

A Plague of Life by Robert Reed

A Novelette

Robert Reed reports the following news: "My latest novel is *Sister Alice*, and she just came out from Tor. My two-year-old knows everything, and most questions deserve a 'No' answer. I bought my first new car in fourteen years, thanks in part to *Asimov's*. And I now have a website, which was built by a local SF club. You can reach it by going to starbaseandromeda.com. 'A Plague of Life' is the indirect result of watching a couple of million slides taken by my wife's father's family -- the pictorial renderings of an important dynasty. They owned a black lab, and though long dead, he is still much loved, and his adventures are the stuff of legend."

It was a remarkable year, my mother has always told me. After a decade of nagging drought and bitter winters, our district found itself immersed in the mildest weather of the century. Wet blankets of snow melted with an early spring that brought nightly rains and warm sunny days free of hail and windstorms, and the following summer was warm as blood and perfectly damp, coaxing every dormant seed and spore to erupt into something green and happy. It was a year where every female hawk laid that second egg, every doe had her little fawn, and our cattle produced veritable lakes of milk and sweet blood. Even Lady dropped two pups in the same miraculous morning, and we kept one of the pups, while the other were sold at a good price to neighbors who knew about Lady's excellence. I was conceived during that exceptional summer. Mother always implied that I was planned, while my older half-siblings preferred to joke about wine and my father's youth and the interdiction of the Almighty. Whatever the reason, I was born the following year -- a final blessing from a spendthrift time. My father very much adored me. People have always said so, and in the photographs and grainy films, he seems very much the doting father, and I am his giggling little girl, each smiling at the other in almost every surviving scene. Father was big and handsome, with the sharp features that only the youngest men possess. He was a teaser and a joker, and he could work hard from dawn to dark, which I suppose was one reason why my grandfather allowed the marriage. Father was a good man, too. I can't remember anyone saying otherwise, at least in my presence. He had a voice born for singing. He had a jolly attitude that I failed to inherit. He was smart in certain ways, particularly with machines. I wish there were more photographs and films showing him, but in our extensive family archives, for that particular period, the one who garnered the most attention was Lady.

A wonderful dog is a treasure. Grandfather says so, and it's hard not to believe him. In those times, our daily newspaper was delivered by airplane. A local man named Bergen -- fearless and foolish in equal measure -- would fly over each of the scattered farmsteads, dropping a tightly bound paper through a slot cut through the cabin floor. I don't know how many times the camera caught a glimpse of wings and then focused on Lady as she galloped across the yard, returning moments later with the paper in her mouth, bringing her prize up to the main house, always wagging her long stiff tail. But that was just a minor trick in her repertoire. Lady was old enough and smart enough to understand a fair portion of what she heard, and she was extremely skillful in killing rats and rabbits. In season, she was a champion bird dog, and in every season, her loyalty to my grandfather and the rest of our family was a subject of unalloyed pride. One day, while Lady and my father were walking near the highway on the east edge of our farm, strangers drove up, dressed to hunt. They had come all the way from the city. There were two or three or four of them, depending on who tells it. But everyone agrees that they were from that portion of the city that people such as us don't frequent. My father, being good-natured, spoke to them for a while. They asked about Lady. He told a few stories. They asked if they could hunt the land, and Father allowed that it wasn't his decision to make, waving them up to the main house. My grandfather stepped out onto the porch and looked at them and politely told them, "No." Mostly, that's the way the story is

told. He told them, "No," and then the disappointed men drove away, a tail of dust rising high into the bright autumn air.

A day later, Lady turned up missing.

She had never run away, and never would. Own a dog for as long as Grandfather had Lady, and there is no way the animal can surprise you. Of course she could have been hurt or killed somewhere on the property, but one of her gifts was a lifelong capacity to evade harm. Her mostly grown pup, Precious, did his best to find her. But there was nothing to find but some mysterious tire tracks on a dirt lane.

Accompanied by my father and uncles, Grandfather journeyed to the city for the first time in years. The actual details of their adventures have always remained mysterious and intriguing. Whatever happened, they were gone for two days and nights, and when they came home again, Lady was riding on the seat beside the old man. Unharmd and perhaps a little wiser, the grateful dog ran between the houses for most of the afternoon, and according to my mother's telling, I chased after her until I was exhausted, collapsing into a soft stack of hay and sleeping past dinner.

The world settled down for the next weeks. Autumn turned to winter, and one cold morning, my father went out by himself to check on our blood cattle. From the physical evidence, he must have been standing within sight of the highway, and someone armed with a deer rifle put a slug into his exposed neck, and then as he lay on the ground, bleeding to death, they shot him just beneath his armored vest, in the guts, making certain that his last moments would be exceptionally miserable.

The murderer was never caught.

"We tried," Mother tells me on occasion. Speaking with a philosophical resignation, she says, "The police did their best. But those people, that neighborhood ... it's very difficult to learn anything ... the kinds of people they are, and so clannish too...."

About the murder, I remember nothing.

Except for everything that I have been told, of course, and everything that I can see for myself.

Lady is still a wonderful dog. Her son died long ago, the victim of too much bravery and some very thin ice. But Lady remains healthy and happy. More than a century has passed, but on those rare occasions when I come home, I make a point of looking into those golden eyes, wondering: Do you remember your adventure? What did you think about the city and those strange people? And do you know, Lady ... can you remember ... what were the exact words Grandfather used when he told the strangers to get off his land...?

* * *

I return home only for the best reasons. At this point, it takes three reasons to compel me to make the considerable journey.

My mother isn't well, which is the perennial motivation. Despite a robust bloodline, she suffers from a slow decay of function -- mostly in her muscles, but increasingly in her mind too. She claims that she needs me. I am her only surviving daughter, and nobody else understands or has patience when it comes to an ancient woman. She suffers from tenacious fears and enduring panics. Modern medicines help -- antioxidants and tailored enzymes -- and if you chart her decay against the growth of biochemical knowledge, I suspect that she will pass out of this crisis in another five or six decades. But a daughter can take nothing for granted, and she is my mother. Of course I will come visit her. It is my duty to hold her hand and listen dutifully while she repeats stories that have been repeated too many times, and in exactly the same way, acquiring a stone-like reality of their own, immune to questions or the tiniest doubt.

Usually my family supplies my second reason to visit. On a world increasingly tiny and crowded, they have maintained possession over an exceptionally rich expanse of soil and water. The farm is a business. The business supplies food for thousands of city-trapped souls. As a minor shareholder, I am required on rare occasions to show my face, casting my little vote in some officious matter that keeps the legal machinery of the farm running smoothly. As a token of his appreciation, my grandfather usually pays for my journey home. But his charity has limits, and leaving the farm will always be an insult directed at him. I am required to find my own way back, whether it is a brief ride, or like now, a very long flight.

Finally, I need some personal reason to make the journey. Perhaps I'll bring a new man, or maybe some personal success has come to me. Success still finds me, although not nearly as often as when I was young. What matters -- what is essential here -- is that I bring along something about which I can brag. My self-esteem demands it. If I have to sit with my half-brothers and uncles and aunts, plus my endless cousins and nephews and nieces, then I need some good reason to be prideful and self-assured.

"It's so brown down there," says my reason. My perfect little son. He glances at me, and winks, and says, "I know it's winter. I know. But I mean ... doesn't it seem awfully dead down there? Doesn't it to you, Mom?"

* * *

There are no roads anymore. Every lane has been plowed under and planted. Even the old highway has been replaced with a single elevated rail to carry freight or the patient traveler. The land is simply too valuable to waste beneath strips of hard pavement, and it is too productive to be set aside as mere parkland, and there is always the extended family hungry for any income that can be wrung from sun and soil. To travel is to ride one of the spider-legged farm machines, or to walk on your own trustworthy legs. Or with a dose of bravery, you can fly. In the last century, air travel has become a deeply safe business. But there will always be the occasional catastrophe. Only when your multirotor has safely landed can you breathe easier; all of your remaining worries are very much your own.

