

# Kill Me

## by Vylar Kaftan

I'm sitting cross-legged on a rock in west Texas, somewhere north of El Paso, bleeding into the dirt. The pose feels like a meditation. I'm fascinated with the knife mark on my left thigh, a shallow slash from hip to knee. It's surrounded by bruise clusters that look like flowers of broken skin. In the silent desert, I hear only the soft clicking of the car cooling down. Then his urine splashes against the rock behind me, and I hear his zipper when he's done. The night breeze is icy on my back, drying the blood into clots. He did me well, I admit, glancing up at the full desert moon. If my body survived — which it wouldn't — I would be scarred, possibly disfigured. The welts on my back throb like electricity, and everything — the moon, the desert, the wind — is alive with me.

He walks in front of me. I look up at the man who brought me all the way from Denver. He looks like a black dog, matted and angry, and growls like one too. My eyes travel to the cluster of thick hair springing from his shirt neck. He folds his arms over his chest.

"The night's almost over," I remind him.

He scowls. "Get in the trunk."

I hesitate — he paid me to do the shy-girl act, a popular one — and he grabs my arm. He hauls me over the rear bumper into the trunk of his '33 Axis. He slaps me once across the face — not as hard as I expected — and crumples me into the tight compartment. He slams the trunk closed, catching my hair in the door. I try to pull free, but it's no use. I don't think he meant that part, but he doesn't seem to notice the long trail of hair hanging out of the trunk. The car door opens and the ignition starts. I tug on my hair once more and then relax, concentrating on where I hurt, where my body throbs with pain.

As many times as I've done this, I still try to experience it all. Because it's not every day you experience death. Only every three months.

The car makes a sharp left. I can tell we're on a road again because the ride is smoother. My head cracks against the spare tire, and I black out briefly. I twist my neck a little, and arch my back so it isn't pressed against the floor. My back is wet with injuries, and the trunk smells of tires and blood. He drives for only five minutes before the sirens start.

Patently, I wait for the questions I know will be asked.

A deep voice, muffled by the trunk walls: "Sir, may I see your license?" A long pause, then, "What's in your trunk?"

"A professional masochist," he responds. I'm impressed with his calmness and confidence. Most of my clients would have lied. I suppose he expected the cop to search him anyway.

A short pause, then the trunk flies open. I blink at the red and blue lights in my eyes. There's a dark, burly figure in front of me. "Ma'am?" he asks.

Before he can go on, I recite, "Professional masochist, license 148-XZ, expiration date 7-8-38, name Ada Maureen Protierre, backed up by HMX Micro Industries, category 13B." I must be a sight, bloody in a stranger's trunk, rattling off my legal information.

He narrows his eyes at me. "I'll check," he says icily. He walks away. I make no move except to gather my hair into the trunk. I'll check out, I know. The Company documents everything so thoroughly that

lifelong bureaucrats weep with envy. The lights on the cop car are close enough to blind me. I expect the manufacturers weren't thinking of people in trunks when they designed them.

The cop comes back. "You check out," he says. He too slams the trunk on me, almost hitting my head again. I wonder if he meant to. I hear the voices from the front again, the cop saying, "I don't want there to be any witnesses now, you hear me?" Aha. A cop of moral righteousness, who condemns this whole business. There's only three kinds: those who are righteous, those who are indifferent, and those who take part.

My client says something unintelligible, and the cop drives away. The car starts up, and the ride becomes bumpy as we head off-road again. My hair freed from its trap, I can roll over and inspect my wounds by touch. I wince with every brush of my fingertips. My thighs are bruised, and my ass is sticky with blood and caked dirt, but my back is the worst. He was not skilled with the bullwhip, and his strokes are carelessly placed. I run my fingers along my neck, realizing that one mark is perilously close to my preservation device. An angry welt wraps around my collarbone and ends four inches from the palm-sized metal cap on the back of my skull. I must report this man to HMX. He cannot be trusted with the safety of his masochists. Fear flickers in me; my hand reaches instinctively to my device as I curl up. But no — the Company knows where I am. I have trusted them for three years, and they have always restored me.

