

The Lottery
A Hucow Story
by Violet Kirkwood

“Why do you want me to take a walk so badly, Aubrey?” Mila crossed her arms and fixed her gaze firmly on her sister. They were in the small sitting room of their dwelling. Outside, the sky was as gray as ever, but it wasn’t raining for a change. The end of work shift was near, but only half the men had gone out. The other half had been working in the village to set up the stage. It was Lottery day, and the last thing Mila wanted to do was walk around in the palpable dread of the village.

Her sister, Aubrey, looked frantic. “I will give you the bottle of shampoo I got for my birthday.”

Mila’s face went wide with shock. “The whole bottle? For a walk?”

“No, wait, I will share it with you. Mila, please. I have literally never asked for a moment alone in this house.”

Mila grabbed her bag and slung it over her shoulder. “I don’t think you’re asking for time alone at all,” she said with a smirk. She knew Aubrey’s goal, but putting the shampoo on the line was a surprise. The bottle had been a gift from Matron Jacinda. Four ounces of goo that meant washing her hair took thirty minutes instead of half a day. “I think there’s one thing as important to you as that shampoo. Time alone with Logan?”

Color rose in Aubrey’s cheeks. “Why not? Tonight I may get called in the Lottery. Shouldn’t I be allowed some time to myself. Time with someone I want to be with?”

The hurt and fear in Aubrey’s voice was easy enough to recognize. Mila had felt it herself for three years. At twenty-one, she was no longer eligible for the Lottery, but it was only Aubrey’s second. Last year, the younger woman had been a nervous wreck. When Proctor Gawain called out Bethany von Howstone, Aubrey’s knees buckled and she turned into a sobbing mess for three days. Logan had been the one to help pull her out of it. The two had been sweet on each other for years, but with Logan approaching his final year in the Lottery, he had taken to more seriously courting Aubrey. As such, Mila was sympathetic, but leaned toward cautioning her sister against further heartbreak. “Keep your shampoo. I would never take your gift. And, I know it’s hard, but you shouldn’t...get attached. Not yet.”

“I know,” she answered in a whisper, bright eyes gleaming but free of tears. “But we like to talk with one another. It will make the night easier knowing we share our worries.”

Mila gave her a reassuring nod. “I’ll go up to the wall and back. We’ll need to get dressed for tonight, and any longer wouldn’t be appropriate.” She opened the front door of their dwelling right as Logan reached up to knock. His face went through a series of drastic emotions before settling on cautious optimism. “Logan,” Mila said, “what a surprise. Aubrey will be delighted to see you. I was just heading out for some fresh air.”

“Oh?” he managed to mutter. Logan was a von Quell, which meant he had fair hair, light skin, and hard luck when it came to women — except, apparently, Aubrey. In fairness, Mila

thought, other than his von Quell features, Logan checked all the boxes. Tall, broad shouldered, and muscled from long days of hard labor in the fields. Unlike most of the young men, he did his winter shifts in the forests cutting timber rather than the manufactories. Most thought that made him simple minded, but he'd confided in Aubrey, and therefore in Mila, that the rations were better and the outdoors appealed to him, making it the only logical choice.

Mila thought Logan to be an ideal husband even if, like most in their village, she preferred men dark complexions and auburn curls. No man with those features, or otherwise, had any apparent interest in her. The young man who Matron Jacinda had hoped would take interest in Mila had instead chosen to join the Arcanites in hopes of seeing the wider world. It wasn't a bolster to Mila's confidence or her social standing. It didn't persist, but for a few months, she was regarded as unwanted by the matchmakers. That wasn't something she desired for Aubrey, so she was more than happy for the two lovebirds to spend some time together.

"I'll be back before the fifth bell to have time to dress for the evening," she said. "I suggest you should be home by then as well." She patted Logan on the shoulder and headed up the stone path without looking back.

"The Earth Died. 2197-08-05"

Mila looked up at the words she'd read almost every day of her life. Carved into a steel and drilled deep into the side of the rock face, the message hadn't changed. Whoever put that into the steel didn't want it to be taken by time, at least not for a long while. The lettering sometimes filled with grime, but as long as someone cleaned it now and again, it would last a few thousand years at minimum.

Beneath it, in shallower lettering, was an account of the final days of the human race. Or so thought whoever went to the trouble of writing the epitaph. Mila didn't need the history lesson. Like everyone in the village, she learned their history from her first day of schooling.

In the end, whatever killed the Earth didn't matter. War, climate change, antibiotic resistant viruses, overpopulation — all of the big causes made a play for the title while simultaneously working together to strangle the world. Humanity sensed it coming late enough to turn the biggest profit. The first half of the 22nd century was a mad dash effort to escape. The combined efforts of all the world for the great exodus was truly remarkable. Six billion people, a number beyond Mila's conception, took to the stars. If they'd agreed to start sooner, four billion might not have died to achieve it.

Not everyone would go. Not everyone was wanted. Those left behind were expected to die out in the husk of society the Travelers had abandoned. But, a funny thing happened when billions of humans left. The earth recovered, at least enough to sustain a small portion of human life.