"It's cold," Jacob says. Not as a complaint, but as an observation. "I don't think I've ever been this cold, Mom."

But this is nothing like the winters of old.

"Is that Lady?" my son inquires.

The ancient dog approaches warily, dipping her head and pinning back her ears, telling the world that she is harmless. Quietly, I say, "You remember me," and she responds by dropping to her belly and crawling close. Born before there were fancy breeds, Lady is a big plain dog with stiff black fur and burly shoulders and a mind that has retained its canine flexibilities. "Good girl," I sing, scratching behind those laid-back ears. "Good, Lady."

Jacob helps with the scratching.

A voice announces, "He wants to see you."

Uncle Ethan stands behind us. What might be confused for a smile shows on the wide strong face, and hands bigger than seem right begin to gather up our little bit of luggage. As always, he is dressed for work. I have rarely seen him any other way. His clothes are rough and padded, the modern armor protecting his chest and head. The resemblance to a soldier is understandable. Even on a modern farm, machines can explode without warning, and sharp tools might fly in unwelcome directions.

"How are you?" I ask.

The smile brightens, if only a little.

"This is Jacob," I say.

My boy nods and grins and says, "Hello, sir."

"I'm well enough," Ethan says, answering my polite question. And then he stares at his great-nephew, measuring him in some fashion or another before saying, "Good to meet you, boy."

My natural first step is toward the main house.

"No," says Ethan. "He's waiting up at the old blood barn."

I don't care where he waits. With a shake of the head, I admit, "I want to see my mother."

Ethan has never been overly clever, or much of an actor, either. He has been coached, and with an obvious duplicity tells me, "Your mother's sleeping now." Then in case that isn't adequate, he repeats himself. "He's waiting for you. In the barn." One arm points up the hill, a pair of traveling bags lifted high. "Walk through. You'll see. There's a new gymnasium at the back."

I have no choice, it seems.

As we walk away, Jacob tugs at my arm. "How old is he?"

Where we live -- the only place Jacob has ever known -- I am considered to be a rather old woman.

"Is Ethan as old as Grandma?" he inquires.

"Older." Then I remind him, "They had different mothers. He's only your great half-uncle. Understood?"

"How old?"

"Seven," I begin to say. But that's what I was told when I was a girl. Adding my own age, I admit, "No, he's better than eight now. Probably nearly nine hundred years old, I suppose."

Jacob considers that span of time.

I could offer more, but I don't. Instead, I lead us up to the barn -- a massive structure built of limestone boulders and oak timbers and black slate shingles. The interior is spacious and brightly lit, both by the low winter sun that pours through the open door and by the halogen lamps dangling from the distant ceiling. Old-style barns are picturesque but quite incompetent when it comes to today's agriculture. Modern machines need different proportions, while modern milking and bleeding operations have their own rigorous requirements. In a place where blood was once let and bottled, a kind of zoo has taken hold. I recognize the twin plow horses and the huddle of black-and-white milk cattle, and I suppose I should know the blood cattle, although the ancient herd always had a sameness about them -- burly aurochs with long horns slicing at the air, their tawny color lending them a kind of anonymity. The rest of the herd was slaughtered decades ago, replaced by a series of more productive breeds. The last three aurochs happened to be my grandfather's favorites, which is why they have been sequestered in this little prison, fed a livable quantity of grain and hay, and kept safe -- thousand-pound mementos of a mostly lost epoch.

I fully intend to stop and talk to the beasts. Anything to delay the inevitable. But Lady gallops past, barking with a certain pitch, and from behind a new wall at the back of the barn, a man hollers, "Who is it, Lady? Is it Hannah?"

The next bark might mean, "Yes."

It is a game. Grandfather pretends to speak to his dog, just as he pretends not to know who is at his door. With a booming voice, he calls out, "Come in here, Hannah. Let me see that great-grandson of mine!"

Jacob glances at me, and grins.

Why shouldn't the boy feel excited? Knowing what he does about the old patriarch ... how can my son be anything but thrilled...?

* * *

My mother has always been handsome enough, but she fully admits that my beauty comes directly from my father. When I was a young woman of thirty, it seemed natural to pursue acting. Against my family's wishes I left home, and against every expectation found success -- if only for the first decade or two. In all, I appeared in half a hundred early films. If the roles weren't large, at least I enjoyed a comfortable life. When the roles were important, I managed not to embarrass myself too badly. The classic outlets still show my likeness, in silvery grays or reenergized colors. But there always comes the day when the public's tastes change, and that was the day I woke to discover that nobody needed a willowy beauty who wasn't quite a household name and who really, if the truth was told, had only a modest talent with acting.

Some years later, in a particularly awful decade, a man appeared. He claimed that he was a devoted fan of my work. He told me he was some kind of researcher, and he would pay for a sample of my blood. It wasn't an enormous sum, but it felt like a windfall. When the transaction was finished, he slipped the dark vial of blood into a small cooler, and with a nervous little voice, he told me, "I've adored you. Your movies. Your presence. I think your work has always been badly underrated."

Those last words always ring hollow for me. Is it genuine praise, or is it simply a measure of how minimal my career seems to the half-informed?

Nonetheless, I told him, "Thank you."

"I would love ... if I could ... take you to dinner, Miss Cross...."

"I'm sure you would," I countered. "But more to the point, I think what you want is to go to bed with me."

His face flushed.

"Say it," I pressed. "Where's the harm in admitting the truth?"

"I guess that's true enough. Yes."

"How much money do you have?"

It was such a horrible time in my life. On occasion, particularly when the rent was due, I resorted to using my face and willowy body.

The adoring man named a figure.

With a frank voice, I explained what that amount entitled him to do.

For a long while, he could do nothing but tremble. Then lust and years of fond daydreams took hold, and

with a shy dip of the face, he agreed to my terms. Together, we walked to the far side of my little one-room apartment and lay down, and I listened to the rumbling of the trains and the singing of city horns, and when it was finished, he happily collapsed on top of me.

"Why?" I finally asked.

"Because you have a rare beauty," he professed. "I don't think they saw your talents. The directors didn't, I mean." He couldn't stop explaining the wrong turns my little life had taken. "You shouldn't have been the nice girl or the heroine's pretty friend. What you should have been, I think, is a criminal. A rogue. The serenely cold villainess who can enslave a man with a glance."

I let that thought percolate deep. Then with a reproachful voice, I admitted, "But that isn't what I'm asking. I want to know, why do you want my blood?"

About those matters, he was less forthcoming.

But then I made a third business arrangement with him -- actions given for knowledge -- and while I used my mouth, he stared at my cracked plaster ceiling, talking with a distant, distracted voice that slowed and then stopped entirely, and then began again. He told me about plotting the genetics of humans on every continent. He spoke in dense, nearly impenetrable terms about marker genes and common traits, maternal mitochondria and still-warm mutations. Then after I finished my portion of the bargain, he lifted his face and stared at me, eyes blurred and his voice edging toward sleep.

"Your grandfather," he said.

He said, "Nathaniel Cross," with an eerie delight.

"What about him?"

"Do you know? How long has he been alive?"

"Thirteen, maybe fourteen centuries." But that seemed to amuse the researcher, forcing me to explain, "That's what I've been told. My mother says so. Grandfather says so. Everybody claims he was born early in the Dark Age, on the island of Malta."

"He is a very long-lived person. Isn't he?" The man grinned, asking, "Can you imagine what he has endured? The wars. The plagues. Famines, and every stupid accident. Do you know the odds against surviving through the last fourteen centuries?"

"Rather poor," I allowed.

"Life used to be endlessly dangerous," he reminded me.

With a voice edging toward respectful, I told him, "My grandfather's better than most when it comes to survival."

"Yes," he agreed. "Without question."