The car stops, the trunk opens, and the client drags me out of the car. I think about screaming and begging for mercy, but he didn't pay for that. He throws me down and steps on my back. He grinds his foot into my spine, and I choke on dirt. He says nothing, which is remarkable. Usually they brag with macho comments, or make sexist slurs, or just scream like animals. I suppose he's one of those cold-blooded killers. He seems almost afraid of me, I think, and then I wonder at the strangeness of the idea. How odd, to imagine that he's afraid of me just as he's about to kill me.

He rolls me over onto my back. Pain shoots through my body, and I look up at him. My body feels like lightning. He's silhouetted by the moon, and his eyes are shadowed. "Any last words, whore?"

Oh, the drama. I want to tell him how many men have used that line with me before. It's nothing new. Dying hasn't truly excited me for months. But I restrain myself and say, "Be sure that the preservation device is undamaged and returned promptly to the Company." I think to myself that he didn't pay for me to say anything more. And I wonder what it will be. The knife again? A gun? His fists?

He snarls and drops onto me. I gasp as his hands encircle my throat and the air leaves my body. My heart races and every instinct screams at me to fight. But I try to relax. He didn't pay for me to struggle, so he damn well won't be getting that pleasure. For a moment, it's almost peaceful — like choosing not to breathe, to empty myself of air as the sharp sagebrush cuts into my bloody back. His hot breath touches my face as his weight presses me against the ground. Then comes the moment of panic, where my body realizes this is not a joke — there is no more air. I tremble as my body demands oxygen, then cannot resist anymore. My body struggles weakly. Foolish body, I think, you get nothing. You will be replaced. This is a strangely painless way to die — frightening, as I fight for the air I will never get — but not painful. His face is stubbly up this close, and he smells like Old Spice deodorant. "I've always wanted to kill a pretty girl," he whispers, leering at me. He lifts my neck and slams my head against the ground.

For the first time, I panic. Not the back of my head! I want to scream, but no sound can escape his chokehold. My God, I think, he's going to break my device. He's going to kill me for real. The device is strong, but not unbreakable. He lifts my head and slams it down again. I try to raise my arms to shove him off, but I know it's too late. I'm dying. I wiggle in vain underneath his hairy body. My lungs burn. Every capillary cries for air, air now, I have to have air! He crashes my head against the ground over and over, and I black out.

I wake up on the familiar metal bed in Denver, resting on comfortable padding. Dr. Sorrington is removing needles from my arms. The company's room smells like antiseptics. No time seems to have passed. Every time I die, I always try to pay attention, to know what the moment of death feels like — and every time I'm denied, because it's like falling asleep. You just won't remember that precise moment.

Dr. Sorrington must see my eyelids fluttering. "You're fine. He didn't destroy any critical parts of your device."

I am relieved, but I wonder: what is critical? The memory of my sixth birthday party? The first time I tasted cheesecake? Maybe I've lost memories already. I have no way of knowing. "Am I—"

"You're fine," he says. "We've had him arrested on charges of destruction to Company property. We have very good lawyers who will get him locked up."

"What about attempted murder?" I demand.

Dr. Sorrington frowns. "You know what's written in your contract, Ada. You consented to the murder, so legally, we can't press charges for that."

I am silent. That man could have destroyed my device and killed me. It seems wrong that the charge against him is merely destruction to property. I look down at my naked new body, freshly cloned at high speed. The knife scar received while cutting a pear has disappeared from my left hand. Finally I say, "So what happened doesn't even matter to you."

"Of course it matters, Ada." His voice is soothing and well-trained. I don't know how the Company selects doctors, but I suspect they give them a personality test to weed out the sadists and the soft-hearted. Then they shape the remaining blandness into doctors, like lumps of gray clay. Dr. Sorrington continues, "Your device was heavily damaged. But we recovered you just fine. This incident, to our regret, was unforeseen."

"I need to get out of here," I say, and it's true. I'm angry. Angry at the close call, angry that I almost died permanently. I get out of bed and yank the remaining needles out of my arm. Blood wells up from the holes. I don't care. This body will only last three months before it's killed.

I walk over to the chair, which holds my folded clothes. They're the same ones I wore here last week — hardly seems like it — when I reported for work. I put them on. The doctor watches me dress. He says, "Remember there are free counselors available if you need one."

