

Fiction Shorts

by **SciFurz**

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Notes

2020/08/09: Added Road Surprise.

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Seclusion

He walked up the path and found himself in front of the concrete apartment building. A small open area in front of it was partly littered with junk as evidence of previous occupation. He wiped the sweat of his brow, looking up for any sign of movement inside. As with all the other apartment buildings he had encountered so far in this part of the country, be it jungle or savanna, this one too was a lifeless concrete shell with the various colours of paint peeled off slowly by the weather.

The weather was turning bad now. Rain started to fall in thick drops and he decided it was late enough already to get some rest. He didn't go all the way to the top floor but searched for a good hidden corner on the next to last floor. He found a small room with an old mattress in it and a door he could close. Before he closed it he carefully arranged a couple of empty crates and boxes in front of it to make it look like the room's not in use.

He laid down his weapons next to the mattress, two silenced automatic pistols, although he rarely used both together, a tricked out sub-machine gun with silencer, detachable barrel extension for sniping, scope, laser, flashlight, double width magazine for extra ammo and even a grenade launcher. He still wondered after all this time he owned it how anyone was able to pack all that firepower and accessories into this fairly compact thing. His backpack was too large for a pillow so he rolled up his jacket after removing all the ammo packs from it and his pants. Having all sorts of hardware stacked on your body does not make for comfortable sleep.

With the door closed the room was quite dark and he went to sleep quickly.

Regular evening

He walked down the avenue, neon signs lighting up the street and people going about their business there. He dropped by the mini market to get some wine and snacks, the afghan cashier knew him as he was just about a daily occurrence there. It wasn't quiet, but it wasn't the same noise as daytime. Things seemed more relaxed somehow in the dark. Especially during the hot season. Everyone feels happy that things are cooling down for a bit. He sat down on a bench eating a few snacks while watching the people pass by. He got up again and walked further home until he reached his favourite bar, an old, small bar playing jazz music at a decent level visited by mostly older folk during the day. He greeted the barman and ordered his usual beer, then continued his observation of people on the streets.

Drive

I get on the highway. It's empty at this time at night. The coolant temperature is normal now but I keep the speed at 100. The oil pressure is still 1 bar above the pressure when it's warm. The music from Tool is preparing me for the ride. I can feel the urge to step on it being charged.

I see taillights ahead of me and gain on them slowly. A middle class car, sedan, two people inside. I signal ahead of time for my switch to left lane. Most people remember to do that only after they're already halfway on it. That's like saying "Watch out!" after someone has already tripped or bumped into something. Drivers are selfish.

I overtake the car slowly. I can sense the middle aged man looking at my car. Must be the low rumble from the exhausts making him curious to see what's passing him.

I get back to the right lane when I see headlights coming closer in the rearview mirror. This one's going faster.

I estimate him going between 140 and 150 when he passes me. It's a popular standard station model with the standard alloys. Probably someone who works in sales. I'll surprise him soon as I see the bridge that marks the end of the reduced maximum speed.

I'm charged up as I pass the bridge, the music changes to the next song. The slow bass and drum riff build up with the rumble under the bonnet as I slowly step down on the pedal. The torque from the V8 easily pulls me forward. No need to downshift as with puny 2 litre engines.

I gain speed fast. 110, 120, 130, 140, 150, 160, 170, 180, 190, 200, I pass the dull stationwagon, probably making him wish he had a car that could do that, 210, 220.

Enough for now. The white from the broken line flashes quickly in the reflection on my window. The air whistles comfortably around the car. It sticks to the road like glue at this speed. There's plenty more if I want to go all out but there's no need.

I love driving at night. There's this freedom you don't have during the day, not to mention peak traffic. I prefer to take it slower then because everyone's just pushing and getting stressed about being a minute late. Idiots.

There's a lonely car ahead of me. I slow down a little moving to the left lane. The guard rail is like a blurry line next to me. I'd love to get really close to it but I know it's not straight enough to drive along it at just a couple of centimetres.

I overtake the car in a slow bend, this time a coupé with all the bling. Seems I triggered a nerve because I see it coming closer. I guess he's seen the Fast and Furious movies. He overtakes and I see the young guy in the passenger seat grinning at me. This time I think I can show off and downshift. Before he can fully enjoy getting ahead of me I pass him on his right giving him a loud roar from my back. I see him struggle but he's just no match for this oldfashioned muscle.

I keep up this speed for a while relishing the whistle coming from the

intake beneath the engine rumble. It's feels like I've got the engine of an oiltanker powering my car, relentless, unlimited power.

Time to get off the highway to get onto another. I downshift and let the engine brake. By the time I reach the bend I go slow enough to not have to brake more. I step on the gas letting the car pull me into the right bend. It's dry weather and I can hear the tires squeal. The pull keeps going for the 270 degrees turn, then a short straight and a bend to the left followed by a quick bend to the right and onto the highway again at almost 200. I keep it at 220 again. There's a low bump on the road making the car go up for a second but the wheels stick firmly onto the ground. The last stretch is just speeding between the lines until I get to where I go off again.

I turn down the music a little and go through the empty streets, rounding corners without needing to drift or slow down much. This car does 90 degrees bends for breakfast.

Home. I go through the last two narrow streets at almost idle revs and park it in front of my garage, giving it a little more time to settle down and enjoy the sound before shutting down.

I get out and stroke the roof. I love this monster of a car.

The End

I read.
I like to read.
I read a lot.
I love to read.
I really read a lot.
Really, really a lot.

It started off with illustrated stories of a noble bear and his young cat friend. It was funny and I liked the fantastic adventures they had with magical beings and strange technology made by silly inventors. Then I found detective novels. Old ladies who happen to be curious about events in the region and somehow got dragged into solving the mystery, professional detectives doing work for police and government. Fantasy and science fiction was next. Roaming the galaxies as the lone anti-hero, as a mundane salesman, as a soldier to fight hostile creatures on distant planets. Travelling around the world to find a special magical item in a dragon's den, saving disguised princesses from evil witches and demons, meeting different little and large folks. The horror couldn't scare me enough. I wanted to run from hungry monsters, hide in silence from undead, get trapped in mazes full of poisonous creatures.

I read a lot.
I wanted to read.
I needed to read.
I craved to read.

I got fired because I messed up a lot at work. I couldn't stay awake there because I spent all night reading. I went around to search for books that would get thrown away. Garage sales, pawn shops, boxes of books from deceased people when nobody had a use for them. Sometimes I'd fall asleep. Then when I woke up I started reading at once. I often ignored hunger and thirst, eating anything quick when I had to. I lost a lot of weight. I desired the books, the sentences, the words. I dived into them, floated among them, revelled in them. I didn't know when I was reading or hallucinating. It didn't matter anymore. I found bliss.