Among those who were left behind were brilliant minds who would form the Arcanites,

an order dedicated to the preservation of the human home world at all costs. With the rest of humanity gone, they had resources and technologies capable of propagating life in a harsh world. For themselves, they created a treatment which would bolster their resistance to radiation and chemical poisoning. For the general population, they devised new vaccines and new food technologies, but these failed to drive growth.

As the new histories tell it, the Arcanites believed people had lost hope. Though near wizards in their scientific fields, they had little understanding of the human psychology. So, rather than building a new type of hope, they decided to build a new type of human. Virility and fertility treatments, extreme by necessity, were created and administered. Humanity was, once again, saved. And once again, it came at a cost. Those who took the serums were rendered into little more than animals fit for nothing other than breeding. It was a burden the Arcanites forced on the survivors, but with it came new problems.

Genetic variety needed to be maintained. The Arcanites ordered facilities built and registries taken. DNA samples were collected, and a system was devised to produce viable offspring. They took volunteers to form the Matron class, sworn to devote their lives to raising children. Surnames were abandoned in favor of facility of origin as the children were transported through the Arcanite's network to different villages and settlements. The resettlement was in hopes that natural conception might return, but a century later, non-serum births remained non-existent. When conception did occur, it was usually terminated after an examination. The Arcanites had bred a race of humans capable of withstanding the new earth, but they failed to consider the constraints harder offspring would put on the reproductive system.

Humanity has been dead for centuries now, Mila thought as she looked up at the epitaph. She stirred from her gloomy mood as she heard footsteps along the path. Matron Carlisle, a kind, small woman, was shuffling along the stone walk with a wicker basket slung over her back. Though everyone had their own Matron, it was mostly a distinction without a difference. All the Matrons took a heavy role in raising the children. Matron Carlisle had been the clever, quirky one who was more interested in teaching her wards about mushrooms or raccoon traps than being a strict disciplinarian. Many of those under her charge were infused with a wild spirit. Logan, for example.

“Matron Carlisle, how are you this afternoon?”

“Mila von Chich, don't you go asking how I am, knowing full well what this weather does to my old bones. They ache! I ache. Head to toe, is nothing but ache!” She didn't stop her slow shuffle and Mila joined her, matching the woman's pace. “Do you know, girl, where aches come from?”

“Inflammation in the joints?”

“Bah, no. That's the tosh your Matron taught you. Aches are what you get from loving too much. You pick someone and love them and a string is tied around your bones. The longer

you love them, the tighter the string. And when you've been Matron to as many whelps as I have, you're a walking bag of knots."

"Is that what you've been teaching them?"

"Of course not, but it's a nicer way of complaining about the agony in my joints. What has you out walking only a few hours before the Lottery? Your luck has won out, hasn't it? No chance of your number being called. At your age, you should be kicking your heels at the tavern with the others freed from the gallows." Matron Carlisle kept her vision on the path ahead of her, but occasionally cocked her head to the side and glared with one sharp, half-mad eye.

"My sister, Aubrey, still has years to go. It would feel strange to celebrate."

"Sister? You have four dozen sisters. You've had three sisters called in your place." The old woman gave a dismissive shrug.

Mila rolled her eyes. "You know that isn't true, and it's wicked to be so brutal." Though she likely had numerous true sisters and brothers across the territories, Mila and Aubrey had bonded closely through their childhood. Matron Jacinda registered them as sisters on Aubrey's twelfth birthday. It was almost entirely ceremonial, but Jacinda encouraged her wards to form such bonds as a way of building community.

"It would be wicked to see a sister torn away," Matron Carlisle said. "You have not seen the ruin it leaves when a brother or sister is taken by the Lottery. Jacinda claims such things build relationships that last a lifetime. Some have, yes. Others, no. Time wears down such bonds, no matter how close. But when they are fresh, at an age such as yours. To have them broken leaves a scar that lasts more than one lifetime." Her voice cracked softly. It was unsettling to hear from a woman known for her amicable wit. "Pardon me, dear. Lottery days are always a burden to Matrons. Two of us will lose someone we have raised since they were babes."

Shame heated Mila's cheeks. Not once in her life had she considered what the Matrons must feel. They have so many to look after that they usually distance themselves from those who have left the home. Yet, Mila didn't doubt any one of the Matrons would throw themselves in front of a carriage to save any ward of the village. Jacinda had a young man get his number called several years earlier. She disappeared for several days and still wept quietly at night when she came back. "It's a horrid thing we do," Mila said. "Why give people a life only to take it from them?"

Matron Carlisle's head turned. Owl like eyes widened, blinked twice, and then she shrugged. "Why indeed? They tell us why, naturally. They must measure the population over time and adjust the lottery weights accordingly. We must simply adhere to their wisdom. Jacinda still teaches logic, doesn't she? Then show me the reason of it. Brilliant men and women devoting their entire lives to an equation. They know the result they need. They have already created the values to get that result. Yet they must discover them over and over, each year.

Strange, isn't it."

