ALMOST HUMAN

Attachment A: Creative Project

A novel submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Portfolio of Design and Social Context
RMIT University
May 2013
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ACT ONE

1

[Ariadne]

The Anatomy Lesson

Like a butcher, I shall strike you without anger and without hate.

Charles Baudelaire, L'Héautontimorouménos

I had him pinned to the old Anatomy School’s faded sandstone wall. My high heeled, steel spiked boot pushed hard against his chest. His breath was shallow, eyes wide with fear. The stench of desperation emanated from his pores.

I inhaled deeply. I loved what I could do to men like this.

“Please. I have children.”

“So? You want me to eat them, too?” He whimpered.

Not like a dog, I might add. Some dogs are my best friends.

No, he groveled like a pig. Pigs are smart. Pigs are dangerous. Pigs have always been my enemy. My nose twitched. I knew there was something about the professor that wasn’t quite right. Always trust your first instinct. The one the rational mind doesn’t filter out.

“My mother always said, don’t talk to strangers. She told me to play with them first.”

My hand, human mode, toyed with his hair. I enjoyed men with thick, dark hair. Men as tall as me. Tasty men. Smart men. But alas, men like the professor were my undoing. I should stick to trawling the Kings Street nightclubs, rather than decayed university buildings. Men used to sniffing out nuances between words and looking at shadows in meanings had a way of seeing the animal in me before I was ready.

“Anything - I’ll give you - anything.”


“I. Will. Eat. You.”
I pushed in for emphasis. My long legs, encased in slick black PVC, tingled at his heat. I regretted not having time to linger. I suspected his DNA enhancements had endowed him with more than just pig cunning.

“I don’t know anything.”

“Oh, come on professor. I’ve been reading your journal articles on cybernetics and anthropomorphism. So interesting that you have chosen to conduct your research here. Especially as the government stopped funding the School of Human and Animal Anatomy.”

“I got private backing.”

“Names. Now.”

“The money just came in – every month – before the full moon.”

I bit into his shoulder, hard. My hand clenched over his mouth so he couldn’t scream. Then, with a mouthful of his blood and flesh, I kissed him deeply.

“Try again,” I said.

“It was - in the name of - Mare - Fecunditatis. The Lunar Mare.”

“Sea of Fertility. An interesting choice. And with what did you supply this benefactor in return?”

“DNA samples.”

“Whose?”

The professor shook his head violently. Our faces smeared with blood, bodies pressed hot against each other, my claw on his chest. We looked like any other couple engaged in a little bestial action on a Saturday night in a dark carpark off Lygon Street.

Except this was Tuesday afternoon at the University of Melbourne.

“I can kill you quickly or leave you for the cybs. Your choice.”

His face contorted. That smell again. Ever wear pig skin?

“I run a free clinic. We get Level 10s coming in for prosthetics.”

“How very illegal.”

“Why do you care? You’re not even - ”

“What?”

“You’re not human.”
I ran the claw across his face as I willed it back to flesh. Red fingernails flickered across his scarlet drenched chin. My smooth hand kneaded his cheek.

“Tell me that again.”

“What are you?”

His voice held the fear of a thousand nightmares. It echoed with the trembling whispers carried on a cold wind from so many yesterdays. His fear was filled with the stench of corpses in crow-picked gibbets. It carried the shuddering scream of the loving embrace of the Scavenger’s Daughter. His was the terror that quivered hearing a lone wolf’s howl, as it drifted into the bitter dawn of a Macedonian mountain village. It was a fear worn old with folk tales and warnings. It smelt of blood and the leaking brain fluids wrought by the last twist of the Kranz Schneiden. It was fear as pungent as the nutty sweet aroma of spilt popcorn on a Saturday night. It was teenage girls clinging to their boyfriends as the monster of their childhood horrors loomed on screen. It was the fear men had when they looked up from my breasts and into my eyes.

“I am something that doesn’t exist even in your anatomy museum.”

“You can’t be real.”

“That’s what they all say. At the end.”

“Please.”

I ignored him. Charged him under Section 3. Raised my hand.

Read out the Xenos oath.

“Like a butcher, I shall strike you without anger and without hate.”

“No!”

He watched as my hand changed back. He watched as I plunged my claw into his chest. His eyes were still open as he watched me hold his still beating heart.

They were open, still, as he slid down, leaving a thick blood trail behind him on the wall’s mellow hue. And there, slumped on the ground, he was still ever more.

I tossed his mutated heart into the rose bushes massed around the ornate wrought iron gate at the entrance to the Anatomy School. Some passing cyb would snaffle it to sell. Maybe a pig would sniff it out for a snack. They liked to eat their own.

So, he had been amputating hooves and replacing them. When I got back to the grid I’d check with our German connections. That’s where the best prosthetics came from.
Though there were serious repercussions for use in anything other than fully human recipients. Like laser hair removal, it was an offence to allow anyone Almost Human access to the technology. But when had that ever stopped the Germans?

I took out the wet wipes from my backpack as I walked through the nearly deserted university up to the Law School. Here and there a light glowed through the arched windows of rooms surrounding the old quadrangle. A few desultory Christmas decorations were taped to the glass. I paused for a fraction of a second, willing myself away from Duncan’s office. No, he’d be able to smell the blood on me. I quickened my pace through the Gothic cloisters towards the Swanston Street tram stop, wondering at the significance of the code name. The Moreau group could have chosen another lunar code name - the Marsh of Decay or the Lake of Death perhaps; all appropriate considering the coming battle.

I placed my hand on the bio-scanner at the super stop. It glowed green: H. Another commuter, face flushed with the spirit of an extended end of year celebration and someone else’s alcoholic largesse, smiled as they glanced at my status. It was the little things that mattered, right? Human, or not. I grinned back, hoping I’d managed to pick all the stray remnants of the professor’s shoulder from my teeth.

I was turning forty next week. Under the circumstances, Mare Fecunditatis seemed a barbed joke at my expense. But I had the last laugh. For the last fifteen years my fertile eggs had been stored safely in a bio bank. All I had to do now was convince Coben Thorley to be the father.

It was easier to get that man to give me a pay rise.
“Kally, how do you feel?”

I am in the white room. They always bring me to the white room. There is a part of the university where the buildings are new and none of the tourists go. That’s where it all happens. Underground. Sometimes they keep me here for weeks, asking questions, taking blood. I look at my arm.

“It hurts. It always hurts.”

I don’t know this one’s name. She is new. She looks at me and smiles her tight smile. They never tell me their names. I watch the blood move up and down her neck through a fat, pulsating vein. I wonder if she knows that my teeth are getting sharp. Some mornings I wake up with blood on the pillowcase. I have to wash it out before they discover it.

“Tell me about your dream.”

I shrug. I pick at the skin around my fingernails. They are growing sharp too. The dream only happens when the moon shines in bright onto my bed, through the old windows that rattle with the wind. My bedroom is up near the attic. I can hear sounds in the walls. I wonder if they are rats. Maybe they are watching me as well. Waiting. The professor keeps me up here so she knows when I walk down the stairs. Then her bedroom door opens and she asks me, “Kally, what’s wrong?”.

I have never told her about the dreams. Of waking up and feeling this thing inside me. One day I know it will come out of my skin and I’ll see what it really is. Now it is quiet. But every year it gets bigger and I can feel it pushing against me. Sometimes I look in the mirror
and I can see it watching me. A little speck moving in my eye. It’s waiting too. It’s like having
bubbles under my skin. I wonder if it is my blood boiling, hotter than anyone else. Or if it is a
bit of bad food trapped there, in my flesh, trying to get out. Or maybe it is a bug that crawled
in through my ear.

I found a needle in her cupboard. When they thought I was asleep I pressed the end
into my skin and watched it sink in, hoping the thing would pop out and I could see it. But it
must have realized what was going on and I felt it slither away. Blood came out. A lot of it. I
pretended I cut myself and buried the needle in the garden. Every year after the snow
thaws, I watch and wait. But nothing grows in that spot.

The woman looks at me. She wants an answer.

“I don’t dream,” I lie.

“Really?” says the woman in the white coat. “Your mother tells me you have been
getting nightmares.”

“She’s not my mother,” I say.

I think about the way the professor fusses with me, does my hair in plaits, tells me how
much she loves me. I look at her in the mornings with her briefcase, her big earrings, her
red lipstick. She’s always on the phone. She makes me play the piano and practice every
day. She makes me do intensive math homework after school. She won’t let me play with
the other kids. She says I can play with Dr Mackenzie’s boys, Edward and Angus. I don’t
want to. They are boring. But even though I watch her when she’s finally asleep, I can’t find
any part of me in her.

When I was little she’d show me pictures. She’d point to photos taken on the grounds at
Mansfield College where she was tutoring at the time, before she became a professor.
“There’s you inside mummy’s belly.” She was big and round in a floral dress and she
showed me the stretch marks on her skin, and the deep angry line where they had to cut me
out of her. But when I lie against her hard body as she reads to me, I look at my arms next
to hers and her white skin and red hair and her freckles, and my olive skin deep like coffee.
And my hair as dark as hers is red. And I turn to her and I say “but you aren’t my mummy”
and she bites her lips and gets angry.

The woman in the white coat sighs and taps the clipboard with her pen.

“Now Kally, this is not very helpful. And it’s very upsetting for your mother.”

“She thinks there are bombs everywhere,” I say. “She won’t let me go out.”
“Is that what’s worrying you? The attacks?”

I nod. “We check every morning. The security guard who wears the university jumper has this long handled mirror and looks under the car.”

“Your mother works in a very important area.”

“People hate her.”

“Not the people who know her.”

“They hate what she does.”

“Her research saves a lot of lives.”

“It kills a lot of animals.”

“Is that what they tell you?” she made notes in her clipboard. “At school, is that what the other kids say?”

I am tired after these sessions. The professor knows this and she comes to pick me up and gives me chocolate. It is supposed to take the pain away, of the needles. And then we go home, in the grey afternoons. I don’t want chocolate today. I want freedom.

“She says ‘don’t look at the cybs’,” I tell the woman. “Why not? You guys made them.”

“Well, not me, personally.”

“It was your research. And now that things have gone wrong …“

“You know they can be dangerous. And your mother is only trying to protect you.”

“I want to put money into the bowls they carry around, but she won’t let me.” I didn’t add that I thought maybe I was a cyb, and that’s why I felt like this; that maybe the thing inside me was artificial, something that had worked its way loose from the machinery. I wanted to talk to a cyb and ask them, she’d push me on. There was always someone with me, either the professor or one of the university monitors assigned to me. So I never got a chance to talk to a cyb.

“Are they the ones painting the signs?”

“What signs?”

“Are We Not Men?”

“I haven’t seen the signs,” she said. Her jaw twitched. I could smell she was lying. I could hear her breath get faster.

“It’s on the news,” I say. “They show the signs painted on the wall after the attacks.”
“We are just trying to keep you safe.”

“And every morning she lines up the pills for me, with a big glass of chilled orange juice to wash them down.”

“Your mother is concerned – we are all concerned – that considering your father, well, we have to be on the safe side. For your own good.”

“What was he like?” I ask this question every time.

“I’ve only seen his medical records.”

“Can I see them?”

“They are classified.”

“But I am his daughter.”

The door opens and two men come in to take more blood. As usual, they are wearing full bio-hazard suits. They have wheeled in a stainless steel trolley and behind them is another man in a black outfit with a shield over his head and a Tazer gun. I hate that thing.

“I am perfectly healthy,” I say. I start to get up. She puts her hand over my arm.

“This way, you’ll stay healthy.”

I don’t say anything. Under my skin I can feel it, like it’s trying to get out. Like at night, while I am lying in my bed, the cat will jump off in fright as the thing starts to move under my skin, back and forth. I haven’t told them this.

I am used to lying. If you don’t lie, they keep you in longer so you have to make up stories.

“It’s just that I am scared,” I say. I start to cry. “The dream is so bad, I can’t even tell you what it is about.”

The woman pats my hand. “You poor little girl,” she says. She waves away the men, tells them to come back later. “Tell me all about it. Tell me about your dream.”

I watch as the men close the door. I can hear them walk down the corridor. They will take off the suits in that room at the end of the corridor. They will wait to be called back. I let the woman hold me as I cry. I go to the library every lunchtime. The others don’t want to play with me anyway. They say I ruin their games. So I find stories I can use.

I tell her a story now.

“Kally, how does it make you feel?”

“It makes me feel very scared.” I cry. Just like they want me to.
She hesitates, and then hugs me. I nuzzle her neck, flick my tongue out. And when the blood starts gushing, I drink deeply. She sinks into my arms. Dead.

I wipe my hand on her white coat. Red on white. I don’t have much time as I know they have cameras everywhere. But I know where to run. I know this place.

And so does the thing inside me.
It was almost twilight. The grey water lapped indifferently against the carved concrete steps that led from the marina to the plaza. The water was the color and shining slickness of a dirty martini that had been left languishing on the counter of a third-rate motel bar. Even the bats which sleeked across the sky in uniform grace seemed to surge a little faster just to get out of the place.

I knew how they felt. I hated Darklands duty. I hadn't eaten meat since the last full moon and the falafel for breakfast, consumed in haste at a café after I'd slunk out of a strange bed on the right side of town, was not fulfilling. Much like the encounter with the stockbroker called Dave. What did they say? Buy cheap and you buy twice. It was the same when it came to picking up men.

I was used to Mr Right Enough for the Night. It was something of a necessity. I could handle lack of sleep – it was lack of sex that made me reckless and bad tempered. Coben was, as usual, out of town. Even when he was in Melbourne he was often out of reach. Emotionally it probably suited me. Sexually, I was frustrated.

The sound of the swing drifting in the wind caught my ear. I sniffed the air. No children. I guessed, from the way the screeching noise carried and the direction that the wind hit my face, the playground was a few blocks away. Perhaps near the new estate. I tightened the grip on my gun, just in case. Dogs could be anywhere.

I swatted back the almost automatic pull of nostalgia. Certain noises – like the cooing of a pigeon, the warbling of a magpie – pulled me back to the time before the change. I was 10 years old; remembered blue skies, the long white vapor trail of a far distant plane overhead and my other at my side before she was taken away. We must have had time, then, to be like everyone else. Why else would this sound take me back?

A swing in a playground.
When was the last time I heard that sound? In Dolos, in my father's remote village in Macedonia. I'd looked up from the steep garden where I was helping move the old stones that had tumbled from the decaying house above. Although the air was sharp and cold, and the mountains surrounding me echoed in the still mornings with the taunting call of the wolves, I half expected to see the dazzling bark of a gum tree against a clear blue sky when I turned to that almost forgotten echo from my childhood.

There were no children in the village. But there was a playground just near the church. It seemed forlorn, hopeful, waiting. I wandered in and twirled the roundabout with my hand. A tremendous sadness had filled me. There would always be old people, it seemed, to sit in front of the tavernas holding onto their sticks, watching. Just no-one on the swings.

The children had left the village long before. Fled to cities for anonymity. The elders who protected them in the past would no longer. A child's laughter could be heard anywhere, but it was obscured where people didn't care, too busy in their own pace. Because they were so caught up, it took a while to realise that the younglings were slowly disappearing from the streets.

I lowered my gun. My nose would have detected anything suspicious, such as the whiff of a dog tapping the swing aggressively with its paw. But the wind must have picked up the swing and rocked it back and forth in a lonely parody of what had been.

There was going to be nothing today. I was surely going through the motions. I had half a mind to call it in. If the ferals were on the hunt, they'd make sure they waited until darkness fell. That way, the most human could blend in. I knew them better than they suspected. Sometimes I sensed one of the mutants recognised me, though I did my best to keep them out of sight if I had a partner with me. Tonight it was Jenkins; a white shirt with irritable bowel syndrome and unfortunate flatulence. He'd been sent down to the frontline from Canberra, where I bet he hoped the job he'd signed up for in Xenos was computer based, deskbound and confined to the bleak Capital Territory. But since the last outbreak, all bodies were needed, ground skills were mandatory and I had been saddled with a succession of security forces simulacra.

It was hard to keep the younglings out of their radar; depending on whom they paired me with, there would be questions about why we didn't investigate some of the edges of the Darklands, the fringe buildings that housed ordinary office workers by day. But I knew the top floors had been taken over, burrows gnawed out of the service cable routes, parallel corridors secreted alongside the lift shaft. Even a human could sense what was going on, if they listened closely enough. I couldn't take the chance.
Tomorrow would be better. The pull of the moon would have retreated one week back and I would be at my calmest. Early in the phase, that was when I volunteered to do the most public work, team meetings and interventions. I liked to be alone when the moon swelled, and after all these years there were no questions asked of me. I did a good job. No-one came close to tracking like I did. If my methods were a little unconventional, well, so what?

My phone rang and broke my thoughts. "Yeah?"

"Got anything?" Jenkins sounded bored. Bored was good. It meant he was off the game, mind wandering.

"Nup".

But then I saw a flash of red from the corner of my eye. The sound of a distant swing, the almost human sound of running. What was I missing? I sniffed again; the air was clean. But something was wrong. What was I missing?

"Ariadne?" Jenkins repeated. I hadn't answered his next question. I wasn't going to. I had seen enough.

I dropped the phone. Jenkins's voice tumbled to the ground as the object shattered, glass face splintered across the screen. I crunched the remains with my high-heeled leather boot as I sprinted after the child.

Even a hoof sounds different in leather. It was their gait. Animals are not meant to walk like natural bipeds. The arms – the child wore a cape, covering the protruding elbows jutting at unnatural angles.

Unnatural for a human that is.

Hand on the gun, I ran silently after it.

Since the last attack, Xenos had been on code amber. CA meant a bullet to the head after curfew. We weren't collecting strays anymore. The mills had become overcrowded and the last disease – you couldn't even get the most desperate humans to work with the sick ferals anymore. Even those who were vegans and only slept with their ethical kin were repulsed. In the mills, the strongest of the tribes had to nurse the weakest and when the doctors couldn't learn anymore, they were processed.

No-one asked about the smoke stacks coming from the paper mills. Belching thick clouds of waste in the night. No-one asked. The mills had been there in Alphington for so long, many of the younger humans had forgotten that it had been sold and taken over. It had
been the monolithic paper mills. Now, it was just The Mills. But when did anyone see what the factory really produced? People preferred not to know.

If this child were caught, she'd be sent there. Processed. Why had elders started sending children into the night? Especially ones with tails – the cape couldn't cover something so animal. Didn't they have any "almosts" left to do the job of collections?

I ran after her, hiding behind one column to the next. The child darted from tree to tree in front of me; like it was a game she played with her mother. Each step a little jump, a bound. Fast. Too fast for a human.

There was a flashing light up on the plaza steps. One, two, three – a laser flashlight. Jenkins was signaling me. I reached for my phone to tell him to back off and remembered, damn. If he saw the child he'd shoot. He was good, too. Quickly I edged to the corner of the building, the large awning fanning out in front of me for cover. From this angle, with human sight, he couldn't see me.

Crouching, I wedged my gun into my holster and placed my hands on the cold asphalt. This was better. Low down, my centre of balance stable, I could see the world more clearly now it was dark. I only needed to pick up the scent and attack the child's feet or grab the tail and hold her. The child was small enough to immobilize while I carried it up the building shaft and inside.

When I came across it, several blocks away, I stopped and panted behind a tree while I watched the child on the swing. Even in the dark, in this abandoned part of the city, it was such a risky thing to do. Back and forth she went, the cape flipping each time she pushed up through the air, the end of her tail exposed. I half wondered, as the child jumped up mid air, whether I'd ever felt so reckless and free at that age.

I pounced. “Like a butcher, I shall strike you without anger and without hate.”

There was no cry. It was quick. The pig gasped in recognition as he saw my claw.

Blood scattered, a red rain cloud of warmth, showering over the kid as she watched. As she wiped the blood from my face, I could see myself reflected in the yellow eyes. There were so few who could pass and the ones who did had the genes manipulated for eyes. They stared up at me, frozen, unblinking. It seemed that each time I killed like this, that I looked less human in the reflection of the eyes of the thing I just murdered.

The child nodded at me. She had her hand out, five fingers spread. There was no fur on them. But she didn't speak. We both looked at the stinking body between us.

"Help me move him," I said calmly.
In silence we dragged the man’s body to the side of the park, where the great pine trees spread. What was she doing here? Who’d send a child out for supplies when predators like this beast were roaming everywhere? When I got her back to the tower I’d have words to the elders, certainly. This, thing, at our feet, a pig thing, was the reason children should be locked away safely after dark.

The smell was disgusting. Blood oozed from the thick skin and the bristles. I had emptied three rounds into his hide before he hit the ground. Pigs were fast. Not as fast as a wolf, though.

"We bury him," I said.

The child nodded. I doubted she had much language beyond what could buy her what she needed on the streets. Or what she could sell.

We started to dig. Together we had it completed in less than 10 minutes. Before I rolled the carcass into the hole I checked for wallets, watch, the sort of valuables traders had on them. He smelt of cheap alco, probably purloined at the last place he terrorized. No-one would miss a pig. It almost sickened me to reach inside his thigh pocket and feel the length of his fat penis nestling near the wallet. I suppressed a smile when I smelled that it was made of pigskin. Well, they were bloody carnivores, weren’t they?
The Lilydale line

Came the day when fate did frown
And the wolf blew into town.
With a gruff “puff-puff” he puffed just enough
And the hay house fell right down.

- Traditional

There, in the warm glow of the fire, Wolf felt his mood soften. He could feel her, and the pull of longing that was already building up. If his hands could still use a microscope, he would be able to see the blood change and the tiny molecules of his DNA dance in hers.

She was his. His bloodline. His legacy. His hope for the future.

The Skype connection was fuzzy, but he could see how like her mother she was. Dark hair, dark eyes, the smooth, olive skin. He looked at her as she sat in the crate, holding the doll he told them to give her. Every so often she looked up and looked straight at him, as if she knew she was being watched. He could feel her; across the planet and down to this subterranean pit he called home.

Inside her, he had what could help him. She was strong, he’d seen that. And unlike the other viruses, hers was his perfect match. They wouldn’t be able to kill him. Or the rest of them. Oh, how they terrified the humans, out of the cages let free. They’d tried everything to get rid of them, but it wasn’t working.

It only took a small cut for contamination to occur: the merging of blood, the crossing of the species barrier. Inject a person with pig’s blood and they’ll live – for an hour. Swap their kidney for a baboon’s and pump them full of anti-rejection drugs and you might get them to open their eyes and have breakfast before their body turns in on itself. But the scariest things Wolf ever worked on in the labs were the patients who signed up for the new donor program. Now, it’s true that they are genetically closer linked to us than animals that share the earth with us, but they also carry the risk of the Xenos virus.

He told the cubs, once you have seen what that can do to a person’s memory, you’ll run a mile. Wolf could see it now, under the microscope. The soup that became the final resting point of the frontal lobe, with the viral spores spreading like tentacles, reaching into the optic nerve. They couldn’t even investigate post mortem. It was too dangerous. Once the dead
rise again, they don't take too kindly to a steel blade or saw being wielded at their decaying flesh.

Still, that's what happens when you tamper with nature, right? Wolf raised his paw and rubbed the pink skin that appeared in patches around the fur. Fur and flesh, man and beast. Even now, it was hard to believe that once there was nothing but red dust and desert out there. Imagine, the centre of a great continent without water. He'd helped change that, long ago. When his hair was still dark, not this patchwork of grey and silver. He'd helped create the water, and pumped it into the centre until it formed the vast flat plateau that now provided most of the world's genetically modified crops.

It hadn't helped the others, though. People can cope with artificial water, they'll eat GM bread, but when it comes to giving suffrage to hybrids – well, no average citizen ever felt comfortable with difference, didn't matter what it was. But they'd sooner welcome people with different colored skin and a different God than those like him. Even if they did look like regulars on the outside. On the inside, they're all animal. Their blood is pig blood, their hearts baboon and their central cortex – well, reptilian. When scientists first started mapping the human genome, they thought all that was important was encoded on the DNA sequence. Then they realised it was the junk DNA that held the key. All it took was picking the lock and finding out what makes us human and others animal, and how to meld the two.

He watched the child's fingers on the doll keys. Did she feel the link to the animal under her fingertips? Was she aware of the different noise that cats gave her when she stroked them? The way dogs turned to her in the street and bowed their heads? Kally was the link. And she must be returned to the fold.

Did she know who he was? Who he had been? Patience. Wolf knew the time it took for the change to begin. He had felt it as his own human body began to melt. He pushed the thought away. Now was not the time to become melancholy, not when there was work to be done. The rumble of a train in the next tunnel alerted him to the time. Soon, the others would be back from the raids and he could access the weapons they had stolen.

His snout twitched.

Wolf smelt his rival before he heard the old metal door heave open. The young upstart had already challenged him once, and although Wolf had lashed out and caused Cub injury, the realisation that his powers were no longer at their peak upset him.

"What news from above?" asked Wolf?
Cub stood by the door, scratching at his skin and pulling at his clothes. He was still in flux, and the fur grew in patches leaving his flesh red and sore. Wolf had no sympathy. Transformation was a difficult and convoluted process, no matter what the elders said.

Wolf growled and circled Cub, his fur and leather jacket brushing against the young one's legs. Unlike Cub, Wolf had evolved to walking on four legs, his arms now thick and muscular and his spine both supple and strong. He could flex into humanform at will, but remaining upright soon grew tiresome. Man had lost much once he stood on two feet: witness the grace, speed and balance his animal counterpart enjoyed.

Wolf jumped up so his front legs balanced on Cub's shoulders. He could feel the young one shaking with fear and respect. With a sly grin, Wolf opened his mouth and licked Cub on the face with his fat pink tongue.

"We have everything in place. We'll take her tonight. Have her on a cargo ship to the antipodes before the week is out," Cub said.

They both howled with anticipation and joy. The sound could be heard through several brick walls, all the way to platform three where passengers for the Lilydale line glanced nervously at each other.
Pigs are Trouble

This little piggy went to market
This little piggy stayed at home
This little piggy had roast beef
This little piggy had none
And this little piggy went "Wee, Wee, Wee" all the way home!

- Traditional

"Careful, it might be alive," I hissed to my partner. The torch was cold and heavy in my hands and the evening air bitter with the menace of winter. Water lapped from the side of the lake onto my boots. The blackened, naked trunks of long dead trees poked forlornly up through the oily surface.

Derrimut Haliz carefully prodded the body. The shape was human, but something about the thick hair that covered the limbs wasn't right. I aimed the beam directly at the head and gasped when the light caught the facial features.

"Neanderthal?" Derrimut joked. I could smell his fear. Six months together on this surveillance and his adolescent sense of humor was wearing thin. Still, he'd lasted longer than Jenkins. Pig attack outside Flinders Street Station. Ugly.

"Very funny. Is that a tag on its ear?" I pointed at the solid yellow plastic, the sort used in animal research. The body wasn't far from the research facility located near the desolate shores of Lake Corangamite.

"There's no blood. I can't even see a wound," Derrimut said. "I guess the theory that it was shot by one of the farmers because of attacks on the sheep is unfounded."

"We need to bring it back to the lab." I pulled out my mobile phone and barked instructions. The van would be there soon, thanks to their GPS locator.

A deep howl penetrated the darkness. Despite my training, I could feel the adrenalin surge through my blood.

"What was that?" Derrimut glanced nervously into the night. "Maybe something is coming back for this?"

"You scare too easily. Come on, help me turn it around." I already had on my latex gloves and handed a pair to Derrimut.
He reluctantly eased the gloves onto his large hands. At six foot he was a reasonably tall man, but I could look him in the eye. That didn't stop me wearing heels. I stopped worrying what men thought of me a long time ago.

Together, we bent down and carefully moved the body face up.

"Holy mother!" gasped Derrimut.

For once I didn't admonish him for his outburst. What was in front of us was truly grotesque. I shone the torch closer on the deformed face. It looked as if wild animals had chewed it and yet …

"Shit, it's Asher Brooks." I could tell by the eyebrows which met in the middle, and the large birthmark near his right temple. Brooks worked briefly with us on data cleansing and was fond of regaling us with wild tales of life in Scotland before the virus took hold. He had the young girls in the DNA department literally eating out of the palm of his hand. A hand, which I now realised as I glanced upwards, was dangling from a twisted branch of a charred gum tree.

"No way - its - horrible." Derrimut stepped back, swaying and gagging.

With the end of my torch I flicked off the crawling maggots that had formed a writhing crust on the blue-grey surface that was once Asher's neck.

We both looked at our former partner with a mixture of curiosity and dread. It was a moment before I felt I could state the obvious. Asher's face had mutated into something neither animal nor human. Where his nose had been was, unmistakably, a snout.

There was a noise again. A deep growl. And the sound of movement nearby. Without appearing too obvious, I tried to sniff the wind. I could pick up three, maybe four canines. Could they smell me? I had been a tad liberal with the Arpege eau de toilette this morning – my salary didn't allow me parfum – but it had been a long day and I suspected the animal within me was creeping back into focus.

"What was that?" Derrimut swung around. "Something is out there!"

I pulled my gun. It felt good, dependable. As I said to Human Resources last week, burn my bra? You could have it, but my gun? No way.

"Stay calm. The van will be here soon." I was pleased with the tone in my voice. Just the right amount of reassurance. The leadership-training mentor would have been proud of me, if I hadn't killed him. (Note to self, never sleep with a superior officer you suspect of being of a different species under the skin.)
"We're gonna die, aren't we? Oh shit, oh fuck."

"Pull it together, Derri. Now, tell me, what was Asher working on before he disappeared?"

"Pen surveillance. Routine st-st-st-stuff," Derrimut said. His stutter was back and I took him through some deep breathing exercises. All the time, I could smell the dogs closing in.

I counted silently – three, maybe four different animal noises. A pack then. To be expected, but terrifying nonetheless. I gripped the cold, wooden handle of my gun until the pressure caused my ring to dig into the palm of my hand. A gnawing hunger pain suddenly twisted my stomach. I really needed to start eating meat again. Even if it meant I had to shave more often. A deep guttural growl involuntarily belched forth.

"Stephanopoulos!" hissed Derrimut.

"I didn't have time for dinner," I lied, thinking about how I'd been humiliatingly stood up yet again. Ariadne, Ariadne, I said to myself – will you ever learn? Coben will never leave her. Just choose a man and have him and discard him. Then there is no pain.

There was another noise this time. A snarl. A whimper. Then, movement. I realised it was coming from the shape in front of us.

I pointed my gun at Asher's body and started moving back. Too late. An arm sprung forward and grabbed me by the ankle. I just had time to empty a bullet at the hairy torso before I was flung into the air. I hit the ground hard and blacked out.

I woke up shivering. From the cramps in my legs and the deep pounding ache in my head, it was obvious I'd been unconscious for some time. I was on a hard, metal surface and it was pitch black. The air was adequate although sweet and full of the heavy portent of decay: the herald of a corpse, perhaps.

I was in a container, my legs were tied and my hands bound with metal chains that cut into my skin. Carefully, I tried to move but immediately regretted it: the pain was instantaneous, sharp. It took a second to realise it came from the metal prongs attached to the bindings that held my ankles tight. Rising nausea flooded through me and I struggled against the urge to vomit.

Whoever tied me had anticipated my desire to escape – sharp prongs poked from the chains into my flesh, causing me to gasp out loud.

A mistake.

The howling started.
I lay as still as I could, let my training take over. Assess the situation. Work out where you are, why you are there and who is around. What are the perimeters of your current environment and what chance do you have of getting out?

The answers to all the above seemed overwhelmingly negative. And the squeals and grunts from the occupants of my wider environment could only mean one thing. Whatever was out there was hungry.

It was at this point that I felt something potentially worse than the sharp metal objects digging into my flesh. It was the full tampon, sitting sodden inside me, threatening to overflow. I now regretted my stubborn refusal to have the long-term contraceptive implant that would have rendered me barren and dry for at least two years. Foolishly, obviously, I believed I had a future with Coben and he would agree to try for a baby with me. And when you are already 40 years old, two years dry and empty was the last thing for which you volunteer.

But now I was in a dilemma. Judging by the noise and the smell, I was sure that I had been placed in the holding pens at the experimental facility in the western district, which my team had been investigating for the last six months. It was off the main road, way down a dirt track and nestled not far from one of Australia’s largest natural inland lakes.

It was a secure facility, and had a satellite blackout zone. Not even Google Earth knew of its existence. Neither did the media. No-one knew this place existed. This meant they didn't know where I was.

And unless I could figure out a way of alerting them, or breaking out, then I knew with certainty that Ariadne Stephanopoulos would soon cease to exist as well.

Was my life meant to flash before my eyes? Wasn't much of a life then, was it? The career ladder, the relentless climb to the top – while the other pretty girls in the office swigged bottles of lemon detox diet juice and traveled overseas on group adventure holidays and shared herpes stories, where was I? Eating microwave meals for one and having affair after affair with older married mentors who promised they'd leave their trophy wives but left me instead.

Stop it Ari. Now is not the time to feel sorry for yourself. You did the right thing, girl, you took your eggs at their peak - nice, ripe, twenty-year-old eggs – and they are now snug in a biobank waiting for Coben to commit. He was different, Coben. He wanted children, he said he did.

The container lurched to the side.
Damn! They could smell the blood … that meant I couldn't stop them when they attacked. Even the lure of providing the interrogator with a captured Xenos agent wouldn't stop them taking a bite or two out of me.

I sniffed. I knew that smell – these beasts, whatever they were now, they were once feral pigs. That was bad luck. Rats were halfway intelligent and with cats you could appeal to a selfish core. Dogs, you treated them as a pack but pigs. Pigs were nothing but trouble.

I had to think, and do it fast.

I felt the answer between my breasts. The cold, silver object dangling from the chain was my solution. I smiled.

And then I screamed, as loudly as I could.

The door of the container opened, a rush of light seared my eyes. Flinching from the pain, I could only make out the haze of a gun in my face but I could feel the cold steel on my skin. And the rough hands on my body. Claws, too. Pulling and prodding and – the smell – I gagged. In retaliation, something snarled and prodded me with a zapper, the jolt hitting my kidneys.

Screaming in pain on the ground, I felt the bile in my mouth. Pushed to the ground, the dirt in my mouth. Then I heard him. A howl. Standing on two legs, but with the unmistakable snout and ears and fur. Dressed in army fatigues. Silver coat against the camouflage. A wolf.

I was in Moreau's lair. There could only be two things he would do to me. Kill me, or mate with me. I didn't know which would be worse.

The pack circled. I wasn't going to take this lying down and pushed myself up until I was in a semi upright position.

"I'm a government agent – they know where I am," I said. I raised my forearm to indicate the tracking device beneath my skin but there was a jagged tear in my flesh instead.

The pack howled in laughter. But there was a sound like rolling thunder coming from behind them. The sound of the wind being beaten against the thick sharp blades of rescue. So, my team had tracked me after all.

The pack turned to run, but Wolf approached me and sniffed. Still on two legs, he bent over me. Too late he smelt the fumes coming from the pendant, which had been developed
for just such an attack. Animals have a heightened sense of smell and Wolf knew he couldn’t touch me unless he wanted to risk certain death.

I was safe – momentarily.

Wolf howled into the wind, his voice carrying to the distant trees where a flock of cockatoos screeched and flew in fear. Before he left with the pack, he turned to me. He placed a metallic object at his throat, the sort of vibrating medical aid that hybrids who hadn't had corrective surgery to normalise their vocal cords used. His dangled from a long chain around his neck, and with his paws he placed it against his fur.

"We are not finished, you and me. I have something of yours." His voice was cold, mechanical, but I could understand him clearly.

"Whatever it is, it means nothing to me."

"You sound so sss-ure." Wolf said. The "s" hissed against the metal.

"When you have nothing, there’s nothing to lose."

It was the first rule of being part of Xenos. No ties, no loves, no family. I was happy to comply. Emotional self-protection was a well-developed art I had honed over the past decade. Why else would I waste my love on a married man? Why else would I choose empty sex with the others?

"You are wrong, Ariadne."

Wolf bent down, so close I could see his human blue eyes. They blinked and I saw my reflection in them. For a second, his gaze seemed oddly familiar. Like a memory.

"What do you have of mine?" I asked.

"Your daughter."

He reached inside his flak jacket pocket and flicked out a faded color Polaroid. He must have access to old stock. I'd heard rumors the packs had got into old warehouses that hadn't been burned, pilfered archaic communications equipment. Off radar, pre-digital, they survived by roaming without an electronic footprint. Satellites couldn't pick up the almost the altered animals from the real ones, they registered the same on all fours. With the packs overrunning the countryside, making raids on the citify fringes as they foraged for food, it was the perfect camouflage.

"I am not a mother," I screamed at him.

He laughed – howled. "Don't be so sure."
I watched as the photo blew across the ground, carried by the gust created by the helicopter. As he crouched on all fours, he shook his head. I grabbed the photo as he leapt and deposited it at my feet. The face of a dark haired girl stared back at me.

“The Moreau have her. If you want her back, it will cost you.”

I looked at the photo. This was ridiculous. She was 12 years old, thereabouts. Not what you’d call pretty. But Wolf wanted to bargain.

“What do you want in return?”

“You will be told.”

He ran away, tail flicking behind him. I had no daughter. I'd never given birth. But that girl looked oddly familiar. In fact, she looked like me at that age.

I pushed the pin out from its hiding place inside my mouth and slowly eased the chains and cuffs off myself. I regularly practiced in a specially constructed Houdini water escape tank in my basement, so this escape was simple now the threat of the pack was removed. I was on my feet as the rescue team landed.

That just left one thing.

Find another tampon.
[Ariadne]

**Category GS**

*Who shall conceive the horrors of my secret toil as I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay?*

*Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, 1818*

The cold dawn emerged, glass grey and friendless. I nursed the latte procured from a small café at the edge of Darklands. It was one of those former milk bars turned hipster by art school dropouts who filled the windows with misshapen hand sewn koala bears that despite their efforts to render them whimsical looked menacing instead. Cheap taste chased cheap rent. The upmarket shops selling high heels and small handbags to thin women had moved out once the cybs moved in.

