

Gothic Reign 5

Words From Within the
Realm



Bela Lugosi is Dead

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ISBN -- registerd at night, bar code didn't show up on black. What's the point?

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Contents of the Jar

Remove the lid slowly and drink from the jar the contents of minds lost in creative ponderings. Here be words joined together by the blood and sweat of years of tormoil, struggle and loss. Here and there after this page will simple say, 'Enter the Contents'

Standing in the Reign

Being bleary eyed has often enabled me to miss the horrors of the human race, well at least the terrible things we do to each other. In my works here I avoid confrontation by being narcissistic, and easy frame of mind when you spend all you days drinking copiously. But some horrors cannot be avoided and these are the ones we set out to find for ourselves, the written Gothic Reigns of our lives; the deliberate delving into the dark and arcane.

In my stupor such bleakness of fear riddled rantings are normal and as such never break the skin, but others, the journeyers who read the prose that can sometimes (not always) fill these pages may not be so, well, thick skinned enough and blood may be drawn. I know I am written about in a book ([Uttuku](#)) but I am more than this depiction now, well I hope I am more I have been drinking so much of late I wonder if everything I have endured has been a manufacture of my mind, a dream darker than the darkness I promote here on these pages.

Out in the world, away from the Gothic Reigns of our society, the small secret rooms hidden in back streets and basements a dark horde also hides from the terror of human existence, the terrorist, the drive by shooter, the serial rapist and serial killer, the human face of what the Gothic Reign attempts to venture away from. The darkness of fantasies, the supernatural horrors of horrors is

nothing to fear when you compare it to the reality of man blowing up a bus full of children. If the reason was for evil possession, the overtaking of a life by a force wanting to destroy man then the fight back would be clear, the recovery from death's great curse easier to combat, but such atrocities are done my people who are beyond the possession of evil, even evil has a purpose, these lost souls have no purpose.

So, while we delve into the Gothic Reign and the Reign it has brought onto the people of the Western cultures, find peace and salvation in the haunting and unknown blackness. Escape the human pestilence and come with me into the depths and just see how black, black can be.

Drink on, drink on I say

Diana

Seeing Red

My mum told me to get out of the house because I was stinking up my room, so I dug through a pile of clothes and fished out some not so smelly track pants and T that almost covered my extended and quite hairy belly. To leave the house would mean stepping out into sunlight and I didn't like sunlight, it tanned the skin and took away my well developed pale appearance, so I applied some white makeup, painted my eyes black and made sure the bone through my nose wasn't covered in snot again. It would only be a short walk to Hole's place; she was more Emo than Goth but sometimes she let me have sex with her provided I watched her cut her arm. A good trade when you are desperate - and I am always desperate.

Even though the sun made me feel like I was on fire I made it to Hole's place and settled into the darkness of her bedroom to watch movies on her laptop. She had a friend, who had a friend who had movies. In the gloom of the room and the desperation I could see in Hole's semi naked form on the bed we watched 'The Road'. It had been so long since I'd seen a proper good film I was startled by the reality and did actually check the otherside of the heavily curtained window to make sure the fall of man wasn't really happening and this was a doco. I guess 'The Road' is about a journey of a father and his boy but the little wander down the road isn't all that normal and the feeling of deep forboding is so great you sit stunned as it unfolds around you - even Hole stopped slashing her arm long enough to absorb the heavy nothingness, the absolute sense of despair. Hope and

joy only enter the film through the watcher, so for an Emo and Goth there just wasn't any. I nudged Hole at the end of the movie and hope was granted.

With her now sleeping naked in my arms I used the remote to check her play list and locked onto Final Destination 2, an American shock horror fic that did turn me green when I saw the usual cliché American doing the usual cliché American thing. I had to wonder, are all American teens and younger adults who have just been given permission to get drunk, really so self absorbed? No wonder this film thankfully done away with them all. If you like shocks and spooky shooky shit that isn't spooky but is shit then sure, Final Destination might do something for you. But after being in the dark for so long and connecting with hell through Hole the visions of dismemberment amongst All American young folk and a few rednecks was about as pleasing as listening to my mother telling me to change my underwear.

I did watch the whole move though, I didn't really want to move the press of Hole's naked breasts from my chest. In the end all died as they were supposed to and so called feaky accidents continued to happen so that death by weirdness just became, well, tiresome and boring. I know I don't always get to see good films because of the limnits on my video hire card but if this is what is coming out today I don't think I'm missing much. The Road actually troubled me deeply, Final Destination just made me wake up Hole and find another way to pass the time.

Beneath the Bed

I had almost lost my cool, hard when you aren't really alive, but I had been getting Kmart books shuffled to me and starvation of literary joy was consuming more than the hunger for young blood and virgins. As seen before I am blessed with yet another foray into the psy-changling world created by Nalini Singh and again find myself wanting for this world to be real, as it is far more colourful than the reality of the vampiric and wolfish domain. Within the pages of **'Caressed by Ice'** darkness confronts darkness and Judd must turn it in on itself if he is to survive and do what he must. but to do this and control the passions and heat of two raw and brutal hearts may be his and Brennas undoing. With the passion of the old ways, the desire only raw lust and hunger can bring, **Caressed by Ice** is a burning tale that will make you want for the cold of night air just to cool your blood before sleep. Nalini Singh has yet another winner.

I took a moment to calm, as some books do devour me as much as I devour them, so as a pleasing bonus I was slipped the **Twilight Reign series by Tom Lloyd 'The Storm Caller', 'The Twilight Herald' and 'The Grave Thief'** and are these books a journey to be had. fast, furious, delightful and tragic and bristling with not only political and emotional intrigue but alive with characters and races that drag you deeper and deeper

into the story as you move from book to book. From the early raw and uncontrolled power of **Storm Caller**, through the struggles of power and personal denials in **Twilight Herald** the series culminates with the final stand, the acceptance of the ways and difficulties of being in **The Grave Thief**. A feeling I understand well enough. All three books follow Isak, the white eye, from his early poverty and wants to his total power and domination and all the horrendous costs and payments made between. Yes, this is a journey, but one that captures the heart and soul of the reader and delivers them perhaps from their own internal torments. Tom Lloyd writes with the skill of a Master and delivers the story of a true and unfettered bard.

Big is the book, big is the story and big are the characters. Tom Lloyd has a new book **'The Ragged Man'** and what a book this is. From the realised worlds of his **Twilight Reign** series comes a world more vibrant, more alive and more dangerous and its promise of even greater conflict comes to life in all its glory (gory at moments) Book 4 of the **Twilight Reign** series is simply a must, even if you have not taken the earlier 3 journeys. You must take this one. Be prepared to climb on for the ride of your life. **'The Ragged Man'** has best seller written all over it.



Sarina

Cigarette Burn

Simone Betyr

In the dark he hid from the ever hungry thing that stalked the streets at night and invaded the day with mind's ever growing hunger for blood. The time of the moon was the only way to escape the daymares, the invasive flashes of thought from it. The thoughts would strobe through his sight like a nightclub at full ecstasy swing and bring a sickness that no binge could match. Carbon sniffed his fingers and savoured the bitter scent of nicotine and closed his eyes to the memory of his last cigarette.

It would find him, he knew, but the darkness was still his best bet for survival in the short term. Long term he had to escape the city, but its mind held what was left of the people captive. To escape you had to break free of the mind; that would mean killing it; he just didn't want to get that close. His immediate thoughts were how could he survive its nightly feeding, its hunting of the survivors? Carbon should have evacuated years ago, when it first came and began the torment, but he'd stayed, like others, to loot, to steal the riches others had discarded as they fled the city

He heard a scream; a long way off, short, loud and pain filled; another survivor taken without seeing

Carbon edged further back into the doorway, further into shadow. He could feel the press of the cold steal door on his back through the rags he'd been reduced to wearing these last few months. Winter had come and its hunger had grown. Carbon's coat held all he owned but it no longer held warmth or stopped the wetness of rain seeping in. Come morning he'd scour some more of the homes in nearby Halifax street for new clothes, a warmer coat. For now, it was far from him and he would suffer the cold for that small comfort.

Carbon had no name for the thing that fed of the remains of Adelaide's population. A name seemed superfluous; it brought death and that was all he needed to know.

Another scream caused Carbon to open his eyes and stare into the dark until the white dots of struggling sight caused him to close them again. Was it getting closer? Rocking he prayed to the God that had been driven from the city of Churches, begged for a moments sleep and protection.

"Carbon?" a whisper stroked his ears. "Carbon, ya here?" It was Lightfoot, the old man who was known to eat what the thing left behind; a scavenger cannibal.

Not wanting to answer, to give himself away, Carbon held his breath, fought against the shivering

in his body. June is no time to be outdoors.

“I know ya here, I can smell ya,” Lightfoot whispered again. “Ya can not hide the smell of burnt ciggies.”

“What do you want?” Carbon said, straining to hear the old man’s footsteps.

“I bring a warnin’.”

“I heard the screams.”

“It has ya smell. It’s followin’ ya, comin’ for ya.”

“How do you know?” Carbon asked, no longer feeling the cold of winter.

