

[Dear Readers, below is the first chapter of my novel, *The Harvest*, which I am currently revising. I will start pitching it summer 2019. If you want to get updates on my work, consider subscribing to my newsletter <https://www.barrioblues.com/newsletter.html>]

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The Harvest: A Novel

By Dr. María J. Estrada

Chapter 1: Ashley Packer

My mother hands me an old gallon container; this one is grey without a filter. I look out the window and see no Red Guards on the street. No Guards means no Harvest, most of the time.

“Now, Ashley,” says my mother, as if I haven’t been doing this run since I was six years old, “Don’t talk to strangers. Don’t stay out in the sun too long. If you hear the sirens, run to the old bunker. Just last week, Mrs. Ramirez’s boy was harvested right before he got to his safe spot. You can’t hide here during harvest.” Her faded grey eyes are still beautiful, and I want to trace that deep indentation with my finger, but caring too much is a sign of weakness.

“Mom,” I sigh looking at her weary face. She is leaner than I remember with ever graying hair and perpetual orange stains on her hands and face from the processing plant. Her hair is a knot over her head with nothing holding it tight but a wispy strand of her own dwindling hair. I want to give her a biting remark, as really, I should outrank her because I am more productive now, but instead I smile and say, “Don’t worry Mom. I’m the fastest runner in my class and besides, there was just a harvest yesterday.”

Mom hesitates like she wants to tell me something, but even plant workers are not supposed to talk about their trade, and I am always suspicious of the packing plants. I live in

Packer Town, one of the suburbs outside the vast city of Horizon. Most of the people in Packer Town work in the packing plants.

"Just be careful," she gives me an unusually long hug, "Remember--"

I clamp my hand over her mouth like I used to as a toddler and say in a robotic tone, "Be productive. Be accountable. Be safe." But safe doesn't mean from the Harvest, but dangerous anti-government ideas. I take my hand off her worried face, "I got the red ribbon again this month. I will be safe." It's true. I have gotten the red ribbon award for being productive, accountable, and punishing those who are not true patriots. I am safe.

I step out into the harsh glaring sun wearing a large Panama hat. Panama was once a country, and that is all they tell us in school. I walk confidently because running is suspect, but I manage to walk 3.5 miles an hour like I have purpose, when my only purpose is to get clean water.

Half way down the street, my heart freezes and fight to maintain a neutral face. The sirens begin softly, like an old song you can't forget, and then the sound rises to a near immobilizing pitch. I check to see if guards are around and run, making sure not to drop the gallon. I wonder where everyone is or if someone got an underground notice I didn't. I crash hard into an old man. It's the homeless man who has been avoiding harvest since I was a little girl: Old Hope, I call him. He's too old to be processed, but I always wonder what they do with old spare meat or old people in general. I don't ever want to find out.

For a moment, we both have the same impulse. Though I am only twelve, I am strong and lethal. I have learned fifteen ways of killing someone, two with my bare hands. I could maim him or at least stun him, so he will be left behind. But instead, we both get up and run in opposite directions. I guess we are not productive citizens after all. I head down Victory Road toward the retiree compound. She will be waiting for me, my old friend.

I look quickly to my right and see a red squad beating a young boy down. He is unusually fat for the neighborhood and is overburdened with water jugs. Water jugs! I only carry one, and although I can lift 40 pounds easily, the empty container seems to weigh more than anything. To my left a grey volunteer emerges out of nowhere and grabs for my arm, but I offer a swift punch to her throat and easily scamper away into Mrs. Jenkins' apartment. Maybe she will get it, even though she volunteers. I despise volunteers. They are normal women who can't afford genetic modifications, unfortunate women who couldn't find a sponsor. Still, that doesn't give them the right to harvest us. Especially not me.

I am a girl with high prospects.

I look for any squad member that might be lurking about. Hiding from the squads inside your own home if you are on the streets when the harvest starts is illegal; that tracking is possible because the census software at home tracks my arm-port, since I don't work yet; one must be accountable. Being hidden in others' homes is frowned upon, but Mrs. Jenkins doesn't care what

the neighbors think. She doesn't care if she gets sent to the processing plant. I really don't think she cares about anything but our weekly meetings.

"Thought I was going to have to get out there with my shotgun," chuckles the old Mrs. Jenkins.

She sits by the window, unafraid of gunfire. I know she has been waiting for me because she is holding the old history book in her hand, the one with *all* the pages in it. There is the familiar smell of green tea and black-market biscuits. I spy them on the table and besides the adrenaline rush, I feel a strong surge of hunger. I wonder how much they cost her; in the market, non-meat products run astronomically high. Last week, I traded a whole leg of dog and two bananas for mom's sanitary products. Mom never said where she got the leg. Dogs are also rare and bananas even more so. I give Mrs. Jenkins a sincere grin, and know better than to pester her for details.

"Oh please," I answer catching my breath, "You wouldn't last a millisecond. Out there," I point, "With your broken hip," I aim at her hip.

I try not to stare at the bright orange shawl she wears that matches her almost glittery skin, one of the best modifications money could buy in her youth, "Or that 'kill me' flag you have on." Only Mrs. Jenkins favors them over the military style uniform retirees wear. Today, the woman sports a knee-high pink dress which makes absolutely no sense and clashes against her intense blue eyes. Her eyes are younger than the rest of her body, which is starting to show signs of deterioration. I guess Mrs. Jenkins doesn't care about the latest mod trends.

"Hmmm," I admonish with mock-disapproval, "Trying to get arrested with those clothes?"

Taking my gallon, she walks with the step of a young girl into the kitchen, despite her slight hobble "Bah, no one cares about a woman over fifty. I don't taste good anyway." She winks at me and walks away slowly. Her hair is long and graceful, like the tails of our neighborhood cats that run rampant because cats are honored and protected. I cringe at how long and impractical it is, especially when water is so hard to come by.

"Don't you mean sixty?" I say. A loud bang makes me head for the kitchen but not too quickly. After all, we are trained to be unafraid of death.

When I enter Mrs. Jenkins has the gallon filled to the brim. I never ask how, but she always has water. *Always* has enough, but then, she lives alone without daughters.

"Two liters, not worth the risk," says the woman, "You should go out on Sundays and with your escort, a c-ervant would be prime."

I snort, "Mom sold it. Besides, she doesn't have the money to have me engineered, again. Not that they'll take me at the Center," I pause and look over my shoulder, "I still can't eat government protein. I tried again this morning. Doc B says it's the enzyme, but she hasn't reported me. She can't run the test to figure out what is wrong with me. It costs too much money,

and mom is already so in-debt from the internal mods I have." I stare at her, longing to glimmering skin and someday, ferocious nails, "Mrs. J, are you sure the meat doesn't come from the harvested? Is it human meat? Tell me, honestly." I always ask her the same questions, and she always answers the same.

"No way, that's just a rumor to keep people more afraid. People are harvested for organs and whatever the government needs. Most people are intact and become servants, especially children."

I give her a skeptical look, "Right, Mrs. J. Intact. What do they need human servants for if they have c-ervants? Besides, I've never seen any. Have you?" Almost everyone I have seen harvested is a bloody mess.

"Beatrice is a good woman," she says switching the subject, "She was one of my students once, before all this—" she says, "You're so tall."

"What?" I ask.

"You're so tall and smart. I'm worried someone will want to patron you, sooner than your finals," she looks out the small kitchen window, "Then, I won't see you anymore." That is rare; patronage starts when a girl is 16, usually, but some girls are more adept, and I have been hiding some of my skills.

I give her a knowing look, "No one will take me. You know that. It's too expensive to feed someone who can't eat government meat. Anyway."

The sirens end and the announcer reports, "There will be no more gatherings for thirty-six hours. Be productive. Be accountable. Be safe."

"Liars. Liars. Liars," I say in the same robotic voice, "This is the third harvest in two weeks. Do you think we are going to war again?"

Mrs. Jenkins gives me a squeeze, "We're always at war. Now, go take this to your mother and come back fast." She hands me a small pouch, "Go before they have time to search you. Plant this in the rooftop like I taught you. Be sure no one sees."