Classification officer Tyber Jones didn’t look happy. His hat had ear muffs pulled low over his lobes. Considering it never got below 12 degrees in Melbourne in winter, this was absurd.

As I got closer, I smelt why. He’d been dabbling. And the consequences were erupting like boils pushing their way to the surface. Ugly. He’d have to go somewhere to be cleansed and that was going to be a painful exercise. I didn’t like to tell him what it would entail. People shouldn’t mess with their DNA. Classification work was dangerous, affording endless temptations. The thrill of running like a tiger and fucking like a lion were within easy reach. And a containable high, until your ears started sharpening to points. Even the lure of Donkey Dick had seen more than one high profile judge end up face down in a writhing pool of vomit and blood as gangrene set in after days of engorgement. I guess next to that, Tyber’s bat ears were a minor oddity.

“What have we got?” I asked. Non-committal. *Don’t look at his ears.*

“A pack of dogs found it two hours ago.”

It. The body under the reflective silver tarp. As if “it” needed keeping warm. Maybe that’s all the ambos had to ward off the citizen journalists who prowled with their smart phones, ready to upload content to the news feeds for a small fee. Or maybe it was to confuse the cybs.
I glanced around and sure enough, there was the PR official already tweeting the standard details that would hopefully flood the net with misleading information. A runaway. A drug overdose. A tragic death. It would be live on the news feed within seconds.

Looking down, I saw a paw-hand poking from the tarp. The fingernails, long and sharp, painted a girly pink to make them look more human. I kicked the hand back under with the tip of my pigskin boot.

“Classification?” I asked.

“Oh, C3. The thick fur covering the flesh is a giveaway,” said Tyber. “See the patches?” He squatted, donut in hand. Great, if the dabbling didn’t kill him, or the cybs didn’t maul him in a Darklands atrium, his arteries would seize. Whatever happened, he’d be dead meat within two years. COs never lasted.

“You think she had laser hair removal?”

I shook my head. “Waxing. Cheaper.”

“Then it will be easy to track. All salons have to have records. And depilatory aids are a restricted substance.”

I laughed. “You can melt lots of stuff down to rip out hair. And look how smooth the skin is. Even though there’s a roaring black market trade in illegal waxing, threading is untraceable.”

“Threading?”

“A middle eastern technique where they twist a strand of cotton around a hair and pull it out. For a C3 hybrid, even a single hand – paw – whatever, would take days.”

“But how would she pay for it?”

I looked at Tyber incredulously. How long had he been working Darklands? “Fur sex. It pays well. And you’d better believe that there are enough men who’d trek in from the suburbs for a little bestiality.”

Tyber’s revulsion betrayed his inherent speciesism. “But she’s a C3 – Not Quite Human.”

“Yeah, and if she’d been a C4 – More Than Animal – you can be sure she’d have ended up being both fucked and eaten. I’ve heard of Furgrounds where they roast them alive for you with an apple in their mouth. And that’s after you’ve …”

Tyber held up his hand. “I get the picture. Unfortunately.”
Tyber’s forensic team arrived to erect the filter tent around the corpse so we could investigate the body without cyb interference.

“Ariadne!”

I looked back to the apartment blocks. Coming down the carved granite stairs, a remnant of more illustrious days, was Dr Ekaterina Ivanovich. Neat, navy pants suit, solid gold hoop earrings and a flame red bob with a killer blow dry. I smiled. My favorite hybrid forensic pathologist.

I’d first met Ekaterina during the Biotech Wars. She’d made a bleak winter in Riga almost bearable. We hugged.

“How’s Paros?” she asked. “Any improvement?”

I shook my head. Not for the first time since the accident, I wondered if I should offer my kidney again. As a twin, Paros would be a perfect match and wouldn't even require antiviral drugs. But the doctors refused to do it. They wanted to turn the machines off years ago. Said the brain damage meant he was a vegetable. I refused to listen. I could sense him when I slept, sinking into my thoughts, willing me to find a way to bring him back to life. But he didn't seem to acknowledge me when I visited, no matter what I said. The steady beep and compressed hiss and thud of the ventilator kept time, the metronome of his life.

Ekaterina sighed and clutched my arm.

“What have we got here?”

Tyber whipped the tarp back with a flourish and then gasped. Despite the hairy arm, the corpse was quite human looking. Naked. Lying in a thick pool of blood. I was wondering why it hadn’t spread all over the place.

“Turn her over,” ordered Ekaterina.

This time, none of us were prepared for what we saw. Her belly had been sliced open. Like a sucking pig flayed in the window of a Chinese restaurant in Box Hill.

“How come there isn’t more blood?” I asked.

Ekaterina was down near the body, latex gloved hands plunged in the gaping body cavity. There was a sloppy, bubbling noise as she pushed aside what was left of the organs and intestines, some of which flopped like coiled sausages onto the ground. It was at this point Tyber stopped chewing on the donut.

“Anti Colag injections. Whoever’s behind this knew what they were doing.”

“What were they after?” I asked.
Ekaterina stood up, holding something like a deflated jellyfish in her hands. “A baby. This is the placenta.”

“Oh Lord,” gasped Tyber. He started gagging.

“Human?” I asked.

“I’d have to do more tests back in the lab. It looks human.”

“I wouldn’t expect that from a C3. Hybrids don’t gestate human babies,” I said.

“This is not good,” muttered Tyber. “I bet they’re going to cancel my leave. I was going to take my girlfriend to Hamilton Island.”

“I am sure that this girl found her death inconvenient, too,” said Ekaterina.

“But she’s not human,” Tyber said.

I felt like ripping off his ear muffs. Ekaterina arched her eyebrows and carefully placed the placenta in a polystyrene container her assistant brought over. It looked like the ones used by my local Thai takeaway.

“It’s illegal for a C3 to have a human embryo implanted,” she said. “It’s my bet she was chosen because she was cheaper and wouldn’t ask questions. In that case, someone was trying to evade the two-child policy. No doubt you’ll find an older woman with adult children involved. She gets a young lover and pays a university graduate for her egg, then gets it made into an embryo with her lover’s sperm and implanted into a C3. Cheaper, and controllable.”

“Yet risky,” I said. “There’s a good chance the foetus could turn.”

Ekaterina nodded. She took off her glasses to clean them. She could afford implants and perfect vision, but she didn’t want to mess with biotechnology. Not after what she’d seen.

“If there is something wrong with the baby, they’d have it taken to a Pharm for experimentation. Newborn’s spinal cortex is especially prized in stem cell research.”

I looked at the body. She was young, maybe only 15. Even her face could have passed. And she was doing her best with the hair issue. She’d gone to a lot of trouble to keep healthy. No track marks. Well nourished. She’d probably been eating regularly. I snapped on a pair of gloves and rolled back her lips with a pen to check for fangs. She had normal human teeth. I eased some meat wedged between her teeth into a plastic DNA baggie. Someone was buying her protein. At least animal flesh was traceable. Even on the black
market, you could find out who was trading. She went to all this trouble for the baby and she was just treated like an incubator. Her payoff was death.

“A little slice and dice caesarean,” I said. “Without anaesthetic. Grab the baby. Leave her to bleed to death or die of shock, pain and exposure. Or all of the above. Bastards.”

I felt someone walking over my grave. Then I realized it was Tyber, stepping on my boots as he edged closer to the body. He was trying to take a photo with his smart phone.

“Stop being so sentimental, Stephanopulous,” said Tyber. “It wasn’t like she was human or anything.”

I nudged him so he overbalanced and his phone smashed to the ground. I didn’t apologize.

The cold wind snaked its way into the tent. The howling started. Tyber went to order the guards to shoot to kill. I shuddered. I hoped there was no-one I knew in the circling pack.

“It’s always haunting, isn’t it?” said Ekaterina. “That sound, it’s like part of human memory to be scared of a pack howl.”

“They’re warning of others nearby. Packs liked to bury their own,” I said.

“We need an autopsy to find out exactly what she was carrying,” said Ekaterina.

“Who are we looking for?” I asked her. “Who’d do something like this?”

“The same people who always exploit others’ bodies for their own gain. Countries like India have really clamped down on the human fertility trade so hybrids are being used in their place.”

I couldn’t stand looking at the hybrid’s blue, human eyes staring glassily up at me. I reached down to close the lids.

“Women think they have all the time in the world to have children,” Ekaterina continued. “They think that their forties are the same as their thirties, but despite the advances we’ve made in freezing ovarian tissue and reactivating it, the human body is a very stubborn creature. It’s almost like mother nature decides that fertility will run out in your early forties, or at least run down so much only the strongest and fittest have a chance to reproduce.”

I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear this. I guess I always thought I’d have the egg transfer once Coben had decided to leave his wife. Once I was senior enough in my career that I could take some time off. But neither of those things had happened. And I was now forty.

I looked at the ragged, dark pit of emptiness in the core of this woman mutilated in front of me. Would that be my fate – procuring a C3 to carry my late life baby? I thought of that
photo in my wallet. The girl I’d been told was my daughter. I was about to take it out and show Ekaterina when Tyber came back into the tent.

“We’ve got a van standing by to take the body to a secure bio facility,” he said.

“But I won’t be able to do the autopsy there,” protested Ekaterina.

“Don’t worry, doc, we’ll take over from here.”

I started to protest on Ekaterina’s behalf when Tyber held up his hand shook his head. “Word’s just in. Classification division is taking over this one.”

I was furious. It was one of my runners who’d contacted me with the sighting. This was my case and Tyber knew it. I wanted Ekaterina to check out the body. She had her hands in the woman’s most secret and private places, and she’d seen this sort of thing before. I wanted to know what she knew.

“I don’t accept this. Who gave the order?” I asked. “I have a right to know before I challenge you.”

“It was Coben Thorley,” he said.
There are only two things anyone needs to know about me – the first is that I am *not quite* one hundred per cent human; the second is that I am trained to kill those who are definitely not.

Through the smoke and haze of the dimly lit nightclub, I saw my target dancing suggestively - his long lean body gyrating, his hands near his groin. The bulge was clearly visible in his tight black jeans. A cascade of chest hair poked from his patterned shirt, but it was his smell that made my nose quiver.

I could sense the animal within. It was strong, vibrant, compelling.

The flickering strobe flashed over his toned body and the woman close to him thrust herself towards his chest, willing him to caress her.

I stirred the daiquiri with my finger and ran the cool strawberry sludge over my lips.

"So, you come here often?" A man next to me at the bar leered and nudged a little closer. Not one of the more original pick up lines I've heard, and besides, I was working.

"I'm just waiting for my lover," I lied. "She's running late."

"Bloody waste," he said. His eyes ran over my ample chest, and took in the deep cleavage. What he couldn't see was the sharp knife tucked into my boots – or the gun hidden behind my back, covered by my leather jacket. He was too dim to register the contempt I felt for men like him, and if he looked even a little closer, he might have seen the longing in my eyes for the man I'd rather be curled up in bed with right now.

Except Coben Thorley was in Geraldton, at the US military base, bunkered down at a meeting so top secret even the travel plans were ears only.

I thought it would be easier loving a man that you worked with. At least I didn't have to lie to him about my job. I knew from the beginning that it was a dangerous situation to love the man who is your boss, which is why I held back for so long, despite the strong attraction. But slowly, steadily, Coben pursued me. Yet long after I had given him my body and my
heart, he insisted we live the lie and not let anyone know we were lovers. So I was frequently alone, and lonely.

The first time I met Coben Thorley I hadn’t thought there was anything unusual about the man who came and sat near me in the library while I studied. He gave me a glance, as they all do, pausing for a second on my breasts. I expected as much, even here, in the university. I have no idea why women want enhanced breasts. I’ve been a double D cup since I was 12. All it got me was openly lewd gawping. And blouses that never button properly in the middle.

I wondered if he was an overseas tutor. He was older, a broad American accent. I saw him searching the same sections of the stacks, there with me and a motley crew of others late at night with the glaring fluorescent lights casting a pasty hue over us. But I never saw him around the university.

“There’s a guy hanging around the feminist theory sections of the library,” I remarked to Duncan who was writing an article for the student newspaper on mandatory detention of hybrids.

“Cute, huh?” He momentarily glanced up from the computer screen.

I shrugged. “We don’t get a lot of blokes rummaging through the works of Andrea Dworkin. Castration anxiety, I suppose.”

“You are pretentious.”

“That’s a bit much from someone who wears a bow tie.”

Duncan wanted a few very simple things from life. Starting with an internship at Schnauzer & Savage before finishing his law degree, culminating in taking silk before he was forty. His greatest fear was that he’d end up back here, at the University. Lecturing.

I asked my lecturer about the man I’d seen. Rachel agreed that any man lurking about late at night near the collected works of lesbian separatism had to be suspect.

“Do you think he’s stalking you? Do you want to put out a restraining order?”

“I’m not worried about him, just curious.”

It wasn’t just loitering around lesbian fiction that had me puzzled. I began to see him elsewhere. A café in Lygon Street, the secondhand academic bookstore, the Nova cinema. I couldn’t explain why he seemed different, apart from being older, but I couldn’t let it go.

“Be alert, not alarmed, or is it the other way around?” I asked Ahmed.

“Dunno. Read your fridge magnet.”
“I know what you’re thinking, too many forensic crime shows, right? But it’s not like I think I’m psychic or anything, it’s just everywhere I go I seem to see him.”

“Considering you hardly leave Carlton, is that surprising?”

A group of young men in dark blue overalls laughed and then quickly nudged each other and took off for the basketball hoop. They were just the young building students on a break between lectures and I had long got used to them sizing up the women on campus. Sometimes, when the moon was full, and the animal inside me was at its height, they’d go crazy around me, hormones jumping around.

It wasn't them, I was sure of it. What then? I rubbed my temples and handed over a $10 note for my extra large double shot long black. The deep heat seared my fingers through the cardboard. Now I knew why Italians sneered at hot coffee – they preferred theirs tepid, all the better to gulp it down while standing up reading the paper, jostling for space while the tourists sat and paid extra for the privilege.

I wouldn't have minded a hit of lukewarm caffeine today – in fact, a caffeine patch like those nicotine ones would suit me fine. I was just so damn tired. My research paper was progressing at a glacial pace and the impending crisis over the ethics review board was like a crushing weight on my chest.

"Hard day already?"

I glanced up from the newspaper and squinted. In the gloom of Labyrinth, the subterranean coffee shop in the bowls of the university, the only external window courtesy of the partly obscured skylight to the footpath rendered the speaker's face a blur in silhouette.

It was him.

“Ariadne!” Duncan, calling for me, waving the newspaper in his hand. His first article published.

And the man was gone.

That evening I forgot my earlier anxiety and took the back way down to Building 311. Unlike prestigious University of Melbourne, based on the grand universities of England, where I was studying was slap bang in the centre of the city and its campus stretched over a motley collection of old buildings. Lectures were held in a variety of old industrial buildings and warehouses, and others like Building 311 were only accessible through a circuitous series of back lanes and signposted walkways. There was a rumor that a part-time student once got so lost trying to get to building 267 that they died of a heart attack and weren't
found until weeks later, their partly decomposed body eaten away by the feral cats and mutant hybrids that thrived near this end of town.

I thought of this now, as I pushed through an old steel fire door that led from building 308 to a walkway that connected to the far side of building 311. I could hear someone's footsteps behind my own. This was a worry, as I knew there were no classes about to start. In fact, I'd checked and the floor was unoccupied for the next hour, which is why I had decided to head there to do some work.

But the footsteps continued and I picked up the pace, my hand sliding into my bag and grasping the mobile.

Damn – reception didn't work in this building. An old warehouse from the gold rush days, Building 311's impenetrably thick walls meant there was no chance of mobile or even TV reception. The university tried to knock a hole through a side wall to extend and at least add some heating or cooling, but a thumb print had been discovered pressed into one of the hand shaped red bricks and work was abruptly halted. And sign of convict labor immediately put the building on the historic register, and that was that.

I was almost running now, my heels slipping slightly on the concrete floor. I had no idea what I was going to do once I reached the room – it was locked and although I had a key, whoever it was felt close behind me and I wouldn't have a chance to get inside before they caught up. I tried to think of another way I could go, but remembered that the side exit had been blocked off because of crumbling asbestos panels.

I'm imaging it, I thought. No one is behind me.

But then I heard them cough. A deep, masculine cough.

Do I turn around and face them? Maybe it's just another student? Shaking, I slowed down and very casually dropped all the books I'd been tightly clutching. One by one they dropped, heavy tomes falling with a dull thud. I sighed theatrically and bent down to pick them up. Either he's going to walk past me or grab me, I thought.

"Can I help you?"

There he was again.

He picked up the books and handed them to me, looking at the titles one by one.

"Interesting reading. What's this? Film theory? Feminist Studies? Gender as Artifice? " He had a distinctive American accent. "Ever wondered what you are going to do with all this in the real world?"
“I thought I was in the real world.”

"I think you’re wasting your time with this stuff. What with everything that’s happening out in the world. Even your friend is writing about it. In fact, the whole student population seems to be galvanized about locking up illegal hybrids in the inland sea detention centres. Everyone but you."

"Why should I care about the world?" I asked. "Who has seen tomorrow? And how do you know what I am studying will have no impact on the future?"

The man gave a little bow and a smile. "A good Arabic proverb; did your grandfather tell you that one? And may I also give one to you then: "Kiss the hand you cannot bite, and pray for it to be broken."

I felt my teeth sharpen. Did he know what he was saying? It was only the middle of the month, so he was safe – and yet – I dismissed it. Every proverb can be read in many ways.

"What do you mean?"

He glanced around. Put his finger to his lips. "Walls have mice. Mice have ears."

I noted that he wore clothes that while on first inspection looked causal; they didn't belong around here. Too expensive, too well co-ordinated. His shirt had been ironed and although he had a courier bag slung over his shoulder, everything about him seemed too neat, too clean. It was like he watched the students and tried to blend in, but his natural aversion to ill-fitting and cheap clothes had got the better of him.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Coben – Coben Thorley. I have reason to believe you might be interested in working for me."

"I don't graduate for another year."

"Yes, I know. Bit of a problem with the ethics committee, I believe. Then what? Work in a bookshop to supplement some sessional work lecturing while you try to grind out a doctorate on hybrid terrorism and feminist film studies?"

“Who do you work for?” I rolled out the usual suspects of all the American companies I could think of. Decided I’d better add the CIA as well. He laughed.

“In fact, despite my accent, I am working for an Australian intelligence organization. Lending my expertise, if you like. Part of that is a recruitment drive. What we are seeing at the moment is the tip of the iceberg. I’d like you to come to London, finish your degree there, and see what’s happening.”
“But I’m not the most brilliant student. Duncan is far better. And he is politically active.”

“Exactly why I’m not interested. I want you, Ariadne. I can sense inside you something that would be very useful to Xenos.”

“Xenos?” I knew that word. It is Greek for ‘foreign’.

“We could help each other.”

“What makes you think I need any help?”

Coben smiled. "Ariadne Stephanopulous. I know you much better than you think.”

“How do you know my name?”

“I know more about you than you realise.”

I didn’t fall in love with him then. That came later. And now, it’s been so long, I can’t imagine not loving him. He’s 55 now, bald. Lean and hard from running. In the twenty years since he picked up my books in Building 311, he’s stayed married to the same woman while loving me. I’ve kept myself busy with other men, who touch everything but my heart. He keeps saying he will leave his wife. I am still waiting. That is why I was working on my birthday. With only Derrimut to keep me company.

"Tell me, Derri, am I unappealing?"

"You outrank me, Ariadne."

"That's not an answer." I was 40, but he’d told me on many occasions – usually when drunk – that I looked younger. My friend favoured younger women himself, usually 20 year olds who were impressed with his impersonations of Darth Vader, not to mention encyclopedic knowledge of Melbourne Cup winners over the last 50 years – so I guess I believed him. I was, however, feeling insecure tonight, not that I would ever let him know.

"You want another drink?" he winked. I wondered if it was a tic. Or if he was trying to be nice.

"That guy from Human & Animal Resources never called back after our last date," I said.

"Did you try and take him to bed?" Derrimut sighed and raised an eyebrow, knowing the answer in advance.

"What's it with young men these days? They seem to be – not up for it. Or is it just me?"

"Ariadne, you're incredible. It's just, well, sometimes the guy likes to make the first move."
"Rubbish. Men like to be dominated, at least sexually. Maybe this guy was rethinking his sexuality?"

"Sure, he's gay, that's why he didn't want to sleep with you."

"What can I say, Derri? I'm an old fashioned girl. I believe in sex on the first date."

"Which is why you're on a stakeout on your birthday, rather than home watching television with a man who snores and you've been married to for five years."

"You make marriage sound so appealing." I cast my eyes around the room to see if the prey was in sight. I'd been discreetly sniffing the crowd, but a visual cue didn't hurt either.

"Let me tell you about my ex-wife and her ..." Derrimut started.

"Please don't. It's my birthday. Be nice to me."

"You don't want safe and boring, Ari, face it. You'd rather be here, doing what you love, than being with some boring old man."

"What makes you think I'd settle for a boring old man? I want someone interesting and vital."

Derrimut shook his head and had another gulp of his beer. His thick gold wedding band glinted in the nightclub hue. "We all get old and boring, it's the way it is."

"Before the rescue choppers came in, Wolf said I had a daughter." I pushed the photo across the counter.

Derrimut whistled. "Looks like you."

"It's crap. I've never had a child."

"Yeah, men's oldest nightmare. Open the door, 'by the way, you slept with my mum 15 years ago, I'm yours!'"

"But you don't understand – she can't be mine. I've never been pregnant. I would know. It's different for women. No woman has ever given birth and looked at the baby between her legs and wondered, 'whose are you?'"

"Have you told the boss?"

I shook my head. I hadn't found the right time. It was one thing for him to have a child, but me? And anyway, how could she be mine?

Besides, there had been no time. We'd received a tip-off that a member of the Moreau "heat squad" was at the club, and randy and ready to go.

I tossed my long dark hair back, and patted Derrimut on the shoulder.
"I better attempt to blend in."

A man who was sitting at the far side of the bar had been looking at me, looking away then back again. I slid into a stool near him and returned the gaze. Pushed my empty drink towards the bar. Counted to three.

"She'll have another …"

"Fuck Me Stupid," I smiled and pointed to the blackboard menu – daiquiri, whiskey and absinthe.

"Do what the cocktail says," he said. He winked at me, and then gestured to the bartender.

I eyed him and sniffed. Human. Also, edible. Tall enough to look me in the eye and wearing a suit. He was about 35 I guessed, and worked out. If I wasn't working …

"Come here often?" I asked.

"Not often enough, as I haven't seen you here before."

He was my type. Disposable. Where was Coben, anyway? On my birthday. Didn't I deserve a present? He'd do.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Do you care?"

"Not at all."

"Then I think we're soulmates," he said.

I threw back the drink in two gulps and paused a second while the heat worked its way down deep inside. The blast was better than wasabi for clearing the sinuses. I pulled him – whatever his name was – to his feet.

"Dance with me."

Dancing was a good way to assess his fitness, and endurance. I couldn't be bothered wasting effort on a man who wouldn't be able to take me where I wanted to go in bed.

We gyrated to the music, my body close to his in the pulsating swirl of the club, the lights low enough and the music loud enough to draw us closer so we could stay connected.

And then I saw him from the corner of my eye, surrounded by a sweaty pack with a bunch of young women, all at their peak fertility. My prey. Tall, broad shouldered, with thick wavy hair that hung down to his shoulders and the most piercing deep brown eyes – and eyebrows that met in the middle. He was wearing a white shirt slashed to the middle of his
chest. I could see the thick hair that descended all the way to his pelvis. One night with this stud and any woman would be carrying the virus at the least, a mutant hybrid foetus at the worst. Moreau packs could spread hybridity fast. In Europe, they favored using cat-women for the job. But Aussie women liked a man with balls, chest hair and attitude. They fell for this ploy. Hard.

I looked at them, with their drunk and drugged faces. They ran their hands over their bodies and thrust themselves at him. What was he? Lupine? Dingo? Wolf-dog, it didn't matter. He was dangerous and on a mission.

Well, so was I. Should I enter the pack alone? I thought better of it. I was nearly twice the age of the women he was hoping to impregnate and I wanted to catch him with his pants down. I always preferred a clean kill. I didn't want to let a hint of suspicion put him off his game.

The man in front of me smiled and put his hand on my hair, and then touched my face. He tried to lift off my dark cat's eye sunglasses, but I hit his hand away. If the hybrid saw my eyes, he would know what I was. The room was dark anyway, and throbbing. Blue light caught his face, and shone on his eyebrows. He looked at me. I pulled the guy from the bar close to me and he grinned manically as if he couldn't believe his luck.

I caught sight of Derrimut near the stairs and gave him the sign as I saw the hybrid move off to the toilets with two young women trotting behind.

As I turned to follow, my eager man grabbed me. I shook him away. "Ladies, ok?"

He gave me the thumbs up, and I gave him not a second glance. I could smell them, even as I pushed through the crowd of sweaty bodies. Derrimut was waiting for me. Gun in his hand.

"Shouldn't have pissed him off," he said. "He might have been a nice diversion after work."

"He'll keep. Like a beer you leave while you go and check on dinner."

"You're such a romantic."

By the time we got to the toilets, the hybrid had both women up against a wall in a cubicle, and was pulling their clothes off as they groaned with pleasure. He barely registered as Derrimut pointed the gun at his head. But he must have smelt me.

With a snarling hiss he flipped around and bared his teeth. I recoiled and crouched, ready to pounce. He ran towards me and I launched into his chest, and we went down on
the hard, tiled floor together. Derrimut kept screaming at me to get out of the way, in a blur I
could see him trying to aim his gun at the mutant for a clear shot but the adrenalin flooded
through me. Only the taste of blood could end this now.

I could hear the women screaming and his hot fetid breath on my face as he bared
down on me. I grabbed his chest hair and pulled hard, feeling it lift off his skin as I applied
force. There was a gasp as he realised how strong I was and it gave me the leverage to flip
him over onto his back. My things pinned him down and I was disgusted to feel his erection
against me. Derrimut yelled, "pull back" and I turned my head in time as he unloaded a
round into the mutant's head.

"Like a butcher, I shall strike you without anger and without hate," he yelled, as he shot
the hybrid.

Blood and brain sprayed over me and the sound reverberated in my ears. One of the
women ran to me.

"You fucking bitch!" she screamed. "You tired old bitch! You ruined my evening!"

Derrimut pulled her off. He slapped her across the face to calm her down. I felt the sting
of truth in her words. Forty suddenly felt ancient.

She was still screaming, pointing, crying. I could hardly bring myself to look but I faced
the carcass and watched as it changed into an animal before me. The head was blown off at
the spinal cord, so there wouldn't be snout tonight. But the body ripped and buckled, arms
elongating into legs, hands to paws.

"What is it? What is it?" she wailed.

I looked at her confused face, contorted into a ball of hate. I suddenly felt pity for the
mutant we'd killed. We were all animals under the skin. Some of us just had more hair. But
this human – she knew where the border was drawn. She was Homo sapien and the mutant
– he might have been human enough for her to fuck, but she wouldn't have invited him
home to see her parents.

A sound had caught my attention. Ticking.

"Derri, hear that?" I patted down the hybrid's legs quickly, then slipped my hands under
his belt and eased them into the front of his pants. This was hard as his torso was now long
and hard, the animal's body. Next to his still throbbing erection was a hard metal object
strapped to his leg. The LED light flashed.

Oh, Jesus. No.
"It's a bomb!" I cried out.

We each grabbed one of the terrified women and ran. We were halfway across the dance floor, pushing through a pack of bodies, when an intense light filled the space and a huge explosion ripped the back of the building open.

The force threw me backwards, into a concrete pillar. There was a warm taste of iron in my mouth and dust in my lungs. I looked for Derrimut. He was lying next to me, his eyes staring vacantly, blood oozing from his mouth. Tenderly, I reached out and closed his eyelids. I lay there wondering how long I should remain among the bodies and smoke and broken glass. Where was I going to go? Derrimut was dead and what did I care about the others? Maybe Coben will come and see me tonight, after all, when he found out what happened. The thought was comforting, like the fantasy about what if he called, and you imagine what he'd say and how he'd ask you out, and what you'd wear. Except with Coben it was about what if he left his wife, and said he loved you and wanted to be with you.

I thought about that as the ambulances arrived, and a paramedic pulled me onto a stretcher and braced my neck and wrapped me with a thermal cover. They must have given me something, because I fell asleep for the first time in weeks.
The child was sleeping. He had asked a minion to find a suitable pelt for her. Here, under the labyrinth of old tunnels that once housed the underground road system, the cold seeped through the concrete walls. She was pale, feverish; he wondered if she needed medicine.

But it could be a sign the change was coming inside her. Metabolically, she was becoming what was imprinted deep inside her.

She was becoming like him.

A sound reached him as a smell before he could even hear the gentle bark. Marion.

"I’ve come with food," she said. She threw the severed leg at his feet as a greeting.

"It still needs to be cooked, she’s not ready for this."

"You said – she was –" 

"Not yet."

They looked at the child. He didn’t like the fact she was in a cage, even with the bed and the pelts, but he had no idea, yet, what she was capable of. What if he was wrong? But he had taken her blood before he had taken her, and there was no denying who she was.

"You are sure she will come, the mother?"

"Quite sure. Blood will out."

They were silent. Even down here, under the cold earth, under the city streets, they could feel it. The full moon.
"They will be busy tonight, it's a good time to go above for supplies. There are not enough police anyway, when the change occurs," Wolf said. He touched Marion on the face, paw to her nose. Her fur was soft, her human eyes blue.

"I'll take an advance group, head to the university. We can get medicine," she said. "It was a red sky tonight. The authorities will be busy."

"No. Carlton is still too dangerous. I'll send the young ones. I need you here." Wolf nodded to the child. "She's our only hope now."

Marion sniffed in her direction. "She hasn't offered any resistance. How do you know you're right?"

"I can sense it."

But there was more, something even Wolf didn't want to say out loud. This one, she looked like her mother when she was a child. He remembered, long ago, when he was still almost human, watching her from the bedroom door, marveling at her perfection, amazed that something so frantic and frenzied had resulted in a child so calm and resilient.

When Ariadne was a baby, he would stand over her cot, watch her breath; wonder if the moon outside would cast a sinister or benign glow over her in the years to come. As a parent you never knew how your progeny would turn out. You raised them and hoped for the best. But he didn't get the chance. Ariadne had never known him in his human form. And later, when he ran after her through the lonely outback, keeping her within scent as she tested herself against the other animals, he'd kept his distance. Had she known he watched over her? And the times he could change back, briefly, at the equinox, he had lost the power of human speech by then, and could only sit in nightclubs and watch her dance, indicate to the bartender to get her a drink, patrol her car to see that no other prey were sniffing around. It wasn't much, but it was all he could do.

He never told Marion. Would she even understand? She'd been rescued from the pens. She'd never had the change, she'd been altered in the labs; it wasn't the same. And of course, being created, she was unable to bear young. It hadn't bothered him, he didn't want that again – not the responsibility, the aching longing, the desire to be close, to share, to guide. To – father.

The child stirred. Her dark hair fell against her flushed face, eyelashes dark against her olive skin. He was the only one with a key to the cage. He didn't trust the others, not the young ones, especially. The alarm would pierce their eardrums if they ventured too close without his authority. She had to be protected.
Lead Lined Coffin

*Fee, Fie, Foh, Fum!*

*I smell the blood of an Englishman:*

*Be he alive or be he dead,*

*I'll grind his bones to make my bread.*

- Traditional

The coffin was heavier than usual and that's what alerted me to the danger. Derrimut was a thin guy so there could only be one explanation for the weight that was cutting into my shoulders.

*Lead lined.*

I shuddered at the possibilities of what that meant. And stumbled. The coffin slipped slightly from my grasp.

"Hold it!" hissed Lydell, who was behind me. I took a deep breath and gripped the brass handles, grunting as the cheap molding cut into my flesh.

I scrambled the options through my sleep-starved brain. Maybe Derrimut's wife paid for a heavy-duty send off, that could be it. But a quick glance at the scattering of mourners standing in the pews confirmed that they were all Humint colleagues here more for the hour off and complimentary church hall catering than grief or even a sign of respect. I couldn't even see the famed Wife Number Two, let alone Wife Number One. Maybe they had all just been a fantasy. Maybe that's what this job did to you.

I tried to recall the last week of his life, after we got back from the Asher Brooks incident. I had debriefed him personally after his return from French Island, and recommended that he be spared transfer to the New Fairfield Infectious Diseases Hospital. He'd been so grateful he escaped a stint at New Fair he kissed me.

"Low rise! Low rise!" The undertaker stood annoyingly to one side while he waved us to bend down to get through the church door. Damn these Anglican churches and their modest display of religious symbolism. My knees buckled and the sweat slid from my neck down to my breasts. I shouldn't have worn heels.
At least the hearse was waiting.

But there was a short run of stairs before we could at last slide in Derrimut’s coffin. The weight on my shoulders had increased the way the weight of a fully loaded, six shot Smith & Wesson increases from its one kilo actual weight to a lead weight when you’re holding it with a rigid elbow and wrist.

In desperation I hissed to the undertaker: "We need to put this down NOW".

"In the hearse, in the hearse." He kept waving at us from the bottom of the steps.

"I can't," I said. That was it. If the funeral parlour could refuse to lift the coffin because of occupational health and safety, I wasn't going to do my back in just to prove I was as tough as the guys. I called out to the others that I was going to put it down and there were great sighs of relief all around.

The undertaker rushed up the steps to tell us that this wasn't the protocol. Polite company wouldn't want to hear what I called him.

"Have some respect, Ariadne, watch your language."

I turned to the deep voice behind me. Coben was standing there, phone in hand. He looked like he hadn't slept in days.

From the depths of the coffin came a loud howling. The distinctive, deep gutteral growl followed by a high-pitched squeal. There was only one thing that made that sound. And it wasn't human.

Worse still, it wasn't entirely animal either.

I pulled the gun I had concealed beneath my coat and aimed it at the head of the coffin.

"What's inside?" I yelled.

Coben didn't answer.

"Tell me!"

The coffin shook on the uneven paving. Whatever it was it was trying to get out. I kept my gun aimed and gave the wooden side a kick.

"Don't!" Coben moved towards me, and told me to step away.

"What's in there?" I asked. I took off the safety catch.

"We need it alive," yelled Gerarty. "Don't shoot!"

"It's not alive – we were about to bury it!"
"Is it Derrimut?" Lydell's face was grey and his wrist was shaking. His pudgy hand was wrapped tight around his square barreled Glock. If he had to shoot, his muzzle was going to be off target.

"It was." Coben made a quick sign of the cross.

The rain had bounced off my shoulders, down my legs and was running from the end of my coat into my boots. I shivered and steadied my grip. So that was why the coffin was lead lined.

At least I had come prepared. I had six silver bullets in the Smith & Wesson. Enough to take out a hybrid as it emerged from its lead lined coffin. Derrimut – a hybrid? It didn't matter how it happened. If my partner had mutated, he wouldn't want to live like that. In the Xenos Task Force, once you signed in you made a pact first day with your new colleagues. The pact was a living will. If either of us started changing into an animal, the other would put us out of our misery. We knew what they did to captured hybrids.

Silence, then came the splintering sound of wood smashing. The coffin split open and I emptied a round into the putrid combination of flesh and fur struggling to emerge from inside.

“Like a butcher, I shall strike you without anger and without hate,” I said. "Rest in peace, mate."

The anonymous office building in Queen Street was the headquarters of the Xenos task force. I took a lift to a floor that didn't exist on the public information display, before being subjected to a retina scan and allowed into the secure area.

I saw Coben pacing in the conference room and hesitated. I was overwhelmed by a stupid mixture of elation at the mere sight of him and dread at what I knew would be a severe dressing down for disobeying his orders.

His secretary scurried to my side.

"He's very tense," she said, pushing me into the conference area. The door closed behind me and I stood there, waiting for a smile.

But Coben simply glared at me. He wasn't my lover today – he was my boss and he was angry. Probably not a good move on my part, but then it was typical of me to let my heart get in the way of career advancement.
"Perhaps you'd like to explain what part of the order "don't shoot" you misunderstood?" Coben said. He crossed his arms. He was wearing a dark, pinstriped suit and the red tie I gave him last Valentine's Day. Was this a good sign?

"How did Derrimut get infected? That attack? But they were clean, we did a sweep – he was going to get rabies if he survived the blood loss, that's all. The pack weren't carrying the virus …"

"He volunteered," Coben said. "French Island. We were testing a vaccine."

"You tested on humans?"

"Moreau have stepped up their campaign of terrorism and we have reason to believe they are planning a major operation," he said. "We have to be ready."

Coben pulled a chair out for me and sat on the edge of the table. Our knees touched. He glanced up at the windows, which overlooked the central surveillance area with its u-shaped arc of desks. It reminded me of the plow of a ship.

He gave my hand a squeeze when he was sure no-one was watching.

"Honey, you could have been killed at the club."

"Well, I wasn't." I thought of Derrimut. Who was I going to hang out with now?

Coben reached into his pocket and handed me a small box. "Happy birthday, darling."

I gasped when I open it. It was a ring. A diamond ring.

"It's an 'I want to be with you' ring. Is that okay?" He gazed at me as if I was the only person who ever existed for him. I bit back tears of joy and nodded.

"Best not to arouse suspicion by which finger you wear it on," he warned.

He watched as I slipped it onto my right hand, middle finger. It sparkled.

I forgot everything. All the lonely nights and the weekends alone. The phone calls Coben didn't make, the emails he didn't respond to, all the birthdays he missed and then that other woman in his life. And the child he had with her. I didn't care. Coben Thorley was mine and I loved him. One day, we'd be together.

There was no other option. I couldn't leave. I couldn't hope for a man who loved me back as much as I loved him. For someone who wanted to share my life. I didn't want to date again, to go out looking for a man I could intellectually connect with, laugh, talk, share common interests. Those men didn't exist. They were a figment of women's magazines, some commercial illusion to make us buy lipstick and keep us in our place, longing rather
than ruling the world. Anyway. I had my mate right here. The rest were just cocks to fill a lonely night and soothe a primal longing.