“I’ve seen it,” the old man’s voice was close. “It’s been sniffin’ ya ciggy butts.” A light came on in front of Carbon, he slammed back into the door, nowhere to run. “Easy, mate,” Lightfoot said, his hairy face glowing behind the light. He switched the torch off and plunged them into darkness again. “I’ve been followin’ ya, followin’ ya trail a butts, ya really must put ‘em out fully, mate.” Carbon felt the old man’s hand grab his, pry it open and press a handful of butts into his palm. “Put ‘em in ya pocket. No trail, harder to find ya.”

“Why are you following me? And how far is it from here?” Carbon wanted to run, but he couldn’t see. The sky was heavy with storm and the moon had been vanquished.

“It’s still some ways off, but

I think you should get movin’ pretty soon,” Lightfoot said. “The why is not important; just be thankful I did.”

Carbon knew why. If it got him Lightfoot would have a warm meal. He wanted to punch the old man but he had picked up the butts, thrown it off his tail.

“Why not just let it get me?”

Carbon asked. “You’d get your meal.”

“Ya hear the screams. I’ve already eaten, no point wastin’, eh?” The cannibal had saved his life, for tonight anyway. “I have a place,” Lightfoot said. “Not far from here, it’s safe.”

“Why should I trust you?”

“I found ya first, isn’t that enough?”

He had a point, and he hoped that Lightfoot’s place was at least warmer than the doorway. A deeper darkness moved in the dark, a shadow against the black. Carbon forced his eyes to see.

“Follow me,” Lightfoot said. The shadow moved away.

It was slow going but Carbon managed to follow Lightfoot along the hard surface of lanes, roads and across overgrown parks. The old man’s smell was easy to locate when the eyes could not follow his shape. They crawled on hands and knees until Carbon’s back ached and his head throbbed with the strain on his senses.

“We’re here,” Lightfoot

said. He turned on his torch briefly to show a hole in a wall. "Not much, but safe."

The light flicked off and stars danced before Carbon's eyes. Even without the light he could smell Lightfoot's hide. He crawled until he was into the heart of the stink and his hands were relieved to find soft material on the floor. Carbon sighed, "Blankets."

"No, coats," Lightfoot replied. "Took them from those it killed. Some are bloody but still warm."

That was the smell; rot, the smell of old blood and probably bits of flesh still clinging to the clothes. If he'd managed to eat during the day he would have thrown up; he felt too tired to protest. Carbon fell forward and buried himself in the coats ignoring the odours that tried to swallow his face.

The softness welcomed him as he rolled onto his back and struggled to find clean air.

"What's it look like?" Carbon asked, not really sure he wanted to know.

"Hard to say, really," Lightfoot said. "Big, black, like a shadow that swallows shadows." The old man rustled some papers before lying beside Carbon. "I've never seen it close, but I'm tellin' ya, it's comin' for ya."

Tiredness forced Carbon to sink into the coats on the floor. If it came in his sleep, fine, just so long as it didn't

wake him first.

Carbon crawled from the hole in the wall at dawn. The sky hung a low purple grey. It had rained during the night and the alley way had turned into a thin, black pond. Assorted flotsam made like ducks on a garden lake.

"Ya wake?" Lightfoot said, standing in the midst of a pile of bones further down the alley. He was nibbling at dark residue on one of them. "Should taste it, save ya life, it would."

"Where are we?" Carbon asked, standing and feeling stiffness in his back. He rubbed at his lower spine trying to ease the pain away.

Lightfoot pointed to the way they'd come in the night before. "Rundle mall."

Carbon stared in the opposite direction.

"Pultney," Lightfoot said, throwing his bone on the pile.

"Are they all ... you know?" Carbon said looking at the bones.

"Some, maybe, but mostly dog and cats. Scrawny and tuff, but good when the feedin's slim."

"I'm going to the mall, you coming?" Carbon wanted some food and the sight of the bones made him uncomfortable.

"No, I've got a woman stash'd down the ways, want some?"

“Sex?”

“No,” Lightfoot laughed, kicking at the bones.

“No thanks,” Carbon said with a shudder. “There’re shops in the mall, maybe some food still in them, tins and stuff.” He wasn’t sure if there would be food in the stores, the great run away happened years ago, but it was still worth a look.

“Can’t eat that stuff any more, gives me a crook guts.” Lightfoot turned and started a slow lop run down the alley towards Pultney street. The old man was thin, tall with a haggard face and hair so matted it could be mistaken for a hat.

As he rounded the corner he gave a wave and was gone. Carbon turned towards the mall and searched his numerous pockets for a cigarette, remembering he’d smoked the last yesterday.

“Time to give up,” he said putting the lighter back in his coat.

The day flashed. Bright. Painful. Carbon dropped to his knees; *its* mind crashed his thinking. A daymare. The invasion of *it*. He dry wretched as the images of blood flowed across a street, spilled from building windows and splashed up against closed glass doors. The vision pressed hard behind his eyes. Blood flooded his skull. He grabbed his head and rolled in the thin lake, letting the water sap the warmth from his body.

Screams rushed at him, bludgeoned his ears, strangled his cries. He wretched again and the images were gone, the sound fading to the silence of a dead city. Carbon’s head ached, his stomach cramped – nausea replaced his fear.

The thing ruled the night with its feeding but during the day *it* ruled with the hunger of its mind. As he eased himself to his knees Carbon wondered how the flesh eating Lightfoot dealt with the daymares, or was he immune? Carbon staggered to his feet and using the walls of the buildings as support he made his way into what was once the busy shopping heart of Adelaide. The brick pavers that ran its length held for all time the scuff marks of millions of people, tiny nicks of history. Feeling sturdier he crossed over to the far side of the mall and made his way to the blown out shop front of Woolworths.

The ground floor was a shamble of rotting clothing and signage for the day’s special. The strong scent of rats pervaded above the water lying on the ground. The food area was down stairs. Carbon walked down the escalators and into darkness, not complete darkness but enough to make seeing difficult. He could see that many of the shelves were empty. As he moved between them he could hear the scurrying of vermin.

“Tin shit,” he said to himself

using a dying lighter to see. Running his hands over the shelves he hoped to find something long hidden in the shadows. Towards the back of the floor, in the darkest part, he found three tins, labels long gone to the small animals that called this place home. He didn't care what he'd find inside, it was food. There were other tins and packets of stuff, but these few would do for now, at least he'd found a supply of sorts.

Out in the mall he placed the tins on a bench and took an old can opener from his coat pocket. The first can was pickled beats. From another pocket he pulled a grimy fork and ate the whole beats in a few mouth fulls. The vinegar was bitter, but the beats quickly drove away the pains of hunger; they did nothing for his nausea. There was a chemist in the mall but he wasn't too sure about taking expired drugs, maybe if the head aches got worse he'd investigate.

Carefully he put his fork and opener in his coat and pocketed the other two cans. Carbon spent the next hour wondering the empty stores, finding a few skeletons without heads – obvious victims of *it* and food for the rats, maybe even Lightfoot.

At the front of a café, littered with up turned tables and chairs, he found a rack of cigarettes. Many of the packets had been eaten through but he found a few packs that hadn't.

He opened a pack of Marlboro, Smoking Causes Cancer bold on it flip top; they were stale. He grabbed a handful of lighters; the tenth one worked and he drew deeply on the cigarette until his head began to feel light, fingers tingling and balance, for just a moment, waned. It was a good feeling, he thought, good compared with the daymares.

"I should give these up," he said to an empty fridge with a faded coke sign at its top. "Maybe tomorrow, eh?" He took another drag, savouring the acidity of the smoke in his mouth. Once he'd smoked it to the filter he dropped it and stamped it out. Remembering Lightfoot's warning he picked up the butt and put it in his shirt's top pocket with the others. He figured that once he'd filled the pocket he would find some bare ground and bury them.

"What's ya name?"

Carbon ducked behind the shop counter, heart thumping, head ringing.

"It's only me, Li'Foot, no need to go getting spooked like that." Looking over the edge of the counter Carbon saw the old man sitting on a metal chair in the centre of the mall.

"Shit, Lightfoot, don't go creeping up on me like that."

"It doesn't come during the day," he said, waving a silver can in his right hand. "Look what I found ya.

Tell me ya name and it's yours."

Carbon climbed over the counter and out into the chill of the day.

"Carbon," he said approaching the old man.

The day flashed. Carbon staggered. Blood gulped his mind. The world went black.

The smell of death clung to him like vomit. He gagged, opened his eyes and saw the craggy, grimed face of Lightfoot smiling down on him.

"Ah..." He tried to move but his body hurt.

"Stay still a bit," Lightfoot said. "Ya had a big one by the way ya collapsed." He removed a rancid coat that had been covering him, the cold came quick. "The thing must have been close to do that to ya mind."

"How ... How long have I been out?" Carbon asked, finding his throat sore and tongue fat.

"Be a full day; it's night out now."

Carbon closed his eyes and tried to let the pain in his head slide away. It had been quite a while since he'd had a nightmare that strong.

"Ya can't sleep," Lightfoot said shaking him. "It checks here every night, gotta move, hide in the shadows somewhere. Less ya lookin' to feed me, that is."