"Ah Mrs. J, everyone has a rooftop garden hidden under solar tarps—"

"Yeah, but not for girls. Now hurry along!" she strokes my hair and pats me on the butt harder than she should.

I know she is right. The gardens are to grow food for boys, the lucky boys who have brave parents. My mother jokes that the extra food is to fatten them for the harvest, but she is bitter having lost two sons by the age of sixteen. I never got to meet them, so they don't mean much to me, but she still mourns them, even though truly, she doesn't know what became of them.

I walk nimbly, avoiding strangers. No telling who might steal my water or worse, says Mrs. J, but I am not sure what worse is, yet. I have seen young boys being raped in the alley and

dead people starved or shot by regular citizens. Once, I saw a woman selling her male baby on the street corner, and I held my tears all the way home. We are not supposed to cry for boys.

"Hey," says a raspy voice. It is Guadalupe Ramirez or as I like to call him Alan. Boys are given their mother or a matriarch's name and father's last name. It's cute for most mothers to do that, but his mother hates him. That is part of the reason I call him Alan, after his father.

He is my age and in the same class. He has the most brilliant smile with strong white teeth. It's the only thing that is strong in his body. His dark brown hair is cropped short with highlights from overexposure to the sun. Most boys in the neighborhood have dark skin and black eyes. He has unusually blue eyes, and I wonder if somewhere along the way, the gender got botched up. His smile warms me to the core, and for a moment, I forget the ugly harvest.

I wave, then think better of it and scowl, "Carry this for me, *boy*."

Alan snorts and takes the jug, "Humbly, oh great one."

We both giggle, and I pace two feet ahead of him, which isn't hard because today he is wheezing so loud, anyone can probably hear him way down at the processing plant, which is three miles away. He wears an ugly shirt with some red flowers and patched up blue jeans.

"Glad you weren't harvested," I say pointing at his shirt and add, "I was sorry to hear about your cousin."

He doesn't say anything about that loss at first, "You and me both; mom dressed me this morning and sent me out, even though I could barely breathe. When the sirens went off, I hid under the old resistance bunker."

I am instantly furious. Even if he is sickly, she has no right. Boys, especially lowborn boys, are not allowed to wear red. That is a color of honor, one I wear often but am not partial to. Everywhere you see red: red cameras, red advertisements, red screen ads. Red sidewalks.

"Too bad *he* wasn't that smart."

"Next time, lose the shirt and say some girl tore it off your back," I urge him.

"And get sun burned? Then, I'll wear red all the time," he hands me a jug, bows gracefully, and continues onto his flat.

"Hey, boy?!" I ask, "Where is your shit suit?" because I just noticed he has no protection. Most Girls' skin is genetically modified to bear the sun's deadly rays, but not boys, at least not boys in our neighborhood.

He shrugs his shoulder, "Mom sold it to buy lard and some flour to make food for Johnny's wake."

"See you at school," I say. I turn back to look at him; he is walking with a limp on his left foot. I gaze upward and note how the hair on the back of his head is near white, bleached from the sun.

I hurry up to see my mother, "Mom you here, or food?"

"Not roast yet," she jokes giving me an enveloping hug that smothers me. As a plant worker, I suspect she knows what happens when people get processed, but she has never talked about her job, and I wonder if she is conditioned not to say anything or if she is hiding things from me. She comes in to kiss me but thinks better of it, and yanks my ear. "What have I told you? Do not consort with that *boy*."

"Mom, he's in my class, in my group," I lie. All boys and girls are put into groups until grade nine; he is in my year, but not my group. I am glad, because after eighth grade the divisiveness starts. Boys become the focus of teachers' scorn. They get segregated and made to be the practice targets of kicks and punches. Alan has been my best friend since we could walk; the truth is I have few friends that are girls because they are so competitive and would surely turn me in if they found out about my defect. Luckily, I have always been a recluse, a sort of genius slotted to be patroned for engineering, so I can play the snob and be detached. Girls aren't supposed to love boys anymore, but I care about him, just a little.

"Too bad. You should be in a private school for girls," my mother rubs her hands together, "Not going to school with *that* boy."

"Awe, mom, it's OK. Some day I'll go work in the Horizon and buy you a new apartment where only women live."

Mom laughs. Her parents refused to modify her, although she claims they had the money to do so, but that is a story all low-class women tell.

I go into my room and hide the seeds behind the bedpost. There is a hole I carved there when I was five, where I used to hide small trinkets. I am not the only one with one of these, but people need some kind of escape, some way to feel they are not totally controlled by harvesting laws. I pull something out and hide it in an inner pocket. I look up to the ceiling. My dad inserted a panel in below the grubby chandelier. For someone supposedly of average intelligence, he did a job even a Red Guard couldn't see past. All of his hiding spots were in places no one would suspect, not under floorboards or compartments in closets. Up above is where I keep my book of short stories and gun, just in case. I run back to Mrs. Jenken's street.

Up high on a reinforced communications pole hangs the body of someone who will never contribute again. That is the worst kind of punishment, someone who will never nourish society. I wonder what he did. He could have liberated some men or worse, killed a woman. But, that crime is rare, unless it's harvest time, and only poor women are expendable. It's not knowing, what people fear the most. No one knows what ever happens to those who are harvested. Some say it's a gimmick to control population and others that they are sent to war. Few that their meat is actually government protein, besides, too many people are starving for that in Packer Town. Besides, I know eating human flesh has dire health consequences.

Last month, a woman three blocks down actually ate her little boy. She grew very ill. It made the national news, and as her punishment she was fed to the Pit. Even though human life has little worth in the slums, cannibalism is highly frowned upon.

My arm-port lights up, and there is an advertisement for a new mod I can't afford, “Tiger Teeth,” not the most creative ad. They are literally pointy teeth, and I shiver at what those teeth could do on the playground. I could rip some choice girls' throats out.

I think about who I won't see at school this week. It would be so easy to list who was harvested with our technology, but the government doesn't share the names. Instead, it highlights the names of all the girls being patroned that month. I hit “Like” on a few; two went to my school. Lucky them.

On my way back to her house, I almost step into a large red pool. A long blonde hair dangles in the breeze. I suck in my breath and think of Marcia Goodwin. She is the only girl I talk to at school, a plucky girl who always scores low on her monthly tests. I think her mother did drugs when she was pregnant because Marcia doesn't even have the minimum internal attributes like agility and intelligence. But, then genetic engineers are not gods. I look again and imagine a volunteer or worse a Red Guard beating her down because her name has made a list of someone who holds no promise. Marcia Goodwin would never be truly productive in society, and I am not even sure that she is safe from anti-establishment ideas. One day, I spotted a book that was peeking out of her pocket, but her, I didn't report. I think she even knew that I saw, and she could have used that information against me, but Marcia also has a weak heart.

Blonde hair is common I tell myself, knowing instantly that long hair is not. Even I sport a short brown bob, so I don't waste water when I wash it or look too gross when I style it with government goop. I turn to look at the stain one more time and run right smack into a Red Guard.

“Watch where you're going, citizen!” she hisses and stands ready to strike.

I look up; it is a slender, graceful woman with expensive glimmer skin and perfectly sculpted ears. I stare at that unnatural golden glow. It must have cost her a fortune. Her eyes are an unusual emerald underneath her crimson visor. But I notice she is relaxed and not really poised to attack.

“My apologies lieutenant,” I say confidently, “Be productive. Be accountable. Be safe.”

“Be productive. Be accountable. Be safe,” she answers with a slight smile on her face—slender tiger teeth protrude—and marches on.

I can't resist taking a look back. This guard hasn't done the full transformation, or she ran out of funds after getting those wonderful mandibles. She is still five foot six, and not over six feet tall. Her hair is also not long, which means she ran out of money.

What's the point if you can't tower about poor people like me? I wonder.

When I walk into Mrs. Jenkins' house, the teacup and biscuits are still there. I put my hand over the items and let the warmth seep into my hands; the tea is a rich Earl Grey, my

favorite, and the biscuit is an insta-biscuit, but Mrs. Jenkins has stuffed it with butter, not margarine.