"No." I have never wanted a counselor.

"All right then," he says. "See you in three months." He walks out the door, then turns back. "You know, we will always bring you back safely. We guarantee that."

"Barring unforeseen incidents," I snap.

He realizes the folly of his words and leaves. I put on my shoes, leave out the back door, and drive home to my apartment. I run a foaming lavender bubble bath and slip inside its warmth, letting the bubbles cover me.

I had almost died. Forever. The lavender-scented bubbles aren't enough to overpower the smell of blood, of dirt, of him. If my preservation device had been destroyed, then I would have been obliterated. The device holds my memories. Memories — being no more than electrical impulses in the brain — are easy to store. When a client kills me, he's supposed to bring the device back to the Company. So my mind can be completely restored each time I need a new clone body. The Company can't keep backups

of me because Congress passed some sanctity-of-life law that says there can only be one version of a person at a time. So I just move to a new body every three months, like some people trade their cars. Three months seems like so little time to spend in a body, but it's due to the stress the device places on it. Of course, the device was my only option if I'd wanted to survive that car wreck. That's how I'd gotten started with this business.

I grab a handful of bubbles and try to crush them. They squirt between my fingers. I let my hand fall, and water sloshes out of the tub. I'm sick of the whole mess. I'm tired of renting out my body to be murdered again and again. I don't want to be a way for assholes to release some aggression. My mind wanders back to the days where I started to explore pain: a little harmless submissive game here, and a little more intense session the next. I advanced from spankings to floggings, then to needles, electricity, full-body suspension. The pain heightened my senses, focused them, like sunlight transformed to a laser beam. The pain kept me in the present moment, kept me whole. I'd been at the clubs every night, looking for the right partner, looking for someone stronger than the last person. Someone who could take me to the next level of awareness.

And then the car accident, three years ago. I was driving home from the club, my mind lost in the scene I'd just played, when I slid on the icy road. I struck a pedestrian and killed her instantly. Then I sailed over the embankment and rolled the car six times. My brain was alive, but my body was a tangled wreck when they pulled me out. I had no life left, and the only answer was to download my brain and then upload me into a clone.

When the company interviewed me, they offered me a job in their most elite set — the professional masochists. A business designed to let people explore their darkest fantasies, based on the idea that expressing their psychopathy with consenting victims would release the anger safely. At the time, I'd agreed instantly — it paid better than waitressing, and the pedestrian's family was suing me.

I reach for the faucet and run more water into my bath. There's no hot water left. I'm angry and sick of everything. The risk is too much. It's not worth the money. I resolve to turn down the next job offer. To pay for my next clone out of savings. I do some math in my head — I have enough saved for maybe one clone. Probably not even that much. Three months left to my life. I submerge myself in the lukewarm water and swallow my scream.

The next three months are awful. I take a terrible job at a small diner. The owner yells at me for the cook's mistakes, and the customers don't tip. But I need money, and I can't find anything better right now. I don't go out anymore because I'm saving every dollar.

My voicemail fills with messages. My mother calls to ask me how my job is going. It amuses me to talk to her — this time, I'm not lying when I tell her I'm a waitress. But I'm still lying when I tell her everything is fine. As I lie awake at night, I realize that the client might as well have killed me.

My former play partner calls too — Skye, the most recent one, who was fun while it lasted. Skye's great if you're into mind games without much substance. I haven't done anything with her in a year, but she calls me sometimes to tell me about the community. I think she only tells me the positives, to convince me to return to the clubs. I haven't wanted to go much since I was cloned — being killed every few months is like scratching the itch with a knife.

In her latest message, Skye wants to know how I'm doing, and tells me there's a special event on Saturday night, and she has an extra ticket, and she can take me if I want to go. She says some people have been asking about me, one in particular, and if I come on Saturday I can find out who, and don't I really need to know who it is? I don't take the bait. Skye's always spoken in a series of "ands," pretending that her manipulations are afterthoughts.

