

The Learned and The Lost

I'm not sure whether all my troubles started that week, or whether my life started anew. So many things happened. I'll let you the reader, decide.

At the time I was working in a high stress job in the computer game industry, developing some of the more violent (but popular) video games. Memorial Day weekend had always been the day that I "got away from it all". It's the first real time off, when spring ends and summer begins. Typically the weather is neither too hot nor too cold. Work had been overly stressful in the last few weeks and I was desperately in need of a release. So, I came to the mountains. It was one of the few places I could relieve the stress and meditate. The sunny warm air and the smell of pine was my incense. I hiked in silence. The only sounds disturbing the silence: the call of eagles and the crunching of dry, brown pine needles under my feet. The sleeping giants all around me creaked and moaned as the wind blew through their highest branches.

I walked along the well-trod deer trail, which made its way up the rocky slopes. I stopped, only for a moment, to gaze out from the top of a cliff. Nothing but green-needled conifers and snow capped mountains as far as the eye could see. As I stepped away from the edge, it happened. I'm not sure if the rocks gave way, or if I slipped on gravel, but I was falling. I saw the cliff face speeding past me as I frantically grabbed for something to stop my fall. I snagged the rock face with one hand and slammed into stone. Bad mistake. I lost my grip immediately and started to tumble and fall again. Then everything went black.

The pain shot through my legs and I opened my eyes. I was on my hands and knees. I was crawling, but I had no memory of how far I'd crawled. My hands were stained with patches of dirt and sap and blood. My fingertips were torn and raw. Blood, bright and red, splattered on my hand. I looked at it for a moment, wondering where it had come from. Then I felt the warm drizzle run down my face and arm; a lot of blood. I remembered what my old scoutmaster had told me about head wounds. They bleed a lot. He was right. I rolled over on my back and yelled. It was more of a scream than a yell. At first it was a guttural roar mingled with anger and pain. Then I started calling for help, even though I knew no one would come. I started feeling dizzy and cold. I've had

enough first aid training to know I was going into shock. Then I remembered my Telsat phone. I could call anywhere in the world. All I had to do was get it out of my back pocket before I passed out. The world started spinning faster. I lay down on my side and fumbled for the phone. It came out of my pocket – in about five different pieces. If I hadn't felt so helpless at that moment, I might have laughed. Maybe I did. I don't remember. The world went black again.

I had dreams that were both disturbing and frightening. Most had to do with falling and not being able to wake up. It was a suffocating feeling that made my heart race. I awoke suddenly from one of these bad dreams. I shivered. Not from cold but from the chilling fear left over by the nightmare. I expected to find myself outside still, but I instead found myself indoors. The room in which I lay was painted grey-blue in color. Antique, redwood furniture decorated the room. The bed on which I was lying was warm and comfortable. The soft linen sheets were tucked tightly under my chin. Through a dusty windowpane I could see that it was nearly dark outside. Hues of the red and orange sunset dimly illuminated the forest outside, and cast an eerie shadow into the room, which reminded me of a hooded man. "Where am I," I thought out loud.

"My place," a woman's voice answered.

I turned my head towards the door, which was on the same wall as the head of the bed. Standing there was a young woman. At first I thought she might be in her mid twenties, as she had the figure of mature woman, but her face made me think she might still be a teenager. Her aquamarine eyes still held the a bit of the sparkle of innocence. Her blonde-brown hair, the color of tanned deer skin, was braided into a long tail that was swept over her shoulder and hung down her front almost to her waist. She was dressed in a old tie-dye t-shirt, and worn blue jeans.

"How did I get here," I asked groggily. My forehead was beginning to throb.

"I brought you here," she replied. "I was out on my daily hike and found you at the bottom of the Richmond Ravine. You'd taken a pretty nasty fall, so I threw together a makeshift stretcher and brought you back here."

'No small feat', I thought to myself. I guessed she stood at about five-foot two inches, and couldn't weigh more than one hundred twenty-five pounds. She was ten inches shorter than I was, and a little more than half my weight. No small feat indeed. I smiled.