“Gift?” said Mrs. Jenkins automatically holding her hand out, “And don’t tell me what you did for it, dear.”

“Nothing perverted,” I say handing her the red velvet pouch.

“Oh my,” says Mrs. Jenkins, “What a treat!” Mrs. Jenkins picks a pinch of white gold and lets the granules roll between her fingers and back into the pouch.

I beam at her, “It’s real sugar. Real sugar, not some synthetic knock off.”

“How?” asks Mrs. Jenkins, showing genuine admiration.

“I helped the Lister girl pass her midterms. She may be modified with the best, but she’s a total moron,” I smile triumphantly because that is partially true. The other truth is that I had to beat someone up at the playground who had upset her that day. “Her family is so filthy rich compared to us, and Lister kept bringing chocolate and other treats. Of course, she never shares, but just the sight of them made me think her family had to have sugar. . . I was right, but . . . how is that possible when the islands are gone?”

Mrs. Jenkins snorts, “You *still* believe everything you read on the vid-screen or your arm-port? Ha!”

“But there were storms and famine,” I argue.

“Sure, but man has a way.”

“Don’t you mean woman, you dissident?” I ask in the authoritarian tone I heard earlier.

For a moment, Mrs. Jenkins looks at me uncertainly, and we both start laughing.

“Let’s drink our tea and eat our biscuits where no one will see us,” heading to the basement, she urges me to follow.

Mrs. Jenkins always makes sure all the doors are locked; she sets the wall vid-screen at a high volume with the national channel blaring. Today, they are televising the arena but not a single famous woman is fighting. No doubt, these women are just parading for show, so they won’t fight to the death, just maim each other brutally.

I walk into the basement, which is always cold, but the old woman asserts that helps a person think and stay alert.

“Today,” announces Mrs. Jenkins, “I’m going to tell you about China. . .”

Almost every day it is the same thing. Old Mrs. Jenkins, once a respected member of the Old Guard tells me impossible stories. Families used to have more than one child and celebrated boys. People ate animals like cows, all households. Everyone had clean water, but men messed everything up.

I can only imagine times what these times were like and can’t conceive anything being herded but citizens or criminals. Today, she is talking about the flu, a disease that has since been eradicated but nearly wiped out all of the Chinese population.

“Was it biological warfare?” I ask habitually because it’s always biological warfare.

“Well, that is one theory,” says Mrs. Jenkins, “You tell me girl, when has there ever been a virus that only affected one area of the country? Or one part of the world?”

I think long and hard, “Never, but then why was no one else in other parts of the world infected?”

“Well, some say it was the government itself that spread it through food. Others an errant corporation that did not properly test its products.”

“But,” I ask, “Weren’t most Chinese products exported?”

“Ah, that is the mystery,” she says looking out the window and assigns, “Try to figure it out, and we’ll continue next time.”

For the next few days, I analyze the problem. *Was it the food?* No, most of that was exported. *Was it medicine?* No, most of that was exported, too. *Was it a virus?* But, there were no reported cases elsewhere. I research the historical archives, yet there isn’t much text left, just images and a few articles that support the Red Guard and a lot of history on the ills of men.

I look at the images carefully. They are advertisements with beautiful women, at least I think they are beautiful because their skin is pale and their eyes the color of burnt earth. There is not a single modification on them. I look up at the window and see my reflection. I am tall for my age, nearly 5’ 7” and although I am skinny, my instructors tell me I am all muscle. Mrs. Jenkins says my face is sweet, the shape of a heart, but I don’t see it. My hair is a honey colored brown, and I hate to see the day it has to be turned a deep, unnatural red, because if I am lucky, I will join the Red Guard. Maybe I will be modified like those strange Siamese woman, trying to look like their beloved cats, if I am lucky and manage to eat government meat.

No. I look at the ads and see one for make-up. I can’t imagine modifications without engineering, but people used to change their looks like a chameleon. No one uses these cheap tricks anymore. Everything is engineered with science.

Make up. Definitely not.

Then I notice a magazine from 2032 and spot something interesting at the bottom of the page. It is in the August edition, and I haven’t seen that mysterious ad anywhere else. I scan through other pages. I smile contentedly.

“Well, well my little friend. Whatever could you be?”

I scan other international magazines, but find nothing.

I take a snap of the ad with my arm-port and go to see my history teacher. I mutter to myself, “I know it’s cheating.”

Ms. Loop, my history teacher is one of the few women I can talk to without feeling measured and assessed all the time. Part of the reason is that Ms. Loop is so uncharacteristically plump. She had the full genetic modifications, but she is so clumsy that no one admires her. Her skin is luxurious, though not the golden tone from the lieutenant earlier, and her amber eyes are

simply perfect. I come in quietly and see her full bottom hangs over the small government issued stool. I guess even government modifications can't prevent flaws and bad habits.

"Ah," says Ms. Loop with joy, as she sips a cup of something, "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

I spy a clumsy rivulet of blood trickling down her expansive face. Showing blood while you eat or drink is seen as a sign of low-class starvation. Blood must never show. Hunger must never show, although we are always hungry.

"You have a little. . ." I inform caressing my own cheek.

"Oh!" snorts Ms. Loop, spilling more blood onto her desk, "Who cares anyway? It's not like no one knows. Government blood is the best for optimal performance."

Startled, I look around, but we are alone. I want to ask her if she thinks it is human blood, but that is a terrible insult.

"Would you care for some?" she says reaching for a cup, "It's fresh. I believe this is goat's blood."

"No thank you," I say although I am feeling treacherous hunger pangs, "Uh, I was wondering if you could tell me what this was?" I show her my arm-port.

Ms. Loop analyzes the image and smiles approvingly, "I see."

"What year was this?" inquires Ms. Loop.

"2032, I think." She knows no one has assigned me this work, but she never asks why I am asking questions because she is ever delighted that I *do* ask questions. The other girls avoid her and make fun of her behind her back. Once someone drew a lewd picture of Ms. Loop being done by a dog. Of course, I beat up that girl and erased the image during midday break; no one has drawn stupid pictures of her since.

"And what was happening in 2032?" she presses on.

I answer uncertainly, "Well, a series of earthquakes in China, tsunamis in Asia which hurt their economy, and most importantly, loss of crops with dramatic weather changes," I add in a joke laughing, "You know people used to not believe in Global Warming? Those stupid, stupid men. Now look at us."

She laughs heartily, "Arrogant men with too much power." She snorts and little blood oozes out of her nose, which causes us to both laugh.

She regains her composure as most women do, on command, "How many people died in China that year?"

"Uh, over 800,000." I still don't see the connection. I admit, I feel like a man must feel all the time. Quite stupid."

She never judges, "And how did they die?"

"A virus. I think," I stare at the image, "I don't understand."

"Saliva," answers Ms. Loop.

She looks at the advertisement. It is a cute cuddly creature, a cross between a cat and something else. The eyes are a disturbing red with hints of green.

“These were government issued companions. If you were stressed, if you were lonely, if you were poor, the government issued one of these pets. Free. They are nothing like the companions of today, but they served the same purpose.”

I am stunned, “How many? How many were issued?”

“A little over 800,000. How did they not get out of the country?” she says guessing my next question. “They were banned from airports and honestly, they had a very short life span. Just enough to bring the population to a controllable number, and even then, well. . .” Ms. Loop.

“Could they do something like that here to control the population?” I ask.

Ms. Loop’s smile vanishes, “My dear, they don’t have to. Our system is near-perfect.”

“Of course, thank you,” I say bowing respectfully, “Be accountable, be productive, be safe.”

She smiles wide and tweaks my nose, “You be safe, my dear. Important people are coming, so be sure to neaten your desk.” I want to ask more, but I leave wondering if she just threatened or warned me about my ideas and extra-curricular activities.

*

The playground is the one place I hate to be, but we all need to be there. The boys sit on the benches and watch. Most of them are jealous of us. They can’t run as fast or do some of the flips we do. On occasion a fight breaks out between the boys and girls, but the teachers let it go just a bit, especially when potential patrons are around. Today, there are two potential patrons lurking about, so the fighting will go on longer than usual.