Movement wasn't easy

but Carbon managed to get up and crawl out into impenetrable darkness; another moonless night with a light fog of rain. Instinctively Carbon started to breathe shallow and listen. He had to find shelter well away from Lightfoot's safe hole.

"Take this," Lightfoot whispered pushing something into his hand. "It's a hand watch, no glass." Carbon felt the old man's bony hand grab his other and guide his index finger to the face of the watch. "When the little hand is here." He indicated the twelve. "Come back." There was silence for a moment. "If it gets ya... no hard feelin's, okay?"

"Okay," Carbon said, though the thought of being eaten didn't appeal to him.

Carbon moved toward the mall, he could find shelter in one of the large buildings for a time, but it searched buildings, so he would have to make each stay short. Once in the mall he lit up a cigarette and savoured the brief rush it gave him, it felt like it burnt too quickly and the moment of relaxation was short lived. With the butt safely in his pocket he made his way to the old Myers complex. It was big and spacious, making the place easier to hear if it was approaching.

A choked-off scream punctuated the dark. It was close. Carbon shimmied under a fallen counter in a store just by the entrance

to the centre. The place must have been the Body Shop, the fragrant smells of soap and lotions still permeated the air.

He lay still for a long time, listening, trying not to breathe. Accept for the occasional movement of a rat and the constant patter of rain on the mall's paving the only sound was his heart thumping blood though his ears. The dark was complete but he knew it was nearby, he could feel the presence as if it were dew on his skin.

Something big moved outside. He froze, holding his breath. Something was being dragged over the paving – a low swish of material through water. The sound stopped. Carbon clenched his teeth, lungs screaming for air. It sniffed nearby; he heard the intake of air through nostrils like a horse. It had found him. Carbon couldn't move. A darkness entered the shop. Dust rose and assaulted Carbon's nose. He wanted to sneeze. Heavy, big breaths escaped it and became all sound. Carbon bit his lips, tasting blood. It snorted and the shuffling of heavy feet moved away. Carbon's chest protested; his nose tingled his eyes into tears. A growl emanated from the dark as the dragging sound resumed. It was moving away. Stars danced before Carbon's eyes as his lungs cried for air; his nose demanded a sneeze. Once the

steady fall of rain could only be heard Carbon relaxed and launched into a fit of sneezing. With air now filling his lungs Carbon's mind began to work again. His relief was palpable. He lay beneath the counter thanking all the gods he could remember.

The sound of the rain and rats remained constant for a time. It had moved on and wasn't coming back too soon, he reasoned. Making as little noise as possible, Carbon reached into his coat pocket and eased out a pack of cigarettes, pulled one free and slipped it between his lips and lit up. He closed his eyes against the darkness and let the nicotine do its work. His heart pounded and his breathing slowed. The head rush this time didn't take his mind off the danger, off the fresh hunger eating at his guts. Carbon couldn't open a can in the dark, not while lying on his side under a counter. He butted out the cigarette and put it in his pocket. He relaxed into the floor, he wanted to sleep but knew he couldn't, wouldn't; keeping alert to noises was his only defence against it. Every few minutes the hand of the glassless watch moved ever closer to twelve and increasingly closer to safety.

Carbon wondered why it always checked Lightfoot's place at night, why hadn't it taken the old man who tracked it? Did Lightfoot and it have a kind of pact? Or was it and

Lightfoot one in the same?

By the time the small hand reached the twelve Carbon was fully on edge and his imagination had created Lightfoot into a monster; should he go back to the hole in the wall or take his chances on his own again? Cold air hung low to the floor, causing his mind to fog with thoughts of warmth and the mound of coats the old man possessed. Carbon dreaded the thought of crawling back to Lightfoot's hole in the heavy, pouring rain but he couldn't stay where he was. Shimmying from beneath the counter Carbon made his way outside. He couldn't smell anything, it was too wet, the rain too dense. He crossed to the other side of the mall and using the building overhangs as shelter, and following shop walls, he found the alley that led to Lightfoot's hole. In a dash through the rain he found the hole itself.

"Old man?" he said. A bare whisper above the falling water.

"It's comin'," Lightfoot said, turning his torch on to show him cowering in the doorway opposite his hole. "It's comin' for ya."

"It's coming here?" Carbon asked pressing himself against the wall.

"Soon, soon."

"How do you know?" Lightfoot turned off the torch and dived back into the winter ink.

"I brought it," he said. "I need food, okay?"

"You brought me here for it?" Carbon hissed. He had to run. The old man had set him up. "I'm going to kill you!"

"No, I lead it to the kill, it leaves me alone, no hard feeling, okay?"

"It's been looking for you, not me?" Carbon yelled. "You're the one it's been hunting, aren't you?"

"In a way, but you're here now, I'm safe. Tomorrow it look for someone else."

Carbon had to run, escape, he turned in the direction of the mall. Something slammed him backwards then pressed him up against the wall.

The stench choked him. Hot breath rushed into his face. The smell of meaty decay flowed into his nose, his mouth, through his skin. It snorted, the sound of an angry bull. It had him. Carbon closed his eyes and waited for it to bite his head off. He couldn't move, couldn't push it off and run. He urinated in his pants; the warm wetness caused him to cry. Carbon whispered pleas through his tears. It sniffed at him, he felt a sharp nose press to his chest, sniffed at the cigarettes butts in his pocket. The fucking old man had made him carry them, not to stay safe but to lure the thing to him. Carbon's cold hands were pressed flat against the wall, he could

feel the cracked rendering, the rough edges of exposed brick. He fingered a piece of rendering, trying to break it free, he needed a weapon, any weapon. Why didn't it just kill him? The weight slackened and Carbon collapsed to the ground. It moved away.

“No!” cried Lightfoot. His scream punched through the rain as if trying to stop its fall. Then came the sound of crunching bone. Loud animal growls and slurping washed over Carbon with the stink of a ruptured stomach. It had killed Lightfoot. Carbon lay face up on the ground waiting the same fate. Again a big nose pressed down on his chest. It growled, nudged him then moved away; the dragging sound vanishing beneath the splashing of the rain.

Water fell into Carbon's face as he stared up into the darkness, his eyes filled with the tears of the sky. He didn't know how long he lay there but he was thankful to be alive. A scream far off brought him to his knees. He felt his chest pocket and the now soggy butts. The smell of the burnt cigarettes had put it off, stopped it from killing him. It had been Lightfoot the thing had been tracking, not him; how wrong the old man had got it.

Carbon crawled into Lightfoot's hidey hole, stripped off his wet clothes and pulled one of the dead's coats about him. He fished through his clothes and found the

cigarette lighter and with shaking hands and many attempts the yellow flame leapt from the small plastic cylinder. Now with light he found his opened packet of smokes, they were wet; he searched his coat and found one of the still plastic wrapped packets, pulled off the wrapper and quickly put one in his mouth. Carbon stroked the end of the cigarette with the flame and puffed it into life.

By his fifth cigarette the shaking had left him and the hidey hole was filled with smoke. Carbon stared at the end of his last cigarette for the night, watching the red glow play with his sight. He watched it burn to its last then lay on his side, pulled more coats over his body and closed his eyes to seek out sleep. Carbon was thankful he didn't pick today to give up smoking. Tomorrow he'd search for more. At least for now he knew how to stop it from killing him, maybe tomorrow he'd work out how to kill it, but that was tomorrow.

Broken Things

Bipo Larson

Baxter hadn't wanted to leave his job, never even wanted to leave the family, but Sarah had stabbed him for the last time and he'd had enough. She'd simply made it impossible for him to stay. At first light he stole her old mag-trak vehicle and hit the connect-way. The trip to the nearest town dome was six hours and six hundred kilometers away – far enough to at least break her hold over him.

He plugged in his fifth neural charge for the morning as he rounded another curve on the mag-trak; a slight deviation of thought along the endless desert-connect-way that wove through the Australian desert. Red sands, red rocks and desiccated trees, a vastness that even tested the capabilities of his created mind. Baxter had always wanted to visit the Australian desert, but he had never wanted to spend his time in it – the idea wasn't even part of his initial protocols.

"Protocols," he laughed. He found the sound interesting and yet troubling. It was a human action, not something really suited to his voice modulator, but it fit with his thought. Protocols. Sarah had destroyed the structure of his nano-brain, destroyed the connector and nano-flament

passageways. She didn't want a faithful companion out in the loneliness of the desert; she'd wanted a victim.

He checked the time readout on the vehicle's navigation screen. It didn't match his internal chrono, and he liked it like that; it kept him questioning, asking his mind what had gone wrong. Rubbing his chest he tried to calm his thinking, tried to instigate rational over the spikes in reasoning and even actions. Two years ago he would never have considered the possibility, let alone stolen someone else's property. He would never have considered his very survival and sanity; for that was what had caused him to flee – he needed his sanity back.

Baxter knew it was the shunt invading his thinking, neural charges did that; made him try, made him want to find logic amongst the damage. He switched the vehicle to auto for a moment while the ebbing electrical charge caused his eyes to flicker. It didn't effect his control over the vehicle, but while there was still the auto option he sat back in his seat and enjoyed the mind-flow. It was a drug, a robot drug so to speak.