I wonder when they'll find my body between the stacks. There have been accounts of dead bodies lying around for years before anyone accidentally found them. I have no contact with others. No family, friends. I'll be here for a long time.

Maybe it'll inspire someone to write a story.

Delivery

Gila re-assembled her gun after cleaning it and put it in the inside pocket of her jacket. She turned off the radio, put on her boots, took the jacket and went out the door to her appointment.

She waved quickly to the old landlady as she passed outside her window. It just started to rain again when she turned the corner at the end of the street and soon the wet street and sidewalks reflected headlights, streetlights, windows, and shop signs as if a rainbow drank every cocktail ever invented and vomited all the way back home.

She followed the street along the inner docks where private and small business owners kept their boats. Businesses here sold anything having to do with the sea, from fish and diving equipment to cheap artwork and expensive antiques. Her destination was a bit farther, at an old bar named Jantje's Plezier. She would meet her contact there for a delivery job.

She let an older couple walk out before heading in, looked around the dimly lit interior and found the young man in old-fashioned clothes sitting at a table at the side.

She stepped up to him after he nodded at her and gestured at the barman for a beer before sitting down.

'How are you doing?' he asked inbetween sipping from his whiskey.

'Doing okay, Luis. Can't complain about lack of work. You?'

'As you can see, can't complain either.'

The barman brought her her beer and Luis ordered another whiskey.

'So what do you need?' she asked.

'I'm doing a friend a favour. He's got some documents that are of interest to the people in the defense industry, especially those building submarines. He doesn't know anybody who could sell or transport these so he asked me. I know someone willing to sell so I wanted to ask if you could deliver.'

The barman brought the whiskey and Luis looked around casually.

'Sure.' she said. 'I haven't got anything planned for the next couple of weeks. You know my rate.'

He nodded. 'Thanks. I'll have it ready for pick-up at Norman's bookshop.'

They continued with some small talk until she checked the time and they left the bar going their separate ways.

The next day she went around town, checking out the smaller shops for interesting things while keeping an eye out for anyone possible tailing her. At the end of the day she was convinced enough Luis hadn't been followed and had caused her to be tagged for surveillance.

Back home she made herself comfortable in her chair and enjoyed a good movie with a bottle of wine. The next day she visited a couple of bookshops before walking into Norman's. She looked through the collection of thrillers, horrors, and secondhand books, moving along the small aisles between the wooden book cases. She took a couple to the counter where Norman sat reading his book. She thought he looked too stereotypical for this kind of work with his slender figure and thinning grey hair.

He checked the book titles and looked up at her over his reading glasses.

'How about this one?' he asked picking a thriller about the navy from behind him. 'Seems you might like this one as well.'

She took the book and read the cover. 'Looks interesting. I'll take it.'

He had just wrapped up the books when she gestured at the notebooks behind him. 'Almost forgot, I also need a small notebook.'

He grabbed one and held it up. 'This one?'

'Yeah, that'll do.'

'Shall I wrap it up with the books?'

'No need. I'll just take it like that.' she said and put it in her jacket.

'All right.' he said as she paid him.

'Have fun reading!' he said as she left.

She dropped by the supermarket on her way home to get dinner and checked once more if she might have been tailed.

There was no sign of it and things were quiet on the way home until she had to wait at a crossover. The moment the lights went green for the cars the person sitting behind a motorcyclist grabbed her package and they drove off.

She yelled and ran after them for a moment, then cursed and kicked a stack of empty crates to the ground.

'Damned son of a bitches!' she growled as she stomped back home and up the stairs.

'They were tailing me and I never noticed!' she said to herself while she started packing her bags. 'Luis'll kill me for sure.'

She went downstairs again and hailed a cab. It drove her to the train station where she boarded a train going south.

She dumped her bag on the luggage rack and sat down, sulking while looking out the window.

'I guess things went well?' the woman in front of her asked, not taking her eyes off the magazine in her hand.

'Yeah, you can tell Luis I'll be meeting his client in a couple of days with the contents of the notebook. And I better hope they won't find out soon that what they got in the package is a fake.'

'He thinks it'll take a couple of months for them to realise the bits they managed to decrypt from the datacard in the book are useless. By then they have bigger problems to deal with than chase after us.' she said and stood up to get out at the next station. 'Enjoy your trip.'

'Already do.' Gila said with a devious grin.

A Favour

She moved slowly to the top of the dune on her hands and feet trying not to get burned by the hot sand. When she could look over the top she stayed still for a while scanning the area and letting the sand underneath her camouflage suit cool off in the bit of shade.

When she saw nothing out of the ordinary she laid down slowly, getting used to the remaining heat from the sand. She pulled up the sniper rifle she had bought the week before, checked the magazine and scope, took another good look around her, then checked the busstation a kilometer away through the scope.

Two weeks ago she got the message from the Jackal; find out who had been sent to assassinate him and clean it up.

She felt sweat coming down her face but kept her focus on the station. She had wrapped up the rifle and put a shade above the lens of the scope to prevent reflections so she was confident she couldn't be seen at this distance between the dried grass.

The Jackal was a bastard, but he had pulled her out of that brothel she was forced into as a little girl, learned her how to handle weapons and she felt the need to repay the debt.

Casually travelling to Leboa-Sako, she had snooped around a little and found him getting in and out of the headquarters of UFL and APR. Seems he didn't care what side he worked on as long as he got paid. She also liked to get paid, but she did keep to one side as long as it didn't change its stance. He even helped other mercenaries with their schemes to pull a fast one on the faction's jobs. The only background she managed to get was from a local taxidriver. He came in by plane, most likely from the USA, and suffers from malaria.

"Serves him right." she thought as she saw the bus approaching in the distance.

After she aquired an informant in town she went to a local arms dealer, a south American guy in horrible shirt, who at least could scrounge up some passable weapons. He was able to get her an AS50 and she didn't want to know how. After that she found a secluded spot to get used to shooting it until she got a call from the informant he'd be taking a mission out in the desert near where she was. He saw him boarding a bus in town so she saw it as a great opportunity to ambush him.

"Borrowing" an old Datsun left out at a shed she drove quickly to the busstation where he would arrive and walked out into the desert unnoticed.

The bus turned off the road at the station, joining the others. It became hidden from view but she kept an eye on both sides of the station. She felt hot under her disguise, but at least the sand had cooled down enough and the disguise would be a little less warm than lying here out in the open sun without it.

People walked away from the station. One guy left by car but she hadn't seen him yet. Doubt always bothered her but she was sure she hadn't

seen him leave yet.

Things became quiet after the bus had left for the next stop.

A quick breeze made some noise in the rusted carwreck a little down the dune. For a split second she wanted to look to make sure it wasn't something else but kept her focus on the busstation instead.