That stupid redhead, June Lister, gives me a smirk; I know she’s angry with me because I outscored everyone in math, although not perfectly. Usually I do just above excellent, but never the top. That day I was just so distracted with the thought of mom and Alan’s raspy cough.

“Hey Starving Trash,” she says nastily as I walk past her.

I can’t ignore her or that would be seen as a sign of weakness, “I see you got new shoes,” I comment before she attacks me.

She shows off her shiny leather shoes. They are red with an unusually silver pattern along the edge of the sole.

“I guess you got tired of wearing your mom’s heels. The cheap whor—“

I don’t even finish the sentence before she strikes, but I’m ready for it. I lower my body unnaturally nearly touching the ground. She claws where my face would have been. Shots to the face are not allowed. I do a back flip back and strike, get into pose 1, and strike her with my left hand across the ear. That is a sensitive spot on her since her level 3 mods; she has soft round ears that haven’t quite healed yet. She yowls, and I grab her lengthening hair.

It’s slick, far more slick than I imagined, which must be a new mod because it feels smooth and slightly oily. She slips away and does a double back kick clipping my chin. But I have been kicked harder before. My head doesn’t even snap back, and, I suck in and lunge forward.

I knock her to the ground and punch her repeatedly, being careful not to hit her face. I punch the side of her perfect right ear, the one I struck before, again, and she screams trying to hold back tears. I punch her clavicle and hear something pop.

My homeroom teacher, Mrs. Aspen blows her whistle and slowly pulls me off with one arm.

“Ashley! You are not supposed to fight with level 3 mods. You are at a severe disadvantage,” she says angrily.

“Clearly,” says Ms. Loop laughing heartily.

This infuriates June, and she strikes my face. I know she has cut me deeply with her steely claws, her absurd level 3 mod claws that are not necessary in our age group. The blood is streaming down, and I have to close my left eye, so it doesn’t get drenched.

“Now girls,” says Mrs. Aspen, “The fight is *over*.” There are rules to engagement, and June Lister has done the unthinkable: She has acted like an animal. It takes a moment for her to realize what she has done, and she tries to strike one more time despite the coming punishment.

Reflexively Mrs. Aspen grips her in a headlock and takes her away like a rag doll, while she whines about her broken clavicle.

Ms. Loop escorts me to the nurse, “Come now. I have Med Creds, just enough to fix up that wound. Put some pressure on it before everyone wants to lick your face.”

The thought is repulsive to me, but I see a fourth grader staring at me intently.

I look at her and the rest of the kids. Some of them are giving me smiles of approval. They love it when a level 3 modified girl gets shown up, especially by a lowly level 2. I look at my feet, then, at Ms. Loop, “I think your wrong.”

“What?” she asks fumbling wither her account module on her arm-port.

“I think you’re wrong about animals being at fault for the flu,” I say sighing, “It’s always people that do the worst thing. Always.”

Ms. Loop gives me a warm look and escorts me to the medical wing.

There must be some important women there today because a girl two grades above me has two of her fingers severed. They will be repaired if she has enough credits.

“Wow,” I say to myself, “She must really need the money.”

Ms. Loop snorts, “Or she got what she deserved.”

I look at Ms. Loop. Teachers aren’t supposed to have favorites, let alone students they don’t like. All girls are equal and honored in our society, at least that is what they tell us. Still, teachers tend to favor their wealthier students, though, no one would admit to favoritism.

She smiles at me and tweaks my nose, “You should have gone to a private school.”

I smile at her weakly as the pain in my head grows stronger, “People tell me that.”

The nurse is in a cranky mood, “Shit. I’m running out of supplies. Three sponsors are here! Imagine.” She grabs my face and looks at the cut. The scanner checks for a concussion and for good measure she scans the rest of my body.

“You need to eat more meat,” she says, “You’re borderline anemic. No sponsor wants that. Hmmm, no menstrual cycle at all, yet?”

I shake my head and try to divert the conversation, “Why sponsor then? They’re supposed to help needy girls like me.” Ms. Loop chuckles.

“Cheeky girl,” says the nurse. With one sweep, she takes her silver machine. I smell burning flesh, and it burns cold. In seconds, the cut is gone. I touch for a scar, and there is none.

“Good as new!” says Ms. Loop cheerily and escorts me back to class. By then, everyone has been talking, and Alan gives an imperceptible thumbs up. I go to the front of the class where all the girls are seated. The boys sit in the back and usually just tune out when the teacher talks. The teacher is overly enthusiastic and almost bouncing, and then I see *her*.

She wears an uncharacteristic silver outfit, tight around her body, with that every gorgeous skin. Anything would look amazing next to that golden color. I look carefully and realize it’s the Red Guard I ran into before. She smiles at me, and I stare at my desk. Could she be looking for me? Sometimes the selection is so arbitrary. Sometimes it’s premeditated, and no one ever knows what happens to the girls until much later when they are almost unrecognizable. The teacher asks questions, and I answer well, but not exceptionally because I can’t afford to be sponsored. Productive citizens must consume, especially the government issued rations and that means eating government meat.

I steal a glance at her, and notice the gun peeking through her jacket.

On my way home, I think about China for a long time and not how wonderful I would look with amber eyes of my own and that amazing skin or those hideous nails. When I reach Mrs. Jenkins, I feel more confident about the answer.

“Well, did you figure it out?” she asks scrutinizing me.

“No,” I answer, “I thought at first it was these . . .” I show her the image of the government companions. “But, that didn’t make sense because the poor got the brunt of the disease. Even the rich got these pets. The president’s daughter also died; that’s why China issued its first modifications of girls. Resistance to this disease. I think the pets got infected first somehow, and then the people.”

“Good work,” says the old woman, “Most people thought it was these animals, but the so-called experts were wrong. Those men who thought they were scientists.”

“Well,” I say waiting for an answer I know I won’t get it by just asking, “What was it?”

Mrs. Jenkins clucks her tongue, "You haven't figured it out yet?" She pulls out another ad next to it

There is only one full-page ad, *Nutri Pills, Your Pathway to Top Health*.

"Nutri Pills?" I don't believe it.

"The first ones," answers Mrs. Jenkins.

"But, they weren't starving in 2032. What was in them?" I ask staring at the advertisement.

Mrs. Jenkins shrugs, "Who knows? Political prisoners? *Herded* people?" she chuckles mocking my humans are food theory, "The product was patented, and only top scientists knew what was in them, but I suspect they were compliance pills. Once the Chinese project failed, not much else was heard about Nutri Pills until fifty years ago, when we developed our own."

"Wait!?" she asks, "How do you know it was the Nutri Pills?"

"Because my father helped re-issue them," she answers her ears almost flicking back. I can't tell if she's sad or just pensive, "He was a great doctor, just like me. Just like me. And that is all for the day."

I stare at the clock, we have an hour left, but I walk home anyway. I think about my father who was a no one. I often wondered if he killed himself because he was ever so clever and was too smart to get herded. Some men just do that; they kill themselves. One day two years ago, he never came home. No government papers came to report that he was processed or imprisoned anywhere. In fact, for months, Mom would search the streets and ask around the black markets. He looked for cannibalized parts there, too. An eyeball on a disfigured face or his unusually thick black hair. But, it happened that way sometimes. People would just vanish. My fear was that someone we knew just harvested him in some basement, processing unit and actually consumed him, selfishly with no accountability whatsoever. Though illegal, some basement processors existed, but the penalty was worse than death. At least that is what Mrs. Jenkins tells me, and I am not sure what is worse than death.

"Hey your majesty," says a familiar voice. Alan sits at the doorsteps looking depressed and weaker than before.

I sit next to him and take out my homework pad pretending I am showing him how to solve a complicated math problem. We are better off than boys, but girls shouldn't always be cruel.

"What's the matter?" I ask.

"Mom says I have to go outside and play for three hours," he answers bitterly.

"That bitch," I glare back towards his house, "I should report her."

"Who would care? They only care if girls are mistreated," He nudges me with his foot. It's his way of warning me or questioning my judgment, "What you got there?"