The mood between them grew tense. They passed a pair of field workers. They both nodded respectfully to the Matron, and she nodded back with her normal, mischievous expression. Once the men had passed, Mila cleared her throat. "Logic games are one thing, but to pretend to know the reasoning behind the Arcanites' choices is...dangerous." Her tone fell on the final word.

"Haphazard, you mean," Matron Carlisle offered.

"Quite so, yes."

The bell tolling saved her from further conversation. As the note peeled across the village, Mila said her goodbyes and veered away from Matron Carlisle's path. As she hurried toward her dwelling, her mind went carefully back over the things Matron Carlisle had said.

She's a harmless old woman. It's only right for her to be unsatisfied with the way of things. How many has she lost to the Lottery over her many years? She's earned the right to a few seditious whispers. As long as they're said to me or the other Matrons. So long as they aren't heard by some of the revolutionaries. The Yesterday Men would prop her up as a spokeswoman, if they didn't martyr her first. I have enough to worry about without adding a sharp tongued Matron to the list.

Mila attempted to put it out of her mind. She considered mentioning something to Logan. Carlisle was his Matron after all, he could speak with her about the wandering thoughts. But, Mila was almost as guilty. She'd been the first to speculate. In the end, Logan had already gone by the time she reached home. Aubrey was in good spirits, though unwilling to discuss what she and Logan did with their time together.

An hour later, the bell tolled again, calling for all adults of the village to attend the Lottery. Hand in hand, Aubrey and Mila headed to the square.

The village crowded into the square. The underage remained in their dwellings, minded by the older wards. The infirm were exempt as well, and a few other administrative roles were allowed to skip. By unspoken rule, those in the lottery migrated toward the raised stage. Others stood among them. The Matrons and other elders, mostly for moral support. Those in their first year of eligibility were prone to faint. The second and third time through seemed less dramatic somehow, even if the stakes were still high. Facing it down once bolstered courage for future attempts, Mila supposed.

She stayed by Aubrey, standing close behind her in the arc of people watching the three figures on the stage as they slowly rolled out two silver, cylindrical hoppers. Inside each were roughly sixty wooden balls, each polished smooth and lacquered. The balls had a number, the number corresponded to a list of other numbers. Never names. Supposedly that was meant to

prevent any illicit tampering and to be emblematic of the indifference of genetic selection. Mila thought it was turning one step into two to stoke the drama.

The three Arcanites on the stage looked like half burned candles. They wore heavy gray slickers over drab colored robes. One attended each of the hoppers. Prior to wheeling them out onto the stage, the two Arcanites had taken each ball from a case, offered it for inspection to the village council, and visibly placed it inside the hopper. One for each eligible young man and one for each eligible young woman, demonstrated to show no favoritism. The Arcanites in question were never the same. If they'd repeated at any point in Mila's twenty-one years, she didn't recognize them. The third, however, was always the same.

Arcanite Rishlan von Nyork, the regional Lottery administrator. The first time Mila remembered seeing him, Rishlan had been in his thirties, but still weighed down by his path in life. The mottling of skin showed back then, but now he kept it hidden behind his garments. His voice, too, had withered into a scratchy croak. The eyes of an Arcanite were unlike those of the common people. Their pupils dilated further and a deep crimson color took over the sclera of their eyes as they aged. Rishlan's eyes were black voids surrounded by seas of blood, but still he smiled and complimented and flirted.

A single chime from the village bell brought silence. Rishlan held up his hands, his sleeves yawning open to give him the silhouette of a ghoul. "Citizens! Honored Matrons! Thank you for coming. For those of you here for the first time, a special greeting and an introduction. I am Arcanite Rishlan. To my left, Arcanite Josiah. To my right, Arcanite Eveyson." The other two did not react and no one in the crowd made a sound. Rishlan clapped his hands and continued, "Another year has come and gone. We will soon draw lots to bestow the honor of joining the ranks of the rejuvenation effort. But first, some news."

Murmurs rippled through the crowd. Rishlan liked to ham up the event, but he always stayed on the topic. One year he extolled the virtues of sacrifice and another he went on for an hour about the amazing effects of the serums. Mila had only attended the Lottery a handful of times, but clearly an offer of news from the outside world was something truly rare. Matron Jacinda was nearby. The tall, proud woman looked at the stage with a mingling of fury and dread, but spared a glance to meet Mila's curious stare. The Matron offered a quick shrug and focused resolutely on the Arcanites.

Rishlan cleared his throat. "First, our efforts to reclaim the mountains goes splendidly. Teams have brought two more laboratories up to working order and right now are running experiments on water purification. In the northern ruins, Arcanite Ulgrim recovers lost treasures almost daily. The Great Library will need new additions to contain the lost relics of the dead world. Trade remains robust with goods flowing easily between settlements. However, as we celebrate these great strides of advance, the time has come to discuss the Yesterday Men openly."