I call Skye when I know she's not home, just to leave her a message. I tell her I'm quitting my job, and this is my last clone, and I'll be dead in a few months. I don't return any more of her calls. Maybe now she'll stop trying to tempt me with half-messages. I know I'm being cranky, but I'm tired. I'm sick of the whole business. I want nothing to do with it. I just want to live out my life alone, away from the complexity of the world.

When the Company calls me three months later, I'm prepared to turn the job down. But Dr. Sorrington entices me. "Ten times the usual pay," he says.

"Why?" I ask suspiciously.

"Because the gentleman is offering it. Says he thinks the worker deserves it."

Gentleman my ass, he's a psycho like any of them. "Give the job to someone else."

"He asked for you by name, Ada."

"How did he know who I was?"

There's a pause. Then he says, "As part of his increased fee, he requested that we not tell you that information. But we verified that he knows you through legitimate means. And he wants to see you soon."

"When?"

"Tomorrow night."

"No," I say, "I'm not doing this anymore."

"Then why did you ask me when?"

He's right. I'm thinking about it without even realizing. I don't want to be killed, but I also don't want to die. I say, "Let me know where and when."

So I come to a mansion in the mountains of Santa Fe, done in the old Southwestern style. I pass through the gates and adobe wall surrounding the house. No one can see into the yard from the outside — not that I'm anywhere near the roads. I'm almost as isolated here as I had been in Texas three months ago. I shiver, even though it's June, and look up at the house. Iron grates block the windows. They look like black teeth. My feet crunch on the gravel as I approach his door. The bell chimes, and a servant admits me. I follow him up the spiral staircase, noting the enormous crystal chandelier and the desert landscapes on the walls. No wonder he can afford ten times the usual rate. I wonder who the client is and how he knows me.

The servant opens a door and holds it for me. He says, "This way, if you please." Unused to such treatment, I thank him and enter. I take a deep breath. The room is a library that smells like smoke and some sort of incense. There's a desk near the far wall. The client is sitting at the desk, and rises as I approach him.

"Antonio," I say, surprised.

He smiles. "Ada. I see you still won't call me sir."

Antonio Silva — I know him from years ago, in the clubs. So simple and unassuming he seems, a man of sixty-something years with wispy white hair and blue eyes that study me as if I were a cut of beef. He's a small man, made smaller by age. He would show up on the Denver scene some nights, a guest of local

members. He never said much except to the people he scened with. I refused him twice. I'd seen him in action — he was intense, but I didn't trust him. One of his former partners says he wouldn't stop when she told him to. That was enough for me. I wouldn't deal with him. Skye must have told him about my voicemail. I realize that this man I twice refused is going to kill me tonight. Does he hate me? Want me? I don't know.

I take a step closer. "I only say 'sir' when I respect you. I heard what happened between you and Robin."

He laughs. "Prettier than I remembered, and much sassier. I like sassy."

I fold my arms. "So here I am. Why did you ask for me? You've hardly ever spoken to me. Just stared at me a lot, from what I remember."

He ignores my comment. "Did you know Robin said the same thing about five other people in the Denver scene? Including your ex, Skye, whom you trust? Robin's got some issues with communicating her needs."

I hadn't known that. I shrug and look at him. "He said, she said."

His blue eyes focus on me. He speaks as if to himself. "Not just pretty. Beautiful."

My toes curl inside my shoes, deep in the plush blue carpet. Compliments from clients always make me uncomfortable, and doubly so from Antonio. I say, "How will it be? What's your fantasy?"

He doesn't answer. He beckons me to follow him. We enter a sitting room lined with bookshelves and knickknacks, with a large clock against the back wall. He sits in a soft brown armchair and folds his hands in front of him. I sit in the wooden chair across from him and rest my arm on a nearby table, knocking some papers away.

"Well?" I ask.

"Well what?"

"Do you know how this works?"

"I have purchased the right to destroy this clone of your body, which will expire soon even without interference. I may destroy you in whatever way I find most intriguing and pleasurable, provided I don't harm the preservation device on your head. You will experience pain during this event, but you have consented to this activity. You are an individual who has experienced and enjoyed pain in the past, and now that you wear a preservation device, you are free to experience the ultimate in sensation. In fact, the preservation device allows you to move beyond any previous limits, since you are not afraid for your safety or your life."