I show him the picture of the government companion, “They were issued in China. You would most definitely get one.” I laugh, but he doesn’t get the joke, so I tell him, “I mean you’ve got such bad luck. You’d get an infected one. They spread the First Flu in China.” That only makes him unhappier, and I want to tell him the truth about Nutri Pills, but knowing the truth is dangerous.

“Want to go rat hunting?” I say cheerfully. He goes to grab his stick, and we head down to the water channel. The water channel is not off limits, but if you are caught there, there is nowhere to hide. Only the rats are small enough to go into the small openings. But they are starving too and roam the channel. Not many girls are quick enough, like I am, and I can bash a few over the head. Rat hunting happens to be one of my specialties, and it’s one of the few types of meat I can eat.

Today, I fake being dead. I have this talent for being still for a long time, and my heart rate drops to a near coma. I always wonder if the doctor messed up my engineering, but it helps out. I lie still, and when the rats get close to my eyes, I grab one by the body and second by the tail. Before they can wiggle off or bite I bash them in the head against the concrete.

“Two down,” I say triumphantly. Now, I run after the scampering rats and grab for one, but miss.

“HmMMM,” says Alan, “Guess you must be tired today.

I grin at him, “I’d like to see you get at least one.”

He chuckles a false chuckle, “Thank you for dinner.” We walk back together. Alan is always nervous. Thus far this year, he has been out during four harvests, but he has managed to survive them all. He is lucky.

“Don’t worry, if the sirens go off, I’ll protect you,” I say.

“I know,” he says blushing, “I would always protect you.” He blushes near purple, and I try not to make a big deal about it.

I start to laugh but bite my tongue. I pat him on the back, “Alan, I wouldn’t want anyone else fighting by my side. . . Except for Mrs. Jenkins. Maybe my mom, with a large gun.”

We both laugh, but we disengage as soon as we near other people.

“I hate this,” I say under my breath. When I was five, I was a scrawny little thing. I could run, but Alan was always faster, stronger. One day a hungry Rottweiler started chasing after me. He was a ways away, but I knew he was after me. I tried running into my unit, but I forgot the code in a panic. I saw it running closer, and I thought it was the end. Alan came running out with something long and heavy, too big for a boy his age to handle. He bashed that Rottweiler over the head, over and over. By the time the Red Guard showed up, the dog was dead. We had roasted dog for *four* days.

Now, Alan wheezes as soon as he takes a step outside. His skin is overtanned and his whole head turning blonde in odd patches. He looks forward and pretends not to hear me, “I’m sure you’re not the only one.” Alan winks at me before he goes into his flat.

I want to say more, but what is there to say?

The trumpets blare, and I tune in with fake interest.

“Attention citizens, there will be a special challenge at 8:00p.m. tonight broadcast on all channels,” the broadcast ends, “Be productive. Be accountable. Be safe.”

It’s not law, but everyone will tune in to watch the challenge. This means two high-ranking women are going to battle, sometimes over trivial matters, often just to make us crave what we can’t afford. I don’t really want to be genetically modified any further. In fact, unlike most people, I like my body. But, the challenge also means there will be no harvest, so I will be able to haggle at the market. Today, we need soap, but I also want to trade for a mouth filter for Alan. I have a harmonica my dad left me, and even though no one can play it, the piece is old. Someone is bound to trade for it.

The market is also not illegal, but people with real goods are rare. Most items are banned anyway, like old books or old music. Sometimes old paintings are banned, and if the Red Guard catches someone, they’re pretty much processed.

I look for Alex Carpenter, an unusual name that could be a boy or girl’s name. He’s not much older than I am, but he’s the best scavenger in the market.

“What’s up squirt?” he says hugging me from behind.

I try to disengage.

“Guess all those genetic mods can’t always save you!”

With that, I flip over him unnaturally and give him a solid kick on the ass.

I smirk triumphantly as he lunges forward. The people in the market stop; there is always the chance that a genetically altered girl could go feral. It has happened before with illegal mods, but mine are genuine.

I laugh good naturedly, “You were saying, *boy*?”

He turns and grins, “Where’d you learn that? You’re too young for that type of combat.”

“Please,” I snort, “You’re never too young for any combat. . . I watch government battles. Beside, they lowered the age, again.”

“Well, well, soon you’ll all be fighting in diapers,” he says.

“Watch your tone,” I say, not because I am offended, but because someone might overhear and turn him in. And who wouldn’t for some extra rations? That is the reward informants get, but if the Red Guard finds the person has lied, he too becomes sent to the plant or wherever.

His face darkens, “Don’t worry squirt. No one here’s gonna say anything. . . . Enough fucking around, what you got?” he holds out his hand.

I hold back, “Please. Do you think I started trading yesterday?”

We go back and forth like this for ten minutes. I ask for high priced items I won’t buy, when I really want that filter. He shows me dehydrated coffee. I show him a rat pelt and rat jerky that I gladly trade for soap. He shows me an apple, and I wonder where he got that from. I don’t want the apple, but I managed to save some sugar. I trade for five aspirin tablets for my mom’s headaches and joint pain.

Finally, I ask, “Do you have a filter? A mouth filter?”

“What do you need that for? I thought your lungs were already modified, you being a girl and all,” he says.

I have no comeback because anything I say will give me away. A girl wouldn’t be trading for a boy, especially not one outside her family. I hold up the harmonica and give him a steady look.

I try not to look around to see if anyone is overhearing. I know he wants it because the left corner of his lip involuntarily curls up every time he sees something he really wants.

“Quit being an asshole, Alex,” I say ending the banter, “Trade me already. . . . Please.”

He pauses and stares for a moment, but he won’t just give up the filter. He has to make me sweat because I think it’s his way of putting one up over a girl, any girl.

“I have this pretty pair of silk underwear,” he says holding up a pair big enough for a hippo.

“Got plenty,” I lie.

“Or, how about this nice buck knife? I bet you could use one of those to skin your rats.”

“Don’t use them. Got a paring knife.” I start to grow impatient and start looking around. Someone else could have it, but I don’t trust anyone else. He sees me lose focus off him.

“Well, it’s an awful trade,” he says pausing, “But, here you go. I’ll throw in the knife. Just give me five, no ten of your next kills and some an ultra battery.”

An ultra battery? What does he want with that? They power arm-ports and expensive electronics, but it’s none of my concern. We shake on it, grab my package, and I run without thanking him. That is rude, but girls never have to thank boys.

When I reach Alan’s home, it’s dark. His mother is watching the vid-screen along with some other neighbors. I ring the bell five times.

“What?!” asks his angry mother.

“It’s me,” I say.

She opens the door. I want to laugh because Alan’s mom now has modified ears, but they are dark, and don’t match her skintone, which means they are illegal.

“Uh, is Al—Lupe home?” I ask looking past her.

She gives me an angry look, “He’s gone.”

My heart stops, just like it stops when I hunt rats.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he's gone. He hasn't come home," she says finally without a trace of sadness or remorse.

I want to ask more questions, but she slams the door in my face. I stand there motionless, stuck between a sob and a scream. On instinct, I run to Mrs. Jenkins' place, and I don't care. Maybe he's there. Maybe he decided to leave his lousy home, once and for all.

I don't even bother to knock and let myself in. Mrs. Jenkins is wearing an outrageous flower print dress. I would normally mock her, but she sees the frightened look on my face.

"What's the matter?" she asks.

"Alan? Is Alan here!?" I yell not caring who hears.

She shakes her head no, and I do the thing girls are never supposed to do. I run to her and cry.

Between sobs, I tell her the story about how sick he has become and my trading. She hums a low hum and strokes my head. When I finish emptying myself out, all she says is, "Good friends are hard to find, even if they are boys. He is clever, more than most. I wouldn't worry too much."

Most women would admonish me, and tell me not to care, let alone cry over some sickly, skinny boy. Instead, she makes me a strong cup of mint leaf tea.

"Did I ever tell you about the Mayans?" she asks.

I hold onto my warm cup of tea and let the warmth seep in. I sit and try to listen, and images of Alan being hacked by a dirty axe invade my mind.