Mila expected more murmurs, but the crowd stayed quiet. The only thing Mila noticed was a soft clicking sound from a few feet away. She spotted Matron Carlisle holding knitting

needles over a sling filled with yarn. Her hands worked automatically while her sharp eyes looked at some fixed point beyond the stage. A cold sweat formed in Mila's palms. *Something bad has happened.*

“As good citizens, I doubt many of you even know the name. The Yesterday Men are a rebellious faction. They seek a return to what they call ‘native humanity’. By which they mean the destruction of our entire way of life. The destruction of our survival. Though my colleagues and senior Arcanites hesitate to call them by what they are, instead preferring words like misguided, I do not hesitate to name them plainly. Terrorists. Seditonists. Traitors. But why do I burden this peaceful village with such knowledge? I assure you citizens, I am loathe to do so. My hand is forced by caution. As shepherds, we Arcanites must caution our flocks against the wayward wolves. The Yesterday Men have spies and infiltrators. Only this past week did we uncover a plot of open rebellion in an entire settlement. Ithilca, to the southwest. Those responsible have been apprehended and, as according to law, hanged.”

From somewhere in the crowd came a short huff of breath.

“Ill tidings, my friends. Ill tidings on a sacred day, but necessary, yes. In the coming weeks, Arcanite investigators may come to this village as they have gone to others. Assure them of your loyalty. Show them your fastidiousness. Send them away satisfied and add your village to the unending list of good, valued settlements.” Rishlan ended with a clapping of his hands and a slight bow of his head as though he expected applause. The crowd remained abjectly silent. The moment drew out painfully until Rishlan gestured to the female Arcanite. “Eveyson, if you please.”

The other Arcanite roused. She spoke in a stronger, shrill voice, “I will turn the lever for twenty seconds to assure a random outcome. I will then reach my hand into the basket and withdraw a single orb. It shall bear a number which corresponds to the list in the administrator's hands. He will read out the identification number associated with the orb I have selected. The chosen will raise their hand and speak their name before coming immediately to the stage.”

Tension rose as the lever turned. It squeaked. The tumbling chunks of wood rattled. It stopped. The door opened. An orb was pulled out. Arcanite Eveyson spoke, “Thirty-nine!”

“Thirty-nine!” Rishlan repeated. He held up the list and ran his hand down it until he reached the thirty ninth spot. “Eight-one-three!”

Mila's chest ached. Pressure bore down on her from an invisible force as her mind raced. Before her, she saw Aubrey's knees wobble. *It's Aubrey's number. They can't have her. They won't.*

A hand shot up, “Mila von Chich!” She roared it out, defying anyone to contradict her. The color was gone from Aubrey's face. She fumbled to find something to say, but before she could Matron Jacinda had wrapped her in a tight hug. Their Matron spoke sharply in Aubrey's ear while looking directly at Mila with grim understanding.

On the stage, Rishlan cleared his throat, “Ah, good. Come up then dear. Mind the stairs.”

Mila’s whole body was shaking by the time she reached the stage. The gray woman offered her a tablet which displayed a small circle underneath a huge block of very small text. “By placing your thumb here, you accept the outcome of the Lottery and bind yourself as this village’s selection for the current term.”

In the crowd, Aubrey had a hand over her mouth as tears streamed down her face. Feeling numb, Mila pressed her thumb into the reader. The screen flickered, the Arcanite did something on it, and then tucked it away into her robes. “Good. Stand here beside me while they call the other number.”

On the other side of Rishlan, the process repeated. Arcanite Josiah spoke the same words that Arcanite Eveyson had. He repeated the same motions. He spoke out a number, “Sixty-Two”.

With macabre gravity, Rishlan repeated the number, held up his list, and read out another three digits.

A hand raised in the crowd, pale fingers curled slightly. “Logan von Quell.”

The muffled wail from Aubrey broke Mila’s heart. The pieces fractured again and again as she realized the depth of her misguided altruism. Aubrey would lose her sister. Aubrey would lose the man she loved. And she would know both of their fates — to be turned into near-mindless, rutting animals for the rest of their lives. Worst of all, Aubrey would know that Mila and Logan would be together. That their offspring would likely return to be raised by Matrons in their village. The twisting of Chance’s knife was worse than betrayal.

Logan looked paler than usual, but resolute as he took the stage. His thumb pressed into the tablet with no more dramatics. Rishlan waited until Logan took his place beside Josiah before speaking, “Yes, it is a sacrifice. My heart has not gone cold to the feelings of loss brought on by the Lottery. Know that these two go on to a life of pure service. Laud their names, celebrate what they give, and rejoice that humanity continues on. Mila von Chich! Logan von Quell!”

The names thundered out from the crowd as Arcanite Eveyson guided Mila from the stage. They marched along through the village paths until they reached the Village Hall. Dimly, she knew what happened, but the jolt of adrenaline at taking Aubrey’s place left her in shock. Before she knew it, she was standing in an office that belonged to one of the village council. Logan was seated in a chair nearby. She didn’t know how long they were alone together before he spoke.

“That was Aubrey’s number,” he said in a whisper. “I know it by heart. We swore to

remember them, to remember each other no matter what happened today.” He shifted in his chair and pulled the neck of his shirt down over his left pectoral. “We inked them on each other so we wouldn’t forget. Even if they take my mind, I can look at this and remember.”