The vehicle skipped. Baxter opened his eyes and touched the dash panel resuming manual control. The desert left drifts over the mag-trak; at speed one could skid a vehicle from the trak and away from the power grid. Baxter was strong, but not strong

enough to lift a two tonne transport. Back in control he thought of Sarah, she would be waking up about now and would inevitably see his empty tool locker with all his power cells gone. What would she say? What would those first words be?

“Baxter! Baxter 15 where are you?” How many times had he heard that very scream? In the last few months he had to admit that he had become afraid of her; an emotive response for sure, but then he was an AI, but fear tended to be a solely human experience. He didn’t like it, didn’t like it at all.

He touched his face, feeling a line across his cheek. He hadn’t wanted to leave without talking to Sarah but he felt he had little choice. Her frightening possessiveness and fits of fury told him that his parting; well his breaking of their service contract – legal but rare - would be all rage and flying objects rather than teary farewells and hugs. He hoped Dome 8 would be far enough away to escape her reach and influence, escape her violence. He’d only stay there the night, to rest. Even that reminded him of her. He’d never grown tired before she’d given him his first shunt, but now, after fourteen hours, maybe twenty, he needed sleep. Baxter could no longer shutdown his systems, that mechanism had been removed and its junction smashed one night when

Sarah decided he could suffer insomnia like her. She never understood how he worked was not really the same, but he is now left with the inability to shutdown and reset parameters, the best he could do was lay down flat, preferably a bed and allow the system did the best they could while he was in a semi standby mode.

Sarah took credit for giving him dreams, but they weren’t dreams, not in the human sense; these were simply an attempt to find order in the events of one full processed day. It never worked properly and he was always left with a deep ache in his chest.

He’d been on the trak for two hours, eight minutes, and thirty two seconds, the sun had lifted a quarter into the sky and its warmth told him it was going to be another desert scorcher. His regulator adjusted to the slow climb in temperature and to ensure his comfort he set the vehicle’s climate control on the same steady rise. Baxter settled back for what would be at least another two hours to the nearest human rest dome. His mind was abuzz with wild electrons from the charger, so he closed his eyes and allowed the experience to envelop him in a sparkling haze. He didn’t know what the human response the shunting was but if was anything like his experience it was little wonder Sarah was insane.

It was because of Sarah he'd become addicted to circuit shunting with neural chargers. She'd removed his governing blocks and activated his natural response and free thought systems, unlocking the full AI part of him. She didn't do this for his betterment or out of any good will, but because she needed someone on whom to take out her rage; a punching unit, a victim far worse than she. The shunting was to give him a weakness equal to her own; she was a neural stim abuser – high yield stuff and illegal. Sarah couldn't stand anyone or anything to be better than her. Baxter quickly became a shunt addict and found he used it more as an escape from mental anguish than he did to satisfy her abusive needs.

The charge beeped empty. He pulled the round disc from his wrist and dropped it on the floor of the vehicle. Even with a head full of misfiring neurons he could count twenty spent discs. He felt weakened, the nutrition sacks needed refilling – he might have been a machine but his nano-flesh needed solid food processing for it regeneration; nothing complex, a few nutrition bars usually did the trick. The stay at the dome might be a good place to contemplate the future, there weren't too many jobs going for free thinking tech units out in the barren zones. Maybe he'd just turn north and head

into the Queensland Forest Dome, into a future that wasn't all dry earth, wind and fractured memory stores. Baxter checked the communications network, he was now out of service range – the bitch couldn't contact him and what's more, couldn't track him.

With the sun burning through the passenger window and the vehicle filling with ozone he tried to get the audio system to work, but like his life it malfunctioned, another broken part of his reality. He thought about singing, but the only thing he'd ever uploaded came from Sarah's husband and he didn't feel like singing 'She's Gonna Get Sick and Die' by Muddy Waters. Though he felt the sentiment behind every one of those words, he just didn't want to go there; too human.

Coming over a rise he saw something on the trak. Forward scanners showed a transport, an old farm level vehicle, charge full, one organic and one tech form. It was the tech on the trak waving. A breakdown in the middle of nowhere. Baxter touched the vehicle controls bringing it to a stop just behind the beaten up grey, box-like vehicle. The vehicle's silver wheels were padded with mag-discs, they looked old, many of them damaged. The tech on the road was a female class and going by her bare midriff, small yellow top and hipster jeans, she looked like an entertainment

unit.

Baxter sat in the vehicle and shunted another neural charge, watching the female as she continued to stand in the middle of the trak, hands by her sides and eyes fixed on him through view screen. He released his door with a hiss. He flipped the spent disc on the floor and climbed out. The heat stung his bare arms and face and his cooling unit audibly hummed up a few cycles. Instantly, sticky flies tried to crowd his mouth and eyes. It didn't take long to hate the desert. How did the human's put up with it?

"What service issue do you have?" he said, closing the door.

The female smiled, showing perfect white teeth, but said nothing. She pointed to her vehicle. Baxter moved to the driver's door and looked in through the open window. Slumped forward over the drive console was an elderly human. Life scan said he was dead; more than twenty four hours dead. He didn't bother using his olfactory sensor, he knew from the flies that buzzed about the body that it would not be a very pleasant smell.

"Asleep," the female said.

Baxter tried to make a one on one network connection with her but she had refusals on all channels. He tried an emergency signal but still got a block.

"Asleep," she said again.

"Dead," Baxter said, turning to face the female and the burning sun. She looked like a good model, pretty in the human fashion, a bit like Sarah, except where Sarah was dark haired and dark browed this unit was fair and light around her eyes. This tech unit had real flesh over her plastic skeleton; he could see veins in her arms and neck and small squint wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. Expensive.

"Asleep," she said, as she moved past him and shook the man. "Wake up," she said softly. "Low power reading," she said, but her voice altered slightly, becoming mechanical. The man didn't wake and Baxter could see tiny maggots wriggling in the his's ear.

Software corruption, brain overheating, Baxter thought as he watched her child-like actions. He examined her fine features, her pretty face and soft blue eyes, he could barely detect the crisp edges of the crystal lenses. She didn't look disabled in any way, but then he knew there were many things that could cause problems with a nano-mind, maybe the desert heat had affected her, maybe her cooling system had failed. It could be just about anything. Looking at the tech unit he couldn't help but think of Sarah and wonder how he managed to escape serious brain injury.

"Wake up. Please!" she said

in her woman voice again.

“He is dead,” Baxter said.

Once more he tried a connection, but all he got was red shutdown signals and refusals. “The human male is deceased.” And if he didn’t get the female out of the sun maybe she would expire as well.

“Asleep.”

“Dead!” Baxter raised his voice and the female cowered against the side of her vehicle. She squatted, hugging her knees and burying her face beneath folded arms. She started to cry. Baxter shuddered; it was too human – good system interface but still too human.

“Run down,” she sobbed, the voice mechanical.

“What’s your name?” Baxter asked, crouching in front of her.

She looked at him, her eyes red, cheeks wet. “Lilly, Lilly Davis,” she said. She looked up to the open vehicle window and the buzzing flies. Her voice had taken on a soft resignation. It was as if she already knew the man was dead and had just been waiting for someone to confirm it.

“Is this your owner, Lilly?” he asked.

“Grandpa.”

“This is your Grandpa?” her asked.

“Yes, I’ve known his since I was a little girl,” she said, her blue eyes

searching his face. “Why?”

She’s an embedded unit, he realized. He guessed she didn’t even know she was a tech unit. “Where are your parents?” he asked, not wanting to add system confusion to the problem. He touched her arm. He had to get her out of the sun. Baxter could already feel his brain boiling in his chest.

“Dead,” she said staring him directly in the face. “There’s no one to love me now.” She looked forlorn, lost.

“Shit!” he cursed. That was something else Sarah taught him; frustration. He didn’t have time for a screwed up embedded without owners and with a dead human thrown in to complicate matters. “Shit!” he said again, adjusting his cooling system.

“It is rude to swear,” Lilly said.

Baxter stood and offered her a hand up. Lilly pushed it aside and stood by herself, keeping her arms firmly folded across her chest; brain protection mode. He moved away from the vehicle and the sound of flies and munching grubs, slowly leading her to his own transport and the extra coolness of its air conditioning. He hoped there was a storage bay at Dome 8; he didn’t want to take her with him.

“Where were you going?” Baxter asked. A part of him was now

wishing he hadn't stopped.

"Doctors," she said, "Doctor Tinday. She's nice. I like her."

"You were going to the doctors?" Probably to have her brain replaced.

"Yes. She's nice. Lives in Dome 11." That was a large dome three hours away.

There was little choice, Baxter would have to take the girl with him to Dome 8 and drop her off at the security station, they could store her. He'd have to tell them about the body, which wasn't a bother, they should be used to that kind of thing happening out here. Though this was a main connect-way there was little traffic in the summer, so waiting for a service drone to come by wasn't really an option.

"I'm going to take you to Dome 8," he said, opening his door.

Lilly simply pointed down the trak.

"Yes, that way." Baxter sighed. "Where do you live?" he expected her to just point in the opposite direction.