Anything else was a lonely highway to nowhere, just me getting older. I knew I was lying to myself when I said I was only interested in my career. I didn't want to spend the next 10 years on dates, pretending just so I could make some connection. I wanted the companionship of complacency and silence; I wanted the mundane of domesticity and boredom. I wanted marriage and life. I wanted a baby. I wanted Coben.

"I love you," I whispered in his ear.

"I love you, too, darling," he said. "One day, when my daughter recovers ..."

"I know." You can't argue with a terminally ill child. You are nothing against someone's child. Coben above all was a father. He made it clear from the beginning. He set out the rules. Never call at home, never compromise his domestic life, and never let his child discover he had another life.

The door opened and Rawley, the head of the Comit section, walked in. I barely had time to shove the ring box in my pocket before he sat down and showed me the latest intelligence reports on Moreau.

"The animal rights group has been getting more violent, as this latest suicide bombing testifies," said Rawley. He was a short man, balding but with a sense of style. He clipped what little hair he had close to his head and favoured narrow, mod rocker ties with his suits.

"We intercepted communications from known Moreau safe lairs to Wolf. The latest transmission was last night."

I still had that photo in my wallet. I looked at it every night. I'd been meaning to follow it up but I'd been too busy. Besides, what was I going to say to Coben, "oh by the way, you are not the only one with something to lose, I have a daughter as well."

Rawley shook his head. "Chatter has increased among the known packs. We have reason to believe a major outrage will occur within the next month. We got this tipoff about Leighton Hall."

He handed me a letter. With his bare hands. So obviously it had been bio-scanned, it looked like a child did it. Cut and paste. Letters from random magazines.

"Beware Moreau." I read.

"Familiar?"
I nodded. "It's the same as the graffiti that's been appearing on the laneways. That and Are We Not Men. H.G Wells."

He smiled. "I sometimes forget you majored in English Lit. Should have got you transferred to counter intelligence ages ago."

"It's more exciting here. If I wanted to sit behind a desk I would have become an academic," I smiled at Coben. "And so would you."

"Well, we both know how that turned out." He grinned at me.

I rubbed the ring on my finger.

Coben handed me a file. "This is someone who chose another path. Professor Ruraidh Mackenzie."

"And we care about him … because?"

"He's the key. He's brilliant. And he's missing."

We looked at the large screen on the far wall as a series of images appeared. Mackenzie was tall, blonde, and intense looking. And very young.

I looked at the file pushed in front of me and tried to pronounce the name. "What is this, Ru-arh –idh?"

"Scottish, you pronounce it Rory. He's only 30 and he has two PhDs. He's an Oxford professor in radical anthropology and expert in human and animal behaviour. He'll be vital for helping you track down Wolf," Coben said.

"Oh, looking for some action was he? Little bored with the ivory towers? How old did you say he was? 25?"

"Okay, Ari, so he's young, maybe a little inexperienced outside the world of books."

"Oh, you reckon?" I threw the file down. "I have a bad track record keeping my partners alive. Perhaps you noticed?"

"It's a tough job and not everyone is as – born to the job as you," Coben said, choosing his words carefully.

We looked at each other and I wasn't about to say what he was thinking. So I pointed to the screen instead.

"Two bloody doctorates," I snarled. "Don't you think that smacks of self indulgence? And an inability to plan a life outside academia. Now this Ruaridh wants to play on my turf, in my sandbox …"
"Ari, we have a problem." Coben stopped me.

He reached into a drawer and pulled out another box. I looked startled. Here? In front of Rawley? But Coben opened it himself this time and exposed a long, thin syringe.

"It's a new genetically engineered virus. It will spread among the hybrids from the pack leader down. You need to administer it directly into Wolf."

"Is that what killed Derrimut?"

Rawley nodded. "He was given the prototype."

"So, it's like mixo?"

"No, it actually doesn't appear to harm the hybrids but it will render them infertile. Totally. Then it does something else to the DNA. Fatally corrupts it within its own lifecycle."

I must have flinched as I touched the syringe. "So, it's a death warrant?"

Rawley nodded. "And this is the antidote in case you are infected in the process."

Another box with a syringe was pushed towards me.

Rawley added. "We've refined the antidote since Gerarty. It won't interfere with your DNA, but as for your reproductive system, I mean, your eggs, they'll be fine, it's only animal DNA that it mutates."

I looked at Coben.

"I don't imagine there will be any problems with this, Ari -- after all, it only affects hybrids," Rawley emphasized.

Rawley was a looming presence in the room.

But I had to say something.

"Coben I ... can we discuss this?"

Coben indicated to Rawley to leave. Once the door closed, he grabbed my hand.

"Ari, I know you had your eggs and slices of ovarian tissue retrieved and put in a biobank storage when you joined the service after university," Coben said. "This won't affect your long term prospects of motherhood."

We looked at each other for a second longer than necessary.

"But it's also -- deadly to hybrids."

"You have a different DNA structure."

"I'm still a hybrid."
“We have an antidote.”

“I have a daughter.”

Coben let go of my hand. “What?”

I took the photo out of my wallet. “Wolf gave it to me after I was captured. Said she was mine.”

“How?”

“If they got my eggs? The biobank?”

Coben shook his head. “It’s secure. You don’t think I would have checked. You don’t this – us – matters to me?”

“Then, what?”

“Wolf is lying. He wants you to hesitate and then he’ll gain the upper hand, paw, whatever.”

I looked at the photo. “She looks like me.”

“Digital manipulation, that’s all,” he touched my face, tenderly. “You’re my best Ari, always have been, and we need you now. This ploy of Wolf’s is good – it means he wants something from you, and we can use that. Now, Dr Mackenzie hasn’t been heard of since making a routine survey of the genetic experiments at Leighton Hall. That was last week. We have a helicopter waiting to take you there. You need to find him, get to Wolf and administer the virus."

"With Derrimut dead …" We’d been a great team. I didn't need to tell Coben that.

"You'll go with Shelby. You've worked together before. He's already at Leighton Hall, undercover. "

I did my best not to blush. I don't think Coben knew that Shelby and I were – friends with benefits.

"What about Dr Mac?"

"He needs to get up to speed first. And how to use a gun. He's, well, ivory tower as you pointed out. No, you and Shelby can collect the Intel first, find Dr Mac, then report back, ok?"

"So what's my cover?"

"You go as yourself. Xenos Task Force. Shelby's posing as an animal rights activist, just try and bring him back alive, ok?"
I touched the ring on my finger. Coben pushed the con-panel, and before I even stood up, Lydell and a few boffins from technical intelligence swarmed the room with a modification for my bio-alert. As I was taken to the lab, Coben caught my eye briefly. I guess I wouldn't be getting a goodbye kiss. The helicopter was waiting. They gave me something for the pain in my arm after the little surgery they conducted, and I was on my way to Leighton Hall.
ACT TWO

1

[Ariadne]

Leighton Hall

Man thinks

Benedict de Spinoza

It was routine for all laboratories connected with the university to have back to base alarms if a pen was breached. After the last wave of bombings, no-one could afford to take any chances.

Last time I was here, I remembered admiring the Constables and the Turners which, I was assured, were authentic. It had been part of the fire sale that followed the final decline of the Earl of Ambridge's disgrace that cost him his family seat and more. Leighton Hall, like many of the large homes that had been relocated from the Victorian Western District, had been turned into a profitable clinic and stem cell and xenotransplantation lab. Its many rooms catered for the wealthy clients who came from around the world to be injected with pig embryos to cure prostate cancer, paralysis or organ failure.

I had to admit, though it might be artificial it was a great view. If only Charles Sturt could see the inland sea now, poor bugger. The Bradfield Scheme and the massive pipelines pumped Lake Kati-Thanda full and buoyant. The money that flowed from the GM companies enabled places like Leighton Hall to thrive.

It was legitimate, sanctioned but contentious. Animal rights activists had periodically raided facilities like Leighton Hall; it was the job of the Xenos Task Force to make sure they were able to operate. Under strict guidelines. I was shown through the reception areas to the oak paneled front office.

The letter had come anonymously, of course. Tipoffs usually were. Usually the result of disgruntled employees, diddled on their overtime. I had no idea why corporations like NewHeart didn't conduct themselves more diligently. The slightest leak of confidential information and they could be up for more scrutiny than they desired.

Shelby had infiltrated the public relations section. The plan was for me to "interrogate" him as Xenos Squad to civilian. I was told he was in the labs, writing up a report.

I was shown down a corridor, carpet sinking under my feet, plush and floral. Landscapes of the realistic and boring variety hung on walls to calm the eye and not cause
offence. Muzak hummed. I guessed it was all done to obliterate the seeping pain I could feel coming from below.

"First door on your right. You can't miss it." The guard smirked at me. His eyes quickly running over my top. I wanted to slap him across the face but kept my temper in check. I mentally went through the list my psychologist gave me on integrating.

"It's good we're getting rain," I said. I flashed a smile but the guard's eyes narrowed.

"Eh?"

"Rain. Good for the garden."

He shrugged his shoulders and approached the first security screen. His fat hand flattened against the panel and a blue ultra violet light hummed as his flesh was scanned. With a barely audible hiss, the door opened and we stepped into the corridor. At once, I started shivering. I should have worn a coat. The labs always caught me by surprise, although you'd think that having grown up with one under my house, I would be used to the temperature.

Cold inhibits the growth of bacteria. That's why operating theatres are bone numbing.

I don't like confined spaces. Worse, this one smelt. I couldn't put my finger on it at first, and then a flood of memories returned. It was moldy straw. The sort that I used to use for my pet mice. Dad kept tight tabs on his lab animals, but before they were tagged I always managed to get one or two and hide them in the special cage I constructed in my bedroom. He never went in there. We had an understanding. He said it was all about trust.

"It's been drugged, so I don't suppose it can move. But I'd stay back, if I was you." The guard indicated to the heavy steel door at the end of the corridor. He stayed back as I approached the small plate glass panel the size of a letterbox slot. A quick look inside confirmed the body was sleeping. A blanket was draped over and I could only see a patch of thick, dark hair.

"Is it human?" I asked.

"That's what you're here for, isn't it?" said the guard.

I watched the body for a moment, trying to detect a rise in the shape as it breathed. I could make out a human form, a torso, two arms, two legs, and a head. But apes can look human in similar circumstances.

"Have you seen it uncovered?"

"Nope."
"Someone must have brought it in –"

"Not on my shift."

I sighed. I pulled out my gun and prepared myself.

"Let me in."

I approached the shape with caution, gun ready. But something caught the corner of my eye as I approached the shape. It was a man, naked, curled in a foetal position, head a mass of broken bones and blood. I carefully moved over to him to check if he was alive – and prayed he wasn’t. His eyes had been pushed in with a sharp object and his nose chewed off. Deep scars ran down his face and exposed his cheekbones. I stifled a cry when I saw the small yin and yang tattoo near his neck – or what was left of his neck.

It was Shelby.

I heard the door slam shut and bolt behind me. As the lights flickered and the shape on the bench moved, a heavy metal object came crashing down on my head. The last thing I remember is the feeling of fur on my skin.

The room smelt of damp, and the cold concrete beneath my feet caused me to pause for a moment. I wished I’d done as Coben had suggested and worn something warmer, but I had been hoping to make him look at me in a different way. So I had chosen something thin and tight and low cut and quite unsuitable for a London winter. His refusal to touch me was driving me to distraction. Even when I kissed him, he’d turned away, responded with an indifference to the probing of my tongue, so much so that I apologized for shocking him.

"You didn’t shock me – life might shock, but not you."

He never said why he didn’t kiss me back.

Young men were lining up to take me to bed, and of course I indulged myself when I felt the urge, but I wanted Coben. And he didn’t want me. I thought once we were in London, and his wife and kids were still in Melbourne, things would be different. It was one of the reasons I decided to take the Fellowship.

My job was to record everything that happened on the expensive video camera on loan from the university. Under no circumstances was I to let him out of the cage. I was not to touch him.

Fanciful, I thought at the time. He isn't interested in me? Well, I can show him what it's like to get snubbed. Now, as I held the chains in my hands, turning over the cool steel links, I wondered how I would last the night. Coben had stripped down to his underwear, and
although he must be freezing, he didn't appear to acknowledge the cold. He had a magnificent body. Almost naked, he was muscular and toned. Oddly, he had no body hair whatsoever. And I couldn't smell him. Everyone exudes an odor. Sweat. But Coben – nothing.

I so wanted to touch him. Even in this rather innocuous phase of my cycle, I wanted him. I wanted to run my hands over his chest, I wanted to lick his skin, and I wanted to feel his hardness as I kissed him deeply. I wanted him to respond. Or at the very least, I wanted to see that I excited him.

Dr Thorley's new hybrid anthropology class had been created in part from a research grant to investigate the experimentation that had followed the closure of the controversial pens. There was a lot of money in hybrid medical technology pouring through the United Kingdom. People generally had no idea where the money was coming from. Journalists who wrote about the US Government links disappeared. And the truth was people didn't care. They were happy to eat and kill animals, so what did it matter if they were altered to grow human organs inside?

Livers especially were running dry and with a wave of hepatitis C reaching epidemic proportions, the race was on to create synthetic pig-human livers that could be used in xenotransplantation.

The Sark Travelling Fellowship put me in the centre of all this intensity. But London stirred up memories I'd hoped were long buried. It was the smells that brought them back. I closed my eyes on the Tube, and as London rushed over me I could smell the tunnels that had been built long ago, tunnels now filled with those who escaped. I wasn't even seven when we came back to Australia. So why were the memories so strong?

For the first few weeks, I thought it was my imagination.

Then when I was standing in a crowd on the platform at Victoria Station, waiting for train to take me back to the Hillington Medical Museum where I worked evening as part of the conditions of the fellowship, I heard something. Something that took me back to my childhood. I was five years old and standing in my grandfather's library. I'd found the key I'd seen him hide when I was behind the curtain, and I went towards the locked oak door at the far end of the room. I remember still the unbearable curiosity and the desire to see where he disappeared each evening. Key in hand I approached the door and then I heard it. An animal. A howl of pain and fear like nothing I'd heard before, even from the zoo on the estate.
If they were here, in the tunnels, it meant that some had escaped. It meant I wasn't alone. It didn't stop me wanting to change, but it did make finding out what Coben Thorley knew all the more imperative.

"No matter what happens, you must never let me loose, not until the sun comes up," he warned. "There is a saying, "it is always darkest before the dawn. Well, take heed. You will be at your most vulnerable then. And I will be at my strongest."

I blushed. Did he think that I was that weak? I was tall for a woman but he towered over me. He was more than six foot in height and worked out. Coben stepped forward and held his hands out.

"Remember, whatever I say, don't let me out. And don't come near the cage."

He blinked. For a second, it appeared that his eyes were a startling golden yellow. Like mine. Or perhaps I saw myself reflected back in him.

"You make it sound like you're a wild animal."

"I am much worse than that," he said.

"You don't look like you're a wild animal." I was flirting now.

"I have a genetic corruption, which is what we will be observing tonight."

I was attracted to him even with the harshness in his voice.

"If you are right about a genetic problem, then it isn't your fault, it's an accident of birth," I said.

He shook his head. "It wasn't an accident."

As he requested, I began the ritual of chaining him to the chair. First the cuffs around his ankles and then around his wrists and finally, his neck. When I finished, I switched on the video recorder and waited.

It was only after I fetched myself a cup of tea and a cream filled biscuit that had been left thoughtfully on the bench that I glanced at the journal left open on the table. It was a yellowed copy of Charles Darwin's Origin of Species, open at the chapter on 'Struggle for Existence'. Later, when I woke to the insistent alarm clock, I saw the time, 4.45 am. Then I heard the sound - a deep growling. And then I saw that Coben Thorley was gone. And so were the chains.
When the lights flickered, I grabbed the iron bar he left "just in case" and edged to the door. Purring – is that was I could hear? Yes, purring. When I turned around, I saw sharp fangs gleaming white in the moonlight. Black fur. Talons. It was myself. Reflected in the mirror.

The first sound I heard was howling.

I opened my eyes and squinted in the glare. A single light bulb was hanging from a ceiling cracked with buckled plaster and flecked with mold. I sniffed. The smell was animal. Judging from the way the sound traveled, the howling was coming from a tunnel nearby. That made sense with the damp.

The metal around my wrists cut into my flesh. I moved slightly, testing the chains. A mistake. Whoever had knocked me out had done a good job. My skull throbbed and I gingerly raised my hands to confirm they were shackled to the bed.

Howling again. This time, mixed in with a human sound. A howl and a moan together.

"Are you awake?"

A man’s voice. A thick Scottish accent. I opened my eyes.

Despite the throbbing in my head, I quickly took in his deep skin tone and thick black hair, which was cut on the foppish side with a thick fringe and then pulled back into a ponytail. He had a good broad chest and strong shoulders, and was wearing a snappy pinstripe suit with a magenta tie. And also – I could now see – a waistcoat. Who wore such an item in central Australia?

Professor Ruaridh Mackenzie.

"Can you get up?" he said.

He eased me into a sitting position, accidentally grazing my breast in the maneuver and instantly hardening my nipples. He was looking at me as intently as I was at him. I hope he wasn't just checking for signs of concussion – anyway I reminded myself - he wasn't a real medical doctor.

"Can you speak?" he persisted.

I didn't want to give myself away. First rule of surveillance: suspect everyone. What was he doing here, when he was supposed to be debriefing and in training?

I got up as far as the chains would allow and winced. It was as far as I could move.
"Here – let me try –" Ruaridh fumbled with the chains. Quickly I realised he might have two PhDs but he knew nothing about bondage.

"I need a gun or a knife or –" I said.

Ruaridh raised his hand and showed me a set of keys.

"I have a fascination with Houdini, as it happens," he said.

"We have something in common then."

He lent over me and released the chains and the cuffs and rubbed my wrists before I could complain. His skin was soft. Soft academic skin, I thought, the kind that never did anything harder than lift a book. And as I looked at his smooth dark skin, I also had another thought. Soft young skin. He was so young. Well, young compared to me.

I swung my legs to the floor. They hit an old puddle that sent shivers through me. I swayed against him, momentarily unsteady on my feet. He caught me before I fell. Only then did I realise that he was much taller than me. And I stand at six foot.

“And we haven’t even been properly introduced.”

“Dr Ruaridh Mackenzie.”

“They ever call you Big Mac?”

“No, never.”

"Do you know the way out?"

Ruaridh nodded. "I have a photographic memory."

I sighed. That would be right.

He directed me to a door at the end of a long corridor. The ceiling was curved, as if we were in a bunker.

"Hurry."

We ran down the corridor, glancing at the other cells. They were empty, save for ominous blood stains on the concrete floor. I heard Ruaridh panting.

The door opened to a wine cellar. I looked around in astonishment. When I arrived, I'd entered the lab through the elegant corridors of the Leighton Hall reception rooms.

"Lovely - uncork the Malbecs, the Shirazes and the sparkling wonders."

"We don’t have time –" I pushed him ahead.
Visitors to Leighton Hall knew only of the formal rooms, not of the vast labyrinth beneath that housed the workers. A stately home was like a mini city, with a separation between the superior parts of the house and the domestic offices. Back in the days when it had been built, Leighton Hall's architects concealed all evidence of the domestic machinery needed to feed, clean and heat the building. Some two hundred years ago, South Australian pastoralists had used the underground springs to irrigate. The money off the sheep's back built this place. Then the encroaching drought killed it. And now the inland sea had again replenished its fortunes. I ran through the maze of service corridors to find an entrance to the formal areas which would lead to the forecourt and, hopefully, my car.

I rubbed my wrists, chafed red where the chain had cut in. I felt something prickly, like little hairs sprouting through the skin. Looking closely, I realised they were hairs. Thick, dark ones.

With increasing urgency, we sprinted through the long corridors, through the old kitchen and the old dairy, with its painted glass windows and cool marble bench tops.

I pointed to the wire that connected the servants' bell system across the ceiling of the corridor and at last found a door that gave way into a paneled study.

It was empty.

I realised that the piped muzak which filled the rooms with a soothing if bland ambience was the only sign that someone had recently been here. Fresh flowers gave a discreet natural perfume, which masked the chemical odors. I went from room to room with increasing frequency. They were all empty. Some tables had coffee cups, still warm, and rimmed with lipstick stains. A half eaten sandwich lay abandoned on a plate on the secretary's desk in a waiting room.

We were alone.

For how long, I didn't want to calculate. I needed to debrief Ruaridh quickly. What were the chances of everyone in the building knowing who we were? This was operating on secrecy, after all.

We found a bedroom. I knocked on the door authoritatively. "Room service!"

There was no reply and I pushed Ruaridh inside then jammed a chair under the door handle.

"We've got perhaps 15 minutes. I need to know what you know. We're here to find Wolf. Have you found him?"
“In a word – no.”

“Where the hell have you been? Xenos has been looking for you. You didn’t report in.”

"I’ve been locked in a rather important debate in this rather magnificent place with Dwayne Asmur - know him? Tall man with a weak chin and receding hairline."

I nodded. “Associate Professor of Applied Human Specific Intelligence at the University.” I was about to add, I tore his research partner’s heart out recently, but stopped myself.

“Yes, well, Asmur and I had a run-in at a Bioethics conference in Auckland a few years ago, on the right to experiment on the so-called byproducts of late term abortions, the usual cybernetic implants and swapping species heads and so on. As always, I found myself and a lone Catholic priest the only ones arguing for the possibility of the existence of a soul in genetically damaged goods and the protection of the last remnants of the integrity of the human species.”

“And this helps you find Wolf – how?”

“Ah yes well Ariadne – may I call you that? A lovely mythological name, by the way, especially as we try to find our way out of this labyrinthine place – very apt.”

I was getting sick of Ruaridh’s self-indulgent and rather florid way of speaking. However, I had to admit I could have listened to him talk all night. His accent was very seductive and he was probably self indulgent because he was so erudite.

“What did Asmur have to say? Why was he here?”

"Asmur claimed they’d had an incident in Hobart.”

I shook my head. “Tasmania has been clean since the Buenos Aires protocol.”

"That wasn’t ratified," he said.

“The borders are safe. Nothing gets in. Why do you think it started off as England’s most horrible penal colony?”

"Asmur said that the Erasmus Biobank 2 was violated two days ago.”

I felt a sick knot in my stomach.

“Then nothing is safe.”

“It was only a matter of time before the transgenic fallout washed up on your sunny shores.”

“What did Asmur show you?”
"The data – the files - the room flooded with images. Horrible, grotesque. I recognised them instantly. Operation Spinifex."

"In the future lies the past," I said. "You wrote that three years ago. A week later your first wife is attacked and torn apart by what appeared to be wild animals on a remote field trip. You didn't go to the funeral. Instead you flew to the remote corner of the South Australian wasteland to test a new drug. Asmur came here to meet you, specifically. What are you working on?"

"We are hoping for an antidote. We were testing a hybrid strain of human and animal DNA to form a Mix mitosis that mutated the species barrier."

I thought of the lead lined coffin. What was inside.

"Some of it got out, am I right?"

Ruaridh nodded.

"It infected a school. This time, a schoolyard filled with twisted, bulging bodies that half resembled humans and half reptile. Skin had burst apart as scales pushed through flesh, jaws wrenching off their sockets as snouts pushed forward the bone structure."

I knew the lineage – Coben had taken it upon himself to give me that little history lesson soon after I joined. Hunter 11 was responsible for the first infectious outbreaks when they invaded the pens in the vivisection protests. Thousands died and the legacies – birth mutations – were still felt globally. But hey – some experimental animals were safe – all that mattered to some. The Moreau Group had evolved from the most radical of the Hunter 11 that escaped capture. They were the ones who mated with the first hybrids.

"But you don't think Hunter 11 or Moreau are behind this," I said.

Ruaridh shook his head. "I haven't seen this sort of work before. Ariadne – the images, they shocked me. A child screaming in agony mid mutation as its spinal cord snapped in half. Babies with snouts rather than faces. This occurred in an isolated population over the course of a week. I have no idea what can cause an outbreak this fast."

He took his silver framed glasses from his pocket and put them back on.

"If it isn't a known virus, what is it?" I asked, looking at Ruaridh intently.

"Something much, much worse," Ruaridh answered with a shudder.

I heard the shouting first. Together with the hairs on my wrist, I knew it was starting. The change. Sharpened senses. Damn it – this wasn't a good time – but then, when was it ever a good time? I was always caught off guard. It was one thing to remember the tampons
in the bag the whole time, but the rest of the curse was even more inconvenient and there was no hiding it.

"They're coming," I said. "And they've got dogs. I can smell them. We've got to get out of here."

I directed Ruaridh through the side window, pushing his large body first. It was a firm body, too, broad shouldered, reassuring. His dark suit was covered in dust from the cell, but I could tell it was well made. Probably an English tailor. Bespoke.

I staggered after him, already sweating. The sun momentarily dazed me and I could feel the wound on my head opening again, and blood started seeping down my cheek. As I felt in my pockets for the car keys, I didn't see the shadows that fell to my right. Too late, I realised we were surrounded.

I was commanded to drop my keys, raise my arms over my head and interlock my fingers.

"Ariadne Stephanoplous!" I yelled out as I was pushed into the back of a black Humvee. "Xenos Task Force! I'm here on surveillance!"

No-one listened.

"Where are you taking me?"

They grabbed Ruaridh as they hauled me away. He said nothing.

I was rewarded with silence. The last view I had of Leighton Hall as the Humvee careered down the gravel drive was of a hunched figure, covered in fur, peering at me from behind a tree, talking on a mobile phone. Human, animal or hybrid? I couldn't tell anymore.
[Ariadne]

Xenos

_Pussycat, pussycat_

_Where have you been?_

_I've been up to London_

_To visit the Queen._

_Pussycat, pussycat_

_What did you there?_

_I frightened a little mouse_

_Under her chair._

- _Traditional_

The room was dimly lit, with only a few pieces of important mid 20th Century furniture to enliven the surroundings. From the window, the red dust swirled in an endless cycle of drought and decay. A large painting by Peter Booth of mutants eating their arms, legs and genitals graced a smooth cement wall, and on the huon pine conference table sat a small digital recorder.

I was alone. Ushered in by the Xenos troops who pushed me out of the black Humvee four hours ago and marched me into the holdings. It was another hour after that before the blindfold and handcuffs were taken off. Then another hour in one of the wait-cells with only a half-ape to keep me company. I would have preferred to be alone. Call me a higher evolved species, but it's a basic rule of thumb, so to speak, that those who walk on four legs stink like they shit without using toilet paper. And they make lousy conversationalists.

Oh, the irony of it. There's an outbreak of something not even animal roaming the Victorian countryside and I'm in custody for a crime I supposedly committed a month ago while on surveillance. And I didn't even know where Mac was. It was my job to find him and bring him in – instead, here I am.

I expected as much. You don't kill one of their own and get away with it. Mind you, if that was my only defense, I was as good as fried. I only wish I'd worn better shoes. Leather
shoes. Actually, pigskin. My full lips curled at the thought. Pink pigskin stilettos with a Perspex heel. In fact, the last word in killer shoes.

But as it was, I was wearing non-leather shoes. On trial for killing a genetic mutant and not even wearing shoes made from the beast. I wanted to throw the bloody things against the glass wall, but what was the point? The window was bullet proof and anyway, I could be sure that the sat-link would be picking up everything I was doing and relaying it as far as the Outer Hebrides. After all, global killing meant global repercussions. Even if the only thing that got between you and your gun was a mutant.

No, especially if it was a mutant.

It used to be said as a joke. You know, "ha, even mutants have got rights these days!" But it was no joke. Once the animal testing labs had been emptied, the genetically enhanced rats and rabbits and dogs and cats and monkeys were set free to crossbreed.

And you'd better believe there was more than the odd human out there happy to do it with a monkey. Or a dog. Especially when they looked almost human.

Hell, I've seen rats that looked more human than one or two of my boyfriends.

But that's not why I'm here. In this room. With my future dependent on what I could remember of that night on the Xenos raid.

That bloody night. Rain pouring down like there was no drought. Of course, it was genetically enhanced rain, the sort you get when you shoot particles into low-lying cumulus. But it felt real. It felt cold and wet and the roads were slippery despite the flexi grip tyres.

With Miyata beside me. The last time we went out together. Jesus – I sighed. Poor Miyata. My mind flashed momentarily on a memory of him laughing, eating sushi out of a plastic takeaway tray, his eyes watering from too much wasabi and a trickle of soy down his chin. And then the sickening sound of a cat screaming. A guttural yell. I had my gun out but not quick enough and the mutant threw Miyata to the ground. One minute Miyata was there, next, his head was rolling down the dirty sidewalk, and the sushi was all over the concrete.

I did what I had been trained to do. Emptied six rounds into the feline and then stood back and watched as the damn beast morphed back into human. A woman with four gunshot wounds to the body, Edinburgh style. Two in the chest, one in the forehead, and one in the genitals. For good luck.

So now here I am. Facing a murder charge. Fighting for my Xenos badge. What do they say? Life's a bitch, and then you die.
Well, not me. Not yet. At least not today.

I’m half past caring and it isn’t even lunchtime.

It was cold. Of course. Heat and dust outside, but in here, in this hermetically sealed crypt, it was just the right temperature to stop bacteria growing. It's cold in other places too. Operating theatres, morgues. The holdings. Anywhere to stop the rot spreading, the fungus blossoming. The chain reaction. Xenosgrowth.

I shivered and pulled the cashmere cardigan tighter across my shoulders.

"Would you like a cup of tea?"

I turned to the voice. I'd smelt him standing there about five minutes before, but figured it was all part of the test. So I didn't turn around until he actually spoke to me. No sniffing, no mind reading. Act like a regular human.

"No, thank you," I said. "But thanks for asking."

"You’re not thirsty?" He came over to me, standing stiffly in his white lab coat. Did they think I'd open up to him if I thought he was a real doctor? I'd done the training. I knew the drill.

I shook my head.

"Well, then," said Dr Fahour. "Let's get on with it, shall we? Could you please state for the record your name, rank and special ops force?"

"Ariadne Stephanphanos, Investigator, Xenos Task Force. Melbourne branch."

"And Miss Stephanphanos, you've read the charges against you? You've waived your right to counsel, I see."

"This is only a preliminary hearing and I –"

Dr Fahour put up his hand to silence me. "Murder is a very serious charge. Shooting a civilian six times while they were out on their evening run –"

This time, I interrupted him. "It was night. Cats hunt at night. She was looking for food."

"She wasn't a cat."

"She was when I shot her. She was when she ripped my partner’s head off."

"Autopsy showed no trace of feline in her body or even in her DNA."
"Well, they were wrong. She was a cat. I could smell it on her. I didn't even need to look into the yellow of her eyes to see that."

How could I be so sure? Well, there are only two things you need to know about me. The first is that I am one hundred per cent human; the second is that I am trained to kill those who are not.

Perhaps there is a third thing. And that is the reason I was trained in Xenos identification in the first place.

You see, I have a sort of sixth sense about spotting the animal within. I can see it in the dilation of the pupils; in the way they grunt or squawk under questioning, or in the way they run unnaturally fast. But it is more than that. Any competent Xenos killer can do what I do. But I go further, deeper; I can sense the animal at a molecular level.

And the irony of it is that it appears this is an ancient gift, one that separated the Homo sapiens from the ape’s millennia ago. But it's not a human trait I have; it's a long buried animal one.

I hope you sense the irony in that.

I work for Humint. That's something else you should know, but not even my own mother does. I had to sign a lot of documents when I joined. Legally binding ones. Ones signed on veal parchment and dipped in blood. My blood.

Join Humint and you're the Government's for life. Every time we go into the HQ, we step into glass pods that electronically scan us for hidden devices and do a resonance sweep for rogue DNA. A blast of freezing air followed by blinding laser light nukes the last traces of the outside world so you don't contaminate the grid. Join Humint and you have to swear you'll lie about your job for the rest of your life. Join Humint and to have to swear you'll never identify another Humint or Xenos member on the outside, for as long as you live.

You could be in a restaurant, a department store or the dentist waiting room, and if a colleague or former colleague were there as well, you'd have to pretend that you'd never seen them before.

Spying hasn't got any easier over the years. In fact, since the animal surfaced within, it's become harder, riskier, and the methods we've employed to eradicate the gene mutations aren't pretty.

I have to admit I laughed at first when I was approached at university to join the team. Sure, I was going nowhere in my doctoral thesis on Charles Le Brun's "Line of Animality
theory in the 21st Century”, even my ethics approval had fallen through when I asked someone whose child had Cri du Chat Syndrome to participate in a stem cell sampling. Okay, so I was going to splice it with actual feline DNA, but hey, would the atom bomb have got made if scientists had always erred on the side of caution?

"You don't think that's an insensitive thought to have around me?"

Shit. Caught out. Fahour was a mind-head. One of the special ops psych team. He'd seen right through me.

"Okay," I sighed. "Even I know that under the circumstances of the last atomic war in Iraq, that was an insensitive analogy."

"Are you just saying that because you think it's appropriate?"

"No, really, you don't have to write that down. I know it was insensitive, right?"

"But you still made the comment."

I looked at Dr Fahour and smiled. Tried to act "normal". I had gone through my list this morning before facing the Tribunal: my "Things to Say and Do to Make Yourself Look Normal" list. I thought I had everything down pat. The sincere smile, the initial inquiry into the man's general health and wellbeing. Comments about the weather.

The war always tripped me up.

Then I had an uneasy thought. Fahour. An Arabic name? This could mean that his family had been caught up in the fallout. I shifted uneasily in my seat, trying not to sweat. Animals can always sense a rising fear, and while I was sure Fahour was human without any bio-traits that I had, there was something about the pure human psyche that I always found hard to fathom.

Well, obviously, or I wouldn't be here, would I?

Facing the murder charge.

"And what are you thinking now?" asked Dr Fahour, peering at me from over his bifocals.

"Why you didn't opt for laser eye surgery."

"That's another insensitive comment. Are you prone to them?" he replied, dryly.

"It was a joke," I tried to bluff. The fact is I never really knew where the boundary was. This is why I was so good at my job.

"Actually, my job requires that I suppress human qualities like humor," I said.
"Is that a joke?" Dr Fahour asked. I saw him writing furiously and didn't know if it was a good or bad thing. Now, if he was a dog, I would be able to tell you what he was thinking by the twitch of his left nostril. If he was a mullato-canine, a kind of transverse DNA sub stem you have probably never come across, then even though canine traits are well buried, I can sense them. No, not smell, it's more psychic than that.

But people. Common or garden 20\textsuperscript{th} Century style DNA humans. They floor me every time.

"Tell me when you started at Xenos. You were selected at university after a failed experiment alerted authorities to your, well, how should we put this, unorthodox methods?"

"You've obviously read my file. Why repeat it?"

Dr Fahour glanced down at his folder, and flipped a page. "Right then, Ariadne – you don't mind if I call you by your first name, do you? Ariadne – you graduated top of your crypto-class, were fast tracked through Xenos training and then a year at the FBI Academy in an exchange program at Langley – and then back for a stint at ASIO before Coben Thorley signed you up for the special task force. I see you never married." He grinned.

"Well, it's hard to keep a marriage on track when you have to lie to everyone about what you do."

"You were put in charge of the Melbourne Xenos Task Force after a successful containment of the Mix mitosis scare in the Nullabor after the inland sea development exposed unfortunate substances in the salt lake crust."

"They needed teams in there immediately. Operation Spinifex was a success."

"But you wiped out an entire Aboriginal tribe, and a sheep station."

"They were infected." Those awful screams. The fur that covered their bodies, the limping, and the terrible twitching and finally, as the virus exploded out of their membranes, the blood, and the rivers of blood that dissolved into the red earth…

"You received a special citation, a Commonwealth Bravery Award. Impressive." Dr Fahour smiled and peered at me over his glasses. I wondered if he'd ever considered a lupine implant. They work quite well. Especially night vision.

"I was just doing my job."

"Explain it to me."

"The Xenos Task Force was set up back last century, although no-one except a select few knew of its existence then. You can trace the line of inquiry back to the 17\textsuperscript{th} Century,
when Charles Le Brun's groundbreaking work on the similarities between human and animal physiognomies and the treatise of de la Chambre alerted the early scientific community to the possibilities. The actual scientific paper scientists based early hybrid work on are held at the Bibliothèque de l'Âncienne Faculte de Medecine in Paris."

"But the Faculty was destroyed in the Second World War," Dr Fahour said.
"Convenient."

"It wasn't destroyed, just moved. As soon as they occupied France, the Nazis took all the documents held there relating to the human-animal mutations that had been recorded. It became the basis for Mengele's little known experiments with hybrid sequencing."

"That's just a wild rumor!" exclaimed Fahour. By now, his eyes were opening wider, glistening like a child who has been given a push-pop with endless sour dipping flavor. Disgusting, yet strangely compelling. I could tell I had him hooked.

"The only reason no-one found the evidence was the Americans took it back with them when they liberated the concentration camps. It wasn't only nuclear weapons being developed by émigré scientists, you know. But the British soon got wind, and their espionage has always been better and more ruthless. By the 1980s, their animal experimentation had taken a more sinister turn."

I thought of my mother's work at Trentham Downs.

"Go on," urged Fahour. "This is an interesting story –"

Was that a twitch I saw in Fahour's cheek, a little patch of hair forming under his eyebrow? I glanced at his fingernails, which seemed a little longer and sharper than before, and his hands were twisting with a claw like movement. I forced my breathing to become slower. Lower my blood pressure, delay the fight or flight reflex like I was taught. There is a specific way of dealing with animals. Especially when you are the meat.

"Humint was established back in 1985. At the time scientists began gene sequencing, they noticed something more than the fact that we are so closely related to apes that it was only a sharp righthand turn of chance and biology that we ended up running the planet and they ended up the hunted. No, it's more than genes in common because, and this might shock you, we have about 58 per cent of genes in common with an eggplant. Think about that.