Mila focused on the coldness in her to hold back tears as she took in the welts on his chest. They’d used block digits, like those on the side of a die, instead of Arabic numbers. If the serums were half as strong as rumor, he wouldn’t be able to make sense of the numerous clusters of dots at all. “I was trying to save her,” she said.

“I know,” he answered. “That’s why it hurts.”

The office door opened again and Arcanite Josiah entered carrying two bags. To Mila’s surprise, Matron Carlisle followed behind him. The Arcanite put the bags on the desk behind her. “Honored citizens, we will depart before dawn, however it is customary for the transfusion to take place in your home village. If this secret has been well kept, then this will surprise you.”

Mila had no idea what the man was talking about. Clearly Logan didn’t either. Matron Carlisle moved through the room and slid open a panel in the rear wall to reveal a keyhole. She produced a key, inserted it, and as she turned it a loud click echoed through the walls. A narrow doorway opened up to a set of stairs. She waved for them to follow.

One floor down, they entered a small space that resembled one of the infirmary exam rooms. Lights flickered on as Matron Carlisle opened a second door against the far wall. It was dark inside until warm orange light swelled along the baseboards and along the ceiling. The room contained nothing other than a bed. With mingled fascination and horror, Mila realized what the room was for. She was also aware of how many times it had been used. Yet a warm scent of sandalwood and linen filled her head, teasing her away from the rigidity of shock and letting fatigue take the place of worry. With the room explaining itself, Matron Carlisle pointed back to the antechamber where Josiah waited.

“The bags I left upstairs are a collection of your belongings gathered by your Matrons. Normally, a Matron attends to represent each selection, but as I understand it, Matron Jacinda is dealing with some volatile emotions. Matron Carlisle has offered to represent the both of you. She will explain what happens next while I go to prepare the serums. Afterward, you will spend the night in the adjoining room adjusting to your new bodies and imprinting on one another as primary mates. You will be collected when it is time to depart, but please remember that you will not be separated. The imprint can make understanding this concept difficult, particularly in the case of the male. It is significantly easier and more pleasant for your transport to be without sedation.”

He gave a curt nod and slipped back up the stairs. Matron Carlisle followed him. Mila heard the dull sound of their conversation and the closing of the door before the small woman returned. Logan had taken a spot on one of the exam tables. Mila took the other. The Matron stood between them, “Logan, you’ve always been a bright lad. I know your thoughts are muddled right now, and it will get worse, but you need to listen to me carefully. Mila, what a

damn fool thing you've done. Blessed child, you have no idea the turn of fate you've started. Aubrey is a kind heart, but too flowery. You're better suited for this. She'll understand. Do you know why it's been hard for you with the matchmakers?"

"Matron? What does any of that matter now?"

"This moment notwithstanding, it's because you are too damn smart for all the young bucks. They want someone to dote on them, not to challenge them. You could have been an Arcanite if they'd bothered to test you. So, we're thankful they didn't. Remember what you said? *Why?* Why go through all this pomp and foolery? *Why* is a big question that doesn't fit in small minds."

Mila giggled nervously. "Then it'll be squeezed out of mine in a few hours, no doubt."

"This isn't the way it ends, Mila," the Matron said, her voice little more than a sharp whisper. "I do not have time now, but everything you have learned is only half of the truth. Logan knows more, but not all. We cannot save your bodies, but we can preserve your minds." She paused and withdrew two slender glass vials from her cuff. Each contained a glimmering liquid like blue mercury. Logan stepped over and took one. The Matron offered the other to Mila. "Take it."

"To what end?" she asked, dark ideas in her mind. "What will it do? Sicken us to make us sluggish and uncooperative? Sterilize us further so we make poor breeders?"

"Your willfulness is a credit at other times, Mila. It will do as I've said. We obtained these at extreme costs. You will be transformed, but you will retain your minds. You will play the part of docile breed stock for a while, but we will come for you. Once they give you the treatment, you will have back all of what I only possess part. You will know the need for this measure better than anyone. You will *feel* it. Or, if you choose to side with the status quo, then I have another option."

She hiked up her skirts. Beneath the heavy layers of cloth, Matron Carlisle stood on two sturdy legs clad in lime green pants. Strapped to both of her thighs were two solid blocks of composite explosive.

"Shit-fuck, are you out of your mind?" Logan pushed the woman's hands down. "You'd take half the village out with that!"

Carlisle shrugged, "We're further down than you think. It'd send the hall sky high, but minimal damage otherwise. Deniability as well. We made sure to request an Arcanite inspection of our power cell bank which happens to be just next door. So, Mila, what'll it be? Mindless cow squirting out kids for the next three decades. Or a leader of the revolution with a huge rack?"

"She's crazy," Mila said. "And left me no real choice in the matter. We're not

revolutionaries. I volunteered to do my duty.”

“You will. You will sacrifice for the people you care about in exactly the way you intended. The only difference is that you won’t be on the Arcanites’ leash. Bottoms up, kids. The simple one will be back any minute.”

