded CK with a wicked smile, as they proceed to walk towards their warehouse. “You can tell me what happened to you in the enemy’s den while I eat.”

“Agreed,” answered Rachel as they walked on, CK leaning on her slightly for support.

They spent the remainder of the night in the familiar surroundings of the abandoned warehouse. Although Rachel couldn’t sleep, her mind racing, CK did not have any trouble. It was probably the first time he really rested since he and Rachel separated.

“Leave me alone,” CK whined as Rachel tried to wake him up at dawn. “Let me sleep.”

“We haven’t got time,” she replied to his complaint, “we have to get going. We have a long way to go.”

“What are you talking about,” moaned CK, as he sat up stretching his back. “Where are we going?”

“Come on and I’ll show you,” Rachel replied, dragging him off the floor and outside. As they crawled out the window and out of the alley, she stopped and looked up. “There, that’s where we’re going.” She stood smiling and pointing to the large ad-vid. CK looked up and listened:

“Come and spend your vacation in Alaska. With your own bungalow and comfortable temperatures, summer is a breeze. So leave your breather at home and journey to Alaska, the land of cleaner air and cooler climates.” The ad-vid proceeded to show images of the preserve while CK turned to Rachel in confusion.

“You want us to go to Alaska?”

“Don’t you see, CK, it’s the perfect place. We can hide out in the wild, where no one would suspect to look for us. The Organ Squad is not allowed there, only tourists and rangers. We can hide in some remote spot, away from everyone.”

“Sounds great,” CK stated, with false conviction and disbelief, “but how will we get there?”

“Don’t worry about that.” Rachel replied with enthusiasm. “We’ll find a way. We can hide on tourist transports or even supply trains. Anyway, it’s much easier to elude the Squad when you’re on the move.” She looked at CK’s concerned little face and with as much assurance and enthusiasm as she was capable of, Rachel declared, “We will get there, even if we have to walk part of the way. I promise you, I will never desert you again. We’ll be a family, and we *will* survive, together.” Not completely reassured, but somewhat hopeful, CK nodded in agreement. They went back inside the warehouse, gathered their belongings and headed out.

The journey ahead even seemed insurmountable to Rachel, despite her enthusiasm. That enthusiasm did not stem from self-assurance, or any guarantee about their future. It was generated by the

internal workings of her soul or the small mechanism inside it that swelled like a hot air balloon and carried the spirit, enabling human survival – hope.

As they cleared the alley, leaving the warehouse behind them, a sudden feeling of being watched came over Rachel. She turned around but only the street remained. It was probably nothing. They moved on.

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