God, it even hurt to smile. "Well," I said between gritted teeth, "can I ask the name of my rescuer?"

"Moriah Ross," she replied.

"John Caradock. Pleased to meet you."

"Dearly beloved gift of God," she stated with a smile.

"Huh," I replied stupidly.

"It's what your name means," she said as she came over and checked the bandage wrapped around my aching head. "You should rest, or you'll end up tearing out your stitches."

"Stitches," I squawked.

"Yes," she answered calmly, "twenty-eight of them; ten in your head and eighteen in your leg. You're lucky I've had medical training. The nearest hospital is nearly one hundred miles away. You're even luckier you weren't more seriously hurt. No broken bones, but you have a mild concussion. I tried keeping you awake, but you weren't cooperating. I've been keeping a pretty close watch on you for the last two days."

"Two days," I started, "I've been unconscious for two days?"

"Maybe longer," she replied, "when I found you, you'd been lying there for a while. The blood had already clotted in your wounds. I was surprised you hadn't bled to death."

"Well, thanks for patching me up," I said. I tried very hard to keep civility in my voice, but my skull ached and I felt dizzy again.

"You're welcome, John Caradock."

Her voice faded off as I lost consciousness again.

The next time I awoke, there was daylight outside my dirty window. Moriah explained that I had been out for another half day. One of my first thoughts was of work. By now it was probably Tuesday or Wednesday, and I was expected back in the office on Tuesday morning. When I asked Moriah if she could contact anyone she told me she could not. She had no phone and the only way to get a message out was by the shortwave radio, which had been broken for weeks. "Isn't there any other way to contact the outside world," I asked. "Don't you every want to contact the outside world?"

"Not particularly," she replied. "Should I?"

"Well," I began, "do you ever have any visitors? What do you do for food and

entertainment?”

“I usually don’t have visitors. In fact you’re the first. I live here alone and I entertain myself by reading, studying, or hiking. Food is brought here by helicopter every six months,” she said matter-of-factly. “I set that up with my father before he died. They last food delivery was two months ago, so they won’t be back until September.”

My head began to buzz with concern, “September! I can’t wait here for another four months! I have a job and a life waiting for me.”

Moriah looked sad for a moment, “I...see. When you heal up a bit more, we’ll head down the mountain. There’s a ranger station about thirty miles from here. They can take you back to civilization. Or perhaps someone will come looking for you and they can take you back.”

I grumbled to myself. I would surely be missed, and someone was bound to try and find me, but I’d made the fatal mistake of not telling anyone where I was going. I wanted to get away from it all, and I got my wish. Moriah seemed to be annoyed by my desire to leave so I decided to change the subject, “So you study for fun? What do you study?” She apparently didn’t mind the change of subject, because she perked up and answered me right away. “Everything.”

Several more days passed and I soon found out what she meant by “everything”. From my bed I could look into the mirror on the opposite wall and see the living room. I could see that it was lined with bookshelves floor to ceiling. When I was able to get to my feet I ambled out to get a better look. Every shelf was packed with books. She had a computer desk stacked with DVD libraries. Most of the Library of Congress could fit on the media she had there. She informed me proudly that she’d read every book and every DVD. Even better, she remembered every word she had read. Apart from her striking looks, and what I found to be a good sense of humor, she had a photographic memory, and an IQ that made me feel horribly inadequate. She wasn’t extremely well spoken, but she spoke as an authority. She was an all around know-it-all, and was a little bit detached emotionally. I’ve been told that geniuses are like that. From what I could discern, her fields of expertise were broad indeed. She spoke and wrote twelve languages fluently, including Latin and Greek. She had attained the equivalent of five doctorates in the fields of botany, biology, chemistry, electronic engineering, and internal

medicine. Later that evening, as we sat by the fireplace, I asked her why she was living out here alone, and not working professionally in one of her chosen fields of study, her answer was disturbing.