Mila wanted more explanation. She wanted to talk to Aubrey or Matron Jacinda. Her head ached with conflicting emotions and worry. Her life was teetering on the brink of insanity and someone was about to shove her no matter what. “Promise me this is the right thing,” she said.

“It is,” she answered. “Jacinda would tell you if she were here. Aubrey will tell you when you come back.”

Mila looked to Logan. He shrugged and drank the shimmering liquid. With a sigh, she did the same. It tasted bitter and caused a feeling like frozen worms wriggling down her throat. “Now what?”

The transfusion went smoothly. Logan and Mila sat on their respective exam tables while the Arcanites worked and Matron Carlisle watched. The Arcanites spoke as they worked, but it was in a language Mila didn’t understand. Occasionally, they lapsed back into the common tongue to explain something to her. After the third time, she realized they were trying to keep her calm. It made her giggle.

The process itself didn’t surprise her. A needle went into her arm. Different bags came from a small case, each of them filled with a mysterious liquid. It went into her veins in a rush while her blood went out through another needle in the opposite arm, swirled through a machine, and returned somehow changed. None of it hurt other than the pricks of the needles, but with each passing minute, Mila grew more restless.

“You will want to undress,” Matron Carlisle said as she helped Mila into the attached room. Logan had been hauled in by the Arcanites and left on the bed. He was conscious, but groggy. Mila knew how he felt. “Your clothes won’t be any good in a few hours. No sense in ripping them all to pieces. Another young woman would love that color.”

Mila allowed herself to be disrobed. Her legs and arms weren’t numb, but leaden. Every small movement seemed to require double the effort. Logan caught her eye as he lazily swung an arm in an attempt to free himself of a sleeve. With little control, the arm thudded into Josiah and sent the man tumbling back onto his backside. Mila giggled again before refocusing on Logan. He grinned at the small havoc he’d inadvertently caused. Seeing the playful expression on his face caused a flicker of something Mila had never felt before. Her face grew warm, and Arcanite Eveyson noticed. The woman said something in the unknown language, and the two of them sped up their efforts.

Minutes later, Mila rested her back against side wall. Matron Carlisle stood in the doorway, her face unreadable. She said something, probably goodbye, but Mila felt like someone had filled her head with feathers. The door shut, and she was alone in her underwear with Logan von Quell.

He remained sprawled on the bed, having entirely lost his war against gravity. They'd stripped off everything except for his undershorts, and even those had been untied. Mila had on a cotton shift that fully covered her, but made her skin prickle everywhere it touched. It worsened when she let her gaze move along the lines etched in Logan's body. She knew only in concept what they would become, but already Logan was a specimen most men would envy. His broad, pale chest was not the withered, lean muscle of most villagers, but a burly, hard slab built from hoisting and hauling timber. She wondered if he would object to her touch. She wanted only to feel the strength in his arms. It would mean nothing, only sate her curiosity.

A tremor made her refocus on her own body. Beneath the shift, she assumed she resembled every other woman her age in the village. She was bustier than some, but not nearly so as others. Her black, silky hair remained in a plait. *And what else do males value? Pretty hair, perhaps. Breasts certainly. Curves in the hip and rear.* Logan's body twitched, fingers jerking like the dying spasms of a spider. Sweat beaded across his body. Mila thought to find a towel to cool his fever. *Caring, usefulness, kindness. Those are the things a man wants. But we are no longer man and woman. We are stud and breedstock. Am I fit to bear children? Fertile? Will he care about my kindness? Or the style of my plait? Are all those trappings of humanity to dissolve behind animal instinct?*

Her skin felt feverish, but the fatigue and weakness diminished as time passed. Restlessness reasserted itself as the main concern of her body. Energy sprang from nowhere and drove her to her feet. The shift no longer prickled, but chafed. She went to yank it off entirely before a new sight stopped her. Logan remained on his back and the start of changes was visible. His size had increased from head to toe. Arms that were merely muscled now seethed with cords of it. Pale, wire-like hair curled out on his chest, matching the slightly lengthened mop of curls on the top of his head. These things were noticed, but not dwelt upon. Instead, her eyes went to the bulge slowly emerging from the untied waist of his shorts. The thick lump of flesh had no definition or true shape as it bent and formed from growing pressure. Mila wanted to free it, to better watch as it rose to its full height.

Logan's back arched in sudden spasm. The shift caused his cock to spring free. It swelled rapidly to full hardness, straining out like a lightning rod from his straining body. His breath came in sharp gasps while the cock pulsed, throbbing as it swelled into a thicker and longer version of itself. His hands knotted into the sheets, and he groaned as a thick spray of cum shot from the tip of his flared head. Mila gasped, eyes wide, watching the torrent of fluid fling upward and splat back down onto his thighs where it soaked into the shorts. The motion rolled through him with each peak causing a slightly more diminished jet of cum. The visual made her veins burn with lust.

She tore away the shift and stood naked beside him. His eyes were shut, and his jaw

clenched. Mila wanted him to look at her, to see the changes happening to her body in hopes that it would stoke his lust further. She could feel the sensations rising and falling almost down to the individual cells. Strength flowed into her limbs and replaced the leaden detachment. She felt *alive* in a way that she never had before. She wanted to touch and be touched, not driven by curiosity, but need. Her fingertips grazed along the changing man's biceps and crossed over to his chest where they touched the pattern of dots etched onto his skin.

