

Red Desert Blues, Part I

by TrebleCleffy

Author's Note

Well. For the first time, I wrote a contest piece that really was too long to finish by the due date. So, this story is Part I of a two part saga. You'll get the second and final part from me soon. Rest assured, I'm committed to finishing this tale. For now, Part I is designed to be as satisfying as possible, while leaving much of the story yet to be resolved. I also say this about every contest piece, but this is a hastily proofed draft that I intend one day to revise more rigorously.

This is a slow burn, expansion kink erotic sci-fi adventure romance with some western trappings. That's a mouthful, but it's all true. Before most of the erotic elements ramp up, there will be a lot of character development, plot and worldbuilding to set the stage. I hope you enjoy.

I couldn't have written this story on my own. A lot of conversations with very generous people helped make it happen. So, I'd like to thank those people in the rough chronological order of their contributions. Oct-Oppai did tons of brainstorming with me while I was trying to put the basic pieces of this story together. He also helped me design the major alien creatures and at least one side character. Blure spent a lot of time helping me work out some major details of the characters, romance, stakes and plot. On top of that, I owe her a tremendous debt for everything she did to develop the concept of sci-fi pheromones into something far more involved and unique for the story. I cannot understate how important this single element ended up being. Great thanks as well to CleavageRomeo for blazing through an extremely late proof of the story. I'm in awe of his speed, kindness and enthusiasm.

This story is not suitable for readers under 18.

Main Tags: *ass expansion, romance, nanotechnology, sci-fi, pheromones, cults, mind-altering, male/female romance, sapphic scenes*

Additional Tags (pertaining to side characters): *muscle girl, leg expansion, lip expansion, hourglass expansion, anthro, spanking*

I: Pequeña Rio

The one thing she needs is a rideshare companion with a thousand gold pesos. So, she sits in the El Ventana Transit station, huddled in her bloodjaw skin poncho and wide-brimmed sun hat and watches the incoming travelers from the windows that look out on the road. There has to be someone. The streetrafts stop along the curb, ramps materialize, and travelers march down to the sidewalk. They pass through the station doors, sometimes groups of two, three... Four would be best. A split like that would save her a decent chunk of the 463 gold pesos she has left. The extra money wouldn't hurt.

There! A pair of nuns. She leaps to her feet, tosses her rucksack over her shoulder and wheels her bag out of the waiting room.

"Hey! S'cuse me! You going west? Taking the coach? Y'know, I could, um, split the ride fare with you two. Save you some money."

They smile sympathetically. They're bound north.

She keeps an eye on the train schedule. No point bothering travelers who are obviously here to catch a train. For her, it's a coach or nothing. There's no direct train route to El Nuevo Corazon and the trip is too long for a single ticket. She'd be wiped out and stranded before she'd get there.

Rio can last five days. Any longer, and she won't make it by Opalsday. She tries not to think about what will happen if that's the case. There's a job waiting for her out there, in El Nuevo Corazon. If she's there by Opalsday, her friend Leafie can get her in to see Sal. Leafie has some clout at the Lolite, as much as a stripper ever gets, anyway. She can get Rio five minutes in front of that Honcho and that's all she needs. She'll show him she can dance. She's good. Pretty, too. The Laredan years have not worn her down. Not yet. And, she has a golden ticket. It's tucked in a tiny ziplock she keeps stapled to her underwear. In less days than she has fingers on one hand, she'll use that ticket—and then be beautiful. Sal will definitely hire her with that. She'd have used this ticket already, but it's bad timing. There's 4000 kilometers of Red Desert between here and El Nuevo, and she doesn't have a cooler to moderate the effects.

Get on her way to El Nuevo Corazon, use that golden ticket, impress the boss. Then, at last: a roof over her head, wages, a place to dance. Most importantly, she'll have freedom.

The station empties out with each train departure, then slowly fills up again. The vents above keep her cold, even with her poncho on. The cold makes her sleepy. Not good. She needs to be awake to catch a rideshare. But, there's not much to this waiting room besides the steelstring tunes drawling from the ceiling and a couple sunbaked hangings of black and white photos: a Laredan sunset and a herd of wild bloodjaws, one of whom bares its huge incisors

and curved tusks at the photographer, its wispy dark hair crazy against the sky. Rio had a friend who lost a leg to one of those things. Damned beast dragged the poor woman out to the horizon. Horrible day.

Rio propositions a team of nurses, a mother and daughter, a married couple. She almost speaks to a tall lady in a track suit, but the woman has a pointy eared dog on a leash, and Rio can't quite bring herself to break the ice. Some just aren't going her way. Others won't say why they don't want her on their ride. Maybe they just don't like her. Or, maybe they can guess what kind of dancing a girl like her does.

The Laredan sun sets, the windows cool against the desert night. The coach service turns off its lights. No luck today.

Rio returns to the hostel, spreads her bedroll out in the corner, and tries to get a few hours' sleep amidst the snores, whispers, and sobs from the women on the bunks. By sunup, she's back in the station. She washes herself in the bathroom sink, then takes her seat in the waiting room, nibbles a beanstick, and tries to keep her eyes open.

A man in a bowtie offers Rio a free ride, but Rio takes a good look at him. His body language is tight, over-rehearsed, uncommunicative. It's a facade. You can't get in a coach alone with people who move—and don't move—like that. Even a skinny girl like Rio needs to watch out.

It's Diamondsday today. Midweek, and a slower time for the station. The hours drag.

In the late afternoon, a thick, dreamy song with a burbling bass plays from the loudspeaker and she gets up and starts to dance. She's weak on hunger and stress so she keeps it simple: a little sway, a swing of the hips, a twirl here and there. An old man and a traveling school teacher pretend not to watch. For a minute or two, she feels okay.

Diamondsday comes to a close and she ambles off in the darkness of El Ventana. She briefly considers robbing a store. A thousand gold pesos: it's less even than what the miners make in a week, at least, the ones who don't have to travel. But, she has no weapon to coax money from the register and anyway, her stealing days were supposed to be over when she pilfered her golden ticket from her old friends, plus money, supplies and provisions.

There is, of course, another option. But, there's no one to look out for her here, and anyway, how many people would she have to meet in the shadows for a thousand gold pesos? For money—*good* money—maybe, she'd do it. But here, now, it would be an act of sheer desperation and she can't quite see the salvation of El Nuevo Corazon if she has to take that kind of risk.

A bar called The Stallion is still open this late. She orders an iceless glass of the cheapest spiced tequila they've got. It drains her of eight gold pesos and she almost chokes on it, the

taste is so raw, but she feels light and cozy after she downs it and decides it was worth the expense. Anything to get through this week.

Real reason she's here, though, is the Socie connection. The Stallion doesn't charge extra for sending messages, unlike every other establishment in this town, even the hostel. Rio draws out her scratched up, old pocket console and sends a message.

Rio: *What are the odds of Sal giving me the job if I don't make it before Opalsday?*

Leafie's response comes in quickly. She's a couple time zones behind, no doubt too early for her to get on stage. Rio can picture Leafie in the dressing room, donning makeup, notching her bodysuit straps against her huge tits.

Leafie: *There's a LOT of demand for a gig here. I swear, the job opening won't last a day.*

Rio: *I have a body mod though. Doesn't that help me out?*

Leafie: *You're not the only one, Rio. You need to get over here.*

Leafie: *I can get you in front of Sal before the job posts. After that, nothing I can do.*

Leafie: *Do you need money? Get a loan! I can help you settle it and handle the rest with you later.*

Rio shakes her head. Even if a lender in this town wants to cut Rio Quinton some slack, they will have to ask her for ID. As soon as they run it, Interpol gets a notice. They'll block any loan or digital transaction, arrest her and question her on a minimum of four incidents of highway robbery and/or carjacking. They'll make her give up names of old friends. Some aren't worth protecting, but plenty still are. Maybe if Rio had spent more time in the cities these past few years, she'd know whose door to knock on, who to cut a deal with. But, the city's underbelly is closed off behind the tenement fronts and factory walls and the eerie silence of its streets.

Rio responds:

Rio: *Don't worry about it. I got this.*

That night, a fight breaks out among two women on the other side of the bunk room. Someone calls the police and Rio spends hours fearing the officers will come around to her for questioning. One scan of her eyeball and they'd have Interpol's record. It doesn't happen. But, once the officers leave and quiet spreads through the hostel and Rio has peace enough to close her eyes and dream, she finds herself in *his* arms.

Axon's. He holds her like a precious thing and the inky black pools of his eyes swallow her. There is fear. There is always fear. But in Axon's arms, fear is forever delayed and forever on its way. Only desires live in the here and now. She watches herself like a disembodied spirit as she

undoes a button in the middle of his shirt and slips her hand inside. She runs her hand against the protrusion of his ribs. She's already sopping wet. He leans in. She tries to kiss him but he licks the salty perspiration from her lips as she feels the muscles in his back. Of course she could never escape him for good. Not Axon...

Somewhere not far away, a dog barks. She gasps, suddenly awake, her bedroll damp with sweat, the tingles of an orgasm still flitting down her legs. Alone. Rio weeps—for her freedom or her solitude, she couldn't say.

The next day is Pearlsday. Rio feels barely alive when she gets to the station. She wonders if she has the strength to proposition anyone today. If she's still here tomorrow, the job is good as gone. Her money won't last long either. Nowhere to go, but...back.

An hour goes by. Rio drifts. Then, she jolts awake just as a pounding, obnoxiously rowdy steelstring tune ends.

She looks around and wonders if she missed her big chance. It's too easy to picture that perfect party, the ones going her way, the ones who would have gladly taken Rio's money and shoved off with her on a coach, missed and gone forever thanks to a nap.

But, she looks out the window and sees someone. The low sun flickers as he cuts into its ray. He has faint, wispy, stubble, wears sunglasses, olive green boonie hat, brown button up with a paisley design. In one hand, he carries a satchel. The other hand drags a large suitcase. He's neither tall nor short. He's not here to take the train. Train riders have that rushed gait. This man is cautious, uneasy. He wants to be left alone.

And Rio probably should do that—leave him alone. A single male passenger is a bad choice for a coach companion, for a lot of reasons. And anyway, Rio doesn't have enough gold pesos to split a ride in half. She'd need at least two companions to make her share close to equal.

But, there she goes, rucksack slung, bag in tow, because why not? Even small odds sometimes even out. She pauses momentarily and pulls off her sunhat. The hat bops against her shoulderblades from its drawstring as she strides out onto the station platform.

The man looks around. He gives the impression he's never been here before. Rio approaches.

"Excuse me, sir?"

He shoots Rio a startled look, then tries to compose himself. "Uh...me?"

Rio opens her mouth to speak and makes a loud huff. She tries to remember her line. "Uh! So, um..."

He squints at her through his sunglasses. The sunlight catches the side of his face. The white of his eye gleams like a pearl.

Rio swallows. "I-I need a coach ride. I mean, I need someone to split the cost and go with me. I'm going west, and..." She laughs nervously.

The man clears his throat. There's something very un-Laredan about him, a delicateness this planet tends to grind out of people. "West? How far?" His voice is thin and wavering.

"El Nuevo Corazon."

"El Nuevo? By coach?"

She nods. "Um...I-I can cover a third of the trip. It's all the money I have. About 450 pesos. Cash."

He looks down at the floor of painted sandstone. He's thinking. Then, he shrugs. "I was going to pay for the whole trip myself. If you want to help me out, well..." Her heart swells as he gives her a little smile.

"Oh my god, thank you thank you thank you!" Her bag drops to the floor as she scurries up, throws her arms around him. This man is okay. He won't do anything to harm her. And even if he does, a simple human man of this stature is no great threat.

"Ah! Y-yeah, sure. G-glad to help!" He laughs uneasily, his hands still tethered to his satchel and suitcase.

She lets him go, smiles. "Sorry, I'm just—I-I *need* this trip. You have no idea. Um...I'm Rio, by the way."

He takes off the sunglasses. His eyes shine like amber. Short bangs poke out from under his hat. "J.R."

"J.R.? Just those letters?"

"Just J.R."

She nods. "Okay."

He points over his shoulder at the coach kiosk. "But, uh...I wanna go now. I'm kind of in a hurry."

"Oh, me too! Me too! Let's go."

* * *

J.R. too, is carrying cash. Once they settle up for the ride at the kiosk, and again with each other, a transit specialist unit detaches from the wall, approaches on belted wheels, looks up at them with a face that resembles a pair of binoculars bolted to the hull of a toy steamship and chirps "your coach will depart on the 10:20 train. Please follow me."

They follow past the station's overhanging ceiling out onto the white concrete and reflected steel of the platform. Cranes look down on them from above. The sun cooks their backs. The bot's chrome body blazes in the overwhelming light as it cheeps on. "We urge you to rely on your Laredan Transit Coach's auto-driver for the duration of your journey. Your auto-driver has maximum visibility into present road conditions, traffic, weather and wildlife circumstances as well as possible incidents of civil unrest that could postpone your travel time. Keep in mind, your auto-driver is the only agent permitted to make full use of your LTC's terrain speed. Human operators are restricted to a maximum of 130 kilometers per hour...."

The transit platform is broken up into strips by the train tracks, but two of the aisles look down into a cavernous garage, bounded by railing. The transit unit stops by the edge and chatters on as a metallic clunk and a grating whir seeps out from the depths below. "In the unlikely event your coach finds itself in a state of irreconcilable complexity, operational responsibilities will be relinquished to your designated driver until the situation is resolved. Since only one of you opted to show us identification"—referring to J.R.—"that same person will be the sole individual authorized to maneuver the vehicle. Except in extreme circumstances, unauthorized operation of the LTC is prohibited by law, and..."

From below, first comes an antennae, a large, many-branched thing aimed at the sky. Then the blocky edge of a vehicle frame rises into view. Then comes the body of the coach with dual thrusters jutting out at its end. Finally, the shocks and massive bulky tires, each half a man's height, appear and the elevated grating the vehicle stands on comes level to the platform with a lurching *thunk*. Rio and J.R. bear another forty seconds of legal terms from the transit unit, then it finally concludes with a cheery, "we thank you for choosing Laredan Transit. We wish you a safe and pleasant journey! Please stand by while we prepare your coach for boarding." The bot rotates its upper body a full 180° and its now-forward-facing belted wheels carry it across a two-step causeway to the coach. The unit's neck extends to a little black lens where a laser lock reads the barcode in its eye. The coach hums to life. The transit specialist rolls back to the platform, pulls something from a slot in its body, and hands it to J.R. It is a pair of keycards, which lock and unlock the coach. The specialist departs as the pod door, a half-story

up, swings open of its own accord and a nanite ramp materializes from its bottom edge and extends to the platform where J.R. and Rio stand.

J.R. takes a step back, affixes Rio with a polite gaze and gestures to the bridge. "After you."

They scale the ramp, bags in tow and pass through the door into a spacious and clean-scented interior with upholstered benches facing each other, two feet apart. Each bench is broken down the center into halves to make room for an aisle that crosses the coach, back-to-front. At the back of the pod is the hold where Rio and J.R. tether their bags against the walls with straps. At the front is the cockpit, sealed off by a small door. Each bench would hold three people on either side with plenty of room to spare, or even allow a single passenger to stretch out on her back, which Rio plans to do.

They take their seats across from one another, J.R. facing forward, Rio backwards. There's a ding and an automated announcement overhead reports that the auto-drive and station ops will deliver them to their designated train and the cockpit will remain locked until noon when the train reaches the wildlife preserve station. At last, the coach turns off onto the aisle and rolls up the platform. Rio watches as the train cars and the outer walls of the station beyond, its lights and occasional windows, flit by under the bright, indigo sky. Wisps of cloud blanket together in conspiracy to blot out the sun, but the sun doesn't seem to care, and shines on.

Finally, the coach rolls into place and a crane extends a magnetized grabber arm. Rio feels the ground fall away below them as the coach is hoisted up. She looks out the window and gets a final glimpse of the dusty streets of El Ventana beyond the station. The biggest city on this whole backwoods planet. And, that's not saying much. Who knows when she'll see it again, or if. They are plopped onto an open car of their train and a set of huge locks clank the coach into place. The automated announcement informs them that the train is scheduled to set out on time and to please stand by and observe the "fasten safety belt" sign.

Rio yawns.

J.R. beholds her, sympathetically. "Tired?"

She nods, pulls her hat string off her neck and tosses the hat to the far end of the bench. She unbuttons the top two joins of her poncho from the collar and pulls it over her head. Beneath, she wears a beige, ribbed, sleeveless crop top and a pair of very short shorts. She eases off her coffee brown boots and removes her alpaca wool socks with her toes, then notices J.R. shifting in his seat. He's trying to look out the windows. Is he uncomfortable seeing so much of her skin? She remembers her own first days out on the prairies of Lesser Laredo. (How many years ago was it, now?) So many men and women, topless. Sometimes bunches of them would be full-on naked in the evenings when there was shade from the falling sun. It was the first thing about life on Earth she let go of: the idea that your skin is a private thing. It seems

prudish now. She wonders how much time this man has spent locked up in the cities that he can afford to trouble himself over a skinny woman's belly and legs.

Rio hums a little tune as she spreads her poncho wide. Its tassels have gotten frayed, but the white, brown and brocaded bars of the body still hold luster. She was careful to wash it as often as she could. The material squishes between her thumbs and fingers, as bloodjaw hide does. She folds the poncho from a half circle to a quarter circle, folds the tip in, and then the wings. Bunched together like this, it's nearly as thick as her pinky is long. She sets it down on one end of the bench.

"Think'm gonna sleep through the train ride." She winks at him. "You won't try and take advantage of me, will you? I'm tired and m'not up for that sort of thing right now."

He squints at her, then recoils. "Uh! I-I had no intention..."

She laughs. This guy must've spent his life under a rock. It's just a courtesy to let people know when you're not available... But, Rio stops laughing when she remembers where she comes from. "Anyway, you're fine," she murmurs, and drops her head down on her pillowed poncho.

There's a slight lurch. Friction gives. The overhead speaker says such and such about the time of departure and the final destination. Her eyes slowly part and she catches a field of scattered, white trailer homes whizzing by. Through the tinted windows, the sun warms her skin and she feels delivered at last into the embrace of freedom, of sorts. Surely, this is the end of all real problems. The Red Desert that was her purgatory for so long now shoots past her at 600 kilometers an hour, as if it has already forgotten her and must attend to other miscreants. She falls back into cozy sleep.

* * *

The pressure in her ears awakens her; she tenses her jaw and they pop. She looks up. The floor is at a tilt. J.R. stands over by the coach windows. He steadies himself with the overhead bar and looks out on the peaks of the canyon mountains as they zip by. They must be high up now.

Something is on top of her. She lifts it and realizes it's a tweed blazer. A man's. Rio clears her throat. "I wasn't cold."

J.R. looks over his shoulder. His hat is off. His hair is dark, shapely. It breaks into unruly waves that almost curl. It's trimmed down on the sides and back, but full and buoyant on top. He

looks at her almost apologetically. "Sorry," he says. "The A/C was blasting us pretty hard. I notched it down. Uh...you had goosebumps."

"Oh," she hesitates. "Thanks."

He shrugs and takes his seat across from her. "Won't be long before we hit the wildlife preserve."

She nods absently. She's now upright in her seat, examining the tweed blazer. It's been ages since she's seen one. Up close, the weave is made up of greens, blues and tans, but from a distance it looks gray. It's a Laredan design, not an import. He clearly has money, but he's not a big man. If he were a Corpo or a Honcho, he wouldn't be anywhere near a coach. He'd be in one of those luxury sports wagons with a security entourage. She lifts the collar to her nose and sniffs underneath and sighs. It's been a long time since she's taken in human scent this clean and unobtrusive. Out in the desert, with the others, human scent was abundant. Thick, tangy, some acrid, others intoxicating. And then, there were the *special* smells. The ones that only came out at night or early in the morning—the smells that were impossible to resist...

J.R. is watching. He tries to not make it look obvious, but it is. Rio tries to remember, was there a time when someone smelling her jacket would have made her uneasy? Yes, though it seems a lifetime ago. "I just like the fabric," she says, and tosses the blazer back into J.R.'s surprised arms.

Rio sits up, stretches, rolls her head around and smiles at J.R. He smiles politely back. She looks around the pod. The canyon peaks whoosh by, streaks of red against a pale lavender backdrop. "Anyway," she declares loudly, hopefully loud enough to rinse out the discomfort in the pod after the blazer stuff. She scoots another inch toward J.R. "I'm bored. How about you tell me something about yourself and I'll tell you something about me? Something true."

"Something true," J.R. repeats.

"Not your life story. Just *something*. I'm..." She hesitates, then persists: "I want some *truth*, okay? I've been in EI V for three weeks and all I've had is small talk. Just...gimme something, okay? Please?"

"Ahh. Well..." J.R. ponders.

"Look, I'll start us off, okay? I'm a dancer. Or, uh...I'm going to be."

"A dancer."

"I'm good at it. I could show you."

"Like, what kind of dancing?"

She hesitates. She'd better back off from this topic. "Fun dancing," she says sharply. "Your turn."

"My?—uh, okay, well." He swallows. "How's this: I'm in love."

Rio squints at him. Her brain has to work to access the phrase, *in love*. Not that Rio is unfamiliar with love. The family used the word all the time. "Love tonight, love tomorrow, love forever." That used to be their mantra. But, *in love*: the state of being enraptured with one unique person. Before she got to Laredo, Rio might have found the expression a bit trite, even silly. Now, it glimmers with a weird garishness. *In love*. "With who?"

And now, J.R.'s eyes go glassy. He falls lightly back on his bench like a daffodil finding stillness in the wind. "Her name is Jolene."

"Have you...uh, known her long?"

"Only a few weeks. But it feels like it's been ages already. In the best way."

Rio's mouth opens and closes. She doesn't know how to navigate this subject. By the airy look in J.R.'s eye, he hides nothing. "But...but..." She swallows. "H-how does anyone fall *in love* on Lesser Laredo? I mean, this planet's...it's...it's not exactly a place where dreams come true. Y'know?"

J.R. smiles. "Oh, I know it. But it's real. I'm going to spend the rest of my life with her."

"And, that's why you're going to El Nuevo? To see her?"

He nods.

A twinge of irritation strikes Rio. *In love*. Apparently, there are still people in this world who think their feelings for one another amount to some kind of exclusivity. But, maybe it's just her. It used to be that Rio had unfettered access to most full grown men in the Family (not to speak of the women—oh, the women!). That there is a man who...who *belongs* to someone else, a man she definitively can't have. It's not that she *wants* J.R., per se. But, to no longer have such a privilege...

And through all this, a sensible voice inside Rio tells her she'd better not show J.R. her dancing, after all. It wouldn't be a nice thing to do. She was capable of being happy for every member of the Family. Surely, she can be happy for this lovestruck boy. "Sounds wonderful," she says, flatly.

"Thank you. I have a capture of her, if you'd like to see."

"Sure."

J.R. produces a jet black pocket console from a pocket. "Show capture, index 5044." Good god, he remembers the *index number* of the picture. He really must be in love. He passes the console to Rio. On the screen is a blonde. Crystal blue eyes, a peach-colored flower in her hair, sun on her face, bordered by imported palm trees and bright violet Laredan sky. She smiles without smiling. Her relaxed eyes have that giddiness the mouth doesn't quite corroborate. Rio zooms in. There are flecks of silver in the eyes. Her pale skin is flawless. Rio rotates to a profile view where the palm fronds take up the background. Still gorgeous. Her head shape is even, exacting. Rio lowers the angle. This woman is *just* plump enough to pass the Laredan beauty bar. She lacks the decadent waist rolls that rich girls truck around. Rio rotates the POV behind the woman. The bun that ties her hair is expert work, obviously expensive. Rio hits the return button and resumes the front-facing angle. Even in a 360° capture, which leaves so little to the imagination, there's a touch of mystery to her, between the sunlight and the bar of shade that darkens the side of her face.

"Gorgeous," she says flatly, and gives him back his console. "So, um, why are you here and she's there?"

"Huh?"

"You two are in love. Why aren't you with her now? What's the holdup?"

"Oh, well, I..." he trails off. For a second, he looks strangely unsure of himself. "I-I had something I had to...I-I had *business* to settle in El Ventana." He puts a bit too much emphasis on the word *business*. There's a note of defensiveness there and Rio wonders if he's suddenly being a bit less truthful. "I just needed to get...um, something from El V., and then... He cuts off mid sentence. His gaze falls to the floor. Rio wonders if he's fallen asleep. He seems strangely vacant. She waves. His eyes are still open, but he doesn't respond.

What a strange man.

* * *

Half a minute passes and J.R. comes to and busies himself on his console, apparently untroubled by the conversation he phased out of. The train shoots down a canyon. Variegated rock zips by the windows: grays, purples, yellows, reds all encroaching on each other. Then, the mountains fall away to flatter vistas of hard ground, cracked open by weed tufts and spike lilies. Dark wine petals drink in the high noon sun. The clouds are gum pink and bilious in the lavender sky.

Soon, the ground is softer, craggier. Zigzaggy trunks lift spiny bulbs in the air. Weave shrubs braid thick, brown pipes into flame shapes. At first, the desert vegetation is occasional, but it grows thicker. Soon, the ground is all but hidden by bunches of tall, purple reeds and knobby brown shrubs with tubed appendages. Shacks, monitor stations and dish satellites come into view. Then comes the tarmac and railings that signal their arrival in the wildlife preserve.

J.R. and Rio wait as the passengers spill out onto the platform. Then, the coach crane lifts them over the station roof, its shingles glittering in the sun. The overhead speaker bings breathlessly with announcements as they are lifted high in the air, then lowered and set on the paved road that connects to the westward highway. The overhead voice changes to a thinner, more roboticized chirp.

"This is your auto-driver speaking. Our arrival at El Nuevo Corazon is expected on time in eighteen hours and eleven minutes. Please observe the fasten safety belt sign as we approach the highway and accelerate to cross-country speed."

The thrusters hum to life. The coach rolls out onto the highway. It picks up speed, faster, faster. There's a crackling as the thrusters heat up. At last, the coach zooms ahead. The ride is a touch bumpier than the train but, no longer at train speed, it's easier to pick out details in the rushing landscape outside the windows. The rock and sand, already dark orange, quickly deepens to a mottled crimson as they shoot deeper into the heart of the Red Desert.

For Rio, it's like seeing her old home one last time. It won't be the same after this. The rocks, bushes, plateaus, the shaded cliffsides she camped under, the buried reservoirs of fresh water that kept her alive, the ditches she occupied with family in wait for an approaching caravan... In time, these landforms that were like rooms and furniture to her will fade into wooly memory. Tears build in her eyelids. She keeps them back.

The coach coasts up the highway. The speaker bings again and, near their heads, slats open up on either wall of the pod, exposing spigots and a dispenser of plastic cups. The auto-driver reminds them to hydrate. "Yeah yeah, I know," Rio grumbles. She wonders if she's ready for, perhaps, a lifetime of *this*. Of machines chirping at her to sustain herself like a fussy parent. She escaped it once.

J.R. fills a cup. Rio has a skin pouch in an inner pocket of her poncho which she replenishes. The trip up the highway grows more scenic as the vegetation recedes and the land begins to pop up in striated rock columns. The fasten seatbelt sign stays on and will remain so for as long as they are on the road, but on an automated coach with all the conveniences of satellite data, even a sudden jamming of the brakes is extremely unlikely. Every road condition for half a mile north and south is visible, its effects foreseeable. So, they unbuckle the belts, stretch their legs, and peer out the windows at the stepped peaks and the canyons below.

An hour goes by. Another. The shadows slant in the opposite direction of the coach's trajectory. In the backside wall of the pod is a refreshment vendor that takes six gold pesos and dispenses salted flax grainmeal into the plastic cups. Rio, believing herself only mildly hungry, gobbles a cup down in two minutes. She misses the melon stews, the blackened tuskmole meat, and the frijole pastas that went around during the family's better times. The bland, factory-churned slop that keeps nearly the entire incorporated Laredan population from starving would forever be a disappointment for Rio after *that*. But, food is food and Rio is, apparently, famished. She wonders if her appetite will change once she's no longer scrawny, but big and voluptuous. Leafie did say, Sal takes good care of his girls.

J.R. is hunched over his console. He has that look again, the languid recline of his body, the distant gaze whenever he takes his eyes off that little screen. He must be talking to his *Jolene*. Rio tries not to look at him, tries not to think about that photo. That Jolene woman looked so primped, so groomed and practiced. The photo had to be touched up, at least a bit. Even if it wasn't, she wouldn't look quite so appealing without the makeup and obviously pre-planned lighting. Still *nice*, but not ethereal. This planet doesn't make 'em like that. Newcomers find out quickly.