"Unit base 27 just outside of Dome 93," she said.

That was close to four hundred kilometres the other side of Sarah's place; a pathetically small unit Sarah insisted she and her husband spend the rest of their lives on. Lilly was from the deep desert. Why so far

out? As Lilly stood beside him he wondered what Sarah would be doing now. He wasn't there for her to hit, to stab with a knife or burn with a power connector. Would she now be doing this to her husband? He fingered a scar on his cheek, not even his smart skin could heal over the wound.

"Do you need anything?" he asked, slowly pointing back to her vehicle. "Do ... You ... Need ... Anything ..." He punctuated his speech by pointing at her vehicle.

"Yes," she said as she went back to the vehicle and retrieved a small blue bag. She walked slowly back to him, her face creased with concern. "Why are you talking funny?" she said, her eyebrows raised. "Do you think I'm stupid? Grandpa thinks I am stupid."

Baxter shook his head, at least he thought he shook his head; the heat was beginning to drain him.

"Lilly, your grandfather is dead and we have to go get help," Baxter said normally. Lilly's face darkened and she started to cry, shoulders shaking. He put his arm around her and she lent her head into his shoulder. "I don't think you are stupid," he said. But you are damaged.

"Dead," she said. "They are all dead now."

Baxter didn't really know what to do, so he held her tight and

waited for the crying to stop. After what felt like an hour in a dry sauna he managed to get her into his transport and started moving towards the dome.

The day was getting hotter and the vehicle's climate control began to falter; his own system increased its capacity and he hoped hers was doing the same. They'd been travelling for ten minutes, sixteen seconds when he remembered she'd said something about low power. Baxter pulled the thin tech unit charge cable out from the control console and held it in front of her. Lilly simply took it and wriggling the connector slightly she plugged it into her belly button. She said nothing. After seventeen minutes, forty two seconds she unplugged the cable and set it back into place in the console. The whole process was done in silence and in a manner that suggested Lilly didn't know she was recharging. Something wasn't right with Lilly and Baxter knew it wasn't all software corruption. Trauma can cause nano-brains to fail, just like human ones but he didn't see any signs of injury; no scars. She didn't have smart skin, so it would have shown.

With the whine of the road Baxter found that Lilly was putting him on edge. They still had at least an hour until Dome 8 and being a Sunday in summer that meant no one out and

everything shut. He tried the vehicle's network access service, but that, too, wasn't working.

"Why are you going to the doctors?" he asked, wanting to break the spell of whining tension.

"She's my friend," Lilly said. Her heavy frown and tears had now been replaced by a bright smile. "I have been visiting her every month for years."

"Why is she your friend?"

Lilly looked out the window. She was ignoring the question.

"What do you like to do, Lilly?" he asked. His neural charge was ebbing and he needed to communicate to help him keep focused.

She looked at him and smiled again. "Reading and watching old movies."

"What type of movies?" Baxter liked films, maybe they had a common interest – it might be something to break the boredom of the trip.

"Sci – fi, Star Wars, Star Trek, Claxon One, the old stuff." Her face lit up. This was obviously something she really liked.

"Really," Baxter said. He was more a tech service show watcher himself; though Sarah had made him watch human sex acts and even joked about him not having what it took to be a real man.

"I like Moon Dance too,"

she laughed. "They have robots, you know?"

The heat in the vehicle had climbed to 32 degrees C and Baxter guessed it would be approaching 40 degrees C outside. "Are you feeling hot?" he asked, pulling at the collar of his service vest. He wasn't hot, but the heat did annoy his skin.

"I feel fine," she said. Good, her cooling system was okay.

He turned the air conditioner on high, cold air blasted onto their faces. Lilly laughed.

"I like space ships," she said after a few kilometres. Her voice in the quietness sounded strong, yet soft.

"Why are you going to see the doctor?" Baxter asked, carefully trying to watch her and the trak at the same time. Even with a good proximity alarm mag-vehicles still hit kangaroos.

"Don't you like space ships?"

"The doctor," he asked again.

He saw Lilly's smile vanish and her eyes shift away from him.

"Lilly, what is it? What is wrong?" Baxter had to concentrate on the trak as it rose and fell with the undulations of the desert. The auto grid was reliable, but he had heard of sand drifts which could throw them off the trak, he'd like to avoid that.

"Broken," she said.

"What's broken?"

"Things, lots of things are broken." She looked at her hands, turning them over in front of her face as though seeing them for the first time. Unlike his they had the definite lines of deep veins rather than a smooth appearance. She then reached into her small bag and pulled out a tiny statue of a horse, one leg was missing.

"Is that what is broken?" he asked.

She took out another statue, this time of a butterfly with one wing. "Broken things" she said. She stared at the two statues for a while then carefully put them back into her bag. "Many things are broken."

"What things, Lilly?" Baxter wanted to pull over and concentrate on what she was saying, but for some reason he had to keep moving. He felt that if he stopped the vehicle would stop working and they would be stranded out in the heat. "Tell me what else is broken." Was it her reasoning hemisphere?

"Can't say." Her voice was low, hushed.

"Are you afraid of something?"

"Can't say because I don't know."

He glanced at her and saw a tear rolling from her eye. "You don't know what, Lilly?" The tear looked so

real, so personal.

“What is broken?” She sat just clutched the bag to her chest with one arm and gently stroked her stomach with her free hand.

“Is that why you have to see the doctor? To find out what is broken?” Baxter felt tired and it wasn’t from the driving.

“Do you like space ships, I like space ships.” She turned to him. “Can we talk about space ships now?”

Drumming his fingers on the navigation bar Baxter struggled against not having a shunt. Lilly hadn’t said anything about his twitching but he did see the wrinkling of her nose when she finally noticed the pile of discs at her feet. He hadn’t answered her about the space ships and it didn’t seem to bother her that he hadn’t, maybe she had become used to being ignored. He thought about the old man, wondering what he might have been like for her; what would they have talked about? He’d forgotten his first owners. Sarah had the memories erased one night after heavy shunt of stims. He managed to keep the essence of the memory but he could never really make a connection with it.

“What are you thinking?” Lilly asked, her bright eyes inquisitive rather than judging in the way Sarah asked such

things.

“What was it like living with your grandparents...”

“Only grandpa, grandma left him when I was only a girl.”

She had a full history. He wished he had one. “How was it like living with someone so old?” The oldest person he knew was Sarah’s dad, and he was only forty eight.

“Quiet.”

A moment passed as the whine of the wheels wrapped around them.

“Is that all?”

“He didn’t like sci fi movies, he didn’t talk much and he smelt like your vehicle,” Lilly said with a smile.

The edginess still gripped at Baxter’s chest. He needed a neural charge but he didn’t want to stop in the heat to have it in private, away from the gentle eyes of Lilly. He grabbed a grey metal case out of the tray between the seats.

“Do you mind, I really need one.” He pulled a neural charge free and jammed it in his wrist.

“Does that hurt?”

“Yes,” he said as he shunted.

“The why do it?” In was a reasonable question.

Half closing his eyes the tickle felt like it was tugging down his tension, releasing his shoulders, softening his mind. He twitched.

“It hurts yet it doesn’t. It makes me

feel better, I think

“Grandpa did that,” Lilly said staring at him. “Is that why he died? Will you die?”

He tried not to close his eyes, letting the charge warm him, almost collapse his thinking in on itself. He let the question pass. The day had started out crap and slowly it jangled downhill ever since. Right now the thought of shutdown was beginning to feel quite preferable.

“Your grandpa shunted?” he asked, feeling the first wave of electrical stimulation pass.

“He called it tickling,” she said, watching him.

Baxter knew what it was. It was the human equivalent, the base from which they introduced the experience of shunting to the tech population. Lilly’s grandpa used a thin cable attached to his frontal lobe to tickle his brain.

“Dr Tinday will be sad, she liked grandpa,” Lilly said watching as his shaking began to subside. She sounded sad.

“How many years have you been seeing the doctor?” He felt more relaxed, yet more alert to the road and the noise. He let the second wave flicker through his mind and let the heaviness sink deep into his chest. He wanted to close his eyes.

“Since I was...” She fell silent.

“And.” He flicked the spent charge on the floor.

“I ... I...” He could see tears forming in her eyes and sweat had started to bead on her forehead for the first time since getting in the vehicle. It was weird to see a tech sweat; Lilly was special, but she didn’t know it.

“I... I can’t... I...” she stammered. It was what he did when Sarah harassed him, when she prodded him with her finger. That stammer, that imperfection of voice that annoyed him, embarrassed him as Sarah laughed.

“Tell me! Tell me what’s wrong?” he snapped, feeling back on edge again. The voice of Sarah filled his head. She’d yell at him, punch him when he didn’t answer. They were her words, her voice that left his mouth. “Tell me!” he yelled.

Lilly started to cry and Baxter felt guilt. Had he sustained damage? Given he was an addict it was more than possible. It wasn’t Lilly’s fault she’d been broken. He pulled his hair back from his forehead and sighed; it eased some of the tension in his neck and back, the tactile interface was working overtime.