Then with a cool hand, he touched me. And with a conspirator's quiet voice, he admitted, "I shouldn't tell you any of this."

"What?"

"This project of ours...." He hesitated, achieving a useful melodrama. "We're investigating patterns in human genetics. Patterns treated with elaborate algorithms. And there seem to be several distinct

footprints ... geneprints, we call them ... left behind by the same few enduring people."

"What people?"

"Always men," he explained. "Since a woman's fertility is limited, and childbirth can be dangerous -- "

"What about my grandfather?"

"We've tried," he said. "But he won't let us test him, or anyone living on the farm. Not that it matters much. We're already quite sure that you've got relatives scattered across the New World, and Europe, as well as Asia and Africa, too."

"We all have our distant cousins," I began.

"Have you ever been to the Nile? No? Well, if you ever find yourself in the New Kingdom, remember this: The entire population is made up of your distant cousins."

"What are you saying? Grandfather isn't fourteen -- ?"

"He's closer to five thousand years old," my new lover blurted. "And that's the minimal figure." Then he tried to cuddle with me, and I endured his touch, listening to the happy wet voice. "He might even be older," he admitted. "Really, we can't decide. But he's definitely one of our prime candidates to be the oldest human on Earth."

I could never have imagined such a thing.

"Of course, perhaps he doesn't know his own age. The brain forgets as it lives. New neurons replace the old, and over time, memories seem to get washed out of the enduring soul."

"Who was he?" I muttered. "On the Nile ... was he one of the Twelve Great Pharaohs?"

That brought an easy, irritating chuckle. "No, Hannah," he purred. "All the Pharaohs are accounted for. Large public men and the leaders of empires ... in troubled times, they and the poor are always the first to die...."

* * *

I can't remember my grandfather as anything but fit and imposing. Where some people allow their bodies to gather fat, he works endless hours, on the farm and with weights, maintaining a durable truce with pernicious sloth. As happens with some very old men, his hair has grown thin and retreated. His response is to shave his scalp every morning, long before anyone else is awake. Whatever his real age, he has endured a hard life: His face and torso are crisscrossed with the scars of old cuts and burns that in turn help obscure older, more terrible scars. Portions of two ribs are missing under his right arm. A small toe and the tips of three fingers have also vanished. A nameless infection dulled his left eye, and both knees suffer from a poverty of cartilage that modern medicines and simple rest have never entirely cured. Yet his heart and lungs remain strong and clear, and as we enter the gymnasium, he calls out with those great lungs. "Hello!" he roars, thick arms pressing against a pair of padded levers, a great black block of iron rising from its cradle. Sitting on a narrow bench, bare-chested and vigorous beyond calculation, he says to my son, "Come here, Jacob. Let me get a good look at you, my boy! Finally!"

If my son had wings, he would fly. As it is, he runs toward his great-grandfather, trusting and happy. Both qualities terrify me, yet I say nothing. I watch the old man drop the iron with an almost musical crash and then reach out with both arms, embracing Jacob exactly long enough to convince a boy that he is accepted and perhaps even loved.

"Hello, Hannah. A pleasant trip, was it?"

"Pleasant enough," I allow.

"And thank you. For finally bringing him to us, thank you." Grandfather holds the boy, but he watches me. Not for the first time, I sense that his dulled eye sees quite well. Indeed, it could possess some extra vision not given to lesser mortals. That is the eye that cuts into me. From it comes the gaze that always makes me feel sorry and small.

Letting go of Jacob, he tells both of us, "It's wonderful to have you here. I hope you can stay for a very long time."

Then with his powerful arms, he shakes the little ten-year-old. "So what do you think about our farm?"

"It's different," my boy sputters.

"Different? How?"

"It's all brown," Jacob says.

"That's called winter."

"I know, sir."

"You live inside a fancy can," the old man reminds him. "A fancy heated can that always has the sun, and of course you don't need seasons -- "

"Yes, sir."

"But then again, this isn't much of a winter, either." A sly smile breaks out on a face that looks as if it was axed out of a block of tough walnut. "I can remember, you know. Winters so appallingly hard and long that people thought they would never end."

Jacob nods, listening intently.

"The glaciers charged down from the mountains. Crops froze under the late snows. I skated on ice in places that never even see frost today. Everybody prayed to God to save them, and maybe their prayers worked. From what I've read, our world came dangerously close to another ice age. A few degrees colder -- one good snow in the middle of a northern summer -- and everything would be different now. Everything here would very much be dead."

Jacob nods weakly, imagining all that terrible ice.

"Come here."

Grandfather means Lady. The dog has been sitting to one side, patiently waiting for those words. With a seamless devotion, she walks up and sets her muzzle on his lap, a thin streak of drool leaving a spot on his trousers.

Scratching the dog behind her golden eyes, he tells Jacob, "Look around the farm. Take a little tour."

"I don't think he should," I begin.

"Quiet," Grandfather says, not even bothering with a corrective glance. "Don't touch any machinery, Jacob, and shut every gate you open. Understood? And if you find some little relative -- we've got a few

kids underfoot these days -- be friendly. But explain to them. You don't know anything about a real farm, and if they do anything mean to you, I will be angry."

"Yes, sir."

"Tell them. That I will be very angry."

"I will, sir."

"Now go. Go!"

"Helmet and vest!" I shout after him. "Find yours and wear them -- !"

"Yes, Mother," he replies, using his most dismissive tone.

Then it is just the two of us. The three of us. Lady continues to enjoy the scratching of her ears, and the old man continues to study me with his dangerous gray eye, and I stand my ground despite nervous feet. Glancing at my surroundings, I observe, "This is new." And when neither companion responds, I add, "Every machine has just the one setting. Doesn't it?"

"So I won't grow weaker," Grandfather responds. "When I lift, I have to endure the same load that I lifted two days ago. And two years ago."

I nod, as if paying close attention.

"You look thin," he says.

I wander over to a distant machine, touching a dangling bar covered with thick foam rubber. A fat steel cable attaches to a mass of black iron that waits inside a cage that helps keep out careless toes and hands.

"What's your gravity up in that can-world?"

"At our apartment?" I shrug. "Eighty percent Earth's."

"That's not enough," he growls. "The boy won't grow up properly. In the bones, the muscles."

"He's growing fine. His school and the parks are near the hull, which is .95 gees."

"And the radiation levels -- "

"We have shielding."

"What about the lost bolts and fuel tanks? There's a lot of garbage flying around up there, from what I hear."

I stare back at him. "Honestly, the engineers and the rest of us ... we take every reasonable precaution...."

He smiles, enjoying my anger.

Then with a quiet, gruff voice, he asks, "Why?"

I pretend not to hear him. But when the furnace cuts on, I flinch.

"Why, Hannah?"

He wears trousers but no shoes. I look at his feet for a moment. Thousands of years of gravity have made them broad and quite ugly.

"Why what?"

"You came here for a purpose. Is it to show off your son?"

I stare at the dark broad chest. "Partly."

"What else?"

Finally, I look at the face. Mustering an expression of nervous courage, I tell him, "I want to sell my share of the farm."

The news is heard, and vanishes.

"How much is it worth?"

He seems to expect my question. Using his most quiet voice, he offers a concrete sum that no force in nature can change.

After a prolonged silence on my part, he adds, "Our farm wears a lot of debt. We've been modernizing again. And we're expanding past the old highway. I loaned money to the Kirks, and they haven't met their payments, so we're using lawyers and the courts to take away a fat chunk of their land." He pauses long enough to smile at his own progress. "Not that we won't pay everything off in another five years, of course. You should see our projected profits. Your profits, too. But right now ... this couldn't be a worse time to sell out, darling." Then with an accusing, almost raging voice, he asks, "Can you possibly wait?"

"No."

"Why not?"