The stepped peaks smooth out into dusty foothills, scattered with black fronds, as the sun sinks lower and the first traces of evening glimmer, red against the now-visible distant mountains. At about this time, a strange though familiar sensation hits Rio. It starts as a sort of psychic tickle, as if someone whispered a silly something into her ear. Five minutes longer, and a haze begins to cloud her mind. It's cozy and warm, though hardly reassuring. She knows this feeling. There is a presence in the coach. It's like someone—friend? enemy?—might be standing right next to her...

"Do you...feel something?" she mutters.

"Hm?" J.R. looks up from his console.

Rio shakes her head. "Nothing." But, her breath comes out rushed. Her heartbeat is quick. When did that start happening? Rio isn't sure. Though there is no reason for the coach to stop anytime soon, Rio anticipates a moment of contact. With...? She's not sure. Too many names she could name. Why is she scared? Why is she also...eager, somehow?

Rio looks over at J.R., still occupied by his console. He shifts uneasily. There's a hint of perspiration at his forehead where the hair parts and the light catches it. It's not just her. Maybe he doesn't know, but he's feeling it too.

There's a thick, blunt snap from above. It echoes down the metallic shell of the pod. Rio and J.R. look up. Something darkens the skylight above, then disappears.

J.R. pockets his console. "Did something hit us? I saw something go by up th—" He's cut off as friction seizes the vehicle.

Neither of them are in seatbelts. Rio is tossed off her bench. She tumbles forward across the pod and slams into J.R., who takes her with a belted "oof." Her knee takes the edge of the bench. It hurts, despite the upholstery cushioning her impact. The coach is slowing down quickly and Rio has nothing to grab onto except J.R. so she braces against his shoulder and tries to steady herself with her bare foot against the floor. J.R. clings to the right strap of her sleeveless crop top. They groan as the coach decelerates and presses both of them into the seat, and into each other. J.R. flushes.

The speaker is talking but it's no longer the auto-driver. It's a wooden female with weak intonation. "Warning. Satellite reception lost. Please stand by as we disable your auto-driver and commence emergency parking. We ask that you remain seated and observe the fasten seatbelt sign as we bring the vehicle to a complete stop."

The coach slows, slows, slows. It pulls over and stops.

"Y-you alright?" J.R. tries to say through winded lungs.

"Nnnmmnng," Rio whines. She attempts to rise but her foot slips and she lands face first into J.R.'s chest. J.R. groans.

Rio pulls herself up on unsteady legs which send her back into her bench. They both sit there, trying to catch their breath.

"Satellite input lost," says the speaker. "Auto-drive disabled. Are any passengers hurt?"

J.R. huffs. "Yeah, what do you think?" he snarls at the ceiling.

"We apologize. We will send an emergency radio distress signal for help and attend to—"

Rio waves her hand. "I'm okay! I'm okay!"

J.R. clutches his torso, grits his teeth. "Ugh. I'm not."

"Do you need a doctor?" says Rio. "Cuz, you just told them to call one."

"What?"

Speaker lady belts out: "Sending distress signal n—"

"Wh—no, no I'm fine! ...Hello? I don't need an ambulance? Okay? Stop...stop sending the distress signal."

"Understood. Distress notice canceled. Please notify us if any emergency services are required at a future time."

J.R. staggers to his feet. He looks around. "What just happened?"

"Please understand, your LTC vehicle will remain parked until your designated driver is ready to—."

"Okay," shouts J.R. "Thank you. Thank you. I didn't ask you."

"Please understand, your LTC vehicle will—"

"Shut up!" Rio cries at the ceiling. A few quiet seconds go by before J.R. and Rio are sure they are left alone.

"Something hit us," says Rio.

"I-I think I know what I saw go by up there," says J.R., pointing at the skylight. "It was the antenna. Something snapped it and it slid off the roof. We can't get any satellite data now, so the auto-drive can't see our path from above."

Rio nods vigorously. She wants to say something but words are difficult to assemble because the haze, the cozy warmth, the dreadful feeling of familiarity, all are stronger than ever now...

"Well...guess I'll take the driver's seat," says J.R. He steps into the small corridor that leads to the cockpit.

"W-wait," says Rio. "Wait for me." She has a very bad feeling.

The cockpit is not much different from the front seat region of any manually operable car. There's a driver's seat, a passenger's seat, a console displaying the state of the vehicle (parked), a profile image of the car with its one damaged part (proving J.R.'s theory, the antennae is lit red), current kilometers per hour (zero), outside temperature (31.1°C), inside temperature (22.3°C), humidity (12%) and so on. They've been pulled over next to a small cliffside along the road on their right and a rocky foothill to the left. The sun is fiery crimson and low on the horizon, casting the sky in blinding violets that fade into bruised purples. The tinted windows don't quite cancel out the glare.

J.R. is already in the driver's seat, notching his sunglasses over his eyes. Rio, shading her hand against the sun, takes shotgun. Then, she peeks beneath the visor of her hand and sees people. They have bikes but they're not driving them. Some ten meters away, the bikes are chained together, three or four rows of them across the highway in alternating directions. It's a blockade. She looks over to the foothills to the left. Figures are stepping down it.

And, Rio knows these people. She knows them as well as she has ever known anyone. She doesn't know how, but they've found her.

J.R. throws his hands in the air. "What's going on? What're these—"

"We're in trouble," says Rio. And that's when Rio remembers. How could she have forgotten: her golden ticket. That's what they're here for. There is no more time. She has to take it now. It's dangerous to do it here, but if she doesn't take it, they'll take it from her. She needs this job and for that, she needs her golden ticket.

"What're you talking about?" says a frightened J.R.

Rio does not reply. She yanks down the waist of her shorts and finds the tiny ziplock, stapled to the band of her underwear. She tears it off. Inside is an amber colored pill. And inside the pill: a dark chip, ribbed and nobby in an even pattern. Her trembling fingers press the tiny, ripped bag into a little cup shape. She lifts it to her lips and tosses her head back. The pill hits the back of her tongue. She swallows. Her parched throat barely gets it down. It hurts along the way. She pounds her sternum with her fist.

"Did-did you just drink someth—?"

He's interrupted by the triple bang of a hand against the driver side door. He jumps in his seat.

II: Afortunada Rio

They wear bloodjaw ponchos, rawhide jerkins, camo pants, fleece collar jackets, frayed crop tops, canvas cloaks, paint-splattered track pants, studded gauntlets, biker helmets with spray-painted smiles, sombreros, pilot goggles, broken gas respirators. A handful, men and women, are topless and the low sun glimmers against their sweaty shoulders. They brandish guns, knives, spiked bats, crowbars, chains, whips, machetes.

The coach sags on its shocks as boots and hands lift bodies up the tires, the hood, the steel bars on either side of the doors. One by one, heads appear in each window, darkening the cockpit. Faces leer, blunt fingers tap the glass. Cruel laughter erupts around them. One big bald man in a jerkin sinks his body obscenely against the left side of the hood, presses his forehead against the windshield, stares straight at J.R. and licks the glass, his large tongue smearing the dusty grime.

Three faces take special notice of Rio. One of them, a woman with a canvas and chainmail cloak, waves eagerly like she's at an amusement park and spotted an old friend. Her name is Rhonda, and Rio had a couple sweet nights with her. The others, two men, make kissy faces, one of them tapping the glass with the nose of a revolver.

Rio knows it's a show. Intimidation is half a bandit's job. But, by the sickly pallor on his face, the act is working on J.R. Rio puts her hand on his shoulder. "They're not gonna kill us. Just cooperate with them. Let me talk."

"D-do you know these people?"

Rio doesn't quite answer. The warm haze, the feeling of a special presence, is thickening. Her pussy is getting moist. Not so long ago, her life was such that she felt like this all the time. She lifts up in her seat and tries to peer over the heads. She's looking for somebody. It's one of at least four people.

A loud, raspy female voice fills the air. All the heads stop, turn. "Alright boys and girls, lay off a sec. Let's have a look at 'er." Rio follows their gaze and catches the bob of a flat top black leather cap with a short brim and a pair of circular, wire-rimmed sunglasses approaching from the left. Dead center on her hat is a cross stitch of a dog skull in profile, bordered by curved columns of flame with the family's name, *Xolot*, written beneath in bone white letters.

It's Jetta Kyrie, Xolot Family Lugar. The revelers at the driver side door get off and make room. As Jetta nears the coach, her height is more apparent. Though the cockpit is high above the ground on massive wheels and a steel frame, the top of her cap is visible. A heavy boot weighs down on the coach and the sly face of Jetta peers into the cockpit. She makes eye contact with Rio. Her brow flexes into an all-knowing smirk. She drops below the window, yells

something and the revelers start to peel off. Rio follows the top of Jetta's cap as she circles the vehicle and climbs back up on Rio's side.

Rio notches a switch on the door and lowers the window.

"Woah, hey! What're you—" says J.R. But Jetta's white-toothed grin stops him short. She lays her forearms on the window frame. They bulge with muscle and vein. Her thick fingers poke out of workout gloves on either hand. There's an ominous pause and she makes intensive eye contact with Rio. Finally, she says, "gotcha."

Rio sucks in a breath. Her mind is cluttered. Her pussy pulses. It aches. Most of the family isn't here. Some part of Rio is disappointed, even a bit dismayed to see only perhaps a fifth of them. Don't they care about her?

"We...should talk," mutters Rio.

A bicep the size of an acorn squash comes into view as Jetta extends her arm through the window and strokes the side of Rio's head. "Oh, we *will* talk. But," and now she points past Rio to J.R., "who's the pretty boy?"

"I'm J—"

"He's not part of this. We're just in the same car together."

Jetta's face contorts with skepticism. She's not buying the truth. "Anyway Cupcake," says Jetta, "this is gonna go like every raid ever does. No special treatment. You let us into the pod, or we let ourselves in." Jetta starts to climb off the coach, then she hesitates and pops her head in once more. "Oh, and your little gingerbread boy here? He gets out. You stay in for now, and we'll have that talk."

"Jetta, this doesn't have anything to do with him."

Jetta smiles. "Good. Let's see if he acts like it."

Jetta drops out of view. A weighted silence falls on Rio and J.R. "You should get out," says Rio. "Keep your hands visible. Don't talk back to anyone, don't take them seriously. It'll be okay."

J.R.'s body shrinks in. "Are you fucking *sure* about that?"

"This is about me. Not you."

He puts his hand on the door handle.

"Ah, one thing."

J.R. turns back to Rio.

"Leave the console in the dash. They don't have a reason to steal it. It's too much trouble to break into those things. But, it's better we don't give them a reason to think you're gonna call Interpol, or something."

Reluctantly, J.R. drops opens the glove compartment, tosses the console in. Then he opens the door and climbs out showing his hands where he can. There's a bit of hooting and giggling from the crowd outside.

Rio makes her way into the pod. She takes the handle of the pod door, the one facing the foothills and throws it open. The ragged, warm air of the desert blasts in.

The first to climb in are Zig and Chance. They're twins, both armed and topless with baggy camo pants and crew cuts. Zig wears black and white target pasties on her nipples. Chance wears X'd tape over his. Both have that tight, lean muscle on their tan bodies. They have matching glocks, both aimed at Rio.

"Hi," says Rio.

"Long time no see," says Chance.

"Yeah, what the fuck, Rio" says Zig.

"Didn't fix you for a deserter," says Chance.

"It's nothing personal," says Rio.

"Idiot," says Zig. "You're with the Family. Everything's personal."

"Including that mod you stole," says Chance.

Rio is relieved for the interruption when Jetta's broad shoulders darken the pod hatch. Jetta is the only person she needs to talk to.

Rio's breath catches in her lungs as Jetta's full figure enters the pod. Her arms look even bigger from a distance, biceps the size of her own head. Her full boobs are hugged in by a skintight, black crop top which bears long rows of abs and frames her deep chest. But, the legs steal the show. Held fast in mid-thigh length exercise shorts, Jetta's legs are hard with rippling muscle, accented with bulging, thick veins. Half her body is just legs. At the moment, she must be well over two meters. She steadies herself with a hand against the ceiling. She can't quite rise to full height in the pod. Not at this time. Rio wonders how many days it took for Jetta's mod to make her this huge.

Beneath Jetta's collar are symmetrical tattoos, lighting bolts, just beneath her collar bones. She's also got the Xolot dog skull on her left shoulder and a bunched up snake on her belly that reminds one of small intestines. But the real show is on Jetta's back, on which is tattooed

a map of the entire Red Desert. Certain points on the map are starred, but Jetta has never shared what personal association the stars designate. They don't correspond to landmarks Rio is aware of. Jetta wears two belts. One bears four pouches, the other bears the holster for her gun, which Rio has never seen Jetta use. She has never had to, with that mod of hers.

Jetta's large, black boots make a funny sound against the floor, like a rubber zipper trying to zip. She drops to a squat in front of Rio, looks over at Zig and Chance and hooks an arm in the direction of the small corridor that leads to the hold. "Check the bags. You know the drill. I don't give a shit about socks and underwear. Look for the stuff that matters."

"You sure you don't need help with—" Zig tries.

"Did I fucking say so, Zig? Get your ass back there. And, once you're done, look everywhere else."

Zig and Chance holster their glocks and disappear into the hold.

Jetta shakes her head slowly at Rio, her mouth a tight smile. Outside, Rio can hear members of the family teasing J.R. *Tell me somethin' sugar buttons, how many times a day you gotta munch Rio's pussy?*—that sort of thing. After a long, uncomfortable pause, Jetta slips off her sunglasses, folds them and slips them into the drooping collar of her sleeveless top. On her huge, squatted legs, she inches closer to Rio. Folded up like this, she's easily still taller than Rio. Jetta reaches out and touches Rio's cheek. "Where is it, cupcake?"

"I sold it," says Rio.

Jetta pats her cheek, then leans in closer. "No, you didn't, hun." Her voice is crisp, even.

"You can search my bags. It's not there."

Jetta drops her knees to the floor and unfolds, rising tall above Rio. She's still holding Rio's head gently in her hands. She could snap Rio's neck if she wanted. But, she wouldn't, thinks Rio. Not Jetta. Beneath all that muscle and height and tough talk, she doesn't have it in herself to kill Rio. Rio hopes she's right.

Chance's voice pours out into the pod. "Hey, Jetta? You oughta take a look at—"

"Not one fucking word, Chance," yells Jetta. "Until I say otherwise, you little shits are eyes, not mouths." She glares at the corridor, then returns to Rio. "Cupcake." She leans in. Her face is barely an inch from Rio's. "You swallowed it. That's what happened."

Rio looks into Jetta's green-flecked brown eyes and says nothing. Jetta brings her lips to Rio's ear and whispers. "Take these fucking clothes off, whore." Rio claws off her crop top, drops her shorts, wriggles out of her panties. She stands naked before mountainous Jetta.

Jetta paws through Rio's discarded clothes. It takes very little time before she finds the shred of ziplock, stapled to her underwear. "Uh huh. I thought so." She takes Rio by the arm and drags her to the corner where a shaft of late afternoon sun peeks through the open door. Jetta sits on the bench and drops Rio into her lap like a misbehaving toddler. Jetta's grip hurts and Rio struggles. She twists Rio so her legs dangle off her thigh, then binds Rio's wrists behind her back with one hand and with that same arm, hugs Rio against her torso.

"Ugh! You're hurting me," cries Rio.

"Shut up." Jetta's free hand fumbles in the pouches that hang from her belt. She draws something out and holds it in the air. Rio squints at it. It's a small magnifying glass. Simple, old-fashioned design, been around for centuries. Jetta lowers the glass into the sun's ray and angles it. A cruel blast of light flashes briefly into Rio's right eye. "Ah!" She tightens it closed.

"Hold still," Jetta snarls. "One way or another, this isn't gonna take long."

A few seconds and Rio feels the glass's concentrated ray against her left tit. She does as told—holds still, lest Jetta aim for her eye on purpose next. Rio breathes sharply through her nose, clamping her mouth shut. Her pussy is pulsing harder than ever. Jetta has held Rio on her lap many times before, often to plant kisses on her face. Rio could not have imagined something like this, bound and burned, would ever come to pass between them.

As she awaits the roasting pain on her chest, Rio hears Zig and Chance's footsteps. They enter the pod and start opening hatches on the walls. They're still searching, but there's nothing to find. Except...what was Chance talking about a minute ago when he said there was something Jetta ought to see? Rio makes a mental inventory of the contents of her bags: clothes, a toothbrush, cheap jewelry, a few worthless keepsakes, a meager handful of unspent gold pesos. The Xolot family generally doesn't bother with people's personal junk. They raid for three things: bulk food, drugs and quality tech. The one item in Rio's possession which fits that bill went down her throat not twenty minutes ago.

Rio peeks open her eye. She feels the heat from the glass on her boob, but there's no pain. Did Jetta's hand slip?

"Well, there it is," says Jetta, "you *did* swallow it."

"Huh? How d'you—"

Rio is cut off as Jetta squeezes Rio by her shoulders and lifts her in the air. Rio shrieks, legs kicking. Jetta tosses Rio down over her lap like a sack of flour stomach down, ass up. Rio's lungs pour out. Her chest hurts. Jetta's hand once again binds Rio's wrists behind her as her torso dangles.

Smack. Jetta's free hand whips Rio's behind. Her ass ripples. Rio cries out as the pain shoots into her lower belly.

"You don't burn in the sun anymore," growls Jetta. "That means, you're soaking it in." *Smack.*

"Ugh!" Rio's face blazes pink. Her pussy throbs. She writhes. It hurts. Oh fuck, it—

Jetta screams. "Stupid little twat—" *Smack.* "That wasn't—" *Smack.* "Yours—" *Smack.* "TO TAKE." *Smack.*

Rio screams through gritted teeth, whimpers. Spittle flings off her lips. No doubt, everyone in the raiding party, plus J.R., can hear her. She's just a hair short from orgasm. For all the things she doesn't miss about the Xolot family, she has missed this: Closeness. Even in the midst of Jetta's discipline, it's there. It really is something for a person to care enough about you that they'd lay you over your lap and give you a spanking.

Jetta hoists Rio upright by her wrists. "Do you know what you're making me do? Do you FUCKING know?"

Rio just swallows. She has no answer. Jetta releases her and she crumples to the floor.

"Cupcake, if you thought for one FUCKING minute I was going to let you drive off in this tin can with a stolen mod, you are wrong. Here's what's going to happen: we're gonna chain you down to someone's bike and drag you across this desert until we find a first tech garage within a hundred KMs willing to cut a girl open and fish that goddamn piece of hardware out of you. If you're lucky, you'll live. But you'll *definitely* lose the use of those legs, maybe your arms too. Just you fucking *try* dancing with that. I swear Rio, it's bad you deserted, but why, tell me fucking WHY, you had to go and steal from us. It didn't have to come to this."

Rio starts bawling, her mouth belts out words before she even knows what she is saying: "I'm sorry, Jetta! Please! Don't do this! Oh, please, don't do this! There must be something I can—"

"*You* did this, Cupcake. This was all Y—" Jetta pauses.

Rio looks over. Chance and Zig are standing in the pod, witnessing Rio's miserable scene.

Jetta screams, "did I ask you cunts to stand around and *watch* us?"

Zig and Chance look at each other. "It's important," says Zig.

"Really is," says Chance.

Jetta gets to her feet. Her head bangs the ceiling and she hisses, rubbing it. "Ugh. Fine. Y'know what? Show me now. You can show me..." she looks down at Rio, who's looking up at her through splayed fingers. "Because, we're fucking DONE."

Her boots tromp across the floor. Zig and Chance try to take her back in the hold. It's a tight squeeze for a long-legged, muscle bound amazon. "Fuck that," she says. "I'm not fitting back there. Bring it to me."

Zig dashes into the hold. She reappears with something brown and leather. Rio realizes: it's J.R.'s satchel. She flips it open. "Take a look."

Jetta peeks in. "The fuck am I looking...?" She reaches in and draws out a small stack of paper, rubber banded together. "Wh-what the...?" Jetta is speechless. She flips through the stack.

"Federated," says Chance. He sounds short of breath. "There's over forty stacks. Do you know how much these—"

A grin cracks open Jetta's face. She tussles Zig's head, then Chance's, then takes them by the shoulders, leans in and whispers to both of them. Rio can't hear her but she catches Zig and Chance's reactions. They look unsure at first, then they start nodding.

"Both of you, outta here. I'm gonna wrap things up."

Zig and Chance scurry out of the pod. Jetta straps the satchel over her shoulder and returns to where Rio lays, curled up and sobbing. "Get up," she says. Her voice is softer now. Rio looks up at her, terrified. "C'mon, Cupcake. On your feet."

Rio rises. Her body hurts. Jetta sits and pats the bench next to her. Rio takes the seat. Sitting on her sore ass hurts a lot. She looks down at her bare knees and wrings her hands together. Jetta puts an arm over Rio's shoulder. "Rio, my girl, you're either a goddamn genius, or the luckiest idiot that ever lived."

Rio swallows. "You're-you're not gonna cut me open?"

Jetta pats the satchel. "Tell me where the fuck you found this. Or, do I wanna know?"

"I-I don't kn... J—uh...the guy I'm with. It's his."

Jetta squints at Rio, then her face softens. "This bag just saved your goddamn legs. There is a truckload of money in here. *Federated* bills, not the gold shit. What the fuck this kind of money is doing out here in the Red Desert, I can't imagine. But it's not counterfeit. Chance and Zig know their shit. This is gonna pay for the mod you stole three times over. Four times, actually? Five? I don't fucking know. It's more money than the family's had its hands on in a long, long time." She squeezes Rio close in a side hug. "And, I have you to thank for it."

"It's...it's not my money. It's his."

Jetta chuckles. "Not his anymore, Cupcake. You brought it to us. That's how I see it, anyway. Don't you give me a reason to rethink this picture. This is a glorious fucking day. We're fucking loaded and to top it off, I got to spank your ass."

Rio weeps. J.R.'s going to hate her. To make things worse, she's also relieved. She can't see life happening if she can't dance. Still, she wonders, should she insist: take me, not his money? But, there really is no point. The Xolot family does not let a prize like this go for the sake of courtesy. They'd sooner take Rio *and* the satchel. Jetta hugs her close. "I swear, every time I think I've seen it all in this desert, some new crazy shit rolls in. Guess I need to add a new star to my back."

"You mean—?" Rio sniffles.

"Yep. Every time life shows me a turn I didn't see coming, on the map it goes. Saves me from forgetting." There's a long pause as Rio catches her breath and Jetta smooths her hair. "So," says Jetta, "here's what's gonna happen. Today, I'm the nicest lady you ever met in your life and I'm gonna leave you on this chintzy touristmobile with your new boyfriend. I don't know why you left us, but I'm not like the others. Never gave a shit about making people stay. We'll miss your dancing, though. Unless...unless you *wanna* come back?"

Rio looks deep into Jetta's eyes and shakes her head.

Jetta nods solemnly. "In that case, I got a warning for you, Cupcake. I came out here for the mod. But, Axon doesn't give a shit about that. He wants *you*. Hasn't been the same since you left. And, he's not gonna be happy I came back without you. I'll do you this one nice thing and take the heat for it. He never gave me explicit orders to drag you back and, way I see it, I'm a fucking hero now. Good thing it was me that caught you and not Billy Boy or Starlyn. *They* wouldn't be so nice."

Rio squints. "Axon wants *me*?"

Jetta laughs ruefully. "You surprised, Rio? You know you're his favorite, right?"

The face Rio makes sends Jetta off into laughter. "You didn't know! All this time." She shakes her head.

Rio falls back against the head of the bench and stares into space. His *favorite*.

"When you went away, Axon got *real* depressed. You know his special cloud? Well, it turned fucking rancid. He got perma-drunk and holed up in his tent. Bitched and moaned and felt sorry for himself. And the fucking pheromones, I'm telling you, the smell was unbearable. It was everywhere. Total buzzkill, dick softener. It was like someone took a shit on the whole camp. It was getting everybody down. So, I told Axon I was going off to find you. I just wanted the damn mod back, not to mention get away from him until he joins the living again."

"But, how'd you find me? We *never* raided coaches. Not once."

Jetta grins. "True, coaches ain't worth the trouble—unless Rio fucking Quinton is on one. I had a hunch you'd be heading this way sooner or later. You wouldn't go east of El Ventana cuz there's nothing out there but mines and crusty old miners. You wouldn't go south, cuz I don't see you mingling with the rich fuckers down in the tropics. I suppose you could've headed north, but the cotton cults up there...they're not so fond of dancing these days. So, my money was on west. I picked a spot, snatched up a few Family members and we set up camp. And then, we caught you heading our way on this big toy."

"But, how'd you know I was on here? Were you spying on me in El V?"

"Oh, cupcake. If you're asking that question, I'm surprised you made it this far. No, we didn't spy on you. That's Starlyn's game. I caught a whiff of you out here, not even an hour ago. You have a scent, y'know. Soon as I got a radio from our sniper that a coach was coming this way, I told him to shoot off the antenna."

"My scent?"

"Mm-hmm." Jetta gets to her feet. She secures the satchel under her arm. "Anyway, maybe I'll see you later, Cupcake. And, don't expect me to be this nice if there's a next time." She keeps her head ducked beneath the ceiling as she approaches the hatch. Then, Jetta turns back. "By the way, that probably wasn't smart of you to swallow a body mod out here. You obviously got no cooler to keep it down. Too bad I'll miss the show when you're too thick to fit any of your clothes. Ah, well." She blows Rio a kiss and climbs out of the pod.

As Rio gets back into her clothes, J.R.'s desperate protests cry out. "No wait! Come back! That's—that bag's not yours... Please..." The raiding party laughs, hoots. "Aw, you wanna earn it back?" says a sultry female voice. Rio feels worse every passing second. And, her walk is stiff thanks to this pulverized ass.

She pokes her head out of the hatch. The family is beginning to disperse. In the glowing amber of sunset, they pump fists into the air, cry out in triumph, share hugs as word gets around about the family's unexpected find. J.R. is still standing in the dirt by the coach as they clear out, taking his money with them. As their motorcycles start revving up, J.R. spins around and kicks the coach's monstrous tire. He cries out, falls to the ground, clutching his hurt leg.

Rio climbs the ladder to the ground where J.R. sits, back against the tire and watches the Xolot Family speed off east, bike after bike. A girl in a side car makes a heart sign to J.R. with her hands as she goes by.

"I...I didn't know you had federal cash," says Rio as she approaches.

J.R. looks up at her. Tears are streaming down his cheeks. "They fucking robbed me. Fucking goons."

Rio has no words. She's been one of those *goons* many times before. "Yeah," she says finally.

He looks up at her. His nostrils flare. "I-I never should've taken you along. I could've paid for the whole trip just for me."

Rio swallows down the lump in her throat. "Yeah."

J.R. looks around the rusty landscape. The sky is pink in the west, trailing off to amethyst in the east. "I just...I wanted to help. You...you clearly needed to get somewhere."

Rio inches closer to him. She fumbles for words. "Can...can I tell you, I'm sorry?"

"Sorry!" he cries. "Rio, that was 280,000 dollars! It was my life savings. I was..." he chokes, "I was going to use it for..." he huffs out staggered breath. "Jolene and I...we were gonna use it to pay off her debt and leave this planet." His voice goes frail and weak. "We're...we're stuck here now. Stuck on worthless, fucking Lesser Laredo. For...for at least a couple more years. God... 'You'll be okay,' yeah, go ahead and tell me that."

III: Ensanchándose Rio

Dusk falls. The sky is a blanket of plum and emerging stars in the east. Only a blazing red glimmer of sun remains, haloed by pink. The lights in the pod have popped on.

"You can yell at me if you want," says Rio. She sits on the bench, hunched forward to keep her weight off her ass.

J.R. paces back and forth, window to window. His eyes are glued to his console, which he is talking to. "C'mon, c'mon. Please answer," he mutters to the gadget.

"You can call me a dumb twat."

He refuses eye contact, goes on pacing.

"You can kick me out of this coach, if you want. Make me fend for myself. I won't hold it against you."

He sits in the corner, sets his console on the cushion next to him, rakes his fingers through his buoyant, dark hair.

"You can spank me."

He looks at her, gets to his feet and throws his arms in the air. "Shut *UP*."

A pause. "That works," says Rio.

J.R. drops back into his seat, hides his face.

Rio sits out an uncomfortable, wordless five minutes. Then, she gets to her feet. "Okay, y'know what? I'm gonna get off here." She passes him into the hold. Their bags lay open, the contents scattered across the floor. Rio hastily folds her laundry, zips and rolls up her bedroll, sticks her toiletries in the pocket of her rucksack, puts her box of keepsakes back together. She also tries to tidy up J.R.'s possessions. She zips up the bags, slings her rucksack and rolls her bag into the pod. She stops in the pod, slips on her poncho, her sunhat, throws the rucksack over her shoulder and stops at the door. She's not sure how to extend the nanite walkway. Maybe she should just throw her bag over. But, it would just be more trouble if it broke a wheel.