“I am different,” she began. “Because of my intelligence I have been treated with disdain by some and by curiosity by others. Most people look at me and see a freak. My intellect has caused me to be handled like a lab rat. There have always been people in my life, that think I’m fascinating, and who want to study me. They give me tests and treat me like I’m more than human or less than human. They never truly accept me. The only person who truly ever accepted me, or loved me was my father. He and I established this place as a refuge from society. You see he was gifted as well. This gift of intellect set us apart from others. So apart from others we stayed. After he died, I decided I wanted to stay here. I have no wish to return to the world outside.”

“What about companionship,” I asked. “Doesn’t it get lonely out here?”

She glared at me coldly, and replied, “I have all that I need here.” Abruptly, she got up from the couch where she’d been sitting next to me, went to her room, and closed the door. The rest of the evening was spent in silence. Apparently I had touched a wound deep inside her that had never healed.

I wanted to spend the next day getting to know my surroundings. It was only my second time out of bed in over a week, and I was still very stiff and sore in my legs and arms. The clothes I’d been wearing the day I fell were pretty much shredded, but the ones in my backpack were still in good shape. The backpack itself was still intact, and looked all right, except for some large bloodstains. Just as I finished getting dressed, Moriah knocked at the door.

“May I come in,” she asked.

“It’s your house,” I replied as I finished buttoning my jeans.

She stepped into the room, and set my heart racing. Her choice of clothes was simple yet attractive. A light blue cotton shirt with short sleeves, and pair of khaki canvas shorts, both of which complimented her lean athletic figure and her smooth bronzed skin. Her head was hung low as she began to speak, “I want to apologize for the way I acted last night. I had no right to take that out on you. You’ve been nothing but kind to me, especially since I’ve inconvenienced you so with your job and your life. The anger I have

about my past doesn't belong on your shoulders."

"It's alright," I said, trying to make the words as soothing as possible. "Everyone gets angry once in while. We're only human."

She nodded and smiled at me. "It's good to see that you're feeling better," she responded cheerfully.

"For what it's worth," I grunted. My body felt as though an elephant had trampled it during the night. "I thought I would get up and take a look around today. Care to be my tour guide?"

"Of course," she answered. Her eyes gleamed with happiness.

She helped me hobble out of the room, and gave me a cane to lean on. It was fashioned from walnut, with a silver elephant head sculpture as the grip. She told me that it had been her father's.

Moriah's home was actually quite nice. It was a large log and stone cabin. There were seven rooms; two bedrooms, a kitchen, a living room, a bathroom (with a flush toilet!), a study (with more books), and a greenhouse. There was also a basement, the door to which Moriah kept locked. She told me the generator and the fresh water supply was located there. Each room was extraordinarily decorated, with redwood furniture and various works of art. Those works included some art deco pieces, some art nouveau work by Alphonse Mucha, some ancient Greek sculptures, a painting by Monet, and a sculpture Rodin.

We then took a tour outside. The late spring air was a bit cool, but the sun was warm and pleasant. The exterior of the house was as nicely put together as the interior. The way the cabin was designed and colored it blended in with the surroundings perfectly, almost as if it were a living part of the forest. One whole half of the roof was lined with solar panels that provided the cabin with electricity and hot water. At the rear of the cabin was a large rocky hill. In fact, a good portion of the cabin seemed to be built directly into the hill itself. Moriah explained that it was designed to be that way to aid with insulating the cabin from the elements, and prevent visits from unwelcome strangers.

"The architect must have been quite gifted," I said with amazement.

"Actually," Moriah responded, "my father designed it." Her voice was at once filled with pride, and I think a little bit of sorrow.

I nodded my head. "Your father must have been very well off financially as well. To build

this beautiful place, in this location, with all the work put into it, must have cost quite a lot.”

“No so much. We worked on it together,” was her simple yet cryptic reply.

I did not understand why two such gifted people would separate themselves so completely from society. Moriah and I walked slowly down a narrow path to a stream that ran quietly down the mountainside. I had begun to feel tired again so we sat down at the stream’s edge and soaked our feet. I shivered when my feet entered the water. Snowmelt had made the stream quite cold. Moriah plunged her feet in, seemingly unaffected by the icy fluid trickling between her toes.