"You think too much," I say.

He smiles. He looks like someone's grandfather. "I find it an interesting subject to muse upon. Tell me, how did you get started in this business?"

"What, you haven't been researching my life?"

"Perhaps a bit. I want to hear it from you."

I pause, not wanting to talk too much with a client, not sure what he already knows. Finally, I say, "I was

in a car wreck. I wasn't supposed to live. They cloned my body."

"Is this your return of payment?"

"No. I do this for the money. Although this job is how I paid for the procedure, so I suppose you could say it's a payment."

He coughs, and removes a red cloth from his pocket. He wipes his mouth with it. "So I'd heard, from my sources. Is that it? Money? I would think that they'd pay you enough so that you would no longer need to do this."

"Actually," I say, digging a toe into the carpet, "if they paid us better, they wouldn't have anyone to work." My eyes wander to the skylight above us. I can see stars against blackness.

"You don't do it for the money," he says abruptly.

Startled, I look back at him. He's staring intensely at me, almost hungrily. He leans forward in his seat.

He continues, "You do it because you like to submit. Because you enjoy being tied to the train tracks, waiting to see how long you can last. Because you want to lie down in front of God, spread your legs, and say 'Fuck me' — knowing that you're going to stand up whole again, with a mind-blowing experience that even God himself can't top. Am I touching a nerve here? I plan to touch more before we're done."

"Everyone in the scene is like that," I say, with a wave of my hand. I distract myself with an interesting landscape on the wall.

"No." His voice draws my attention, and I stare at him. "Not everyone. You. Me. A few others, who aren't afraid of the deepest, darkest places within us. Those of us who crave the ultimate human experience of giving and receiving pain. You're like me, aren't you, Ada." It isn't a question.

I swallow. "No," I say firmly, "but you have some interesting theories. Regardless, you've paid, and you will get what you paid for. Now, what do you want?"

"The same thing you want."

"You don't know what I want."

He chuckles at that. "Ah, but I do. I'm like you. I'm your other half. Not professional, of course."

I shift in my chair. "So you like to deal it out. Heavy and deadly. I'm used to that. Think about who I deal with in my job."

The clock ticks steadily as he speaks. "I'm sure." He coughs again into the cloth. This cough is prolonged and wracks his body. I wait. Finally, he puts the cloth down again. "I have a proposal for you."

"Shoot," I say carelessly.

"I want to own you." He says it calmly, like he's telling me about breakfast.

"You do. For the rest of the night, until you kill me in your chosen fashion."

"No. I want to own you."

"I'm not open for a permanent contract."

He shakes his head. "Let me explain. You said you do this for the money, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well. I am dying tonight," he says, staring at me. "My lungs are mostly decayed; I have plans to hasten that experience with a certain toxin. I don't plan to kill you. In fact, I want you to live. I will sign over my wealth to you if you promise to stop practicing masochism."

I stare at him — this crazy little man, dying in his plush armchair — and shake my head. "You're kidding."

"I have never been more serious in my life," he says. "I was prepared for the fact that you would not believe me, so I have drawn up the legal papers to add this clause into my will. You will find those papers sitting on the table next to you."

Surprised, I pick up the stack of papers and read them. They seem official and legally binding. I look back at Antonio. "But why?" I ask, genuinely puzzled.

"Because I want to," he responds.

"All your wealth?"

"Yes, all of it."

I set the papers down. "I get it. This is some weird revenge game for — I don't know what for. You're just fucking with my head."

"Not at all," he says. He offers me a dish of mints, which somehow feels like the strangest thing he's done so far tonight. I shake my head. He takes one and sets the dish back down.

I fold my arms. "Why would you do this? Are you about to die penniless or something?"

He pops the mint into his mouth. "Not at all. I'm quite well-off, and I have no family. If you'll read the contract, you will see that it states my net worth."

I snatch the papers up and start reading again. I draw in my breath sharply when I spot the total. It would cover the cost of replacing my body every three months for the rest of my life, until the preservation device corrupts in another twenty years or so. And I wouldn't have to work for the Company anymore. "This is so strange."

"No stranger than what you are, and how you live," he whispers. "Tell me, will you do it? Will you let me own you?"