"Like us they too killed to sustain their society. But, they made sacrifices, so the world wouldn't end. We kill because the world is ending, and there are not enough resources for everyone," she says.

I almost start crying again, wondering if someone in the neighborhood is desperate enough, to butcher him, but who isn't? I choke on my tea and look at the vid screen for the first time.

The images of two women show up and I ignore them, until I realize one of them is the sponsor from the school, Ms. Way Warrior, but I don't care if she gets her throat ripped out.

I think about what the days ahead will be like without Alan. I will have no one to talk to after school. Even ratting will become dull and more dangerous. No one would ever harm a girl, not usually. People who are so hungry they wouldn't care if they were strung up alive along the wall for committing such a crime, but why him? I walk home in a daze.

Then things get worse. Eight days later, I come home and see the slick black car with red wheels outside our door.

I grow frightened. Has someone noticed I can't eat government meat? Have they come to investigate the garden? I enter using my most confident walk.

It's her, sitting on the couch. She has short red hair and upgraded steel nails. I look at her hands, and then at her face.

"Lieutenant?" I stretch out my hand.

"*Captain Warrior* can't have children," says an officer standing next to her, a man. His lack of formal introduction irritates me, "She has seen your young girl, Mrs. Packer, and checked her fighting statistics. Her intelligence may be below superior, but that doesn't matter to her. Ms. Warrior thinks she has high prospects."

"I suspect that is an irregularity, the scores," says Captain Warrior, smirking.

Mom wrings her hands trying to erase the orange blotches. She glances longingly at the woman's perfect hands, "Why do you say that?"

"Because statistically, she shouldn't be missing the same exact percent of questions each time," she answers, "The mistakes are patterned."

I grow stiff. I didn't think I was that obvious; I was just always careful to miss a certain percentage of questions, 5% on average, and no one ever said anything.

"Is that true?" asks my mother faking disdain and alarm.

I know two things for sure. (1) I will be evaluated and (2) I will be injected for optimal performance. I won't be able to lie. "Yes," I say keeping my head up.

"Why?" asks the official, an old greasy haired man with thick glasses.

I answers as honestly as I can, "Because we're poor, and I didn't want to be removed from my mother. She needs me, still. I work and hunt for us. "

Captain Warrior nods her head knowingly, "I grew up in Junk Town . . . You wouldn't know it now. I used to make a mean rat stew, but claimed it was goat." She stretches her slick arms and smiles at me.

I smile at her; there is no point in being rude, like her sweaty companion.

"You will be evaluated tomorrow morning with and without enhancement. Be ready at 7:00 a.m. and bring only one school issued bag. Here is a list of what you can and cannot bring," with that they leave.

I look at my mom, but I have no more tears left.

"Where were you?" she asks getting that nervous tick in right cheek, "I was worried sick!"

"I was with Mrs. Jenkins," I answer, "Alan got taken away. Or worse, Mom." I lean into her, but she pushes me away.

"Always that boy! Don't you know your place!?" then, once she's done chastising me, she comes to me and hugs me tight because she once loved her boys too.

"Mom," I say not caring if anyone hears, "Tomorrow I may be processed. They're going to find out."

Mom holds me tighter, "I don't have any suicide pills."

“No Mom,” I say horrified, “You’ll be processed too for not saying anything.”

Women’s suicide carries the penalty for all family members. Sometimes maiming, but since mom is my only relatives, she would be killed for sure because she’s not as young or productive as she once was.

I analyze our situation, and realize my best bet is to go through the selection process. I enter my room which is so sparsely furnished. The walls are a dingy color, besides my small twin bed, all I have is my sparse desk. There are no windows in my room, which has allowed me to read whenever I want to.

I pack my red bag meticulously. We can only take arm-port cards, one spare change of clothes, and one memento. I take a digital picture of my mom and am careful to hide my dad’s image behind. The digital frame is at least fifteen years old and will look like a sign of prestige.

That night, my mother and I play cards on our ports until 1a.m. and drink black market tea. Mother should be alert for her job, always. Any mistake, and she could be punished, but this may be the last time I see her for months and months or ever. I let her win a few times and reassure that I will be sponsored by someone wealthy, “I’ll buy you that house in the inner city, and get you a state of the art car. Maybe even a car.” She scoffs, “I don’t even think I can drive anymore.” “I’ll drive you, then.” I kiss her on the forehead because I need to be at my best.

That night, I lay in bed, unable to sleep, but when I wake up, it’s 6:30a.m., and I am not exhausted.

“Ah mom,” I say as I look at my desk chair. Mom has ironed my best school uniform. I wash quickly with an old rag and a water basin using a digi-mister to get any grease out of my hair. The solution smells like cheap alcohol not the roses or fruit rich girls use. I put on my school uniform, which is loose. Mom puts my hair up in a ponytail and gives me a long hug before she goes to work.

“They’ll pick you, even though you’re younger than most,” she says, “You are so smart and able. Surely—“

“Don’t worry, I survived four outbreaks,” I say making her laugh.

The doorbell rings, and I give her one final hug.

Captain Warrior is wearing a blue dress and old sunglasses, really old plastic impractical glasses.

“Blue?” I ask and stop myself from asking more questions.

“I don’t care for red,” she says, “Besides, no one will be watching me.”

I suck in my breath. She doesn’t care for red? Is that a political statement? Could she be a member of the underground? I doubt it. But, maybe she is like Mrs. Jenkins, a remnant of old thinking.

“Where will I be tested?” I ask. I look at the car. It’s not the same black car with red wheels, but a white convertible. Decadent and slick. I hope to buy a car like that for my mother some day.

She gives a tinkling laugh, “You’ll see.”

I try not to grow irrationally nervous because even though girls are precious, sometimes they disappear. We drive for almost forty-five minutes to the inner city. I have never been in the inner city before, and I am shocked. Girls are playing with a few boys, and a young woman kisses what looks like a young man. I try not to stare, but it’s hard. In the next block, I spot someone eating a tomato.

“Is that allowed?” I ask incredulously.

“Oh yes,” she answers, “I favor peas. You see here, we can afford to vary our diets a bit more. What is your favorite meat?”

Is this part of the test? I could either lie and keep lying, but I tell the truth. Lying can be exhausting.

“Rat,” I answer flatly.

She laughs heartily, “Ah rats. I don’t miss those days.”

“And human meat?” she asks after a long pause.

I give her a steady look, “I don’t care for it.”

She bursts out laughing, “Don’t tell me you’re *compassionate*?”

“No,” I answer trying to be nonchalant about it, “I always hunted well and never had to stoop that low; I never broke the law, like others. Ever.”

Captain Warrior lets out a long breath, “Sometimes that happens.” She pauses dramatically, “I once ate a forearm.”

“Who?” I ask.

“Someone dear to me.”

I don’t ask any more questions because cannibalism is frowned upon, and I am not sure if she is trying to shock me. Still, I have no doubt she is telling the truth. I also have no doubt that she was starving in Junk Town.

We stop at what looks like an old clinic.

“I will be back within the hour,” she says and drives off. I grow tense because I don’t know where I am, but I walk in with a steady stride.

A friendly Siamese woman looks up with soft green eyes. Her fur is white, with black fur along her face. She is one of those weird women that worships cats. I try not to stare. “Ashley Packer? We’ve been expecting you. Come here dear.”

I walk through a bright corridor, and I am greeted by a man in a lab coat. He takes my blood and comes back a few minutes later. I wait for so long I think they are calling the Red Guard to launch me into The Pit.

He comes back whistling a happy tune, "It's nothing major, your inability to process government meat. We just need to modify you a bit, and you will be good as new."

I lie down on a long steel table. I have been through this before with major mods. The first thing my mother modified with a five-year debt, was my skin to withstand the sun's rays. Then my teeth so they wouldn't rot out of my mouth. The scanning begins with a quite machine, then the injections. They contain nanobots, no doubt or some serum. He checks on my progress through a large flat portable and smiles approvingly. There is always the slightest danger that something could go wrong, or worse, nothing really changes.