"What're you doing?" Rio looks over her shoulder at J.R. His expression is beyond exasperated.

"I'm not doing you any favors by sticking around here. So, I'm gonna find my way to the nearest town. There's one not too far off, I think. And then...I dunno. I'll get to El Nuevo somehow."

She goes on looking for a button, a control screen...where the fuck is it?

"C'mon, don't—" J.R. tries. "Y'know, I don't fucking need this."

"Damn right, you don't." She looks up. There's a backlit panel that says *Open Hatch* but it's dimmed. She mutters, "why can't I just fucking...?"

"You have to open the door first to extend the ramp."

"Oh." Rio pops open the hatch. The panel is lit. She pushes it. The ramp materializes, solidifying from the coach to the ground. "Thanks," she says. "And, like I said, I'm sorry." She passes down the ramp and steps onto the road. It's beginning to cool outside. The sandfurs are starting to hiss their hunting calls. Small gusts toss sand at her ankles. Gravel rolls beneath her shoes. In any case, it's nice to be outside.

She only takes a few steps before J.R. scampers down the ramp behind her. "Hey, where the fuck are you going?"

She turns. J.R. is lit in the pink of terminating sunset. Rio's long shadow darkens half his figure. "I'm going west," she replies.

"Will you get back in the coach? I don't need this drama on top of everything else that happened today."

"You can forget about me."

"Just get back in here."

"There's no way I'll ever be able to repay what you lost. All I can do is save you from more."

J.R. tromps over to Rio. "Don't make this shitty situation worse than it already is."

"J.R., this desert has been my home. I can survive out here."

"You paid for a fucking coach ride. Will you just...get back in?"

"I paid a third. It was nothing. That's *your* coach."

They stare at each other in the dusk, neither of them knowing what to say. J.R.'s arms are crossed contemptfully. At last he breaks the silence, shouting at the top of his lungs, "if you go, I can't tear a new asshole out of the horrible bitch that got me robbed blind." His voice echoes off the hillside.

"Fine!" screams Rio. "I'll stay on the fucking coach, then!"

"Good!" J.R. screams back.

Rio's scream rises to a piercing shriek. "You're welcome!"

They go quiet, still staring each other down. J.R. lets out a breath. He indicates the coach with his thumb. "What happened up there earlier, anyway?" he says.

She squints. "Huh?"

"You were screaming."

"Oh, that. Yeah, Jetta was spanking me."

"Spanking you. Why? And was Jetta that...?"

"Huge lady? Muscles? Legs, legs, legs?"

"Yeah her. Why did she spank you?"

"For being a dumb, selfish twat. Which...is fair." Another pause. "Were you okay out here?"

J.R. stares at Rio a long time. "No. They...they said awful things." He casts his face to the ground.

"I'm...I'm sorry," says Rio. "I guess I've been around that kind of talk a lot, and..." She hesitates. "What I'm saying is, I forget how rough they can be when they're doing a raid."

"Talk like that shouldn't be normal," says J.R.

Rio considers this. "Maybe you're right."

"I am." J.R. exhales audibly. "Will you get back in the goddamn coach without making me say *please*?"

Rio takes a step towards J.R. "Alright."

J.R. leads the way back to the ramp. "I'm still completely pissed," says J.R.

"Fine," says Rio.

They climb the ramp. Rio closes the door behind them. J.R. pauses thoughtfully in the middle of the pod.

"You know the trip's gonna take longer now, right?"

Rio squints. "Huh?"

"No auto-drive. I guess I could send a distress signal and then *maybe* Laredan Transit would eventually send us a new coach. But, this vehicle still drives and neither of us are injured—unless you count you getting spanked. So, we're legally obligated to send a code

yellow, not an orange or red. That means we could be waiting a long time just for them to get back to us. Could be days. And, without auto-drive, I have to take the wheel. So, we don't get the thrusters, which means we go slow."

Rio feels like an idiot. She completely forgot about the disabled auto-drive. What a day it's been. "I can drive too," she says.

"No you can't. Unless you have a license you didn't show the kiosk back at the station."

Oh, yeah. She's not a Xolot Family member anymore. She has to follow *rules*. "Right."

J.R. sighs, looks down at the floor thoughtfully. His words are tinged with embarrassment. "Do...do you think there's any point in me reporting this robbery to Interpol?"

Rio shakes her head. "They're gone. We've—*they've*—stolen from Honchos, Corpos... Always got away with it. Interpol doesn't give a shit what happens to normal people out here."

The despair on J.R.'s face is hard to look at. "Anyway, I'm gonna drive. I want to be far, far away from this place."

"Now?"

"Uh huh."

"Need anything?"

"Stay out of the cockpit. Like, for the whole trip. As I said, I'm pissed."

Rio nods. "I'll stay out."

"Buckle up," he says.

Hours go by and J.R. is still driving. The coach rolls on between craggy hillsides and velvet dunes. Rio gets tired. She pops open the steel cabinet beneath her seat and finds a blanket and pillow. She turns out the lights and lays down. She peers up through the skylight and watches the stars. There are millions of them, loading the sky in thick clusters that seem to whirl and bubble. Even through tinted windows, the pod is softly illuminated. That was the first thing she loved about Laredo when she came here, years back. The atmosphere here, markedly weaker than Earth's, reveals vastly more stars. The first time she saw these Laredan skies, she felt like she could never be alone. Not under this sky.

Not alone. She felt alone for such a long time in the Xolot family. How could Jetta say she was Axon's *favorite*? If Rio had known, would she ever have left? But then, it couldn't be true. Axon bestowed body mods to valued individuals. The dancing girl was never in consideration, even if

she was a founding member. Rio had donned raiding gear and begun attacking caravans as early as any of them. The Family won territorial disputes. Its ranks grew and Rio began taking on bigger responsibilities. But, no one had ever said anything about giving her the next mod. She had brought the matter up once with Axon and his only response was, *don't worry about that, you're beautiful just like you are*. At the time, she was certain he was just placating her. But, what if he also meant it?

She turns over, hides her eyes under her blanket. Would it be just as well to forget the dancing job and regroup with the Family? Today was, in a sense, her finest raid ever. A score of nearly 300K Federated Dollars. It would be so easy to join them again. Like she never left. Maybe some of the Lugars would not trust her for a time, but that would pass.

Rio turns over again and gazes out once more at the stars. She does not believe in the Family anymore. She hasn't for a long time. Though, it hurts to picture Axon longing for her. She still loves him. But, out here on her own, at least her head is clear. She can make choices for herself. When she's stuck inhaling the Family's stew of pheromones, choices are mediated by the constant desire to be with *them*.

She lays awake for some time, occasionally rubbing her sore butt. J.R. is still driving when sleep sets in.

* * *

The bonfires billow up into the pitch black sky, casting great flashes of warm light up the cliffs of the plateau. Hulking columns of smoke blot out the stars. The camp is alive with hoots, cheers, hugs, fucks, and drunken brawls. A small orgy unfolds in the pit—the area at the center of camp, padded with mattresses and wedged between the three great fires. A find of 280,000 Federated Dollars is an occasion for rejoicing indeed. After a solid month of low morale, things are starting to look up for the Family.

This massive landform that surrounds them is Devil's Hook, a towering chunk of plateaued mountain that curls in on itself, walling in a rubbled interior that remains shaded for all but a couple hours of the day. Few places in the Red Desert offer better cover from the Federated Nations' hated satellite system. The fifty square kilometer chunk that surrounds the hook is rife with high winds which stir up dust devils, which add to the green dust atmosphere, producing a blotchy aerial picture. Thus, it is one of a handful of spots on the map the Xolot Family makes a regular home. For all that, there is no doubt Interpol could make an educated guess that the Family is here tonight. They could rope in the Interstellar Treaty Organization. The ITO in turn could send a battalion of armored gun units to cut off the Hook's opening, as well as the

northwest and south tunnels that pass through the mountains. They could trap the Family here and make a bloody last stand of them. They *could*, in theory. But in the Hook, the Family would see the raid coming before the ITO clearly sees them. The Family would be ready with electromagnetic pulse emitters that scramble the units' communications. They would be ready with guns, grenades, drones hauling cans of armor-eroding acid from above. And that's assuming the ITO is wise and sends automated units. If they're so foolish as to send *people*, they must be praying the Family doesn't have enough dust bombs to asphyxiate every gas mask in the battalion and force every troop to breathe in the pheromonal cloud the Family carries with it at all times. Nothing could be more dangerous than putting a few good men in the middle of *that*. It may still be a victory, but it may as well be an embarrassing rout and a loss of tens of millions of Federated Dollars in units, logistics and personnel against an enemy that is publicized as ruffraff, an enemy that should be an easy target for the most powerful military in the civilized universe. A failure of such magnitude would be hard to keep from leaking to the headlines. And, the ITO does not need a bad week in the press like that, especially not when public sentiment too often favors these *Robin Hoods of the Red Desert*.

Such is the life of the Xolot Family's every day. Such is Axon's reading of the authorities—and he's been right for a long time. Such too, is the general consensus of the more tactically savvy Lugars of the Family, not to mention a handful of specialists, a few of whom served the ITO or Interpol for years before crossing over to banditry. In all this time, the Family has provisioned, armed, surveilled and counter-intelligenced its way along a narrow path of freedom. Yes, there is still freedom in this Red Desert. You have to fight for it every day of your life, but it's there for the taking.

The interior walls of Axon's trailer are painted maroon with yellow flame coming up from the floor. Even the windows are painted over. The only light inside is a solar lantern on a small coffee table that emits a warm glow with limited reach, unobtrusive to the eye—that, and of course, the blue light of Axon's cooler, where he presently sits.

Coolers are funny things. They look like something one ought to see at a children's theme park, like a throne for a witch or something. He sits bare-assed on the hard, transparent seat, his nakedness buried in a knitted blanket. The back of the cooler is like a window with busy rubber lattices that pads his tall, skinny back as he reclines, seeking some modicum of comfort. Inside the cooler's posts, rails and armrests, dozens of blue hairline currents run from electrodes and collect where Axon's ass, thighs, back, arms and neck touch the glass. A pipe juts from the cooler's left side over Axon's shoulder and coughs out a thin column of smoke which rises to the ceiling and passes up a narrow chimney into the night sky. The currents are cool against the skin, like anti-freeze without a residue. Axon shivers.

A quick, frantic knock at the trailer door: Axon knows who it is. The cooler tamps down his cloud, but he could be face first in mud and he'd still know that skittering heartbeat, those quick lungs, that frothy slit, that fragrant perfume of her own...

He shouts, "Truffle, not now! I'm—"

Too late. The door pops open and a freakishly doll-shaped figure darts in and shuts the door behind her like she's keeping a tornado at bay. She turns to Axon and in the faint light of the lantern, her pink bob, huge eyes and giant, kissy, puckered lips are an unsettling parody of feminine beauty.

"Axshon!" she cries, "You shhould've heard Shtarlyn tonight! Shhe's awful! I hate her! I hate her!"

No one was prepared for the horrific, wonderful things the *xXx Doll* mod would do to Truffle. Within days, Truffle's legs began to lengthen, her hips and butt acquired an unnaturally perfect roundness. Her waistline thinned, then thinned still further. Soon, she had a midsection so narrow, you could wrap splayed hands around it and your middle fingers would touch on one side and your thumbs would touch on the other. Her boobs grew fuller, rounder, firmer and had an overeager bounciness that reminded one more of silicone balls than human flesh. A few days more and new effects took hold. Truffle's neck elongated and narrowed until her head was suspended a forefinger's length higher on her shoulders. Her diminutive 5'2 was no more; she was closing in on six feet. And then, there was the matter of her face, which grew mindbendingly heart-shaped, with a chin that narrowed almost to a point. Her eyes expanded to fill larger sockets until they neared golf balls in size. Her lashes followed suit, sweeping all the way up past her brows. Her lips filled and filled, her Cupid's bow growing high and more angular, her lower lip growing plump in the middle, narrow at either edge, producing a hypersize Betty Boop pucker. And yet, as if one single mod hadn't had enough to do, it also stretched Truffle's tongue to such a freakish length, everyone wondered how she could keep all of it stuffed inside that mouth. Worse still, the mod deepened Truffle's cunt and made her persistently wet.

The more freakish effects of the *xXx Doll* mod could be curtailed, so long as Truffle was careful about her time in the sun. Alas, after a few days of angst and dramaturgy, Truffle suddenly decided she *loved* the new her. She became intoxicated with her own reflection and stayed up late into the night, experimenting with lipsticks and eye shadows. She spent a month in search of the perfect mascara for her finger joint-length lashes. When the Family was stationed, she would hop around camp in the blazing heat in white go go boots, paisley black tights, a tailored black mini dress and a buoyant tutu, twirling a sunbrella like Gene Kelly or an angel on vacation. The sun's now weaker effect on her skin saved her many sweaty hours and kept her makeup fresh. Her pheromones smelled like cotton candy stuffed with lavender. They had a pleasing effect on all, and made Truffle's trademark whininess easier for everyone to bear.

Truffle's mod nevertheless had certain attributes that complicated things. She was shy about her overlong neck, which had earned her the occasional comparison to a giraffe. Thus, she spent more or less every day hiding it under ruffs. Truffle's huge, kissy lips were not much help

when it came to speech. She typically had a whistle-y lisp that only thickened as the xXx Doll mod pushed her into ever more extreme territory. With enough sun absorption, it got to the point where all that came out of her mouth was vowels and spit. Then, there was the wetness problem. In the early days of experimenting with her new body, Truffle ruined a hundred pairs of underwear or so. During an extended stay in the flatlands, she grew fascinated by the way her sodden panties dried out in the heat and stiffened hard enough that you could wave one around like a handfan. She amused herself by hanging these panty sculptures like Christmas tree ornaments from a tuber bush outside her trailer. And, that was the final straw: Starlyn knocked on Truffle's trailer door, informed her she was disgusting and if she didn't start using a cooler to tame her mod, the Family would relinquish her panties and she would wear a diaper from here on. Truffle's weepy, spit-full reply was indecipherable, but she got the message and reined the mod in. From then on, she averaged a moderate lisp and a height of 5'10. She wore vaginal pads daily, which kept the panty waste down.

Truffle falls to angular knees. Her tutu poofs like a sail as she crawls over to Axon and grasps his hand in both of hers. Tears well up in her huge, glassy gray eyes. They spill out not in drops but heavy clusters that shoot down her cheeks, soak her ruff and plop audibly to the floor. "Axshon! She took my Bunny tonight! She didn't even ask or shay please! I haven't shheen him for dayshe cuzsh Jetta took him on the raid and now he'sh back an' I don't get to..." She tugs Axon's arm and presses her tear streaked face against his hand.

Bunny is, lamentably, Truffle's favorite, a tall, soft-spoken fellow with a nice smile, thick, dual dreads (thus, the nickname) and a bionic left eye that sees with pinpoint precision. Partly thanks to the eye, he's a crack shot with a sniper rifle and got an honorary cheer at tonight's feast for clipping the antenna off that coach while it jetted down the highway at full speed.

Axon tosses his head against the cooler back and stares into the black-painted oblivion of the ceiling. "Truffle," he says. He whips his hand in the air and tears fly like sprinkler water. "You know we can't have favorites here. It's not our calling."

"It isn't fair! It isn't fair! I've been good! Oh, Axshon, Shtarlyn did it to hurt me, I know shhe did!" Truffle rises up on her knees and falls over Axon's blanket-covered lap, wrapping her arms around him. The blanket slips, exposing his bare, tattooed chest. He sighs, shakes his head at the ceiling. He is not in the mood for this tonight. Nonetheless, Axon wipes Truffle's tear-soaked face and runs a hand through tufts of pink hair. Her sobs quickly abate. "You're shho nicshe, Axshon. You've alwaysh been the only one who undershtandsh me."

Axon rolls his eyes. Truffle just talks like this. Capo, Lugar, Biker, Hauler, Foreman, whatever one is, they could get in a room alone with Truffle and count the seconds. They'll be the *so nice and only one who understands her* person before five minutes have gone by. "Truffle, take it easy, will you? I'm not in the mood."

"But, I mean it, I mean it! Axshon, what're we doing here? We could wun away together! We could go far, far away together where no one can bother ush. Jusht you an' me."

This is when he stops petting Truffle's head and shoves her off his lap. She tumbles to her sculpted ass. Her huge eyes widen so, they could be coasters. "W-what washe that for?"

Axon braces against his knee and leans down to where his face is scarcely an inch from Truffle's. Words pour like acid out of his mouth. "We don't talk like that here. We're a family. I don't wanna hear one fucking word about running away. You know what the fuck it is you're saying?"

But, of course, she doesn't. Axon should know it. His temper is doing the talking.

Truffle wails, recoils, shakes her head and sends tears hurtling. "I'm shorry! I'm shorry! I didn't mean I wanted to—" She's interrupted by a fierce rapping on the door. Once again, Axon knows who it is. "It's unlocked," he yells as Truffle supplicates on the floor beneath him. "I swear, I didn't mean it like that," she whimpers.

A beast of a woman squeezes sideways through the doorway. The trailer tilts as it takes her full weight. "Heard you wanted to see me," says Jetta.

"Mm...evening," mutters Axon. He rubs his temple with the heel of his hand, feels the tension and stiffness in his jaw. He needs to dial it down. He can rain fury on a creampuff like Truffle, but he needs to check himself around Jetta.

Jetta climbs the steps to the trailer floor and braces against the ceiling. She's nearly two heads too tall for this place. Her pheromones are running hot. That salty tang Axon knows so well is thick and obtrusive. She sees Truffle in a whimpering heap on the floor. "And a nice evening to both of you," she says, and adds, "Truffs."

Truffle turns to Jetta, rises on her arms. The way she's poised, she looks like a wine glass on that spindly waist. "Jetta," Truffle wails. "Did-did you hear?"

"Mmm...about Starlyn snatching Bunny Boy away for the night? I heard something about you being not too happy about that."

"It ishn't fair!"

Jetta snickers. She shuffles over to the opposite wall, drops to the floor and throws her arm over the arm of a small couch. "Buns landed a perfect shot on a fast-moving antenna. If he wants to spend a night between the ice queen's titties, that seems plenty fair to me. He's earned it."

"But, what about me?! I haven't sheen him in daysh! He'sh been off with you!"

Jetta waves a weary hand in the air. "Truffs, not now. Don't kill my damn vibe."

"Mmmnnng!" Truffle pounds her dainty fist into the floor.

"Enough," says Axon.

"Truffle, get the fuck over here," says Jetta. Truffle crawls over to Jetta and Jetta sweeps her up and spoons her, petting Truffle's head while that absurd cartoon face pouts. "How Starlyn ever convinced us to make you a Lugar, I'll never fucking know," Jetta mutters. Truffle doesn't reply, just sinks back into Jetta's abs. Jetta turns her attention back to Axon. "So why you skipping the festivities, Ax? It's a great fucking night. Everyone's living it up."

Axon pulls the blanket back up his body. "Why'd you let her go?" he growls.

"Rio? She didn't want to come."

"You're talking about Wrio?" Truffle chirps.

Axon hisses. "And, that's it? You gave up there?"

Jetta shrugs nonchalantly. "Soon as I saw the money, I didn't care too much about the mod she stole."

"Who caresh about a shtupid mod? Wrio'sh our sishter!"

"She's one of us," agrees Axon.

"Not now. Way I see it, she bought her freedom today."

Axon's hands ball into fists, his teeth grind. He rises from his cooler. The blanket falls to his feet. "Bought it! *Bought* it! Since when do we put a fucking price on each other, Jetta? Everyone else on this miserable rock does that. We're supposed to be different."

"Wow," mutters Truffle, "it'sh awmosht down to hish kn—"

"Shut up," snaps Axon. Truffle shrinks deeper into Jetta's embrace. "Jetta," he says, his voice now leveled, "that wasn't your call to make."

Jetta smirks, cocks an eyebrow at Axon. "Well, there was no one else there to make it, Ax. Look, I like being here. I like the stealing and I like the pussy. But, *stealing pussy*? If that's the game, you better do it yourself. Cuz, way I see it, I'm swinging for the family just fine. I think the real question is, when do *you* start swinging, big boy?"

He glares at Jetta, snatches up the blanket, wraps it around his waist and drops back to the cooler seat, rubbing his face. Jetta has a general preference for females, slit or no slit. And, Axon knows better than to embarrass himself.

"I know where she's going, though," says Jetta, her voice more conciliatory.

"And, where's that?"

"El Nuevo. Gotta be."

"Did she say *why*?"

"No, but if I guessed, I'd say she's hoping to attach herself to one of the Honchos out there."

"Those *pigs*? Why would she choose them over *us*?"

"You'd have to ask her that yourself."

Axon digs his fingers through his long, dark hair, whips it out behind him. "Do you...?"

"Hm?"

Axon speaks softer now, "do you think it's worth it? Following her?"

There's a long pause before Jetta answers. "Rio never got a mod. She's been with us since the start, supported us for ages. She risked her neck raiding a gazillion times and loved on us all. Whenever we had mods to give out, her name came up. You always said no, not her. I dunno why, and I'm not asking. But, I don't think she knew either. Ask me, that's probably her whole deal. So, we go out, all five of us, give her the pheromonal love bath she's been missing out on, and then you talk to her—let her keep that mod she stole—does she change her mind and stay with la familia? I can see it. I can see her thinking twice about walking into a sleazepit like El Nuevo. She still loves us, Axon."

"Let'sh do it!" cries Truffle. "Let'sh get her back! I mish her sho much!"

Axon takes this in.

"I gotta tell you something though." Jetta, leans in towards Axon. Her voice becomes low and heavy. "I respect you. I respect your instincts. If getting her back means so much to you, I support it. But, if we don't change Rio's mind, we'd better be fucking ready to kill that girl. We're talking about sending the whole damn crew out across the desert to get one person to join us again. If we fail because she *politely declined*, well, that's a crying shame. That's when our boys and girls start questioning our strength, not to mention our judgment. Don't get me wrong, you're strong. I've seen you hold this group together through thick and thin, but if Rio embarrasses you, people could stop believing. I don't know how she got strong enough to walk away the first time, but if there's a second, she may not be the last. It's a retrieval mission or it's revenge. Either way, we have to win. You'd better be fucking ready for that, Axon. You love her more than you should, and that's a problem." As Jetta says these words, Truffle nods with saddened eyes.

"I know," Axon replies icily. "Just tell me, can we make it in time, before she mixes in with the Honchos?"

"With the wheel crew taking shifts? Sure. Rio's got herself and some poor mister who doesn't know what he signed up for and a coach that can't use its jets. There's two of them and 150 of us. I don't see them getting to El Nuevo without a few stops along the way. But, before we head out, Axon, are you gonna let us party tonight? Cuz, we need some goddamn good times to fuel us for this trip."

Axon's face softens. "We set off in the morning. Get volunteers for the first drive shift. Then, go ahead and let loose."

"You bet your ass I will." Jetta nudges Truffle off her lap and stands, then bangs her head against the ceiling. "God dammit," she growls, rubbing the back of her head. "I need to cool this fucking height off."

"Don't," says Axon. "We need to stay primed."

Jetta scowls. "As you say." But, here," she shoves Truffle, who stumbles across the trailer into Axon's arms. "You need her more than me tonight." Jetta squeezes out of the trailer and leaves them.

Truffle gazes into Axon's eyes. "Wanna shee if we fit?"

Axon sighs. He switches off the cooler.

* * *

They are still moving when Rio awakens. The coach is winding left...right...left again, tossing Rio slightly on her bench. She looks outside. The stars are gone. The maroon sky has traces of gold. It's almost sunrise. Rio shifts. There's a slicing pain in her inner thigh.

She throws back the blanket and her jaw drops open. Her legs are...*not* skinny. Flesh bulges around her panty seams. No wonder it hurts.

Rio pulls the blanket over her head and groans softly. Somehow, she forgot: she took a *mod*. She's a new person now.

She paws at her legs. Her hand sinks into buoyant flesh. She squeezes and gets half a handful of pinched thigh between thumb and forefinger. Rio bites her tongue and reaches behind

herself. Holy fuck. An ass cheek fills her hand. She tries to squeeze but the soreness from Jetta's spanking, though duller now, hasn't quite subsided.

Rio sits up and gathers the blanket around her waist. She pads over to the back corridor where the coach's tiny bathroom is, cranks the handle and steps inside. It's basically a closet. There's a toilet, a sink, a small receptacle and a cupboard above. The mirror is too high and Rio is too short. She can't quite see herself below the waist. She drops the toilet lid, climbs on top, braces herself against the wall, turns and sticks out her tush so she can *just* see it in the mirror.

Rio blinks, swallows. Her heart races.

Goodbye little butt, goodbye skinny legs. This ass is thick, round and shapely. Rio shakes her tail. There's a slight wobble to the sturdy flesh. Oh, what she could do with that on the dancefloor. Rio puts that thought out of her mind for now. She reaches out and braces herself against the opposite wall and leans against it, holding herself in place by her bare feet on the toilet lid. In the mirror, she sees a short stack woman on a diagonal axis in a crop top and a pair of panties that sink into her fleshy hips. She's wider by at least half an inch on either side and her flanks make a very nice curve from waist to hip to thigh.

Rio gets down, sits on the lidded toilet and thinks. At last, she's pretty. *Laredan* pretty. Maybe not ravishing—yet—but she has that meat. The thought makes her giddy.

If the mod made her this big in only half a day, how much bigger will she be when she gets to El Nuevo Corazon? *When* will she get to El Nuevo Corazon?

Rio bathes in the sink. She fetches her toiletries and shaves her legs, remembers it's Pearlsday and takes her birth control. She emerges into the pod, somewhat refreshed. The land outside is brightening. The passing crags are starting to catch the first glimmers of sun.

Rio looks down the corridor to the cockpit where J.R. has the wheel. He's closed the door, but it's a thin barrier. She goes over to it, opens it just a crack. "Hey, did you ever sleep last night?" she calls in.

"Didn't feel like it," J.R. replies.

"Are you *going* to sleep?"

"Who cares?!" He pulls the door closed.

Rio huffs, shakes her head, falls back in her claimed bench on her puffed out tush. She thinks for a while. She doesn't want to ask anything of J.R. after yesterday, but there is one thing she needs: an ETA. Will she make it by Opalsday?

But, if she tells J.R. about her plans, he *could* use them against her. He could slow their trip, take an unplanned detour. Would J.R. do something like that? Correction: would he do

something like that *to her, who deserves it?* Best not find out. At the moment, he's gunning for the west like a spiderlope fleeing a wildfire. Fine. Leave him to it. But, she still needs that ETA...

She gets up, enters the cockpit corridor and taps on the door.

"What is it?" yells J.R.

"Is there a map in there?"

"Uh..."

The door opens an inch. "Did you say, map?"

"Yeah. Is there one in there?"

"I dunno. Why?"

"Don't you want to know how long it'll be before you can see Jolene?"

There's a long, long pause. "Map's not gonna help when we don't know where we are," says J.R. "I haven't seen a sign marker for a while."

"I know where we are," Rio replies. "I just need a map so I can work it out."

Through the crack in the door, she catches J.R.'s right hand fumbling. Then, the door swings open and something goes flying out, spinning over Rio's head. It spreads wings and lands in the pod with a papery smack. Rio goes for it and the cockpit door clicks closed.

It's a Laredan atlas, an old-fashioned paper-and-ink *book*. Rio can't keep a smile off her face. She loves these things. Words and pictures printed into *paper* and all the beautiful indelibility that brings. She has always wished her parents would have given her picture books when she was a kid instead of reading her bedtime stories from screens and letting her play with hologenic toys she could touch but never feel.

Rio sits on her bench and flips through the atlas. There's a full 2-page topography of the entire Red Desert with cities, towns, mountain ranges, rails, landmarks—everything. She finds El Ventana and traces the railroad to the wildlife preserve. She looks outside where the jutting crags are at full glimmer and the morning sky is deep purple, clothed in clouds of brilliant gold. On the coach's left is a meager railing that fences off a cliffside which slopes down to a rock valley. She knows they're close to Hellhound point, but did they pass it or is it yet to come? Rio checks the crags: they're too small. This must be the eastern side of Hellhound. They haven't reached it yet, but they're close. About twenty minutes, she guesses. Rio finds Hellhound point on the atlas, and measures out the distance on the highway in units of a hundred kilometers using her thumb, dividing the turns into chunks as best she can. One hundred...two hundred...

She knocks on the cockpit door.

"What?" calls J.R.

She opens it a crack. "We're 3100 kms from El Nuevo."

Pause. "Okay," he says. Then, he mutters numbers. Rio waits. "I guess we'll be there in like, a little over a day."

Rio looks at the door, aghast. "What?"

"I said, a little over a day and we'll get there."

She hesitates. Does she want to speak up? "It's not that easy," she replies. "There's mountain hairpins, the dust valley where you'll have to slow way down, there's the fields where you gotta be careful of the wildlife..."