I sit on the adjacent machine, pressing my feet against matching pedals. I have always had strong legs, and my knees are perfectly fine. I lift the iron partway, and then feigning weakness, I let it fall again. The crash is still echoing off the rafters when I confess, "I'm buying passage on the Centauri ship. For Jacob and myself."

"But I can't give you nearly enough money." He has to grin, betraying the depth of his knowledge. "With your existing assets, plus your share of the farm, you'll still fall way short of that goal."

I stare at him.

"Hannah," he laughs. "What did you tell yourself? Just because you don't live on this world anymore, do you really believe you can escape my reach?"

* * *

I used to grieve for the corn.

When I was little, younger even than Jacob, I invested an entire summer watching that tropical grass grow tall and green, sprouting those long ears covered with a rich golden silk. When the ears ripened and the stalks browned, I assumed that the plants had fallen asleep. Like trees and ground squirrels, our crops were simply hibernating, and come next spring, they would burst from the ground again.

Mother was first with the hard news. A little perplexed, perhaps even disappointed, she said, "No,

honey. They're dead. They always die when the frost comes."

"But why?" I asked.

"Just because," she replied. Never a person to concern herself with the deep workings of the world, she shook her head and shrugged, saying, "Because that's the way it is, honey. And will you stop crying now, please?"

Grandfather was more informative, and more horrible.

"Plants have that trait in their blood. I mean, in their sap." He laughed at the image of bloody corn. "At least some of the species have it. Annuals, they're called. They know they'll live for one good year, so they throw all their energy into making sugary seeds that can grow like mad next spring, making new plants. Those seeds can feed us, if they happen to be our crops. Which is a good thing. If we had nothing to cultivate but perennial grasses and berry bushes and fruit trees ... well, there couldn't be nearly so many people in the world...."

That was too much for a little girl to comprehend, and looking back, I probably don't remember it correctly. Every school lecture and everything that I have read since has been grafted into my shadowy memories of that uncomfortable instant.

Regardless of the truth, what I remember is the old man telling me, "Animals aren't the same as corn. Fish and turtles, and people, and mice, too. We just live and live. Because there's no real reason to do otherwise."

"Why's that?"

He laughed at me, his good eye narrowing. "I've read a few things." Grandfather read exhaustively on many subjects. "The idea is that we could have been otherwise. This is just the way we happened to evolve. Early on, the first animals stumbled into metabolic pathways that avoid oxidation poisoning and the planned collapse that comes to the corn. You see? Then if a turtle or a man is very successful, he gets to live for a long time, leaving behind many turtles, and many children, too. When and if he ever happens to die."

"But if things were different?" I asked. Not then, but some years later. I remember a different conversation where I was a studious schoolgirl, asking that simple question, "What if we were like the corn?"

"Planned insolvency? Well, that would change a few things. But not as much as you'd guess. Not over the long course of evolution, at least." He gave the matter some thought before adding, "For most of my life, it seemed like everybody was dying. Wars killed thousands. Every epidemic killed millions. And there was bad food or no food, and you can't imagine all the ways you could die just in the normal course of your day."

"My uncles survived, too," I pointed out.

"Some have, yes. The ones you know, and a few others." A vague smile softened his features. "We are a family, Hannah. We care for each other. Which helps us survive, of course. And I don't think it hurts that when these new continents were being settled ... with all this empty land free for the having ... that I decided to move our family here, escaping the crowded guts of Europe...."

We emigrated barely two centuries ago. Practically yesterday, in my grandfather's mind. "So much has changed in these last years," he told me. Then with an easy menace, he explained, "The old killing

diseases have been conquered. And our food is clean and unspoiled. We have sewers and hospitals. And what nation can raise a willing army when its citizens can seriously entertain the prospect of a ten thousand year life?" He sighed and shook his head, saying, "This is a new world. A dangerous, foolhardy world, some would think."

"Why?" I asked.

"You love that word. Don't you, Hannah? 'Why?'"

"But what's wrong?" I persisted. "Isn't it good that people don't get sick anymore?"

Grandfather gestured at the cornfield. It was another summer, and both the crops and I were half-grown. "All right," he grumbled. "Imagine this. The corn doesn't live a little while and die. But it still makes seeds by the hundreds and spreads them under its feet. How can that be a good thing? You are a prosperous plant. But suddenly all these children are springing up between your toes." Disgusted, he pushed the image aside. "If that happens, you have two choices, Hannah. Two courses you can take. And believe me, neither choice is even a little bit pretty."

* * *

Mother sits in a wide, thickly padded rocking chair. Her weaknesses are many, but her face remains handsome, almost girlish. With a voice almost too soft to be heard, she asks about the journey back to Earth. Was I ever scared? Then she reminds me about the shuttles that have malfunctioned in the past, and the people dead after taking what seemed to be the most inconsequential of risks.

"Those were the old shuttles," I reply. "The new models are as reliable as a heart."

"He died, you know."

"Who do you mean?"

She rocks the chair and moves her stronger arm, a faded quilt falling away from her badly shriveled shoulder. "Mr. Bergen. He would bring us our newspaper in the airplane. One morning, he flew down low and dropped the paper ... and then one of his wings fell off, and he crashed...."

"It's a sad story," I agree.

"Flying," she says. Just the one word, and it causes her to shiver.

Like a dutiful daughter, I lift the quilt over the shoulder, and not for the first time, I wonder if death might be kinder than a tiny, endless existence full of mismatched memories and the occasional meal.

"Be careful," she advises.

"I will be."

"In the sky ... be careful...."

Since my last visit, her hair has thinned noticeably and turned a little white. New teeth are sluggishly filling the holes in pale pink gums. Her breath smells of stale milk and blood cake. Because she can't sit comfortably at the family table, she has already been fed for the night. Because she sleeps so poorly nowadays, a strong pair of my cousins will put her to bed in a little while. This is our chance to talk, or at least to make the attempt.

"Tell me," I whisper.

The words aren't noticed. But then, after a long pause, the girlish face brightens. "Tell you what?"

"About my father."

She appears perfectly lucid, and then she speaks. "He was an English count. A gorgeous man. Tall and wealthy, and wonderful on horseback -- "

"That's a different husband," I warn. "An earlier husband."

"Was he?" She seems to doubt me before she doubts herself. But then with a gentle resignation, she admits, "That daughter died. I remember. While she was a baby. Something attacked her lungs."

"I know the story, Mother."

"You want to hear about your father?"

"Your last husband," I prod.

With a chiding smile, she says, "Hannah. I do remember him. Better than you ever can, I should think."

* * *

Father had a young man's talent for machines. He was gregarious and quick-witted, stronger than most, and perhaps better than anyone my mother had ever known, he could remember faces and the names that belonged to each one. But as older, grumpier souls would point out, young men simply haven't seen that many faces in their little lives. Perhaps if he had survived until today, my father's talents would have begun to fade. Every face would resemble every other, and he would fumble over names, and our modern machinery would have seemed as sophisticated and impenetrable as the fatty insides of a human mind.

The farm needed a good, cheap mechanic. As the story goes, Uncle Ethan paid the newspaper to run an advertisement for a full week, and after Mr. Bergen flew in low and dropped the paper, and after Lady had carried the paper up to the front porch, Ethan took a break from his morning chores, sitting out on the mesh-enclosed porch, drinking cold coffee and reading the headlines with his usual indifference to most of the world. What did it matter, the elections in Asia? Who cared about the drought in Africa, or the borders shifting in Old Europe? Not even sports scores or lurid murders captured his minimal imagination. He read only for the most basic reason: Habit. He read because his own father might bring up one of these many subjects in conversation, and he didn't want to appear stupid. And then after a few minutes of studious apathy, Ethan thought to look into the back pages, scanning down the narrow columns to find a single entry -- WANTED, MECHANIC FOR NEW TRACTORS, TRUCKS, GENERATORS, WELL-PUMPS -- that he read with care, twice, before hearing a big throat clearing itself.