"Aubrey," Logan grunted through clenched teeth.

Mila nearly doubled over from the sudden surge of weight in her chest brought on by emotion. She recognized them, but realized quickly that she'd never truly felt them. Grief, regret, and longing all mixed into one cacophony of sensation that made her feel hollow and overfilled to bursting at the same time. "No, Logan," she said. "Mila, remember?"

He forced open his eyes. "Yeah, of course. Mnngh, you're...naked."

Another flush of heat rushed down to her core. His eyes raked down her body. Her slight figure had thickened. Her apple sized breasts swelled to heavy teardrops, bigger than even Logan's hands could hold. Padding on her hips accentuated the narrowness of her muscled waist. Her thighs struggled to catch up, but for the moment showed strong muscle supporting the round bump of new flesh forming her plump ass.

His gaze drank her in with familiarity. She could almost feel the point where he looked as it slid over her nipples and down the center of her body. The spasm in his body subsided, and he sat up, peering at her sex with open hunger. "Never seen..." he said in a hoarse voice. His arms reached out and wrapped around her waist, hauling her onto the bed with him. Everywhere their bodies touched roiled with heat and need. He spun her around to her back and pinned her. She kept her knees together as he sat to her side. Again, he slid his gaze across her. "I need... you," he said. "But, I don't —"

She cut him off with a finger pressed to his lips. She knew what he would say, but it didn't matter. "I need you, too." Opening her legs, she took his hand. "Touch me."

The heat of his fingertips reached her before his touch. They hovered over her lips as a war raged inside of Logan between his old self and the serum churning in his body. Mila could see his cock, veins throbbing along its length as the head leaked a steady stream of clear fluid. She had never imagined sex before. Without a chance of children, she didn't see the point. Now, she thought she might go insane if something wasn't inside her. Mewling, she arched her hips up, and Logan's fingers met the slick, puffy folds of her pussy.

He groaned as his hand pressed down. Two fingers glided along her slit while his palm pressed down on the bundle of nerves at the crest. Mila cried out with pleasure, so he repeated the motion. Her heart thumped in her ears, the rhythm reverberating through her body. She shook and everything jiggled. Her nipples stood up, hard and red, surrounded by sensitive tissue desperate to be touched. Unable to resist any more, she spread her legs wider and put her hand

against Logan's fingers, nudging them toward her center. He took the hint and pressed them inside.

Her warmth clearly shocked and excited him. She noted the twitch in his near gargantuan cock. Though she had no concept of what size would fit inside of her, she worried she wouldn't be able to give Logan the one thing he truly needed since already she felt full from only his two fingers. The walls of her pussy contracted around the invaders, squeezing them in the vain hope of procuring seed. He stroked gently inside of her, further enticed by her moans. And each flick of his fingers or nudge of his palm against her clit caused a fresh wave of energy to coalesce in her core before seeping out into her body.

Emboldened by her enthusiasm, Logan gave more of himself to the mindless lust. His mouth lowered to her breast and kissed while his free hand went to the other and squeezed. Both sent shivers of joy through her. His tongue lavished praise along the needful flesh until it found her nipple. His lips closed around the bud and sucked. The feelings became too much. She wrapped both hands around his arm, trying to hold him still, and came.

She realized somewhere among the explosions of euphoric joy that she'd never had an orgasm before. She may not have even been capable. Mila didn't have a concept of pleasure so intense, yet somehow she wanted more. Clawing her way back from the brink of a pleasure induced coma, she pleaded with Logan. "Fuck me. Logan, please, fuck me. Take your big fucking cock and fuck me!"

Her hands clawed at him as she pulled him between her legs. His body rippled with a strange mix of control and wildness as he hovered over her. With a shift of his position, the full length of his cock pressed against her thigh. A conflicting sense of horror and need filled her as it pressed nearly the full length of her upper leg. The smear of precum along her soft flesh won her over. She moved her hips and let the head of his cock lodge against her lips.

Their eyes met, and between them passed a flurry of emotions that their bodies would not allow them to process. She scooped her hand around his neck and pulled him down to her lips. Their mouths mashed together in a frenetic kiss, unknown needs driving open their mouths and allowing their tongues to twine together. Her fingers tightened on the back of his neck, holding him close to her and admiring her own strength while understanding that the transformed man on top of her was something closer to a god than mortal. He pulled away, his expression tumultuous and his chest laboring to keep his blood filled with oxygen. He spoke in a growl, "Mila, it may...hurt."

She had no idea what he was talking about, nor did she care. Her legs bent around his hips, and her ankles crossed. The wide head of his cock nudged against her with more force. She urged him on by pressing down with her legs. He let out a groan of relent and pushed into her. Mila gasped. Her hands grabbed around his ribs, fingernails unintentionally raking into his skin hard enough to tear a normal man's skin, but leaving no mark on the heaving beast on top of her. Logan's groan continued on in a low reverberating hum that grew in his body until it roared out of him. Unable to help himself, he thrust hard into her. Mila screamed with pleasure as his hard

body slammed into her. Her walls stretched to the point just before pain to accept him. Every beat of his heart transferred into her through the grip of her sheath around him. He remained rooted in her, hands pressed down into the mattress above either of her shoulders until finally he withdrew a few inches to plunge back into her.