When the procedure is finished, he waits twenty eternal minutes and gives me two pills to swallow. He waits a few more minutes and offers me some broth. It tastes gamey and rich.

"Congratulations," he says, "You can metabolize govmeat."

I am stunned, "How? They've tried before."

"We have all the best in the inner city. All the best," he smiles at me warmly, "Good luck with your sponsor. She has high hopes for you." He winks a little too friendly, but there is something genuine and free about him.

"Wait," I ask, "What's in it? What is govmeat?" I think about my father and the brothers I never met.

"It's just synthetic protein," he says, "Don't believe all the talk on the streets. We are not savages."

I got to shake his hand and hope he is an honest man. He stares amused and shakes it weakly and then hangs on tightly.

"Look," he says getting uncomfortably close to my ear, giving me a last bit of advice, "Be careful of your sponsor. She may be looking for a daughter, but she will throw you under the bus if you underperform because you're her first. You don't want that. I have studied your entire record. Start performing at your peak. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I answer and walk out my legs shaking.

She waits for me outside and smiles confidently.

"Well?"

"Good as new!" I say pretending to be super-excited because now my life has been changed forever. Now, I don't have to hide because I cannot.

"Wonderful!" she pats me on the back.

On the way to the Education Center, she doesn't say a word. I have a thousand questions. I want to know how she paid for the test and the digestive mod, but she is not obligated to tell me. Besides, the only way to thank her is to do my absolute best.

I look at her waiting for advice or directions, but I get out and enter without her. I go into rat hunting mode before I enter the building.

The Center is almost empty. The rooms are surrounded by two-way windows where interested parties will scrutinize us like the lab rats we are. That is also how poor girls get duped. They are offered patronages by impostors, and vanish forever.

This place, however, doesn't look like it is illegitimate. But, what do I know? A woman with long blonde hair sizes me up. She is completely normal as far as I can see.

"Name?"

"Ashley Jones."

"Age?"

"Twelve."

She takes a machine and gets a blood sample, and scans my body quickly.

"Hmmm," says the woman, "You're not afraid or nervous?"

"No, mam," I answer, louder than I should.

"Your heart rate is unusually calm, too calm," she says.

She takes me to a large room with a table. There is more food here than I have seen, even at the market.

"Is this part of the test?" I ask.

"Ha," she gets a plate for me, "No. You need to eat before the first test begins. You haven't eaten yet have you?"

"No," The truth is that we only eat twice a day on good days, and breakfast is always sparse, "Not really, I just had some tea and broth."

"Great!" She steers me towards the plates.

"Where are the other girls?" I ask looking around.

"Oh, you won't get to meet them, yet. Always causes trouble if you meet ahead of schedule. They are in their rooms or in the courtyard. You are the last one here."

I stare at the table longingly; in the distance, I spy an orange and some carrots. I love orange produce and am waiting for her to leave, so I can eat. But she remains there waiting for me to do something.

I grab a carrot and orange, might as well take advantage. I look at the meats and see one I vaguely recognize. It's plump and far less red than the other meat. I put a few pieces on my plate.

"What is that?" I ask pointing to some purple fruits.

"Those are grapes," she answers observing me carefully. She writes into her clipboard.

I grab a small handful, "I have heard about grapes and wine." I don't want to be perceived as being low class.

"Oh, I'm sure," she says noncommittally.

I sit at a table and begin to eat. The grapes are like a song in my mouth. They are sweeter than sugar, and I wish I could share with my mother. I eat my carrots, then the orange

appreciating every bit of juice. I haven't eaten an orange in over two years. I savor each bite, smelling every single peel, and then eating them too. I know that's not proper, but I don't care. Finally, I make a go at the meat. Part of me is very sad, because in a few moments, I will vomit it all or grow desperately sick. I chew it slowly and look at the woman who is still writing in her board. Before long, I have cleaned off my plate. I wait keeping an eye on then nearest trashcan, but nothing happens.

It's true, then, the mods work.

I look at the woman, "What kind of meat did I eat?"

She chuckles, "Pork."

"Can I have some more?" I ask. She nods and I grab another slice. Part of me wants to hide food in my pockets for Mom or Mrs. J, but that could be part of the test. Besides, I will not see them for a long time. I take another slice and grab more grapes. Alan would love these, and that slows me down. Everything tastes bitter as bile rises from my stomach. That is good because I need to stay sharp.

I stop eating abruptly, as a loud robotic voice says, "Ashley Packer, report to the Arts room."

Art? Art is not my best subject. Well, at least I am not as good as I would like to be. I can paint just about anything, but I can't play any instruments well besides the harmonica. I doubt they play that in the city or anywhere but working-class neighborhoods like mine.

"The map of the center has been sent to your arm port," says the woman, "You may only go to the blue areas." I wait for her to escort me, but her work is done.

I look at my arm port. The area is easy to get around. There are four major corridors, in each cardinal direction, and two connecting ones at the end of each hall. At the end of each corridor are two large instructional rooms and along the halls are small classrooms. I go down the hall going north, and pass classrooms where I hear energetic discussions. Once I get to the end of the hall, I walk down the corridor on the right. On the far left is a large room. I report and am relieved to see a variety of tables.

"Choose one," says another woman; she is at least six foot five with perfectly sculpted muscles. Her hair is an unusual pink hue and her eyes are silver, the color of clouds after a rare rainstorm, but they run eerily into her pupils making it seem like they have no boundary. She too has Tiger Teeth and her left tooth has a bit of red. Her outfit is a dark red, with gorgeous thick leather boots. I look back at her smile and that deep red flap of flesh, ever so tiny, but bright against her immaculate tooth.

I shudder and turn away, choosing the oil painting section.

"Paint a picture of your father," says the woman coldly, "You have thirty minutes."

I am torn. Part of me wants to paint a picture where he is smiling; instead I paint a picture from a memory of when I was little girl. He came home drenched in blood, and once he sat

down, he wept. I never got an explanation about what happened, but thinking back, that happened shortly before he vanished. That is the image I capture, but in the background, I put the flag of our great nation, a dark red flag with five intertwined feminine hands. I rush the last hand because I only have two minutes left, and when I am done, it's not perfect though a competent likeness. Still, competent won't cut it.

The woman stands behind me and stares. She gives me an appreciative look.

“Now, let's move onto the computer room,” she touches my shoulder and herds me to another room.

In the distance, I hear someone scream, and I want to see what is happening.

“Don't worry,” she says, “It's part of the test.”

When we enter the computer room, I am surprised to see Lister. She is smiling triumphantly and already decking herself with an entourage. Pretending she doesn't see me, she goes back to her work.

I sit at a terminal. It is twice the size as the ones from school, yet they have no physical screen. I have seen these computers advertised on my arm port, but I never thought I would actually use one. I acclimate myself to the controls as computers are something I not only enjoy but excel at. The questions are far too easy, and before the hour is over, I am at a level eight within ten minutes.

The woman gives an appreciative hum, “Wow.” I am sure she's not supposed to say that. The other girls look up at me, some of them with hate in their eyes. Lister has grown uncertain because I know she probably didn't make it past level two, so I smirk at her, *right* at her, and hold her gaze.

“Now,” says my guide, “Onto combat.”

I grin at Lister one last time. I hope with all my might that she's my opponent, but we can't fight girls from our school, at least not in the first few months of training. Most schools are loyal peers are loyal to each other and will cooperate when they should compete, but no me. I am only loyal to my mother, Mrs. Jenkins, and maybe Allen.

I think back to the first fight I was ever cognizant of. I must have been three years old, when I realized that women fought, but not women like my mom. These women were huge with bulging arms and unnatural skin. Their hair was something out of ancient fairy tales. One of them was pitch black, black all over her body, and the only color was the pink of her tongue. The other woman was soft and grey, but still unusually and just as muscular. This was before glowing skin was popularized by our last president. The grey woman was calm and slender. I turned and asked my dad, “Why are the monsters fighting?”

“Same reason as always,” he answered with disgust, “One wants what the other has. Or one insulted the other one.”

I stared as the panther-like woman struck the grey one leaving a huge gash on her cheek.