"So?"

"So, it'll take us a lot longer than a day to get there."

He hesitates. "Fine. Two days."

She shakes her head in dismay. "Are you planning to *sleep*?"

"No."

"Do you..." she stops herself.

"What?" snaps J.R.

"Nothing?"

"Fucking, *what*?"

"Do you want to drive us off a cliff? You're gonna need rest."

The door slams closed.

Rio sighs, returns to her bench.

In any case, they can still make it to El Nuevo before Opalsday. It's doable. Doable, as long as J.R. doesn't nod off behind the wheel and take them straight down a mountainside.

She stretches out on the bench, rests her head on the pillow and watches as the crags outside cluster and rise higher as they speed through the canyon. The morning sky is pink with cotton candy clouds that shade into deep purple, dotted with flocks of gildadactyls, swooping out among the peaks on translucent wings.

They pass a towering cliffside and the ground on the coach's right plummets into a valley. Cleaving the valley in two is a steep mountainslope terminating in a huge, diagonal, jutting rock extension that winnows down to a rounded point with hollows that resemble nostrils and a large crater just beyond the base that could be an eye socket. Hellhound point does indeed resemble a dog skull. She shuts her eyes.

It was on a pilgrimage here that an angry and disaffected band of polyamorous ex-weavers from the prairielands chose their name: the Xolot Family. Rio was among them. The name was Axon's idea, after the dog-headed Aztec deity of fire and lightning. Industry had driven them to highway banditry. Thus, they would deliver fire and lightning on the industrial powers that sought to hollow out the land of its minerals and make the territories unlivable for any but the neutered city-dwellers. In the three days they spent at the base of that canine crag, Rio danced, ate, slept and fucked in what seemed to be a prism that sealed time away. Day and night blurred together, at times seemed to happen simultaneously. She was dying and becoming born, dispossessed and delivered, one and many, all at once. It was the happiest the Xolot Family would ever make her. Once they left Hellhound point, time resumed and had its way with all of them.

And now, Axon returns to her. She curls up on the bench, wound inside the blanket. She's in his arms, drinking in his warmth, his heartbeat, the crystalline precision of his words, always so well chosen that they remind Rio of the unfathomably intricate sandalwood carvings, finer than any factory process could replicate, wrought in the artisan shops of the tropics. She buries her face in his chest and cries. Of course, she could never leave him for good. Not him.

And then, the darkness pulls Rio in and she slips down, down, down. Her legs kick at the air. Suddenly, they find solid ground and she runs. Footsteps thunder behind her and she hears the salivating growl of dogs inches away, jaws snapping at her rear...

A sudden lurch to the side flings Rio off her bench. She spills onto the floor, fighting the dogs, twisting her face away from their hot, wet teeth. But, it's only a blanket she wrestles with. Rio catches her breath and looks around.

The coach is weaving about on treacherously zigzaggy road. J.R. is taking the turns too fast. Rio climbs to her feet and gets a funny feeling at her hip. Her panties bite into her. Hip flesh mooshes over and under the band. Her ass sucks the back of the garment deep into her crack. Her thighs crowd the leg holes and drive the seams deeper into her groin where they chafe and redden her skin. Rio looks down at herself and swallows. Her hips and ass have swelled out into a bubbly heart. Still not huge, but it's barely afternoon outside.

The couch swings into a heart-stopping left swerve and sends her spilling over into the next bench. Her butt cushions into the upholstery as she grasps for the support pole.

Finally, the hairpin turn is done. Rio snatches up her blanket, wraps herself in it and fights the coach's inertia on topsy turvy road to the cockpit door. She raps on it. "Hey!" she screams.

"Yeah?" calls J.R., without opening the door.

"You're going too fucking fast!" but as she screams it, the coach hits a bump and her hand bracing against the corridor wall is not enough for balance. Her blanket slips and she slams shoulder first into the door and falls to the floor on her thickened tush. She grits her teeth at the door and pounds at it with her fist. "I said, slow the fuck down! You'll kill us taking the canyon this speed."

The brakes catch and the coach decelerates. Rio gets back to her feet, readjusts the blanket and flips off the cockpit.

Then, the door opens a crack. J.R.'s voice is suddenly sheepish. "Uh. Sorry. I didn't realize how fast we were going."

"Yeah. Because, you're too tired to fucking drive, asshole." She hits the door one last time, then turns back for the pod.

Clearly chastened, J.R. now seems to be taking the coach at half the speed he was before. It's an overcorrection, but for the moment Rio is thankful for the reprieve. She fills a cup of grainmeal from the dispenser, seasons it with cayenne and gobbles it down. Then, she fills her cup again. She never eats two successive cups of grainmeal at once. That stuff stays in your stomach for hours. She wonders how much hunger she has neglected recently.

As the day rolls into noon, the canyons give way to dusty, brown mountains and the road straightens and smooths.

Rio notices suddenly, she's once again sitting in the bright square that the sun is casting through the skylight. She feels the warmth but her body doesn't cook in it like it used to. How strange to have a body mod and never be at risk of a sunburn ever again. She ought to get off this bench right away. In sunlight, tempered only by the window, her body must be drinking up energy fast. That energy will build more nanites that spread through her flesh and produce healthy growth among her fat cells, her muscles, her tendons. Her butt will grow and her legs will thicken, filling her silhouette into a beautiful set of curves. She really ought to intervene, slow the process down. But she's bored. Her only company on this ride hates her. So she sits here in this square of sun and simply contemplates her predicament.

J.R. slows, turns off the road and parks in the gravel next to a huge dirt hill. Just as the cockpit door pops open, Rio dons her blanket to hide her swelling body. Can't let J.R. see all this.

He steps into the pod. His lower eyelids are dark, his gaze is wavering and his gait is stiff. "I'm taking a break," he mutters, supposedly to Rio, but he avoids eye contact.

"Okay," says Rio, cradled in her blanket. She considers going outside herself but then remembers the sun.

J.R. dons his boonie hat, pulls the crank on the left side hatch, throws open the door, extends the nanite ramp and goes down, his body looking for all the world like it wants to topple over and sleep a million years.

Rio wonders how long she can keep this body mod a secret from J.R. If he stays locked away in the cockpit, is it possible he'd never know? At the rate she's growing, no. But, how do you broach this topic with someone who hates your guts?

Outside the coach, she faintly hears J.R.'s voice. He's talking on his console. Rio can't make out specific words but she's pretty sure it's his precious Jolene on the other end. Little miss blonde, plump and perfect. Woop-de-do. At least, after a bit more time soaking up sunlight, Rio can match Jolene for beauty, if not for blonderness or, ha ha, perfection.

Rio's reverie is interrupted by a sound.

Fssssh...

It's like hissing, choral maracas, coming from outside. Her blood goes cold. She turns to the window and takes a closer look at this giant hill of dirt J.R. parked them next to.

Down below, almost out of eyeshot from the window, Rio catches a puff of dust, tumbling from the side of the hill. Then she catches something wiggling. It's the curved and forked end of a brown pincer. Next to it is a flexing, spidery leg. Gravel cascades and there are more pincers, more legs. One falls out. The maraca sound thickens.

Spearmouth Excavators, or dirt eaters, as the Xolot Family has always called them. As Laredan wildlife goes, these disgusting subterranean hive colonizers are something between a giant cockroach, a crab, a viper and something worse than all three. Small dinner plate-sized and teardrop-shaped with a bulbous carapace, the dirt eater sees out of five eyes and walks on twelve legs that wriggle out of its tapering, segmented hide. When it gets defensive, the exoskeletal segments flex out to make it look bigger, and from the right angle, you might catch a glimpse between the hide slats of its translucent, egg-white inner body, and within that, the dark, acidifying bile that occupies what best can be described as a stomach. The family doesn't call them dirt eaters for nothing. But what's truly the stuff of nightmares is its tri-pronged mouth that spits up a gelatin-like ichor, along with whatever hasn't yet reached its aforementioned stomach. The ichor won't do much more than make the skin itch, but something far worse is in store. Each prong of its mouth, which holds a sort of dilating, triangular lip is a rod-like protrusion that brandishes a scorpion-like hook point. Each rod is actually a sheath, which holds a membranous, jaundiced tube. These can stretch a length that exceeds that of the spearmouth's body. If one of these fast-shooting stingers tags a leg, a

forearm, whatever, a fast-acting venom is injected into the flesh. It's not enough to kill an adult human. But, should all three stingers hit, the odds get steeper. However, when the spearmouth is defending its colony, it brings an army along with it. If three stingers don't kill, try that, times ten or twenty.

J.R., you fucking moron. Rio gets to her feet, snatches her blanket and runs into the hold. She unzips the side pocket of her ruckstack. Inside is Rio's hunting knife. She tears it out of the sheath and runs out, holding it point down in her fist.

She emerges into the blazing light of the noon sun, knife and blanket in tow. The ramp clatters under her quick feet.

Standing in the narrow shade of the left front corner of the coach, J.R. chats on his console. He leans his hip against the front tire, traces a lazy arc in the gravel with his left foot and stares out to the west. Rio runs as fast as her bare legs on baked pebble will take her.

"I'm not saying I'm okay with this, okay? I'm pissed. You have no idea. But, I can't just leave someone out in this desert. It's dangerous out h—"

"Behind you!" Rio screams.

But, the startled J.R. looks over his left shoulder—at her—when he ought to be looking behind his right where a vanguard dirt eater is crawling up the gravel, just a pace away from his boot. The air is alive with hissing, rattling maracas. And, for some reason, J.R. hasn't *noticed*.

The seconds pass like ages as Rio bounds past him, knife in her right hand, blanket bunched under her left arm. As she nears, the vanguard dirt eater inclines its body on six stepped pairs of legs, its segmented abdomen flexing on an upward curve. It spreads its pincers that unfathomably wide distance and makes way for its gaping maw. Then comes that awful sound. Not the maracas. This is the huffing, bellowing discharge as a spittle of ichor and dirt flecks arc in the air toward J.R. It comes out in increasing propulsion as the two top prongs and one bottom prong of its mouth widen and tremble. Only another second and they will shoot out and stick in J.R.'s flesh.

"What's going—?"

Rio cuts by J.R. His console leaps in the air. She rounds the corner of the coach and gets a full view of the dirt eater's entourage. Some ten or more hissing, skittering spearmouths are charging in on quick legs, pincers out like twin cutlasses. She sees down the gooey, dirty, yellow and pink triangular portal of the vanguard dirt eater's mouth beyond the rising fountain of spew streaming from it.

With a vengeful scream, Rio throws the blanket over the dirt eater like a matador working his cape. There's a gut-churning sound as the spears shoot out—and pierce the fabric. Two stingers poke out the other side as the blanket sails.

"Holy f—" screams J.R., who at last understands their predicament.

The blanket lands doubled over in the gravel and weighs the dirt eater down. It huffs an aggravated breath as it tries to move, but its stingers are caught in the blanket. Yet its marching entourage is nearly there to join it. The ground wriggles with yellow-brown, pink-spotted carapaces and quintets of beady, black eyes and twitching pincers.

Rio drops to her knees, holds the knife high in the air, and brings it down. The point drives clean through the blanket into the dirt eater's hide. The splitting exoskeleton sounds like ice breaking. She drives the blade deeper still, into the soft, wet machinery of its organs, and then breaks its belly on the other side. Rio stabs it thus, twice more in quick succession, then lifts the hissing, impaled creature in the air. The blanket flips back shielding her arm, exposing the dirt eater's wriggling legs and the finer segments of its run-through lower half.

She waves it side to side. Drops of black blood fling out on the army as their mouths begin to split open. They freeze. Dirt eaters panic when they encounter the exposed blood of one of their hive.

"Get back inside! Get in the car!" she screams. J.R.—idiot!—is in the middle of retrieving his console from the ground. He picks it up, but his boonie hat tumbles off his head. He breaks into a dash and leaves the hat behind.

The still writhing, soon-to-be-dead dirt eater flies off Rio's knife. Its still stuck stingers take the blood-splattered blanket with it as it falls before its kin. Rio runs.

As Rio and J.R. near the ramp, another contingent of the dirt eater army is circling the back side of the coach, legs skittering, their rage palpable as hisses, rattles, rapid clicks and chirpy growls fill the air like sulphur. Three dirt eaters are only a pace away. J.R. tears up the ramp with Rio close behind. A particularly bold dirt eater follows them up.

They dive into the pod. J.R. hits the button over the doorway and the ramp disintegrates, bailing the pursuing dirt eater to the gravel. Rio slams the door closed. "We need to go. The whole colony is on us."

"Right," says J.R. He speeds into the cockpit corridor. Rio follows him.

They dive into the front seats. J.R. puts the coach into drive and steps on the accelerator. There's a slight lurch on Rio's side, accompanied by a sickening crunch as the vehicle bursts an exoskeleton. J.R. swerves onto the road and gathers speed.

Rio checks the right-side rearview. What once was a dirt hill is now a wriggling, brown-jaundiced sheet, alive with legs, beady eyes, wagging pincers, quivering carapaces and segmented abdomens. The beasts crawl down the hill's sides, cluster across the ground, sometimes piling on top of each other in vengeful mounds. Some three dozen or so march sentinel on the hill's stepped peaks. Most of them are staring daggers at the coach as if flinging curses and opprobrium. She watches as they get smaller, smaller, smaller.

And, something else catches Rio's notice just as the coach curves behind a crag. There's a pentagonal sign back there.

Rio turns to J.R. "You parked us in a wild zone," she says.

J.R. gives her a shellshocked look.

"J.R., you know you're supposed to stay driving when you see those things, right? Even bandits do that."

J.R. shrinks against his chair. He glances at Rio, then quickly looks away. His eye twitches and his mouth is trying to form words. "I-I...I know."

"Didn't you *hear* them?"

"What?"

"The noise! The hissing they make. It was loud as hell and you were lollygagging around on your console."

His face when he looks at Rio is a mix of shame and fear. "They...they were making...?"

"Are you fucking deaf, J.R.? What's wrong?"

He pauses in thought. "Guess I'm...just really tired?"

"If you're too tired to notice a sign, you should let me drive. I can at least keep us safer than that."

"Sorry."

"I'm not saying it 'cause I'm angry. I'm saying it because I'm *worried*. Where's your fear, J.R.? This is the Red fucking Desert. I had to run out there in my underwear to save you."

"It won't happen again."

Rio quiets down, feels her pounding heart slow. J.R. takes the coach down a winding slope. Beyond the hills, Rio makes out the gravel flatlands, pocked with black and brown reeds and weave shrubs.

J.R. keeps his console in the ashtray. It's been lighting up with messages since he sat down and started the coach. He takes it in his right hand, holds the scanner over his right eye. The ubiquitous unlocking sound comes, then he speaks into it: "Send to Jolene. Begin. Sorry I left abruptly. Had a close call with a spearmouth and I'm back to driving now." He hesitates. "My coach companion saved me. I would've died back there. End." He drops the console back in the tray. Then, he falls silent and a graveness comes across his face.

"Hey," says Rio, "you okay?"

He says nothing. He's still driving, but he doesn't seem to hear her. There's something not right about this man. Not in the creepy sense. He just really does not seem *okay*. One moment, perfectly composed, the next, *gone*. Not even the hissing of an army of dirt eaters can rouse him. He is obviously extremely tired, but somehow, that doesn't quite satisfy for an explanation. Could it be drugs? Rio has spent lots of time around drug users. J.R. is too lucid for downers, not twitchy enough for uppers. What's more, J.R. himself cannot seem to account for his own disorientation. *Guess I'm just really tired*, he said. He wasn't just trying to pacify Rio. It really was the best answer he had.

The land smooths out and at last, they're on a stretch of pure, straight highway. Nothing but red earth, weeds, amethyst sky and blazing sun now past its crest and plunging for the Laredan horizon.

"I have a question for you," says J.R., now apparently out of his reverie.

"Yeah?" says Rio.

He hesitates a long time. "What are you doing up here in the cockpit, with the sun shining on you, when you have a body mod?"

Rio looks down at herself and gasps. Her legs are huge. Maybe twice as thick as they were yesterday. Only a couple inches on each side of the shotgun seat remain uncovered by her hips and ass. The right side of her panties are splitting apart. The creases of her hips swell out to either side, split by her underwear band, which cuts deep into her flesh. Her lap is so broad she could set a dinner plate there. Even her knees and calves look markedly chunkier. Worst of all, this underwear is getting too narrow to hide her groins. She could easily flash pubes at J.R. like this, and maybe she already has.

It's times like this that Rio wishes she hadn't spent so much time with the family in the nude. She has forgotten too much of the shame she once knew. It's rough to suddenly remember it.

A flush burns in her cheeks. She covers her crotch with both hands. "I-I'm sorry!" she cries. "I completely forgot I was...I saw the dirt eaters going for you and I ran and got my knife and..."

"I wasn't sure at first," says J.R. "Like, maybe I just didn't have a good read on your...uh...figure. But, you really look different today."

Rio curls up into a ball and yells like an agitated schoolgirl. "I am! I've grown a ton since yesterday."

"You're right in the sun's rays. Are you *trying* to soak it in?"

"No!" she cries.

"Well, now that I know that," says J.R. He wakes up the coach control screen on the dash, selects *Windows* from the menu and scrolls down to a dimmer slide. It's not even halfway between lighter and darker. He slides it all the way to dark and the nanite windshield deepens to a gray that borders on opaque. "Sorry, I can barely see with it like this" he says, and slides it back by about a fifth. The desert through the windshield is as if viewed through shades. J.R. takes off his sunglasses and drops them in the tray with his console, no longer needing them. "Anyway, that'll slow down the mod transmission. Won't stop it."

"Okay," Rio whimpers, still clinging to herself in a fetal position. "I'm sorry if I flashed you."

"I just...uh...didn't look there."

She buries her face between her knees. "Thanks. You're nice."

An awkward silence hangs for a minute. J.R. breaks it. "Unfortunately, the windows in the pod are just glass. I can't adjust those. So..." he hesitates, "maybe you should stay up here during the daytime. Either that or the hold."

"I thought you hated me and didn't want me in here," says Rio. "Uh...sorry I came in here without asking, by the way. I just...followed you."

"I..." J.R. hesitates. "I can't exactly *hate* someone who saved me from those things."

They gaze at each other, both uneasy, both at odds, and yet despite everything, now at an understanding: they need to get through this desert. Better together than alone.

"S'cuse me a sec." Rio stands—and immediately utters a curse. The waist band of her underwear no longer reaches her tailbone. Ass cheek drags them down, exposing a couple centimeters of crack. Her hips pour over her waistband and bulge under, too. The material is so stretched and frayed, it has begun to roll up, showing more and more skin. Her thighs are hulking cones, tapering down to her knees. "God, dammit! Only one day and I'm already pouring out of these stupid panties." Grumbling, Rio takes a step into the corridor and her stride drags her panties further down her ass. A few centimeters below that, her butt cheeks are slurping the panties into her crack like lemonade.

"Sorry for being naked," she calls over her shoulder as she waddles into the pod.

"Like I said, I'm not looking," J.R. calls back.

She goes into the hold, digs through her bag and finds the packet of larger panties, three in a set, that she blew twenty gold pesos on back at El Ventana. She tries on the light gray. There's still a little hip bulge over them, but at least her pubis and crack are covered. To think, she feared these panties would be too big the day she reached El Nuevo. And she's so far away from there still. She finds her crimson dancing skirt. It used to slip on like a glove, now, she can *just* squeeze into it. The hem used to go down past her knees. Now, with her hips and ass taking up slack, her knees are almost completely bare. With her lower half skirted, it hits Rio how different her shape is. She's only maybe half a handspan wider from hip to hip, and yet her body seems like a new specimen. She wiggles her tush and watches the garment sway. A shy smile crosses her face. Not bad, for a dancer. Maybe it's best to focus on the upside.

Rio returns to the cockpit, takes her seat beside J.R. "I'm decent now," she says.

J.R. looks at the skirt and smiles nervously. He clears his throat. "So, why a body mod? Why out here of all places? This is like the most uncontrolled place you could take one. You're on a slow-moving coach in the desert."

"I didn't plan to take it when I did. When Jetta showed up yesterday, I-I had to. That's why she went after us, by the way. To get the mod back."

"To get it *back*?"

Rio swallows uncomfortably. "I...I stole it from them and left."

"You *stole* from them. Why? Those people are dangerous."

"I needed to get out of the Xolot Family—that's what they call themselves. A family."

"Why steal a mod though?"

"I *need* it."

"For?"

She pinches the hem of her skirt between her legs and swishes it in the air. "Like I said, I'm a dancer."

J.R.'s mouth pops open in realization. "Oh. *That's* why you're headed to El Nuevo Corazon."

"I'm gonna get a job at one of the clubs there. Just need to pass the interview. And, I can't go in skinny. I need to be pretty."

"You must've been on Laredo a long time if you think skinny is bad looking."

"It's not just the fashion stuff. The Xolot Family—the Lugars and the Capo, I mean—they all have mods that make them bigger or different. It's what makes the Xolot Family special. Everyone in the family loves and worships them. Hell, *I* did too. I *do*, sort of. I still think they're all beautiful. Every one of them. Not saying they're all great people, but..." She shrugs, looks at J.R. meekly. "You can only be with them so long before that stuff gets into your head. Maybe I should know better. I was with them from the beginning, when they were just ordinary. Just *people*. Before they turned into...y'know, demigods."

"Why El Nuevo, though? No offense, but that's like, the chintziest place on the whole planet. You seem..."

"What?" says Rio.

"You seem like such a...a *for real* person. I saw you stab that sp earmouth. Not saying you don't dance, but, is El Nuevo really where you want to end up?"

Rio tosses her head against the seat and groans. "You don't understand, J.R.! I'm a *criminal*. Interpol definitely has records on me. If I want to get away from being a biker bandit, I need *protection*."

J.R. looks at Rio quizzically. He doesn't follow.

"Look," says Rio, "This whole planet is run by four different kinds of people, okay? First, there's the Corpos, who run the industry—the guys who own the mining and the factories. Second, there's the Honchos who run the clubs, the warehouses, the drug cartels, the casinos—the El Nuevo types, right? Some of them are more legal than others, but they're all the same. Organized, rich. Third, there's the Capos who run the bandit groups out in the wilds. They steal from the Corpos and Honchos, smuggle drugs—like the Xolots. Fourth, there's the cultists up north and who knows what they do besides make cotton shirts and come up with weird rules about technology and how you should dress and who you should marry."

"What about the government? The courts? Interpol? Where are they in this picture?"

Rio laughs derisively. "Those guys? They're like, chess pieces for the Corpos and the Honchos to play with. That's what I'm *saying*. Look, I stole from caravans out here in the desert, right? Then, I left the Xolots. That makes me an enemy of the Corpos *and* at least one Capo. So, I need to work a good job for a Honcho who can offer his *protection*. If I do right by him, *hopefully*, he calls Interpol one day and makes that record disappear. And then, *maybe*, I get to be free again. That's how this whole thing works. You can't be an enemy of all four kinds of men. If you piss off one, you need another who's got your back. It's the way to survive." J.R. gazes straight ahead through the tinted windshield at the eternal flatland whooshing by and lets

out a very long, drawn out exhale. It's clear enough, he's hearing a lot of this for the first time. Rio leans in a bit closer. "You haven't been on Laredo very long, have you?"

"Two years," says J.R. His face twitches disconsolately. "I was working for...well, I guess you could say, I was working for an important person."

"Important. Corpo, Honcho, Capo or Cultist?"

He looks at Rio with deeply sad trouble in his eyes. "Actually, I'd rather not talk about it."

"Okay," says Rio. Her head swims. She feels the initial signs of a bad headache. She's weary and a pressure falls on the crown of her head.

"Anyway, that part of my life is over," J.R. goes on. "All that matters now is Jolene."

"I'm...sorry to ask this but..."

"What?"

"What will you do, now that I...fucked up your plans?"

J.R. sighs. "I talked to Jolene. She said not to worry. We'll find some way out of this place. She just wants me with her. As soon as possible."

I didn't ask about her, I asked about you, thinks Rio. But the headache is getting worse and she has no will to press him on it. "It must feel good to be so...special to somebody."

He sits back in his seat and considers this. He seems about to say something. Then, the glint in J.R.'s eye fades. He squints out to the horizon. His hands still work the pedals and the wheel, but he's a million miles away.

Rio waves. "Hello? Were you about to say something?"

"What?"

"I said, it must feel good to be so special to somebody."

"Oh. Yeah, sure."

There it is again. A total fadeout. He's lucid and conversing for a good twenty minutes, then he loses himself.

Rio sinks her head against the window and decides she ought not to care. It's none of her business. She closes her eyes, but there's no relaxing with this throbbing in her head. She endures it for a few minutes, then turns to J.R. "Hey, do you have any painkillers?"

J.R. looks at her. He's back: glint in eye, signs of awareness in his body. Like nothing was ever the matter. He indicates the corridor behind them with his thumb. "There's a wellness kit in the wall there. There's always a bottle of cycoxylene in those."

She starts to rise from her seat.

"What's the matter?"

"Headache."

"Did you drink water today? Like, enough?"

Irritated by such a naggy question, Rio drops her plushy rear back in the seat. "I always drink my water. I lived in the desert. I know my limits," she says peevishly.

"Yeah but, maybe you don't anymore."

"What?"

Your body weight is *increasing* from the mod. You need more water now. If you have a headache, that could be why."

"Oh." Rio's irritation gusts out of her with a quick breath. She gets up, goes to the pod, refills her water skin, snaps open the wellness kit in the corridor, finds the cycoxylene and washes two pills down. She returns to the shotgun seat with her mouth glued to the water skin. Water tastes amazing now. She chugs it.

J.R. arches a sly brow at her. "Mm-hmm. Thought so."

"Thank you," she says, wiping her mouth with her wrist. Already, the headache feels half as bad.

"You should probably eat too. Mods burn a lot of calories when you've been out in the sun."

"How do you know so much about this?"

J.R. looks at her, seems nearly ready to say something. Then, he turns back to the road, shrugs. "I read up on stuff. Anyway, we need to stop at a charging station soon as we hit civilization. We're not using the thrusters so the battery is draining fast. And..." he looks over at Rio, "we should refill the water tank too. You'll need as much as you can get."

Rio nods solemnly.

"And..." he hesitates. "Fuck it. Let's grab dinner."

"You mean, a diner?"

"Why not? Grainmeal's getting old."

"I only have 26gp."

He chuckles ruefully, shaking his head. "Then I'll pay and you'll owe me, I guess."

Rio stares at J.R. a long time. "You shouldn't be so nice to someone who got you robbed."

"Don't I fucking know it," he replies.

IV: Contaminada Rio

Night falls. For a time, the sky is raisin-colored. It deepens to black and the star clusters come out.

J.R. unshades the nanite windows to see more of the dust and pebble-strewn highway in the coach's headlights. There are no streetlamps to show the way in the Red Desert, and along this flat stretch, a sign only maybe once every fifteen minutes. J.R. starts to nod off, so Rio pokes him awake, starts chatting to keep him going. She asks if he needs to pull over and take a rest. "Once we hit a charging station," he replies. So, Rio keeps chatting; J.R. keeps driving.

"Hey, look," says Rio, pointing. At last, a sign: charging station, dining, auto repair, convenience shop. It's what they need.

"Hallelujah," says J.R., rubbing a bloodshot eye with his knuckle. They turn off the highway and follow a piercing glimmer of white light.

The roadstop is an oasis of luminance in a jet black world. The stars fade as they get closer. They pull under a halogen-lit awning and park next to a charging kiosk. Out of the pod, Rio is thrilled to be on her feet again. These dancing legs weren't made for coach seats.

It's unspeakably quiet. Only the whisk of an occasional breeze, their feet on the tiled floor and the mild hum of the halogens fill the vacant space. How can this be civilization when so much *nowhere* stretches out in every direction?

And yet, Rio hears something. Or, does she feel it? A vague, rhythmic undulation that slips into indistinctness. She wonders if it's her heartbeat, but she checks her pulse. Her own heart is not in sync with the sound or sensation or whatever it is.

J.R. waves the coach's keycard over the lens by the door, locking it, then he flips up a long, rectangular hatch between the wheels. Beneath is a console with, among screens, dials and other inputs, a power port bigger than a playing card. "Power. Deposit payment," he says to the kiosk and gets close to it for the eyescan. There's a click as one of three stacked compartments next to the kiosk unlocks. J.R. pulls a plug fastened to a wheel-wound cord out of the compartment, sticks it into the coach port and flips a switch to lock it in place. A new hum sets in as the coach drinks the power. "Water refill. Same deposit account," says J.R. The compartment above the cord unlocks and he draws out a hose with a nozzle and sticks it in an aperture close to the port.

"What am I covering?" says Rio. She may be down to her last 26gp, but she has to pay for *something*.