“Yes,” she purred. “Fuck me with your stud cock. Breed me. Do it. My pussy wants you to breed me.” The words came out of her without any conscious consideration. Her attention was focused on the knot of pleasure swirling in her core. A new sensation caught her notice, though. With every thrust, the momentum seemed to move up her torso and into her swollen breasts. As Logan’s hips worked frantically to bring himself to climax, Mila’s breasts swelled to the point of aching. Her nipples grew thicker and engorged, darkening from rose color to crimson. As her tits wobbled back and forth from the movement, she realized the pressure shifted independently and understood. “Logan, my milk...”

As she said it, he moved a hand to paw lustfully at her chest. The second his fingers grazed the sensitive tissue, her milk came. Thick beads precluded the sudden gush as the pressure released in a narrow spray that coated Logan’s chest. He stopped, stunned, and Mila grunted her frustration as the knot of pleasure threatened to dissipate. She planted her feet on either side of him and thrust her hips up, fucking him until he came out of his stupor. She squeaked as he wrapped an arm around her and rolled, throwing her on top of him and keeping her heavy breasts dangling in front of his mouth. Both hands moved to the engorged teats and squeezed as she slid back down fully onto his cock. With the first streams expressed and milk dripping freely, Logan raised his head and slurped her leaking nipple into his mouth. When he sucked, Mila’s cares finally disappeared.

Mouth filled with her milk, he swallowed and sucked for more as she rode him. When she slowed his hand strayed to her flank and gave her a swat. One breast slowed, so he moved to the other and nearly drained it before he released and let the remainder drip down between them. Moving his hands to her hips, he greedily squeezed her curves and moved her back and forth along his cock. His eyes went heavy lidded. Mila cooed encouragements, mostly nonsensical as she felt the rhythm of his pulsing cock change slightly. She could feel her womb readying for him. Her body called out for his seed with every cell. Logan roared as he came, and the blast of sticky heat into her core caused the knot to explode like atoms shattering.

Every jerk of his hips, every twitch of his spurting cock, and every hard squeeze of his strong hands registered in the din of ecstasy as they slowly fell down from the crescendo only to find him still hard inside of her. Cum seeped out around his thick shaft. Milk spattered on his chest. Logan’s eyes focused on Mila, and she felt his heartbeat quicken. “Again,” he rumbled.

She nodded, “Again. From behind.”

They parted with a wet slurp. She went to her elbows on the bed as he towered behind her. The head of his cock slid down the deep cleft of her ass until it reached the dripping pussy. His fingers sank into her soft rump, and Mila sighed as her walls spread open for him.

It was late. Or early. The room offered no hint of the outside world. They'd exhausted themselves and finally laid down together in silence. Mila's soft, yet powerful form rested beside Logan's chiseled body. Her thigh draped over his. Her pleasantly sore sex still leaked his cum. With a sense that she didn't understand, she knew she was pregnant.

She rose and swung her feet over to the floor. Logan's hand trailed down her back to her ass sending a fresh thrill through her despite their hours of sex. "Do you know who you are?" she asked in a whisper.

"Yes," he answered. "I am Logan von Quell." His hand came away. From the corner of her eye she saw his fingers tap against the dots on his chest.

"And I am Mila von Chich. Daughter to Matron Jacinda and sister to..." She trailed off. Turning to face him, she rested his hand on top of his. "Aubrey will understand," she promised. "She will forgive us."

"How?"

She listened and tapped her finger against his chest, matching the rhythm of his heart. "Out there, their hearts beat with love, but they do not *feel* it. I never knew. Never even had a hint. I understand now what Matron Carlisle spoke about. The Arcanites gave us hearts of stone. They bred us into cold husks that hold emotions, but do not experience them. The seed already taken hold in my womb... I do not know if we are born that way or if it is done to us. Either way, I will not let that happen to our offspring. In this room, I have felt...things beyond words. To deny humans these feelings is to take away the thing we call a soul. Until now, we've lived without it, speaking dumbly about the ocean when all we have known is desert. What would you do to keep those feelings? To make sure your progeny feel them, too? To make sure Aubrey feels it?"

Logan rose to his elbows. "I'd do...anything."

She pressed her forehead against his. "That's why Aubrey, why everyone, will forgive us." She moved closer, sliding her hand along his inner thigh. "We need to discuss how we go forward from here. You have to tell me everything Matron Carlisle has told you. But, I think we have some time yet before sunrise. The Arcanites will expect us to behave like beasts, so we must pretend while we plot."

He pulled her to him, dragging her soft body across his lap. "Then I will be a beast for you, Mila. A beast that is thirsty." With a subtle shift, the now familiar head of his manhood pressed into her as she guided his mouth back to her leaking nipple.

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