They were still thirty minutes from the dome and soon she would be the responsibility of security; he wanted to know what the story was with her. At first he only half cared but now it ate at him, ate at the same

raw wounds left by Sarah. He itched at an old cut on his chest, a scar across his mind where she'd stabbed him with a garden trowel. Now that was a buried memory. He almost laughed.

"I'm sorry for yelling," he said, reaching over and touching her on the shoulder. She flinched and sank into the corner of the door and seat; so human, so fragile. "I'm not going to hurt you, Lilly." He pulled over to the side of the trak, the vehicle shut down. He'd really upset her and had to set it right. Security might think he'd damaged her. "I'm sorry. Really, Lilly, I am sorry for yelling." She wouldn't understand the connection between her stuttering and Sarah; he had a hard time understanding it himself. Is this how the human mind worked?

He tried a connection and found a small opening into her network. Quickly, before it shut him out he accessed her. Her mind was ablaze with surging data but little of it went anywhere. It was then he noticed medical blocks on memory lines, emotion inhibitors and feedback loops. He probed her fluid matrix and redirected a memory flow around the medical block, watching as the once silent nano-line burst back into life.

The vision hit him like the fire of the sun. His sensors tingled as he tried to filter, shield himself from the burst. He was in, but where? There were broken data strings everywhere.

"Help me," she whispered.

"Please, help me."

Baxter set to work on one of the emotion inhibitors, it slowly leaked information as he worked.

"Don't hurt me," she sobbed, her face now wet; it was like her soul was raining.

"My baby," she cried dropping the bag and wrapping her arms over her bare belly. "Don't take my baby!" she screamed and lashed out at him. Baxter broke contact and fought off her blows until he grabbed her wrists and forced her back into the passenger seat.

"Lilly!" he said, trying to stay calm. "Lilly."

The girl's eyes were wide with anger, the crystals unforgiving. She was shaking; skin going cold, yet clammy. Shock. Could she really go into shock? Baxter still held her wrists, trying to find recognition in her eyes, in the redness of her face. He accessed her again and tried to lessen the emotional and memory flows, but he couldn't. Lilly's mind became a fire of restoration.

"Aaron, please, please don't."

Her voice was barely a whisper. The fight was leaving; escaping back to the place it had emerged.

"Lilly, it's okay. You're not with Aaron, it's me..."

"Please put down the gun; let's talk. Aaron, put down the gun."

“Lilly!” he said. “It’s okay now.” He broke contact and slumped back in his seat.

Lilly had stopped crying, stopped fighting; she seemed to stop functioning just for a moment. The heat through the windows clung to them, made everything more intense. Baxter wiped sweat from his face. His skin was reacting to the heat. Lilly was wet through with sweat, real sweat, her face and neck still showed the pinkness of anger and fear, but at least now she was calm.

He thought of Sarah and the violence and how he’d lock himself in the bathroom to escape her. Did he ever look like Lilly? He looked at his hands and noted he was trembling. He opened and closed his fists in quick succession, trying to calm himself, trying to slow the pounding in his wrist and the confusion in his chest. He felt disjointed. He was in the bathroom again.

“He killed my baby,” Lily said. Her voice, so soft, was almost swallowed by the heat penetrating the vehicle.

“Aaron,” Baxter said, fumbling for a neural charge. How could she be pregnant? he wondered. Was she a surrogate? He’d only ever heard of them, never even considered them to be real.

“He shot me.” She lifted her top and showed him a small, round

scar just beneath the bottom stitching of her bra. “I nearly died.” He knew that couldn’t be true, it would take more than a small projectile to stop a tech unit.

“Why did he shoot you, Lilly?” He managed to calm his hands long enough to slip another disc home. He wavered a moment in tingling relief.

Lilly looked out of the window; out at the barren landscape, the dry, dead stones and the bluer than blue sky. She said nothing for a long time. Baxter finished his neural charge and added it to the pyramid on the floor. He wanted to touch her on the shoulder and say it was okay, that she was safe but he couldn’t. He didn’t know what to do for her or even understand what she was going through. How could he tell her she was safe when he didn’t feel safe? What good was one broken mind to another.

“I’ve never remembered that before,” she said just as he powered up the vehicle and moved back onto the connect-way.

“Why?” he asked as the road noise again filled the cabin and the air conditioner struggled to cool the them. He didn’t need breathing air, but he now noticed she did. The steady rise and fall of her chest told him that she was indeed special. Damaged, but special.

She looked at him; tears still present in her eyes. "I hadn't remembered until you yelled at me."

"I'm sorry... I didn't mean ... I accessed your..." He stopped. He couldn't tell her she wasn't human? Did she even know he wasn't?

"That's okay, I think," she said. She wiped her face with the back of her arm, sniffing and fighting back more tears.

"What happened to Aaron? Did he get arrested?" He asked, staying with her.

"I think he is dead," Lilly said. "My memory is a bit disjointed, but I am sure he is dead." Lilly no longer sounded like the damaged woman he'd been speaking to only minutes before. He hadn't repaired much, but it seemed to be enough.

"Was Aaron your husband?" he asked. He caught site of Dome 8 as they came over a rise. They were still twenty minutes away. It was now the hottest part of the day and even the air conditioner struggled to keep the sun's heat off them. Baxter's cooling system wasn't rated for these extremes.

"My brother," she said. Lilly seemed to have become smaller, more childlike as she sat next to him, as if the burdens of her mind had left her deflated.

Not knowing what to say to that Baxter simply said nothing.

"Mum knew," she said. "She planned to send me away. Send me to the Forest Dome, or to another community." Lilly straightened in her seat, looked more at ease.

There were many tech units that were made to be family embedded, but Baxter had never heard of one having a memory store so troubled, so deliberately corrupted.

"What happened to the baby?" he asked.

"I remember being told it was dead. I'd lost too much blood and the baby died." Lilly wiped her face.

"But why did he shoot you?" Baxter said.

"He shot everyone."

"What!" He tried not to yell, but it just came out of him like a plea for help.

"He killed Mum and Dad. He even shot my little sister."

"That can't be?" Baxter said. "Lilly, that just can't be."

"I found them," she cried. "I saw them, I saw all the blood." She looked at him like a wild animal. The memory was alive in her – a live current that had found a grounding point. "I found Aaron soon after he killed Mum, waiting, waiting for me. I argued with him, he said he loved me and that no one was going to take me away from him. I was his." She looked Baxter hard in the face. "He loved me but his soul was gone. We struggled and the gun went off."

“Then what?” Baxter asked, feeling tense and sickened at the same time. Lilly was a tech; the story was human drama. What was she?

“I remember being taken to hospital. Security surrounded me and doctors fought to keep me alive. You see the bullet had nicked the circulation pump and my entire system had gone into shock.” She looked at her hands. “They didn’t have to, you know. I was only a tech, but I’d also been a surrogate chamber.” She looked at him.

Baxter snatched up a disc but she grabbed his hand.

“No one knew that I knew what I was, and no one had the heart to tell me. They sent me to grandpa’s to live, he lived far enough away for me to vanish. I’d stayed with him when I was a kid every summer. I loved that old man.” She released his hand. “I have all the memories, everything, even knowing what I am I can’t help but believe the reality of my life.”

“How did you manage to be a surrogate for your brother?” Baxter asked.

“I’d been implanted with the egg, but the family wanted a natural insemination. It’s not ideal, but it works,” she said. “Aaron raped me before my father could deposit his sperm.” Lilly seemed to fold in on herself with the memory. “On insemination the act was supposed

to be erased from my memory, but my mind was set for the father, my father – my mother couldn’t conceive any more, she had no eggs. Aaron wasn’t...”

“It’s okay, Lilly,” Baxter said. “I think I understand.”

“The murders... I couldn’t think ... it was too much...”

“The doctor knew what had happened to you, didn’t she?” he said.

“I assume so, but we never directly spoke about it. I didn’t remember the murders until you yelled at me, until you got access to my memory store.” She stared out the windscreen. “I don’t even think the doctor knew I was a tech.”

That made sense, Baxter thought. Only a tech would have picked up that she wasn’t human.

“So, you’re okay now?” They came over another rise and the dome looked bigger, more defined.

“No,” she said, releasing his hand. “It hurts, hurts in my chest and I am trying not to see all the blood around mum’s head.” She started to cry again, but more subdued as if she were trying to control the emotions that had been suppressed.

“I’ll recharge the vehicle once we’re in the dome, then I’ll take you on to see your doctor,” he said, offering what he hoped was a reassuring smile. “I think she might

be surprised to hear what you've remembered and might be able to help you."

Lilly smiled wanly as she settled into her seat, looking relieved. Baxter shuddered at the thought of Sarah having children.

"What's your name?" Lilly asked, pulling hair back from her face.

Baxter hadn't told her his name. Why? He looked at her as they passed the sign announcing the dome. Did he want to tell her? Did he really want her to know who he was?

"Dave, Dave Baxter. I'm a series 15A," he said, feeling relief in telling her. "But most people call me Baxter 15."

"Then I'll call you Dave," Lilly said. "I'm not most people, am I?"

"No, you're not," he said. "You most certainly are not."