"Let's not talk about money tonight. It's going to depress me," says J.R.

Rio sighs, turns away and soaks in the darkness beyond, the sulfur smell of battery acid, the arid breeze cooling their skin, the gnawing hunger in her belly. She has lived in this desert for a long time. Why does it seem so much more frightening *here*, in the blinding light of a charging station? She steps beyond the kiosk and looks up and down the length of this empty roadstop. Beyond one side of the charging station is a large parking lot for overnights. On the other side is a strip of businesses, starting with an automated convenience store—no employees, no customers. Just beyond that is a mechanic shop, apparently closed. At the end of this little strip of civilization is a diner with a top of curved glass and a sign along the side that reads *Espresso Royale* in old-timey, loopy, neon pink letters.

Again, she notices it: that rhythmic pulse. A feeling of pressure, then release. Pressure, then release. But, it's behind her now. She turns and sees J.R.

It's *his* heartbeat. No, not just that. The blood coursing through his veins. There's more, but she can't separate it all out. It clusters like unmixed audio.

Is this what it's like to have a pheromonal cloud? To be so intimately aware of another person?

J.R. points down the strip to the diner with an exhausted gesture. "We'll eat once the water is done filling. We can leave the coach to charge. It'll take it an hour before it's ready, I'd guess."

There are circles under J.R.'s eyes, his posture is stooped, there's a visible strain in his neck as it tries to hold up his head. She senses the unsteadiness inside his body too. Perhaps his blood pressure is low. "You look terrible," she says.

He chortles. "Thanks." He takes his console out of his pocket, glances at it. Briefly, sadness looms on his face, evidently a feeling he can't stuff down when he's this tired.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah," he says as if it were a silly question to ask, and pockets the console. And once again, his face goes blank. He leans against the coach tire, gazes down at the tile floor and seems a world away. Rio privately decides not to let him drive any more tonight, assuming she can stop him.

To calm her nerves, she begins to sway her hips. The crimson dancing skirt swishes from her broad hips. She twirls, rocks from foot to foot. No music but the wind and the uneasy pulse of J.R.'s heart.

J.R.'s heartbeat picks up a notch. Rio turns and realizes J.R. is watching her. There's curiosity, even a touch of sentimentality in his face. He turns away quickly, as if to pass his stare off as nothing. Nice try. He withdraws the hose and lets it auto-wind back into the compartment and snap closed. "Let's go eat," he says gruffly.

* * *

The diner is an extension of arched glass, divided in large, even segments by a steel ribcage, mounted on a white-painted adobe frame that rises to about waist height. With so much window going from walls to ceiling, the place would afford a decent view of the night sky, except the steel ribs all meet at a rounded steel overhang at the ceiling's summit. From there, bulbs of retro light shine down and choke off any taste of external atmosphere. Tables are spaced along the walls on both sides of the building. Running down the center of the interior is a closed loop of countertop with stools spaced all around it. And in the center of the loop, a pair of android waitresses skate around on wheels.

They wipe the counters, brew coffee, work the grill, assemble sandwiches, bake pies that they store in a mounted case—and presently, they cheerily wish Rio and J.R. a good evening as the two of them pass through the door and an old fashioned bell jingles over their heads.

The nearer waitress rolls to the counterspace closest to J.R. and Rio. A smile spreads on her red lips. Dimples form on her white silicon face. Her eyes are black with digital blue rings for irises. She wears a small cap over a shiny, dark, sculpture of hair and a white apron. Her body is colored along the shoulders, sides and upper legs to suggest a turquoise dress underneath. Pinned to her apron is a name tag: *Call me Donna*. When she speaks, her voice is sweet and homely. "Sit wherever you like, you two! I'll be with ya in just a sec!"

Rio giggles. Perhaps a desert-dwelling technophobe like herself ought to hate all this garish artifice, but she can't bring herself to. Not here. There's something cute, daresay bittersweet, about retro restaurants, so eager to recapture the imagined flavor of a life that died ages ago on a little slice of a planet, unbearably far away. In fact, the overall effect in Espresso Royale is not embarrassment, but eeriness. There is absolutely no one here. Just J.R., Rio and a pair of bot waitresses. Indeed, there may not be another person for kilometers in any direction. Yet, the diner is lit, the coffee is fragrant and the waitresses are up and it is as if someone's life is supposed to happen here. A languorous honky tonk number twangs along at a low volume from the speakers and tries to mask the eeriness, but only adds to it. The singer warbles in a creaky croon as he recounts his Texas night of getting trashed on whiskey and calling up some girl named Cindy who tells him to stop dreaming, it's over. It's an apt sentiment in a place where dreams never die, but don't exactly live either.

J.R. turns to Rio. "Counter or booth?"

"Mmm. Booth."

They venture out to the end of the diner where the glass curves around the building, not that there's much besides blackness to see outside. Rio sits, immediately shivers. The upholstery is stone cold and she's got nothing but her thin, flowy dancing skirt and a pair of panties to cover her doubled-or-more-in-size ass. Goosebumps pop up on her thighs.

J.R. slides in across from her. "Something wrong?"

She makes a pouty face. "My butt is *freezing*."

"Oh." He laughs nervously. Is that the ghost of a flush on his cheeks? Is that the quickening of his heart?

Before Rio can get a solid read on J.R., Donna the bot waitress arrives, bearing a pair of laminated menus and two coffee cups dangling from handles by the rubbery finger of a segmented hand. "And, how are *you* folks doin'?" she chirps. "Can I getcha some coffee?"

"Right here," says J.R.

"Iced or hot?"

"Hot."

"Water for me," says Rio. "No ice, *please*."

"Comin' right up!" sings Donna. She sets a coffee cup in front of J.R., skates back to the counter and then returns with a carafe and a water glass for Rio. Her aim is flawless as she fills J.R.'s mug with steaming coffee.

J.R. chuckles as Donna leaves. Rio gives him a look and he explains: "back on earth, I was in one of these places with a co-worker. The waitress bot started pouring his coffee, and then didn't stop."

"Oh *no!*"

"She filled the cup and then coffee started going everywhere. It got on my pants and I had to climb up on my seat to get away from it. My co-worker was like, 'stop! Stop! What're you doing?!' but the waitress bot just kept pouring—with that smile on her face."

"Sounds like a typical Earth fiasco."

"Why? Because of the technology?"

"Tech is everywhere on Earth. You can't escape it. You're stuck with it whether it works or not. That's why I left."

"You left to get away from machines?"

"At least, to live in a place where they weren't everywhere. From a very young age, I felt like I was stuck living *inside* a machine. I wanted real stuff in my life. And, more real people, instead of...y'know...bots and hologens and voices of fake people."

"Hm. So, uh, how did you go from shunning technology to taking a body mod?"

Rio purses her lips in a pout. "Don't make fun of me."

"Like, don't you think technology, *sometimes*, can make things more interesting? Or, more beautiful?"

She flutters her eyelids at J.R. "More beautiful—like me?"

J.R. hesitates. "Sure. Like you." There's no mistaking the quickening of his heart this time. He's nervous. Maybe a little excited, too

She flushes slightly, clears her throat. "That's different, though."

"Why's it different?"

"Every mod is unique and it's made by some genius, somewhere. It's like when I see a wooden cup, carved by a really amazing craftsman. I mean, I *guess* it's technology. But, it's not a *machine*. It's beautiful and alive. But it's even better when it's a mod because, when you take it, it becomes a part of you."

There's a change inside J.R. Perhaps his breath is catching in his throat. Something about what she said has affected him in some way. But, he tries to hide it with a polite smile and a nod.

Donna returns. Rio orders a chimichurri incubado burger and turnip fries. Fifteen minutes later, Donna serves her plate and Rio's mouth gets so busy gobbling down fries and sinking her teeth into the dressed up faux-meat patty, she has to stop talking. When at last she comes up for air, she's astonished to find two thirds of her meal gone. She looks over at J.R. who observes her politely as he sips a fava bean and faux-bacon soup.

"If I order an omelet, will you help me with it?" says J.R.

Rio looks down at her vanishing burger and fries. "I'm probably gonna be full soon."

"Just a few bites?"

"If you order it with salt melon? Sure."

J.R. waves Donna back to their table and orders an omelet with feta, salt melon, onion, tomato and hot sauce. When the omelet arrives, Rio's burger and fries are gone and somehow, she still has an appetite. J.R. scoots the omelet over to Rio. "You first," he says.

Before Rio knows what's happening, less than half the omelet is left. "Uh...oh my gosh, I'm sorry."

J.R. laughs. "It's fine. You can finish it. I'll order more food for myself. Do you like biscuits and gravy?"

Rio squints at him. "Are you ordering for me or for you?"

"Just asking."

"I hate biscuits and gravy."

"Okay, well in that case, how about—?"

"I'm just kidding. I *love* biscuits and gravy. I was testing you. Why are you ordering me all this food?"

"Well, your mod has been busy all day. It burns a lot of calories. You need to eat so it doesn't exhaust you."

Rio looks at the piece of omelet on her fork. It's the last bite. "Oh."

"So, biscuits and grav—?"

"Fine. Bring it."

J.R. summons Donna again and places the order.

"How do you know so much about mods, anyway?"

J.R. shrugs. "I like to learn stuff."

"Okay, well, can you tell me, if I eat more, will my butt get even bigger, just from eating?"

There it is again, that slight race of his heart. It's even more noticeable now. The coffee and food has rejuvenated him. "Well, sort of," he says. "Food doesn't have a direct effect on the mod's expression, but it does make it easier for your body to cooperate with the changes and the mod gets more efficient. So, if you eat properly, you'll grow a bit faster tomorrow."

Rio is about to utter a sly rejoinder, but she's diverted by a light from outside. It's a bus. Its thrusters are still humming. The double decker vehicle pulls to the curb. The lights inside pop on and the air brakes hiss. Figures from inside queue up, exit the vehicle and approach the diner.

"Guess we're not alone anymore," J.R. mutters into his coffee.

Miners. They straggle in through the doors, most in dusty coveralls. Respiratory masks hang from their necks. Goggles are tucked in their pockets. Some bear rucksacks with gloves and boots dangling. The men are bearded and grizzled, the women pain-faced and haggard. They fan out to the tables, the counter. As Donna and the other waitress roll out to take beverage orders, two more bots ascend from the floor behind the counter and follow suit.

Rio's mind fills with the raw data of human bodies.

"What's up with those two?" says J.R. discreetly. He's looking over at the doors where two figures still stand while the rest of the bus riders have taken their seats. Both are women in flowy, bone white dresses with lace trim, neck collars and long, baggy sleeves. They wear knitted white sweaters, sandals and their heads are covered in straw bonnets. Here in a fully automated highway diner filled with itinerant miners, they are utterly out of place. And, something is troubling them. They lean together, whispering to each other as they glance out over the dining area. In fact, they seem to be looking at Rio and J.R. Then, they walk out the doors. J.R. gives Rio a puzzled look.

"They're cultists," says Rio. "From up north. The prairielands."

"Ohhh. Do they all dress like that?"

"Not all, but the white dresses are pretty standard up there for the Awoken."

"Why do you suppose they walked out?"

Rio wants to answer, but it's hard. There are over forty heartbeats in the diner now. Forty pairs of lungs. Forty aortas siphoning blood. Forty nervous systems, firing tens of thousands of signals around like shots across battle lines. All these signs of life pour into Rio, uninvited and unexpected. It's like an overwhelmingly bright light or a blaring alarm. She struggles to breathe.

"Uh...you okay?"

Rio looks at J.R., looks down at her plate.

"After I finish this biscuit, can we go?"

"What's wrong?"

"It's too much." Rio drops her fork, presses her hands to her ears and squeezes her eyes shut. It does nothing to quiet the data pouring in from all these bodies around her, but perhaps J.R. will get the picture.

"I-I don't understand."

It takes a while before Rio can respond. "I-I have a cloud now."

"A cloud?"

"Y'know...pheromones."

J.R. nods, his eyes lit in realization.

Rio steels herself against the onslaught and tries to pay attention to the savor of her food.

"Um, anything you need?"

Rio shakes her head. "I just need quiet. Until I can get out of here."

J.R. lets her eat. The clamour weighs against her like a lead blanket. It's impossible to know whose bodily signature is whose in all this. She could scream. It's unbearable. This biscuit she's eating is her life line. She eats up the last few bites of it.

"You can head outside," says J.R. "Get away from the...um, noise. I'll take care of the charge."

Rio nods. "Thanks," she says weakly. She gets up and walks very quickly to the doors. She throws them open and tears out across the paved walkway to the curb. There, Rio sits and rubs her face in her hands. She can still feel a few bodily signs from the diner, some eight paces away, but it's fainter. The distance is like breathing again after being choked.

Rio catches her breath. If a diner full of patrons was too much for her, how will she tolerate El Nuevo, where people are everywhere? For that matter, how does Axon cope with this every day? How does Jetta, Billy Boy, Starlyn and Truffle do it? All it took was two minutes in a crowd and she couldn't handle it anymore. Do mod users with clouds just get used to this?

She's interrupted as two sturdy heartbeats approach, coming clearer as they step deeper into Rio's extrasensory radius. Rio looks. It's the two cultists. They stand a stone's throw away on the sidewalk. The bonnets are gone. Both of them wear gas masks now. Not simple face respirators, but full masks with goggles and snouted breathing valves. Half-lit by the glow of the diner, half shadowed by the darkness beyond, masked while in full cultist gowns, there's something ludicrous and at the same time deeply menacing about them. But, Rio can tell by their thumping hearts that they're scared.

"It's you!" one of them, the shorter of the two, cries in a muffled voice.

Rio stands and faces them. "What?"

"You're trying to poison us."

Rio squints. "Poison?"

"We shouldn't be so close," the tall one cautions the short one.

"You're a desert wolf," says the shorter one. It's not a question but an accusation.

"Eleanor!" cries the tall one.

Rio's heart lurches. She is talking about the Xolot Family. Since the Family drummed up a reputation for raiding caravans and relinquishing expensive tech, the *desert wolves* moniker has followed them everywhere. People don't know a wolf skull from a dog skull.

Rio puts a hand on her hip. She takes a step in the cultists' direction. "I'm not a wolf."

"Oh, no no! Don't you dare get any closer. I'm warning you," says the tall one. She's terrified. The same is not as much so of her companion, apparently named Eleanor, whose heartbeat is just as quick, but her bodily energy seems wielded, like a weapon. Eleanor *wants* something from Rio.

"State your business or go away," says Rio.

The cultists hesitate. Then, Eleanor speaks: "we're looking for a girl named Teegan."

Rio tosses her hands in the air. "Why would I know someone named Teegan?"

"Eleanor, there's no point talking to—" says the tall one, who wants to get away from Rio as fast as possible.

But, Eleanor persists: "she has long, dark hair and gray eyes and a low voice."

Rio laughs ruefully. "I don't know her. And, why should I?"

"The desert wolves took her."

"We don't know that for sure," cautions the tall one.

Rio hesitates. The words that come out of her mouth are wobbly. She's not proud of them.

"The...the desert wolves don't *take* anyone who doesn't want to go with them."

Fury alights in Eleanor. Rio catches the cultist's heart racing. Her hands are balled up into trembling fists. "Liar!" she screams. "You're a dirty, horrible liar." Her voice is cracked by a sob.

"Eleanor, let's go."

"You wolves don't build anything, you just destroy. You destroy people, families, communities. You took her from us! You're a liar, and you took her."

Once, in one of the small towns close to the northern border, Rio was out with some Xolot companions and a group of cultists started throwing wood chips at them and called them dirty and disgraceful. Rio took a friend by the collar and started making out with her. The woodchip chucking continued and the verbal haranguing intensified, but Rio had always felt she'd won

the dispute just by showing these cultists the joy of life in the Xolot Family. Cultists can only dream of being so free. But there is no Family to make out with here, and the rage in Eleanor's eyes is not something that can be kissed away. "I told you," says Rio, "I don't know who you're talking about. I've never seen her."

"She-she wouldn't have left us. You wolves polluted the air with that *stink*, that poison that changes people. From those...those *gadgets* you put in yourself. You *changed* her."

The tall cultist tugs on Eleanor's arm. "Eleanor, let's get supper." Eleanor doesn't listen. She's trying to think of more insults to spit at Rio. It's clear enough that what Eleanor really needs is a hug. But, she won't get it from her antsy companion and Rio can't offer it either, not now.

"What's going on?" calls a voice. It's J.R., approaching.

Eleanor notices J.R., then looks at the ground. "You're disgusting," she says to Rio, her voice trembling. "Your clothes are disgusting, your body's disgusting, and so are you." Then, she and her companion turn and head for the diner doors.

"Hey! What's wrong with you? You shouldn't talk to people like that," J.R. calls after them.

Eleanor stops at the doors and looks back at him. "She's poisoning you too," she says over her shoulder. "Watch out." They pass through the doors.

Rio stares down at the gravel. Her skin prickles. *Disgusting*. If she could unfold her whole life like a paper bird just to see if there really is anything disgusting in it, she would. But, it's all wadded up together. Her proudest moments are placed too close to the moments that are the most shameful to say what's disgusting and what's not.

J.R. approaches. Rio feels his hand on her shoulder. She feels the warmth inside him. His beating heart, his pressured lungs. "Don't listen to them," he says. "None of that's true. You're not disgusting."

Rio takes a handful of J.R.'s shirt below his collar and moves in close. She wants to kiss him. She wants it so bad. She doesn't know why. It's not just his kindness. It's not the fact that he somehow can be here next to her when he has every right to hate and shun her. There's something about this man that feels like dipping her face into cool water after years of sweating her life out through sun-cooked skin. In the Family, she had so many companions, so many warm bodies, so many hugs and kisses and kind faces and hands to lift her up. How can this feeling about J.R. be something *new*? Maybe it's that she once had *many* people in her life and now has none. Simple deprivation. It *must* be that. There's no way this one person who is here for her now can be *special*. The only special people in this world are the ones who have power, and it's clear enough, J.R. doesn't have much more of that than she does.

She can't kiss him so she clutches his shirt and breathes and feels his heart in his chest and leans a little bit against him in the dark. He lets her do it, just holds her by her shoulder. "We...we should go back to the coach," she mutters at last. She doesn't want to, but she's a hair's breadth from doing something stupid. Neither of them needs that.

* * *

The coach's battery is at full power when they return to the charging station. Once in the cockpit, J.R. pulls the coach out onto the road.

"Please don't drive anymore tonight," says Rio.

"I'm not," says J.R. He turns into the parking lot and halts the coach.

The two of them move to the pod. Rio searches the bench compartment for a new blanket. J.R. takes a trip to the hold and returns with a console. Not his pocket one, but a larger, oval-shaped device, about the size of a splayed hand. He takes his usual spot on the bench and turns the device on.

"What're you up to? Shouldn't you be getting sleep?" says Rio as she wraps a fresh blanket around her body and takes her bench.

"Checking something," says J.R. The light of the screen glows bluish white in his eyes. Rio lays down on the bench and watches him. After a minute, he rises from his seat and brings the console over to Rio. "I need your help with this part," he says, and holds the device out to her.

Rio frowns at him. "What?"

"We can sign into the local server of your mod. But, the only way to authenticate is with an optic scan."

She takes the console, but still looks at him strangely. What is he on about?

"Your mod probably has adjustable settings," says J.R. "We can reduce your somatic receptivity."

"What are you *saying*?"

"The noise? The cloud you mentioned, how it was overwhelming at the diner? We can adjust that down so you can be around people and not lose your mind."

Rio's jaw drops open. "Y-you can do that for me?"

"I won't know for sure until I see the settings, but it's a pretty standard feature."

"But...but why do we have to scan my eyeball?"

J.R. points to his own eye. "You have the mod. When you take it, there's a microscopic little nano fixture that finds its way into your eyeball. It puts a *very* tiny barcode inside your retina. It's too small for the naked eye to see, but it's there. That's how you authenticate."

Rio looks at J.R., stunned. She lifts the console to her face. On the screen is a prompt: *please enter password or retinal code*. Inside a box within the prompt is a video capture of her face. A subtitle at the bottom of the capture tells her to move the camera closer. She does. There's an unlocking sound, then the prompt disappears and a menu pops up. It displays a series of sliders titled with funny words: *Dorsal Extension, Femoral Integrity, Superficial Texturization...*

"Can I take a look?" says J.R.

Rio hands him the console. He takes a seat beside her and scrolls down the menu. "Here it is." He points to a slider titled *Sensorial Acuity* with *low* on the left and *high* on the right. It's adjusted three quarters to the *high* end. "This is to adjust the receptivity of telegnostic nanites you release."

Rio scowls at him. "How do you know these words? How do you know all this *stuff*?"

"I-I just read about..." he hesitates. Then, he goes silent and just looks at Rio uneasily.

Rio's heart leaps. The thought did occur to her back at the diner, but it seemed too incredible to be so. "J.R." she says softly, "are you an architect? Do you *build* mods?"

J.R. looks around the pod. He bites his lower lip. "I was just trying to be helpful," he says. He rakes his hair front to back with his fingers.

"J.R.," says Rio, "what the fuck are you doing out here in the Red Desert? You have to be a genius. You're like, the most important kind of person on this whole planet."

He laughs spitefully. "That isn't true. I'm not a genius and I'm not important."

"My ass, you aren't. Laredo doesn't even matter without people like you. Without the mod industry, there's nothing out here. Just gold and other pretty rocks."

J.R. falls back in his seat. "I'm not important," he repeats. "Valuable, maybe. But, not important."

Rio puts the console down and touches J.R.'s shoulder. "I won't tell anybody. I promise." Rio has never met a mod architect in her life, not knowingly, anyway. But, every bandit understands

value. Architects are such commodities, they have to travel in secret, usually on private aircrafts. If kidnapped, they can be ransomed for hundreds of thousands.

J.R. sighs. He looks at Rio, shrugs helplessly and smiles. He gets up, goes over to his bench and rests elbows against knees. "Anyway," he says, "I'm not an architect anymore. I left that behind."

"Why? They must pay you a ton."

"They did," says J.R. "But, it wasn't worth it. I was miserable and hated myself."

"Why?"

"I was stuck in a gated community. Everything I needed was delivered to me. I was under constant watch. I couldn't go anywhere on this planet without exhaustively documenting my travel plans. I was bound by contract to cooperate with all of it. And, I'm not even talking about the work, which I'm technically not allowed to discuss, but that was horrible too. And, now that I've quit, they want me back. Even though they hate me."

"Why do they hate you?"

"They hate *all* mod architects, because we're the only ones who can build the mods safely. There's no factory process to construct these things without an architect getting into each unit to condition the nanites so they're safe in the human body. Each strain of nanites is its own subspecies, per mod. It has to be that way, because nanites need to adapt to tiny fluctuations in their environment to work. Otherwise, they produce horrible results that can kill people. Building mods is more art than science. They want to change that. They hate having to pay high wages to people like us, who've been through years-long apprenticeships just so they can pump out a couple dozen mods a year, per architect. They need us, so they hate us. They're waiting for the day when we become obsolete."

"Do you know who built my mod?"

"Well, it wasn't me. I sort of wish it was, because I'd feel better about the last two years if I spent them making mods that grow butts, muscles, and so on. I'd be making way less money, but at least I'd be making things that might make life better for people. I was at a megacorp, making mods for special military ops and espionage agencies. The sex work side of the mod industry is its own world. It's a much more Laredan thing. The mods cater more to Laredan fashion. Y'know, for bigger bodies and stuff. I don't really have contacts in sex mod architecture, but whoever built yours did a good job. It's well harmonized, the solar cells are efficient, and it has a very powerful secretional system."

Rio shakes her head. "What're you saying?"

"You call it a cloud, or pheromones. It's really a discharge of sub nanites that your main nanities produce. That's what allows you to sense other people, to feel their respiratory, circulatory and endocrine systems. And to, uh...y'know, make people sexually aroused. Because, that's a big thing in sex work."

Rio thinks on this. "Have...um...have you ever heard of a cloud—sorry, I'm not calling it a *secretional system*, that's gross—that can sort of turn a whole crowd of people into sex slaves?"

"Sex slaves?" J.R. furrows his brow, considers this. "I mean, obviously, clouds have a powerful effect on the body, which alters the mind to some extent. And, there are sub nanite species that can do terrifying things to the brain. But, those don't operate in a cloud. You have to ingest or inject them. Secretional—*cloud*—systems are never that powerful. Nowhere near. At least, as far as I've seen."

Rio's mouth is dry as she speaks, "I know someone who has a cloud like that. It alters your mind. Yeah, it makes you horny but also...a slave. You don't just want him, you *need* him."

"Who is this?"

"Axon. The Capo of the Xolot Family. He can control a band of a hundred and fifty people with his cloud. Make them excited, desperate, whatever he wants them to feel. And when you're not in his cloud, you *miss* it. He's like a drug. He has over a hundred and fifty people under his spell. He gets help from the Lugars, since they have cloud mods too, but his cloud holds it all together."

"A hundred and fifty people? That's crazy. I can't imagine how a mod could have that kind of reach *and* that kind of effect at the same time. With clouds, the rule is, the bigger the cloud, even if it has lots of time to spread, the more watered down the effects are. Entropy wins."

"It *is* possible. I've been through it. Sometimes, his cloud was so intense, I started *seeing* things. Visions. Some nights, it seems like he was a messiah. I-I still think about it all the time. There's a part of me that *misses* it, that wants to go back and feel happy in his cloud again."

J.R. thinks this over. "Mods aren't just products that have a closed effect. They have a relationship with their users that's beyond symbiotic. The mod integrates with you. The cloud is sort of like a new appendage. If someone has a lot of conscious control over their cloud...I-I guess *maybe* they could make it do things that don't come with the instructions? But, you'd have to be a pretty special person to do that."

"Axon *is* special. He's extraordinary."

"Did...did he hurt you?"

Rio thinks it over. "Not like you mean. I didn't feel like I was doing things against my will. But, as time went on, I felt like my will wasn't *mine*. Like, my life was moving in ways I never could have decided on my own."

"So, you left?"

"When I was strong enough to. It took a really long time. But, I got to a point where I had to get out of there."

"Why steal a mod if you just wanted to escape?"

Rio rubs her face in her hands. "I didn't *just* want to escape, I was angry too. I wanted power of my own and they wouldn't let me have it. I had to stay a slave. They were starting to hand mods out to people who were newer. People who hadn't been around even a year. It-it wasn't fair. I was with them from the beginning." She looks up at J.R shyly. "Does...does that sound petty?"

"Which did you want more, status or freedom?"

Rio shakes her head. "I don't know. Both, maybe?" She sets her elbows on her knees and covers her face. "Look, I'm-I'm not trying to make you think I'm a good person. If they had given me a mod like, a year ago, yeah, I'd probably still be one of them. You can judge me for that, if you want to."

"If they would take you back, would you go?"

Rio draws in a long breath. "Maybe they *would* take me back. But..." she exhales. "Axon scares me."

J.R. crosses his arms. He looks down at the floor. He looks beyond exhausted and Rio feels guilty for keeping him up still later into the night. "Well," he says, "I wouldn't judge you for *that*."

The conversation dies there. Rio feels too raw to keep going down this path and J.R. looks half dead with exhaustion. After a time, she goes to the cockpit to get her waterskin. When she returns, J.R. is slumped against the back of the bench, head tossed back, asleep. She gets another blanket out, unfolds it and lays it over him. Then, she pulls the curtains over the windows, nestles up in her own blanket and commands the coach to turn out the lights.

She feels light, empty, and desultory after talking about Axon, like a plastic bag, rolling across the landscape. It's not a pleasant feeling, but it does come as a relief of sorts. When Rio finally does sleep, she does not dream of Axon.

V: Affectuosa Rio

Something awakens Rio in the early morning. The sky peeking in through the curtains is a turgid lavender. Some sort of change has taken place, not inside her, but nearby.

She looks around. J.R. is not on his bench. But, he is close, and wherever he is, he is in a different state than he was last night. Rio squeezes her eyes shut and tries to focus on him. He has a new scent. Yes, *scent* is the best word for it. His body swarms with fresh molecules, not just one kind, but a whole ecosystem. They hum through him like circuit signals in a well-integrated machine. His heart rate is elevated, his breath labored. It's not easy to read another person's body, but there are things Rio catches in J.R. that are enticingly similar to things her own body does under certain circumstances. He's in distress. Why? She pays closer attention, feels him muttering things to himself. She doesn't know what the words are, but they seem like self-castigations.

What's wrong, J.R.?

Rio slowly rises. Wherever J.R. is, she doesn't want to disturb him. But, curiosity draws her to her feet.

He's not in the cockpit. He's...in the bathroom. Of course. She tiptoes to the back corridor. The signals of J.R.'s body are loud and clear. As she nears the bathroom door, she hears—actually *hears*—his breath. It pours out of him like gusts of steam.