"What scientists found truly terrifying was that the bridge between human and animal wasn't a couple of per cent that made all the difference. It was the junk DNA they thought wasn't important that held the key. No-one knew when the cloning experiments first started
that the sequence of junk DNA would be turned on so rapidly and that in just one
generation, the species boundary could be breached if animal implants were grafted to
humans.

"I guess it's no real surprise I ended up working in the Xenos Task Force. After all, my
mother was one of the scientists who experimented with animal-human transplants."

Fahour looked at my file. "It says here your mother injected herself with the virus."

“That was after I was born. I am clean. We have regular monthly blood tests to check
that contamination hasn't occurred.”

Fahour stepped away from me and licked his lips.

"Do you sleep around?"

"I'm sexually active. And yes, I use protection. I'm not that careless. No, you don't need
to write that down – look, I've told you before, I've already been to Psyche to debrief on the
Miyata Incident."

Even as I said it I wanted to cry. Jun Miyata. We had been assigned to the Darklands
job for a special assignment when Derrimut was away on what I thought was a top secret
job but I know now this was his death warrant. Now they were both dead. I should work
alone.

Fahour looked up at me and pushed the glasses back firmly onto his face. I could smell
the perspiration emanating from his pores. The slight whiff of his adrenal secretions, the way
his pupils dilated and then contracted in the hard light that streamed through the windows of
the conference room. I wanted to put my sunglasses on myself, but under the
circumstances, didn't think it was a good idea.

After all, despite my DNA sheet, I was being accused now.

How ironic.

"Tell me about what happened that night," Dr Fahour asked. I could sense his heart rate
climbing down now, and tried to imagine the blood pushing through his veins. It was hard to
break old habits. That's what made people nervous around me.

"There's nothing much to tell as I put everything in the report. We got a tipoff that some
hybrids were squatting in the old Darklands area, behind the Arkeley Tower block. They'd
found an abandoned town house complex, we were told. A passing child had rung in saying
they'd smelt something funny."
"Funny?" Dr Fahour crouched forward. Damn, I could now see the perspiration on his skin, slight glistening droplets rolling towards his chest.

"Musty, animal smell. Like straw she said. That was an immediate warning bell. Most hybrids, if sufficiently evolved, will use the toilets but if the animal is taking over, they'll defecate in the corners of rooms, often on piles of papers. That's why we have such tight surveillance on paper recycling depots."

"I want you to go back to the night in question," said Dr Fahour, crossing his legs again. The slight bulge in his crotch alerting me to the fact that he was attracted to me. His clean jaw was a turn on, I admit. No hint of hair. He paid a lot to stay smooth, I could tell.

"I decided to check it out, go undercover. I have an alias in the hybrid community, and some slight gen-modification to my bio-output can make me look feline." I pushed my dark hair back, showing off my slightly pointy ears. The effects of the surgery would take a few more months to subside. Other symptoms, the nocturnal habits, the wandering, the absence of anything but meat and milk from my diet, could take a little longer to leave my system. I didn't mention it to psyche, but I actually liked some of the characteristics.

Maybe they would think that included the killings.

But I only did those for the job.

For the good of mankind.

"Did you take back up?" asked Dr Fahour. "The report says here that you refused to engage the help of –" he squinted at the writing.

"Detective Krifi. Yeah, well, I had my reasons."

"Tell me about them." As he spoke, Dr Fahour took out a laser pencil and flicked it in my eyes. The classic pupil response test. I held my head still and waited for him to finish.

"I'm clean?" I asked.

"Did you doubt it?" said Dr Fahour, putting away the pen.

Lying, I shook my head. I doubted all right. The doctors said I was clean and the feline was psychosomatic. But I knew better. I could feel claws under the surface of my nails, ready to spring.

"Krifi had been drinking," I said. "He wasn't in a fit state to confront a group of hybrids. I decided to go in with Miyata. The two of us could handle it, but he was hungry. We picked up a sushi pack and he was eating it as we got to a block of the Tower."

"Do you know what species they were?"
I shook my head. "Although from the clues, I guessed rodent. That musty smell, the shredded paper, and so on. I thought as a feline hybrid I would be able to spook them out. Anyway, we did the same drill as always. I'd go up, wired for sound; Miyata would be down waiting with the stun gun and a rifle full of lead shot just in case."

"What happened when you got to the apartment?"

"I knocked, pretending to be a pizza delivery person with the wrong address. The first hybrid opened the door and told me to go away, but the smell of the pizza made him change his mind."

"When did the trouble start?"

"Once I was in, I could sense that things were breaking down pretty fast. You have to understand that with hybrids, the memories can take over at a cellular level until you don't realise that you are changing. The hybrids all had pink eyes and twitching noses. Some had the classic claw shaped hands and were beginning to revert to walking on all fours. The leader, however, looked human which was disturbing as he was paying for their survival by selling his body on the streets."

"You could have called the police at this stage," said Dr Fahour. "There are laws against willfully spreading the virus through sexual transmission."

I nodded. "Sure, if you can get them there on time. You have forgotten how fast mice are at evading capture. Anyway, I had baited the pizza and taken retina scans of all the hybrids with my ocular implant when I realised that I knew one of the smaller members of the group."

"Did they recognise you?"

"Yes, I think so. I wondered if she was going to give me away, but she didn't say anything. Her hands were in a pretty bad state, and she couldn't feed herself unless she ate off the floor. I think she just wanted an end to it all, to tell you the truth, but she was scared of going to the holdings and the experiments."

"Your report states that vivisection is still widely practiced in the holdings?"

"Yes. I have eyewitness accounts."

"From a bird hybrid only."

I ignored him. He was obviously more "speciest" than he made out. Either that or he was trying to get me to say something that would have me off the task force for good. And back to what? I wasn't cut out for a nine to five job, a husband at home and three genetically
perfect children. I often wondered if I had enough animal in me to kill them, but not enough to love like them.

"When did the shootings start?" asked Dr Fahour, tapping his pen on the notebook. Damn him, I knew he had all the facts on the screen. What was to be gained from torturing me this way?"

I was about to tell him that I didn't care what they charged me with when I noticed something odd. The hair on Fahour's upper lip was getting longer as we spoke, and his nose was getting fatter. It was as if his face was dissolving in front of me, judging by the angle of shadows on the floor, which could only mean one thing ...

He was a mutant and the steroids were wearing off.

They put a damn mutant in a room with me. Why? To see if I'd notice? To see if I'd crack?

Maybe they wanted me to kill him. I casually brushed my hand across my crossed leg and felt the reassuring weight of the knife wedged in my boot. I could get it out of the sheath before he grunted. Then again, if he were mutant pig strain, he'd be strong. He'd be stubborn.

Briefly, despite myself, I wondered what pig would be like in bed. They say after you've tried pig, you don't go back.

Fahour leaned forward. I could feel the heat from his body. And smell a subtle pigskin odor.

"You didn't answer me," he said. "The shootings. Who started it? Was it your gun?"

"Sure," I replied. "I like to be on top – of things. And the rats attacked first. It was self-defense. Pure and simple."

Fahour twitched. He kept going on about the phone call I'd logged in when I realised we were under fire. Listed the time discrepancies. There was some sort of delay between when I called in the attack and the round I emptied in the mutant. And all I could say was my partner's head had been ripped from his body – what did you expect me to do?

His fingernails were definitely longer, and his hands were turning into claws as he interrogated me. This was not a good sign. Werewolves I could handle, they are very specific with their metamorphosis, but mutants, there's never any warning about when they'll turn.
"You and Miyata – you were lovers, right?" asked Fahour. "I mean, the camera doesn't lie, does it?" He pushed a series of photos across the table. Incriminating ones, I admit. Miyata's wife wasn't going to like seeing those, but I guess that was the point.

"So what? We got the job done. Friends – with benefits."

"You know who this is?" Fahour waved a glossy crime scene still at me. It was going fast but I knew right away it was the mutant I'd emptied the rounds into. "Like I said, the mutant attacked first."

"You know who she is?"

I shrugged. 'A mutant."

Fahour held out another photo. A wedding photo. At first, I didn't recognise Miyata. Back then he had long hair and a goatee. And the woman in the wedding dress next to him, must have been –

It hit me hard.

A cold slap in the face with a bucket of reality.

The woman next to Miyata was the woman lying bleeding in the gutter.

I'd killed his wife. And she had killed him.

It was making perfect, horrible sense.

The bitch had set me up. It was so unfair. Of course I slept with her husband. I have sex with anyone I feel like. It means nothing. The only sex that matters is that which engages the heart. And, apart from making love to Coben, I don't make love to anyone. I just fuck the others. Men appreciate this difference. I was sick of women getting emotional about it. I had needs. Fucking this woman's husband was no different than getting take-away.

"So you see," Fahour said. "We didn't bring you in because you killed a mutant. We brought you in because you had sex with one. That's prohibited for any government official. Punishable under the DNA Amendment Act." He closed the file with a flourish. "Next time, be more careful who you are intimate with."

My hand reached over to my leg. He was quick, but I was quicker. I said the oath.

"Like a butcher, I shall strike you without anger and without hate."

You don't spend years Xenos training for nothing.

I walked out of that building with a spring in my step. The sun on my face, a fat hairy claw sectioned off as a trophy in my backpack. I was hungry. For meat. A little pork perhaps.
I needed a leg wax. I grunted. It was so hard to look remotely human when you're undercover.
If that horse and cart falls down,
You’ll still be the sweetest little baby in town

- Traditional

She knew he was watching her. Even with her eyes closed, she could sense it. She didn't know why, but she knew he would not hurt her. Or let the others hurt her. The first time she'd been let out of the cage, she tried to run and one of the packs had nipped her on the leg, and she'd watched as the wolf had sunk his sharp teeth deep into the neck of her attacker. As the blood flowed on the concrete floor, and the pack howled, the wolf had looked at her in the eye. In her head, she heard him speak to her, told her not to be afraid; he would never let this happen again.

They'd found bread for her, and fruit. Sometimes the meat was warmed, as if they knew she wouldn't eat it raw. But the truth was, as the weeks went on, she grew used to the taste, and even looked forward to it. It was as if her teeth had got sharper, able to rip into the flesh more easily.

And she could hear sounds clearer, smell things vividly. It seemed to her that the smells themselves became images, so she could see someone by their odor, long before they appeared.

How long had she been here? She had scratched her finger nails into the soft decayed part of the floor, a line for each day, but sometimes she wondered if she imagined one day from the next, or if she woke from a sleep to a morning, or if it was still night? Had it been days or weeks or months? They had taken her iPad. There was no-one to talk to, but she thought she could understand the different barks now, each of her captors sounded slightly different.

Then there were the tubes. They snaked around the ceiling, and she could hear air rushing through them, and what sounded like human voices, or almost human. Sometimes she could catch parts of words, and again, they seemed to come from more than one person. She imagined the tubes were how they communicated down here, but she didn't know where here was. Water dripped from the ceiling. She knew there were doors on the
ledge. But no-one came in or out. But when she tapped on the cage bars, in the Morse code she learned in Girl Guides, it was answered.

That's how she knew what they were going to do with her.

After three days, three days of watching, waiting, the thing inside her pulsating with anger, she put her fingers down her throat and heaved up the rabbit they had cooked for her.

“Shit!” said the first man. He had been sitting outside her cage, watching television on the iPad.

He was a half-thing, mostly wolf but with human hands and feet. He kept picking at the ugly boils on his face, and revolted her.

The other thing – on all fours - spoke in English.

“You'll have to clean it up.”

“Why is it always me?”

“Opposable thumbs.”

“Bugger that.”

But the younger one did as he was told, and she curled up the whole time in the cage, sweating and groaning.

“We should get Wolf,” said the all-fours.

“No – Marion,” said the other. “You stay with her, I'll do it.” She knew he was happy to leave the stink she was lying in. All-fours came closer, sniffed at the vomit. She hummed. A little tune.

“What's that, little one?” he said. He had a gleam in his eyes, looked at her and licked his lips. She hummed louder, and he pushed through the half open door, seeing she was chained up anyway.

The thing inside her – it throbbed.

“It hurts,” she said. She held her arms out. Smooth arms, olive skin, the all-fours sniffed then looked around and quickly licked her with his tongue.

She made a whimpering sound, and he came closer to her.

Sniffed her hair. She moaned. He came closer, nuzzled her neck.

She sank her teeth in, deep into the fur. The thing inside her leapt from her throat, pushed into the fur, deep into the skin, severing the vocal cords.
Kally watched, as though removed from herself. She’d never seen it before. Whatever it was. She knew it wouldn’t harm her. It was part of her. It knew what to do when she did not. And now she worked fast, finding the key around all-four’s neck, taking off the chains.

She tore all-four’s heart from his chest and left it in a pulsating mass on the floor. It was so fast he could see his own heart beating as he blinked at her. Her long talon nails sharp enough to poke his eyes out – pop! One by one.

And then she skinned him, so quick, there was little blood, and the coat was warm to wear, when she trotted out. On all fours. Taking the iPad the other had left behind.
The Inland Sea

If I see the sun in the sky and know that it is now noon, I know where to find south, west, north, and east. But for this I certainly need the feeling of a distinction in my own person, that between my right and left hand. I call it feeling.

Kant

I had to keep moving. There was no time to be complacent. Breaking out was one thing, staying out another. I studied the immediate surroundings, trying to work out where I was, where this facility was located. The inland sea stretched Lake Gairdner to Lake Torrens and Lake Fromme and Lake Kati-Thandra. Judging from the amount of time I had been in the plane, I estimated I could be in a remote part of South Australia. Somewhere close to the edge of Inland Sea. As long as I could get near the Dingo Fence, I’d have a chance of finding my way back to Sturt Camp.

I sniffed the air. Hoping there might be a trace of rain, which might make my escape easier. It was as dry as my throat. I cursed myself for not taking advantage of the tea and coffee on offer while under soft interrogation. I usually had more sense than that.

Without the cover of rain, I had to find another diversion. I had perhaps ten minutes maximum before the alarm was sounded. With no gun, no phone and no kit, I had to rely on my training and instincts to get out.

To my left, through the large car park, was a secure entry area, with a tollgate and a booth staffed by two guards. I knew that the surveillance cameras were watching me but so far, they had no reason to suspect me. I scanned the area. I had to get out fast, undetected and back to Melbourne where I could work out what the hell was happening.

I smelt him before I saw him. He was talking to a colleague, walking past the undercover area to my right. I recognised his voice immediately even though it had been three years. Casually approaching him, I turned on a megawatt smile and tossed back my long dark hair.

"Seamus!" I called and raised my hand in a benign, royal wave.

He took a second to register. There was a flash of bewilderment on his face, as if to question what I was doing here, in the middle of a remote secure facility. But then he must
have realised that being with Humint, I could possibly get sent anywhere, and that I was no threat.

What reason did Seamus have to feel threatened, anyway? Our last encounter had been a frantic grope in the foyer of an anonymous Canberra hotel at an ASIO Christmas party. He had been with some timid blonde from ASIS, and I had been smarting from a last minute rejection. Coben's daughter had been rushed to hospital yet again, and he was there with his wife to sit through the latest blood transfusion.

As I briskly walked towards him, I remembered back to the frustration and loneliness I felt that night. I suppose I could also blame too much cheap domestic sparkling wine, but we ended up in my room. It was an enjoyable enough diversion, I seemed to recall. Typically though, what I remember most was the gnawing emptiness I felt as I drank a row of tiny bottles of spirits from the mini bar after Seamus left. I had looked out into the black Canberra night and thought of Coben and Tara clinging onto each other as they waited for their daughter to regain consciousness.

"Well, it's a small world, isn't it?" I said, flinging my arms around Seamus' neck and giving him a passionate kiss. It hit me then – he smelt different. Altered. What had he done – without trying to be obvious I sniffed his hair. Was that – wolf?

"Wow – Ariadne," Seamus beamed. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, the usual. I couldn't believe it when I saw you standing here. Still working on the remote sensing files? Warringal B?"

It was a calculated guess on my part – Seamus had been new on the taskforce back when we had our interlude. The fact that he was here could only mean he had stuck with Australia's Mars project and been promoted. It was a little publicly known fact that major observatories like Warringal B, not even an acknowledged dot in the back blocks of Marsden Station, were also used for intelligence gathering.

"How do you know about Warringal B?" Seamus eyed me cautiously. He had no reason to suspect me of anything, but his training would always shadow his emotions. His eyebrows seemed to meet in the middle, yes, I was sure they did, it wasn't a trick of the light, and his chin was stronger, wider. Would they have given him some wolf stem cell manipulation to enhance his ability? Not the old Seamus I knew. He was too junior for that sort of enhancement, but if he was working on something big –

"Coben Thorley." I said by way of explanation. Seamus nodded.

His phone rang.
He looked at me awkwardly, no doubt wondering if I was going to hit on him or do something emotionally needy like beg him for a coffee and chat in the canteen. Instead, I touched him lightly on the arm in a sign of briefly remembered acquaintance and left.

I counted sixty seconds as I walked between the cars with a determined look on my face. I turned as I dropped my bag and looked around when I picked it up. Seamus had gone back inside the building.

Purposely, I walked between a long row of cars; all silver four wheel drives, clicking Seamus' car keys, which I had grabbed from his inside pocket as I hugged him. As I eased inside, a full blast of Shania Twain hit me as I turned on the ignition. Seamus a country-lite fan? I shrugged. I might have slept with the man once, that didn't mean I knew anything about him except he kept me momentarily preoccupied one sad and lonely night.

I unbuttoned my top to reveal a generous amount of my deep cleavage so that by the time I flashed my ID card at the tollgate, the guards were preoccupied and waved me through. I activated the GPS and calculated the distance to the Aboriginal community I knew was nestled on the outskirts of Woomera.

I settled in for the ride, singing along to Shania Twain. "You're still the one I run to –"

Coben. Would he be looking for me? Worried about me? As my boss or as my lover?

A phone rang.

Instinctively I felt in my pocket, only to realise that mine had been confiscated. I looked around, saw an old Nokia vibrating on the floor of the passenger seat. An image of Seamus standing in the car park talking on his new phone made me quickly stop the car.

That wasn't Seamus' phone.

Warringal B. Wolf. It rolled back, one by one, in a freeze frame of doubt and guilt and anxiety. Wolf, wolf, wolf – he'd been tracking me. He knew. Tracking – he'd tracked me. It had been a set up, from the beginning. Why had he wanted me here?

The phone rang.

I slowed the car down a fraction and threw myself out, rolling with my shoulder hard against the red earth. The air rushed out on my lungs as the impact jolted me. Dust pushed inside my mouth but I rolled, rolled and pushed myself up.

I could run fast, even in heels, but the soft red earth impeded my desperate dash from the car. I counted as I ran – ten cat and dog, seven cat and dog – four cat and dog –
The explosion threw me across the parched desert, devoid of any greenery except for clumps of Spinifex. The last thing I remembered was the sound of my head connecting with a large boulder and the taste of blood in my mouth.

"She's awake."

A woman's voice. German accent.

I opened my eyes. It was dark and I felt a scratchy woollen blanket against my skin. It smelt of stale body odor and vomit. My head pounded and I tried to move. I sank back on to the wooden bench and groaned.

"Careful, mate, you've had a nasty accident."

I focused on the woman smiling at me. She had the unmistakable appearance of a backpacker, with sun damaged skin, and braided mousey blonde hair and a worn T-shirt which revealed sturdy bra straps. She was perhaps forty years old, and sported an array of facial piercings.

"Your car fuel tank blew up. You're lucky Spalding found you."

"Thanks." I gratefully accepted the glass of water she offered me, and didn't object as she held me while I sipped. I looked around – I was in some sort of camp, but not what I expected. Although a warming fire burned in a 44-gallon drum, the tents were well kept old scout tents, heavy-duty canvas beasts that had long been replaced in the wider backpacking community by light but durable nylon. Card tables were set up around the fire and old style camp lights.

"Have I moved back through a time portal?" I asked, bewildered.

"She has a sense of humor, that's good to see. I think we can rule out bad concussion." A deep man's voice made me turn around. In front of me stood a tall, gangly man with close-cropped dark hair. He had thin wire glasses and although he smiled, there was an air of quiet concern about him. He must be Spalding.

I started to get up. "My car –"

"Well, no thanks for saving my life? No, where am I? No, who are you?" Not quite the damsel in distress, are we?" Spalding's eyes twinkled as he spoke. Under the levity was a probing caution. This was a man used to dealing with the unexpected, and with the underhand. He expected a few answers and I knew he'd be harder to trick than the likes of bored tollgate operators or dull-eyed Seamus.
"Sorry, I have no manners –" I offered my hand. "Ariadne Stephanopoulos. Freelance journalist. I'm working on a story about genetically modified crops and the inland sea. And was following a lead. I ran into some trouble at a remote station and had been trying to get back to Adelaide."

In every lie, a grain of truth. So Coben Thorley taught me – on the job, off the job. *I love you - I will leave my wife – when my daughter gets better.*

He smiled. "Well, no memory loss then. I'd say that apart from a black eye, which is rapidly developing, you are going to be fine. Your car on the other hand – it exploded. There isn't much left except for the license plate, which I picked up from the road shortly before a fleet of government cars came charging to the scene."

I nodded. So, they were on to me. Wolf, the government. Everyone except Coben wanted me.

"They don't know you're here, though. We have a policy of harbouring dissenters," Spalding smiled.

The canvas tents – the German I thought was a backpacker – dissenters.

"Is this Blue Camp?" At least with my cover as a journalist I could ask questions. "They say you don't exist, you know." I winced. My shoulder throbbed.

Spalding winked. "Don't believe everything you read about on Google news."

He gave me a tour, such as it was, of the tents. Hidden behind the forgotten remains of an abandoned mission station, Blue Camp’s old canvas tents made sense. Seen in context, they blended in with the weathered huts and the fallen gums. It looked like just another derelict site, perhaps temporarily inhabited by the local indigenous community. In this situation, smart nylon tents would have alerted the authorities. Camps like this had sprung up around the sea, monitoring the hybrid detention centres.

Spalding paused outside the old farmhouse. Most of the weatherboards had been eaten off by birds and beaten and split by the ferocious sun and bitter nights. He pointed inside.

"We picked up something on our last survey of the perimeter of UniPharm," he said. "Just before we found you and saw your car explode. At first I thought it was one of the animals. Some large mammal they'd experimented on. We try to keep a record of the ones that somehow escape. We know the rest are incinerated, we can see the smoke stacks when they do the burning after the experimental procedures."

The hairs on the back of my neck stood to attention.
"Is it alive?" I asked.

"Nothing we find is, thank God." he handed me a torch. "Take a look, primary research. You'll need it for your story."

I was as far as the corridor when I realised Spalding wasn't following me.

And the rustling noise – and the scraping of chains on concrete – alerted me to the fact that whatever was in there was indeed alive.

I held the torch to the sound and the beam of light caught the glow of two green eyes. I gasped – it wasn't an animal, or maybe it was. Hunched into a corner, my torch picked up a pathetically thin body. But it was poised on two crouched legs like a man, arms wrapped around its knees.

"Are you all right?" I called out. I saw an iron bar leaning on the wall and carefully picked it up, its reassuring weight in my hand.

There was no answer. Only the low growl of a caged animal.

"I can help you," I lied. I had no idea what I was going to do. But it was alive and that meant it needed food and water.

"Can you answer me?"

In response, it jumped up and ran towards me, moving quickly on all fours. It screamed as it connected with the bar, and thrashed around on the floor, blood gushing from the wound on its head. In horror, I realised that in amongst the animal death howls came a single, word –

"Help"

I turned to the others. "What is this? My god – it's human!" I crouched down to tentatively feel the shape and recoiled as the stench hit me.

I made Spalding carry the creature inside the farmhouse. He placed it on an old Laminex kitchen table and we pushed a kerosene lamp as close as possible. The absolute necessity to remain under the radar meant no generator, electricity or even water. Blue Camp didn't deal in digital, either. There was an old manual typewriter salvaged from a secondhand shop and a stack of yellowed paper in a towering mound next to it. All correspondence, Spalding told me, was done via snail mail. Paper could be burned without a trace. Digital left electronic shadows that could be traced to your very soul.

"Do you have any gloves?" I asked. Spalding simply grunted.
The emaciated form was covered in dark fur. Its breathing was shallow and it flinched when I carefully reached for its paw to check its pulse. It was weak, but there were signs of life.

"We found it last night. I thought it had died," the distaste in Spalding's voice was thick. If he could spit out what he thought of UniPharm, it would sit in a thick pile of mucus in the corner.

"What medications do you have?" I took off my jacket and covered the shivering creature's chest.

"Why are you doing that? It's not worth saving!" Spalding glared at me, reaching down to pull the jacket off.

"All life is worth something." I grabbed his hand. His eye's widened as I held it tight. Maybe then he saw the glint in my eye. The change of color that happened as the iris widened when I sensed danger.

"You're not a journalist," he said.

"Damn right." I held up the paw again and checked the claws. I wasn't sure exactly what I was looking for, but there had to be a reason he had got away from the facility.

"Sometimes, on a full moon, they change shape. Walk on two legs." Spalding stepped towards me.

"You don't believe that."

"Where do you think the myths come from? Where do you think this –" he pointed with disgust. "This thing came from?"

I thought of Derrimut. The mass of hair and bone and blood that he'd become. Changed, mutated. I calculated the age of the creature in front of me. I wasn't paid to kill things like this.

I looked up to tell Spalding that we needed to break into the facility and release the others. He had a rifle pointed at my face.

"I know what you are," he hissed. "And it isn't human."

I looked Spalding in the eye and felt my nose twitch. I could sense what was about to happen next but kept my face impassive. Animals secrete a musky scent when they are about to pounce. It's a subtle hint that passes most humans by. Ever wondered why dogs growl when you have no idea why? They can detect it just like me.
The bloody mass on the table between us sprung up and wrenched the gun from Spalding's grasp. I stepped back in time to miss the ricochet as the stock jerked back as a shot was fired. The blood and brains that once contained the man in question, however, covered my face and hair.

I licked my lips. Fresh kill was warm and sweet, before the rusting iron taste set in.

I heard the panicked sounds of the group running to the disturbance and scooped the mass up under my arm and charged out.

I found a land rover, bonnet still warm. Someone had left a backpack on the passenger seat. The thing groaned as I threw it in the back seat and hot-wired the vehicle. Through the rear vision, I could see the black speck in the sky that heralded helicopters, and before we were too far down the highway, the smell of high-octane fuel and flesh filled the air. From the plumes of black smoke that billowed, I guessed they'd taken the biopharm along with Blue Camp. Whatever secrets had been wrenched from the animals inside, well, they'd no doubt died with their torturers.

I guess that meant I had the only physical evidence with me. The thing writhing in the back of the car.

I drove for four hours straight, until the shadows stretched out on the road in front. But I didn't need the impending darkness to tell me how time was advancing. I could feel it in my bones. There was a full moon rising and my blood was changing. It was that time of the month again. My cycle was just like that of any woman, only more heightened. When I was peaking, mid month, I had to stop myself from trawling the bars and finding the first available cock. I knew I couldn't help it; it was in my programming, in my marrow, in my DNA. But the taste for sex was replaced by the longing for violence as the moon reached its plump and luscious roundness. Then the beast inside me wanted to rip something apart rather than mount it.

Dammit. I couldn't change here, in the middle of nowhere, and risk wandering off and not being able to get back again. After the change I was drained, in the same way a person suffering an epileptic fit was in a daze after the spasms. Worst yet, I had the thing in the back of the vehicle. It was quiet now, but I knew that once it sensed the flesh on me turn and my skin cover in fur, then I'd be in trouble. It may be mostly human, but we were more alike than I cared to admit.

I ran my hand over my chin. The bristles were starting to come through and my legs were itchy. So much for the Brazilian I'd had earlier. I should time these things better.
"Thirsty."

The voice was strained and in pain. But there was no mistaking its human origin. I screeched to the side of the road and turned around. My hand was on the knife I always kept in the side of my boot.

"Beg of you -" It pleaded.

I unzipped the backpack and found a bottle of water. I reached over and nudged the blanket. A bloody hand took it from me.

Finally, it spoke again.

"Are you Ariadne?"

"Yeah." It must have heard me talking to Spalding.

"They said you'd come."

"Who?"

"Moreau."

I turned around and yanked the blanket down. I wish I hadn't and we both flinched. I let it pull the fabric up. I fought to control my urge to vomit. Dear god – what had they done to it? What had it once been first – animal or human?

"You've been in touch with Moreau?" I demanded, when I got my breath back. "And they let you go?"

"They said to tell you –" the painfully thin body was wracked with a coughing fit. I held the bottle of water to its lips.

"What did they say?" I asked.

"Your daughter. They have her."

I shook my head. "I've never had a child."

"She's yours."

"No - you don't understand – I'd know if I'd been pregnant. If I'd given birth – I have never been – I do not have a child!"

Even as I said it, a pain drove through me. Coben. If I could I would have had a little accident, like so many women throughout history. But I couldn't. All my eggs had been taken and securely stored. I'd get pregnant no problem, but I'd have to go through IVF. I'd have to get Coben's sperm somehow – it had to be planned.
"She's yours."

A violent shudder went through me. I was about to tell it what was happening, but the change was quick. The tremors swelled up and I could hear the thumping of the blood thickening in my veins. Pushing through my arteries as they widened and the bones in my face flexed and spread.

It was too late.

The sounds of the bush intensified. How had I not noticed them before? I clawed at my clothes, heavy against my skin. I heard a metallic sound hit the car as I threw off my boots and saw to my surprise a knife lying on the red earth. I bent down and tried to pick it up, but my hands wouldn't hold it. The skin had peeled back where the flesh had smoothly covered before. My fur felt harsh, like patting a cat the wrong way.

I was hungry. How long since I'd eaten? Food. I needed to eat. My mouth moved to my arms and sucked up the stray pieces of flesh that had covered me before. It wasn't enough. My ears picked up a rustle near the gum tree and in the dark I could see clearly a ‘roo. I had forgotten how fast I was. On all fours, I could get to the animal before it had time to react. I ripped into the softest parts, howling in satisfaction. Then I smelt him. Somewhere, far away, but he smelt me too. I stood up and twitched, tail flicking. My howl turned into an unmistakable growl of lust. He was coming. He knew I was on heat.

The desire to be mounted, to be filled with the alpha male, was overwhelming. The full moon shone down on me, my eyes unblinking, and the anticipation making me stand still with my legs parted, wet and ready, as I waited for him to take me.
Cleaning up

One little duck
Went out one day
Over the hills and far away
Mother duck said
"Quack, quack, quack, quack."
But none of the five little ducks came back.

- Traditional

The cold earth seeped into my bones. My muscles ached as I fought my way back into consciousness. I coughed. My mouth was full of the taste of meat and fur. I moved my head back and vomited, the already decaying flesh violently heaving its way out of me.

Shivering, I realised I was naked. Blood caked my inner thighs and under my fingernails. As I struggled to focus, I saw what I had done. In the weak light of the dawn, flies were already gathering on the carcass. I was used to seeing animals I'd torn apart but there was a long human leg ripped from its socket in front of me, and what I could make out from its fleshy glistening shape, an eyeball nearby.

I screamed. And screamed.

Staggering to my feet, I tried to locate the car, and seeing it rammed against a lone gum tree, I gingerly made my way there. Everywhere I looked, were bits of what I had partially devoured. A jaw on the red earth, and near some Spinifex, a leg bone. The other one.

I looked at my arms, as hairless and smooth as the day they'd been lazered. Sniffing the air, my nose was blocked, senses dulled. Even my eyesight was blurred, and I realised I'd soon need my glasses again.

It wasn't until I had got to the car and found the bloody blanket and the hand wedged near the dashboard that I realised the awful truth. I'd killed the thing I had tried to rescue. I felt something wedged between my back teeth. Pulled it out. It was a finger.

My clothes were where I'd ripped them off, probably before I had been overcome. I rubbed the dirt onto my face and splashed the bottle of water I found in the back seat over the worst of the visible debris that covered me. When I sat down in the car, I could feel the impact of what I'd done. It was always like this. No matter how much I tried to stop myself, I
was always a very bad girl when I became an animal. Because the alphas that knew how I wanted it always found me, and always obliged. I started the car and headed for the nearest truck stop.

I asked for the key to the ladies. They kept them locked now, fearful of the cybs who prowled the outer areas. There used to be a time, I remembered, when parents would worry about junkies and syringes. Now it was the shedding of Nano artificial skin particles. The young guy behind the counter with acne and a retro Pearl Jam T shirt barely gave me a second glance. I must have looked human enough. Certainly nothing like a cyb.

Water splashed on my face and shocked me to reality. I shook my hair under the water and flicked it back, trying to make the memory of blood leave my thoughts.

_It didn't really happen._

That's what I thought each month since it started happening. At first, when I was 11, and the hair appeared along with the shock of my period each month, I figured it was just hormones. I read furtively everything I could — those "now you're a woman" books the library has a stash of and all teenage girls read while pretending not to. I couldn't find anything in the index about stuff other than cramps and diagrams of a uterus and helpful line drawings of flaccid and then erect penises. There was nothing about teeth that sharpened overnight so you woke with blood caked around your mouth, or waking up to find the neighbor's dog ripped apart under your bed. And certainly nothing about the aching, throbbing need to sniff out a mate each time the moon peaked.

First, I figured all the other girls were like me; they just didn't talk about it. But I soon grew tired of their stupid flirting and agonising about boys they liked. "Do you think he noticed me?" "He smiled, twice, he must like me?" "He didn't call, he said he would, maybe I'm too fat."

Jesus! By the time I was 14 I knew if you wanted a bloke, you just went and took him. They didn't complain. And if they didn't call the next day? I didn't want them to. In the daylight, I was disgusted at what I had them do to me. And what I did to them. I never chose anyone I'd see again, or anyone in the same suburb. Too risky. Especially when the animal was strongest in me, and then a king tide of hormones required two men at once to keep me satisfied. Mercifully, after the incessant throbbing between my legs retreated, I became normal again and able to concentrate on things other than sex. It was a relief not to look at every man and wonder how he would fill me. For weeks at a time, I was just like everyone else.
Except with hairier legs.

The door pushed open.

"Oh – sorry!" A large woman in a floral top stared at me, then hurriedly dragged her young daughter out of the bathroom as I looked up from the mirror.

"Mummy – what's wrong with the lady?"

"Ssh! It's rude to stare – come on!"

I caught sight of myself in the mirror. It was worse than usual. The thing had fought hard for its life and I had long welts across my cheek and a black eye was fast developing. I grabbed the disposable razor I lifted from the convenience items and ran it over my face. Thank god Coben couldn't see me like this.

"Nitish," I mumbled into the phone. I'd pushed myself against the wall but the other people in the petrol station diner still gave me furtive glances. I'd done my best to clean myself up, but there is only so much cold water, no soap and a hot hand dryer can achieve. I didn't have any money, of course, but I'd lifted a wallet and some cash as I mingled with the people near the bain-marie. I wasn't hungry, but I needed something to wash down what I'd consumed. Pieces of the thing's hand were still in my mouth. It was prickly and getting stuck in my throat. I gulped a family size bottle of Diet Coke as I blurted out what had happened.

"Jesus – Ariadne – where the hell are you?"

"Outside Port Augusta. I need you to organise tickets at Adelaide airport, okay?"

Silence.

"Nitish?"

"Are you – okay?"

"Yeah."

"What did you do?"

I couldn't say it. "I lost the thing I was hunting."

"You okay though?"

"Nitish – there is something else. It escaped Moreau. It said they would kill my daughter."

"You have a daughter?"

"I've never had a child. But I know she's mine."
"How – Ariadne, for a man this is possible but – you never knew you were pregnant?"

“I had my eggs frozen and placed in a biobank. If they were stolen – “

“You think this is likely?”

“It sounds weird, but I can feel her, Nitish.”

“We are all connected in this world, I believe you.”

“Can you check please? Find if my eggs are safe? Just hack into my bank account and find the monthly payments I’ve been making for the last 15 years. Can you track it for me, see if I am wrong?”

“Ari – of course, but you don’t think you are wrong, do you?”

“I don’t know what to think.”

"Listen Ari - we've had reports from Brisbane of something happening at the Furgrounds, and a bunch of cybs went missing and liberated a biopharm experimental unit. Stuff got out. Things. Experiments mostly but we think some can talk, and maybe are breeding age. We reckon they got into the underground scene to escape. We're on yellow alert – Thorley is asking for Dr Mackenzie.”

I sighed. “I found him – then – we got split up. Things got a little out of hand.”

“Did you get close to Wolf?”

“No. Dead end.”

Yeah, I thought, literally. And now - animal snuff. There were places you could go if you were so inclined, to watch cybs and animals have sex, then pay extra to kill the animals while fucking the cybs. You got handed a gun and were allowed to take shots. Just don't dent the merchandise. Cybs don't come cheap. Nano skin is expensive.

I unbuttoned the buttons on the shirt and walked into the dining area. The first man with a truck who caught my eye was easy bait. And my ticket out of here.

It took about three minutes. I may be human again, but I had the aura of the animal. Men find the possibility of a wild ride irresistible.
[Kally]

**Bellerophon**

*Ding, dong, bell,*  
*Pussy’s in the well.*  
*Who put her in?*  
*Little Johnny Thin.*  
*Who pulled her out?*  
*Little Tommy Stout.*  
*What a naughty boy was that,*  
*To drown a pussy cat?*

- Traditional

Part of me wanted some hot chips. The other part wanted to eat meat again. It had been a long time since I had eaten the all-fours. I still had the iPad, and I got some clothes from the truck driver I ate who gave me a lift to Sydney Central Station. They were too big, and I kept pushing up the sleeves of the hoodie. I found a green recycle bag someone left outside a lavatory cubicle and grabbed that quickly, but it only had magazines and a bottle of water that smelt like someone’s unbrushed teeth. I took a swig of it and threw that away. I put the iPad in the bag and looked for someone useful.

I didn’t have any money, and there was a man who kept looking at me and smiling. I tried to hide among the crowd at the station as I looked at the board – from Central to Southern Cross, Melbourne. I needed a ticket. There were policemen standing around in groups, and I saw one of them watching me.