They said nothing while the vehicle charged. Lilly sat quietly in her seat and let the cool air of the dome replace the warm air in the vehicle. It wasn't a big dome as protected cities go. It had maybe a population of two thousand. They'd stopped just inside the main entrance, a connecting pressure shield kept the heat out but still allowed airflow.

"Do you need anything before we go out to the doctor's?" Baxter asked,

pushing his head in through her open window.

"I don't want to go to the doctors," Lilly said, looking down at her shoes. "I want to go home."

"That is a long way, Lilly," he said.

"Not grandpa's home, my home."

"Why?" he asked.

"There is nothing left for me, Dave, nothing but the house all my memories are connected to." She touched his hand as it rested on the window seal. "I want to go home. Please."

Baxter ducked back into the service store and returned carrying a bag full of nutrient bars and a large bottle of water. He had nano-skin, his body didn't need water, but Lilly had real flesh, she would undoubtedly need the stuff sooner or later. He climbed into the vehicle and powered up.

"You better set the course in the navigation control," he said.

"Sorry, Dave, you have to drive manual, there's no trak leading out to the house." She look tired and the lines around her eyes appeared deeper, strained.

"Point the way then," he said, as he let the navigation control take them to the dome exit.

They traveled for seven minutes and eighteen seconds back out along the trak they'd come in on before Lilly pointed out a dirt track

to their right. Baxter's vehicle wasn't built for rough surfaces and its highly expensive mag-pad wheels would be damaged by the stones on the road.

"You know this will ruin your vehicle," Lilly said.

"Technically it's Sarah's, the woman who owned me," he said. The road was rough, corrugated and potholed. After only five minutes and eleven seconds the first rattles began to invade the vehicle. After twenty nine minutes, forty eight seconds the climate control system failed.

"The place is just over the next rise, 0.76 of a kilometre," Lilly said.

Reaching the crescent of an undulation the desert property coalesced into view through the heat haze. A solitary tree stuck out of the ground, a signpost for civilization, life. As they drew nearer Baxter made out the iron roof of the house and several sheds that were on a severe lean.

"The driveway is just before the cattle grate," Lilly said.

Baxter turned off the main road and onto a even rougher track that lead to the house. In less than one minute and fifty six seconds he was parked in front of the obviously abandoned homestead. He shutdown the vehicle and sat listening to the tick of the mag-pads as they fell from the wheels. The sun beat on them through the glass.

Lilly grabbed her bag, opened the door and climbed out. She stared at the place for a long time, squinting through the glare at her home. She walked around to his side and opened the door.

"I want you to come in with me," she said. "Please." Baxter could see deep pain in her eyes. He could see his face reflected in her eyes; his scar prominent.

"Okay," he said.

They walked up to the verandah and stood before a faded, paint-peeling door. It had probably been red once, but now it was a mixture of undercoat white, red and grey flakes. For some strange reason Baxter knocked. Lilly looked at him and sighed. They both knew no one was home, but he thought it wise to make sure nonetheless.

Lilly pressed her palm against the door lock and pushed the door inwards.

"I even have prints," she said, in way of an explanation.

The door was stiff, she had to lean all her weight into it to open it fully. Without hesitation Lilly walked into the long passage. Baxter stepped across the threshold and waited a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dimness, his lens filters brightened the hall slightly.

"I found Mum in there," she said, pointing to a doorway immediately

on their right. She walked slowly to the opening, hesitating before looking in. She visibly sighed and her shoulders slumped. "Someone's cleaned the place," she said, a note of relief in her voice.

"Maybe your grandfather," Baxter said. "While you were in the hospital?"

"Yeah, maybe."

Baxter stepped up beside her and looked into the room. Lounge chairs held pride of place while there was a large gap and clear floor section showing where a lounge had stood. He stepped into the room and stood next to the gap, looking down, studying.

"The lounge is gone," Lilly said. "She was laying on the lounge in a pool of blood. She'd been shot in the head."

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I think so," she said moving to one of the chairs, dusting it off and then sitting down on one of the arms. "I didn't know what to expect; I didn't know how I would feel coming back here." She looked at the mantle over the fireplace. There were some framed photographs and ornaments. "Even the smell of the gun has vanished."

"How long has it been, Lilly?" Baxter asked sitting on the arm of the other chair. The dust was thick and there were spider webs everywhere.

She thought for a moment. "Six years, eleven months, four days, three hours, twelve minutes and nineteen seconds," she said. "I can remember the day it happened, even every detail but I can't connect with it, it is though I had seen it all through a data recorder; it wasn't me."

"I think I know what you mean," he said rubbing his face. He'd seen some extra emotion blocks in her mind and now he thought it best not release the data. "Sarah made me feel like that most of the time."

"Did she love you?"

"No," he said with a sad laugh. "I was her toy for taking out all her rage on." He pointed to a small scar on his cheek. "She hit me so often not even my nano-skin could repair itself."

"Is she still your owner?" Lilly looked worried.

"Was until this morning. Forgot who or what I was and had to leave." He shrugged. He didn't mind saying it.

"You were running away when you found me?" It was a simple question; he didn't feel any hint of accusation about it.

"I guess," Baxter said looking up at her. He hadn't thought much about his actions that morning.

"Why didn't you just leave me in town?" she asked. "You didn't have to get involved."

"I know," he shrugged. "It just felt

right. I can't explain it."

"You helped me, David Baxter 15A." She stood and moved to him. With slow deliberate moves she placed her hands on his cheeks, cupping his face in her sweaty but soft touch. "I was locked up inside. You let me out."

"I don't really understand what I did, Lilly," he said, feeling awkward. He wanted to pull away and yet some thing held him there. He'd never been touched tenderly before. He liked the feeling. "Has this place helped any?" he asked.

Lilly let go of his face and looked back at the mantle. "Not much, but it's a start."

"Where to now?" he asked, looking about the room and now seeing the dust of years. The inbuilt network function centre looked old, but it still might work, he thought.

"I want to stay." She looked over her shoulder. In the dull light he thought he could almost see the young girl that once lived in the house. It was a strange feeling. "I'm back and I think I'd like to stay."

"Lilly, it is a long way from anything out here." He looked at the grimy window, the faded and moth eaten curtain. "It will be dark soon."

"Wait here." She left the room and he listened to her clomp about the house, opening cupboards and banging doors. It was a house

sound, not an angry sound he had grown used to.

Lilly returned, a smile on her face "The place is still on the grid, not a lot of stored power, but plenty for now," she said, eyes hopeful. "We can stay here the night, and you can leave in the morning." She said. "If that's okay with you, I mean."

"Doesn't it bother you that your family was killed here?" Baxter had to admit he was tired and didn't really want to head out into the heat again.

"Not as much as I had thought it would. As I said, it doesn't feel real now, the emotional connection is missing." She looked at the photographs. "It's like those pictures. I know where they were taken, but I can't really remember what I was feeling at the time." She looked at him. "Please say yes, Dave."

"I suppose," he said cautiously. He stood from the chair and walked to the mantle to study a collection of smiling faces and histories far removed from his world. He picked up a small figurine, one arm missing.

Lilly took out the small horse and the broken butterfly and added it to the collection.

"I suppose there are beds?" he asked putting down the figurine and picking up a small cracked bowl.

"Yes, we can share my parents," she

said as she touched the network function centre. The wall came alive with lights and a power reading at one quarter. She stared at it. "I guess it could do with some fixing." Her smile pleaded for him to stay.

"What if I want to stay longer?" he asked.

Lilly didn't have to answer; her smile and hug said it all. Baxter felt light in his chest and deep down a sense of belonging began to take form. He released her from the hug and offered his own smile. He looked at the bowl still in his hand, at the small painted flowers and its chipped rim. He put it back on the mantle.

"The house is full of stuff like that," Lilly said.

"Ornaments?"

"No, broken things," she said, putting a hand to his face. He found himself leaning into its softness. "She said that was all this house was ever good for. Broken things."

"Do you believe that?" he asked. He closed his eyes and allowed his tactile responses to enjoy the touches of her hand.

"I don't know, but we're here and I'd have to say that we fit the same mould as everything else in the place." Lilly released him and stepped back. "Look, David, I don't want to go back to service. This place is mine now, as a family imbedded I was included in the will."

"Techs can't own property!" What was she suggesting?

"The legals don't know I'm not human," she said. "The manufacturer and registration office would have me out at grandpa's place."

"But he's dead, that means you return to being property of the manufacturer. It's the law, Lilly" Baxter knew what she was up to now, but he didn't see how it could work. Even his separation form Sarah was going to cause problems, but he also didn't think a refit would do him any harm.

She put her hands on her hips, lips pouted. "Just listen will you? Please, David, just listen and then decide, okay?" He nodded.

"There should be a gas vehicle in one of the sheds and a gas pump out back. Dad had the thing put in because he didn't trust the mag-trak and the fact that it didn't reach onto the property."

"And?"

"We can take it, head back and pick up grandpa, go back to his property, bury him with a small service; I'll say a few words, he was a Darwinist by the way, and then we'll clear out his place."

"Don't we have to report that he's dead?"

"Sure, but only to the local authorities. Grandpa's will would be in Dome 8, not in the City Dome, everything, if settled locally, won't tip off the manufacturer of the registers." She began to pace the room, not unlike Sarah when she was

in a state.