She wants to get closer, but hesitates. Then she realizes, if he gets up to leave the bathroom, she'll sense it. She has an advantage over him.

So, Rio inches up to the bathroom door and carefully presses her ear against it. She hears him. Small, stifled groans.

Rio's eyes widen, her mouth hangs loose. He's *pleasuring* himself. He feels good and he hates himself for it. Because...

Of course. Because of her. Because he's been stuck inside her cloud for hours and he can't take it anymore. For all this time, he's been trying to play it cool. But, he woke up horny and now he has to do something about it.

Rio trembles. Her face flushes. She peels off from the bathroom door, staggers back to her bench and slips under the blanket. No way she can sleep now. Her head swims. Should she feel guilty? Thanks to her, J.R. is getting turned on by someone who is *not* Jolene. But, she's not forcing J.R. to *do* anything, so guilt doesn't quite make sense. Still, she feels a pang of sympathy for him. Axon and the other mod users in the Family have done this to her thousands

of times: visited her with unshakable desire. Desire brings pain. How strange to be on the other end of that relationship. A part of her aches for him, wishes she could make him feel alright.

But, there's something else. Something that burns inside her. An awakening. The power that has been denied her so many times is now hers. She's seen how Axon does it. How he pleasures himself and transmits those feelings until she, and everyone in perhaps a ten meter radius, is hard, wet, desperate...whatever. She's been through those spontaneous orgies beneath the desert sky in which every individual's pleasure joined as one. At this very moment, she could touch herself, and J.R.'s pleasure would increase. She could make it burn so hot, he wouldn't have mind enough to hate himself for it. He could forget all his prior attachments and join her in the act of lovemaking from a distance. She could steal him away, just like that. She feels it so acutely, the act seems like it would be effortless. Like dancing, where your body just knows what to do, how to *talk* to another person without saying a single word. It's Rio's true language, not the one that has to grasp for tenuous terms to fit innocuous meanings, but meaning itself, true and personal.

At least, it seems just that easy. Rio clenches her hands into trembling fists and resists. But, she wants to do it. But, the fantasy fills her with glee.

At last, J.R. reaches climax on his own and Rio finds herself strangely moved as tingling pleasure fills his body and at last his muscles slacken and he spends the next few minutes slumped on the toilet cover, finding his breath. He's still mad at himself, but at least it's over.

When J.R. steps out into the pod, Rio pretends to be asleep. Then, when he takes his usual spot, Rio pretends to awaken. "Mm...hello."

"Morning," he croaks.

Rio sits up sluggishly. "You should probably sleep more. It's early."

"Mm-hmm." J.R. gets a pillow from the cabinet, lays down and pulls the covers over him. But, his eyes don't close. He only stares into space. He looks sad.

"Hey," says Rio softly. "Could you do me a favor?"

"Mm?"

Rio locates J.R.'s console on the bench, the oval-shaped device, and brings it over to him.

"Could you unlock it? I'd like to play around with the mod."

"Oh, sure." J.R. brings the device to his face. There's a *binging* sound as J.R.'s authentication switches it out of rest mode. "Turn off auto-lock," he commands. In a gravelly male voice, the device asks for his confirmation and he gives it. Then, he hands it back to Rio. "There you go. It'll stay open for you."

"Thank you. Uh...I'm gonna go to the cockpit so I don't bother you. Get some rest."

"Thanks," J.R. mutters.

Rio shuts the door to the cockpit and takes the shotgun seat. The sunrise pours out onto the parking lot. The peaks of the rocky hills glimmer. She sets J.R.'s console on her lap, finds the program that accesses her mod's local server, authenticates on the device with her eyeball, then scrolls up and down several dozen touchscreen switches and sliders.

She finds *Sensorial Acuity* and dials it down to zero. J.R.'s heartbeat, ever noticeable even from the cockpit, now fades until it is silent. His scent evaporates. The effect is almost lonely. Good to know she can turn the sensations off when she doesn't want them. But, the Xolot Family leaders seemingly always kept them on. Maybe it was to maintain group integrity, maybe to be on guard against intruders or rogues. Or, maybe each of them just came to appreciate the power their mods gave them over everyone else. If you like it, why dial it down? Then again, it is even possible that they simply didn't know how to turn down their clouds, and just adapted their lives to the default setting. The Family, Rio included, was generally averse to consoles, given their deep ties to the luddite communes of the northern settlements, before things got extra culty up there. The mods always came with documentation, but Rio couldn't remember anyone taking a deep interest in the technical details of their mod. Mods were seen as tools, not toys to play with.

Rio adjusts *Sensorial Acuity* back up to 75%, then higher. At 100%, she's astounded. J.R. is coming in so clear and in such detail, it's like he's here in the cockpit with her. The jumble of data can now be separated into more distinct things than heartbeat, breath, molecules flowing through the body... She can map out the signals as they begin in his brainstem and pour out to his fingers, feet, face and genitals. Boy, this is a trip. It's amazing, but if even one more person walked into Rio's cloud, it would overwhelm her. She cranks it back to 25%. Maybe that will give J.R. some peace.

So much for *Sensorial Acuity*. What about the other settings? One slider is called *Distal Tapering*. It's set to 75%. She adjusts it to 100% and feels a strange sensation around her ankles. Rio looks down at her bare feet. Do they look skinnier? Her calves seem oddly narrow. She adjusts the slider the other way, bringing it down to 20%. All at once, her butt and hips shrink and her calves blow up. Her ankles swell and crease over her feet. "Oh, no no no. Fuck cankles." she mutters, and adjusts *Distal Tapering* back to 75%.

Next, she finds a slider called *Flesh Integrity*, set to 80%. She adjusts it down to 30% and suddenly, her buoyant legs collapse into sagging flab or segmented rolls. Rio shakes her head rapidly and adjusts the dial all the way to 100%. She rises in her seat and her eyes nearly pop out of her skull. Her ass looks like a balloon. Her legs are freakishly rounded, as if she were a sculpted cartoon character. Rio examines this insanely buoyant ass. Maybe for the right occasion, this would be fine. But it's a bit silly looking. She adjusts it back to 80%.

Rio goes down the menu. Some sliders have no effect that she can see. Others do freakish things that she promptly adjusts back. It's fun to play with, but it also leaves Rio with the sense that most of the defaults are fine.

Then, Rio is interrupted when something pops up on the console. A text-transcribed voice message, tagged with the name of J.R.'s dearly beloved, Jolene:

Are you still on your way?

J.R. unlocked his console for Rio and was apparently too tired to realize that Rio would be able to see all his incoming messages. Or, maybe he didn't mind?

Rio's stomach tightens as another message pops up:

Please tell me you're still coming to see me.

More messages:

I need you J.R. Please get here soon. Hurry.

I hope you're thinking of me

I can't wait to kiss you again. Can you?

Please call me as soon as you can. Let me know you're still on your day.

And don't forget about me.

The barrage ends. Rio's breath comes out thick and hot. Her stomach churns. So much for her relaxed mood.

Perhaps, it's time to face the fact that she's jealous. Or, maybe she's just thin-skinned because she's tired.

Jealousy is one thing Rio ought to have conquered years ago when she bought a one-way ticket to live on a commune in the Laredan prairielands. Back then, she happily sacrificed any possibility of marriage or a spouse-and-kids nuclear family. For the benefits, it was a good deal. She thought so then and, if old times could have been preserved, she still would. So, the guy you fucked yesterday is getting with the woman you fucked last week and they're fucking each other tonight? Cool. More power to them. But Rio is not on a commune anymore and she's out of the Family. The rules are different. This well-coiffed, plump, needy Jolene has an exclusive romantic and sexual claim on J.R., and facing the fact of it is like swallowing a dagger. Back in the early days of the commune when Rio got hit with a pang of jealousy, she could console herself with the fact that there were half a dozen or more warm bodies nearby that she could nestle up to. Just knowing it could be enough, even if she was to spend the

night alone. There is no such consolation here. Rio can imagine herself loving up to a hundred other people; she still does not *like* this Jolene. If she could challenge Jolene to a wrestling match for rights to court J.R., she would do it happily.

But, it's all so dumb. Rio got J.R. robbed. By all rights, he shouldn't have anything to do with her after this trip. And anyway, they're from different worlds. There is no chance of him understanding her or her understanding him. Forget it. Let him be and try to be happy for him and Jolene.

Rio's reverie is interrupted by a capacious yawn. The three or so hours of rest she got last night were not enough. Perhaps, she can sleep off these rough feelings. Rio reclines her seat, turns to her side, rests her cheek against her folded hands, closes her eyes and tells herself to forget J.R. She's had to let go of so many people and things at this point, she ought to be an expert at it.

* * *

Rio awakens in the late morning with the rising sun slanting through the driver side window. The purple of the sky is so saturated, it almost looks solid, like colored paper you could cut with a pair of scissors. The seat is lit and warm and her mouth is parched. She twists to her back and looks at herself.

"Fuck!" Rio's hips fill the seat's width now. Her dancing skirt is approaching mid-thigh. "Fuck fuck fuck." She adjusts her seat up. Her panties immediately thong her. "Fuuuuck."

Rio shakes her head in dismay as she runs her hands over huge, pillowy thighs and squeezes a hip crease that extends fully into her palm from her pelvic bone. She kicks out her legs and notes thick, shapely calves. Her thighs mash together like two pressed marshmallows. She reaches behind herself and finds a layer of ass so thick you sink half a fist in it.

Rio fiddles with the coach control screen and dims the windows. Dammit, she forgot: J.R. undimmed them last night so he could see in the dark. And, she never thought to dim them again because, with this mod, the sunlight doesn't cook her skin anymore. She just took a long sunbath and now her ass is as fat as a well-stuffed head pillow. If it gets any bigger than this, she'll overfill the whole damn seat. Only a couple days back, this seat practically swallowed her short, spindly body.

She gets up and tries to squeeze between the two front seats. Her hips catch both. Rio growls. Her hips rub tightly against the upholstery. When she pops out the other side, they spill forward and send a crazy jiggle down her thighs.

Carrying her body is strange now. It's not that she's too heavy. The mod builds muscle to carry all this gluteus weight, but her center of gravity is now lower. She wobbles on untrained legs. Each step sends an upward burst of movement up her bubblier thighs. Her hip catches a closet handle. She curses.

Wobbling, grumbling, jiggling, Rio reaches the pod. She fills a cup of water. J.R. is still lying on the bench, but he's coming to. He squints at her, then squints harder. He lifts himself on an elbow, rubs his eye and blinks at Rio.

Rio puts down the cup, sets her hands on hips that would span a trashcan. "What do you think?" she says, glowering, and turns sideways so J.R. can witness her backwards projection. "Is my ass fat enough yet?" It's hard to tell without a mirror, but she guesses said ass has curve enough to rival a soccerball.

J.R. goes goggle-eyed and Rio senses a change in him. Even with *Sensorial Acuity* adjusted down to 25%, the quickening of his heart, the flood of new molecules from his brain, the catch in his lungs, it's all unmistakable. This ass is doing something for him.

Rio flushes, quickly shrinks back to the bench and plops down. "Uh...sorry. Maybe that was a bit much."

J.R. laughs, utterly without mirth. "It's...it's okay." But, it's not. His heart is at a gallop and his breath is frozen. His guilt is back. "How...how long were you out in the sun?"

"Pretty much since it started rising. My fault. I forgot to tint the windows and fell asleep."

J.R. rubs the back of his head. "It's a shame we don't have a cooler with us. Uh...if you want one, that is."

Rio looks down at her widened, plush-assed body. "This is way bigger than I wanted to be on this trip."

"It's-it's not bad," says J.R. Then he looks away, clears his throat. By his body signs, his appraisal is a lot better than *not bad*. "Um, anyway, we can try and keep you covered the rest of the trip."

"Got to. My job interview's gonna be complicated if I can't even fit through the door."

He laughs, a bit more cheerfully this time.

Rio ought to change the subject. She's not doing J.R. any favors talking about her butt. "Oh," she says, "when I was using your console, Jolene messaged you. I didn't want to wake you up. Um, sorry for looking, but the messages just kept popping up."

Suddenly, the heat inside J.R. is dispelled like a sausage, hot off the grill, dropped into an icebox. The wonderful new molecules in his brain go quiet. His eyes twitch. His gaze flits out of focus. "Uh...wha-w-who?"

Rio stares at him. "Jolene. Your girlfriend?"

"Jolene," he repeats, as if he hasn't heard that name in twenty years. Once again, he is lost like a dementia patient.

Rio waves a hand in the air. "Hello? J.R.?"

He doesn't respond. He holds his head in his hands and looks down at the floor. He wavers like this for a painfully long time.

"Hey? Can you hear me?" Rio is getting scared. Something is seriously wrong. "J.R.!" screams.

He looks up. "Y-yeah?" All at once, he's back.

Rio stands. "What the fuck is wrong with you? I just told you your girlfriend messaged you and you went borderline catatonic."

"I-I did?"

"Just now, J.R.!"

"I'm...sorry?"

Rio throws her hands in the air. "I don't want an apology. I want to know what your deal is."

"There's...no deal. I'm...I'm okay."

She takes a step toward him. "You're not okay. You're worse than yesterday."

He shrinks against the wall. "No, really. I'm okay."

Rio takes another step, stands over him and looks into his dark, brown eyes. "J.R.," she says, trying her best to modulate her tone, "what is it about Jolene?"

"J-Jolene? She's my girlfriend. I told you about her. I love her."

"If you love her so much, why did you shut down when I *mentioned* her?"

He swallows, shakes his head, looks up at Rio with wounded eyes. "I-I *do* love her. I love her more than I've ever loved anyone. Sorry if you can't understand that. But it's true. The moment we kissed, I knew. I knew it was going to be her and I. Forever."

It stings to hear it. Rio feels like an asshole for questioning him like this. She takes a seat on the bench beside him, draws in a long breath. "Sorry. It's just...this is freaking me out. You're supposed to be driving us to El Nuevo. If you lose it like you just did while you're on the road, we could both be fucking dead."

"I can drive," he says. "I'm rested." He stands. "I'm rested," he repeats, evidently to himself. He steps into the pod's center and looks over his shoulder at her. "Sorry for scaring you. I-I'm okay, I promise." J.R. takes the corridor to the cockpit. Soon, Rio hears the coach's battery hum to life.

She wonders if she should stop him from driving. She doesn't. The coach pulls out of the lot and takes the road back up to the westward highway.

Rio thinks. She thinks about Jolene's barrage of messages, of J.R.'s story about being in love, about his moments of discombobulation. She saw him go through a couple of those yesterday while on the road. His driving remained steady. Maybe he can lose himself like that and still man the wheel.

But even if that's so, something is definitely wrong. Even Rio, who has had a complicated relationship with the concept of *romance*, is certain this is not what being *in love* looks like. Love can make people crazy, but it doesn't turn them into fucking zombies. No one in love spontaneously forgets his lover's *name*.

What is this *Jolene* doing to him?

Then, a memory surfaces. A conversation Rio had with a stranger about a year ago in a bar in a little town called Santa Rosa. The stranger, a beautiful woman named Solita, told Rio a story that day. A terrible story.

Rio remembers that story and knows what's wrong with J.R.

* * *

Language has never been Rio's strong suit. The best words slip through her grasp like nimble rodents. Where others speak with tact, agility and precision or failing that, at least confidence and alacrity, Rio at her best has only sincere bluntness to offer. It gets worse in times of crisis,

such as now. When the chips are down, most of what comes out of Rio's mouth is stumbling, haphazard mush. If only she could dance it out. Her body possesses the elocution her mouth lacks. But, dancing won't help here. This time, she has to find a way to make words thread a needle through its own eye.

She turns it over in her head once, twice, yet again. She wishes she had a notebook and pen, maybe a friend to practice it out on, some way to simulate the conversation that's about to take place.

Anyway, she has to try.

Rio sidesteps her way between the cockpit chairs. She doesn't mean to brush J.R.'s elbow with her thigh, but her pear-shaped body is in a cramped space.

She drops into the shotgun seat and smooths her packed skirt across her broad lap. "Hey."

"Hey," says J.R. Outside in the distance, the landscape is softening into small dunes. Even through the tinted windows, they look like mounds of cayenne.

"I, uh...have a question for you."

"Yeah?"

Rio clears her throat. "Do you know much about those mods that can...um, work kind of like snake venom and mess with people?"

"Snake venom," J.R. repeats. "Oh, you mean like, pathogenic discharge? Sub nanites that can infect?"

"Yeah, sure. I think so."

"Not my specialty. Those mods are illegal. But, I have a basic understanding of how it works."

"How...does it work? It's not just another cloud, is it?"

"Not at all. Clouds are aromatic. They're inhaled. Individually, they exert a very tiny influence on the body. If the recipient inhales enough of them, the body is temporarily altered. Pathogenic sub nanites are a completely different animal. They're extremely complex and dynamic in their behavior. It takes millions of aromatics to alter a brain. For pathogenics, it only takes one, usually swallowed."

"What do they do?"

"It's...it's like a computer virus, but for the mind. They rig the brain into having internal states it wouldn't have naturally. A certain cognitive pattern, like a memory, can be made to trigger a heavy release of dopamine and oxytocin."

"Have you ever seen it happen? Seen someone infected like that?"

J.R. looks at Rio gravely. "Not in person, and I don't want to. Why do you ask?"

Rio swallows. Her throat is still parched. "Can...can I tell you a story?"

"Uh, well sure."

Rio sips her waterskin and tells the tale.

* * *

"It was a year back, I guess. Maybe more. I don't pay much attention to time these days. I was with a raiding party and a handful of us got sent into a little town to stock up on supplies.

"So, we have the night to ourselves in this town before we have to regroup with the others. We spend it at a little club where I can do some cheap shots and let loose on the dancefloor. And, I end up slowdancing with this chick. Absolutely gorgeous woman. Dark eyes, thick hair, nice smile. I guess I have a type.

"Anyway, we get to the end of the slow dance and I just feel really close to her. So, I try and kiss her. And, she stops me. She puts her hand over my mouth and says, 'Sorry, I can't.' And I say, why not? She says, 'buy me a drink and I'll tell you. But I'm warning you, you won't be better off hearing it.' So, I'm like, fine. I still have some change. If I can't get a kiss from a nice lady, at least I'll get something out of her before I'll probably never see her again.

"We sit down. She tells me her name is Solita and she puts away the drink I bought so fast I wonder if she poured it out. She jumps right into this story. Not so long ago, she was an escort in El Nuevo. A quality girl. Her life was fancy hotel rooms and classy restaurants and vacations in the tropics. So one day, her employer offers her the job of a lifetime. But, she needs to get a mod to see it through. She sees how many digits her payment will be and says yes on the spot. So she takes this mod and they arrange for her to run into this guy at a casino. This guy she has to escort, he's an architect, he used to work for one of the big Corps but left to start his own company. They meet. She's nice to him. They hit it off. He has no fucking clue she's an escort. He's not the one paying. He just thinks he's lucky.

"Anyway, Solita doesn't need to sleep with this guy, she just needs to *kiss* him. So, she does it. She kisses him and makes a plan to see him again soon. And, the next time he sees her, he's different. He's extra nice to her and generous with his money and he seems so happy it's like he's walking on air. She kisses him again that night. And it goes on like that. They meet, they

kiss, they make new plans. They start to really act like a couple. She's not in love with him, but her employer keeps telling her to keep it up. Keep seeing him, get comfy with him. When she has questions they say don't worry about it.

"Solita isn't dumb. She knows her mod is doing something to him when she kisses him. She knows what's happening between him and her wouldn't happen the same way without this mod. But, things are going fine. They move in together. He's super nice to her and he's got decent money. He doesn't even make sexual demands. For a job that pays so much, it's a good deal.

"Then, her employers tell her to drain him harder. She doesn't feel good about it because this guy's already spoiling her pretty well. But, a job's a job. So, she convinces him to take her on this ridiculously expensive vacation down south. They stay at a resort, get all these pricey meals and perks. Solita's boss tells her she needs to insist on the most expensive everything on this trip, so that's what she does: makes him buy her the best manicure, get front row seats to tonight's fancy show, get her the fanciest dress that she'll wear only once for dinner tonight. And, this guy's got some money, but he has limits. The trip drains him so hard, the strain on his face is visible. And, Solita has pried money out of a lot of rich pockets and never felt the slightest bit guilty about it, but this time it's different. She can't write this guy off as another rich asshole. He's not rich enough and he's not an asshole. Again, she doesn't love him. But she has this pit in her stomach that keeps getting worse the more it goes on. It gnaws on her so bad, she starts having sex with him, just out of pity.

"So, they come home and he's not only drained, he's tens of thousands of GP in debt. He can't even pay the next two months' rent. But he's got an expensive girlfriend who he loves and he decides if he can keep her happy, it's all worth it. So, what does he do? Goes back to his old boss and begs to get his job back. His boss gives it to him, but at way lower pay than before. It's barely enough to hold onto their expensive lease. At this point, Solita is begging her own boss to let her wrap this job up. She just wants it to end. And they tell her, not yet. Stick with it for a while. So she stays on with this guy but she's so torn up about it, she can barely look him in the eye at this point. And around then, she starts forgetting to kiss him. Or, maybe she just doesn't want to anymore. He starts acting weird. He has moments where he gets really quiet and spaced out. He starts looking at her like she's a stranger. Sometimes, he's so confused, it's like he doesn't know where he is.

"And, that's when Solita tells her boss, she's finished. She's done with this job and she's done being an escort. They let her go, but they tell her she didn't see the job through so she'll only get half her commission. She says fine, takes the money and walks out. The last thing she hears from her fake boyfriend before she changes all her contact information is this message where he begs her to kiss him, one last time. Everything in his life is upside down and he doesn't know how it happened and he feels like it would make sense again if she would just give him one last kiss. When she sees that message, something breaks inside her. She packs

her bags and skips town, but just before she leaves, she goes to see a quality surgeon about extracting her mod. That's when she finds out, even with the money she's got, she can't afford it. The mod isn't legal, so there's no resale value and insurance won't cover it. She'll be paying in full. And, it's more money than she has. If she'd just stuck with the job a bit longer, she could've swung it, but she didn't.

"And that's her story. She can't kiss anyone. She's already wrecked one person's life with her mouth and she'd rather die than do it again. And, the only thing to do is drink about it, cuz no escort service, no fancy cathouse, no pimp, no nothing is going to hire a poisonous snake.

"But, she tells me one more thing before she disappears. She says, the thing that really scares her is whoever put her up to this job. Her escort service was just a middleman. *Someone* wanted her to break this guy. *Someone* paid for her to get this illegal mod. She doesn't know who. Maybe it's the architect's employer who wanted him back. Maybe it's someone in the mod industry who wanted to kill the guy's competition. She even thinks maybe it's Interpol, cuz she's heard of them working with the Corpos to keep architects on Lesser Laredo so this shitty backwoods planet can hold onto its economy. Whoever it was, they didn't have to witness one second of what actually happened. They didn't have to watch a guy spend himself into poverty for a fake girlfriend and go back to a job he hates for a boss who hates him and then watch his brain empty itself out and leave him not understanding what the fuck happened to him. Where those people are, somewhere high above the rest of us, they don't even think about all that ugliness that happens down here. Thinking about it is what she was paid to do."

* * *

"Well, that's completely terrible," says J.R. He looks thoughtfully over the red dunes that slope higher and higher above the road. There are no more plants anywhere, just Red Desert.

"It's too bad you don't know where that Solita girl is now. It's possible I could've helped her. I can't do surgery, but there is a way to disable mods. It's not easy. It breaks the mod beyond repair. And, there are risks. But, I'd try it for someone who has no other option."

Rio nods. "That's nice of you. But, um, what do you think of the guy she messed up? The staring into space and getting confused and stuff?"

"He was probably suffering from memory issues. Not that he necessarily couldn't remember what happened to him, but emotions are part of memory. Whenever she kissed him, his brain was getting hit by the pathogens. So the kiss—and memories of the kiss—would result in an intense release of neurotransmitters. But, pathogenic nanites die and turn into minerals that get

flushed out of the body. They do live a long time, for nanites. I've heard of them surviving for up to a Laredan week, which is insane. But, eventually, they degrade. Those intense feelings would die with them. He couldn't re-experience the feelings associated with those memories so he probably couldn't make sense of a lot of the decisions he made while he was with her. That would be pretty scary to go through."

"Would be," Rio repeats. She's speechless. He's so smart and so, so blind.

J.R. looks at her quizzically. He simply does not understand.

"Um, if-if someone knew what was wrong with him, do...do you think maybe they could have warned him? Let him know he was being controlled and saved him?"

"I wish it were that easy," J.R. replies. "But, nanite pathogens are sophisticated. They trigger bursts of neurotransmitters, but they also induce the brain to *defend* the prolonging of that euphoria. It's sort of like, if you had a drug high without ever taking a drug and then someone told you your high was a problem. But, you didn't do anything wrong, you didn't take drugs, you just *feel* good. So, what's everybody's problem? Maybe on some deep level, you know the feeling isn't normal. But, that just makes you more desperate not to lose it. Your brain is going to jump through hoop after hoop to rationalize your nice feelings. I've seen footage of clinical trials with afflicted people. When confronted, they deny, evade, and refuse to acknowledge the obvious. You can show a pathogenic nanite subject all the evidence in the world he's being mind controlled. They'll just find a clever way to justify that feeling. It's almost comical."

"There's no way at all? To help them?"

J.R. shrugs. "Only way is to wait it out."

It is near impossible to hold a straight face. Rio is starting to get a headache. "When was the last time Jolene kissed you?"

"Five days ago," he replies, then looks at her. "Why?"

Rio presses her face in her hands. "And...and, how many times did you kiss her?" she mutters.

"Just the one time."

"Once?" she says into her hands. "You kissed her once and you were madly in love?"

"Most amazing experience of my life. Just the thought of doing it again is what keeps me going though this trip."

Nausea hollows out Rio's stomach. This is too much. She could scream.

J.R. shoots her a defensive look. "What's wrong? You have a problem with that?"

Rio throws her hands into the air. "Yes," she cries. "My problem is, I *like* you."

The silence that follows is only broken by the grind of the coach's tires as it treads the sand, the faint clatter of its frame as it bumps and teeters on the road, the muted hum of its battery. J.R. looks at Rio; Rio looks at J.R. He does look shocked or appalled, just scared.

"Uh," Rio stammers. "People...people tell me I'm too open-hearted. I give too much away too soon, I'm ready to share myself too fast, whatever. And, it's true, I've liked a lot of people. But, I don't mess with anyone. I don't bullshit. I don't say things like this and change my mind the next day. When I tell someone I like them, I fucking *mean it*, J.R."

J.R. nods slowly. "Um, if...if circumstances were different, maybe I...I could take you up on this. But," he swallows, "I'm with someone. I'm with Jolene."

Rio shakes her head. "That's just the thing, J.R., this Jolene *thing* isn't who you think it is."

He looks incredulous. "Huh?"

"If she was, I wouldn't bother you with this. But," she gasps out a heavy breath, "you're being fucked with."

J.R. laughs. "What're you talking about?"

"You're going through the same thing Solita said happened to her fake boyfriend. You blank out, you get weird and quiet, you forget who this Jolene even is. Maybe it feels like you're in love, but she's not in love with you, J.R. You're an architect. Someone is trying to do the same thing to you as what happened to that guy. Someone wants you to lose your money and go back to your old boss."

J.R. shakes his head rapidly. "This is ridiculous."

"No, it's not, J.R.! It's obvious and you don't see it. You just had a whole conversation with me about how these snake mods work and you described your own problem, perfectly."

"I can't believe you're saying this. What the fuck, Rio?"

"What the fuck to you, J.R.! You're not thinking straight."

"Like I said, I'm doing fine. Thank you for your concern and thanks for your honesty, too. But, I'm in a committed rela—"

"What were you doing, taking 300K federal dollars across the desert, J.R.? That's *crazy*. That was your life savings. Who takes a risk like that?"

"I had to."

"Why?"

J.R. hesitates. "Jolene has an indenture to her employer. The only way to get her out of it is to pay him in federal dollars. And, the only way to get my investment funds converted to fed money was to show up at my financier in El Ventana so they could scan my eyeball and get a signature. And, the only way to get it back to El Nuevo was to take it there."

"J.R., she's an escort! She's not going to leave her job for you. That money wasn't going to save her."

"If I'm being mind-controlled, why would Jolene send me across the continent to get money? Wouldn't she want me to stay with her, like that Solita woman did with the architect?"

"Your trip was only supposed to last, what? Three days? But, we were raided. We lost the antenna and our trip is stalled. No one planned on that. I didn't and I was a bandit. You were supposed to be back with Jolene right now so she can hit you again with those patho-whatevers. You're detoxing and the detox is fucking with your head."

J.R.'s face is a portrait in adamance. "...I don't wanna talk about this anymore."