A dog started barking, loudly. Its owner, a large woman with a kind smile, shook her head and tried to hold him back on the leash. She held him tightly, the gold rings on her hands glinting.

“I’m sorry – he’s not usually like this,” she said.

The dog looked at me. Inside, the thing wriggled around. Then stopped. I walked up to the dog and extended my hand, so he could sniff. He started to whimper and rolled on his tummy. He was soft and warm and froze as my skin touched his fur.

“I think he likes me,” I said.

“That’s a pretty accent you have,” said the woman. “Are you from England?”
I nodded.

“So many people are from foreign places you know,” said the woman. “It’s so nice to meet someone who is English. Where is home for you, then?”

“Oxford.”

“Here for a holiday are you, dear?”

I smiled. “We’ve come to see my granny.”

The woman beamed at me. “That’s nice. Where’s your mum, pet?” she looked around, trying to see someone who looked like me.

“She’s gone to get the tickets,” I lied. “She told me to wait here for her.”

“Where are you going?”

“Melbourne.”

“Same as me. I’m going to visit my granddaughter. She’d be about your age.”

She probably had money.

“I need to go to the lavatory,” I said. I turned slightly to the man sitting reading a newspaper. “That man keeps looking at me. Could you come with me, please? I am scared.”

The lady brightened up and nodded. “Come on, girly.” She put a protective hand on my shoulder and glared at the man as we walked past him. I had been watching and no-one had been in the separate disabled loos.

“Mum says I should use the disabled ones, in case of perverts.”

“Very sensible,” agreed the woman. “I’ll stand outside, okay?”

I went inside and counted to five. Then I opened the door and poked my head out.

“The lock doesn’t work I’m afraid I’ll get stuck inside,” I said, smiling but looking worried. “Can you look at it please?”

“Of course – let’s see what’s going on – can’t have the door springing open, can we?”

She came inside with the dog. The thing in me wriggled and throbbed. The dog slunk to the floor. As the lady bent down to check the lock I moved in close. I knew what to do now, or the thing did. It happened so fast, she didn’t scream. When I had finished, I pushed her against the corner of the room, and carefully took all her jewellery and wallet, which I emptied of cash. She had quite a lot with her. I left the credit cards, tossing them in the sanitary waste bin. I flushed the phone’s SIM card.
I took the dog, locking the room behind me, and went to buy a ticket.

“You can’t take the dog on the train,” the woman behind the counter said.

“It’s my dad’s,” I lied. “He’s coming to see me off. I am going to see my mum in Melbourne.”

She smiled and handed me the tickets. “I’ve given you a window seat.”

I thanked her and looked at the shops. I had fifteen minutes until the train went and didn’t want to get on until the last minute. I tied the dog up and went and bought some clothes. I looked like everyone else now. I bought a soft drink and chocolate at the kiosk and a new SIM card “for my dad – he’s gone to get the train tickets”, and an iTunes voucher for the iPad.

The train trip took ages, more than ten hours and it wasn’t a bit like going from Didcot to Paddington. The landscape was really boring. I didn’t see any kangaroos. Now that I had internet access, I could finally set up an account and send the email. I remembered what Marion had said to all-fours. It was a word I hadn’t heard before, but I searched it on Google. *Bellerophon*.

I bought a bucket of chips from the dining room. The thing inside me must have gone to sleep. I was feeling tired, but I couldn’t sleep in case someone took my stuff. I had to find somewhere to go once I arrived at Southern Cross. The email came back as I finished the last chip and sucked the salt off my fingers. Now I had a plan.
Carlton was once a gentrified inner suburban university suburb, full of elegant terrace houses and inappropriately planted gum trees, which wrenched the bluestone foundations from the ground. Then, of course, once the experimentations started, most of the suburb became electrified and the security cordons meant you needed the right microchip to get past the scanners. As part of the Xenos force, of course, I had access to all the 3D copying facilities, so it wasn’t a hassle to print then insert the correct chip into the hollow behind my front tooth.

Nitish answered the door straight away. He had on his Ganesha T shirt.

“You look awful,” he said.

“Are you alone?”

“Yeah, my parents went back to Delhi last week.”

“I mean you don’t have a woman inside?”

“As you can see, I have no wedding ring, and you have as yet not been invited to the three week celebration of my marriage in India.”

“You don’t have to go with the arranged marriage, you know.”

“You don’t have to have sex with every good looking man you meet.”

“It’s in my nature.”

“Same, same. You just think you have free will. I know I don’t.”

Nitish’s father had made a lot of money selling miracle slimming pills. He bought his only son this modern townhouse on the edge of Carlton, a good buy he said, and plenty of
room for the relatives when they came to stay – and of course, the many children that Nitish was expected to produce once they had established a suitable bride for him.

"I need a favor, honey," I purred, pushing him aside, my left breast grazing his chest and nipple hardening as I bolted down the stars. "I need to be clean before I get back to the grid. Or even – home."

He sighed. "Why is it you only come to see me when you want something?"

"That's not true," I lied.

Nitish was my preferred bio-cobbler. He had the unique status of being one of the few men I didn't sleep with. It wasn't that he was necessarily unattractive, even for a man whose eyebrows disconcertingly met in the middle. It was just that he constantly refused me, because he said I made him feel cheap.

Nitish eyed me cautiously. Poor guy. I'd called him because I knew he could get me what I wanted – entry into the database, and some vaccine. Let's face it; I never practiced safe sex when I was an animal. I let myself feel momentarily guilty until I told myself Nitish knew what he was getting into.

He was a quick worker. He scanned me and gave me something "so it would numb the pain" before extracting the bio-alert and wiping the chip of the savage memories it encoded from my raised cortisone levels in the outback. He swabbed me and didn't flinch when he saw the marks, the scratches, everywhere. He had stem cell cream that worked quickly.

"Thanks Nitish," I wrapped my arms around him gratefully once I was dressed. Nitish hugged me tight, and then rested his head against my shoulder. Finally, he spoke.

“I checked out the biobank, like you asked.”

I moved away from him.

“And?”

“It took a bit of fancy footwork – I had to hack into some seriously encrypted files – “

“Nitish – what did you find?”

“She might be your daughter. Your eggs are gone.”

“They’ve been stealing eggs from women?”

“Just yours.”

“Why?”

“Maybe – they know. About – Prendick.”
I shook my head. I held up my fingers. “One – Coben Thorley, who recruited me. He has known about me for 20 years, that’s why he went after me. Two, You. I trust you with my life – and my secrets –“

“Gee, thanks Ari – I –“ He attempted to hug me again.


Nitish was silent for a moment. Then he added that he’d discovered something else.

“Does Bellerophon mean anything to you?”

“No.”

“Okay – it’s just that was the codename used in the file I managed to hack into.”

“Could you trace it?”

“It was a UK IP address. Oxford University.”

I shrugged, trying to take it all in.

“You spent your honors year at London University, right?”

“That was a long time ago.”

“Yeah, but you were there with Coben, right? Wasn’t he involved in some research project?”

“It wasn’t connected with Oxford –“

“I’m just saying –“

“It’s not too late.”

“What?”

“I’m only forty. It’s not too late to have a baby?”

“Of course not.” He hugged me tight.

Later, Nitish insisted on driving me home.

"I can come in with you if you want – do a sweep of the flat?"

"It’s okay."

"I mean, I could come in, if you want?" he stood there awkwardly, the g-counter in his hand.
"I'm fine." I just wanted bed, and food, and to be alone.

"You never know – I could calibrate the –"

"Come in." I grabbed his arm and pushed him inside before the neighbors got suspicious. I was never sure who was watching.

I let Nitish do what he was good at – fussing around with machines. I wondered briefly if he'd had a cyb sexually, and then dismissed it. He had a stack of pens in his shirt pocket, and a digital recorder in the other. He was going to marry some nice Indian girl from a suitable family. He seemed as straight as they came. I'd often thought of taking him to bed, but couldn't afford to destroy the one friendship I had on the grid. What was I talking about – the one friendship I have, period. Besides, Coben would have him transported back to the filthy confines of a Pakistan intelligence dump if he'd ever found out.

"Here – drink." I ripped the top off a Pure Blonde and pushed the bottle into Nitish's hand and indicated to the couch.

"Sit."

"I've still got to look at the –"

"Come on, Nitish. As usual, you've saved my arse. Sit down and keep me company – okay?

This is good South Australian Shiraz. A gift. None of that Merlot crap."

"Who gave it to you?"

I ignored him. Nitish could get very jealous. If he saw me leave a bar with a man, he wouldn't talk to me for a week. It was awkward, as we had to work together. My rule is always – be discreet. Then you can do anything. Besides, I preferred the frisson of secrecy. After all, I am a spy.

"Music?" I grabbed a remote. Nitish had wired my sound system and he took the control from me like I was a retarded child and pressed the right buttons, I was always doing something wrong with the complex set up.

Chris Isaak. I hadn't programmed that. Nitish smiled.

"Like it?"

"Sure." I leant against his broad chest and felt his comforting heart beat.

"It's been a rough week," I said. He put his arm around me.
"It's alright now, Ariadne." He ran his fingers through my hair. "Why don't you take a shower? How about I make stir-fry? Last time I was here you had stuff in the freezer. I bet you haven't cooked since then, right?"

"You don't have to do that." I didn't feel like moving. Little muscles I didn't even know I had were screaming in pain, and the wine was making me feel sleepy and apathetic at the same time.

"Actually I think you've got bits of someone's brain in your hair, so go wash."

He pushed me into the bathroom and stood there while I smiled at him.

"Going to help me get undressed?"

"Ariadne – you're half drunk and tired." He closed the door. I sighed. There was something in me that repelled normal, nice men. I turned the water on hot and fast, and poured the new expensive shampoo I'd got for Christmas liberally through my long hair. Just like when I had a rinse through it, swirls of color flooded to the shower floor, but this time it was red with blood. It took three lathers, but I finally felt clean.

I felt almost human when I emerged, and tied a fluffy bathrobe around me. I was actually looking forward to a drink and Nitish's cooking, and talking about his hobbies, which I seemed to recall were fly-fishing in New Zealand and obscure jazz-fusion.

But it was Ruaridh waiting when I opened the door. Dressed in a grey suit with a yellow tie, and a dark blue shirt. It worked.

"How the fuck did you get here?"

"Taxi from the airport. Coben gave me your address."

"I mean – how did you get out of Leighton Hall?"

He shrugged. He sat down and took off his glasses and neatly folded them on the table. "They let me go."

"Just like that?" I was aware he was staring at me and that my bathrobe was on the short side. I needed to get dressed.

"Well, obviously. I'm not the uber spy and secret agent you are – how would I have fought my way out without even a gun?"

"Where's Nitish?" I couldn't even smell stir-fry.

"Nitish had to leave, suddenly."

"He was going to cook."
"I ordered Chinese."

"I'm going to get dressed."

When I returned, the food had arrived, and Ruairidh had produced a bottle of wine and poured it and even found candles which I had no idea I had – must have been a Kris Kringle at last year's office party.

"Well, thank god you had some South Australian Shiraz – even if it is screw top. There was a distinct oversupply of Merlot, my dear, in your rather indifferent wine collection."

"Yeah? I drink out. And for your information, Mr English - "

"Scottish, my dear Miss Stephanoplous – we are very proud of our cultural heritage."

"Yeah – whatever. Screw tops are quick and easy."

"I won't even bother with the obvious sexual references."

I blushed. He was sizing my body up, that I could tell. Not that I had a problem with that – I was hard and toned. I wondered – not for the first time since we'd met – if he knew exactly how old I was. I mean, I knew his age, and I could do the math. Somehow, while it was all right for Coben to be 15 years older than me, the other way around seemed a little odd.

Although a man who perpetually wears a suit, is vastly over educated and has what I am sure is a burgeoning – and I strongly suspect expensive – alcohol problem hardly qualified as cradle snatching.

We attacked the food, and I surprised Mac by how much I ate. Which is saying something, as he had a hearty appetite himself. Coming out of a change, I was ravenous and not making excuses. It wasn't as if he was some bloke I was trying to impress with my ladylike ways after all.

We had almost finished the wine when Mac took out a piece of crumpled paper from his jacket. He spread it out on the table.

"Do you recognise this drawing?" he asked.

"It's a chimera, wasn't it said to be made out of three different creatures: lion, goat and serpent?"

Mac pressed his fingers to his forehead. His eyes were deep dark brown. It was in fact a little unnerving gazing into them, as it reminded me of what I wasn't looking at right now in my apartment. Coben. With his blue eyes, fair skin, his flame red hair. I'd seen holographs of Coben's daughter that he carried with him in his wallet. She had his coloring. Now, with
my arm resting causally near Mac's neck as we lounged on the red sofa, I could see he was
tall like me. Damn him. But so much younger.

While Coben and I weren't the same age, it felt right he was older. And we had 15 years
of history together. We could laugh at memories of the 1980s together. How old was Mac
when I first started going to the Marquise Club when I was in London? The Tote in
Collingwood? When I made my first kill? Apart from dissecting rats and pinning butterfly
wings to a board, I doubted Mac had ever been bloodied. I stopped myself. Why was I
thinking sexually about Mac at all? We were here to work together, to find out what was
causing this mutation.

Disarmingly, Mac rested his head on my shoulder. "God, I'm so tired," he said. "It was
actually hell talking my way out of Leighton Hall."

His head felt warm, comforting to know he was seeking some connection with me after
what he'd seen me do. I really should tell him that the reason he was acting this way was
because of the animal inside me, the hormones peaking and the pheromones luring him to
seek out my body. But I didn't want to. Hell, he was an anthropologist. He could figure out
the animal kingdom. Let me have this sweet quiet moment. I was tired as well. Tired of
longing and needing, of the waiting and logging in every half hour to my Facebook, Twitter
and email accounts to see if Coben had left a coded personal for me.

So I let Ruraidh lean against me and I did not give in to the temptation to run my fingers
through his hair. We'd both had a fair bit to drink. Then he causally stroked my leg.

"So, Bellerophon, ring any bells."

I tried not to spill my wine. "Should it?"

He looked up at me. "There are many interpretations of the symbolism of the chimera.
One interesting interpretation pits Bellerophon, the father of the line of Lycian princes,
against a thoroughly non-Greek oriental style monster."

"Bellerophon?" I bit my lip. I remembered the first time I had heard that name.

"My dear – you have Greco blood – you must have heard of Bellerophon? Freudians
claim the swoop of Bellerophon upon the chimera denotes sexual conquest."

"I thought this was about monsters?"

He nodded. "But of course. In the language of mythology, monsters were beings of
unnatural proportion or parts possessing immense strength and ferocity employed for the
injury and annoyance of man, particularly as executioners or infernal judges. "

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"I think that real monsters are what we are capable of, surely? Maybe the virus – if that's what it really is – brings what's latent to the surface? Are we then justified in killing the monster made flesh?"

"*Il ne peut être commis d' homicide ni sur un monster ni sur un mort,*" said Ruraidh. 

"According to the Traité du droit criminal français, published in 1826, there can be no homicide committed against a monster or a dead man."

"Really?"

"There is no crime in killing a beast. Only a man."

"That so." His hand felt so good on my skin. I desperately wanted him to continue up to my thighs, and work his fingers between my legs. 

"My first degree was in law."

I sighed. Of course it was.

"So where does that leave us?" I asked. I gently parted my legs and his hand inched up. I stifled a groan of pleasure. This wasn’t good. We were working together – I wasn’t supposed to sleep with him – he would go back to Scotland or wherever at the end of this – didn’t Coben say he had a girlfriend or wife? Yes – he was married…..

"We need to go find out exactly what the Australian connection with Bellerophon is," he said. "Someone is hiding something secret. I suspect the reason the virus escaped the labs had nothing to do with Moreau."

He reached for me again, running his fingers through my hair.

"I saw your files," I said. 

His tongue was now flickering at my ear. "Yes?" His voice was heavy. 

"Says you're married." 

"She's overseas," he started to kiss my neck. 

"And I'm convenient?"

"You are a very interesting, strong, attractive woman and I don't subscribe to the idea that we have ownership over other people's bodies. My dear – we don't even have the rights to our own, if you'd like me to go into the complicated legal reasons behind that one…"

"Maybe not." His hand was trawling up my legs. 

"So, yes, I'm married. She's my absolute passion, but –"

"When the cat's away, the mouse will play?"
“You know H.G.Wells called his lover Panther? It was his nickname for Rebecca West.”

"And your wife - she’s happy with that arrangement – you sleeping with others?"

"She’s young and gorgeous and smart and I expect it, while I am overseas, so I have told her I'll do the same."

Suddenly, I felt old. I was about to push him off me, but then his tongue worked its magic, and I reasoned – with the little rational thought I had left as he began bringing me to my first orgasm – that he was perfect. Just my type. Unavailable, complicated, handsome and above all - smart. Like a much younger version of the man I loved but who was actually in bed with his wife. Well, this man-child was married, too, but in bed with me. Revenge sex was the best, after all. Spite gave it an edge. If I couldn’t have the man I wanted, then I could at least have the sex I needed.

Besides, all my appetites were heightened after a change. I needed meat – yes and I needed men.

I buried my nose in Ruaridh’s chest and sank into his smell. He held me tight, rubbing my back the way I liked it – how did he know? - and we clung to each other before greedily kissing. I pushed all the pain from my mind.

This was somehow different. Gentle, sweet, then furious. Did Mac know what I was? Two days after the moon's peak, I was back to normal and yet, could he sense the lingering animal in me? We were both alone, both needed comfort. Who were we harming, even if we were meant to be working together?

"I'm human on the inside," I whispered, as he eased his body into mine.

"That I know," he groaned in pleasure. We fell asleep in each other's arms. He snored.

The dream jolted me awake.

I lay there, wondering for second where I was. I could hardly hear Ruraidh breathe.

_It was a bright sunny day when we watched the dandelions circle the air outside the drawing room window. I couldn't get Esme to concentrate on her Latin. She was preoccupied with her aunt's meddling. Esme was on borrowed time. Soon, she would be seventeen and knew her aunt Celia would procure her a suitable husband._

_She didn't want to leave this place where her mother was buried. She didn't want to leave this place where the rooms hissed and creaked secret mysteries, and where below, carved into the rocky cliff face that hugged the side of the imposing manor, a laboratory filled with her uncle’s work._
I had followed her there once or twice, careful not to be seen. Even through the thick stonewalls the shrill sounds of pain could be heard into the night.

Edward Prendick allowed only his favorite, Esme, down there for he had long discovered she was a curious and preternaturally gifted child. The son perhaps he could have had if circumstances were different. He appeared to ignore her flowering into womanhood, advising her to dress in ever more shapeless garments so she would remain forever the boy – and son - he imagined her to be. Esme was happy to oblige, much to her father's disgust.

But it was Edward's house, and as he sometimes said (jokingly he claimed but I wonder) "my word is law", so Charles went quietly about his business. It was a difficult arrangement to live with, but I had no choice either, because of my circumstances. It was my job to tend to Edward when he had his "turns", the gasping nightmares of what he called "beast folk". When questioned the following morning, always Edward claimed to have no memory of the terror or the bizarre things he said.

I watched Esme glance at the grandfather clock, and check again that the drawing room was locked behind her. She didn't know I could see her – in fact, servants knew every part of the house that could be observed from another (although no-one dared go near the basement, with the wretched smell that wafted like putrid flesh and blood through the walls). Privacy was only for the poor, ironically, for although we had no space we were invisible.

I saw Esme find the large key in the hiding place behind the clock. It looked heavy in her delicate hand. The roar grew louder, more persistent. With a determined countenance, she went to her chores. Later, when I helped her dress for dinner, I noticed blood on her sleeve, and a slight rip in the fabric. There was a mark on her arm, not a gash or claw mark, as I first suspected, but more like she had been tightly gripped and her arm cut with a sharp instrument. She refused to discuss the matter and the following day I was dismissed from service.

I lay there, wondering for a second where I was. I could hardly hear Ruraidh breathe. It has been a long time since I had heard that name. Esme. The place – Romney Marsh. It was coming back, pieces of the jigsaw. I eased myself out of bed and went to the bathroom. I didn't look any different. Perhaps there were some slight lines under my eyes. Maybe I was paler than usual. I ran my hand over my face. Smooth.

"You okay?" Ruraidh stood at the door, rubbing his hands through his long dark hair. For the first time, I noticed a thick yellow gold wedding band on his finger.
"Bad dream."

"You have that stuff in your head all the time?"

"Sure, I collect quotes. That's why I studied law first; I wanted to know the facts. I never wanted to be a lawyer."

I wanted to ask him what he knew about the Lady Vain. *Prendick* – and the dream. It seemed like he knew so much, he could tell me. Then I stopped myself. If he knew – then he could also harm me. People mistook sex for real intimacy all the time. Here we were, standing naked in front of each other, but what did we really know about each other except how we tasted, and felt as our bodies moved together? I didn't know this man – and I sure as hell wasn't going to let him know me. Fucking was one thing – knowing was another.

I walked up to him and pressed my body into him, feeling him stir again immediately. Ah – the true appeal of the young man. What he lost on life experience and complexity and vulnerability, all very appealing, he made up for in sexual recovery and stamina.

"Let's fuck again," I purred, grabbing his cock.
It is the female who inevitably gets punished in primate society for her failure to attend exclusively to the sexual needs of her consort.

Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox, “The Imperial Animal”

Melbourne remains obsessed with rooftop bars and little clubs that used to be working sweatshops, accessible only through shit-filled cobblestone laneways and the back entrances of cheap and rancid Chinese cafes.

We left it until the evening settled black and hot over the city. Ekaterina had told me about a theatre nurse who did a little moonlighting. We’d heard that she knew someone who could lead us to the backyard surgeon who operated on the girls who managed to escape the Furgrounds.

“What have you found out about Dr Zoran?” Ruaridh asked. “Also known as ‘The Master’?”

“He’s taken the tails off a few Level 10s working the cesspits of Dirty Paws, so the story goes,” I said. Ruaridh had been researching the connections. They came uncomfortably close to my secret life. I might be having sex with him; it didn’t mean I trusted him. Even Coben didn’t know of my connection to The Master.

“My contacts tell me he once worked as a medic in Bosnia,” Ruaridh said.

“Ekaterina said he’s notorious in Europe. Apparently Dr Zoran has had a lot of practice with unnecessary amputations on the enemy. Came to Melbourne to escape the long arm of the war crimes tribunal. Addicted to heroin to wipe out the memory of everyone he killed. Now he operates on NQRs to make their faces look human. They say he has a steady hand after he shoots up."

I shuddered. Being trapped in one form or the other. Looking in the mirror and knowing your face has been permanently set in one species.

“And they get jobs as office assistants afterwards?” Ruaridh asked.

“Only one lived. She found work in Coober Pedy, mud wrestling cybs in underground clubs to entertain the miners.”

“Hardly seems a fair trade.”
“I dare say it’s better than being eaten piece by piece by men at Dirty Paws after they tire of stroking your fur.”

The cool change we’d expected never came. I was wearing a low cut silver top and shorts. I am six foot tall in bare feet, so with heels I match Ruaridh in height. His concession to the heat was a lemon yellow polo shirt, pressed pants, brogues. Mad dogs and English men.

The air refused to budge. A layer of rancid bin odor clung to the atmosphere like sticky fly paper. I grabbed an oxygen mask from one of the kiosks, and after I’d been hand scanned and cleared as H, did a retina scan for credit and uploaded some clean air.

“Want a sniff?” I passed the mask to Ruaridh, who breathed in gratefully.

“This is worse than a ‘pea souper’.”

“What do you expect from a convict outpost? You made us in your image.”

“What happened to the Great Aussie outdoors?”

“Global warming.”

I grabbed the mask off him before the timer ran out, inhaled again and then felt the surge. In the flashing neon, my tanned skin glowed with the patina of burnished bronze. I tingled as if dancing ants had exploded in my bloodstream.

This end of town there weren’t many lanes that hadn’t been cleaned up. Commerce and hipsters meant the maze that snaked around the city grid was filled with bespoke bike part stores, pop-up barista bars and galleries. The great drawcard for international and suburban tourists was an unmarked door that led past boxes of imported cooking oil to an upmarket and secret bar. They were so happy once they’d discovered it, and gratefully paid out $65 for toxic cocktails swirled with gold leaf.

But we weren’t aiming for city central. We needed the edge, around the universities. Places where the old warehouses still remained, some trading as they had more than a century ago. Selling old medical tools and early cybernetics and wax molds and wigs. Chemotherapy no longer made your hair fall out. Cloning meant you could grow a new limb, if you were human. But what if you weren’t quite? But wanted to be? You needed the old props.

Just as well things never get tossed out. Who can be bothered? Crates of it remained. Shops that were abandoned once e-commerce brought retail to its knees secretly opened up to the right clientele. Warehouses such as the Artificial Limb and Appliance Institute now
did a brisk trade among the altered. By default, they’d become meeting places as people tested out their new prosthetics.

“It’s on the top floor. A little perverse as it was once the actual Artificial Limb and Appliance Institute.”

“I suppose you had to be keen.”

Ekaterina’s contact dealt with Medazalin. A mind altering substance that was outlawed, but very useful in backyard amputations. She procured the drug from the plastic surgery clinics where she assisted with lunchtime liposuction. It wiped short term memory and therefore the pain of surgery without anaesthetic. Ruaridh looked up at the high brick walls, the massive Victorian buildings towering down on us. Here, under their permanent shadow, all was dank. Something moved.

“Is that a - rat?” squealed Ruaridh.

He flinched, moving closer to me. Not that I minded. There was something appealingly large and masculine about him. All that booze and bad English food. It made a change from the metrosexuals I usually dealt with. Small, hard bodied men with elaborate tattoos. I have a theory about men covered in tats. It takes a long time to get that much ink. It’s a signpost of the ultimate narcissist.

“Usually they avoid you, unless they’re really hungry,” I said, kicking one airborne. I wasn’t in the mood to make new friends. Or snack.

“They bring plague,” he said.

“Everyone blames the animals. Never human waste and carelessness.”

He followed as I walked carefully over a decaying plank of wood covering a sewerage outlet. It was a drawbridge of sorts over the moat we needed to cross in this back lane.

I ordered us two Long Island Teas. They were the specials de jour and I was so preoccupied with the double amputee parading around with carbon boots I just pointed at the board. The waitress brought them over and set them down on the old Singer Sewing Machine converted into a table. Celery stalks bobbed in the fluorescent liquid. She purred as I placed a tip in her paw.

“Well, at least I don’t have to worry about dinner,” I said, biting the green stalk in half.

“I would have preferred a lychee martini,” said Ruaridh.

“And I had you pegged as being happy with any old plonk.”
He tossed the celery on the buckled wooden surface. I watched the room. It was the usual crowd of amputees and businessmen. But they all seemed human. I saw Ruaridh looking intently at a woman sitting in a wheelchair, newly amputated stumps poking out from a lavish short velvet skirt; a stark contrast between the white gauze bandages and the lush red fabric shimmering in its heavy seductive folds.

“This is just window dressing,” I said, keeping my voice low. “If you want the real thing, amputee sex with someone with a NQH classification, you have to go to the inner suburbs. The old Greek clubs and Kafeneons in High Street, Northcote.”

“It must – hurt,” he said. “Quadding up.”

“And then there’s phantom tail pain.”

“But why do they do it?”

“You’re the anthropologist. I thought you got off on human nature?”

“There’s the theory and then there’s –“

“For every disability, a fetish.”

“It’s about power. It’s always about power.”

“Cut your limbs off and you are just a torso, right? Everything is concentrated on your multiple orifices. And you can’t move without assistance. Men pay a good price for renting a complete amputee. These women don’t even want to get fitted with prosthetics. They want to be literally kept women.”

“Like footbinding carried to its most obscene level.”

I shrugged. “Welcome to the human race. Code name – obscene. We mutilate, we torture, we literally fuck everyone over. You won’t find this –” I swept my hand around the room, indicating well-dressed men stroking the stumps of women propped in chairs rigged with harnesses to stop them falling over. “ – in the animal world.”

“Although we do like to keep animals just as helpless,” said Ruaridh. “Everywhere from reservations to zoos, to those living as indulged pets in homes. They are no more free than these women.”

Women whose faces had not yet healed, blood seeping through bandages. They’d paid the price for that illusive youth – the injection of foetal pig’s blood had given them snouts, which they had surgically removed.

Others sat on the old dentist stools, it seemed random medical paraphernalia was the order of the day stylistically, and sipped drinks through straws. Their bodies looked animal,
despite the shaved hair and the tattoos. Others, human looking men, were in wheelchairs, and attached to drips. Buxom “nurses” attended to them.

“You’re not drinking,” I observed.

“I feel a little – ill, actually.”

“Oh, come on – you did a doctorate in human behavior, right? You know that imagination knows no bounds, and prostitution always flourishes to cater for these secret desires.”

“This is why hybrids are so – disturbing,” Ruaridh said. “Not one thing, or another. Indeed, Lacan describes the face as the most elusive of objects,” Ruaridh said.

I indicated to a woman, part panther, who hobbled over on crutches. She had a voice box near a surgical flap at her throat. She purred as she slipped in next to us, and Ruaridh shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

“I can do double, no problems,” she said. “I have a room, upstairs. If you want to drink my blood, it’s extra.”

I pushed some money under the glass towards her. She carefully extracted it with her one human hand, and placed it in the leather holster that held her enhanced breasts firm.

“No sex, just information. We are looking for Wolf.”

“A lot of wolves around here honey. I can get you a pack if that’s your thing. Does he like to watch, or join in?” She indicated to Ruaridh.

Ruaridh went red. She laughed/purred.

“I only want the one wolf – the pack leader,” I said.

“I hear things.”

“I can pay for your time.”

“Things I have heard, maybe. A person. Yes.”

“This person – are they human?”

The panther woman shrugged. “Who knows? We live in the shadows. No scanners where we are. But you have to leave the city – yes. I have heard that Wolf roams the pens. He sets traps.”

Now Ruaridh spoke. “Pens? But – animal farming is illegal.”

“The Pens – the pens – for the others,” she said. “Not the meat pens, no. Down on the farm, yes.”
“Artificial meat pens?” I asked. “Where?”

Panther woman purred and blinked her yellow eyes, set in the deep darkness of her face. I pulled out more money from my wallet and pushed it across.

“Old Macdonald had a farm,” she said, telling me the address. “You will find Mr Wolf there.”
The view that man is essentially vegetarian by nature is without foundation. Doubtless there are some who cannot tolerate meat, and to whom a modified vegetarian diet is well suited, but these cases are exceptional, and it may be added, abnormal.

Swinburne Technical College, Dainty Dishes for Invalids.

“Old MacDonald had a farm, e ei e ei o ... and on that farm there was some Nu-Meat – e ei e ei o ...”

I hummed to myself as we edged through the security wire. Ruaridh quietly joined in for the chorus. Hamish turned to glare at us. He put his finger to his lips. We’ve been moving in silence, quickly across the darkened stretch of land on the back of the Mornington Peninsula. The only sounds the scurrying wildlife - the odd kangaroo hopping past in the eerie distortion of my night vision. Overhead the stars yawned majestically, a thick carpet pushing down on us, as if to emphasize our insignificance in the scheme of things.

The only intrusion was the dark shape ahead, the hulking Nu-Meat bunker that wasn’t on any map but was spotted on the satellite images.

Nu-Meat. Nu-Farm. Nu-Taste. Leading vegans – those socially palatable ones, like models and actresses and sports stars who looked like regular people – not the placard waving, I want to marry my dog plastic shoe vegans, had endorsed Nu-Meat. Grown on a rack. Nurtured by nutrients. 100 per cent animal free. That was the claim. Mankind is largely Carnivorous. That was the problem. The taste for flesh was what kept the killing going. It’s what kept the pens full. Even vegans can’t really let go, nibbling on facon and tofurkey, the blow up sex doll of the palate.

Hamish used to raid battery farms. He was in his early twenties, young, fit and vegan. Of course, Ruaridh sniggered as soon as he saw him, I think the words he used were “appetizer?” But, this time, I wasn’t actually interested in taking the guy into my bed. For the last three years I’d been able to saddle up to a barbecue and tuck into a Nu-Steak. I wanted to know if panther-woman had been telling the truth.

“There’s things going on – yes. You don’t know. Don’t want to know –“
She’d pulled out her phone. Showed me a photo. I tried to push the photo from my mind. I’d never felt better since turning to Nu-Meat and I didn’t want to know.

Maybe we were meant to eat meat, after all. I’d been having iron infusions for the heart palpitations. Men could handle it, but I was becoming anaemic. It was a curse all right – the curse of the carnivore. I held off eating prey for as long as possible, until my body turned on me. Until I got sick and weak and every plump toddler looked like a tasty snack.

No matter how I tried to fight it, no matter how much I didn’t want to eat my kin, there was a cannibal deep within me sharpening its teeth. I come from a small town that’s frequented by drought, floods and plagues of rabbits, mice and anything that moves in bulk and devours hard work. My cousins say vegetarian food is a waste of calories. My grandmother shot rabbit and entered her jellied fowl into the local Country Women’s Association show. She always got a gold medal.

But that’s only half the story - half the story of me. Anyone looking at me would see the other half, the half that tells the narrative before I have the chance. I don’t look like country Victoria. I look like village Greece. My mother left Nardungerup and met someone in Melbourne. He was from a village called Dolos high in the mountains of northern Greece. So small it wasn’t on a map, and where every winter the men would come back with the boars they shot and carve them up in the village square, the blood running in rivers down the cobblestones. My father’s cousin kept the trotters as trophies.

My parents took me to Dolos when I was nine. It was before I changed. It was one of the few times my mother left the laboratory for a family holiday. She felt it was the last time that I could still pass – for many things. I dressed as a boy. I went on a hunt. Wild boar blood staining the leaves, its incisors curled in a grimace. Dogs barking, the cow bell, men laughing, and then the knives. The women – the women of my family’s village – they’d have to slice and cut and carve and scoop out the steaming entrails. My uncle told me, between puffs of a cigarette, “Big boars, good times – you got to give it a shot if you’re a real man.”

My father Panos said, “it’s food and it’s culture”. You hunt the animal for sport. You kill for a thrill. You eat for food. Maybe jumping in a van or 4WD with a pistol and a hunt club hoodie is a better thing to do than buying flesh covered in plastic from a polystyrene tray at the supermarket. But I still couldn’t eat it. I spent two months there, refusing ourounopoelo, kontosouvi, hirino brizoles, even keftedes.

“You insult your yaya!” my father said. I stared at the plate of pork. They were so proud of themselves, these men-boy killers who shared my blood and history.
But, I knew something they didn’t. Maybe they should have never taken me. I looked like a boy, but I wasn’t. The old women in the village told them not to – they knew. It made Stavros spit on the ground. “Here – a smoke?” he sneered, thrusting a packet in my face. All the men laughed. A joke. They put me in the back of the car. Don’t play with the dogs, I was warned. They were hunters; they’d tasted the blood of the boar. Don’t go close. I looked at the dogs snarling and they looked at me and backed down. We agreed to stay away from each other.

“Come back with dinner,” my mother said. She was more Greek than my father. Soaked up the culture as if to say to Nardungerup, see, I am better than you lot; I have traveled further than savory tripe, cutlets a la Princess, and kidney soup. Perhaps pretending to be Greek enabled her to forget she was also pretending to be really human.

The old women, all dressed in black, clicked their tongues, laughed and spoke rapidly in Greek, a wall of sound to me. My dad had assimilated to Northcote, and never taught me his language. Still, I had mother tongue. It was Nardungerup; the All in One Recipe Book, Flora Bell’s Our Cookery, and Dainty Dishes. Yet in Dolos, I was the pretend boy in a van with men with guns and dogs with the taste of blood and we were going to kill the wild boar because that’s what men do and the women cook it. If you don’t eat meat you die. Kill or be killed.

We were in Dolos at Easter, which is a special occasion in the religious and cultural festival of my father’s country. Nardungerup has its rice rings and Anzac Day. Dolos has Orthodox Easter and Kokoresti.

Take two lamb’s hearts, two lamb’s spleens, one lamb lung, the intestines of two lambs, and three sets of lamb’s testicles. Also, one membrane of caul fat. Clean your intestines well, cut your organ meat to about 1 inch pieces, wrap in the caul fat, and then, finally, the intestines. Caul fat is the thin membrane that covers the intestines. This translucent lace melts when cooked, providing moisture and flavor. Only one membrane per pig – so you need a lot of pigs for a lot of dishes.

I watched the women wrap intestines around and around the organ meat, as if they were lacing ballet slippers.

“It’s disgusting!” I yelled at my mother. Her hands were smelly and slippery from threading the thick white strings. “I want normal food.”
“This is normal food, you ungrateful girl!” She wanted me to change the water. The offal smelt because the animals use it to process their waste. It stinks of piss and shit. I told her it was dirty. She said I was stupid. She said even Aussies ate offal.

“Your Grandma Sally made offal; in the depression when the only thing with any energy in Nardungerup were the rabbits, and every last one that could be shot and eaten was. In Nardungerup the women weren’t afraid to raid the animal’s inner sanctum for nutritious meals. What do you think they did during the war?”

During the war, German planes bombed Dolos. My father told me he and his brother ran to the monastery where they drank the rancid olive oil from the lights. They climbed to the top of the denuded fig tree and slept in the empty rooms, all the men gone to battle. I was told it wasn’t any better in the cities. Starvation everywhere. In Thessaloniki, stray dogs roamed the streets for food. Maybe they were eaten too.

In Nardungerup, a tough time in wartime meant meat rationing. All that meant was eggs, butter and the better cuts of meat were hard to come by. The real story is not of European deprivation, but of fish, sausages, chicken and rabbits, not to mention brains, tripe, livers and kidneys. You might not be able to wear lipstick, but you won’t go without meat. Land Army girls helped on my grandfather’s farm for the duration, raising the animals for the nation’s stomachs. Someone needed to see that the second fighting line was fed.

“Can you hear that?” whispered Ruaridh. I pulled up with a start.

“What?”

“The hum.”