The other woman crouched and pounced, so fast the cameras had to replay the action. In less than a minute, the grey woman had torn out the larynx of the other one in two bites.

"Well, that was quick," said my mother disappointed.

"She must have been really angry," replied my father.

My eyes were glued to the T.V. as the woman tore out a trophy from her opponent's chest.

"Turn away," said my father.

My mom held me close, "That was brutal, even for the elite."

"Nothing is too brutal anymore," he got up and went to his workshop, a small closet where he tinkered with electronics, and didn't come out the rest of the night.

I looked up at my mom, "What's an elite?"

She smiled at me, "That's what you're going to be some day, sweetheart. Some day."

But, she was wrong, at least until I got this sponsor. My sponsor stands behind me, and suddenly brings me back to the mock arena where we will display our skills. It is smaller than the ones from vid screen, but I suspect short of killing they are just as bloody.

"Study your opponent and see where her weakness is," she says, and I listen out of politeness, "Your fights at school have been near-perfect. This one should *not* be a challenge, even though most of these girls are older." She ruffles my hair, "Don't forget to block. There's no reason to overstretch medical credits."

I look up and see the sponsor giving the other girl a similar talk. The girl is chunky, maybe 5 feet tall with amber eyes. That means she has at least level 3 mods, which means she is fast. I analyze her face and see fear. I snarl at her and ready myself.

When the third bell goes off, I lunge at her and scratch at her right ear, close, but not enough to actually get her face. I kick brutally bringing my left knee to her stomach. The fight is over in less than two minutes, and I suspect she probably won't be sponsored anymore, but she is fat. Maybe she has money, maybe not. Still, part of me wants to feel empathy because I know she must be struggling just like me, but my sponsor is beaming at me. After all, I am only a level 2.

Mods don't dictate courage, no matter how advanced or trendy, and I have been living in the outskirts for so long, that I would do almost anything to survive. I grin at my sponsor and give her a salute. She salutes back amused.

Just like that, she kills my victory, "Get some rest before our banquet," she says.

"I look forward to it," I say steadily. And I am hungry, combat always makes me hungry. Besides, I am no longer aberrant, I hope, but the growing bile in my stomach could be a bad sign.

She gives me pat on the head, "I left you a gift in your quarters," she smiles.

I hope for a gun or a weapon, in case they are allowed in combat, but I know they are not. When I enter my room, I see a dress made out of real silk from her. It's translucent almost and

will show off my undergarments, which are nothing to show off. I choose to be bold, and I don't wear any because mine are cheap and have holes. Beside the dress is a small white envelope. I recognize the handwriting instantly.

"A little gift from me for the evenings. Love, Mrs. J." I look perplexed at the envelope. In it are three red pills. How did she get the envelope here? Mrs. J has always had secrets, so I take a pill and swallow it without water. Of course, it wouldn't be a suicide pill; I hope it's an enhancer.

After a few minutes, I feel nothing, so I put on the dress and braid my hair in a fish tail, then undo it and put it up in a loose bun like the Chinese model in the magazine, tilted to the right. I have no other enhancements to highlight, no glowing skin, no shimmering eyes, no metal claws, so I walk down the hall to the dining room. At the head table, I see my sponsor who smiles approvingly, but my heart sinks to the depths of my stomach. In the center of the table sits the torso of what might have been a young man.

Then, the pill starts to work. It *is* an enhancer, and I can hear everything clearly; this must be what having level three ears must be like. The girls at the far end are talking about me.

"She is slum trash," says a girl with a long braid down to her waist.

A red head says, "Who cares? At least she's not from Trashville or Junk Town. She can fight really well, even for a level 2. Plus, the teachers were gushing over her scores, I overheard them. I heard she scored higher than even you."

Her companion scoffs and glares, "Look at that dress. Maybe she's sleeping with her sponsor, the cheating whore."

They giggle mercilessly and smirk at me. They are older, although I am not sure how much, but I am glad that I am almost as tall and muscular as they are thanks to my father who was unusually tall by birth.

I want to glare at them, but instead I march over and catch a few sponsors looking at me. I look back at them and bow, spy Lister, red faced and furious as I straighten up. She chose a conservative black gown and covered herself entirely. I bat my eyes at her and near my sponsor.

"Thank you for this," I say in my most grateful tone and give my sponsor a peck on the cheek before I sit down at another table. I sit far from the other girls and with quiet group. I smile at them and get pan faced stares, while I put the napkin on my lap as if I have done it hundreds of times before.

A pudgy girl with a friendly smile hands me a plate and a carving knife. I suspect they have been discussing who will carve the meat, and no one has volunteered. I look at the torso and hesitate.

"I know," she says, "I grew up on ground meat. I had no idea how to carve a toe when I was your age." I give her a quizzical look, and I cannot tell if she is joking. She can't be more

than two years older than me, and I doubt she has cannibalized. Her hands are too perfect, and her teeth are genetically altered to be perfectly straight and stainless.

"Thank you," I mutter.

I take a small slice from his side and put it on my plate. Her plate is empty, so I carve her a generous slice, and cut like my mom taught me. She thanks me in return. I look around at my companions, and see a short haired girl is cringing. I cut slices as thin as I can and give one to the five companions at my table. The same shorthaired girl looks like she is about to vomit, and I shake my head for her to stop, which she does.

The meat is raw, and the smell is not appetizing. The skin has turned an unnatural grey color, and there is the orange of processed meat that I remember speckled here and there. I can feel bile rising in my throat, and in a few seconds, I will vomit, but I breathe deeply and think of rats instead. I think of the stew I made from my vegetable garden. When I bite into the meat, I don't grow instantly sick. In fact, I can't taste anything.

"How do you like it?" asks the girl who is warming up to me.

"It's delightful! I have never tasted anything like it." I give her an appreciative look and smile despite my mouth being full of saliva and the bit of meat I am hiding in my left gum. But the truth is, I don't taste anything, and I swallow and have to force myself not to gag. My body doesn't reject this protein. I take another bite and stare at one of the other girls. They are hesitating too and looking at me like I am a savage.

Suddenly, all the sponsors start laughing. The c-ervants remove the torso. It's an elaborate joke, at least I hope it is.

My sponsor is laughing so much, she sputters wine into her napkin and snorts a charming little sound.

"I thought," she guffaws from a distance, "you didn't cannibalize!"

It is my turn to blush like Alan would, "I don't. I just didn't want to be rude." Besides, I don't want to be the outsider.

The other sponsors applaud in appreciation, and the other girls radiate hate at me. Some make a kill signs, while sponsors aren't looking, but none of them frighten me. I am favored. The girls at my table unlike the others grow warmer towards me, one of them smiling, who despite the other girls around the room, begins to laugh.

"We have a very talented cook and artist," says a sponsor with long blonde hair and near translucent skin. "We never eat human flesh, ever. Only people from Junk Town do that. That was beef." She goes off into a detailed explanation about the genetically modified skin and the use of colors.

I want to ask a million questions, but instead, I listen. Not to her but to the others sitting out of my range. I am not sure how long the pill will last, yet I am sure this is why Mrs. J gave

them to me. *Battles are not just fought in the arena*, she would often say, *They are fought through ideas*.

“Excellent prospects, that one,” says an older sponsor sizing me up. I look at Ms. Warrior, and I wonder if there is a power struggle or if she is also marginalized because she comes from Junk Town. That comment about Junk Town was unkind.

“She is so cute with her perky buttocks,” says a woman with brown skin and yellow eyes, an odd, unpleasant combination

I smile at her; I have always been on my own, but that is not entirely true. Suddenly a sharp pang radiates from my chest, as I think of home, tears sting my eyes. Where could Alan be? I imagine someone slicing carefully into his side, and want to vomit.

“Hey,” says the girl who grows serious, “Do you miss home already?”

“Don’t be sad,” says a long lanky girl, “I had a rough first couple of days too, but don’t tell anyone.”

I shake my head, “No. I am just happy to be able to eat with everyone. I can tell I’m in good company.”

With that they begin to introduce themselves and begin to bond.

¹ Introduce this teacher earlier.