There still was no movement for a minute until he finally emerged at the back. He had slung a machinegun over his shoulder. Looks like he came prepared for some heavy shooting.

She followed his path and was glad he was walking.

Wind speed was low, she aimed a little in front of him, fired, aimed once more and fired again.

She saw him sag down onto the ground through the scope. A quick look at the building revealed one man running to him, then stop and turn back.

No further movement was enough for her to crawl back down the dune and disappear. Even if he still lived it would be enough to take him out of the picture. The Jackal wouldn't have to be bothered while he carried out his latest plan here.

She put her weapons in the car, sat behind the wheel and took a look at the maps. He had asked her to come to the old prison after she'd be done. Something about clearing a path for the people and containing the disease.

Solitude

The rain came down hard.

I poured the tea in my cup, chucking the tea leaves from the strainer back into the pot, then sat down again in the rocking chair on the porch.

The sound of the radio in the kitchen could hardly be heard above the sound of the rain on the roof and ground. Thunder rolled through the clouds in the distance, a cool breeze played the chimes gently.

The smell of wet grass and earth filled the air, energising it.

I watched the grass plains and blue-grey sky, their colours more vibrant now at the end of the afternoon and sipped my tea.

Writer I

He went downstairs after his morning shower, tensed his half awake body, and turned on the stereo to play his favorite rock music to sing along to in the background.

Feeling a bit peckish he took a small dried sausage from the kitchen and sat down in his comfortable chair with his laptop, looking for a moment outside at the people passing his house.

'It's good to be a writer.'

Writer II

I take another swig from my beer. Dulls the senses and slows my writing down.

It's unreadable if I keep going as fast as I want to put down the flood of words and thoughts and feelings and scenes down on the digital equivalent of paper.

This jumble of words tries to form sentences, just to end up in a horrible mess unless I reign them in. Herd them into an acceptable row.

I had to quit working. It just wasn't working out anymore, if you excuse the pun. I am a night man. Not a daywalker. When the sun comes up, I feel the need to sleep. The night excites me. Darkness. Quiet. Just the stars and moon outside. Empty roads lit by an occasional streetlight. It inspires. Having to wake up early in the morning slowly murdered me.

I need to scream in silence. Grab what squirms inside me and tear it out of my chest in a bloody mess for anyone who wants to see. Its high pitched screams of agony pierce my ears until I put it to rest between pages.

I can't control what I need to write. It just comes up to me, shoving itself into my face, invading my thoughts and dreams, forcing me to express things a sane person would not understand.

I finish my beer and pop open another one. Bittersweet comfort.

A new thought comes to my slightly foggy mind. I haven't even finished the last one.

It's going to be a long night.

Live

I open another bottle. The pills I collect in the bowl laugh at me. I dilligently take my prescription, accept the dosage, then pour it with the previous ones into the big bowl on my table.

The little white and blue pills laugh with me, because I refuse to ignore reality.

I used to do what the people told me what's good for me. Take my pills, go to work in the morning, be nice to others, clean up after myself, go to bed early, live my obedient life in plastic happiness. No more.

One evening I came home after a stressful day with an annoying customer. He was the one who installed those malware filled tools on his PC. I didn't, yet he accused me for sellling him a PC which got slow after just one day. The manager chewed me out for berating the customer. It was not my fault. I had nothing to do with it. But I got punished.

I came home that evening and no longer wanted to be part of "normal" society. I felt tired. So fucking tired.

If this was real, you could take it and shove it where the sun don't shine. I got down to the corner store, bought some of the cheapest liqour and spend the night drinking and watching the weirdest movies I could find. I felt thrilled for the first time in a long time.

I ignore the shit thrown at me, and tell what's on my mind if they bother me. I stopped caring about the fake life you all live in. You can choke in it. I rather have the delusions telling me to live my own life.

Trouble with the Sweet Stuff

Blue and red lights reflected from the large windows, wet from the rain pouring down. Pouring down in my eyes.

I don't know if I'm supposed to feel the wounds. In some movies the anti-hero seems to be in pain, in others he doesn't feel much. I just feel warm blood spreading across my chest. Guess I'm in the latter movie.

'No money, no disco for you.'

I told him I could get the money the next day. There's this jewellery store where the owner always stays late. I can take on that geezer.

'No money, no disco.' the muscle beside him repeated. 'You heard him.' If we were still in high school I could have taken him on. I was one of the strongest back then.

Okay, I can it feel sting a little when I cough. Probably coughing up blood too. The sirens blare in the distance, hear the voices from curious folks better. Sounds like some are disgusted, some laugh, some surely think I got what I deserved.

Had a good time in school, played football for fun and coach said I had a shot at becoming professional. Expected a scout at the next game. Went out with the guys, made out with one of the hottest girls, twisted my knee in a tackle during the game. Goodbye fun.

Five forty-six. I wonder if that time on the clock above will stick with me even in death. I can feel the second hand bounce each time it goes to the next. Thud. Thud. Thud. Counting down my time. I wonder if I will see five forty-seven.

The army. Always the army when there's no other job to be found. Went there with two friends who had no prospects either. At least we could do something to be proud of. Fighting those who try to take away freedom from others, oppress the weak, harm our friends. Addiction to antidepressants got me kicked out. Killed one kid too many to need them.

Blood must have gotten up my nose. The smell drowns out the smell of the wet asphalt. So does the taste. One cop moves next to me, kicking my gun away like a regular Fred Astaire. Loved those black and white movies. Would have loved to see my dying scene in black and white, with just the colour red filled in.

Yes, you can shout at me, talk, whisper. I'm not listening.

Came home, dad disappointed with me, mom sad but still loving me unconditionally. Tried working a straight job. Found out mom was dying. Cancer. No money for decent treatment. Found dad drunk in the garbage at night.

Found the guy with the stuffed wallet at the right place. He found a huge bump at the back of his head.

Yeah, keep the people away. Too interesting to not record it on their mobiles and put it up on internet. Another bunch of views and likes for

their fifteen seconds of fame.
Someone threw a rock at me.

Went back into the hole with the meds after mom died. Couldn't give her one last hug or word when she died while I sat out my time for assault. No last apology to her for fucking up my life. All that was left were tears falling on her stone. Dad never sobered up since. And the meds. Moments of dreaming the world away. Moments of dancing with my head in bright, colourful lights.

Traffic is heavy around this time. The ambulance won't make it in time. The old man did. Never expected him to be a quick shooter. Should have looked closer at the navy picture on the wall.
I never got hold of the money, but I did get my disco lights.

City Streets

Jonah looked the street over. He hated the decrepit look of the brick buildings plastered with torn and faded advertising, the clearly far from new cars driven by their low income owners along the streets with minimal effort to avoid the pedestrians crossing over, some of those homeless. Horns blared and received replies of cursing.