Rio gets up from her seat. "Fine." Her hip brushes J.R.'s arm as she squeezes through again. She exits the cockpit and shuts the door behind her.

Tucked under Rio's arm is J.R.'s console, still unlocked.

VI: Vaquera Rio

She eyeballs into her mod server again and adjusts *Sensorial Acuity* to 75%. Then, she thinks about it and cranks it up to 100%. J.R.'s heart is racing. His blood pressure is high. His muscles are tense. He does not inhale or exhale for intervals of five seconds. Maybe he doesn't want to talk about Jolene, but he has doubts. He wouldn't be this scared without them.

Rio unzips her skirt. She tries to push it down her legs. It catches on her hips and butt. It won't come off that way. She pulls it over her head and assesses herself. Rio certainly looks like a mod user now. Her trim waist is suddenly thwarted by outpouring hips that nearly double her width. Her legs are plumped cones. They stagger at her knees, which still have some definition, but then flare out again at her buoyant calves. Her skin is flawlessly smooth. Her lower body is fat, but not a square inch of it looks sloppy or misshapen. The only thing working against her is her undersized panties, which cut deep grooves into her meaty flanks. Her crack has such depth, the material sinks in and gets lost beneath her hugging cheeks. She considers taking them off but thinks better of it.

It's noon. The sun pours through the skylight, making a warm box on the floor. She notices: the skylight has hinges. Rio grabs a support pole and climbs atop the bench. Steadying her weight against the pole, she leans, reaches up and flips the bracket that locks the skylight in place. She twists a handle and the skylight window comes loose. She eases the window down, then pulls it all the way around until it hits the ceiling beside the skylight, where the opposite side handle fastens it.

The pod is now exposed to the desert and all its heat. Rio finds the pod thermostat and turns off the A/C. She then takes her poncho, unfolds it, lays it on the floor, drops a pillow on it and in nothing but her underwear and crop top, she sprawls out on her back. Bloodjaw ponchos make decent rugs. She scoots so her body fits into as much of that sunny box as possible. No longer is a tinted window between her and the sun. She keeps her face out of the ray so she doesn't have to cover her eyes.

Rio only knows so much about clouds, but one thing she has known for quite some time is, as mod users grow, their clouds get thicker, more potent. There were days when Axon or Starlyn grew to absolutely freakish sizes. Their clouds so abundant, Rio and the other Xolots were reduced to drooling supplicants, eager for the slightest touch or act of affection from the gloriously misshapen ubermenschen who dominated camp. She also knows skin absorbs sun. The more skin and sun make contact, the faster the growth.

Rio lays and waits as the pod cooks under the high noon rays. She tunes into J.R. periodically. Sometimes, he seems scared, other times angry. Fitfully, his body patterns blip, like they did this morning when Rio uttered Jolene's name. That kiss she gave him is losing its edge. He's starting to forget, and he isn't taking that well.

The room blazes. The air grows stuffy. Rio sweats, her throat dries so she rehydrates with her skin. It's hard to breathe. The sun moves west and begins to angle away from Rio. She scoots the poncho-made-rug back a step and stays in it.

It's so strange to be blasted by Laredan sunlight and not get singed. The two years she spent here in the Red Desert were naught but an endless battle against the sun: blocking it, hiding from it, taking pills and sprays to minimize its effects. To no longer be threatened by its merciless radiance is a staggering change. Axon and the Lugars must feel strong, thriving out here in this wasteland.

At times, Rio feels more aware of J.R.'s body than her own. The blood pumping from his heart, the quality of its nutrients, the rise and fall of his lungs, it all comes through so clearly. She notes his blood pressure dropping as he goes too long without water or a snack, the ache in his knuckles as he grips the wheel, the acidity of his stomach as he rues these days he must spend, stuck in a coach with a weirdo ex-bandit who questions his life decisions. Some of this is postulation on Rio's part, but when she has access to so much of J.R.'s internal functioning, she doubts she could be too far from the truth. Perhaps she can't hear the thoughts in J.R.'s head, but thoughts have bodily correlaries. At any rate, she knows he's in pain. She will have to cause him more pain before he's okay.

Rio's thighs press together and sweat. She spreads her legs so they stop touching. A short while later, they touch again. She lifts the skirt from her eyes and gazes down at her sunlit body. Is she bigger now? Probably, but she felt huge before, she feels huge now, and the relative differences between huge and even more huge are hard to gauge. In any case, she feels enormous. It's embarrassing, because she has always been nimble and small. Now, her lower body overwhelms her figure. She must be quite a sight, with a skinny little trunk attached to this beast of an ass.

She scoots back and then back further as the sun falls into the west and casts its rays into the little corridor that leads to the hold. Soon, her hips swell into either wall. Rio runs her hands down her thighs. Her fingers and thumbs sink deep into columns of thigh. What is she thinking? She wanted this mod to make her beautiful, not big as a house.

Noon is late when the coach slows and pulls over by the side of the road. The cockpit door snaps open.

J.R.'s shock is total and extreme; Rio feels it with him as he steps into a pod like an oven.

The vents are off and the still air has grown so thick with Rio's cloud, it feels almost as if she touches the surrounding walls. The cloud's only good point of escape is the open skylight, which lets off an invisible column of the stuff like smoke from an old fashioned train chimney.

And on the far end, lies a sweaty, nearly naked woman with an ass that spans the width of the corridor and legs thick as tom drums. Poor J.R. He's been sealed off in the cockpit where the air conditioning still runs and Rio's cloud thins out, or did. By opening that door, he has just exposed himself to its pungent depths. His body panics. Sweat wets his brow. His breath goes utterly still. He wavers on the threshold, unsure whether to take another step. And for all his fear and aversion, the blood still rushes to his loins. An erection thickens in his pants. His balls stiffen. He's smothered by so much of *her*, he could choke.

Rio props herself on her elbows and gazes the ten paces' distance where he stands.

"I-it's like a sauna in here!" he cries.

Rio wipes a layer of sweat beneath her eye. "Sorry, just getting some sun."

J.R. squints at her. The room is so hot he can barely think.

"Do you need to get through and use the bathroom?" She pushes herself up from the floor and rises on massive legs. Her hips squish against either side of the narrow corridor. Something tickles her thighs and she realizes it's the threads dangling from what can barely be called underwear now. The material that runs from hip to crotch is frayed and thinned to just a few strands of elastane. Rio turns. Her left hip drags against the wall as her ass rotates into view and J.R. is so seized by panicked desperation, Rio genuinely fears he will collapse. She glances behind herself and realizes, navel to buttcheek, her profile takes up two thirds of the corridor. The ass that quivers on the columns of her legs is so huge, she could sit on four faces at once.

She blushes. J.R. stands frozen. Never has Rio witnessed another person's desire in such palpable terms. It's as though J.R. could simply melt into it, all his faculties co-opted by physical need.

Rio sidesteps toward him so the sunlight illuminates more of her bare skin. "Go ahead," she tells him. Oh, she is cruel. There's no way past without squeezing between the wall and her ass.

"S-seriously?" cries J.R.

"Go ahead," she replies nonchalantly.

Nausea hollows J.R.'s gut. He approaches on shaking legs, turns sideways facing the wall. Rio's humongous ass cheeks drag with him as he squeaks through the twenty-five centimeters clearance Rio has offered him. He pops out the other end and Rio's right cheek ricochets back, sending a smooth ripple across her whopping backside.

"You're terrible," he mutters, and slips into the bathroom.

From inside the little bathroom, Rio notes the signs of J.R.'s molten hot desire, mixed with a trembling anger. Rio has been on the other side of this interaction many times. She has desired Axon and each one of the Lugars to the point of desperation, and *hated* them for it at the exact same time. If only it didn't have to be this way.

J.R. exits the bathroom and Rio makes him go through it again. He drags himself along the wall of her ass cheeks, grunting. Once clear through, he gets a cup of water and another cup of grainmeal. He refuses to look at her. "Why are you doing this?" he says at the far wall. "Your growth is getting out of control."

"I'm trying to get through to you," she replies.

"I need you to stop trying." he passes down the far corridor to the cockpit, food and drink clutched in one hand as he opens the cockpit door. "*Please*, close the skylight and turn the fucking A/C back on." The cockpit door closes behind him.

Rio does neither. She readjusts her poncho and pillow and resumes her sunbath as J.R. takes the coach back onto the highway.

Some time later, her underwear snaps at her left groin. She yanks the tattered garment out of her ass crack and rolls it off her right leg. She thinks about covering her naked slit, but decides not to. J.R. is going to hole himself up in the cockpit as long as he can. And, what use anyway is decency at a time when indecency is her best weapon?

The last of the failing light sends a ray back into the hold. Rio sits there with the luggage, pounds water and eats four cups of grainmeal in a row. She's sick of the stuff, but she needs it.

When at last the sun falls out of range, Rio closes the skylight, turns on the A/C, takes a seat on the bench and sips water as her sweat cools. Her rear takes up half of a single bench. With the pod sealed off, Rio's cloud fills every corner of the coach's interior. She can feel the cool air blasting through the vents, the rumble of the coach's chassis as its teeters are cushioned on the coach's shocks. And still, she feels J.R. up front, angry, horny, desperate and sad.

Dusk sets in. The sky fades to a blotchy lavender. The dunes outside are enormous now. Huge, overlapping hills of deep red sand extend out to the horizon. Sometimes their surfaces are striated and make waves that resemble the ocean. Other times, they are so smooth, it seems as though a bullet could glance off them.

The pod lights turn on. Rio takes a nap. When she awakens, night has fallen. She checks the time. It's past midnight and J.R. is still driving. She tunes into him and finds him lost yet again. There's a searching quality to his heart and breath. Perhaps he's seeking some trace of his vanishing love.

There is a dirty trick Rio has not yet tried. She remembers one of Starlyn's slumber parties. Rio was in a tent with Starlyn and ten other women with pillows and blankets all around. They sat in an oblong circle around Starlyn who reclined on her favorite cushion. On this night, Starlyn was huge—comparable to Rio's size now. She told everyone to stay on her wavelength. No one, and she meant no one, was to take matters into their own hand. Anyone who did would be sorry. They watched as Starlyn stripped down to her skin and began to touch herself. Her cloud was so thick, it was like a many-appendaged solid, gracing their skin like a sweaty lover. As Starlyn tossed her head and began to sigh, Rio grew wet in sympathy. They all began to groan, shed clothes. Some very nearly broke Starlyn's rule and stopped themselves. Others had to be stopped by their friends. Soon, the tent was filled with a deafening roar of whines, moans, wails and writhing bodies, everyone crazy with sexual torment. Starlyn, the savvy bitch, took her sweet, sweet time and kept them like that for what felt like an eternity. At last, she brought herself to orgasm. The screams that then erupted from Starlyn's tent were so violent and bloodcurdling, the Xolots outside flocked over, so certain they were that someone was getting killed—until they penetrated the thick, inner layer of Starlyn's cloud and realized. One extremely rash man, however, didn't pay attention and poked his head into the tent, breaking Starlyn's *no men* rule for slumber parties. He got a face full of pillows that night and spent the entire next month as Starlyn's slave.

Rio will never possess the cruelty that laces all of Starlyn's kindnesses. But, at a time such as this, Rio knows exactly what Starlyn would do. And, maybe, just this once, she would be right.

But, to do it while he's driving? It's not nice, potentially dangerous. Then again, Rio's pretty sure J.R. intends to drive all through the night just to avoid her. There may not be a better time.

She covers herself in a blanket, braces against the wall so the blanket stays put and slides her hand between the hulking walls of her thighs. She massages her clitoral hood, tickles around it. Soon, she taps her clit, traces circles. She prods, then releases; prods, then releases. Her breath grows drawn and guttural. She presses with her middle finger and vibrates her wrist. Rio huffs out a sigh. She tunes into J.R., feels his rigid body, the staggered rotation of his stiff limbs. He's still abysmally horny. But, he's holding out, just like Rio and the rest of the slumber party did in Starlyn's tent. She doesn't know how to do this, doesn't even know if she needs to know. But, J.R. seems so *close*, it's like she could reach across that distance and touch him as surely as she touches herself. Heat builds against her knuckles as her fingers work faster. She slits her eyes, bites half her lower lip and grinds down hard on herself.

A shimmer of delight hits her. Seconds later, she feels J.R. twitch. He heaves out a breath.

It works. She rakes herself faster. A flush builds in her cheeks. Her mouth hangs open, the lips moist and hungry. Her free hand wields a fold of the blanket and squeezes for dear life. Her hips get into it. She bucks them into her hand. All the while, she focuses on J.R., who's

crumpling in the driver's seat as a boner tightens his pants. Whether he likes it or not, his body moves in sympathy to Rio's. He shivers as another flash of sensation sweetens his night.

It's not automatic. Rio is certain she could unfocus her mind and her pleasure would not reach J.R. But, it is easy.

Heat pours into Rio's labia. It wettens and swells against her hand. J.R. is fully erect. His hands are clammy and shaking. He groans, writhes, pounds the steering wheel in frustration and utters curses. Then, he hits the brakes hard.

Rio flies off the bench and crashes to the floor in a flurry of jiggles. The blanket buffers her fall a little, but her free hand still takes a jolt of pain.

J.R. pulls the coach onto a sandy plain and parks it. Rio winds the blanket around her waist. Spread open across her bloomed hips and prodigious backside, it hangs a little past her knees. She feels the anger in J.R.'s breath before the cockpit door pops open and he storms into the pod.

"I know what you're trying to do," he cries. He is flushed and trembling with rage.

Rio sits up, covers her naked crotch with the blanket and massages her strained hand. She does not look up at him when she says, "did it work?"

His eyes grow wide with fury. "You need to stop this. This isn't fair."

She gets to her feet, wraps the blanket around her waist and moves to within arm's length from J.R. "I don't think all of you wants me to stop."

"It shouldn't take all of me for you *to* stop," he replies.

She shakes her head. "J.R., you need to let her go."

"No. You need to let *me* go."

"She's not in love with you."

"That's a matter of opinion."

"Not to me."

"We can agree to disagree."

"Not about this. J.R., she's getting paid to *use* you. She's using you now. And yeah, fine. I'm screwing around with you. But, you know what's going to happen? We're gonna get to El Nuevo, she'll find you again and she'll kiss you and you'll be her slave. You'll do everything she

says. You'll be stuck in a life you didn't choose and don't want and you won't understand why. I don't want that for you. Do you understand? That isn't love, it's control."

"Control. And what are you trying to do, by...by infecting me with your cloud?"

"Better me than her, J.R.! I'm not holding you to anything. I'm not trying to get money out of you. I'm not trying to make you think anything that isn't true. I don't *want* you to go back to your job. You left! You should stay gone. Be free!" She swallows down a lump in her throat before she continues. "L-look, I know about this kind of thing. I know what it's like to be someone else's toy. I know what it means when your life doesn't belong to you. I even know what it's like to *enjoy* it! I *get* feeling safe, knowing someone else gets to call the shots. Sometimes, it's amazing. ...I know. But, it's not okay, because we're *people*. We have to make our own choices. Our lives belong to us, not them! Us!" Tears stream down Rio's cheeks. She's shouting now. J.R.'s face softens, his flush disappears. The traces of anger in his body fade. "I'm fucking with you because somebody has to! You're not thinking straight! What the fuck were you doing with 300K in fed cash on a *coach*? I don't think you would do that. You're not stupid. But, that nanite shit in your brain is doing the thinking for you! You're hacked!"

J.R. closes the distance and puts his arms around her. She clutches him by the shoulder and sobs into his shirt.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I-I didn't know you had to go through something like that. That's terrible."

She chokes out sobs and whimpers for a time and focuses on J.R.'s heartbeat. It has slowed, but remains heavy. He's still erect. His body is still alight with arousal.

Rio looks up at him. Her voice sounds like a girlish whimper. "You...you don't have to hold back. I'm here. I'm here for you."

J.R. draws in a long breath. "I can't."

"Why not, J.R.? Why the fuck not?"

He looks down at her now, almost like a father. "Because, I'm in love, and I don't cheat. But, I get you now. After going through everything you did, I get why you'd think there was something wrong with me. But, I promise, I'm perfectly fine."

His words are a leaden weight on her soul. Rio pulls out of his embrace and drops to the bench. She wipes her tears away. She can't cry anymore. It's too heavy for tears. There really is no saving him. Not this guy. He's too far gone.

There's an awkward pause then.

"Um...I'm...I'm going to get ready to sleep," says J.R.

"Okay," says Rio flatly. The despair is all-consuming. She did everything she could. Reasoned with him, pleaded, drove him crazy with lust. But, Jolene still wins. She's too strong.

J.R. goes into the hold. Rio thinks about Axon. If J.R. can't let go of Jolene, how could Rio hope to get away from Axon? Has she been fooling herself all this time? Do all roads lead back to the Xolot Family? Will she die here in this Red Desert, her destiny forever tied to them?

J.R. emerges with a tent, folded up in an elongated sack. "What's that for?"

He hesitates. "It's a tent. Just another coach amenity."

"I know that. Are you sleeping outside?"

"Your cloud is incredibly thick. I-I can't just *sleep* in it. This way, we both get some rest."

Rio sighs, reaches out. "Give it to me."

"What?"

"I'll sleep outside. I've done it a million times. I have a bedroll. I'll camp, you sleep in the coach."

"That's nice of you, but—"

"I was the one who soaked up all that sun today. This is on me. Give me the tent, and I'll leave you alone."

It takes a bit more prodding but at last, J.R. relinquishes the tent. Rio dials her *Sensorial Acuity* back to 25% on the console. She fetches her bedroll, gets her boots and poncho on, hitches the tent over her shoulder, tucks a pillow and her bedroll under her arm, throws open the door, activates the ramp and mutters J.R. a frail goodnight.

"Sleep well," says J.R., though it comes out more like a question. "Let me know if you need help pitching it."

"I won't," Rio replies.

The sky is choked with stars. Rio gazes up at them as she shuffles out across the plain, which gleams blue under all this celestial light. Beneath this wide open sky, both of Laredo's moons are visible, one a waxing pink crescent, the other a red half circle. Together, they break up the quicksilver night. They make Rio think of quarreling lovers.

"If you need anything, just knock," J.R. calls.

"Fine," Rio calls back. He retracts the ramp and shuts the door.

There are signs of life again. A wine bramble here, a weave shrub there. The ground is hard and coarse with pebbles that roll under her boots. The air is clean and crisp. A chill wind gusts against her neck.

Rio ventures out into the plain until she can no longer sense J.R.'s heartbeat. She slides the sleeve off the tent, sets the toolbox on the ground and finds the magnetic cell. She flips the switch on and it beeps. She backs away as the tent unfolds on a skeleton of magnetized wire. Like an umbrella, it billows out and stands sturdy and tall. Rio opens the toolbox, removes the stakes and hammers the tent down at five points.

For a time, she sits on her wadded up bedroll, watches the stars and thinks about Axon and the Xolots. J.R. is a lost cause, but *she* is free. Poor, technically a fugitive, but free. She's not fucked yet, not quite. It was naught but a force of will that tore her away from the Xolots, a strength she didn't know she had. Why it came to her only after two years of desert crawling, raiding and giving herself over to them repeatedly, she still doesn't know. Axon's cloud was intoxicating up to the very end. But, Rio escaped then; she's still escaped now. That will have to be enough. She will just make peace with not being able to take J.R. with her. She has her own life to worry about.

Rio crawls inside the tent, takes off her boots, undoes her bedroll and tries to get inside. Her ass is too big. She unzips it most of the way down, tucks her feet in the end and uses the blanket to cover her exposed hip.

Rio lays awake for some time, still troubled, but the silence of the desert brings a chilly serenity. No one ever said freedom was easy.

* * *

First, the morning sun warms the tent and Rio, who has slept under open sky so many times, snuggles her pillow in its warmth. Then, something blots it out. The ground tremors under a great weight, and somehow, the weight shifts and gets heavier and heavier, and it seems as though Rio carries it on her own back. Gusts of thick breath, like air brakes, fill the space around the tent. Someone is here. *Someones*. The clamour of misshapen organs grows. And, Rio would snap awake and seek her knife which she keeps sheathed in her poncho. But, the patterns around her, though strange, are slow. So instead, she tosses in her bedroll, eager for just another few minutes of rest. Just a few more...

There's a tear. A shaft of light hits her eye. She comes to, looks, and screams.

The tent teeters, the magnetized spokes of its frame shifting against the enormous head of a bloodjaw, which hovers a handspan over Rio. The grill mesh heat emanating from its wild, black tufts of fur cook her skin. Arm-length tusks tap her body and a smaller pair of them curve down and point accusatorily at her belly. The beast's lips are thick as mittens. They open and close, bearing water glass-sized incisors. She gets a glimpse inside its extended snout, where rows of yellowed molars that could crunch bones to dust open and close. It snorts a gust of steamy air. The heat roasts Rio, sweat coating her face. It's so, so hot, Rio half expects to die right here.

She scrambles, rolls away from the head. The intruding sunlight glimmers off the three eyes that dot the left side of its face, one larger, two smaller. The top eye, one of the smaller, is red, splotched with a filmy brown and blinks on its own time. The other two are black, and blink together, the vertically oriented lids snapping like castanets.

Rio finds her poncho, wadded up in the tent's corner. She drags it, and herself, out of the tent where her boots are—and gasps.

Bloodjaws. Two more staring her down. Many more just beyond them. Her head whips around. Are there twelve? Twenty? They make a wall around the tent, almost a room. Rio's full height only comes up to their lower jaws. Their heads whip around and snort, the four nostrils of each face dilating in the morning sun. She stops fumbling inside her poncho for her knife. She's surrounded.

Rio breathes, stands very still, takes careful steps back as the bloodjaws take equally careful steps forward. What do they want? Bloodjaws never swarm a tent unless they are angered. And, they rarely come so near the highways.

Rio's heart thuds, her breath quick and frantic. Her foot bumps something. She gasps, then realizes it's her boot. She's startled again as the tent shakes. The bloodjaw that stuck its head inside is trying to extricate itself. It makes a high pitched whine as it grows frustrated. The other bloodjaws jerk around, agitated by their companion's complaints.

She waves her hands in the air. "Okay...it's-it's okay," she tries to tell them, or tells herself. Rio is wearing nothing but a crop top and a pair of socks. Her massive haunches are bare, her ass and unshaven pussy exposed. Carefully, without taking her eyes off them, Rio slips her boots on. Then, she tries to don her poncho. It's so spread out on her widened hips, it barely comes down to mid-thigh. Now semi-clothed, her gaze darts around for an opening. But, the bloodjaws are clustered tight. If she tries to squeeze by and one of these 1,500 kilogram beasts steps on her boot with its three-toed hoof claw, she may simply not have a foot anymore.

They watch her as carefully as she does them. Why? No bloodjaw has ever taken such interest in her.

Then it hits her. Of course. She ought to have thought of it much, much sooner. Mods were the reason the Xolot family managed to stay fed in this desert for two years. Axon, Billy Boy and Jetta took turns venturing out with hunting parties when food was scarce. Their clouds, swollen and potent, drew the bloodjaws in. The party's protocol: isolate one jaw from the herd and blow its brains out. The hard part was the *isolating*. If the party lured in even two bloodjaws at a time, they would have to retreat. Twelve humans against one bloodjaw was a hunt. Twelve against two or three jaws could be a slaughter of as many as half the party. Twelve against an entire herd? A massacre.

But an entire herd against one mod user with a swollen cloud? That would certainly be dangerous. But, bloodjaws implicitly trust the mod user. Billy Boy once got so comfortable with a herd, he spent two days roaming with them. Everyone thought he was crazy, but they led him to water and he returned with three bulging skins in tow.

So: this herd of jaws invading Rio's campsite are not here to put out a threat. They're here to *mate*. But as always, they get confused when their target is so tiny and unappealing in shape. They want to do *something*, but they don't know what.

"Hey! Hey!" comes a voice. Rio's heart slams in her chest.

Alerted herd members turn. One fills the air with a threatening squeal. Everyone expects jaws to make harsh, stony growls or bone-chilling braes. When people hear a bloodjaw bleating for the first time in field recordings, the mismatch seems comical. But, when that deathly wail rattles your ear drums as all two and a half tons of the thing stares you down, you're not laughing at all, you're trying not to shit your pants.

The bloodjaws rear angry heads. They bear incisors and scream into the morning sky.

"Are-are you in there??" J.R. is calling from a distance. The herd begins to spread as the jaws avert in the direction of his voice. A way between them opens for Rio. She watches it for one second, two...

She makes a break for it, stepping quickly (not dashing—that would be foolish) between the beasts. It doesn't take her quite in the direction of J.R. but as she passes a great, black hide the size of a sedan, the coach comes into view, as does the nervous figure of J.R., now attracting a highly defensive chunk of the herd.

Rio waves her arms in the air. She hesitates to call back because she doesn't want to upset them any worse than they already are.

He sees her. "Get over here now!" he calls, flailing a frantic hand in the air. Brave, but foolish. Two jaws advance. Their steps are still cautious, but Rio knows when a bloodjaw is getting ready to charge. J.R. is playing with death.

"Quiet down!" she screams. But, the advancing jaws have already made up their minds. Their hoof claws dig into the ground, kicking up plumes of sandy dust. Four more jaws follow them up. She can see it much too clearly: J.R., gored and flattened like a punctured tin can beneath a steam roller. And, they won't stop at him, either. They'll go after the coach next. There have been stories of angered bloodjaw herds derailing slow moving trains.

"Hey! Stop it! STOP!" She screams at the herd. To her surprise, she senses a hesitation. She can't read bloodjaw vitals well, not with *Sensorial Acuity* down to, but a change is a change. One of the advancing jaws slows. "Stop it! HEY!!!" she goes on. The other advancing jaw stops. The herd begins to stop with it. Heads turn to Rio. Rio dashes around the herd in J.R.'s direction. She waves frantically at the horizon, opposite J.R. and the coach. "Not here! Danger! Threat!" Some of the jaws pull back. Others watch her with what looks to be anxiety.

Rio joins J.R.'s side, gasping for breath. "Let's...let's get out of here."

They break for the ramp. Before she ascends, Rio looks back at the confused herd. They're all watching her. She follows J.R. up into the pod, turns off the ramp and shuts the door.

They enter the cockpit. J.R. starts the coach and takes off down the highway. Rio watches the herd as the jaw coyly tries to follow, like dogs watching their owner leave on a trip. She can't help but feel sorry for them.

"I should've known this could happen," says J.R. "But, I didn't think we'd find bloodjaws this deep into the desert. Not much grows out here."

"Jaws are everywhere," says Rio. "Even in the deadest parts. I should've known. I've seen them follow mod clouds all over the place. But, I...I guess I thought they only came when the users told them to."

J.R. shakes his head. "It is sort of possible to commune with them, but the cloud is naturally attractive. When you stay in one place, your cloud spreads. Cloud nanites don't live long, but when a lot of them are clustered together, longevity increases. Spend twelve hours in one place and your cloud can extend up to a radius of three kilometers. It's weaker the further away from you it goes, but bloodjaws are sensitive. Way more than humans. It makes sense. Bloodjaws are the reason clouds exist in the first place.

Rio turns to J.R. "What?"

"Clouds were supposed to be a herding technology, a way to keep masses of bloodjaws together and prepare them for slaughter. Laredo's population grows over two hundred thousand each year. All these people need to *eat*. The nutritious slop they give us isn't gonna cut it in the long term."

"Then, why is bloodjaw meat so hard to get? It costs a ton!"

"Because herding hundreds of those things is still really dangerous. Even with mods, jawboys barely last a year before they get trampled or dragged, or die some other horrible way. Until that problem gets solved, clouds are more useful in the sex industry."

Something hits Rio. "That's how Jetta caught us."

"Hm?"

"She stayed in one place and her cloud got really big. Then, she picked me up when the coach entered."

"That's...that's possible? This coach was going at full speed. How could she pick us up and be ready that fast?"

"She said I have a scent. She caught me when we entered."

"That's crazy! Her cloud must've been huge. For her to catch your vitals in it over such a big distance...I've never heard of a field experiment producing anything like that."

Rio shakes her head. "We're not experiments out here. We do the experimenting. Jetta's had her mod for two years. She got better at using it. You architects don't know what you started out here in the desert. Do you?"

J.R. looks at Rio, wariness weighs on his face. "I guess I just didn't know a lot of things when I came out here."

They go silent for a time and Rio once again picks up on J.R.'s body as it soaks Rio's cloud in. He's hard, tense, flushed and very uncomfortable. Rio wishes she could touch him, but she doesn't.

After a time, Rio fetches the atlas, notes their location and estimates the remainder of their journey. "I think we have about eight hours left on the road."

"We'll get there by midday tomorrow," says J.R.

So, even after everything, they will arrive on Opalsday, as hoped.