As the story goes, my father was the one who cleared his throat. Uncle Ethan dropped the want ads to find himself staring at a young fellow not yet thirty years old.

"What do you want?" the old grouch barked.

"Wealth and fame," the stranger replied. Then with a big laugh, he added, "But for now, I'll take the mechanic's job. If it's still open."

Ethan was astonished -- a very rare condition for him. Jabbing at the paper, he said, "This ad just got in here. Today. This is the first day." To be sure, he looked again, twice, before repeating his reasons for being astonished. "How can you be here already? I just got the damned paper!"

"There's different editions," the stranger remarked with a shrug. "In the city, there's a midnight edition. When I read the ad, I jumped on the last train, and I got off at Little Bend, and I've walking ever since."

Ethan chewed on that explanation. "Is that so?"

"I want this job," the man-child continued. "It's tough times. I need work. I didn't want to come all this way and find the job filled. You see my point?"

A habitually neat man, Ethan folded the paper and set it on the table beside his empty coffee mug, and he rose, saying, "You'll need a helmet and jacket, if you want to work here. For our protection. Whatever happens, we don't need some stupid lawsuit chewing us in the ass."

"I wouldn't sue," the young man promised. "But yeah, I've got a work helmet and a good second-hand jacket. There's a hole in it, but the guy who was wearing it is still alive. So it must work, huh?"

Ethan didn't hear the humor, and even if he had, he wouldn't have laughed.

"I've got my resume. You want to see it?"

"Yes." With a slow, studious eye, Ethan examined the brief list of past employers. Most of the businesses were defunct, casualties of the long economic downturn.

Silence seemed to bother the stranger. With a grin, he offered, "This is a beautiful farm. And a beautiful house, too."

Ethan heard the compliments and chose to ignore them. With a crisp, "Stay here," he took the resume inside. His father was sitting in the front room, in his favorite chair. The burly bald man read the single sheet in a glance, and then he looked out the window, investing more time assessing the boyish face and the quick bright eyes. Finally, with a low rumble, he said, "It's your decision. What do you think?"

"I don't like him," Ethan replied.

With a hard little smile, Grandfather reminded his son, "You've never been a good judge of people."

True enough.

"You want to hire him?"

"On a trial basis," Ethan allowed.

"What isn't?" Grandfather replied, laughing at him. "What the hell isn't?"

Ethan walked back outside. In crisp, distinctly unfriendly terms, he described the job while giving the new man a brief tour of the farmstead. To a farmer who had spent centuries working with beasts of burden, the new tractors seemed like abominations, insults and dangerous beyond measure. The two of them ended up outside the old blood barn, watching a herd of draft horses stand in the cool sunshine. Two of the horses were better than two centuries old -- a famous team brought with the Cross family from the old country. On its worst day, a balky tractor could do ten times the work of that pair of animals, and that was why in another year or two, decisions would be made. The oldest horses would remain. But Grandfather didn't have a fondness for creatures without a clear purpose, which meant that their children would be killed and used for that rare commodity: Meat. Perhaps Ethan was thinking about their fate as he stared at them. It is possible that he was sad, or angry, or maybe he was distracted for entirely different reasons. Whatever was happening inside his mind, he barely noticed when the new man nudged him, asking, "So now who's she?"

"Who?" Ethan sputtered, gazing across the big pen. "Which she do you mean?"

"I'm not talking about horses. I mean her." He pointed toward a woman walking from the main house to one of the nearby cottages. "Who's that girl over there?"

"Girl?" Finally, Ethan laughed aloud. "That's my half-sister, and she isn't. A girl, I mean. Shit, she's almost as old as me!"

"Well," the new man ventured, "she looks young enough."

"Young enough for what?" A menace intruded into the constant laugh. "Hey, she's been a widow eight times. No, make that nine times."

"Is she a widow now?"

It took Ethan a few seconds to completely decipher the question. Then with a shrug and a disdainful sneer, he admitted, "Yeah, she's alone. But you don't want to have any ideas about that. Are you listening?"

The new man nodded and smiled, watching the widow walk.

"And we were married within the year," my mother boasts.

I nod, and smile.

"He made me so happy, your father did." Her smile has a practiced quality, bright but wrapped snug around nothing but habit. "That's why I got pregnant with you. Happiness always makes a girl fertile."

I say, "I know."

Then with a different tone, I ask, "What did Grandfather think about my father?"

The question seems to puzzle her.

"Compared to your other husbands, I mean -- "

"Oh," she exclaims. And with a deep, thoughtful sigh, she admits, "He liked them all equally well. I'm sure of that."

Ten dead men, I think.

But I just smile, saying nothing at all.

* * *

Before my mother is put to bed, I manage to corral Jacob, allowing the two of them to meet. The boy is on his best behavior, while Mother seems unsure as to whose hand is being offered. But the moment has a sweetness, and at least one of us is able to walk away happy.

Smiling, I lead Jacob downstairs, joining the rest of the family in the dining hall. Supper is enormous and simple. Eggs and milk, cornmeal and blood, have been swirled together with an array of vegetables, baked to gold, then covered in honey and served with pitchers of weak beer and whole milk. Two chairs have been reserved at the main table. Conventions born long before me demand a strict formality. Conversations are determined and self-conscious. Adults discuss the day-by-day business of the farm -- the needs of various machines and livestock, and who is responsible for what -- while the little

half-cousins near Jacob whisper about school and various friends that he will never meet. Ethan invests his time staring at the hall's enormous window, nothing to see outside but darkness, eating little bites and otherwise holding his tongue still. Finally, Grandfather finishes his meal, and setting down his fork says, "Hannah," with a voice that carries. With a word, I am made into a real person. And now everyone is free to look at me, and if they wish, smile.

"One of our far flung family members has come home," the ancient man continues. "For too short of a visit, I'm afraid. So while she is here, perhaps somebody has a question for Hannah."

A young man lifts a nervous hand.

I don't have my father's talent for faces and names, but he looks new. Judging by where he sits, he must be Ethan's newest son-in-law.

"I love your movies," he claims.

"Thank you," I reply, with what I hope sounds like genuine pleasure. Then I have to ask, "Which movies?"

The question puzzles him. But one of my aunts leaps into the silence, explaining, "You've taken two stabs at acting. Isn't that right, dear?"

The tone isn't exactly approving, but she is correct.

"I've had two careers," I admit. Then to my admirer, I say, "You probably mean my second career. The one where I played the rathe."

"Yes." With a happy expertise, he names titles. "_The Blood of Life_" and "_The Milk of Life_". Those are my favorites."

"So what happens in them?"

Of all people, Ethan asks the simple question, displaying what for him is an unusual curiosity.

"Haven't you seen them?" his young son-in-law asks.

"If I have," my uncle replies, "I don't remember it."

"Hannah plays the old mythic creature," the young man explains. "She's a rathe. Which means that she has some weird genetic disorder. If she doesn't eat human flesh, her body starts to fall apart. Her skin sags and her teeth stop coming. And eventually, she grows ugly and weak and dies."

For some, the concept brings discomfort. But most people actually smile, revealing the same grim intrigue that helped make my second bout as an actress become such an enormous financial success.

"She lives in an old fortress," my admirer continues. "She lives with men and women who have the same affliction, and they use their beauty to lure in passersby." Shivering with delight, he says, "Very spooky. Very fun."

Again, I say, "Thank you."

Grandfather sits at the far end of the table, one hand unseen. With that hand, he calmly scratches Lady's head, and with his free hand he gestures, bringing the room's attention back to him.

Everyone waits for him to speak.

Hours might pass, and nobody would dare move. That is his power and authority, and perhaps on a different day, he might force everybody to sit, demanding that show of obedience. But not tonight. He is satisfied to shrug his massive shoulders, and with an almost casual voice, he admits, "I should probably watch one of those little films. Just to get a feel for them."

With a few words, my unimportance is plain to see.