He fumbled in his beaten leather jacket pocket between his keys and a few old strips of chewing gum for his half empty pack of cigarettes, took one out and lit it after a few flicks of his scratched army lighter. The sensation of the bitter smoke filling his lungs and letting it out in one deep and long exhale relaxed him enough to get on with his stroll to Bernie's.

The sun was already on its way down but the late summer weather was still warm in the shadows covering the street. A couple was in the middle of a domestic fight in one of the half empty apartment buildings he passed, him being the worthless unemployed bum and she being the cold bitch. A little further a kid was crying for candy he'd dropped on the floor. Jonah drowned out the noises from voices, radio music and traffic as he walked down the street, building his own little tunnel which would take him to the bar he wished he'd already been at.

Near the bar he avoided making contact with the couple of whores past their prime trying to squeeze the last remaining bucks out of the suckers falling for their seductive suggestions. He had no time for that kind of woman. He didn't enjoy a two minute satisfaction. If he had a woman she should be worth it to hold in his arms the whole night.

He flicked away the butt of his cigarette into the gutter with the rest of the junk that had gathered there and opened the bar's door with faded yellow fancy lettering on what used to be dark blue but was now more a dark grey.

The familiar hush apart from the background music, dim light, and smell of cheap booze, beer, and cigarette smoke greeted him. Eddie Hazel was pulling off one of his guitar solos. Jonah only needed to nod at the barkeeper once to order his usual shot of whiskey.

'Jonah.'

He looked at the sombre man at a table on the side. 'Frank.' he said. Jonah picked up his drink from the bar and sat down in front of Frank. He had never known him without the old black jacket, slowly but obviously ageing from wear all these years, just like its owner.

Drained

Sheila stopped at the old local gas station next to fuel pumps in the navy blue from a long defunct brand and highlighted with rust to complement the backwater sensation the place conveyed. Rain drummed hard on the steel overhang in matching dirty white with the brand in faded red letters as she stepped out onto the thin layer of slick mud covering the ground and already groaned inward at the mud stains she'd be sure would cover the hems of her pants.

The town was as far away as it could be from the civilized world in the middle of the hills hugging the mountain range and there was nothing but forest all around. Even the weather kept far away from everything by bunching up into dark clouds until it erupted into a thunderstorm once in a while. She eyed the sky and the looming darkness overhead and hit the edge of the gas tank opening with the gas handle's nozzle, eliciting another groan.

Thunder struck in sharp blows overhead, pounding through her chest and raising her heartbeat. 'It's just thunder.' she told herself. 'Just thunder.' She hated the loud noises.

The metallic clack from the pump handle made her jump. The tank was full.

She returned the handle at the pump with a noisy rattle, closed the tank opening and ignored the splashing from the low puddles as she went to the entrance of the gas station's shop. Inside she headed for the large snack section first, then the liquor section because her gut told her that she'd need it tonight at the hotel, even if all she could get was cheap stuff. The turtle faced man behind the counter looked like he'd never been anywhere else in all his life but there. Maybe the oil company forgot about him along with the existence of the station. His plaid shirt looked as if he was born in it and it had grown with him, adapting the colours to blend in with the dull colours of all the cans, cartons, bags, and ancient advertisement posters in and around the rack behind him. She thought his eyes turned as slow as he appeared and wondered if he even realised she was actually there.

'Thirty-seven thirty,' he said without looking at the register after putting her snacks and bottle in a brown paper bag.

She laid down forty. 'Keep the change.' she said with a polite little smile on her face.

He took the money without acknowledging her tip.

She walked out the door clutching her bag and suppressing the urge to say something about being polite to people in general when she almost bumped into a tall man in police uniform.

'Whoa there missy!' he said in a what sounded to her much too stereotypical mountain folk dialect.

She looked up into the officer's face, which seemed honest enough at his thirty something years of age. A man, but still a boyish edge to his eyes and reddish cheeks. 'Sorry.' she said as she looked up at his amused expression.

She was about to continue towards her car when he spoke again. 'You're not from around here.' he said. A statement, not a question.

She sighed silently. 'No.'

Thunder cracked the sky overhead again.

'Mind if I ask where you're from?'

She took a slow, deep breath and turned around to face him. 'Houston.' she said.

Rain kept drumming its beat on the overhang.

The amusement was still there. 'Long way from here.'

She knew someone would ask her eventually. Or ask her in an annoying roundabout way. 'I'm looking for someone who left the public view a long time ago.'

The patter of rain falling on the ground surrounded her. She could hear him think.

His eyes narrowed just slightly enough to tell her he was cautious. 'Some folk like to find a place where they can be undisturbed.'

This was the tiniest of clues she had found in her search but it boosted her confidence. 'Some folk really want to know why.' she said.

The silence lasted on longer than comfortable to her and she expected trouble any second.

'Good luck.' the officer said and went inside the gas station.

'Thanks.' she mumbled even though he couldn't hear it anymore, and stepped briskly to her car.

She dropped the bag on the passenger seat and started the car, driving off with more gusto than she had meant.

Following the directions and map she had printed out she took a right turn at the centre crossing in town, then drove several hundred metres until she saw the hotel sign on the right side of the road.

She took her canvas sports bag after stuffing the paper bag in it and headed for the front door. It was a rather modern glass door compared to the log cabin style of the building. It also didn't really match the dark wooden interior. The weather did though.

The air inside was stuffy despite plenty of fresh air available outside. Or maybe because. A young man behind the front desk was busy with paperwork when she walked up to it.

'Good afternoon.' he said with the polite smile reserved for honoured guests at the hotel. She could imagine him being the nephew of the owner and given the job because his mother arranged it after he dropped out of first year college.

'Sheila Branson.' she said putting down her bag. 'I called earlier to reserve a room.'

With a few keystrokes he confirmed her reservation. 'Yes.' he said. 'A double bed room.' He typed a bit more, then looked at her. 'Will the gentleman be joining you later?'

She wanted to lecture him about modern society and women but thought better of it. 'I like to sleep with lots of space around me.' she said.

It took a moment to register but he nodded and typed a bit more, then

reached back and grabbed a key from the board. 'Room 314.' he said as he laid the key on top of the desk. 'If you want to have dinner the chef can make a light meal, but for something stronger we suggest the steakhouse near the centre of town.'

She took the key and pondered about dinner for a moment. 'Thanks, I think I'll head for the steakhouse.' she said.

'I recommend the T-bone for when you're really hungry.' he said with a little grin.

She chuckled. 'Thanks.' she said and headed for the stairs.