I’d been lost in thought. Carefully following Hamish as we worked through the Nu-Farm perimeter. The noise was sharp, a high voltage drone. There were no power lines. So, it was underground. Nothing is so secret as that which is buried.

“Whatever’s going on hasn’t been photographed. It hadn’t made it onto YouTube. Only the unlisted bunkers had been picked up,” said Hamish.

Old MacDonald had a farm? Not like this. Not in his wildest dreams.

“Where are they generating the power?” I asked.

“Who knows what they could have built.”

“Ah yes, time for some conspiracy theories,” said Ruaridh.

“You saw the photo.”

“It could have been faked,” he said. “She wasn’t even human.”
“Speciest,” said Hamish.

“Listen, it’s better than killing animals,” said Ruaridh.

I understood. If you weren’t 100 per cent – be it animal or human - then you were expendable. I felt a chill down my back, as if someone was walking on my grave.

“It’s still not right,” I said.

“Yeah – well no-one cared when it was animals being slaughtered, did they?” said Ruaridh.

“Amazing how humans always find something less than human to sacrifice, isn’t it?” I replied. There are things scientists are doing that I know about and have to defend. The pharms where I’d have to put a bullet through activists like Hamish. Places where I knew pigs were grown with human brain tissue, transgenic organs that could save the lives of countless people. Organ donor waiting lists were enormous. Fit young people don’t die well, or fast enough. Seatbelts haven’t helped the spare parts factories. Call me insensitive, but I’d seen people die yellow and drained, waiting for a liver. Good people, kind people. And in the face of suffering, famine and disease of our own species, did it matter if transgenic animals were grown so we could harvest their organs for medical reasons? This was the line we were spun. This is the lie that leads to the suffering I can feel creeping along the night air, waiting for me to choke on its toxic reality.

My mother had fed me raw meat while her friends shoveled pureed apple into their baby’s mouths. I was allowed to rip apart the family rabbit and suck it dry when I was a toddler. When dad did the classic whole pig on a spit he knew to stuff another live one inside, where it would slowly boil to death, warm and red, waiting for mum to slash the sow’s belly and scoop it out. We’d gnaw on the tender bones, snapping them so the gravy marrow oozed warm and honey textured down our greedy throats.

By the time I hit university, I discovered a core of lentil lovers, earnest and well meaning. To fit in, I ate facon and felt like a fraud. I wasn’t refusing to eat meat because I had read Peter Singer. I simply realized eating meat made me less than human. Every hamburger I consumed was followed by a thick spurt of hairy growth on my legs, under my arms, between my thighs. If I ate roast lamb, my teeth would grow long and sharp and cut into my lip. What I put into my body came out. It was easier – grooming wise – to snack on tofu and have clear smooth skin. Of course, I’d pass out every month from blood and iron loss, but it was a small price to pay for appearances.
By the time I was with Xenos, I was privy to government reports that would have made even the throng behind Eat Lamb for Australia Day rush to facon. The casual cruelty and systematic abuse against animals for consumption was justified on a government level as a numbers game. Sentient beings were simply listed as statistics and collateral damage. I saw photos - the huge pits outside factory farms where carcasses and worse would be consigned in the dead of night. I upped my iron injections and gave up the furtive snacks on beef jerky.

And then Nu-Meat arrived. The GoodReap Co. Inc, a global consortium based in the US, promised endless quality protein without actual animals being harmed. Its Biotech division had even engineered Nu-Tastes so that every slab of manufactured protein had a distinctive aroma and taste. Nu-Chick, Nu-Steak and Nu-Salmon were the most popular. The marketing was slick, the Nu-Meat phenomenon so successful that there was even niche offshoots such as Nu-Offal (gleefully dubbed “Not-So-Offal” by the food media) and the child friendly Nu-Vegie-Chick, which combined at a DNA level animal and vegetable. A mild green, and slightly bland and salty taste, NVC as it was commonly known, had been embraced by both childcare centres and nursing homes.

There had been controversy as soon as the Federal Government granted GoodReap Co, Inc. vast land holdings on the Mornington Peninsula. There was speculation by bloggers that the location was chosen not only for its proximity to Melbourne, but because it was remote enough to get away with murder.

Panther woman’s photo was one that had been circulating among the activist movement. It had been taken by an undercover activist from Moreau, and revealed several human body parts on the Nu-Meat conveyer belt. The whistleblower was found dead two days later, apparently of a massive stroke. The government said that the photos had been digitally altered as part of an extortion campaign. A fresh Nu-Meat marketing campaign, introducing Tasty Nu-Nuggets (just like chicken!) was launched on the hot new reality TV show.

Hamish reached into his jacket and pulled out a gun.

“What the hell!” I hissed. He’d made me disarm before we even got in the 4WD. I didn’t like to go anywhere without protection, and felt like aiming a well-targeted kick to his jugular. He’d never breathe again.

“They let the failed experiments run free, I’ve seen it on the radar. They run in packs,” he said. “We have to protect ourselves.”
“From processed artificial meat?”

“What if it is true?” asked Ruaridh, alarmed. “What if they really are manufacturing clones?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. They’d use clones in medical work, not for food.”

“Well, I don’t like it. Something is going on.”

“And you wouldn’t let me have my weapon?”

“I know what we are dealing with,” said Hamish.

“And I don’t?” I paused for a second, realizing I was going to blow my cover. “I work as an anti-hybrid slavery activist,” I said.

“Sure, you know all about the fur-sex trade, pig-surrogates and bio-slaves. Think you’ve seen it all, right?”

“I don’t like your tone.”

“I don’t like the fact you act like you want to be the only one with balls.”

We eyed each other off.

“He has a point,” said Ruaridh. “Now girls and boys, why don’t we try to play nice?”

The trouble was, usually I was the only one with balls. We would have stood there arguing for some time, driven by the frisson as much as the desire to be top dog, when I heard it.

The sound carried across the darkness, and seemed to echo around the caverns formed by the dark shapes that were the covered manufacturing pens.

Crying.

“What’s that?” said Ruaridh.

I put my finger to my lips

Hamish, now moving fast in front of me, was taking a reading at the inner wire fence before cutting a hole in it. We’d calculated the security sweeps and monitored the southern boundary as the safest entry point. It was also the closest to Shed D, which had been the subject of “unusual activity” according to Moreau’s surveillance reports. Eventually, whatever they were doing down below had to come up, didn’t it? Or at least the workers did.

“We have 40 minutes, once we are inside,” said Hamish.

I nodded, adjusting my watch. We were near the door, a great, heavy metal sliding door.
“Explosives?” I said. I pointed to my backpack.

But Hamish has been here before. He stops us and points to some concrete steps, tucked away from the main path.

“We go down here instead.”

We entered a corridor, white and empty. We’d done heat scans and worked out there was no movement in the corridors. It was concentrated in unmoving blocks in the centre, indicating stalls with animals penned. Hamish said the sheds – bunkers – silos – I was now out of terms for these holdings (children needed to be given new songs to sing about farms) – went down countless levels.

Ruaridh pointed to the thick tubing that ran across the ceiling.

“The hum – power conduits,” I said.

Hamish nodded. “They need them for the heating and televisions."

“They give animals televisions?” said Ruaridh.

“Keeps them docile and stimulated enough for the neural pathways don’t totally atrophy. These babies are used for medical as well as meat production.”

I looked surprised. There were rows of biohazard suits hooked on the wall and masks. I wondered if we should put them on. Hamish said no.

“We’re not going to be interacting, just getting footage.” He held up his mini-cam. This was the lie we’d sold him. We were activists getting material for a YouTube report.

Hamish opened the door and we went inside. It took me nearly a minute to adjust to the brilliant light. Ruaridh immediately started perspiring from the overhead heating banks. The soft continuous drone of the televisions – all tuned to the same station – meant we had to yell to be heard.

The animals had no fur; that was the first thing, even taking in the whole picture. And they were totally quiet. There was an overwhelming pink-white look, like acres of flesh. Like the animals had already been boiled and blanched. And they were smaller than I expected, much smaller than cows, and so there were so many more packed in and they were all curled up and still, just tails moving as if by reflex.

“What are they?” I yelled.

“You have to come close,” said Hamish. He grabbed my arm, like an excited child and rushed over to one of the pens.
I look over the railings and see the feeding tubes, and the television screen and the tail. And it is not until my brain has a chance to catch up with my eyes that I realize. I am looking at a person. This is Nu-Meat.

“It's not – real?” I say. I say this loudly and as I yell it out, it sounds absurd. What's not real? We are in a huge bunker with thousands upon thousands of humans with tails curled up watching television. And as I look closely, each one has the large branding mark of The GoodReap Corp Inc. on its flank.

“It's real,” shouts Hamish, his camera focusing on the nearest creature.

“But they’re not – human?” asked Ruaridh. His hands are clenched on the rails, knuckles white. I think he might pass out.

One turns as I yell, and the face is mutated. A snout, yes, like that pig I was forced to touch in the village, but with human eyes ....

“They are almost human,” Hamish said. “Made for the Nu-Meat process.”

“Why should we be surprised?” said Ruaridh. “We've all seen how Australian cattle are subjected to inhumane treatment in Indonesian abattoirs.”

“But people protested against that,” I said.

“Sure it prompted calls for an immediate ban on live exports to Indonesia, but society’s response to the treatment of animals in general is complex. Did it stop them eating meat? No. Did it lure them to Nu-Meat? Hell, yes.”

“You're saying that was all about getting us to buy Nu-Meat?”

“Well my dear, the GoodReap shareholders knew they were onto a good thing when ‘ethically grown Nu-Meat’ hit the stores. No more Indonesian abattoir scenes on television bringing down the share price.

Who could forget the poignant final slaughterhouse scene where the last animal waited in terror as it watched its mates tortured and butchered in front of it? Keep the problem underground, literally, and add the ultimate element of deniability.”

Hamish nodded. “Yeah, he’s right. Make something so grotesque no-one would believe it. Voila – Nu-Meat. “

The television screens flicker below. And then the program changes. Wolf’s face appears everywhere.

“Welcome, visitors, to the abomination!” said Wolf. “Forgive me for not appearing in the fur, so to speak, but I have a slight intolerance to unexpected guests and the prospect of
being killed.”

I scanned the building. He could have cameras anywhere. We’d been careful not to alert anyone, but it only takes one slip of the tongue. Loose lips sink ships.

“I’m here to find Kally!”

“She’s safe with me.”

“I’m her mother.”

“You’re with Xenos,” said Wolf. “I can hardly be expected to trust you.”

Hamish turned his gun on me. “You’re with Xenos? They support this sort of stuff!”

“I’m here for my daughter. She’s been taken by Wolf.”

“Only before you try to kill us all.” Wolf’s image shimmered on the thousands of television screens.

“You have a daughter? This is all about your daughter?” said Ruaridh.

I was running out of time. And Hamish was in my way. So was Ruaridh. Pushing back on the railing, I kicked the gun out of Hamish’s hand. Then I pushed Ruaridh into Hamish. As I expected, the two started punching each other. I felled Ruraidh with a kick to the head. The look on Hamish’s face when he saw my hand change into a claw was of abject horror. In the split second that he reached for his knife, wedged into his wide leather belt, I kicked his hand away with a force so sharp it cracked and the skin blistered and buckled and oozed with blood. He fell against the railings. Drops of red dripped onto the docile figures below, rolling down from spine to tail.

“Who the fuck are you!”

I raised my claw. “Like a butcher, I shall strike you without anger and without hate.” His death was instant. I threw his head into the pens. There was a scramble below, as the hybrids moved in to grab a piece of his flesh. As the hybrids went in for their instinctive act of cannibalism, I wondered if indeed it was any more cannibalistic than total humans eating Nu-Meat. I wondered, briefly, if Hamish tasted like chicken. The ancient Egyptians perfected elaborate mummification techniques and stored organs in canopic jars around the body, because the body needed to be intact to be resurrected again in the next life. There is the myth of Isis, who reassembles the fragments of her murdered lover, and for the first time in history performs the rights of embalmment which restores the murdered god to eternal life. Hamish would go back to meat. The flesh. His body eaten so it could be eaten. Welcome to Nu-Meat.
My hands covered in blood, I reached into my pocket and pulled out a letter. I held it up so Wolf, wherever he was watching from, could see me.

“This is for Kally. I want you to give it to her. I am not going to chase you any longer, Wolf. I have the virus but if you want it, you are going to have to hand over my daughter. To me, and me alone. Not Xenos. Not Coben Thorley. Not Moreau. You give her to me. “

I picked up Ruaridh and slung him over my shoulders. What was I supposed to do? It wasn’t even a dog eat dog situation. I was fucked, basically. Kill or be killed.

As I jogged back through the fading dark, Rurai’s weight heavy on me, I thought about the pig shoot in Dolos. The dog pulled at the fur and skin after the boar was killed, and men laughed and hauled the corpse onto the van. Hog-tied it. Back in the village, I stood on the roof with my cousins, and we took turns to bend down and hold the head as the proud elders photographed us. The boar was still warm in my hands and I felt its psychic energy run through me. Bending down so no-one could hear me, I whispered, “I’m sorry.” They made me eat pork that night, and I threw it up, great chunks, heaving outside, watching in fascination as the maggots came with it. It was the pig’s revenge. The next day it was a full moon, and the change came over me. I was never allowed out with the men again on a boar hunt. They said the animals could smell what I was. This was what was going to happen to Kally. Only I could guide her into womanhood.

“Old MacDonald had a farm, e ei e ei o … and on that farm there was some Nu-Meat – e ei e ei o …”
ACT 3
1

[Kally]

The Letter

Hush-a-bye, don't you cry
Go to sleep, my little baby
When you wake, you shall have
All the pretty little horses
Dapples and grays, pintos and bays
All the pretty little horses!
- Traditional

My darling daughter:

I know Kally is the name your birth mother gave you, but I am the genetic marker of your life, I am your true north, I am your real mother. Kalioppe was my mother's name, and the name I always imagined I would give to you. You being called Kally is to me a sign that you were meant to be returned to me. Soon, you will turn 11. Wherever you are. Your body will be changing, turning into what you will become – what I am, and my mother was, and down the line, a twisted legacy we trace back to a doomed sailing ship called the Lady Vain. I hope there will be time to tell you these stories, the stories of how we came to be. If you have access to the Internet, look up H.G.Wells and The Island Of Doctor Moreau. The lie is that this is a great story he imagined and wrote into a novel. The truth is your heritage. Edward Prendick's encounter with Dr Moreau on the uncharted island after he was shipwrecked is true. You are related to Prendick, who continued with Dr Moreau's research after he returned to England. We are part of the proud lineage of the beings he created.

No matter what your birth mother told you, no matter what Wolf and the pack that are holding you have told you – it's all lies. You are not any classification that exists at the moment. There are no others like us, you and I, except for your uncle, and he cannot help you now. I am the only one who can guide you through what is about to happen, which is why you must come to me.

I know you are scared. I was. I know you do not trust me – why should you? But I did not give you up; you were stolen from me before you were born. I never had the chance to conceive you, never had the chance to implant you or carry you in my womb. All that was taken from me. But you are mine, you are my flesh and blood, and though I would have it
any other way, what's done is done. I did not get the opportunity to tamper with your DNA, to alter you so you would be normal. I know that your birth mother did not realise what she had taken. She was after human eggs, which are a valuable commodity on the black market – and mine were stolen.

What I do know is that I need to help you deal with what lies ahead. How to hide what you are, how to live with what you are about to become, and how to pretend to live this lie. I know this very well, for my own mother taught me.

I always knew I was different. I was told I was different.

I guess for the first 10 years of my life, from the time I could understand what they were saying, I thought it was because of my Greek heritage. When I played with Barbie dolls I wished I to be blonde like them. It wasn't until I reached puberty that I learned the truth.

You don't look like her, do you? The one you call mother. Haven't you always felt different? Out of step with her and her family? I imagine that at dinner something would hit you, a sense of revulsion as you put a piece of meat in your mouth, or the startling knowledge that you could read your pretend cousin's thoughts? And you could smell the boy down the street as he was riding his bike, couldn't you? And did the bats call out to you as you walked beneath their twilight flight? And your dreams, Kally; were they of running, of touching the earth on all fours? Have you had the killing dreams yet? This is to come.

It's about to happen, Kally. It did when I was your age.

Menstruation hits girls hard. It is the end of one life, of an asexual innocence of climbing trees and not critically looking at yourself in every reflection. When the blood comes, it is the beginning of another phase. A tidal pull of hormones and emotions that peaks and flows and pulls and ebbs, month after month. I was to discover much later that the sexual highs were directly related to my cycle, that the insatiable lust that would consume me mid month was nothing more than an ancient biological survival system, designed to make sure I would reproduce. I thought, in a way, I had cheated it by storing my eggs in the biobank, but this didn't change the hormones.

For me, as it had been for my mother and it will be for you, it wasn't just the blood that was disturbing, or the pre-menstrual blues and crankiness. Or even, as I grew older, the desire for men. (As for men - do not be scared of this, Kally – remember – you are in control. They will always bow to your will.)

What you must fear is something much worse, much more deadly, and far more uncontrollable.
One of the clear memories I have of my mother – your grandmother - before she died was when she unexpectedly flew to Melbourne to see me. Mum and I didn't usually go out alone; she was so often caught up in her research she rarely had time, and unlike other girls I knew, we didn't do that mother-daughter thing where we went shopping for clothes or out to see a chick flick together. I would like to do this with you, Kally, something quotidian, something totally human. Your grandmother's groundbreaking work in epigenetics was all consuming and it was to my father – a school teacher with regular hours and term holidays – that I looked to for such parental companionship.

They told me you didn't have a social father. They said the woman who stole you raised you alone. Who did you turn to, Kally? Who told you that the dreams you had – the ones you had where you pulled the head off your friend's dog when you ran with the wolves - were symbolic only? Not real? Who protected you from the truth? That we dream of what our forebears did, or of what we will do, or of what our blood calls out for us to taste. There is no escape, even in sleep.

Your uncle Paros and me weren't allowed to ask our mum about her work. The times she had to bring something home, some animal that she was experimenting on that couldn't be left alone, she would arrive with a cage and move it into the basement laboratory the government had set up in our house. Sniper guards were posted at the door. Dad kept a shotgun handy. But once someone broke into the place despite the security and they were waiting for mum in the garage. The shot woke me up, and when I ran downstairs to see what happened, dad was waiting for me. There was a room in the house made especially for incidents like these, to keep Paros and me safe, and we were pushed inside.

It wasn't soundproof though and we could hear the howling, and the screams. I don't know which was more frightening. I guess I was 8 or 9 years old at the time. I dimly remember seeing mum afterwards, her face covered in blood, as we were released from the safe room, and seeing a small crumpled black garbage bag - far too insignificant for the size of a dead man - as it was taken away to a biohazard disposal.

That's why mum had moved us to Melbourne. It was supposedly safer, although considering a lot of the genetic research was taking place at the universities, and the activists were as volatile as in the capital territory, I couldn't see how it was safer. Maybe she meant it was just safer not being around her.

I got used to it. Mum came home every third weekend, we went on holidays together, and as dad constantly pointed out, her research paid for us to lead a good life. It wasn't exactly conventional, but we had a routine.
That's why I was surprised to see her mid week. She opened my bedroom door and caught me on the phone to a friend.

"Ariadne, we'll go for a walk after dinner, okay?"

"Sure mum."

It was nearly a full moon, and the sky was bright. Overhead, bats flew low in a formation, one after the other, and the beat of their wings rhythmic against the breeze. The street we liked to walk down – flat and even with beautiful houses and sheltering trees reaching gracefully to the night sky – was on the sonar flight path for the bats on their way to the river. Even back then, the area along Richmond had been closed off after the virus mutated again, as lingering toxins in the damp and waiting soil meant no-one was allowed through the barricades. The bats had free access, but the media was constantly warning about never feeding them in the gardens, because of the potential for bites and cross species contamination.

I knew some older kids at school had snuck down to the abandoned warehouses near the water with their boyfriends. I am not sure if I believed them entirely, but they said they saw survivors there, and watched them run on all fours through the broken windows. Mostly they made out, then quickly carved their initials into the old wooden beams and floorboards, a sign they'd briefly crossed the boundary. I think the thrill of having made it through the old drain and back again was probably more exciting for them than a teenage boy's inept fumblings, but that's just my opinion. At the age of 11, I hadn't ventured down the drains and I sure hadn't let a boy touch me yet. I simply wasn't interested.

Are you interested, Kally? Has the desire for a man's hands on your body entered your mind? When I was your age it was a blur, maybe there was a feeling, a crush I had on someone I saw on television, but I wasn't sure what to do with it. Later – maybe at 15 or 16 - it crystallized. It's only a few short years, but a huge gulf.

As mum and I walked, she took my hand and held it tight. We chatted about school, about my progress in fencing and interest in parkur. I gasped out in pain when I felt something sharp piercing my palm. I looked down.

Mum's hand had changed – it was more like a claw, and there was a long, sharp talon instead of her fingernail. My blood fell onto the concrete.

"Don't be scared, Ariadne – this is what I needed to tell you. See how the moon is nearly at its peak? Can you sense how the dogs cower in their yards as we walk past? I can smell the change about to happen inside you, and you need to be ready."
"Mum – you’re hurting me!"

"Ariadne – I’m sorry, darling, but this is for your own good."

"What is?" I tried to wriggle free of her grasp. The pain became excruciating.

A large, black four-wheel drive suddenly screeched ahead of us, pulling to an abrupt halt on the kerb. I remember mum pushing me away, screaming – "run!" - and the smell and sound of gunfire. I felt her die even before I saw her fall to the ground and the blood pooling around her body. Something took over inside me.

I jumped fences Kally! I climbed trees! I ran across rooftops and I flew from one house to the next, as if I had wings! It wasn't until later that I saw the wound on my hand, and realised that mum had given me her blood, and that's what awakened the dormant genes. Puberty would have done the same, but she realised she was being hunted, and they would come for me.

When I returned home, it was empty. Paros had been taken, and dad lay cold and still on the kitchen floor. Shot in the head and the heart. They'd killed our dog, too. The safe room was open – they knew all our secrets. Or at least, they thought they did. I was 11 years old – where was I going to run to? Anyone around me wasn't going to be safe. I couldn't risk dad's side of the family; despite their disinclination towards me, they were the last I had of him. And maybe my last link to a human world.

But mum knew this day might come. She had told me to find someone, she'd given me a name on that walk we had, while she explained things I didn't want to know. I need to tell them to you, now, Kally, as they are coming for us. And if I die, then you are all that is left. You are the last of what remains, of the fateful voyage of the Lady Vain.

If you want to come to me, do not be afraid. Trust your instincts. What the others have forgotten, you have remembered, believe that. You know in your blood, Kally, that you have the answers. I will be waiting. I will find you, no matter where you are.

Xxxx

Mum
Ruraidh was waiting at the café. I glimpsed him sitting by the window, sunglasses on to cover the enormous bruise where I said Hamish hit him with the gun. He was bent down in a newspaper. Dressed in his usual suit, thick blond hair bouncing over his face. Even in the full sunlight he looked impossibly young. Soft hands I remembered as he turned the page. Hands that have never killed anyone.

I wished then I had never slept with him. Too late now. The least I could do was not go for a repeat performance.

"You called?" I slid into the booth next to him. The seat was leather, buttoned, hard and unforgiving.

He reached into his pocket and retrieved a piece of paper. "Bellerophon."

I grabbed it and admonished him for being so public.

"No-one is watching."

"Someone is always watching."

I think he was about to mutter "paranoid" but thought better of it when he noticed me sniffing and glancing over my shoulder. There was a man at the counter, ordering a latte, whose eyebrows met in the middle. If you looked closely, his hands were hairy, too.

"Is that a - ?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to – you know?" he left the sentence hanging.

"No – what – in broad daylight? I don't think so. Have you any idea how many of them there are? For all we know, he simply had one of those new pig insulin infusions from Norway."

"Or he could be a –"
"I'm off duty. Believe it or not, I don't like random acts of violence. Especially when I don't get overtime. Now – Bellerophon. What have you found?"

"I jacked into the mainframe and cross referenced all intercepts. Apart from the obvious Greek mythological reference – the slayer of the Chimera, the fire-breathing monster whose make-up comprised the body of a goat, the head of a lion and the tail being a serpent -

"They're not as interesting as they sound, believe me."

Ruraidh sighed. "If I may continue. Bellerophon. A rather obvious code name for a covert task force within Humint. Mission – to seek and destroy the chimera within."

"You got all this from which database?"

"I have other sources."

"I work for Humint and I've never heard of operation Bellerophon."

"That I would have thought was the whole point of a covert operation."

I glared at him. He was right, of course. I'd asked him to jack in – I'd even stolen a high level pass key and maneuvered him inside the grid myself, using a sleeper password Derrimut had set up after the Darklands fiasco.

"Who is Chimera?"

"Unknown. For all I know – it could be you."

"A monster?"

He smiled. "Well – only in the bedroom." He moved his hand over mine. I let its comforting weight linger for a second then brushed it aside. I'd slept with too many colleagues to know how this was going to end. He was so much younger than me and besides; I couldn't ruin this like the others. I needed his help if I was going to find my daughter.

My daughter.

I could hardly form those two words in my mind without a giddy feeling. It couldn't be true, could it? After all these years. I remembered the procedure – hard to forget when you're sent regular biobank bills. I paid on the second of every month, had done so for the last 12 years. My little fertility insurance policy, I called it. Now it had been stolen from me. And something put in its place. Not dreams and fantasies of what I could have with Coben, but a child. Born by someone else, raised by someone else. Presumably, a child who had no idea what she was.
I had begun the calculations as soon as Wolf left the message – “we have your daughter”. She could be any age, I knew. She could be a baby – how did I know when the eggs had been stolen? Then again – she could be around 11 years old now. On the cusp of puberty. On the cusp of changing. In that case, she needed me. To show her – how to cope. With what the moon brought with it. There were things she’d have to know. How to keep herself safe. My mother had taught me. It was the family curse. Or the family blessing – it depended on where you stood in the shadow of the moon. And if you were the one whose head was ripped off or not.

I had hoped I’d be able to select the gender of any child I had and avoid this but that choice had been taken from me. This genetic inheritance was matrilineal. It could end with me. I intended it to. Like those women I read about in magazines that discover they have the breast cancer gene and vow never to have daughters.

I’d only known for a full turn of the moon, but try as I could to tell myself she was someone else’s responsibility, I couldn't stop the pull. She had been stolen from me and I didn't even know it. I had never felt a single thing about her for she didn't exist for me. Now I could think of nothing else.

Ruraidh was stoking my hand again.

I left him to it.

Maybe that's why I'd accepted his advances the other night. To obliterate the thoughts in my head. It worked – at the time. The trouble with sex is that it is a temporary fix. Even good sex – and I admitted despite his age - well, all right, probably because of it – the sex had been good. Better than that, but …

"So that's why I think it's imperative that we focus on this lead."

"What?" I looked into his eyes. Like mine, they were deep brown, heavy dark lashes.

"Did you hear a thing I said?"

I pulled my hand away. "You distracted me."

He blushed. And smiled. "I said we should check out Cycnus & Caeneus – a old taxidermy shop. Ring any bells?"

"I know it, the owners are from Thessaloniki. It was firebombed after the Darklands uprising during the cyb rebellion– we had casualties. Hang on – we should check it out?"

"Well, I think I qualify for joining you on the road." He took off the sunglasses. "After all, I was injured in the line of duty. Pacifists can be surprisingly brutal."
I smiled. "It's called active duty."

"Don't worry – I'm very good with semantics."

I pointed to the full cream latte he'd just finished. "You need to get in shape. A few years you'll be forty and it'll catch up. Now, it'll simply weigh you down. Active duty – with the emphasis on active."

"Maybe I'll get some animal help – stay young forever."

"Haven't you heard of dog years?"

"Oh sure, but I was thinking of something with more stamina. Like werewolf."

I stifled a gasp.

Did he know what I was? No – I knew my identity was safe. There was no way Coben could have disclosed anything without exposing himself. Besides, he claimed to remember nothing about being inside the pens. I can render a man unconscious for days. As Ruaridh had been.

But then – Ruraiadh had been brought out from Oxford to solve the latest virus outbreak mutation. If anyone was going to find out – work it out – it would be him. Did he imagine that sleeping with me could give him some kind of power, some immunity? It didn't work that way. I hadn't bitten him – though I did remember a point when I'd been tempted – and it would take more than one bite. Despite what they implied in horror movies.

He looked at me like he wanted me to tell him. And for a split second – I wondered if I could trust him. But sex isn't about trust. It's just two bodies. Just because you sleep with someone means nothing. Women fall for it all the time. Not me. And I didn't think for a second that Ruraiadh – young, handsome, brilliant – thought so either. We were all just animals out for the main chance. I could make his reputation academically – I knew that. And if he were a werewolf – what predatory power he'd have to stalk the hallowed halls of his alma mater.

Put another way – love doesn't exist. We are all out for ourselves. That was the one truth I lived by. Even with Coben. Would he be there when I was – fifty? Sixty? No. I'd be alone.

"You're hurting my hand," he said.

I looked down and saw I had drawn blood. A nail extended beyond what's considered normal. Reflex action. Unsheathed when I could smell danger.

"We're leaving. Now."
I grabbed Ruraidh's elbow and turned him to the direction of the café door. His hand reached instinctively for the flaky croissant, still plump and fresh on the plate at the counter. I told him not to order it.

"Leave it," I hissed.

"But –"

"10 o'clock."

I nudged him.

"What?"

"GO!"

I whispered the last word in his ear, soft and gentle, as if we'd just come down from bed and had unfinished business. He may have been untrained in the ways of the road, but he was a fast learner. He grabbed me by the waist and pulled me to him as we quickly left the crowded shop, two lovers with better things to do than eat pastry.

"You're doing well."

"That's a compliment."

"Just don't look up. Surveillance."

I was used to scanning the eaves of buildings. Major intersections, the city centres. Rule of thumb – you are always being watched. Trick is, to go under the radar; you aim for whatever anonymity you can find. Shadows, doorways, sunglasses – the simple act of not turning your face to a screen.

I could smell them. Dogs. They were below the radar as well. They traveled in packs and I could hear the numbers. Six. An advance scout group. I thought I'd shaken them last night but they were back. Obviously, they'd traced my scent, and despite my efforts they were onto me.

I picked up the speed, Ruraidh panting slightly behind me.

"You're out of shape, young man."

"So I have better things to do than work out."

"Like drinking. A lot."

He mumbled something. I think he swore in some language I didn't register. Or maybe it was the accent. Still – I had 10 years on him, and he was dragging me down. I pushed him into a doorway and reached for his pocket.
"Credit card."

"What?"

I deftly retrieved it before he had time to complain further, and swiped the hard plastic against the lock. The door might have been burned, wood black, but the lock was new.

"Platinum. Nice." I handed it back.

"You bent it."

"Get another."

"Do you know how hard it is to –"

I put my finger to his lips. Raised an eyebrow. Turned my head. I pushed him inside.

I knew the other animals would avoid Cycnus & Caeneus if they could. A relic of the 19th Century gold rush, it was a taxidermy shop with a difference that had once attracted the intellectual underbelly of Melbourne's legal sector. Rare animal skins, death masks and medical ephemera – you'd be surprised at how many judges enjoyed purchasing Victorian anatomy kits and silver vampire revolvers. Maybe it made them feel safe.

I pointed out some of the more obscure items as we paced the shop. Some of my finest kills ended up here. I stopped that thought right there and remembered my training: "Do not listen to old applause." Coben made me go on a Buddhist retreat last year. Workplace training.

"We'll be safe here, for the moment."

"This counts as a normal Sunday for you, does it?" Ruraihd said.

"Hey – watch the tone. You're among master work here."

"So I see." His tone was intentionally ironic.

We looked around. Giant polar bears – two of them with yellowing fur – clawed into the air with teeth bared. A hunched coyote, fur matted and a shiny bald patch, slunk in the corner in a frozen grimace. Bats with slightly bent wings, an eagle with flattened feathers, and a snake that had split at the coiled seams held onto a decaying gum tree branch. Since the fire and the subsequent insurance battle, Cycnus & Caeneus had seen better days. Theo Caeneus, I knew had gone back to Greece.

I moved away from the door and beckoned Ruraihd to follow. The lift – a once proud and elegant cast iron contraption that took collectors to the sweeping mezzanine – had buckled in the blaze. We took the stairs, avoiding the sagging treads.
Ruraidh stopped at an old wooden display cabinet and peered inside. Skulls cluttered the dusty top glass shelf.

"These are – real." He took off his glasses to get a better look, and a large piece of his blond hair flopped over one eye. I resisted the urge to sweep it away with my fingers.

"Of course they are."

"Yes – but they're not entirely human."

I was going to add, I'm not either, but stopped myself. He'd find out soon enough.

With his face pressed into the glass, Ruraidh gasped. "It's – a hybrid. Like an ape and human but it's fully matured – I've never seen anything like this before – what on earth –"

A flashlight hit us in the eyes. Ruraidh stumbled back in surprise and fell over a yellowing bundle of newspapers. A billowing cloud of dust and fetid splash of water followed. He groaned in pain. So much for the agility of youth.

"Ariadne!"

"Yannis Cycnus." I looked at the old man and tried to remember him in his prime, flirting with the customers, always ready with a glass of Ouzo. The shop was once filled with Rebetika music. Cycnus was a real bull in his younger days. Literally. He'd had me up against the back wall near the framed butterfly collections more than once.

"Who's he?" contempt registered in the old man's voice as he pointed to Ruaridh. Even in the half-light, I could see the smirk curling around his wrinkled lips.

"My lover."

The old man laughed. "Ari dear. I've read about cougars, but you could have found a tastier cub."

We watched for a moment as Ruraidh struggled to get up.

"I had a pack on my tail."

Cycnus looked me up and down, licked his lips. “Always such a nice tail, too, Ariadne.”

Ruaridh picked up a stuffed cane toad and squealed when its eyes opened.

“Careful now – cub,” warned Cycnus. “That one still has a touch of the virus. You might recall what happened to the indigenous community in the Far North when it crossed the species barrier.”

Ruaridh hastily put the toad back on the counter.

“I need some help, Cycnus.”
Cycnus shone the torch on Ruraidh. He ran a dried up old finger over my cub’s face. "Come on, then," he said, holding the light in front of us so it shone into the dark further reaches of the building.

Cycnus – who was perhaps 100 years old but I could never tell – had been an enthusiastic early adopter of hybrid medical technology. I guess once you'd sucked the guts out of enough predatory animals, you figure that the lines of the species barrier could be blurred just a little more to embrace life as well as death.

I never asked what he'd been implanted with. He never invited me over on a full moon. Still, he was a useful contact. The hybrid fringes like to gather in his shop. He heard things.

"Here – you look like you could use it," Cycnus proffered a silver hip flask in Ruraidh's direction. It was waved it away.

"It's Laphroaig."

"Okay." Ruraidh took a long sip, first wiping his hand over the opening.

"Now – my dear. How nice of you to visit." He smiled at me. He'd always been an old flirt.

"It was Rory – I mean, Mac's idea,"

"Mac?"

"Ruraidh Mackenzie, Dr Ruraidh Mackenzie, Oxford University," Ruraidh offered his hand.

"Ah yes – I know your work. The Imperial Hybrid – an anthropological history of the created animal-human. A fascinating study."

"Thank you."

"Based on the original work of anthropologists Fox and Tiger?"

"I had a semester at Rutgers as an undergraduate – got inspired."

"I was quite disappointed to discover Fox and Tiger are, in fact human," Cycnus sighed.

"So, Dr Mackenzie, what brings you here with the delightful Ariadne?"

"Your name came up in a search I did."

"And what was that?"

Ruraidh glanced at me. I held his eyes and nodded. "You can trust him."

"Bellerophon," said Ruraidh.
"This should mean something to me?"

"You don't know about it?"

"I'm an old man – my memory isn't what it was –" Cycnus smiled widely. His fangs were clearly visible.

"You've been enhanced," said Ruaridh.

I felt slightly uneasy. I couldn't smell the animal inside him. Why was that?

"And now you say – my, what big teeth you have," said Cycnus.

Ruraidh coughed. Then he wouldn't stop. His legs started to buckle underneath him. Suddenly he vomited all over my pig skin boots. It was bright green, and bubbled.

In a matter of seconds I'd gone from being annoyed with his lack of fitness to realising that he'd been poisoned.

I got to his side before he hit the floor.

"Fast as ever, Ariadne. You're wasting yourself on the cub."

"What have you given him?"

"You shouldn't have come here," Cycnus snarled. "Bellerophon hides deadly secrets."

I felt my fingernails extend. I growled.

Cycnus threw down the silver flash. The liquid burned as it hit the floor, sulphuric flames ignited the floorboards. I pushed Ruraidh out of the way and crouched next to him.

"Want to know why you can't smell me?" Cycnus taunted. "Play with death long enough and it finds you at the edges. Then there's no turning back."

And then I knew.

Cycnus had died in that fire. Someone had put him back again. Or something.

Bellerophon. The fangs that glinted in the fire weren't animal at all.

"Vrykolakes!" I hissed. I knew of the Greek vampires who appear in half-human, half-animal shapes. The older men in Dolos told me stories of how the village was haunted by these creatures and methods undertaken to protect themselves. The callicantzaros was often a child, while the vrykolakes was a werewolf that could become a powerful vampire after being killed.

I heard Ruraidh gasp for breath. He looked up at me with expressionless eyes as I changed before him. I threw my head back as the bones widened in my jaw and the hair
covered my flesh. Cycnus hunched into the shadows but reappeared eyes glowing yellow. My claws connected with his neck and I grasped his windpipe.

But Lewis took me by surprise – grabbing my hair still long around my shoulders. He pulled tight and pushed his knee into my chest, plunging me back into a steel column. I heard the crack before I felt the pain – down my shoulder blade. I sunk to my knees.

"I've already been through the fire – do you wonder why this place was torched – who was behind it Ariadne? Oh – but you know my dear, don't you?"

He kicked me in the face. Another crack. My nose – my nose being broken and then blood rushing out.