I set the papers down again. "Accept your money, on condition that I stop working as a professional masochist?"

"Not just professionally." He smiles and I am reminded of a shark. "I want you to stop practicing masochism in any form. I want you to live the rest of your life without the pursuit of pain."

I blink. He's offering me a chance to escape this business, live a life of comfort — and he'll be dead anyway. He must know I'm dying too, that I don't have the money for more clones, and only his intervention will save me now. I close my eyes briefly and remember the last time I was killed. It seems like someone else's life, someone else who is killed every three months. Antonio is offering me another chance to live. Who knows — in twenty years or so, technology might improve again, and my life might be even longer. Maybe forever. The thought excites me. "Sure," I say. "Where do I sign?"



He copies my digital signature from my organizer into his written will. "Thank you."

"I'm suspicious that there's a catch somewhere," I say.

He laughs feebly. "Help me into the bathroom. The medicine is there."

I help him out of his chair and we walk to a clean white bathroom with a tiled floor. He says, "Open the medicine cabinet and get me the small green bottle." I obey. He counts out four yellow pills and swallows them without water. He smiles and leans on my arm. "Very good. Shall we lie down together in the bedroom?"

"No sex allowed, per Company contract," I say immediately.

"I don't want that. For heaven's sake, I'm dying. I just want to hold you."

I shrug. I don't like any kind of fake intimacy with my clients, but this one just bought me my freedom. We move into the bedroom — a black wallpapered room with a wooden four-poster bed. He lies down on the bed, and I take off my shoes and lie stiffly beside him. He curls around me and strokes my hair. This feels even weirder than usual. I've never been near anyone who was dying, except myself.

"My death will only take a few more minutes," he says. "But I must confess. My motives are more selfish than saving you from this life you lead. I have always wanted to own a woman — own her completely — and have power over her after I am gone. I remember you from the clubs in Denver, and I am giving both of us a chance to get what we want. Will you truly stop working as a masochist? Participating in any activities?"

"Yes," I say. "It's a condition in the will, isn't it?"

"You will let me own you?"

"Sure, why not?" I'm not really listening at this point. I'm staring at the ceiling, with its tiny sparkles embedded in white stucco.

"Listen to me, and the real reason behind what I have done." His voice drops to a whisper, charged with electricity. "I have sought my entire life for my other half, for someone who understands the experience of pain as I do."

I am listening now, with the strange feeling that hits before a lightning storm. "You feel that I understand this?"

"I know that you do," he says, tangling his fingers in the hair at my scalp. I move away as his hand brushes my preservation device. "You wouldn't survive in your profession if it were only about the money. There's a powerful urge that drives you to want it. To want to be murdered."

"Not really," I say, but I feel uncomfortable.

"Tell me, how did you get your start?"

"In S&M clubs," I say. "Playing submissive."

"And in that time, you played with pain and your limits?"

"Yes."

"Look at me." I turn my head and see his blue eyes. This close, they're bloodshot. His breath is hot on

my face, and smells like mint. "Tell me, did you ever dream of someone killing you?"

"Yes," I admit. My hands are cold. I wish he would die faster.

"And did you think you would like it?"

"Yes — but it was a fantasy."

"And now your fantasy is true."

"It wasn't like I imagined," I say.

He ignores me. "Sometimes — you think back on each death you've had. Relive the experience. Relive the exact moment of death, even though it's a lot like falling asleep."

I don't answer, but I bite the inside of my lip. He continues, "It's defined you. Made you who you are."

"Maybe."

"And I have bought that part of you. You denied me before, but you cannot deny me now. You can no longer make choices. I have made them for you."

"True," I admit, clenching my fists.

He takes a deep breath, and I see his eyes glint. His breathing is rapid and shallow now. "You are my other half, Ada, and without me you will no longer exist. I am the last man to control you, and I control you even beyond the grave. You have no choice. I die knowing that I own you completely. I am so powerful that I can — destroy the very essence of what it means to be Ada. I — I am..." He coughs. "I am taking you with me to the grave. You — are mine."