The room was spacious enough and had white walls to her relief. The double bed would suffice for her sleeping habits and she tossed her bag on the chair at the end of the bed. "Tonight," she thought. "eat well, drink well, and sleep long."

The steakhouse was actually a combined restaurant and bar near the centre crossing of the town and Sheila was glad she didn't have to leave her table to get a few drinks after eating.

She leaned back in the corner of one of the booths in the back, satisfied with the amount of meat filling her stomach. She couldn't deny being a carnivore and it showed in her figure which wasn't fat but wasn't idealistically thin or slim either. She disliked women who tried to discard every hint of fat from their bodies.

She sighed. Physically she felt satisfied but her mind wouldn't rest. There was still a job to do. She had to go through great lengths to convince the people close to her at work that she had found a lead to the whereabouts of Shadow Walker and she wasn't about to give up. She would find him. She had barely finished her first drink after her dinner when she noticed the presence of someone in the back corner.

The area she sat in was pretty lit up and there were even a few people in some of the booths enjoying dinner or some private space to drink and talk or flirt, but the one corner that caught her attention was dark. Someone sat there and she was fairly sure she had seen the waitress stop at the table during her dinner once. A shiver shot through her when she thought she might have been observed during dinner.

She didn't like it. It made her angry like it did when some cocky guy tried to pick her up at a bar when she just wanted a few drinks and enjoy the atmosphere.

But something was different. She could only sense his stare and it wasn't that he ordered her a drink as an excuse to get near her. She could only feel that she was being watched. Intensely.

Her eyes went wide at a sudden possibility shooting through her mind. Had she found him!?

She frowned. It could just as easily be a creep. It wasn't the first time she had encountered one and she didn't want to waste time on a stalker. She had a specific goal in mind and any distraction irritated her.

She took a deep breath. This was a public place. There were enough people around. She could confront whoever it was without getting into a lot of trouble. The best way to deal with unwanted attention was to turn

their attention back to them, something she had learned over the years of clubbing in the city.

She stood up from her booth and walked up to the booth in the corner. 'So, are you looking at me or am I imagining too much this evening.' she said. The hearty chuckle from the dark corner was unexpected. 'I don't know about your imagination, but you did catch my attention.'

The voice was grated like a rusty piece of iron, and the face leaning forward into the light shocked her.

'You look like someone whose curiosity gets her into trouble, but also gives her life.' the aged face of the once revered hero said to her.

Sheila examined the face of the man who sat at the other side of the table before her. He looked older than he was but it wasn't just that time hadn't been nice to him. The wrinkles between his eyes and the slack around the corners of his mouth showed there was more than just the years at work.

He took the bottle of vodka in front of him and held it up in an offer to her. She had her share of drinking bets and wouldn't be intimidated by alcohol. Without a word she downed the last of her drink from the glass she had taken with her and shoved it forward.

He smiled and poured her a drink before filling his own glass.

Her eyes had adjusted to the dark and she took a good look at him. Grey hairs had appeared in his black scalp, unflattering wrinkles around his grey eyes.

His eyes. She was drawn to them. They hadn't lost the air of intelligence but had grown in wisdom. Wisdom from a hard life.

He smiled ever so slightly. 'You're a hunter.'

She downed half her glass, ignoring the burn going down her throat and focused on the way it would help digest her earlier steak. 'Maybe.'

He finished his glass and sat it down. 'I can only imagine one reason to hunt in this place. And only one type of hunter to do so.'

She twirled her glass on the table. He wasn't talking about the area rich in wildlife. 'And what type is that?'

He poured himself another drink and downed it. 'Ruthless.'

She laughed out loud. She was sure some people called her that but this was the first time someone had honestly told her.

She rubbed her eyes after regaining control of herself. 'Sorry.' she said. 'But you might be right.'

He just grinned at her and refilled her glass.

They just sat there in the booth for a while, drinking and ignoring the dampened conversations from the other booths and while Johnny Cash sang the last song of his life from the loudspeakers at the bar.

'You want to know.' he said.

She gave him a nod.

He watched the glass in his hand, twirling the contents slowly like the memories in his mind. 'I just had had it one day.' he said. 'Fed up completely.'

She sipped her drink patiently waiting for him to continue.

'Every day.' he said, emptied his glass and filled it again. 'Help me, save them, stop the fire, rescue the cat.. So fed up with them..' He took a drink and sighed. 'They weren't my problems but they all made it mine when

they knew I could solve their troubles without effort. For the most part though.' He leaned back into the corner of the bench and wall. 'There are some things I just can't solve but they still expected me to do so without any effort on their part. Refusing to think for themselves and change their own behaviour or accept limitations on what they can do.'

Sheila nodded gravely. 'I think I get it.' she said and finished her drink.

'They stubbornly keep doing the same thing over and over again thinking the result will be different each time.'

'Exactly.' he said, filled her glass and topped his off. 'They became lax since I was always there to save the day, and got impatient if they had to wait even a minute for me to show up.' He frowned and took another drink. 'And this any time of day or night as if I was there twenty-four hours a day just waiting for them to call for me.'

'So then you just up and left.' she said.

He scoffed. 'I tried to tell them I wouldn't be there all the time, told them to think before doing anything. They just forgot it the next moment.' he said and groaned. 'And then one day I just couldn't anymore.' He emptied and filled his glass once more, then stared at the bottom of the now empty bottle for a moment. 'I was completely blocked. Stared at the wall while the phone rang. Nothing could make me response to anyone or anything.' Sheila knew the feeling. She had wanted to get away from all the stress from work and what happened in the world often enough. But she wasn't expected to save lives so it was easy enough for her to take a vacation and get away from it all. Now people were blaming him for any death caused by accidents or natural disasters. Not all, but enough for the media to use it to crank up their viewer count.

'When they kept on calling out to me constantly I just grabbed the few things I wanted to keep and left for the remotest town I could think of.' He chuckled. 'Contrary to what everyone believes I'm no farmer so I can't grow my own food and I need a place to do my groceries.'

She chuckled. 'Right.'

'I grew this ragged half beard,' he said and rubbed the short scruffy hair on his chin. 'and hitch-hiked my way up here. Found a job being a Jack of all trades without making them think I can do everything.' A slight smile appeared on his face. 'I make little money but I still have a few secret accounts that I could retire on to fill the shortage. I like the simple life though and it helps to keep everyone thinking I don't have much.'

Sheila nodded. 'Who would suspect the poor man surviving day by day to be the great hero they once knew.' she said. 'Even if he does bear a resemblance.'

'Exactly.' he said and lifted his glass. 'To being a poor schlub.'

'Poor schlubs everywhere.' she said, clinked his glass, and they finished their drinks.

Sheila had ordered another bottle while they talked further about what had happened and his new undercover life. By the time that one was empty, mostly by keeping his glass full, the bar was about to close.