The land turns to cracked, red soil. Thick black and brown grasses pop up, first in clusters, then full pastures. Soon, the land is black with red boulders, grown over, break up the formerly smooth landscape. The land turns lush, with tuber bushes. Spires of gray, Laredan desert fungi shoot from the ground like conical, rubber nets.

Rio knows this area. She has been here many times. "Um, hey. Can...can we stop soon?"

"What for?" J.R. replies. "There's nothing out here for a while."

"There is, actually. There isn't a sign for it, but there's a place I like to go."

"What is it?"

"It's this underground river that empties out here, before it goes underground again. There's a pond and a waterfall...it's pretty."

J.R. looks skeptical "Sightseeing?"

"I want a shower."

Yes. A cool shower. That will do her some good. Maybe J.R. as well.

VII: Cayenda Rio

She wants a shower. After conflicts, wildlife encounters, lost money, lost tent, lost time, she wants to put off their eternally unreached destination and take a damn shower.

J.R.'s never been much persuaded about the existence of god, but this roadtrip just might be enough to make a believer out of him. How else to account for all the ways he's been fucked within the space of only a few days?

First, came the loss of his money, the scuttling of his plans. He was frightened Jolene would leave him if he couldn't pay off her debts. She didn't, but she tried to make him ditch Rio. *You shouldn't be traveling with a criminal*, she said. He couldn't do that. The loss of the money was inadvertent on Rio's part. Anyway, Jolene shut up about it after she heard Rio saved him from the sparmouths. Better J.R. travel with a criminal than be *dead*.

But, that mod. God, look at her now. Her thighs are *enormous*. That poncho can no longer hide her bare hip, which swells out beyond the edge of her seat. He steals a glance and notes the way it bulges, and then starts to curve up behind her just as it reaches the poncho's hem. He doesn't *want* to think about the ass that hip connects to, how huge it must be. He doesn't *want* to think about the nasty tricks she played on him yesterday. He doesn't *want* to think about how rock hard his boner is even now, even after he rubbed another one out last night. He doesn't want to think about the fact that Rio has a read on his vitals and has probably already worked out the extent of his feelings. It's all thanks to that damn mod. Take the mod out of this equation and he still has his money and isn't torn between between two women. As it is, he's swimming in the thickest nanite cloud he's ever experience, trying to keep cool while his nuts ache and she's *right there*.

He can't give in. He already has someone. He's already in...?

There it goes again. His love for Jolene crumples. Like a hole opening up in his brain. He remembers how they met, the things she has said to him, the kiss. But, the memories are frail, hollowed out. He was in love. He's sure of it. More in love than he'd ever known. So in love as to be saved. Saved from a life of desolation. So in love, the dispensation of a quarter million federated dollars was nothing in comparison.

Where is that *feeling* now? With each passing day, Jolene seems smaller and more distant. He struggles even to send her messages. He doesn't know what to say. All the while, Rio seems bigger and closer. Her body has blossomed into a huge, gorgeous pear. She had almost made him forget Jolene last night. But, can he blame her? The poor woman has been through so much. She sees nanite fucker where it isn't.

Alas, he *must* still be in love. He *has* to be. He's just exhausted. Yes. That's why he can't reconstitute those beautiful feelings that drove him to such euphoria a few days back. As soon as he sees Jolene again, it will all make sense. It must. It has to.

"You alright?" says Rio.

He doesn't answer. He can't. He could talk about it all day. There's no way to make another person understand this...this imploding brokenness. Where his life once came together, it is now torn, an open wound where the wind blasts in and howls. There is no way to describe this kind of pain. His thoughts have to jump chasms just to complete themselves.

So, he says nothing. His thoughts are too busy trying to talk to each other to let someone else in. There's a tap at his shoulder. He flinches, keeps his eyes on the road.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't help you," says Rio.

He shivers. She wants to help. She can't, but still, his eyes soften with the stirrings of tears. He swallows them back.

"It's coming up here," says Rio. A rocky, red cliffside, zebra striped with black grass is on their right. It is dotted with prairie flowers that gleam bone white, their windchime fragments quivering in the breeze. Brown, twisty vines net the rock as if to hold the cliffside in from avalanching.

Rio instructs J.R. to pull the coach in beside a dip in the cliffside. He parks the vehicle and follows her to the pod. Her enormous hips drag the corridor walls so badly, J.R. almost forgets himself. Rio spends a minute fumbling around back in the hold and emerges with a bar of soap, and an umbrella.

"Found this in a closet," she says, holding up the umbrella. "This'll keep the sun off me. Y'know, so my ass still fits inside this coach."

J.R. says nothing. He wants to speak, but this hole in his brain is all he can put his mind to. At last, he manages to nod.

Rio looks at him sadly. The tears want to come back. He swallows.

She throws open the right side pod door and extends the ramp. She opens the umbrella and takes a step out. She turns and points to an area on the cliff where the rock ascends into a small clearing. "It's back there, just a short walk. If you want to come—uh, to take a shower too! Um, after me—you can."

J.R. tries to nod. It's hard.

"I won't be too long," she says.

"Take your...time," he manages somehow.

Rio sighs, looks at him sadly. Then, she goes down to the ground, umbrella clutched in the same hand that grips the soap. She steps up the rock, steadying herself with her free hand. J.R. stands at the pod doorway and watches her disappear behind the rock.

He thinks he will close the pod door. He doesn't. He sits, legs dangling off the ramp, takes out his pocket console and opens Jolene's photo.

All he sees is a face. A beautiful one, yes. Blond hair, gorgeous eyes, skin. But he can't shake it: he doesn't know this person. She's a stranger, or, maybe the stranger is him. Certainly, *someone* was in love with this woman, this Jolene. But, who? He stares at her face, the way the light makes part of it gleam, the sunny radiance of her hair. It seems like it would be great to be in love with such a woman. He must actually be in love. Right? He's just forgotten. He's just...

J.R., she's getting paid to use you. She's using you now.

He shakes his head. Rio means well, but she has no idea what she—

I know about this kind of thing. I know what it's like to be someone else's toy.

Shut up, Rio. You don't know what you're saying.

You're not thinking straight!

Not thinking straight. Well, that much is true. His mind has been broken for a few days now. Maybe amnesia, or severe fatigue or shock, or something.

He tries once more to put it all back together.

* * *

His name was Jean Renoir. Three weeks back, he sent his boss his letter of resignation. They offered him more money. He wouldn't take it. He had already taken hundreds of thousands of federal dollars to build mods that, by his own admission, *shouldn't* exist. Or at least, shouldn't be tested on any human. When his boss appeared unexpectedly in person at his townhouse to try and change his mind, Jean told him flat out, he would sooner spend the rest of his days

building sprocket toys for children than make one more mod. The industry had fallen too far from its stated humanistic goals.

His company-issued lease still had a few weeks to go so he had time to work out his exit strategy without burning away cash. With a bit of luck, he would leave the Laredan system and never return.

And then, one day, when he was out for a walk, a woman on an automated scooter shot up the bike path and knocked him over. He wasn't badly hurt, but the woman, introduced as *Jolene*, insisted on having his contact information. She checked in on him that night. He tried to assure her, he was fine. But, she kept asking questions, kept trying to get to know him better. In his gated community where Jean had been contractually bound by his employer to stay put, no one showed much of an interest in *anyone*. Just to talk to someone was a relief. There wasn't much to do here but play golf, drink at the community bar, and consume ungodly amounts of sim chamber porn.

Then, one day, she asked him out. He protested that there wasn't much point, he would be leaving Lesser Laredo as soon as he could secure a ticket on an outgoing ship. But, she insisted. He agreed to meet for drinks. Her company was...okay. She was pretty, gorgeous even. But, talk was eerily vapid. It reminded him too much of all the sterile things he'd encountered since he'd landed on this planet. There was no real connection, at least not on his end. He paid their tab, bade her a hasty goodnight and went home. He had the uncomfortable sense that if he stayed much longer, she would rope him into a one night stand. And, something told him the best he would get out of that would be a waste of time.

After that night, Jolene pushed for a second date. Not wishing to be rude, Jean placated her. In the meantime, he was persistently frustrated in his attempts to buy passage on a departing ship. Inexplicably, his bids kept getting lost. TransAstral kept apologizing for their screw ups and awarded him flyer miles that he could use in the bid for the next departure—which invariably would be screwed up again. Meanwhile, his lease was running out. Not that he wanted to stay in his townhouse with its fake, green lawns that would never grow naturally on Lesser Laredo and fake businesses, subsidized by the local Corpos that made fake gourmet meals that never tasted right. The neighbors who lived here did so for reasons no less mercenary than Jean's own and seemed just as reticent to be here as he was and just as bound by contract not to talk about whatever it was they did.

Stir crazy and depressed, Jean decided to take a six hour bus trip to El Nuevo, a place no less artificial than the pseudo-community he had been trying so hard to escape, but at least, he had heard, people actually have fun there. It was at a low-end casino during a game of blackjack that had been going poorly for him, when someone tapped Jean on the shoulder. It was Jolene, now in a stunning, huggy maroon dress with sequins. She cheered him on to what ultimately turned out to be a draw for his money, then they went upstairs to the bar and emptied a bottle

of imported Chablis. Jean was only as taken by Jolene as he ever was, infatuated with her looks and grateful for the attention, but still bored by that *vapidness*, the way everything out of her mouth felt like an effort to turn the attention back on him. Jean had never had much interest in purely casual dating. Since his earliest stirrings of sexual longing, he had hoped for a deeper connection, something that would give shape and meaning to physical intimacy. But, after a couple glasses of Chablis, he found himself spilling about the crippling loneliness, his desperation to get off Lesser Laredo, the dread he felt about stepping out into an unknown future after his disillusionment with the microarchitecture industry. And, that was when Jolene put her hand on his, told him everything would be alright and to take it one day at a time. None of these platitudes gave Jean comfort, *per se*, but at least she was willing to listen. When she invited him to her hotel room, he accepted. He probably had the Chablis to thank for that.

And then, the kiss happened, and in an instant he knew he had gotten Jolene all wrong. She wasn't vapid. She was beautiful and special and perfect for him. How could he ever have seen her differently? Had his former job crushed his spirits so badly that he could no longer see the potential in a beautiful woman? They stayed up through the night and planned the next stage of their lives. By morning, Jean was on his way to the train station to get to El Ventana and empty his bank account of his ill-gotten gains. If he could spend the money freeing Jolene from her seven year contract, he would be more than glad to lose the money.

The facts are still clear. J.R. can recount them without omission or uncertainty. It's a story in two acts—well, maybe three. There's *Act I: Before the Kiss*, *Act II: After the Kiss* and *Act III: Whatever the Fuck Now Is*. The transition from I to II is self-explanatory. The Jean of Act I is bored, sad, miserable and just trying to escape. The J.R. of Act II lives life more purposefully than any other time J.R. can recall. He had a singular goal and all his actions are comprehensible through the lens of that unwavering purpose. But now, in Act III, that drivenness is gone. What exactly was it that spurred him so hard, less than a week ago? He would kill just to remember. If he could only *be* that person again, madly in love and singularly impelled. If he isn't *that* person, *who* is J.R.? A fumbling clown who couldn't stick to a great job and now lies stranded way out in the Laredo system, his bank accounts emptied? Was Act II just a dream? Is this *all* there is? No purpose, no connection, just driving through the Red Desert for...for nothing?

He looks at the photo again. She's just a face. There's no way to describe what this sort of distance feels like, where you can't even quite remember being the person who once had these feelings. It's not like homesickness or grief, which each have to do with having warm feelings for things or people that are far away or gone. This is just the opposite. The woman in this photo is near, only a day's drive away. But, there is no warmth. Not today. It's an echo. And J.R. can't even hear it now.

You're going through the same thing Solita said happened to her fake boyfriend.

J.R. shakes his head. No. No. It's just a trick of memory. He just needs to see her again and he'll...

You were supposed to be back with Jolene right now so she can hit you again with those patho-whatevers.

The console slips out of his hands and slides down the ramp. He rubs his face, groaning. He tries. He tries so hard to put himself back inside that other person, who only five days back took a train out east. He could do it yesterday. It was hard, but he could.

J.R., money wasn't going to save her.

No, he was going to save her. That's why he was on that train. That's why—

...

There's nothing. An empty memory. A dead husk. A desert.

The whistle of a sand hopper fills the air. A dry breeze ruffles his bangs. A world waits for him. He would do anything not step into it, to stay buried and try to find Jolene again. But, there is no Jolene. Just a photo, a plethora of irritating messages, a memory kiss that was supposed to mean something, but doesn't.

J.R. looks around. His heart feels like stone. He was in love. He was in love. Now, he is as light as a speck of sand in the wind.

His gaze drifts up to the clearing. He looks over his shoulder at the pod's open hatch.

Tff...tff...tff. His steps as he descends the ramp are so loud. He reaches the dozed pebble at the edge of the cliff and notes his console, lying there in the red sand. He could pick it up. Maybe he has more messages from...but, who cares? He leaves it on the ground and keeps walking.

There's a quasi-path that ascends these grassy boulders up the cliff. Above, he spots the violet sky through a screen of cloud. The noon sun is piercing. He climbs. He reaches the opening where the land makes a hairpin turn. He takes it.

The land slopes into a gorge, deeper than twice his height. Where it leads, he can't tell, because on the other side of this cliff is more vegetation than J.R. has seen in days. Black grasses, red creepers, shoots of desert fungi, brown bristle patches. The sand hopper whistles multiply.

And, somewhere below, he hears water. A constant splash.

The path narrows down to nothing, leaving a cascade of spotted boulders to climb down. He gets down on hands and knees and takes them one at a time. When he reaches the bottom, the sound of water is thicker. His shoes sink in tall grass and rattles the fragmented petals of bone flowers. A weave stem tries to trip him. The flap of gildadactyl wings sends an echo down the gorge.

The land feels soft and forgiving beneath his feet as he draws nearer to the water. The earthy scent of petrichor fills his nostrils. He throws back a curtain of red creepers, and looks.

The red sun sparkles off the purple water just three paces away, beyond a bank of black and gray grass.

Water! He's so thirsty he could die. He gets down on hands and knees and crawls to the bank's edge. From above, he spots the bottom, maybe half a forearm deep. Beneath this layer of soil is stone, carved smooth into dozens of curved pockets. He thrusts his hands in the water and the coolness is like an angel's touch. He wets his face. He cups his hands, lifts it and drinks. His parched throat rejoices.

He looks out across the stream's bloated channel, and his heart seizes.

The gorge is bigger than he thought. A house could fit in this place with a decent size front and back yard. Walls of grassy red rock wall it in with pillars of ascending vegetation and clumps of smooth boulder. This bank is just a wing-shaped strip. Most of this gorge is *water*. It streams along in J.R.'s direction, then jets into a rocky vent in the cliffside to J.R.'s right.

Opposite that, on the gorge's north end, two stories up, the rock juts out in a shattered cave. From a channel at its highest point, the water gushes down, first in a tight, blasting shaft. Then, it hits a second level and runs off in a sheet. It falls two more levels and the sheet widens further. Finally, a full wall of it runs into the bottom of the gorge. Set beyond the waterfall is a dark inset of cave wall which spits out the sound of rushing water in looping echoes.

He has never seen anything so beautiful on this planet. Not half as much.

In the middle of the falling sheet, shaded, whipping her head in its gentle rush, is *her*.

She's stark naked, her back to him. From the waist up, she's tiny. Her arms are little sticks, bent as she scrubs water into her face. Her dark brown hair is wetted to a point, which she pulls out into a fan.

From the waist down, she's something else, three times her waist width, or more. Her midriff slopes out into gorgeously fat heart curves. Her bottom swells up to a shelf so broad and round, each cheek could be of a piece with these stream-smoothed boulders that clump along the gorge walls. The water streams down her back in thick rivulets which part ways at her tailbone and take any of a dozen paths down her swollen hips and bulging backside.

Stunningly deep crease curves separate butt from thigh. Her thighs are conical, curved steeply on the outsides, less steeply on the insides. They rub together, the sturdy flesh clapping as she bends one leg and straightens the other, then alternates them. They channel the water down to her knees, the back of which are demarcated with the toned edgings of muscle amidst so much bulging flesh. Her legs swell out again into calves, shapely as bowling pins, before they taper once more and disappear beneath the water's surface.

He watches her, watches the stream fall and mold around her, watches the water steal a glimmer of sunlight, just beyond the shade. She is there, in the middle of this wet, vibrant place, a pocket of life that wounds this Red Desert. In her hand is the bar of soap. She scrubs her neck, her chest, her shoulders.

He takes in a shaky breath, and begins to shed his clothes. Off goes his shirt, his belt, boots, corduroy shorts, socks. He piles it all up on the bank like a wad of shed skin. At last, he discards his underwear. He takes his first step and sucks in his breath. It's cool, and he has goosebumps. First one foot, then the other, the ridged and smoothed rock beneath makes a bit of friction with his bare feet. He won't slip as long as his steps don't glance off it the wrong way.

He approaches. He's embarrassed to be here, in such company. This woman, she belongs here and he is just a visitor. But, he believes himself welcome, and there's nowhere else to be. Nowhere else in this whole world. The water sloshes against his shins. It clings to his ankles in flowing fists. The sun above is so hot, and this stream is so cool.

As he nears the cliffside overhang of the waterfall, he feels the purity of fresh water on his face. He looks up and catches speckles of it on his tongue.

He stops, only a few paces from her. His heart takes a plunge as he drinks in the sight of her. She's such a little thing. The top of her head only comes up to his chin. But, her backside is broader than a doorway. She was a thing of beauty from afar. Up close, she's a thing of wonder.

Should he say something? He doesn't know what. He left words behind back at the pod.

But then, she looks down at the water behind herself and notices something behind her. She turns.

Rio's eyes widen. Her lips part in disbelief.

Here they stand, both naked and together. He tries to say something, but of course nothing comes.

She holds out her arms. J.R. steps into them. She clings to him so tightly, her fingers redden the muscles in his back as the sheet of water drenches him and mats his hair against his

forehead. He shivers. Rio combs his hair back, stands on tiptoes. Her mouth finds him. Her tongue finds him. Her sighing breath finds him.

"You're here," she says.

"I...I..." he tries. She lets him go ahead and stammer. She kisses his cheek, his chin, his neck. At last he gets it out: "I don't want to be anywhere else."

* * *

Here, under this shelf of cliff, walled in by a sheet of water, the echoing whispers of the gods speak riddles to the ear. The cave is alive with the dancing waveforms of sun bouncing off water. The cool air smells of clean, wet stone. A huge, water-smoothed boulder nearly splits the cavespace in two.

Against this rock, Rio sets her humungous bottom, leans back on it, digs her heels against the ridged rock below the water's surface and tosses her hair behind her head. The rock is cold and wet, but her ass will warm it. She looks up at J.R., silhouetted against the sunlit curtain of the falling river. "Come here," she says, anticipation thick on her breath. Drops freckle her hungry face.

"What?" yells J.R. The echoes multiply the stream's pour to a deafening thickness.

She laughs and waves him to her, semi-reclined, fat thighs splayed. J.R. moves in, braces himself against the rock next to Rio's head. Up close, the dancing light of reflected water plays on his brow. Rio reaches out, feels his soaked beard, his skinny neck. Her hand passes down to his dripping collar, his chest. With her other hand, she reaches around to his back and pulls him in. His tongue is soft and gentle and she takes her time, coaxing it with hers. The fresh taste of the river is on their tongues. He runs his free hand down her right side. It passes from shoulder to breast to rib to waist to...he hesitates. She takes him by the wrist and moves his hand to her enormous hip. His fingers sink into pliant but sturdy flesh. She feels him swell against her groin and kisses him harder. He reaches behind her, catches her distended glute and squeezes. Rio gasps out a sigh, reaches down between them and finds him, hard and warm against her hand. She squeezes him back. They go on like this for a time, kissing and playing with each other. Rio's labia twitches. The skin feels swollen and ticklish. She could take him now, but she has always loved delaying herself. Her lips lift to J.R.'s ear. "Touch me more. Touch me wherever you want to."

He pulls away from her grasp and drops out of view, but his hands never leave her. He kisses her left thigh, presses his face against it. He works his way inside, licking the tender skin, lightly sore from all the rubbing lately. J.R.'s tongue traces a hooking path up her groin. The cave ceiling echoes with her gasp. He keeps doing it. She tosses her head, growling and sighing.

Enough. She can't take any more. She grabs a handful of J.R.'s hair and guides him back up to her level. Her hand finds his cock again. It's harder than before. She guides it to her. "Slow," she says in his ear. J.R.'s head presses. With a shudder, she splits. He stays here for a time, working her open as she wettens. Rio rakes his back with her fingernails as he presses in deeper. "Ohhhh." She goes back to kissing him as he slides in and out.

Rio lifts her right leg around his waist, puts an arm under his arm and the other arm over his shoulder. She grips him tight and puts her left leg around his ass and hooks her feet together, walling him in between her hulking thighs. She leans as much of her weight against the rock as she can, so J.R. doesn't slip and send them both tumbling. He gets the message and takes her carefully. Her legs ride the rise and fall of his body as he thrusts her against the rock. She pulls back and looks up at him, panting, eyes and lips twitching. Drops fall from his soaked hair and pass down his neck. There is almost a plea on his face. Rio can't remember ever fucking someone in such a delicate state. She needs to be careful with this one. The echoing waterfall is too loud to coo sweet reassurances at him, so she affixes him with a serious look and pets his face. For a second, he's embarrassed and tries to look away. Rio pulls him back. He needs to know, this is okay. His face relaxes. They kiss. He pushes hard against her and slides the rest of the way in.

The cushion of Rio's ass takes his momentum as he pumps her against the rock. Her upper legs undulate, the writhing flesh slaps his bony hips. He starts to feel really good in there. She wails, tosses her head back on the rock and stares into the waves of light on the ceiling, which droops with hundreds of stalactites. For a time, she doesn't even think, just feels him inside, outside, his warm breath on her face.

Then, it comes. A warbling sensitivity, thin at first, but it widens. Her legs release him and find purchase again on the stony floor. "S-slow again," she gasps in his ear. He slows. The feeling becomes easier to ride on. Her breath heaves as it grows wider, wider... It's too much to bear. She grips his shoulder for support, throws her head back and wails with each thrust.

At last, he pushes all the way in and the feeling in her spills out. She grips him hard and screams, writhing. The cave comes to deafening life as her wails tear through every stony crevice. Her vision goes blank.

When she comes out of it, panting, she looks up at J.R., pets his cheek. "Your turn."

J.R. hesitates. "Can I...?"

Rio looks at him, alert and ready, even through the tingles still threading through her body.

"Could you...turn around?"

She smiles, pushes off the rock. J.R. gives her clearance to turn the full girth of her hips and ass. She lays once more against the rock, now on her stomach. Her arms cross beneath her face, making a pillow for her cheek to rest against. She widens her stance as much as she can while still bracing herself.

J.R.'s tiny hand explores her humongous ass. His fingers rake and squeeze the pliant flesh. Then, he moves in, pressing his hips deep into the buoyant cheeks. She gets on tiptoes and reaches down to help him find her still wet slit. It's awkward, but then he reaches her. He begins to thrust. Rio's ass ripples to life. There's so much movement back there, Rio herself can't believe it. It's as though half her body is jiggling. She feels a touch embarrassed and begins to laugh.

"Y-you okay?" he cries.

"It feels great," she yells. "Keep going!"

Rio's slit opens up to take just a bit more thickness from J.R. He's harder than ever now, grunting and hissing through his clenched teeth. It's only now that Rio notices, she can't read J.R.'s vitals much in here. If she focuses hard, she can make out a heart beat, blood jetting through veins, but it's muted. Perhaps the echoes, the wetness, the mix of warmth and coolness, the thrusting and the orgasm all just make it harder to pick out. She lets it go. Who cares now, when J.R. is fully erect inside her?

He falls against her back, strokes her hair and she hears his mouth whimper beside her ear. The stirrings of another orgasm creep up between her legs.

He pulls back and plows her harder. Her ass is alive with meaty ripples. And then, she comes again. The feeling is rawer this time and she finds herself biting the flesh of her own arm as her knees tremble against the pleasure. Her throat grates out a tormented sound. J.R. howls, goes rigid.

His warm cum fountains inside her. It squirts out between them and stains the rock as the cave multiplies the sound of bliss.

And all that's left for a while is panting, echoing water, J.R.'s body collapsed on hers.

Rio stirs, looks down at her crossed arms, squints at them.

Is her skin glowing a bit?

* * *

The jagged rim that walls the gorge has a steep break of jutting rock, split like a V. The split is narrow and descends steeply to the other side in a hill of black grass and trailing creepers. Gadd looks again, down the gorge and through the film of water that curtains the cave. He wonders what he's looking for at this point. Their voices came out loud and clear. And, he's missed the best part of the show. Gadd slips his dick back in his boxers and buttons up his fly.

He goes to his bike, some distance across the patchy field. He starts it up and rides until he reaches his tent. Inside, he flips on his radio.

"Hello?" comes a voice.

"Gimme Billy Boy. Urgent."

Ten minutes later, Billy Boy tromps across the small camp, ducks into his trailer, crawls to the back and powers the big antenna. His fists tremble with rage. He sits on a stool with a heavy thump that wobbles an empty beer bottle on the floor. With a hairy hand, he switches the radio on and takes the mic.

Axon's reedy, well-pitched tenor comes through. "Yeah, what is it?"

"BB here. We got her at the river gorge."

There's a pause. "Figures," says Axon. "She always did love that place."

"Axon," Billy Boy husks, "she's cheating on us."

"Hmm?"

"She cheated! That whore is with some skinny boy. They did it in *our* gorge!! Gadd saw her!"

A much longer pause. "He's sure?"

"He saw plenty and heard the rest."

"She was...enjoying it?"

Billy Boy does not wish to answer, but he can't keep secrets from Axon. "Passionate as Gadd's ever seen her."

"Well, that just figures. Doesn't it?"

"She's wasted no time with that mod, either. Gadd said she's enormous already."

"She must have a decent sized cloud by now. Are we sure she didn't catch Gadd?"

"Can't be sure. Either way, Axon, we'll have 'em in an hour. Both of them. And, we'll make that little slut very, very sorry. I'll bring her back alive. I promise."

"Fine, fine. Good."

The line goes quiet. Billy Boy's heart thuds. The tiny mic quivers in his huge hand. "...won't waste any more of your time. BB out."

"Wait," says Axon.

Billy Boy waits.

"I've changed my mind," says Axon. "Don't get in their way."

"What?" Billy Boys utters breathlessly. "Axon...this-this is our one good shot! If we let her go, she'll get to El Nuevo by tomorrow!"

"If that coach stays missing much longer without an antenna, LT's going to report it. Then, Interpol gets involved. Maybe they already are. They'll run a search for the vehicle and two missing people. Surveillance will be high. I don't like it."

"But-but...once she gets to El Nuevo, that's it! We can't raid a city!"

"No," says Axon. "It won't go like that. Starlyn's already camped out by El Nuevo. We'll know about it when that coach reaches the station."

"Axon! She'll be hiding in the shadow of one of those fat cats. We'll never see her again!" Tears well up in Billy Boy's eyes.

"You said it yourself: Rio's got someone with her."

"Yes! That dirty, cheating whore!!" As Billy Boy spits out these words, they magnify into a hard, stony brae, louder than any natural human sound could ever be. It rattles the trailer's windows.

Axon's voice is so calm and dispassionate, Billy Boy is reminded why this man is the only person who has ever been fit for him to take orders from. "Starlyn and her girls will be watching for them. She'll come out of the shadows when Starlyn gets to her friend."

Billy Boy releases a breath. "I-I see."

"For now, stay put. We'll reach your camp tomorrow afternoon. You can call off the scouts and take it easy."

"Yes, boss."

"And, BB? Don't be too hard on Rio. You know how easily she falls in love. We haven't even gotten to know her new company. This could be a good thing for everyone involved. And, if it isn't, well, we'll make it as good as it can be."

"I...I understand."

"How's my handsome little beast doing?"

A sentimental smile pulls back on Billy Boy's hairy snout. He strokes the black fur that hangs from his chin. "Doing fine, boss."

"Good. Have a drink on me tonight. I'm out. Love ya." Axon's signal goes dead.

Billy Boy crawls over to the sink, turns in the mirror, spots his reflection through his left eye, then turns to the right one. All those morning hours in the sun and he didn't even notice: his man-beast form is almost fully expressed. Already, his horns are as long as a normal man's fingers. Any more sun, and Billy Boy won't fit this damn trailer. But, Axon will sure be happy to see him like this. He always does love it when Billy lets loose.

Axon was right as usual; he was being rash. Rio has always been so kind, such a team player. This whole thing must be a misunderstanding. Axon will sort it out. He always has.

Rio in love. Yes, thinks Billy Boy, that's one thing I can wrap my big, dumb bison head around.

End of Part I