Again, nobody looks at me. I am a temporary guest, inconsequential and soon to be forgotten. If only Jacob could sense the mood, then maybe we would escape without further embarrassment. But with his own infectious enthusiasm, my boy shouts out, "You know how to kill my mom? When she's a rathe, I mean."

Too slowly, I say, "Don't -- "

"With a golden sword," he explains, one arm whirring above his head. "You have to chop off her head with this big gold sword."

"Really?" Grandfather says.

Then with a low laugh, he exclaims, "What an intriguing image!"

* * *

The hotel was perched on top of a tall bank building, the best rooms looking toward the Great Pyramid. History and the modern world stood shoulder to shoulder. Three hundred million souls filled the narrow Nile Valley, from the delta to the reservoir at Aswan. Extensive irrigation projects and draconian building codes left just enough arable farmland to feed most of the people, the shortfalls made up by imports. My grandfather's grain might have helped feed these millions. Certainly each of those hungry mouths could only make the value of his crops increase.

"Are you going to stare out the window all night?"

I said, "Perhaps," and put on a smile, looking back over my shoulder.

My lover sat in the middle of our bed, wearing a fond expression and worried eyes.

"You know," I said, "you could stand here with me."

"Maybe I will. Maybe I won't."

But he couldn't help himself. In another moment, with the padding of bare feet, he slipped in behind me, warm arms wrapped around my waist and his spent prick pressed against my bottom.

Time had reversed our circumstances. I was the famous actress enjoying her reborn career, while he was just another geneticist hoping for a fifty-year tenure with any mid-tier university. He had a wife now, and a child, and a world bursting with responsibilities. Yet luring him to this place wasn't difficult. Despite all of our wishing, we can never quite rid ourselves of the affections of our youth.

"You know," I whispered. "You helped me quite a bit, years ago."

"I did?"

He thought of the money he gave me. But I admitted, "No, it was your career advice. It only took me another four decades, but eventually I realized that you were right. I should play the villain."

"Well, then, you're welcome."

"So what have you learned? Since then, I mean."

"Learned?"

"About my grandfather." I pushed back against him, causing the prick to stir. "The big genome project went on for years. I've read some of the results. At least as far as I can follow them. But nothing published actually mentions him -- "

"We can't name your grandfather," he interrupted. "The genetic privacy laws strictly forbid that."

"What have you learned?" I asked again.

My lover took a breath, gathering himself. Then with a sorry tone, he admitted, "Very little, really. Since I saw you last ... well, the man's definitely old, and durable. But how old, and what makes him so durable -- "

"Would you like to know?" I interrupted.

He hesitated, his arms lifting off me now.

"Would you like to study his blood?" I asked. "Would that help with your career?"

"Yes, I would like a sample. But I doubt if it would help." He was such an innocent soul. It had finally occurred to him that I was using him, and it would take another few minutes before he grew comfortable with that hard fact. "Hannah," he said, and he breathed again. "Genetics don't mean nearly as much as we'd hoped," he explained. "A person's DNA can be robust, but only to a point. After that, nothing matters but luck and lifestyle. Which is why we dropped our studies with the very long-lived people. We collected enough samples from their descendants -- from people like you -- that we don't have to directly involve them. And it's been twenty years since the data has given us anything new."

"What about his mitochondria?"

Warm hands settled on my hips, as if to hold me to the ground. "What about his mitochondria?"

"He inherited them from his mother. Whoever she was. But his children inherited their mitochondria from their mothers. Maybe his are unique. Maybe that's the reason he can be thousands of years old."

"You've been reading," he muttered.

Then with the steady voice of a practiced lecturer, he told me, "Mitochondria are simple, genetically speaking. Maybe there's something unique in your grandfather's organelles. But even if there is, or was, there's always a steady mutation rate. In the course of a long life, a person's mitochondria will have to change in some significant ways."

"What about memes?"

That brought silence, and curiosity.

"You mentioned lifestyle and luck," I said. "But have you ever wondered? Maybe the old man survived all this time because he has certain beliefs, or tricks, or useful ways of thinking. Memes, I mean. Maybe if you could study him, and I mean carefully ... maybe everybody would learn how to remain young and vital for ten thousand years...."

The hands dropped, but he remained intrigued by the idea.

"Would the man be worth anything to you?" I asked. "Assuming I could actually deliver him, of course."

"Deliver him? Like a package, you mean?"

I didn't explain what I meant.

"That isn't going to happen," he assured me. Or himself. "And really, that kind of psychological work isn't even in my field."

I hadn't thought that any of these schemes would fly. They were just foundations to an assault more basic, more proven. With one hand, I reached behind my back, firmly gripping his testicles and the cool prick. Then with a frankness that couldn't help but work, I said, "I intend to enslave you. Starting now. You're going to be mine to do with as I please."

He laughed, and gulped. "I'm already half-enslaved, darling -- "

"But it's not time yet," I continued. "Not this year, or the next decade, probably. But soon. And until then, I'm going to hold you like this. Understand? Like this!"

He winced, saying, "Please."

"All right then."

My corporeal hand let him go, but in every other fashion, I still had a grip on him. Then standing together, we stared out of the window, watching the sun rise over the Nile Valley, those first red-stained rays reaching high. Like each of the Great Pharaohs, Cheops had drunk nothing but water boiled in priestly ceremonies, and he ate a balanced, moderate diet, and only people who passed through a ritual quarantine could share the same room with him. The greatest of all the pharaohs, Cheops had lived for one thousand and fifteen years, and in that span his tomb became a mountain -- a giant massif of quarried granite -- its slopes kept at a moderate grade to avoid catastrophic collapses, but the pyramid still high enough that the air thinned noticeably on the upper slopes, and when there was moisture in the air, as if on that particular morning, a cluster of sun-reddened clouds gathered around the tiny, sharply pointed summit.

* * *

I won't sleep. I don't think that sleep is even possible. With Jacob snoring peacefully in the bed beside mine, I lie on my back, perfectly alert, counting the minutes and the long hours while marveling at how horribly slow time moves when you stand behind it, shoving hard.

Suddenly my eyes close and remain shut.

What wakes me is a dog barking in the cold night air. Foolishly, I sit upright, the mattress creaking beneath me. But I manage to regain my self-control. I force myself not to look out the window. Quietly, smoothly, I settle back onto the bed, and after another couple of low woofs, the old dog falls silent.

* * *

My father's body was cremated, and because he hadn't been married to my mother for the customary twenty years, he wasn't regarded as really belonging to us. That was why his remains were shipped home to certain obscure relatives. That was why I never got a clear answer when I asked for the whereabouts of his urn and ashes.

"There's no grave," my mother used to claim, her nose wrinkling with disgust. "They probably stuck the urn into the back of a closet somewhere. It's sad, I know. Criminal, even. But you see, darling, these people aren't like us. They don't honor their ancestors. And since they breed like weeds, they barely care about their own children."

"What family was his?" I asked.

She willingly gave me a name. Indeed, she believed in that name. But her certainty was too easy, her manner too incurious. When I made my own inquiries, I discovered that my father's family was barely that. A family. There was a genuine name and a wide array of people attached to that arrangement of letters, but who was related to who was a much more complicated and interesting business.

I didn't find my father's earthly remains until my last visit home. Jacob was two years old, safe with friends inside the orbiting habitat. I had already spent the requisite time with my mother, and I'd boasted about my son as much as I dared, and after signing the necessary forms to remain a stockholder in good standing with the family farm, I saw no reason to linger. Claiming a nebulous problem back home, I left three days early. The hired multicopter flew to the city, dropping me at the front gate of the district's main airport. There I hired a driver and two bodyguards, and armed with clues harvested from a multitude of sources, I took a little ride into the heart of the city.