'We're the last.' Sheila said as she stood up, keeping herself steady by

holding onto the booth wall until she regained her balance. 'Ah damn.. Forgot I have to walk to the hotel.'

A snort made her look back at her table companion who pushed himself up to his feet with some effort. 'And no Superman to fly you there.' he chuckled.

'I don't need to be flown.' she said. 'It's not the first time I've walked home in a drunken stupor.'

He grinned at her. 'That's good then.' he said and swayed on his feet.

'Then I don't have to escort you.' He took a step forward and nearly fell over.

She quickly put her shoulder under his and put her arm around his back. Despite his current state he was still a big man and from the feeling of his weight resting on her, he hadn't become any weaker or lighter.

'Let's get you some fresh air first.' she said and walked with him to the bar. The barman looked back from the bottle shelves behind him. 'Ah, will you be okay with Tom?' he asked. 'I'd drop him off at his home but my car's in the shop today.'

'Yeah.' Sheila said and gave him a reassuring grin. 'Not the first time I deal with a half dead weight.' She looked back at the man leaning on her shoulder. "So it's Tom now." she thought.

Tom held up his hand and let it fall again. 'I just need a few minutes.' he muttered. 'Then I'll be fine to get home myself.'

'All right then.' the barman said. 'Have a good night.'

Sheila half dragged Tom outside and into the drizzle coming down from the black sky.

'Oh goodie.' she said. 'That'll help.'

A bench under a cover to the side of the bar gave them a place to sit and she could clear her head more in the cool night air.

'Are you going to be all right?' she asked Tom.

'I'll be fine..' he said, leaning his head back against the wall. 'Feeling better already..'

'Okay.' she said, looked at her car, then back at him. 'I'm going back to the hotel. See you later maybe?'

He gave her a nod. 'Maybe.'

'Bye then.' she said and walked to her car, made sure it was locked and looked back at Tom again. 'Ah crap.' she said when she saw him lying on the bench.

She looked up the road estimating how far the hotel was, sighed and went back to Tom. 'You're not going to be fine.' she said to him.

'M fine..' he muttered and waved her off.

She grabbed his upper arm and pulled him up. 'Come on.' she groaned from the effort. 'You're coming with me.'

She pulled him up with little assistance from him, then walked once more with him resting on her shoulder up the road to her hotel.

The drizzle had made her wet enough, but just before they reached the hotel it began to pour down. 'Oh great!' she said and nudged Tom. 'Come on, move it, big boy!'

'Don't want to anymore..' he muttered but did move a little quicker when she nudged him again.

Sheila let out a sigh of relief when they stepped soaking wet into the hall of the hotel. A sign at the desk let her know the night porter was away for a family matter but could be called at the number given.

'Looks like you have no choice but to sleep in my room.' she said.

'I'll be fine..' Tom muttered again.

'I'll bet you will be.' she said and walked him to her room.

Inside she sat him down on the single chair in the room and grabbed a towel to dry her face and hair. She watched him sit seemingly asleep in the chair. He looked old, all wet and hunched and quiet like that. No one would believe this man was once the most cherished person on the planet. A shiver reminded her of her own wet state. She preferred not to, but she had little choice but to undress completely while he was there. She hung her wet clothes on the shower curtain rod and went back into the room. He was still out. He'd not be able to undress himself.

With another sigh she pulled him forward and took off his lumber shirt.

Despite his state she thought his upper body looked good. If he wanted to he could be back in his great shape in no time. She dried him off with another towel, then patted his cheek.

'Hey, sleeping beauty.' she said. 'You can't sleep in the chair, so you gotta move to the bed.'

He mumbled something and she pulled at him under his arms. 'Give me a break and help out, will you?' she groaned.

He leaned forward with another mumble and gave enough effort for her to pull him on his feet and hold him tight in her embrace. His body was warm against hers and it made her heart race. If he was sober or awake enough to realise their situation she thought she might just do something stupid. With some effort she guided him to the bed where he dropped down. She pulled off his boots and socks, swung his legs up on the bed and took a deep breath to prepare for the next thing. He couldn't sleep in his wet jeans.

She loosened his belt, unzipped his fly and pulled at the jeans to take them off. She hung them with his shirt over the curtain rod and prepared mentally for the final part she'd have to do, before looking at him on the bed.

When she did she gasped. His briefs had come down partially with the jeans and didn't cover what she was both curious about and wasn't supposed to look at. Since they were down already it didn't matter anymore and she pulled them down further to hang them on the wash basin.

Back at the bed she quickly pulled the sheet over him, turned off the light and lay down on the other side of the bed.

"At least he doesn't snore." she thought and drifted away.

Sheila woke up the next morning from movement behind her. She turned around to see what was going on, watched Tom sit up and recovered last night's events from drunken memories.

He groaned and rubbed his face, blinked to get the sleep out of his blurry vision, and stared at the room. She could imagine his confusion.

He looked left, then right and his eyes went wide when he saw her.

'What..?' he muttered.

'Morning.' she said, thinking about teasing him.

'Hey..' he said, then froze.

He slid one hand under the sheet and a slight panic appeared in his face. Sheila held back a grin while stretching and not quite accidentally showed off the top of her chest.

'Ehmm..' he said softly. 'What happened after the bar?'

She looked at him with a little pout. 'What? You don't remember that?'

'Oh shit.' he said and held his head in his hands. 'I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to.. I mean, I must have meant to because you're a beautiful woman but I didn't mean to do it while I was drunk or take advantage of you and-'

She put her fingers on his mouth and laughed.

'I'm just messing with you.' she said while chuckling. 'You were in no shape to get home despite claiming you were so I brought you here to sleep. We got caught in the rain and I had no choice but to get you out of your wet clothes.'

He let out a deep sigh of relief, then turned red in embarrassment.

'Yes.' she grinned. 'I saw it.'

He looked away with a groan.

'Not bad either.' she said and he groaned even harder.

She got up from the bed, pulling the sheet with her to cover herself enough and grinned at him covering himself with his hands. 'I'm going to take a shower, then you can.'

When they left the room he was less nervous after her reassurance nothing had happened and she barely saw a glimpse before covering him. 'So, what are you going to do now?' he asked when they stood outside at the front of the hotel. He looked up at the cloudy but dry sky. The fresh morning air cleared the last of the fog from his mind. 'You found your answer.'

She pondered for a moment. 'I thought I could get a big scoop about finding the lost hero.' she said, putting her hands in her jean's pockets. He nodded solemnly.

'But,' she said. 'seems it's kinda impossible to find that man. She smiled softly at him as he looked at her. 'The world will have to do without him.'

'Thanks.' he said, returning a grateful smile.