I open my mouth to speak, but I see that his eyes are vacant and his breathing ragged. I close my mouth. Gradually his breathing ceases completely. It's strange to look at him, knowing that he won't come back, that he has no preservation device. I check the back of his head, just to be sure. Then I disentangle from his embrace and stand up. The servant stands at the door. "He's dead," I inform him. "There are some papers I wish to take from the study, and then I will leave."

When I consult a lawyer the next day, I'm almost surprised. The papers are legitimate. All of Antonio Silva's wealth is mine, provided that I never again practice any form of masochism. The form is very specific about what is forbidden to me. I must quit my job and cease going to clubs. I cannot practice any form of self-mutilation nor self-infliction of pain. Any act of masochism and I must forfeit the money. The document is very long, the list of what is forbidden — but I don't care. I am freed of my work. I can do as I please, and still have money for new bodies until the end of my lifespan.

My first action is to quit my job with the company. Dr. Sorrington calls me, but I don't return his calls. My second action is to buy a new body for myself, paid in cash. I lie down on the familiar metal bed and receive my lethal injection. Dr. Sorrington is there when I wake.

"Ada, you're one of our best. We hope you'll reconsider."

I dress quickly. My shirt is on backwards. "No. I'm done. I don't need this anymore."

"You'll regret it. You'll miss this job. You're a natural."

"No."

"I feel you're struggling with something."

"You don't feel anything. You've forgotten how."

He frowns. I can't read his expression. "You're making a mistake."

"Whatever," I say, and leave. I have a life to live. I buy a house with a swimming pool, out in the Colorado mountains. Sometimes I think about Antonio, or I dream about being killed. It feels good to remind myself that I am free, that I don't need anything anymore, as I dive into my pool. I swim every day for three months until it bores me, and then I decide to see the world.

I buy a new body, avoiding Dr. Sorrington. I go to Europe and tour the continent. I start with the tourist traps — Paris, Venice, Switzerland. People everywhere, gawking at these places meant to entice them, to draw their money in. I sit on a park bench in Zurich, watching the tourists walk by. All of them look the same to me. How boring they must be, I realize. How boring I must be for doing this too. Running my hand along the wooden bench, I wince as I take a splinter in my palm. I look at the needle of wood embedded in my flesh. It's driving in towards my veins, a blood-seeking missile. I think of Antonio now, who died saying that he owned me. Hardly, I think, since now I am free to enjoy Europe.

I glance up at the tourists, and see how fake they are, with their designer sunglasses and cheap disposable cameraphones. My hand throbs with pain, and I cradle it against me. I remember the feel of sagebrush in my raw bleeding back, the smell of the desert where I had nearly died forever. I realize that I am bored here too, and that I need something to excite me. Something to help me live. I stop at a club in central Amsterdam and stare at the door. I don't go in, but I remember the sharpness of a knife against my throat, the sting of a hand slapping my face. I walk away from the door, feeling a rush of energy. I don't know why I'm still looking for something, when I have everything that I could want.

I go home and buy a new body. When I return to Europe, I take a backpack. I sleep in the train stations and go down all the wrong streets. I see the dark underside of Berlin, the old concrete buildings still standing from the last century — places no one would want to live. I find the ghettos of Warsaw, teeming with pickpocket gypsy kids. I witness a murder one day, in a farmer's market as I buy a loaf of bread. One man speaks sharply to another in Polish. They fight, a knife flashes, and the second man is down. The first man runs, and the square is in chaos. I move to the dying man's side and take his hand. His jugular vein is slashed in a careless cut. I know he will not survive. I did not survive a similar injury.

"Shhh," I soothe him. He burbles at me, flailing his arms wildly. He looks a little bit like Antonio. I'm entranced by his wound. Dark blood spurts out like a flower blossoming to the sun. I touch his neck, and the red petals smear my fingers. I smell that familiar perfume, of blood and terror and adrenaline, and my pulse races. Someone grabs me and pulls me away — a paramedic, perhaps. He yells at me in Polish and then pushes me away from the man, who is dead. I watch them carry him away. I wonder if he remembers the moment he died, or if it was just like falling asleep for him too. I feel alive again, my senses awake after being dormant so long. I remember what it's like to feel.