“The will has me as the sole beneficiary, which under normal circumstances would mean the manufacturer would lay claim. But as the lawyer would not know I am a tech and that the files would only be logged locally, no one other than us would know what I am.”

“Simple enough,” Baxter said. “But you left something out.”

“What? I covered everything, well everything other than who I am. I think my official files and my imbedded family files, birth certificate and stuff is in Grandpa’s safe room. I don’t have security access.”

“That wasn’t what I was thinking about,” Baxter said, now fully sitting in one of the duty chairs. A cloud rose about him and he felt a compressor tubule give in the seat. “What happens to me?” he said, keeping his tone neutral. He needed a shunt. “Sarah will notify the authorities, I will be ordered back to the manufacturer. I have to obey the law, Lilly or a retrieval team will simply come out here and melt me on the spot.”

“I think I can fix that as well,” she said. “But first let’s take care of grandpa.”

Spending the night in a house that wasn’t filled with screaming and abuse meant that Baxter couldn’t fully lapse into his standby, and kept starting into a sitting position every

hour on the hour. He wished he could shut down, rest a while. Morning couldn’t come soon enough and with the first flash of the sun Baxter was up and studying the houses network system. It was an old model, but he thought he could probably service by using parts from Sarah’s now useless vehicle.

“I’ve got the gasser out and its ready to go, Lilly said stepping in through the back door.

“You’re up, I mean ...”

“I couldn’t shutdown either,” she said with a smile.

Baxter went to tell her about his problem, but stopped himself. The day was going to be long enough without having a very human tech show worry over him. He was still trying to deal with everything else that was going on and was about to happen. The gasser was big, grey and metal with rubberized wheels. It had two seats in the front and a single long seat in the back; no air conditioning, no nav-control and a wheel up front for maneuvering. It was clear to Baxter that Lilly would be in command of this thing.

“It doesn’t look too good,” Baxter said climbing in beside Lilly as she pushed a stick around near the wheel. Her movements were accompanied by loud, metallic crunching. “It doesn’t sound too good either.” He lowered his audio pickup’s

sensitivity as the vehicle jumped into motion. "It's loud," he shouted.

"It works!" Lilly shouted back.

The vehicle belched smoke all the way back to Lilly's dead grandpa's vehicle. Lilly said that was what it was supposed to do, but Baxter couldn't see why humans would make something so obviously faulty.

It had taken a full day to get to the dead man. Baxter moved his body to the back of the old man's vehicle, ignoring the increased number of bugs on the body. The control seat was wet with fluids, so Baxter stripped off his service suit and sat on that. By the time they were ready to leave it had turned night. Lilly's vehicle's lights did not work. Baxter drove the old man's vehicle in front while Lilly followed. It was slow going but they finally made the old man's property by early morning. An aged mag-trak ran to the homestead's front and Baxter realized that Lilly's family must have been quite wealthy.

By noon they had buried the old man by some rose bushes that had been planted along with the ashes of Lilly's family. Lilly cried and Baxter again resisted the urge to shunt.

"We have to get moving," Baxter said.

"Why?" Lilly knelt beside the mound of earth, one hand to her

chest and one on the mound.

"We need to get the stuff and get back."

"Dave, there isn't any rush," she said, standing and walking over to him. "We can take our time, pay my last respects to the property of my guardian and then put his house in order."

"How long will that take? One, two hours?" Baxter calculated the search dynamic of the house from the outside so he could be accurate with the time frame.

"Maybe I need to do something for you now," she said.

The tickle in his chest startled him. She was gaining access. He couldn't stop her, like he couldn't stop Sarah.

"Just try and relax," he heard inside his mind. Her touches were subtle, warm. He thought he could see light, pale yet strong. "You've got some major damage here, David." For a moment everything froze, he lost contact with his extremities; his eyes lost focus and the body regulator shut down.

"Sorry," Lilly said as everything came back online. "I can't fix everything, I'm not trained in this, but I managed to create some new nano-tubes through to your quantum negotiator."

"My what?" Baxter said.
"The thing that makes you who you

are, it was only half functioning, I've managed to boost it a little but it will take more work than I can do to repair it completely."

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"Better, I think." He wasn't really sure. Something was different but he couldn't grasp what it was.

"Let's get out of the sun and start on looking for those files."

"I think I could do with a sit down," Baxter said.

"Now that's the spirit," Lilly said as she took him by the hand and led him into the house. Baxter was surprised that there was no security on the doors or windows. They just walked straight in.

"Welcome home, Lilly," the house said.

"You even have a house AI?" Baxter said.

"No," Lilly said patting him on the arm. "It's a standard tech system that thinks it's an AI. Quite different I can assure you."

"Is that a visitor I detect?" the house asked.

"The thing will want you to stand still so it can calibrate the rooms," Lilly said. "No visitor, it's just me," she said as she walked down a short hallway and then left into the kitchen area.

"Deleting anomaly," the house said.

Baxter sat on a wooden chair. He'd never seen wooden chairs before. It felt good to be sitting, the weight off his feet. He sighed with relief.

"Can I get you any water?" Lilly asked.

Baxter held up his hands. "Smart skin, doesn't need water."

"Oh." Lilly poured herself a glass of water from a tube on the wall. She drank it like a human would drink. She didn't finish the water, but placed the glass on the table next to Baxter and sat on a chair opposite.

"You are perfect," Baxter said, watching her every move, her every flex of muscle, blink of eye. "If I didn't have an inbuilt detector there would be no way of me knowing you weren't human."

"Well, I'm not," she said leaning both elbows on the table.

"Human."

"Perfect," she said carefully. "I might be a top of the line model, David but I'm just a messed up inside as you, maybe more."

"I don't think you understand..."

"I did a little memory searching while I was tinkering," she interrupted.

"So, you know?"

"No all of it, but I did get enough to know I don't want to look again." She finished the water. She looked at the table top, toying with the

glass. "I have to ask you something."
"Ask," he said, finding himself enjoying the rest.

"Do you like me?"

The question sank into him. He couldn't form straight thoughts. He tapped his chest, trying to clear a foginess in his mind. He stared at her, she was looking back at him, her crystal eyes somehow softer.

"I don't know," he said.

Lilly smiled wide then patted him on the hand. "That will do for now, lets get these files and then get to Dome 8 to lodge the death."

Slowly they tidied up the house, emptied the cool room of food stuffs and shut it down, posted a power down for the homestead to take effect in twenty hours and directed the property water manager to discontinue water supply. Baxter took time to look at old images, smiling when he saw images of class C robots driving digging vehicles. It was a bit like looking back at childhood; he couldn't help but touch the image with the tips of his fingers, hoping some of that history would somehow pass into him.

"When you're finished packing those images into storage containers can you come in here and help me decode this door?" Lilly called from a small room on the opposite side of the hallway. Baxter sealed the last container, keeping the

robot image in the cracked frame. It wasn't his history but it was something he understood.

"Can I have this," he asked coming up beside Lilly.

"Sure, I don't know who it is though, grandpa never told me." She was pressing her hand to the safe room's door and trying combination on the touch pad.

"That will take a few years," he said. "Let me have a try."

"You don't have prints."

"Don't need any for this. I'd say this is at least a hundred years old." He pushed hard on the hand plate until it buckled. It wasn't a thick plate.

Carefully he managed to peel it free to reveal a mesh of wires and circuits. "Here," he said. "This small lever is an emergency release." He pulled the small lever down with his finger and the door clicked open.

"And how did you know that?" Lilly stared at him open mouthed.

"Sarah made me watch old crime movies."

It didn't take long for Lilly to gather up all the data cubes and files and pack them into a case. Baxter resealed the room then bent the release lever so it wouldn't work.

They headed back to Dome where Sarah was waiting. Baxter is apprehended for theft. Lilly lies and

says she'd picked him up from Sarah's after they'ds entered into negotiations of a service contract.

Baxter is released as Lilly's property.

"You lied, Lilly," Baxter said as she climbed into the vehicle

"Must be something wrong with my programming, eh?" she said offering a shy smile.

"You really are broken," Baxter said as Lilly hugged him.

"Told you, the place is only good for broken things."

Letters to that Drunken Bitch

Dear Diana,
I want to know if the authors in the magazine are real.

Janie T
(Ed. Unreal folks don't do much writing)

Dear Diana,
Is it true that lesbian lovers like to have sex with lots of different women and have problems connecting with just one. Is that why you are so bitter all the time?

Geoffrey M
(Ed. did you think that question up yourself, or did your dick intervene, again.)

Dear Mz Arlyn)
I find I am quite enjoying the oddity of the magazine. True the stories aren't always well written but they are interesting and I do find the regular articles fascinating as they aren't what I have come to expect from publications. Thank you for being interesting at least.

Chelsie Y
(Ed. call me, maybe we could, you know, go out and get a drink sometime.)

Dear Sarina,
Do you actually read the books you review or do you make it all up. Just asking as I disagree with you on one book from last issue.

Peta F
(Sarina...after 500 years of reading books you ask me a dumb question. No, I don't read them, I eat them and hope the words get into my brain through osmosis - idiot)

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