She took his hand and squeezed it gently. 'I guess he found a better life and is happier now.' she said and kissed his cheek. 'And I wish him all the best as thanks for all that he did for us.' She let go of his hand and took a step back to the hotel. 'I'm going back home now to see if I can find regular people doing heroic deeds instead.'

He smiled softly while watching her go back into the hotel, then looked down the road. He'd go home too to change clothes, then there was the broken bit of fence at old man Harrison's place. He had promised to help him fix it in exchange for dinner made by his wife.

The Green Stuff

Police detective Jason Brimley stepped onto the weathered and creaking wooden steps of the house, avoiding the last broken one as he stepped onto the porch. Harvey Manders, the recently promoted junior detective assigned to Jason's station, watched two squatters sitting on beer crates on the porch with disgust. They just glanced at the visitors with hazy eyes before returning to cut their green stash with a rusty knife.

The front door was ajar. There was no need to close and keep the door locked in a neighbourhood like this. Even in the slight chance no one would be around the house. Jason opened the door with the tip of his shoe, dislocating more of the paint peeling from it. The familiar aromas of a place like this wafted outside.

'Bah.' said Harvey. 'Does it always smell this strong?'

'Sometimes worse.' said Jason who had learned to ignore it after his first few encounters.

He stepped slowly inside. The faded blue carpet in the hallway was almost reduced to bare threads down the middle. It looked older than the house. Bits of trash were scattered along the walls, yellowed magazines were stacked on the steps of the stairs. He recognised two names that had been out of print for years. The marathon champion on the front of one had been found dead a year ago on his treadmill.

Slightly distorted music came from further inside and he walked up to the kitchen. A skinny girl wearing a tank top with faded "My high" printed on the front, tight shorts with loose threads hanging from the seams and dirty white socks in training shoes that barely held together was concocting a brew with the most unappetising colours in a blender screaming for mercy. Jason cleared his throat to get her attention.

She turned off the blender and looked at him, assessing him from tip to toe before turning back her attention to the blender and pouring the contents into a glass. 'Yeah?' she asked.

'Bernie.' Jason said.

Harvey wondered if there wasn't a bone in her body which wasn't visible now. He didn't want to find out though.

'Back room.' the woman said and drank the thick liquid.

Jason walked into the front room with Harvey behind him. A group of people sat on the floor around a low round table with one leg replaced by another stack of magazines. They didn't look up, engrossed as they were in their philosophy of how they reached their high and what substance worked best for them. Some of it in small bowls on the table and scattered across it among unwashed glasses. Two pitchers with similar brews the woman had made stood in the centre. A radio with busted front behind the table was the source of the music.

'How can they live like this?' asked Harvey. 'Some don't even have half a sole under their shoes.'

Jason said nothing. There was no satisfying answer. He opened the sliding doors to the back room and saw his target leaning back in a deep couch. The fabric used to be without the stains. The middle aged man wore a

loose sweat band around his head, a loose sweat stained runners shirt with number 83 on the front and a woman in her early thirties wearing a mismatched track suit had her legs on his lap as she laid on the couch. She moaned softly with her eyes closed while he massaged her calves. Harvey took a quick look around the room. A half disassembled treadmill stood on its side against one wall. A book case with a couple of photos from different sporting events and a collection of cheap participation medals stood on the other side.

'Bernie.' said Jason.

Bernie looked up while continuing his massage. 'Hey, mister detective.' he said, a grin growing on his face. 'Want some too?'

'I've got a few people who are very sick after they got their hands on a bad batch.' Jason said. 'Coming from you.'

'Heh, I don't know what you mean.' Bernie said.

Jason stepped forward, grabbed Bernie's shirt and pulled him up with ease. The woman cried out when she almost rolled from the the couch.

Harvey caught a glimpse of Bernie's round belly before he looked away. He couldn't imagine how that looked on such a body with thin limbs.

'Listen, Bernie.' Jason said, his face close to Bernie's. 'I know you don't grow the stuff yourself, so you know the people who do. And I need to know who delivered that bad batch of greens.'

Bernie held up his hands. 'There are so many-'

'Talk!' said Jason, staring intently into Bernie's eyes. 'Or I'll put you somewhere where you can't even walk straight for three metres!'

'All right!' Bernie said. 'Ask for Fred at the supermarket at the south side. He's the manager there and can tell you who the grower is. I swear!'

Jason dropped Bernie back on the couch. 'If you lie, I'm back here before you can tie your shoes.' he said and went on his way back out the door.

Harvey picked up his phone while he followed.

Outside at the street Jason stopped and took a moment to breath deep to get the aromatic smell out of his nose.

'The lab found out which pesticide was used on the batch of celery.'

Harvey said as he put his phone back in his pocket. 'And we just got a call about a gang of runners hanging around the old school track. They say asparagus are involved.'

Jason sighed. 'Damn health nutters and their addictions.' he said and walked towards his car.

Paying it Forward

I met her a year ago at the library where she told stories to her cousins and other refugee children.

She told me her late mother taught her to find happiness so she could spread it further.

I asked 'Why not write your stories for all children to read then?' and gave her my old laptop.

I didn't get to see her the next day because she and her family were sent to another town, but I just saw her first published book with an acknowledgment to 'the sweet old man that gave her a new happy start'.

Normal

I wake up.

It's always around the same time every day without needing to set an alarm. From the light bleeding through my curtains I know there's a light cloud cover this morning. Light, but not bright. Passable, just like my everyday life.

I draw them aside to see I'm correct and the same view outside greets me. The relatively quiet street with the first shops opening for their early customers, birds picking at crumbs and bits of food on the sidewalk.

The morning routine starts. Heating up water for tea, freshening up in the bathroom meanwhile, breakfast while watching the morning news with one eye, cleaning up after, and sit at the window with the second mug of tea and the radio playing in the background.

Now, I know what you're thinking, but I do have a job, and this is it. I'm a normaliser.

All right, let me explain. There are all kinds of forces working in this world. You're familiar with the obvious ones like things as wind, earthquakes, gravity, the physically tangible ones. Then there's time, thirst, hunger, desire, the not so physical ones but people in general still recognise them. And then there are the ones that collide with the aforementioned ones. We call them unreal forces, and they're the ones that makes you see ghosts, crash your computer for seemingly no reason, or even on occasion make you wonder why you bought those pants with that blouse. Unreal forces collide with normal ones and cause a deviation from the regular outcome and the only way to prevent total chaos is to observe everything.

Correct, they're closely linked to quantum mechanics.

As long as we keep observing normal, everyday life, we keep the worst at bay and the damage is limited to the examples I stated. Luckily we don't need a large army of normalisers to do this. Just enough people to keep an eye on daily events based on area size and population, but we're talking maybe one per half a million to one million people. On top of that we have administrative personnel, agents, support personnel, and of course science departments to study the phenomenon.