There are larger metropolises, most of them more crowded and poor. But my father's city has its own oppressive touches. Its name was stolen from a native tribe that was eradicated with rifles and smallpox. Little more than two centuries old, it possesses a drab, determined newness that makes it indistinguishable from a thousand other immigrant towns. The immigrants came here to build the railroads. They came to work in the early grain mills and blood mills. From Europe and North Africa, as free citizens and freed slaves, they came and settled, built their homes and raised the first of their families. Four million souls are pressed together on the bluffs above a wide brown river, most of them living in the twenty-story apartment buildings that were built from brick for the first century, and then the forty-story towers built with steel and white concrete. And as you walk the narrow streets, people will gaze at you from the high windows -- a certain portion of those faces belonging to the very same immigrants who settled this land, who still speak with rich accents, and in their sleep, still dream in the languages of their vanquished youth.

My father's neighborhood was half a dozen apartment buildings overlooking a cluster of old mills and little factories. His urn and the accompanying nameplate were set in a public mausoleum. Despite the general poverty, death remained an unusual turn of events, and the murder of a young man would always be a horrible, memorable crime. What could have been a thousand years of life had been erased with two bullets. Today, a murderer was still going unpunished. And every day, without fail, somebody in those buildings -- someone who had actually known my father -- would think of him, recalling his smile and laugh, and his happy manner, and his preposterous hopes for the future.

I spent a few moments examining the urn, and then I told my bodyguards what I wished to do next.

They refused. Pointblank, they told me they were hired to bring me here and out again. Nobody had whispered a word about actually going inside one of these slum towers. I offered to triple their salaries, and their response was to threaten my driver. Then the three of them piled back into the low sedan, driving away with an unashamed cowardice.

Courage is a nearly impossible trick when you can see Forever.

I entered the building across the street, taking the elevator as high as possible. After that, I had to climb the narrow stairs, passing between armed men who kept asking about my business, and did I know I

looked like an old movie star? Finally, on the topmost floor, my way was blocked. Two women -- sisters, apparently -- took me into a lavatory and made me strip and relieve myself and then dress again. I was asked and asked again, "What's your business here?" But I offered only hints and vague mutterings. I forced them to summon up the curiosity to invite me into what looked like a small and rather ugly penthouse apartment. Every window was bulletproof. Elaborate sensors watched me as I crossed the main room. But the man sitting at his desk was nothing if not relaxed. With a smile, he said, "I've always liked your movies. The old ones best, I suppose." He had a thick, chewy accent, Germanic and French in equal measures. "Sit, if you want. A drink, maybe?"

"Nothing. Thank you."

In his smile, I saw my father. But then again, I had been seeing portions of my father in every face inside that little neighborhood.

"If I may ask: What can I do for you, Miss Cross?"

I opened my notebook, unencrypted a certain file, and began to explain. A friend of mine had passed through these streets some years ago. With blood samples and algorithms, he had easily established what I'd always suspected. "I don't have a sample from you," I told him, "but it seems obvious enough. I have to be your granddaughter."

"You certainly are," he purred.

"And you're also my uncle," I said.

Which brought a little nod and a knowing grin.

"From what I can decipher, my father and I share the same grandfather."

Of course none of that was a surprise. He knew perfectly well who his father was, and who he was, and whatever reason in the deep past caused him to be disinherited. Ignoring my elaborate diagrams, my grandfather/uncle preferred to study my face and manners. Then with a cold little voice, he asked, "How is my dear father?"

"Alive and well," I reported.

And with a sad sigh, he asked, "Isn't that awful to hear?"

* * *

The alarms are inaudible to me. But I hear a sudden flurry of activity, dozens of feet stumbling in the darkness, voices calling out, "Lady, Lady!" Then the search widens, and quiets, and someone checks with the farm's security system, discovering what seems like a critical clue.

Uncle Ethan comes to wake me. But then he hesitates, looking down at Jacob before moving to my bed, and then staring at me until I quietly ask, "What is it? What's wrong?"

"He wants you downstairs. Now."

Ethan leaves me to dress, and I try not to look at Jacob, but at the same time, I can't think about anyone else. Then I slip out into the hall and close the door, and after four long flights of stairs, I find myself looking at my grandfather, a lifetime of acting experience inadequate to this task.

"What?" I blurt, pretending ignorance.

"Lady's gone," he says. "And we saw who did it. We've got a face. You want to see who?"

"All right."

The image has been enhanced and the point-of-view has been shifted, creating a portrait of someone who looks more than a little like my father. For all we know, this is the same person who stole the dog over a hundred years ago. That is Ethan's working assumption. "I've already made calls," he reports. "Our friends with the police are already setting up watchers, waiting for a stealthed multirotor."

"Funny," says Grandfather. For the first time, I can hear the anger at the bottom of his throat. "These people don't have these kinds of resources. Money, and the like. If they went in together, maybe they could steal a machine and pay for its stealthing. But navigating through our security net and out again -- that takes more money, and skills you won't find in the slums. Which ignores the very sensible question: Why bother? To piss me off? Is that a good enough reason, Hannah?"

Never a bright man, or imaginative in any meaningful way, Uncle Ethan finds the conversation to be steering wildly off-target. "I don't understand," he complains. "Why are you even talking to her --?"

"Is it a coincidence?" his father interrupts. "She comes home, and the dog's stolen away a second time?"

I stand motionless, my face as bland as I can make it.

"What is it, darling? A trap? Am I supposed to lead my family back into that filth hole a second time ... and have what happen...? Is there some kind of ambush waiting for me? Is that it?"

Ethan gulps and stares at me.

"No," I report.

"What then?" Grandfather steps closer, knees faltering for a moment and then locking tight. With a low, raging voice, he asks, "What is your little scheme, darling?"

"You should know."

He nods.

Ethan asks, "What is it?"

"You want your money for passage on that damned starship, right?"

"In essence, yes."

"Essence?" Grandfather says.

"I want all of this to remain legal," I explain. "I'm not extorting this money from you, and you won't be able to block me with lawyers down the line."

"Really? And why's that?"

"My mother is incompetent to make her own decisions," I begin. "You hold power of attorney over her, for now. But I want you to sign that right over to me, and I'll demand her share of the farm. Since she has been here from the beginning, with her name on the original title ... her share and mine will be enough to put her and Jacob and myself onboard the Centauri ship."

Grandfather stares at me, that hard face nothing but astonished.

Then with a low, vicious voice, he says, "That's wickedly clever of you, you little bitch."

In my life, this is as close to real praise as I have ever won from the man.

* * *

The signatures of participants and witnesses have been duly recorded, and the appropriate money has been transferred into accounts set up for this single purpose. Jacob is awakened and dressed, and my mother is dressed but has fallen asleep again, sitting in a robust little walking chair that leads the way. Jointed legs pull open the front door and climb down the porch stairs. In first light, the air is bitter and dry. A brief overnight snow has left portions of the yard white. But where the multirotor waits, between the house and the blood barn, the snow has been swept away, exposing the frozen black earth beneath.

Nobody stands near the multirotor. Its primary rotors spin slowly, with two of its four motors humming patiently. Before we are close enough to feel the wash of the rotors, I tell Mother's chair to stop. Then I take Jacob by the shoulder, telling him, "Wait here."

"But it's cold," he whines.

"No," I warn. "This isn't cold at all."

Several old uncles stand alongside my grandfather. But Ethan stands by himself, down alongside an old pine tree, arms at his side and a stiff, angry expression working its way through his thick face.

To nobody in particular, I ask, "When did the multirotor arrive?"

"Your luggage is already loaded," Grandfather replies.

"The machine," I add. "When did it get here?"

"Twenty minutes ago," Ethan hollers. "I loaded it myself."

I watch him. I stare at his face until Grandfather interrupts, saying, "I'm sorry if you're waiting for a big farewell song. But you can understand. Our mood's pretty ugly, at least for the time being."

"Sure," I say.

I look at him. But of course he won't let me see anything more than an appropriate smoldering. I have worked with some exceptional actors, but in my life, I haven't known anyone as purely talented as Nathaniel Cross.