I have the whole train ride to Moscow to think about it. I try to get comfortable on the ratty fabric seats, but I can't. The train smells of urine and sweat, and the old lady across the aisle is staring at me. Every time I think of the dead man, I think of Antonio. I close my eyes and smell the mint on his breath, as he lay dying beside me. I hear his voice in my head: "Mine."

I slam my fist on the rickety chair. The old woman jumps, and pain shoots through my fist and my arm. The sharpness wakes me. I am no longer asleep. "No one owns me," I mutter to myself. I know what Antonio meant now. I know what he wanted to take from me. And he took it, before I realized he had.

In Moscow I fill my backpack with cash, buy a Russian dictionary, and head for the deadliest section of

town. I search carefully until I find the area I am looking for: an isolated alley, but one that a tourist or policeman might walk by the next day. It's behind a bar, which is convenient. I consult the dictionary. "Ubi menya," I mutter to myself until I have it memorized.

It's early night. The alley stinks with alcohol-drenched vomit. I watch patrons leave the bar, laughing and joking with each other. They pass the alley, but none turn down it. I choose my target. He's alone, and very drunk. I step out of the alley and beckon to him. He ignores me until I show him the backpack of cash. His jaw drops, and then he follows me into the alley.

I hold the backpack out to him with my right hand. He's a small man, with curly black hair and bad teeth. He reaches for the money, cautiously. I pull it back and offer the handle of my pocketknife with my left. The blade is already open and slicing into my hand. I can smell the blood.

"Kill me," I whisper.

He stares at me, and I realize I'm speaking English. "Ubi menya," I say commandingly. I push the knife towards him. He recoils. I draw the knife back, and offer the backpack again. He takes a step closer. "Ubi menya!" I say again. I hold the backpack behind me and offer him the knife.

He steps closer to me, and takes the knife. He looks at me, looks at the blood on the handle. I stare at him. He belches, and the smell of vodka is overpowering from this close. "Give me money," he says thickly, in English.

"Kill me first," I order.

He pushes me down and grabs the money. He looms over me with the knife, and I feel adrenaline surge through me. Fuck you, Antonio, you don't own me. I own myself. I hold my breath for the stabbing sensation I know to expect, the burning, the lava pouring through my veins. This time, I want to be awake and remember my death. I look up into my murderer's eyes. He raises the knife above me, and then throws it to the ground. He runs away with the backpack of money, leaving me alone with the knife.

I lie there for what seems like hours. My face is in an old paper wrapper, and my hands are in vomit. I watch a family of rats scurry into a building. Slowly I sit up, covered in filth and humiliated. Antonio is right — he has killed me. I am no longer Ada. I'm like paint that the wind blew off a house, like the fine dust that blows through the air and never settles. I am no longer connected with this world. I have forgotten everything. The day he took me with him is the day I died.

Angry and bitter, I pick up my knife and trace the edge lightly on my wrist. I could do it myself. I could slash the veins open and bleed to death, here in this filthy Moscow alley. It's tempting, to feel blood rush through me and out of me, to spill myself on this cement. But it's not the same. Not without the other. I throw the knife to the ground and close my eyes, remembering the way the Russian man had looked at me. I can't name the expression, though I've seen it before. It wasn't hatred, or anger, but something more complex.

I leave the alley and head for home. It is not until the flight over the Atlantic, in that moment where I'm half-asleep and dreaming, that I realize what that expression is. I am dreaming of Dr. Sorrington, as he tells me that I am making a mistake. He had the same look as the Russian man. I do know this expression, because I have worn it myself. It is fear. These people fear me because I do not fear them. I am a threat to all they stand for, their power-hungry minds, their precious control. Because when they kill me, I become more alive — while they themselves die every time they touch me.

I stare in wonder at the dark waters below me, and touch a hand to the smooth leather seat in front of me. If they fear me, I have power. And this is what Antonio took from me. "Tried to take from me," I

murmur, and my seatmate stares at me. I stare back. He shrinks into his newspaper.

When I get home, it's been nearly three months. I call the Institute. I ask for Dr. Sorrington. Before he can speak, I tell him, "I want my job back."

He pauses, and then says, "We'll be glad to have you back with us."

"I know," I say.