"You hear that? You won't look so pretty once I've finished with you," he laughed. "I told Theo to join me on the other side, but he wanted to remain pure and human. The fool. I ate his heart while it was still beating."

He appeared to hover above me. Then with a scream like cars screeching across wet concrete, like thousands of fingernails down a chalkboard, he dived for my neck. I felt the ice of his fangs against my skin and waited.

He pulled back.

"What are you?"

My hand was on the knife in my boot. The blood from my nose was pouring down my throat, thick and sweet. I spluttered for air. Then I pushed in hard – into Lewis's chest. But he twisted at the last second, and the knife plunged into his left shoulder, recoiling as if I had hit a brick wall. What the hell? No blood came out, but black ooze like molten tar dripped thick and blistering onto the floor. It stank of rotting meat.

“Ari – losing your touch? And your cub is dying…”

Maddened, I leapt at Cycnus, and threw myself at him, pushing him to the ground. Pressing my knees into Cycnus's chest, I grabbed his throat and squeezed his windpipe until it burst.

You can't kill what's already dead.

Not with your bare hands.

I aimed my sword his heart – or what I hoped my still be lying fetid inside his chest cavity. This was no ordinary knife. Damascus steel. Blessed by the Greek priests of Thessaloniki. It is a weapon against the vrykolakas.
“Like a butcher, I shall strike you without anger and without hate,” I yelled. I pushed the knife, hard.

Lewis’s body twisted in a writhing dance of agony. It came to rest near the centre of the fire and as I looked up and wiped the blood from my eyes, I couldn't quite make out if his body was combusting of its own accord or the flames he had started with the poisoned liquid were consuming it. Then, from flames, his body metamorphosed into a white bird, which flew into the air. I threw my knife and watched with satisfaction as the bird spiraled, shrieking into the conflagration once more.

_Ruraidh._

I scrambled to his side and felt for a pulse. It was hardly perceptible. Red welts had already appeared over his beautiful face, and his lips were blue. I didn’t have time to overthink this. I could save him and tie him to me forever or I could let him die and lose whatever hope I had of finding my daughter.

I clenched the knife and turned my wrist to his mouth, then sliced open part of my vein.

I opened his mouth and let the blood flow in, pressing my flesh to his lips.
I kept trying to not think about killing the wolf. He’d come to give me the letter. He said it was from my mother – my real mother. And that she was a monster. Always had been. The letter was covered in blood and I licked the paper and it tasted like home. I knew I had to find her. She said I’d know how. All I could think of was following the smells and the sounds. The sounds of the animals that I heard. Wolf had been hiding me underground, but I could still smell them. And if I found the animals, then I’d be safe. Close lines of space between pars

Wolf didn’t know about the thing inside me. Or he would have known not to get so close to me. The thing didn’t like him touching me with his paw. I opened my mouth. He said “My, what a big tongue you have,” and then it happened. Very fast.

And when I stood up from the bed, he had already changed back into a man and was lying cold on the ground. I stepped over him and went to the woman, Marion. I needed her clothes, and the key. She should have been scared of me. She knew what I did to all-fours the last time I escaped. Just because I’m a girl, they think they can control me.

But the thing inside tells me what to do. And so I told her that Wolf fell to the ground, clutching his heart and she screamed and ran to him and I bent down to comfort her and the thing moved quickly, and she lay dead next to Wolf. And this time, as she had been human, she started to get fur all over and a snout and I quickly ripped her clothes off, and wore them.

I washed my face clean and took the letter. I went to the zoo. Mum would find me there.
"What does it feel like?"

Ruraidh's body was limp against mine. Still soaked from the drain, we lay dank and putrid in the long grass near the bridge underpass.

Even this close since a full moon, usually when I am still at my strongest, my legs ached from carrying him. My jeans were black with the dark blood that I'd poured into his mouth and spread over us as he gulped it in.

"What does it feel like?"

I pretended not to hear, brushed back his hair and stared into his dark eyes. I had hoped we'd wait a little before this conversation, but of course, given Ruraidh's mind, it leapt at paces beyond the other men I'd infected.

"What does it feel like?"

"It feels like dying and being born again."

"I thought I was dead."

There was no point in lying. The full moon was in three weeks and he'd find out soon enough.

"The body you had effectively is dead. I've given you something of mine that will save you but kill the person you were at the same time. I'm sorry – there was nothing I could do."

Ruraidh just stared at me. Then he turned his head away, his hair falling against my face.

"You could have left me to die. It would have been only natural."

"My blood is alive, and it's a willing accomplice. I gave it to you."

"You didn't ask me. You forced me to take it."

"I saved your life."
Ruraidh was silent. We listened to the cars on the bridge overhead and my ears, hearing still sharper than human, picked up dogs in the distance. I discreetly sniffed – they were ordinary Labradors out for a walk, some distance away. A sound in the grass made me narrow my eyes – rats, a rabbit, a few feral things. If we got hungry before night –

He coughed. A little blood trickled from his lips.

"My blood is in you now, we are a part of each other," I explained. "You will always have me in you now, in your dreams. And I will come to you in dreams. Especially at the new moon."

"And if I don't want it? If I reject you?"

I laughed, bitterly. "It's not like a date, or an affair gone badly. You don't get to choose anymore. This isn't *He's Just Not That Into You* – because dearest, I am in you. We share a sacred bond of blood."

"Like AIDS or Hep C. Thank you very much."

I abruptly stood up and let him fall groaning to the cold earth. I looked at him lying there with contempt. Young men – they weren't worth the risk. What was he but a man-child, unable to accept his precious life back from the brink? A real man – a man who'd lived a good half of his life and knew what lay ahead – he would have been grateful. I'd changed older men before, and they never forgot me even though I knew they couldn't, they were always there for me, bound my gratitude as well as blood. The less time you have, the fiercer you treasure what's left, even if it is a little – well, tainted.

"Why did he do it?" said Ruraidh, raising his head from the dirt. Damn him, even like this he was gorgeous.

"Do what?" I was thinking about the others now, men in my past who'd stayed some of the distance. Good memories.

"Why did he have to poison me?"

"Because, you're the enemy." I crouched down and pulled him into a sitting position, so we could look eye to eye. "You're with me, you were with me – and don't forget, you had been inside me and he smelt that. You play with fire – you get burned."

"So this is about jealousy then?"

"Pack protection. He's an Alpha male."

"You fucked him?"

"Ruraidh – this is me, Ariadne, ok? Who haven't I fucked?"
I actually enjoyed the look on his face. A little shocked, a little repulsed, a little disbelieving. Well, let him think what he liked. After 40, the great gift is not giving a damn what people think.

He suddenly yelled out in pain. Doubling over, I could hear the vertebrae in his back swell and crack; I could see the flesh start to curl on his hands. It was happening faster than I expected. My blood is strong.

"Let's get you somewhere safe, before the pack smells what's happening."

I lifted him up in my arms, even though he was my height, and breathed in deeply. I wished it were last week, at my peak, but I would have to manage. I got him into this, I had made him, and I needed to keep him safe. There are rules, a code; I wasn't about to break an oath that went back centuries. *What you create, that you must protect.*

We couldn't go back down the drain, so the creek bed was the only way, following the concrete drain. I had to get him to a carpark where I could smash open a vehicle and drive to safety. People were reckless with their possessions; we'd find one with a coat lying on the back seat, a child's fluffy blanket on the floor, a bag of gym clothes. Human nature had never let me down yet.

He screamed again as his fingers swelled. I saw the yellow gold wedding ring cutting into his flesh. He wouldn't need that now, anyway. I bent down and put my mouth over it and sucked it off, spat the thing on the ground as I jogged along.

"Why did you do it?"

"I don't believe in marriage."

"Why did you save me?"

"You want the truth?"

"Are you going to give it to me?"

"OK – I wanted to find my daughter, and you are my best hope of doing it. I need you alive. In fact, I need you more than alive, so the alpha did us both a favor."

He screamed again, I clamped my hand over his mouth.

"Yeah –" he finally said, after the latest spasm had passed. "What do I get out of it then?" How is this better for me?"

"You'll see," I held him tight to my chest as I jogged, carrying his long, heavy body. I was panting now, from the exertion. "So much is better, sharper, clearer, stronger. Especially – the sex."
As I jogged, panting with his weight as I held him tight, I thought of her. Soon, the offspring would be developing an active sexuality and appetite and I wonder which one will claim her? Will the animal surface from within, and will this consume her? By the monthly ebb and flow of the call of the wild – or will she remain human?

I do not know her father. The sperm that made her. I read her file and the professor had no husband, no partner. She used a fertility bank and grabbed a random sample of the educated men on file. They are screened, so he was human.

But did the professor know that the embryo she had transferred was not quite human? That my egg could never be?

And I wondered, who made sure it was my egg then that was stolen? Was this by chance or by design? Did someone want to see what happened to Kally and if she would change into the monster embedded in her DNA?

Will she be transfixed as I am by fur, the soft touch of another animal, purring and blood pounding underneath the surface?

I didn't say anymore until I'd smashed in the window of a late model Lexus and hotwired us to go.

"Bob Marley – weird, huh?"

Ruraihd was in the back on the car floor, groaning as the blood mutated inside him. I turned the music up, some thumping reggae. I smiled at the incongruous choice by the car's former owner.

"Maybe you're more a jazz man? Marc Moulin? Or Oliver Nelson? I pick you for intellectual and obscure, right?"

There was only screaming. I turned the volume up.

The safe house in Glen Iris was an anonymous McMansion surrounded by others owned by absent and wealthy Asians who came once a year to check their investments and see their children in the local private schools. The only ones home were the discreet nannies looking after their charges; they didn't want trouble and would ignore the car as we pulled into the garage. Inside, the only furniture was what prying eyes could see from the doors or windows. I kept a well-stocked fridge and knew the deep freeze chest had enough carcasses to last us two months if necessary. I put Ruraihd on the thick leather couch – better for keeping clean if something got murdered on it – and thumped a heavily frozen slab of prime beef into the microwave. Slow cooking would have to wait – Ruraihd needed flesh and he needed it now.
"Here – eat." I pushed the warm beef, raw and bloody, into his mouth. Instinctively, he gagged.

“Think of it as beef sushi."

"I'm a vegan," he whispered.

'Not any more, change of dietary habits, I'm afraid. Eat."

I pushed it further between his teeth, sliding the flesh into his quickly widening mouth. Suddenly, he grabbed it from me and ripped in, his incisors already long and sharp.

"Good boy," I said, ruffling his damp hair. "Now eat up, and I'll take you up to bed."

He reached for my body, the animal in him awakened. I was tempted, but it was the wrong time of the month for me to be reckless. Come mid cycle, I would have taken him there on the floor but there was a wave of gentle indifference barely affecting my libido now. The truth was; I wanted a long hot bath and a deep and restful sleep more than I wanted him.

But I knew it was going to be tough controlling him with the blood surge.

As a former scout, I am prepared, and the thick rope under the bed was within easy reach as I straddled his body and bent down against his chest. His guttural moans were animal and that brilliant mind a confused rush of conflicting hormones and memories of hunting and the smell of rain on the grass and the scent of women. He was easy to tie up, tight and immobile, and I left him there as I stripped off my clothes and checked the damage for today's adventures in the long mirror. I smiled as I heard him howl, watching me standing there naked in the doorway. I wondered whether I should close the door and put him out of further misery, but there is a playful part of me, too, and I wondered if Ruraidh the man or Ruraidh the animal would find the sight of my slithering into a bath more disturbing.

Ruraidh woke up ravenous.

Broke free of his ropes.

I found him with half the neighbor's cat in his mouth, the other half discarded in bits over the lounge. More housework.

I got the chains out. I had seen this so many times before. I knew what was happening.

The scientific journals and data kept by both my late mother, the renowned anthropologist Dr Jocasta Prendick, and her mother, the biologist Edwina Prendick, have helped in my investigations over the years … into what I am.
When I was studying in London, I made the decision to get genetically tested for the condition that has afflicted my maternal line since my great grandmother Esme was born. Coben urged me to. He said, whatever they find, I will still love you.

It appears that despite the best efforts of my parents and the artificial method of my reproduction, I too carry the altered genetic sequence. When I turned 11, my mother gave me a letter shortly before she died.

"There are three things which your grandmother taught me, and which I now pass on to you:

- Never stare a hybrid in the eye.
- Never turn your back on anything with claws.
- Never open a crate in the lab, no matter what the hybrid says."

It wasn't until I was studying in England that I discovered what goes on in hybrid research. Like the defense sites on the moors with the signs that read "under the Official Secrets Act, this place does not exist", the Romney Marsh BioPharm can be seen from the road. England, after all, is a very small country. However, you have to be admitted past the high security fence and put on a bio suit before you get to the point where you realize that they are not shearing sheep.

At the Romney Marsh, pigs are filled with human livers and mice have plump ears growing from their shivering backs. Cows like me are compromised with the DNA of another species but in the reverse – human blood pumps in their veins and they are milked of it in a systematic way, just as their udders are cleared twice a day.

Coben showed me around, the guest of honor. After all, my great great grandfather's research had started all this. Did he already know what I really was when he recruited me? Did he imagine that being intimate with me was a way of being close to Dr Moreau’s original work? They let me explore Prendick's laboratory deep below the ground. It was not a shrine. It was a working lab with the taint of fear and superiority mixed in as one, even though it was kept at near freezing to inhibit the growth of germs and rogue bacteria. Cries from cages and a terrible smell snaked through my nostrils as I bit back the tears. Was I to blame for this? Does what I am make me responsible for what is being done to them?

I was allowed to wander alone. The cages were full and as I looked inside, I could see myself in every face. We had the same deep brown eyes. The crate rocked slightly. Deep brown eyes peered from between the steel slates.
I wondered if any of them could talk when one of them asked me to help. I reached out to touch him. The soft black fur on his arms was like mine before I had laser treatment. And the claws – how many times had I wondered why my hands were so strong, my nails so sharp? He sniffed me as I moved closer.

"Are we not men?" came the voice from the cage. "Am I not like you? You are one of us. We are the same."

"No – I'm not like you," I lied.

"You are my kind – free me from the House of Pain."

He held my hand in a firm grip, but I was stronger. I had to wrench his finger off to release myself and I had the digit in my hand as I charged up the stairs and ran into the drawing room.

I had read Darwin. Survival of the fittest – let the strongest live and the weakest die. It was them or me. I didn't know what to do with the finger, and stuffed it in my pocket, rubbing the blood off my hands. I raced to the bathroom to wash them clean, but the blood wouldn't come off. In desperation, I sucked my fingers clean but was repulsed at how the sweet yet sharp the iron taste on my tongue sent my senses tingling.

I saw the wild look in my eyes reflected back in the mirror and for a second I could feel the jungle grow thick around me and hear the sound of pounding footsteps on the fallen leaves.

My defense is found in anthropology: If a species fails to adapt, it does not survive. I am the future.

And now I have done this to Ruaridh.

After three nights and four days, the blood settled. I began searing the steaks lightly and tossing a little balsamic into the pan. I took a razor and gently shaved him as he sat bound to a chair in the bathroom; his features no longer the beautiful soft haze of pale skin, tumbling curls and deep cheekbones. He was more angular, harder, eyes now with soft green flecks through the brown. The deep cut across the bridge of his nose was healing.

I stopped myself many times from running my hands across his body as I bathed him, rubbed the cuts and scratches and the marks left by the dogs.

He hardly spoke.

I missed his words. The way he spoke to me, what he used to say. I missed his mind now, as the animal took over the body. Whether it would return depended on how strong he
was. What would win in this battle of the blood? I, who had been born into this heritage, knew how to combine what I was with what I would like to be, the public face, the private face, the words and the actions, the animal and the human. It was my second nature, as I hoped it would be Kally's

*I wanted to talk to him about Kally.*

He lay in bed most days, and if I didn't bind him with the chains, he would try and break out of the house. I handcuffed him to the ridiculous dining room pillar once, as I let him finish the cat while I ate a couscous salad. All the meat I was cooking was playing hell with my digestion.

By the second week, when I was watching lying next to him on the bed, plasma TV flickering in the darkened room, he turned to me and said: "You know, Stalin conceived the military stratagem of creating warriors that were half human, half chimp." And I knew my Ruraidh had returned to me.

I tentatively hugged him and he didn't try and maul me.

"I think it's time we took you out," I said.

"I have nothing to wear."

I bought things while you were asleep and chained. I have excellent taste."

"Where are we going?"

"To see a dog about a man."

"Why?"

"We need to find Kally."
Ariadne

The Argus Building

Three blind mice, three blind mice,
See how they run, see how they run!

They all ran after the farmer’s wife,
Who cut off their tails with a carving knife,

Did you ever see such a thing in your life,
As three blind mice?

- Traditional

They still called it the Argus building. It was contaminated from the print residue and the possibility of the virus, but I knew the underground entrance, once used by the trucks and the printers. They'd tunneled out all the way to what was now the Darklands, an aspirational vision of a future of news media which never eventuated. Back then, such capitalistic optimism was etched on the landscape in physical feats like the tunnels we walked through, wrapped in thick blankets against the damp and the dripping condensation. Now, invisible forces that speed through the air, as real as walls and imaginary as dreams, erase boundaries.

The dog in question was a smart bitch called Justine. She ran a pack of mutants and were's that lived in the decay of the Argus. I jokingly called them “newshounds”. It's a joke lost on those under 40 and young Ruraidh was immune to the cultural reference. Despite how delicious he looked in the tight black jeans and crisp white shirt and trouser suspenders I'd purchased – playing to a Gothic fantasy of mine - there had been many times as we bunkered down in the McMansion that I wished for the company of an older man, someone who knew what I was talking about without endless apologies or explanations. Someone who didn't make me feel like Mrs Robinson, but like Lolita's sexy older sister.

Justine sniffed him as she let us into the inner sanctum.

"Fresh, newly made." She ran her hands over his chest. I growled. He was mine. For all his bloody faults.

Justine's eyes widened. 'Have you – since –"

"No. He’s still -"
She softly barked. "A virgin."

Ruraidh was about to protest but I had muzzled him before we entered the tunnel. I could handle anything his cock wanted to do, but that mouth of his could get us in big trouble.

"We've come to see The Master," I said.

"He's in tonight."

"Praise him," we said together.

"You've been gone a long time, we were wondering if you still planned to come to the next raid."

"I've had my hands full," I raised the leash and pushed Ruraidh forward.

I had told him what to expect. About the body sacrifice. Now, we took it in turns to tie the laces. Tighter, tighter still, until she could not breathe but for short little bursts. In the flickering candlelight, her fur-skin glistened as beads of perspiration welled to the surface. Hung like jewels on the quivering edges of the long dark hairs.

Another rubbed in the oils, the ones to calm the pain. It prepared the surface, as well, for the words. Another approached with a razor. She had to be clean. Soon, the other would be brought in, eyes bandaged against the bleeding, which wouldn't stop for months. They had given her enough morphine to keep her talking, but not enough to dull her mind. She had to remember what she saw, or everything would be lost. When they replaced the optic nerve the only thing that could be saved, now, was the scraping of animal on her lens.

People thought animals saw in black and white. Color was for humans only. How wrong they were. When the smells could be replaced into a thousand pinpricks of light that danced into the visions that fed into the memory. A memory of running, of being on four legs, of fucking and biting and killing. Humans had words. We had instinct. A memory of surviving that meant we were still here, even if we were hiding in the shadows.

The building, long abandoned, was littered with old newspapers and typewriters. I fancied I could hear the sound of heavy keys sticking to the cylinders. Maybe even voices. There was the echo of the energy of what had once been. An old memo pinned to the noticeboard said "last news conference, keep this, it may be valuable one day."

She groaned. I couldn't see her eyes under the mask, but I felt her looking at me, pleading. She had volunteered, as we all had, but now she could feel the blade on her skin, it was more real than the wine could ease.
I felt it on my face. The drop of rain. In old buildings like these, the animals nested where they felt safest, eating through the plasterboards and the roof to expose the rest of us hiding in the shadows. The process of breaking up the old office desks and using the slabs of wood to cover the biggest gaps had long been forsaken. We simply couldn't keep up, and the bait was more useful anyway.

They would take the bait, the way we once had. With their dulled senses, slow movements and addiction to the virtual, the humans would carelessly sip the cocktails we made while our flesh was smooth, then collapse when we needed to take from them later in some dark, hidden room off the main city streets. Even as the flickering portable consoles begged to be connected in their bags, we drank from them and tasted their flesh.

It was after all, easier to get poison than wood. No-one asked questions and it was easily traded. A body can buy a lot of anything, sometimes, even if that body is covered in fur. People – men – are not as choosy as you might think. Of course, if you needed to trade something really valuable – books, for instance, the ones that had been banned – then only a clean body would do. In fact, it wasn’t even a body the literate wanted; they were interested in one thing only. Conversation.

There was a belief that only humans had the gift of speech, so if you found a cat woman for instance who could talk, then she must be more or less human. That’s what the hybrid’s relied on.

I tied Ruaridh up against a column. Went to speak to a group standing ready near the operating table. It wasn’t about voyeurism, not in the way people imagined. There was a certain group comfort in knowing what hybrid’s looked like under the skin. We were such a new species, that it was hard to know yourself, to really understand yourself from the inside. So, watching others made it real.

I thrust a bag at them. “Here, medicine. To stop infections. And pain killers. Give some to her now.”

A dog-man shook his head. Barked at me. His companion, who looked almost human, thanked me but added, “We accept the pain if we want to be human”.

I looked at her long, lovely human legs. I saw she had elaborately carved wooden boots fitted to her stumps. She was gorgeous. She’d earn plenty on the streets.

Then, the ceremony began. Ruaridh began to whimper as it started.
I heard her call out then – a whimper, really. And hands were upon her. Was there a flash of a claw? I thought she'd been fixed, pliers taken at the bone, a sharp cut to excise the under matter, the other. They tied her down.

She screamed as they took out her eyes.

But she had cat's eyes, and better that she was blind and has human glass eyes if she wants to fit in. Eyes, the window to the soul, one look and it can change you. Have you ever been mesmerised by a cat's eyes, unflinching and yellow? The eyes of your dog as he makes you do what he wants by pleading, the eyes of a tiger about to pounce, or a hawk before it takes out your throat. Never look into an animal's eyes without first deciding how you want to look away.

The candle flickered out. Here, in this room where so much information had once passed through, I felt his body near mine, even as I pretended he didn't exist.

The Master.

"Ariadne".

The Master looked older than I remembered. He was aging in dog years, of course. I could see the line of grey hairs in his mane. All this elaborate ceremony for the unpalatable truth that there was nothing left for hybrids but to live in the shadows like vermin, trying to survive by maiming themselves to look human and pass. Sending the ones most human out to forage for food and medicine. He couldn't go himself. He was more than 10 per cent animal. But – he could talk, still.

He called my name. His hand on the small of my back and reaching up to slowly stroke me. Despite myself, I didn't flinch at his cold fingers. I had seen them before they reattached the skin coating, unyielding metal like a claw. He'd demonstrated its strength in the lab, crushing a cat's skull beneath his two fingers. But now, with the illusion of human, he was soft, though cold.

"Why did you come here tonight?" he asked. "We hardly see you anymore."

"I brought medicine."

"But that's not the reason."

"I need some information."

"I see you've made a hybrid – all of your own."

Ruaridh was slumped and chained against the column.
“That was – an accident. I needed to save him so he could help me look for my daughter.”

The Master looked at me with undisguised lust. There wasn’t much of him that was human. I felt the fur on my arms rise to the surface. I was hot and wet as well. Power was the ultimate aphrodisiac.

“It’s been a long time, Master,” I said. I bowed to him. He reached for me.

“I have missed you, Ariadne. Maybe if you want me to help you, you have to give me something in return.”

“Do you know where she is?”

He ran his fingers now, over my shoulder, easing the dress down so he was touching my skin, flesh on flesh. But it wasn't, really, was it? I was only almost human, and so was he. As I sunk my sharpened teeth into his neck, and sucked the warm iron juice into my mouth, I wondered in this former shrine to words, this abandoned newspaper office, what words they would have used for us. And what we were about to do.

“Yes, I do. A little birdy told me something …” He groaned as I ran my hands over his chest. A deep, guttural, animal sound. “Yes, Ariadne – take your claw and place it on me.”

“Where –is –she?”

We nipped and bit each other. There was fur on fur.

“Later…later…”

“No – now!” I demanded.

He was beyond disobeying me. Groggy with lust he mumbled, “the zoo – she’s hiding there – waiting for you in the –”

"Ariadne!" screamed Ruaridh.

The word came out as a scream, as my name, as a roar. The wind created as Ruraidh flew into the man on me pushed me back into a wall. My head hit the concrete beam at the corner, sharp and hard and I slid down in agony as I watched.

Ruraidh was on top of him, cub attacks Alpha male. I had chanced this as I brought him here, a cub but one I'd mated with before the exchange of fluids. Blood will out, and as Ruraidh's fangs ripped into the Master's neck and the dogs gathered to watch, I felt a little surge of pride. I had made him, and now that he had his first kill, he was one of us.
I closed my eyes and pretended to be unconscious, but I could hear every bite he took, every piece of flesh being ripped from the bone. The smell awakened a desire in me, or was it simply the pull of the inevitable moon dragging my hormones into line, the sea inside surging forward again, until I would be like young Ruraidh now, with only the desire for desire upon me?

But the others, pulled away from the operating table, were coming towards us, fangs sharpened. We had dared to kill the Master. And now we had to leave – fast. The sounds intensified, the pack swarming as we ran for the door.

“He killed the Master!” howled a half-man. “He must die!”

“It was a fair fight – it is the way of the animals,” I said.

“You have no right coming here –”

“Yes I do – I am one of you –”

“You work for Xenos.”

“I also protect a lot of you from Xenos.”

“Why did you come?” said the woman with the carved legs.

“The Master knew where my daughter has been hiding.”

“Why should we let you go?”

“Because the government plans on unleashing the viral dogs of war. And my blood and her blood are the only thing that will save any of you.”

Ruaridh clung to the wall, foaming at the mouth.

“This one – he won’t survive.”

“He knows what Kally is. He was there when they made her. I need him to live.” I carried him down to the tunnels. Past the old printing presses, long abandoned. Past the hybrids sleeping in huddles on the floor, hidden in the shadows. Once, this place had produced words. Now, it had gone the way of all words. No-one cares anymore. We emerged in a laneway, in the centre of the city. High rise buildings and car parks oblivious to the festering slum in their centre, a place where decay and pain and amputations occurred like breathing. Where the hybrids could hopefully be transformed enough to let them pass for something remotely human. I found a new four-wheel drive to steal and put Ruaridh in the back seat. It was only a 15 minute drive to the zoo from here. I’d be able to scale a wall easily and run through the enclosures until I found her. She’d be able to smell me. I knew that.
Kally – mummy’s coming.
There is a close relationship between ‘I am my body’ and ‘I am my past’, for my body has registered all my former experiences. Of course here a distinction is obligatory.

Gabriel Marcel

I imagined, in my motherhood fantasy, that I would have a room full of flowers in a private hospital suite, and Coben would be at my side, with our baby in his arms. I would be happy, but exhausted after the labor, and overwhelmed by the love and tenderness I felt for my child. I saw the scenario played in my head so many times – mother-daughter outings together, our first ballet concert, sharing afternoon tea at The Windsor Hotel in the city. In my dream, Coben would always be there, smooth and confident, settling any arguments in his can-do American style. It was a motherhood of dolls and dress ups, of making cookies and watching movies together, of soft toys and fluffy dogs we’d only eat if we were really hungry.

The reality, as it turned out, was a little different.

After I found Kally in the lion enclosure, resting her head against a lioness, the remains of a keeper in her lap, we’d got off on the wrong foot. Literally. She didn’t want to leave the keeper’s foot behind, saying she hadn’t quite finished eating it.

“I’ll get you another one,” I said.

“But I found this one, it’s mine.”

I never thought of toddler temper tantrums or moody adolescence in my motherhood dream. It was just all pink and sunny. I am not sure what I expected with Kally, but she’d changed since the photo Wolf had taken only two months before. It was as if the evil chemical factory had invaded her body with hormones overnight, and she had ballooned by at least 12 kilos, with a chubby face and acne. Or, it might be who she was eating. She needed a lean meat diet.

It didn’t get any better once we got to the car.

“Are you going to check for bombs?” She wouldn’t get in.

“Bombs? Darling, this is Melbourne, not Oxford. Don’t worry, there are no bombs.”

“I want to sit in the front seat.”
“Well, you can’t darling – my – um – we have a friend in the front seat, and he’d not feeling well.”

“Is it contagious?” she stared at Ruaridh. He didn’t even look human anymore, just a mutating, bleeding, convulsing lump. No one would imagine he was a gorgeous young man with the blond curls. He’d let Frankenstein’s creature take first prize at any beauty contest.

“No – he’s just, well, changing, that’s all. When he completes, I am sure he’ll look – better.”

I actually had no idea what he’d look like. The last man I changed had to be put down.

Kally reluctantly got into the back seat, then complained that she had run out of charge for her iPad. We had to stop off and buy a power lead. Just as well I had a blanket to throw over Ruaridh. We weren’t even half way to Point Nepean before she started complaining that she was hungry. I let her chew on the foot, wrapped in a paper bag so we didn’t scar the other drivers. But she finished that before Frankston.

“I want more food,” she said.

“Just wait a little bit. You just had a few toes, that should last a little bit.”

“I want more!”

I sighed. *Curse be upon you*, my aunt had told me when I reached puberty. I’d given her hell, shattering the quiet Camberwell Federation she’s called home until my mother was killed. She didn’t welcome me with open arms, but she had no choice but to let me in. Much like my situation, I thought.

I tossed her a Snickers bar I got at the petrol station. She sniffed it and threw it out the window, almost causing the XTrail behind us to crash as it veered sharply to avoid the projectile.

“I’m still hungry,” the kid whined. “I want to eat someone.”

I could hear my aunt laughing, as if she hadn’t been mauled to death by mutants on a sojourn to the outback. (Never, ever trust a dingo-mix.)

I hit the radio to fill the void and drown the panting that was swelling the air next to me. Ruaridh was getting worse. I could hear his bones splitting from under the scratchy wool blanket.

‘Welcome to the Hotel California’. Beggars couldn’t be choosers, and the Pajero I had hotwired was obviously owned by someone well over 50. It made sense - the Satnav was programmed to Pembroke Place, Portsea, the playground of Melbourne’s rich. I made it my
business to only steal from corporate headquarters like KPMG when the top floor rooms were filled with boardroom meetings. Always make every criminal activity, like shoe purchases, count. That was my motto.

*Push, push and push.* Insistent feet digging in behind me.

“Stop it!” I yelled. I looked in the rear view and saw her with her face screwed up in anger. "Stop kicking the back of the seat."

I could hear my aunt in my voice as I complained. My teenage refrain was “How long to pie and chips?” as we cruised the endless stretch of the Nullabor on family “holidays” to meet the in-laws in Ceduna, one of the few places where people who looked like animals could past muster as simply inbred. Even swimming in the turquoise waters off the bight at the eastern end of the Plain wasn’t enough inducement to make me a more pleasant person to be around on those trips.

For the first time in my life, I actually felt sorry for Auntie Joan. She hid her real self behind a perm, heavy make up and a teaching job. Her hobby was running, at least that’s what she told us she did out in the bush. Just as Tai Chi is actually a deadly martial art slowed down to almost freeze frame, so too are running and bushwalking in reality hunting activities where you pause for breath. Joan always washed the evidence off her skin before she returned home. Like I cared.

“I said I’m hungry,” the kid continued to kick the back seat of the car as I navigated down Point Nepean Highway. We were slowly cruising through Rosebud, past the single mums and pensioners walking around the seaside town as if they had no idea that a biological time bomb existed at the end of the peninsula. Well, I suppose that’s because they didn’t. Stick a few “hazardous area, unexploded bombs” signs up on a National Park and former military headquarters and you can get away with anything. Mum had told me this – make people afraid of the prosaic and you get away with what they wouldn’t imagine in their wildest dreams. Just the same way the government had been convincing the hapless farmers it was “rogue pumas” that had mutilated their sheep. Fed by some judicious drugs in the water, dodgy internet images and that infamous YouTube video, and no-one thought to make the links. For instance, if it looked like humans – particularly deadly humans – were involved in animal attacks that could have only been carried out by human predators with canine incisors – and these incidents happened only on the full moon, well, then, the answer was obvious. But people preferred to imagine a rogue litter of big cats, descendants of some mysterious cargo out of Biloxi 80 years ago, carted to Melbourne as World War 2 mascots by US servicemen. Go figure.
“I need something to eat!”

“We’re almost there.”

“You said that at Frankston.”

“I offered you a drive through at McDonalds.”

“That’s not what I wanted.”

“You don’t know what you want.”

“I’m starving!”

“Shut up while I’m driving. We’ll be there soon.”

Ruaridh groaned beside me. I’d thrown a blanket over him, so now he only looked like he was coming out of a bad drug reaction. His hair hung limply over his face, but he was still beautiful. I almost wanted to say, “I’m sorry”, but he wouldn’t hear me. All he could hear was the sound of his blood thickly pushing through his veins, and a *woosh woosh* of his thudding pulse building up against his carotid artery. He set my heart in flames, this boy. I was responsible for his condition – sure, I’d saved his life, but what I’d given him back wasn’t his life, either. It was – this.

As I stopped the car, pulled into a service station and parked near the LP Gas refill, I could hear them. Night birds. Jolted awake by the blaze of the service station lights. I saw Ruaridh flinch as they twitted and hushed them under my breath. The moon was full tonight and at this rate, I wasn’t going to be able to get us all locked in safely. And I still had to get inside the bunkers down at the fort. I needed back up, and some better weaponry than the reliable Walther PPK, which despite its trusty double action trigger mechanism wasn’t going to stand up against the cybs. Nitish had some cousins in Blairgowrie, who moved there after the Darklands incident. He said he was down for the weekend, and you know, if I ever wanted to drop in –

“Stay here – if I even smell you open the window, you'll regret it. There'll be no fresh kill for you tonight, got it?”

The kid stuck her tongue out at me. Its tip was red and bleeding from her newly sharpening teeth. I saw tears well in her eyes. Part of me wanted to hug her? Tell her it was going to be all right. Well, it wasn’t. If we got out of the evening alive, that would be something.
I locked the car. Ruaridh wasn’t going anywhere, but I couldn’t take the chance. In a couple of hours, he’d end up killing someone and another body wasn’t on the agenda. There was only so far rogue pumas could be used as a cover.

I pushed self-pity from my mind as I swung my long legs out of the Pajero. I could already smell a bloke at bowser 3 – with the white BMW 4WD – checking me out. The wind carried drops of sweat as his dick twitched. I watched him, he watched me. I looked at his body reflected in the large shop window, the harsh fluorescent light reflecting his hard, muscular body. But as he turned to replace the pump, his nascent beer gut caught my attention. A high fat diet wouldn’t be good for the kid. I needed something leaner.

What was I thinking? I couldn’t go out on a hunt and leave those two alone. I couldn’t even get a sitter in. I’d have to get home delivery. I headed for the pay phone. They’d be tracking the mobile and I had already flicked the SIM card into Port Phillip Bay.

By the time I broke into 3 Pembroke Place, Portsea, it was dark and this far into the tea trees the canopy meant I had to concentrate to see until my night vision focused. I wasn’t risking flashlights, and snapped at the kid when she tripped coming in. I made her take the bloke’s feet as I carried him, and we placed him on the large leather sofa. I wanted him where I could see him.

“Find a remote, and lower the blinds,” I said.

“I can’t see.”

“Yes you can. Figure it out.”

I left them while I explored. Downstairs there was a new sauna, which might come in handy depending on how bad Ruaridh got. The temperature monitored wineroom had plate glass to the ceiling, and was airtight. The upstairs bedrooms were the size of bowling alleys and looked out onto the infinity edge pool below, which in turn spilled into the grass tennis court. My feet sunk into the thick pile carpet, and I resisted the urge to go on fours, my hands twitching to feel the plush wool on my skin as well. I counted four bedrooms as well as the spacious parental retreat, where the yummy mummy was no doubt meant to earn her keep every night and probably every morning as well. The home gym confirmed my suspicion that ornamentals were also disposable and the woman of the house ran on a negative kilojoule energy balance of fear, the anxiety of being replaced eased only by Botox and filler.

I paused in the ensuite. My long dark hair hung around my face and cascaded down my body. I was taller than most men. It had worried me growing up, now I was
grateful for the edge it gave me when I had to kill them. My deep olive skin meant I could pass for 30 most days. But I found myself running out of things to say with the young men who woke up beside me. You could get them to shut up during sex, but the next morning was always an ordeal. I didn’t care to know their names, much less their aspirations. I suppose I could have gone to their place, but I like to be in control.

*I am not a werewolf*, I said, my mantra as I looked in every mirror I passed. *I am not a werewolf*. I do not change at the full moon. My curse is that I am constantly animal. And constantly human. It tugs inside me mercilessly, a fight that becomes a battle as my cycle peaks. It was better to fight this alone, rather than explain. That’s why I counted on no-one. That’s how I liked it, and the fact that there were two people whose actual lives depended on me right now really, really pissed me off. For a start, the kid wasn’t what I expected. I thought she’d look like me, but a better me. I thought she’d be – I don’t know – funny, smart, not this sullen, overweight and acne ridden creature who had invaded my life. What was her social mother feeding her, anyway?

*Her mother*. I was her mother, right? That other woman – she was the thief. *The egg snatcher*. Some woman much, much older than me who wanted to feel a kick inside and so bought the illusion of motherhood along with the stretchmarks. Because if you look pregnant, give birth and your breasts fill with milk, the kid must be yours, right?

The home cinema and entertainment area stretched out across the entire floor. The four micro suede couches around the large wall length screen were white. What were the owners thinking? It was going to be impossible to get out bloodstains. What would my ideal home look like? I’d moved around so much, worked so many nightshifts and weekends, my flat had become just a place to shower, eat and bring men in for sex. And eat them. I had it decorated by someone from one of those large designer furniture stores when I realized a stylish place seemed to make me happier. And black leather furniture was easier to keep clean.