"Leave," he tells me.

I obey. I walk back to my mother and son, and with a touch, I turn my mother's chair around. Then I kneel and say to Jacob, "Don't ask me why. But we're going to walk now. Through the fields, over those next hills, and down to the rail line. All right?"

But he has to ask, "Why?"

"Then we will wait for the first train north. All right?" As if I didn't hear his question, I tell him again, "Don't ask me why."

We start for the cornfield. When my intentions appear plain, my grandfather laughs. "So what about your luggage? And your mother's things? What should we do with all of that?"

"I'll have it shipped," I promise, barely looking back.

Despite bad knees, the old man manages to close the gap. "You know," he says with what could be construed as a worried tone. "You'll be awfully close to the Kirks' land. And they don't like the Cross clan right now."

I hesitate, if only for an instant.

And I look back at him, letting him see just a useful glimmer of fear.

* * *

The chair is the strongest walker among us. When Jacob tires, I move my mother to one side, finding enough room for the two of them to sit pressed together, wrapped up in the same old quilt. Both spend their time nodding in and out of sleep. We climb the first hill, and then the ones that follow. I fill the silence with little stories about being Jacob's age and exploring these fields and the little streams between. I can remember when the deer lived in herds, there were so many of them. I remember flocks of birds, and in the summer, great swarms of flying insects. But the animals are scarce now. Unless they help the crops, they are nothing but burdens. People are everywhere in the world, on land and in the seas, and we are filling in the sky now. "But it's going to be different on the new world," I promise, talking entirely to myself. My companions are both asleep, alternating snores as we cross the last hill, indifferent to the elevated white rail below, and beyond, the brown lands around which little legal wars are being waged.

"The Centauri world is pure wilderness," I tell myself, recalling the blue seas and gold lands seen by the deep-space telescopes. "And we won't destroy it with our numbers. Not this time. We'll let our population grow until we're large enough to be stable, and after that, a family won't be able to have a new child until one of them dies, or emigrates." It is an integral part of the colony's charter, and for me, a major drawing card. "We won't crush this new world under our feet," I keep saying, more as a prayer than as a strict belief. I am not a foolish dreamer, despite all my best attempts. I actually hear the doubt in my voice when I say, "This time, we will do things differently -- "

And then, I hear another sound.

A sudden, close _crack_.

I almost hesitate. Almost. Then I step out in front of the chair, walking with a purpose, waiting for the next _crack_ while looking to my right, catching the faint glimmer of a laser's measured pulse.

The third _crack_ feels closer.

But the fourth and fifth are barely audible. Plainly, the AI marksman has found its range. I feel confident enough to leave the others, walking sideways on the hillside, gradually dropping down toward a single enormous oak -- the sole survivor of a one-time forest, spared from the chainsaw by my grandfather's love for things ancient and durable.

A figure sits under the tree, dressed in camouflage, with a helmet and a padded vest around his heart and lungs. Once more, he tries to shoot me. I can see one eye expertly sighting along the barrel, and the minimal tug of the finger against a sensitive trigger, and then comes a bullet that moves at what is really an insignificant speed.

The bullet has barely left the barrel when it explodes into a metallic vapor. Compared to the orbital velocities of comets and lost bolts, the speed of a ballistic weapon is nothing. Protecting me is far, far easier than keeping an orbital habitat secure.

Uncle Ethan throws down his gun in frustration.

I am close enough to hear his breathing, to see his wild panic.

But when I search deeper, I find something else. He sobs. He moans. With both hands, he peels away the armor around his heaving chest. If anything, he looks grateful -- a sudden and irresistible gratefulness born from discovering some incalculable burden lifted from very old and astonishingly weary shoulders.

* * *

I am a woman of my word: Lady is returned to the farm unharmed.

She doesn't know half the people she meets. But still, she runs around like a maniac, and the little children chase her. Jacob chases her. Why not? I watch the idyllic scene even while my grandfather is fitted with an assortment of soft, irresistible restraints.

"I didn't hurt anybody," the old man calls out.

Then louder, he says, "Ethan's the killer. I've suspected it for years. I think he gets sick in the head, and he has to shoot somebody...!"

"Why?"

The one-word question is asked, floating in the brightly lit air of the blood barn. And when it evaporates, I offer it again. "Why?" I say, turning toward my grandfather. "My father was killed ... why?"

"Ask Ethan," a rumbling voice told me.

"They're asking him that question now, I'd think. I hope." I show a cold smile. "My uncle isn't smart, but he's not so stupid that he'll sacrifice himself for you. The authorities have him trying to kill three people today. They are going to offer him a deal. Ethan and the rest of the uncles will get the same deal. If they talk honestly about their participation in the old crimes, and if they confess who gave their marching orders, their lives will be spared. Thousand-year sentences will seem like a blessing. And because they are your children, we both know ... they will do anything possible to save their ugly selves."

The gray eye brightens, but the rest of the face is dull and half-dead.

Again, I ask, "Why did my father have to die?"

Then I answer myself, offering, "Because when you went to the city, you discovered that my father had lied. He really belonged to a family that you hated, and his own father was one of your disinherited children."

Both eyes close, and open again.

"Hardly," he says.

Then with a sluggish smile, he says, "I knew who your father was. The first time I looked at him, I knew what he had to be. But that didn't matter. And do you know why, Hannah? Because sometimes in animal husbandry, in the quest for better breeds, it pays to occasionally cross an excellent bloodline with itself."

I tremble, and wait.

"Your father's loyalty was the question. But that was always a worrisome point. So why did Ethan shoot him on that particular day?" Grandfather conjures up a deep, hateful laugh. "Because by then Ethan had

learned how to maintain the tractors and such. Your father had no purpose anymore. And the timing, what with the abduction of Lady, made it all seem quite perfect."

I watch Lady stop long enough to sniff at the heels of my devoted geneticist. He stands with my mother, in the bright chill sunshine, patiently enduring one of her endless, pointless tales.

Quietly, I say, "The court will find you guilty. You will be stripped of your property and your wealth. Your blood cattle, and your dog. And there will be a gallows built specifically for your gruesome old neck."

His laugh sputters.

"But then a pardon agreement will be offered," I continue. "Because you are valuable to an array of experts, the court will offer to spare your life. And since you can't think of being any way but alive, you will agree to the terms. A death sentence will be made eternal. In these next centuries, you will be carted from lab to lab. You'll help geneticists and psychologists and historians. You will let them cut and prod, and as new methods become available, they will analyze your body and mind. They'll coax ancient memories out of you. They'll write great books about you. Of course you'll be poor as a pauper, but a kind of fame is going to find you. Finally. From your little cell, you won't see it, of course. But you will be a famous bastard known on many worlds. And then after another few thousand years, that fame has to die away, and the experts will vanish, and you won't remember anything about your life except the walls of your cell and the same few meals that come through the slot near the floor."

I look at a face absolutely drained of its blood.

Quietly, he says, "So that's what this is. Revenge."

"Revenge?" I ask.

"For your father getting killed." He snorts and yanks against his restraints, and asks, "How many decades have you been planning this, Hannah?"

I watch Jacob playing tag with Lady.

Again, with an easy scorn, I say, "Revenge?"

I won't even look at my grandfather anymore. All I see is my son, and I'm thinking to myself that maybe Jacob needs a good smart and loyal dog at his side. And while I'm thinking that, I am saying with a surprisingly calm voice, "No, that isn't why I went to all this trouble. No."

Where would I find a good leash? I'm wondering.

"Then why?" an old voice creaks.

With the clarity of the honest, I confess, "I was afraid. My son and I would move to a new world, and then a few hundred years later, when the colony is seemingly secure, you would arrive. My family would follow me there, chasing the empty lands...."

"That's what made me go to so much trouble, Grandfather...."

"Not what's past ... but the crimes sure to come...."