If you still think it's something I made up, think about how scientists study things. They need a control group or see what happens when the unreal forces aren't suppressed and that's where events like carnival and Halloween come from. At those times, local normalisers leave the area and unreal forces can interfere with the others and people are the first affected, behaving in ways they'd normally wouldn't do. Our scientists can measure and observe the effects, us normalisers return the next day or week later, and all returns to what it was before. You're welcome.

Yes, we do have to do this to keep a modicum of control on the unreal forces. Suppressed for too long and it could spike at the pressure and

cause mayhem. I don't think I need to tell you examples of when it seemed the whole world or simply a whole country went mad.

No, unreal forces are not the cause of sports fans.

And yes, we do have opponents.

There are those that feel the unreal should be free to collide with the normal, saying that is how nature works and why chaos is needed for progress. In actuality, normalisers are part of nature and have always existed. It's only recently that we know of the phenomenon and how some living beings have the ability to observe the unreal, but the true realists, as they call themselves, refuse to acknowledge that part and only care about plunging the world into chaos. The ones on top think they can then control everything, but they never state that out loud and keep their followers ignorant so they will do what they're told.

No, they're not specific to a particular political party, although some have the same destructive motive.

They are dangerous. At one time they took out enough normalisers and we ended up with a wide spread war. They actively hunted others we sent in and dragged it on for years until we had enough people in place to regain control. This is why we work completely undercover and have recruited more normalisers for redundancy. We have our own network to communicate and the agents are there to keep us safe and sniff out true realists and eliminate them.

Yes, unfortunately that's not an exaggerated expression. This is a very serious business.

I don't worry too much about it although I do keep it at the back of my mind. A balance between constant stress and fatal negligence. I learned this from my old mentor when they first discovered I had the ability at a young age and it kept me sane enough.

The buzzer of the front door of the apartment block went off and I picked up the door phone. 'Hello?'

'Franz? I need to speak to you.'

I recognised the voice of our new local agent, Jimena, and the urgency she held back in her tone. I buzzed open the door, and listened until I heard the door close again after she entered as a precaution for uninvited guests. I opened my front door just as she appeared at the top of the stairwell. 'Come in.'

She hurried inside and I offered her a chair. 'What's wrong?'

She sat down. 'Marie is dead and I'm sure it's no accident.'

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Road Surprise

'Thank you, for everything.' she leaned closer, kissed my cheek softly, and turned around, walking away with a little force in her step.

I watched her until she rounded the bend of the path to the park gate and disappeared behind the high and thick undergrowth. 'Bye.' I said, then walked over to the nearby bench overlooking the large pond of the park and sat down. It's funny how it feels like I'm sitting in an empty shell each time they walked out of my life.

I sighed after a while, looked up a bit at the sky, then stepped into the public phone booth next to the bench, inserted a coin, and dialled. 'All right, I have no reason to stay here any longer.' I said when my old friend picked up the call. 'I'll drive.'

'Come by tomorrow for the paperwork.' he said.

'See you tomorrow.' I said and hung up.

'There's a café up ahead.' said Fazir over the radio. 'We'll stop there.'

I was glad for a break. The drive through the hot desert weather really drained my energy and I picked up the mic. 'Gladly. I think I ate more dust than the air filter of the truck.'

Fazir laughed. 'Then don't drive so close behind me with your windows down.'

'How about you stepping on the gas and not playing the snail in front of me?'

He laughed again. 'What's the hurry? Enjoy the trip and the beautiful landscape.'

He braked and parked at a low building a little off to the side of the road with a large, faded billboard of the oil company they sold gas from, and I rolled up my truck alongside him two minutes later. We walked across the dusty dirt to the entrance adorned with more advertising hung there decades ago. The naturally cooler air inside was refreshing, even if it was only slightly less bad than outside, and the scent of home-cooked meals triggered my stomach.

The sound of a man and a young woman bickering in the back completed that typical feeling of home.

I didn't understand what was said, but when we sat down at one of three tables placed at the shadow side windows and a girl I estimated around twenty years of age with shoulder length black hair and a purple streak in it appeared, I had a hunch what the row was about since she wore rather traditional clothing for someone her age. At least, compared to the girls I've seen in the last major city we stopped at.

Fazir smiled at her while holding the menu. 'I knew it was a good idea to stop here.'

She chuckled. 'We do serve a good meal here.'

He laughed once. 'Looks like we don't have to worry about gambling what it says on the menu.' he said. 'Do you have a burger?'

I shook my head in my mind. Sometimes it seemed all he ate was burgers, but he liked those best on the road. I looked up at her. 'I'd like to try expand my horizons. What's a local dish you recommend?'

She smiled. 'We have a standard beef burger with berkoukes, and for something from around here, my father makes a good small cut beef with berkoukes and steamed vegetables.'

Fazir looked at me and I nodded. He laid down the menu to the side. 'We'll have that then, and a couple of cold beers.'

'All right.' she said and returned to the back, relaying the order.

The clatter of kitchen utensils and pans began and a few moments later, the girl returned with two glasses and two bottles which already had condensation dripping down the side. We poured our beers, toasted to our break, and relished the cold liquid refreshing our hot bodies on the inside.

The meal was very good, we learned the girl was named Berina, her slightly strict father Feliks, and her cheery mother Donille. Apart from a few locals passing by, the place was quiet until a seemingly local hotshot arrived in a car that was rather flashy for this part of the world, but kind of yesterdays for where we came from. The young guy obviously came for her because he made enough advances to annoy even a cartoon playboy. Berina knew how to handle him though and the way she embarrassingly turned him down in front of us amused her. She winked and smiled mischievously at one time and we had trouble keeping a straight face as if we had no idea what was going on. The guy left later and we spent a little time drinking a couple more beers with the family before heading off to our truck to sleep.

After we woke up, we refreshed ourselves, had a light breakfast, and were a little sorry that Berina wasn't around when we said goodbye and drove off for the next leg of our tour.

We were on our way for quite a while when I heard strange noises behind me and I stopped to check it out. I didn't want any trouble in the middle of the desert, even if Fazir was around to help. Now, I have to admit I'm not the type of person to meticulously make my bed in my extended sleeper cabin, so the bunched up blanket and pillows taking up more space than they should was not something I'd notice quickly when I dropped my toiletries in the back while still waking up in the morning.

I pulled away the blanket and woke up Berina underneath.

She blinked sleepily at me, looked away, then back at me with an attempt at an innocent smile, and asked 'Are we there yet?'.

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End notes

Thank you for taking the time to read this e-book. If you have any thoughts about it, leave a review on your favourite site or leave a comment on any of the free online sites where I dwell.

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