I prowled, sniffing. This house – something like this – would it have ever been on my agenda? What sort of woman scored the man who brought the bacon home for this place? Coben Thorley, head of Xenos, Executive Intelligence Officer, Bio-Alert Division 4, didn’t even have a place like this to go on the weekend. I know – I spent enough nights perched in a tree outside his shack down at Lorne to know what he had. The old myth that sea air was good for the lungs turned out to be true - seawater contains all the 89 known elements present in our bodies, including osmium, gold, vanadium, zinc and iodine. Sea air is charged with healthy negative ions that accelerate the body’s ability to absorb oxygen. I suppose
Coben thought taking his daughter down to the beach would help. But cystic fibrosis eats away inside out, and the phlegm inside drowns you with a slow and violent hand. I’d rather go under with the salt water pushing the air from my lungs. I remembered my university English Literature class, before I’d been recruited. *Full fathom five thy father lies; Of his bones are coral made; Those are pearls that were his eyes: Nothing of him that doth fade; But doth suffer a sea-change; Into something rich and strange; Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell …* My nose twitched. Someone was outside the house, near the tennis court. I eased the glass door open, and once out on the terrace ran over to the side of the garden, head down. Behind a large tree, I let my fingernails extend, the sharp points helping me grip. No-one expects to be taken from above.

“**Ahh!!!**” the intruder screamed, as I jumped and pushed him into the ground. “Ariadne?”

I looked up and saw it was Nitish, now bleeding from a sharp kick with my heel. The face bled a lot, unfortunately. I knew white couches were a bad idea.

“Nitish!”

“You said come in the back way,” he whimpered. “Oh, Christ, it hurts.”

I’d broken something. A cheekbone?

“Oh – Nitish! I’m sorry.”

“I can’t see...” Blood filled his left eye.

I stripped off my scarf and wrapped his head in it. Well, it wasn’t actually my scarf – it was a silk Hermes number I had taken from the parental retreat, but in the five minutes I had worn it I’d grown very fond of it.

“Did you bring the stuff?”

Nitish groaned as I carried him over my shoulder. He mumbled something in Hindi and I saw a Peninsula Pest Control mini van parked in the driveway.

“Pest control?”

“Mutants are everywhere,” he said, between his sobs. “People with money pay to have the help scanned. It’s a lucrative sideline. I run it with my cousins.”

“Yeah, it’s a bitch. You know how I said I had company? Well, I need you to meet the family. And be discreet. The bloke is in a bad way and the kid is turning into a feral tiger. Literally.”

Nitish groaned. His blood cascaded to the polished oak floors behind me and as I edged forth, into the deep, New Zealand wool carpet that signaled the start of the open plan
living zone. It looked like I’d have to torch the place after all. The Portsea mansion was fast
turning into a forensic scientist's wet dream. And it would only get worse as far as bodily
fluids went before the sun rose on the convoluted nightmare that would pass as my second
day as a single mum.

I tried to swab down his face, but Nitish pushed me away. He reached into his pocket
and pulled out a luminous green vial.

“Bellerophon.”

I went to grab it from him and he shook his head. “It's deadly to hybrids.”

“I'll be very careful.”

He gave it to me, and I felt its weight. It was in an alkali-aluminosilicate vial with titanium
seal.

“They're after the kid,” he said.

We looked over at her, hunched in a chair playing Angry Birds on the iPad.

“Who wants her?”

“Everyone. She killed Wolf. And apparently – there's a trail of bodies behind her many
escapes. A little like her mum, yeah?”

I smiled. That's my girl. Kill anyone who tries to hurt you.

“Who do I watch out for?”

“The Moreau group and Xenos. There's a shoot to kill order on her head.”

“Why?”

“Ask the good doctor. Ruaridh Mackenzie is in on it too.”

We both booked at Ruaridh, a heaving lump of flesh and fur convulsing on the kitchen
floor.

“He's not going to be useful for some time,” I felt like I was stating the obvious.

“You need to get out – there's a leak.”

“I'm already on the run.”

“Then run faster. Go somewhere they aren't expecting. And don't tell me. If they find out
I've been speaking to you, they'll torture me to get at you. You won’t be safe.”

I squeezed Nitish’s shoulder, his Ganesha T-shirt covered in blood.

“I won't tell you because I don't want them to torture you. Period.”
“I love you, Ariadne.”

I put my finger to his lips. I ruined everything and everyone that I touched. It was the human in me.

A tear rolled down his cheek, mixed with the blood. I wiped it away, tenderly.

He helped me get them into the car. Kally sullen in the back seat, Ruaridh throwing up in the passenger seat. One big happy family. As I pulled out of the drive flames already dancing hot and red on the roof, I stopped next to Nitish’s van and wound down the window.

“Why Kally?”

Nitish shook his head. “Ganesha once told Lord Shiva ‘my parents represent the entire manifested universe’.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s not about Kally. It’s about who her parents are.”

“But that makes no sense – I am her mother. Everyone knows that.”

“And her father? Who was he? I think that’s why they are interested.”

We drove for ten hours, deep into New South Wales before we even stopped for petrol. Kally never spoke to me, just played with her iPad. How many babies were born every day in the world, and had been born throughout history, where for whatever reason – mostly the crimes of war and crimes against women – the father wasn’t known. Mine was just a 21st Century spin on the world’s oldest story. But she was still my kid.
I curled myself around Ruaridh’s sweaty body. The process was making him burn up. His skin radiated a heat so fierce the air shimmered as he breathed.

“Honey, I could fry an egg on your back. Don’t laugh, I tried that on someone once.” I nibbled the thickening tissue at the base of his neck.

He howled. As much as he could with a gag in his mouth.

At least I used a silk scarf.

“You’re hungry, I know. But if I gave you someone to eat now, you’d just be sick. Trust me. The enzymes in your stomach haven’t mutated.”

He wrenched and buckled against me. I knew this would be hard. He’d been vegan for so long. I tried to make light of the necessity for him consume flesh. Human flesh.

“My mother always said, don’t talk to strangers. Eat them.”

He whimpered in agony. I wrapped my longs legs around his, and soothingly ran my hands up his outstretched arms, which were chained to the bed. I didn’t necessarily want the whole BDSM thing, but safety first.

His body felt good. Despite it’s instability.

Ruaridh was tall and lanky in his human incarnation. The metamorphosis was adding bulk, broadening his shoulders, putting muscle on his torso, thick hair on his skin. I’d always been the stronger, but soon he’d be able to pin me down and the thought of being able to momentarily relinquish control in bed – was exciting. Maybe he could tie me up. Maybe.

He wrenched the chains. I whispered in his ear.

“Not yet my love, not yet.”

I couldn’t let him go. There’s a chance he’d turn on me. He was so angry. Once he regained speech, back on the peninsula, he’d demanded that I do something – anything – to
reverse the process. I had to tell him then. This is it. There is no turning back. I made the
choice for him. I could have let him die. He lives.

“But not like this!” he screamed, he held his hands to the light. Twice their usual size.
Long talons for nails. And his eyes. Yes, he could see in the dark. But his pupils were
luminous green. An animal’s eyes. Oh, my tiger burning bright. These are the forests of our
night. A tangle of branches and a rustle of leaves, can you hear it, baby? Yes, the slightest
squeak of a bandicoot, the hurried crawl of an echidna. And that’s why your ears are so
much bigger – all the better to hear them. All the better, my dear.

“And my hands?” he yelled. His voice a deep baritone, if anything more velvety now it
was tinged with the beast. “My fucking hands?” He knocked a lamp over. China on the
carpet. I caught his quick fingers before they could slice a vein open with the shards.
Suicide wasn’t an option. We did not die like that.

“I am so sorry my darling, there is no predicting what happens. Or what the outcome is.”
I held his face in my hands, his still beautiful face; milky white skin, ridiculously high
cheekbones, and strong jaw set off by a mess of deep strawberry blond hair that bobbed in
lush waves. It was only the angularity of his features that saved him from looking like an
overgrown choir boy. That and the stern set of his mouth and the sharp look in his eyes,
onece ice sea blue, the gaze of someone always chasing after ideas.

I kissed his hands, his hybrid hands, the hands I wanted so badly to claw my fevered
skin. I longed for the frenzy of an animal pawing me with desire. And the voice of a man
telling me what he wanted to do to me, and how he wanted to do it. Man and animal. Flesh
and fur. I wanted that combination. Inside of me.

But Ruaridh had taken those hands of his. Those emerging claws. And he’d placed
them firm. Around my neck.

And I who loved him had given him that scar, which will never fade. The one across his
face. The one slashed through the retina now bloodied. And so even though he can see
better than a human, he’ll always be vulnerable.

I didn’t mean to damage him. But I have to protect myself. And the kid. She hasn’t
reached her change yet. She’s still only human, really.

And so I can’t let him run. Stumbling in fear and pain. A half thing. Until he accepts what
he is, he’ll rage until the dying of his human light. Rage, rage against it, my love, but it won’t
help. After denial there is anger. We are in anger now. Bargaining will come. He will offer
me something, like the others. If I change him back, he will plea, he’ll kill for me. He’ll bring
me the head or the heart of my choosing in a red velvet box. He will seek the prize that will render him human once more. I have lost so many men at this stage. Maybe one or two made it to depression. And acceptance, the final stage of the grief process, who among the many achieved that final point in the journey? Not one. Still, where there is half a life, there is a half a hope, and that’s what I am holding out for. Surely this Oxford educated man will be able to paddle through the underworld with more ease than the truck driver from Darwin with such a penchant for young German backpackers he had perpetual heartburn. It’s funny how we suddenly recall old loves. They flare up from our subconscious without warning, glowing briefly in a nostalgic haze before returning to the depths of our past where they belong. The thing is, I want Dr Ruaridh Mackenzie to be with me now. I want to continue with the dance of minds and the conversation, intellectual and yes erotic, that we started. I damn well miss it.

That’s why I could not unchain him. Besides, the cheap hotel, while anonymous, still had other paying guests. I didn’t want Ruaridh on the loose. Not like this.

I had to keep him safe here until the worst passed. Process. Change. Transformation. Name it what you will. It was like stepping off the cliff into a dark sea. Blackness all around and icy water in your lungs. It was like driving blind in the dusk, pelting along knowing any second a roo could bound in front of the car. It was like...

I couldn’t lie any more.

It was like dying.

I had lied, of course. I told Ruaridh that it happened quickly. But what was I supposed to tell him, when his bones were shattering and his flesh was splitting? That it would ebb and flow, this flux between the species? That the hair would force its way out of his follicles and curl in tufts and the next week, he’d just be left with boils filled with rancid pus? And it would start again, and again?

I hated this shit.

I hated what I was. What I had made Ruaridh into.

And yet, what choice did we all have? At least this way, he’d be able to use his voice and brain and his education again. He just wouldn’t look entirely human.

Three raps on the thin door. I sniffed. It was the kid. I eased myself away from Ruaridh and off the itchy chenille bedspread. My feet hit the nylon carpet with a static buzz. The kid looked up at me, her coarse features muddied in the morbid dim of the flickering external, a
miserable eco-light, a 10 watt casting it’s milk weak glow over the razor sharp asphalt, newly laid with the stickiness of fairground toffee.

I looked past her.

“You didn’t lock the car.”

“Yeah I did.”

“I can see the light on. Go back and do it.”

“You do it,” she snarled. Little fangs, white over the gooey pink lip gloss.

I grabbed her by the hair. Pulled her to me. “I said, do it!”

Kally flung the bucket of ice, the bouncing cubes flitting over the ground like diamonds on the black sea.

“I HATE you!” she cried. “I want to go home.”

“There is no home,” I said quietly. I could feel her body quivering under her thin grey hoodie. I eased up on her hair and awkwardly pulled her to me. For once, she didn’t flinch.

I pushed her inside, in case someone saw what was happening on the bed. Kally stifled a frightened cry. “Is he dying?”

“In a way. He’s got my DNA in him now, and it’s fighting what he was. Soon, the change will be complete.”

“And he’ll be like us?”

I almost gasped at the hope barely concealed in her voice. I had to tell myself that she had already killed and eaten three men to break out of the facility. She was my girl, that’s for sure. But her attachment to Ruaridh was touching. If not slightly disturbing.

I pulled myself away from her. Looked deep into her dark eyes, tried to overlook that damned monobrow and the thick dark spread of hair unfortunately covering her upper lip.

“Why do you care so much?” I asked.

She shrugged. Eyes swelling with that teenage defiance. “He’s your boyfriend, isn’t he?”

“Semantics,” I said.

“I don’t care if he’s Jewish.”

I wondered if she was trying to be funny. “We will work on your vocabulary later. I guess he is my boyfriend.” Well, what was I going to tell her? That he was just the latest in a long line of men I fell into bed with? What sort of role model did that make me? I was still working
out this mother thing, but gut instinct told me I should try to find a moral line and stay within its boundaries. And that didn’t include fucking and eating any man I felt like. Pity.

“What about Nitish then, I thought he was your boyfriend?”

“Nitish is a friend.”

“He thinks he is your boyfriend.”

“No way.” I liked Nitish. Trusted him. Ever since the first day he’d come into the grid, fresh from university, wearing that crazy Ganesh T-shirt with its trunk, four arms and female features, I knew he’d understand me. We hung out together. I broke into his house regularly to eat his food and feed his cat. I made it my mission to drive away any hapless young woman his family tried to arrange for him. He helped me clean up after myself, when things got a little – dangerous. We never did anything remotely sexual together. He knew I only cared for him as a mate. Didn’t he?

The chains rattled. I turned to see Ruaridh sitting up. He looked almost normal. He was staring at the kid.

She hissed. Back arched.

“She knows me,” he said.

I put my hand on his forehead. Just like that, the fever had subsided. His eyes even looked relatively normal. For a cat.

“Welcome back.”

“How long do I have before it’s complete?”

“I don’t know. But now that you have stabilized, you are going to get really hungry. And I don’t mean for tofu.

“We need to talk.”

He kept looking at Kally, and in return she stood there, staring at him. In fact, it was more than that. Her whole body had gone rigid and she was overcome with an intensity I had not seen since we’d met. It was almost like she had been transformed herself. Into an adult.

“What is it?” I asked him. I turned to Kally. “What’s going on?”

“He was at Oxford,” Kally said.

“Ruaridh teaches at the university. He’s an anthropologist.”

Kally shook her head and pointed her finger accusingly.
“He did the tests.”

I looked at Ruaridh, who was arching up the bed like a cat moving away from a wolf. But he was twice her size. Twice her age. She hadn’t even gone through her change yet. She was at least six months off bleeding and despite being able to kill and feed, Kally was more or less human. Apart from me, and I was her mother, no-one would be able to smell what she was. But Ruaridh sensed something. I moved away from him, looking at him anew. What had he done to her? To my daughter? Was I one of these pathetic women who let a monster into their bed and turned a blind eye while they molested their nubile offspring? Who was Ruaridh, anyway?

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“She was part of an experiment.” He didn’t take his eyes of Kally.

“The human-animal hybrid facilities are based at Trentham Downs.”

“Yes.”


As I waited for his reply I felt the ground shake. Or it was the bed? But Ruaridh hadn’t moved. Within seconds, the rumble and the movement had increased, and light flooded in from the windows.

“Hit the floor!” I screamed. Kally threw herself down with lightning reflexes.

I threw myself on top of Ruaridh, keeping my head down as I wrenched the chain links with one hand to free him. It took another second to roll him onto the floor and under the bed. In that time, the first wave of machine gun fire hit the back wall, a fraction off from where I’d been sitting.

The noise was unbearable. The sound of a military helicopter close by. Floodlights searching us out like bugs behind a fridge. Under the bed, I reached out my arm to Kally and she slid herself to my side in an instant. They’d be sending in teams as soon as the chopper was low enough and judging by the sounds of the rotors, I had less than 20 seconds.

One Mississippi two Mississippi three Mississippi – I counted to four. Pressed the detonator in my pocket so the pre-prepared C-4 I’d molded to the back wall behind the cupboard exploded. I remembered that nice family from Canberra and hoped they’d left early and were not watching cable TV on the sagging bed.
Kally screamed as the sound blast hit and the wall caved in. I prayed the ceiling would hold up long enough for us to make it through the wreckage.

“Run – now!” I yelled. I dragged Ruaridh and pushed him through the rubble and the dense plaster dust. Kally was ahead and saw the waiting car before me.

There’s always a glass half full way of looking at any given situation, such as being stalked by the government and tracked to an isolated location by a team of trained killers with assault weapons.

Ruaridh could see in the dark, he’d regained his speech, and was the size of a bulked up elite sportsman. Along with the equivalent of road rage, he had claw hands that could rip your face off in a nano second. And I had already hotwired a Pajero for a quick exit with a local itinerant in portion size pieces waiting in the esky. Okay, so I’m a man-eater. Deal with it. I get hungry. I get the urge. Hell, I need protein. A girl can’t live on vegetarian food alone, not this girl, not at this time of the month. And besides, I have mouths to feed.

The 4WD started first go and we were out of the Country Stay Motel faster than you could say “how are they going to cover it up once the bloggers post their pictures on the net?” We had food, water and a full tank of petrol. I always have a back up plan. Besides, I also had a text from Coben with an image of the massive white domed observatory that housed the Anglo-Australian Telescope near Coonabarabran, two hours away.

“You’re going to trust him?” snarled Kally.

“I’ve been with Coben since I was nearly your age.”

“What a pervert.”

“I was eighteen. He got me a place at London University. Transferred me over.”

“So, he was your teacher?”

“He recruited me.”

“Bet you wish he hadn’t.”

Ruaridh started convulsing. Kicked the 4WD door so hard it buckled and the car swerved as I fought to steady it. Kally yelling at me, telling me it was my fault.

It was at least an hour later when we were on the back road towards the Siding Spring Observatory before Kally spoke to me again.

“So, did Coben recruit Ruaridh as well?”
I was about to say no, of course not, when I stopped myself. Maybe Jung was right. There are no coincidences. And though I was concerned about this rendezvous that was Coben’s idea, should I be more worried about a possible traitor next to me?

But what was I going to do? I could keep running – in the opposite direction. Sure, I could keep running. And then what? While I had the kid, and she was safe now, I couldn’t keep her safe forever. She had all the instincts of a fine killer, but I had to train her to hunt properly, and teach her how to cover her tracks. She was still only 11 years old. A baby. The virus was safe for the moment. If Nitish couldn’t get a lock on the tracking device embedded inside me – set to expire the minute I did – then he knew what to do. I wasn’t leaving anything to chance. Better to face Coben head on. I needed to know the truth.

Later, when I glanced in the rear view mirror. Kally was asleep, slumped across the back seat. Ruaridh had woken and was lucid. His hands awkwardly resting on his legs, jeans pitted with holes where his talons had ripped the fabric.

“Is Kally telling the truth?”


“You tell me exactly what you did. Or I throw you out of the car at high speed. And you can see what real animals do when they find a mutant among them. Especially one badly wounded. Maybe with a bullet lodged in its brain.”

He squirmed in his seat and shot me a terrified glance.

“My part in the research was purely anthropological.”

“Go on.”

“I was a young Masters student. My supervisor asked me to be part of a research project in which we’d take a subject as a newborn and observe them in social groups.”

“That was Kally.”

“Yes. We wanted to see how she interacted in social groups in various situations - it was part of a project looking into morality and testing an evolutionary theory that suggests it is the product of a range of domain-specific cognitive mechanisms.”

“In English.”

“I was looking at whether she could co-operate under similar situations to our human ancestors.”

“But this research must have been done before, even in hybrids?”
“With Kally we had the opportunity to start mapping from birth the basis for a large scale investigation into human hybrid moral values. Is there a blank slate? Is there a crossover? It will deepen our understanding of the nature of morality across species.”

The road was flat and endless, trees illuminated in the headlights and nothing beyond. It would be hours to the next town, but I’d already got Ruaridh to scour the map for the maintenance roads heading from Coona into the national park around the observatory. The reports of bushfires surrounding the wider area had me worried.

“Who was the surrogate?” I asked. It hurt to do so. It was like asking who your lover married when it wasn’t you. I wanted to know, but I didn’t.

“Some 20-year-old student from Belgrade. We paid her well, put her in a facility and kept her safe until Kally was born.”

“And now?”

He shrugged. “In a place like that, war’s never far away. Girls like that are disposable. People disappear all the time.”

“Why did you use a human surrogate and not a hybrid?”

“We wanted to control as much of the experiment as possible. A hybrid would have thrown up all sorts of possibilities. Nature versus nurture, womb environment, it was easier to keep it human.”

“But then why choose my eggs?”

He looked bewildered, and I knew. He had no idea. He thought I had become hybrid like everyone else. He had no idea what I really was. He thought my eggs were classification A. Maybe someone knew the significance of using my eggs. But not Ruaridh.

“It seems like a lot of effort to go to in order to get a human child. A university could have procured one from anywhere, even the UK. Why go through with the problems of surrogacy if you just wanted a human baby?”

“We didn’t just want a human baby.”

“But you said you didn’t want a hybrid.”

“I said we didn’t want a human-animal hybrid. The experiment was bigger than that.”

“What do you mean?” I had a frightening flash of Jeff Golblum in The Fly, his jaw falling off.

“Why do you think Coben wants us to go to the observatory?”
I glanced at the rear view mirror and saw Kally looking at me.

How much had she heard?
This old man, he played ten.
He played knick knack once again.
With a knick knack, paddy whack,
   Give a dog a bone.
This old man came rolling home.

- Traditional

That afternoon, we arrived near the summit of Siding Spring Mountain. There was only one other vehicle in the carpark. All staff at the observatories on the summit had been evacuated, and I only got through with Kally and Ruaridh under blankets as I presented my Xenos badge to the fire services.

Coben must have been reluctantly waved through as well.

We were the rogue operatives within government ranks that had few friends. I am sure the feeling was – if you want to go up the mountain, on your head be it. It was the sort of arrogance Xenos was known for.

As we pulled up into the carpark, the giant dome looking down on us, I reflected that some other time, in a parallel universe, perhaps, this would have been a perfect family outing. Me, ersatz dad, the kid. Kangaroos grazing on the green grass in front of the massive building. All we needed was a picnic blanket and a thermos of hot tea. But the bloke was in the front seat of the car in a twisted, pulsating heap. His paw-foot had smashed through his shoe. Talon-toes bloodied at the escape from confinement. In the oppressive heat, it had already started to pus and smell. And the kid refused to budge. She resolutely had her headphones in, something loud and obnoxious giving her tinnitus.

And it was hardly the weather for a picnic. It was difficult to even see the sweep of the Warrumbungle mountain range. Smoke in the distance covered everything in a cataract curtain.

The smell of death singed with the menacing plume of burning eucalypts hit me as I got out of the car. Ash flickered in the heavy air like snow. A memory. My face pressed against cold glass. Daddy, can we make a snowman? A distant land. The big house. Locked doors. Those screams. That smell. I could feel it, sometimes, the flicker of the past licking up, feel
my mouth making the shapes of vowels more clipped than I was used to. A distant dream. The older I got, the less real it became. But there had been a time I knew green grass, when I had pressed my body on the damp earth with my mother by my side, singing me strange nursery rhymes. “Pussy cat, pussy cat, where have you been? I've been to London to see The Queen…Pussy cat pussy cat what did you do there? I morphed to a mouse and gave everyone a scare!” The smell of that deep, lush fragrance was the green of my childhood remembered.

Not this. My wild land. Parched and arid. Wild and magnificent. This endless country that did not embrace me. It knew me as a predator. I felt it reject me, pushing me to the surface like a pimple. I was a blot on its surface, and this furnace that was devouring all around us was nature’s way of cleansing.

My clothes clung to me and I briefly thought of turning back to the car's air conditioning. The thick heat wrapped its claws around me, leaving me gasping for breath. I panted. But I couldn’t leave Ruaridh in the car. Leave a dog or a child in a car in Australia on a hot day and they are dead within minutes. He was as helpless as a child, he wasn’t even panting properly. And if the fire did come up this close?

“You’ll have to help me,” I told Kally.

“I don’t want to.”

“I don’t care – he needs us.”

“So what?”

“We help our own. Lift.”

Something in my tone stopped her short and she snarled and went around to the front of the car and helped me with his feet.

Ruaridh’s claw dragged on the dirt path as we carried him up to the observatory. Before he lapsed into unconsciousness, he’d told me the newer telescopes, like the nearby SkyMapper, were housed in quite small buildings. The smaller the dome around the telescope, the less ‘weather’ it created with the internal air – almost like shrink wrapping. That way, the image of space was less distorted.

A kangaroo and joey, big enough to be out of the pouch, watched briefly as I struggled with the door before bounding off to safety – somewhere. And here I was, bringing my child into the lion’s den.
Inside, it was like a time warp. Ruaridh said it has been built in the 1970s and while they obviously replaced the computers inside the panels, the setup looked like an original *Star Trek* episode, complete with retro chairs. Someone had arranged a chess set between two desks. A faded poster of Agent Scully in the X Files was taped to a door.

A ramp wound down into the main area where the huge telescope dominated. That’s where Coben was waiting for us. He had his gun out, very American. He stood above us, on the telescope platform, his strong, hard body in black combat gear. Assault rifle at the ready. I knew he’d be fully kitted out. Able to kill me with every weapon he could strap to his body.

“You can just toss Big Mac on the floor,” Coben said. He indicated with his gun. I lowered Ruaridh with Kally’s help.

“My, what a big girl you have become, Kally” he said. “Do you remember who I am? I suppose not.”

Kally moved closer to me, shaking. I placed my arm around her.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“I want the kid. She ran away from us. I want her back. She belongs to the experiment.”

“She’s my daughter!”

“Do you even know what that means? Someone else has the stretch marks to prove that statement. We just took your egg.”

“Why?”

“Give me the vial.”

“No.”

“It’s over, Ari – you lost. The humans won. By the way, Kally, thanks for dispatching Wolf for us. He was a thorn in my side for years. It was very Greek tragedy of you to kill your own grandfather, by the way. A nice touch.”

“Wolf? But he’s the leader of The Moreau Group!” I yelled.

“Never quite forgave your mother for experimenting on him at Trentham Downs.”

“My father died. He was shot, I saw his body –“

“He went underground. We were tracking him then. How do you think I came to find you in the first place when I recruited you? I knew your interesting genetic history even then. I just had to confirm you were as unique as we imagined. Clever, clever Prendick. Clever Dr Moreau.”
“All those years together – you were tricking me –“

“You were driven by ambition, Ari. And we had some good times, great sex, right? Now if you give me the virus, and the kid, I’ll let you start again. I have the rest of your eggs.”

“What are you going to do with her?”

“Make more little Calibans – she’s nearly breeding age, and she’s very special. And you can go and have babies. Maybe with Ruaridh? If his wife doesn’t mind. Though you should know I recruited him from the beginning. One of the brightest 16 year olds I’d ever seen at Oxford. He was happy to work with the data we were collecting from this very telescope.”

“What data?”

“But we needed a suitable egg. Not the usual cybrid embryos with the animal nucleus sucked out and human DNA inserted. We needed something recombined at a nuclear level, something very stable, something generations old. A little sub species of the Homo sapiens itself. I needed you, Ariadne. I needed your eggs.”

“Who was the surrogate?” This time, I wanted the truth.

“Someone from the university. Another anthropologist. She was a lot older than we anticipated but the female womb is an amazingly versatile organ, able to be pulled back from menopause with a little cocktail of hormones. She got pregnant with the first transfer. What she lacked in youthful energy we compensated for with au pairs and nannies, while she diligently collected the data and raised Kally.”

“And the father?”

With his free hand, Coben ran his palm against the telescope. “Come on Ari – you surely figured that one out by now? Didn’t Ruaridh tell you? His first wife was a planetary scientist. She interpreted the data we received from sub space. But she got a little greedy – threatened to go public with the information. An unfortunate accident happened.”

“Did Ruaridh know you killed her?”

“No-one is more ambitious than Big Mac, not even you, Ariadne. He’s the son I never had.”

On cue, Ruaridh started screaming. The floor was wet with blood, Ruaridh’s blood. From where I stood, pigskin boots ankle deep, I was about two seconds behind any chance of saving Kally. Even if I leapt, panther speed, at the ledge where Coben stood above us, he’d be able to fire a shot into her before I could reach him.
There was, however, one thing he hadn’t counted on. Why would he? For 20 years I had loved him, served him and been both the agent and the whore he had cultivated and nurtured. Ever since he’d recruited me, up to the time he placed the sparkling engagement ring (but it isn’t) on my quivering finger, I had been Coben Thorley’s bitch.

I knew what he expected. That I’d willingly give him the antidote in return for my precious eggs he was holding captive in the secure biobank. And then, pathetically grateful at having a chance at motherhood, I’d return to him and he would leave me dangling while he decided if now was the right time for him to be a father again – or not.

The only problem with that scenario is that I was already a mother.

And the overweight, spotty, hairy and sullen creature about to be blown up was my flesh and blood. My fur and snaggletooth offspring. My hideous progeny. My child.

Kally.

“It’s over, Coben,” I yelled. I held up the vial. The Bellerophon virus. The one that would destroy all hybrids - myself, Kally, Ruaridh. A sizeable amount of the human-animal population. Possibly, more than that. We are all a little animal, after all. This virus might wipe us all out.

I held it tight. It glistened, luminous green, in the floodlight. It only needed contact with one Alpha male to spread through the population. And Coben was nothing if not an Alpha male.

“Put it on the ground, Ariadne. And then hands in the air, where I can see them.”

I stared at him. I’d loved him for so long I forgotten what he looked like. They say love is blind. So, I’d been blinded by love. But they also say – didn’t see that coming. Prepare to be sideswiped, Coben Thorley.

“Okay. I’ll put it down when you put the gun down.”

“You’re kidding? You can do better than that. She’s a mutant.”

My skin prickled. I felt bile rising from my stomach. She may be a mutant, but then so was I. Besides, she was my mutant. After all, what had I really expected? A blonde, ballet loving, girly girl with perfect skin and blue eyes? Kally was the flesh of my flesh. She looked like my yaya. Monobrow and all.

“Why not have me in on the project? I can help you study her,” I countered.

I could smell him hesitate.
“Maybe I’ll just kill little Caliban,” he countered. “She might be as useful dead as alive, and a lot more controllable.”

The sound was coming up the mountain like a freight train. I could hear it and so could Kally. The fire was getting closer. Inside, it was uncomfortably hot. Coben was sweating.

I handed Kally the vial. Squeezed her hand. Hope she understood. “Go to him.”

“NO!”

I pushed her. He kept the gun trained on her the whole time. She climbed up to the viewing platform – held out her hand. He snatched the vial and grabbed her.

So, now he had a choice. Gun on her – or me.

Suddenly, he realized he’d been played.

“No sudden moves Ari.”

I could see it happening even as he spoke. Kally opened her mouth ever so imperceptibly. What came out of it was unlike anything I have seen before.

How had they made her? She was no ordinary hybrid. She was more than Prendick could ever dream of. No wonder they wanted her. Coben had obviously never seen it either. He screamed in fear as the thing hissed and pulled its razor sharp teeth at him and ripped his ear off.

I had my gun out and put the first bullet in his chest before Kally – or the thing - could attack again.

Coben looked at me with utter surprise. “No oath?” he whispered, as he started falling off the ledge and into the floor of blood, lying next to Ruaridh who continued to convulse before us, limbs snapping and flexing, animal-human-animal-human. Their lifeforce flowed together, blood brothers after all.

I made sure Coben could see me kill him. But first, I aimed one pigskin boot deep in his groin, 20 years of “I will leave my wife one day” propelling my foot.

“I shall strike you like a vengeful mother, for trying to harm my child. Feel my anger and know my hate, you bastard.”

I emptied the next bullet into his head. Another right into his cold heart.

“And this one is for the past 20 years,” I added. A final shot to his groin.

Edinburgh style.
Siding Springs Mountain is seven hours from Sydney. Even by the time we got to the highway and out of immediate danger, the glow on the horizon lingered, and thick black smoke billowed up and choked the air. Kally refused to talk. I turned the radio on, listening to the country burn. They’d find the bodies when the flames settled, as Coben had been hoping. For now, vial in my pocket, my little Caliban at my side, we were safe. But for how long?
For someone called Ariadne Stephanopolous, my grasp of my father’s native tongue is tenuous at the best. I do not have an ear for human languages.

“Kalós orísate,” said the man in the passport control booth at Athens airport.

“Sorry?”

He looked at me suspiciously, looked at the passport again. My name. My very Greek features. My very Greek looking daughter standing sullenly next to me. And I couldn’t understand him?

“I’m from Australia,” I smiled. Making my accent as broad as Bondi beach. “Melbourne.” Everyone had a cousin in Melbourne, right?

“Yes, very good, and welcome here,” he replied. There was, however, no smile. Well, given the economic state of the country, who could blame him?

I breathed a sign of relief when we had finally made it to the luggage carousel. The retina scans at Heathrow had me worried. Ever since the most recent attacks by the Moreau group in London, hand scanners had been replaced at major terminals. I wished we could have flown direct to Athens. As it was we had another five hours of travel time added to our journey. So I watched a lot of airport television.

While the NSW bushfires had made world headlines, I couldn’t rely on nature covering my tracks. Suppose pieces of Coben Thorley – his teeth, which wouldn’t burn – were eventually discovered? Running seemed the only sensible solution.

I didn’t have time to argue with Nitish’s suggestion – or his fake passports. We needed somewhere to go while Kally was changing. Dolos. My father’s village in northern Greece.

Dolos wasn’t even on the map. Surrounded by mountains, it is all but hidden from view. The highest part of the village, where my family’s home is still located, is snug under the
gaze of the looming rocks of Karaouli. I’d climbed up there once before, on a brief visit to the family as I was about to take up my place at London University. I stood on the rock and ripped apart a stray Albanian. With the wind whipping his long hair into my face smeared with warm blood, I sucked his marrow as I gazed at the scattered white houses, red roofs blazing against the deep green trees in the isolated valley below.

I’d be safe there. Although I’d only been back sporadically since my first visit as a teenager, the small permanent group of locals would keep my return secret. I was one of them, a Dolianate, despite what my mother was. I had my father’s name. I belonged there. And they looked after their own. In 1944 when the village was burned by the German army my father, his family and the other villagers had fled and hid in the hills. I’d be able to take Kally there, if we needed to disappear.

My daughter looked more or less normal now, but I don’t know how long that would last. I had to keep repeating that phrase over and over in my head – my daughter.

What she might turn into sent shivers down my spine. I’d given my mother hell as a teenager, but at least she knew what I’d become. Kally, on the other hand, might grow wings, a tail, a thousand arms or tentacles spouting from her torso. Then again, she might be just like me, and change back and forth from animal to human, never quite one or the other.

I’d find out in due course.

I’d spent the long flight to London draining as much alcohol as possible and resisting the urge to grab a man and pound him in the first class toilets. I kept thinking about Ruaridh. The heat inside the observatories had got up to 100 degrees Celsius and even I wouldn’t have been able to survive that. I should have done something, not just left him there.

I suppose the authorities might come looking for answers about that, too, but there were no reports of the Oxford professor’s death. Indeed, a week after they allowed staff to return to Siding Spring Mountain, there was only widespread relief that apart from the electrical wiring and support buildings reduced to cinders, the observatories and the telescopes were intact.

I’d even scoured the astronomy blogs, but there was no mention of two bodies. Or even one. It was as if Coben Thorley and Ruaridh Mackenzie had never existed.

I had won. Right?
We weren’t even finished at the baggage carousel when the kid started complaining. I was fiddling with my mobile, putting in the Sim card Nitish organized so I wouldn’t be bankrupted with an international roaming charge.

“I’m hungry.”

“Not now, Kally. We have a long bus ride ahead of us.” I wanted to avoid planes and scanners as much as possible. We’d take the road to Thessaloniki, and the trains were on strike as the workers protested against austerity measures.

“I can’t get on a bus without food.”

“We will have to make do with human food.” The moon hadn’t peaked. She could handle it.

“But mum – I want a human – please -”

I stopped dragging the suitcases and turned to look at her. My heart did a little flip. Mum? I smiled. “Okay darling, we’ll check into a hotel and I’ll grab us a drug addict from Omonoia Square later tonight.”

She brightened instantly. “Can we have Pepsi with that? And watch Twilight on the In-House movie channel?”

And everyone says that teenage girls can be such monsters. Here Kally was, suggesting a mother-daughter night. I’d better enjoy it while it lasted. Soon, she’d be grown up enough to kill for herself. My phone rang as we hopped in the taxi. I was haggling with the driver about a cousin of his he reckoned had a cheap hotel near the Plaka. He was staring down my top, and trying to rip me off. I snarled, raised my fangs. He crossed himself and drove us there with the meter switched off. I answered the call. I suppose Nitish was checking up on me. It was sweet. And a little annoying.

“Yeah?” I mumbled.

“Ariadne?” It was that distinctive Scottish accent. Ruaridh.

I was silent.

“Don’t hang up. There’s something you need to know about Kally. Before it’s too late.” I glanced at her, earphones in, staring out the taxi window in awe, humming along to her favorite pop song. My daughter. She’d been prodded and probed from birth. Xrayed and scanned and drained of blood and fluids for her secrets. They’d found nothing – yet. Whatever it was, I didn’t want to know. I felt like a forty-year-old woman who had to make a decision about whether her precious pregnancy should be violated to assess whether the
foetus had Down Syndrome. Then passively accept that the baby be aborted if the chromosomes didn’t add up. What did I know about normal, anyway? What did I care if the human race sprouted wings? Maybe Kally was the logical end point of human curiosity, just as I was part of that continuum. Besides, I’m sick of killing to order. From now on, when I hunt, it’s going to be sustainable. I’m only going to kill what I can eat and feed my family. No more oaths.

I wound down the window and threw the phone out.

Kally turned to me.

“Why did you do that?”

“Crap reception.”

“Way to go, mum.”

She smiled at me. My little Caliban.

THE END