“John,” Moriah started quietly, “where are you from? Where’s your home?”

“Santa Cruz, California,” I replied.

Moriah seemed very interested by this, “That’s by the ocean, isn’t it?”

“Yes. On the Monterey Bay, “ I answered.

“I’ve read about it in books. I’ve never been there,” she stated, as though everyone should have been there at one time or another. “In fact, I’ve never seen the ocean. Not in person at least. I’ve seen photos of it.”

I had to smile, “Photos don’t do it justice. The ocean is a beautiful place. So is Santa Cruz. You can step outside on any day and smell the salt water in the air. It’s tangy and friendly feeling. You can lie in bed at night and listen to the ocean roar as the waves crash onto the beach. In the spring and autumn you can hear the sea lions barking out on the rocks and under the pier. In the winter the monarch butterflies stay in a hidden cove just north of town. They hang from the trees in long chains, each one hanging onto the one above it. It’s like being under a living canopy. You can go to the Crow’s Nest restaurant, have lunch on the balcony and watch the fishing boats come in.”

I pulled my feet out of the stream and rubbed them on the soft grassy shore. Moriah watched me intently and then copied my movement. She giggled as the grass tickled her feet. Our conversation moved from subject to subject. It started with Santa Cruz, and how I thought the ocean matched the color of her eyes, moved to the subject of oceanography, then to sailing ships, and on to navigation and cartography. I sat in awe as she recited volumes of details on each subject. She had never been to Santa Cruz, but her knowledge of California was extensive. However, there was always something lacking in her descriptions. She had all the facts, but none of the passion born of

experience. I eventually turned the conversation to places she'd lived in her lifetime. "I spent most of my younger life in our home in Chaddequa, Pennsylvania, but most of my adult life has been spent here. Father had seven different homes all over the world. In Pennsylvania, Paris, Rome, New York, San Francisco, Tokyo, and London. I was only ever allowed travel to Chaddequa or to here," she stated with a bit of regret.

"You were only allowed to travel to two places," I queried. "Why was that?"

"Father was very...protective," she answered.

I frowned, "It sounds to me like he had control issues."

"He loved me and wanted the best for me," she replied.

"What about experiencing life? What about friends?" My questions seemed to make her uncomfortable.

She nodded slightly and responded with a voice that sounded like a lifetime of hidden pain, "I only experience life in books and in the here and now of this retreat. As for friends, until you came along, I didn't have any. Father was all the companionship I needed."

For someone so well informed, she was very naive. In that instant she seemed more like a child, and less like the beautiful woman she'd become. I decided to change the conversation to the subject of the mountains. It was something that I had studied about, and I hoped I could hold my own in a conversation with her on the subject. My hopes were very quickly smashed. Moriah expounded on facts that I could barely touch upon. Her knowledge was so extensive that she began a long narrative about the history of the mountain range, and how it had come into being. About fifteen minutes into the conversation I stopped her, "Jeez, Moriah! Is there anything you don't know about?"

"Besides you," she replied.

I had to laugh, "Yes, besides me."

She looked down at her feet splashing in the water and shrugged, "I'm sorry. I guess I don't know when to stop. My mind is always buzzing with thoughts and ideas. I guess I just have problems relating all of that to people around me."

I put an arm around her shoulder and pulled her close. "It's alright not to be perfect at everything," I said, trying to be as soothing as possible. It was so comfortable and easy to be there with her. Without thinking I leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. She looked up at me strangely. Oh how I could drown in those eyes.

“Why did you do that,” she asked innocently.

“I loosened my hold on her shoulders and replied, ”I thought you needed a hug.”

Her look changed to fascination, “Why?”

“You seemed sad,” I answered.

“Was I?” Her eyes stared into my soul.

She looked genuinely confused. There was a longing in her face for something, though I could not tell what it was. I was too busy with my own feelings, I could smell the fruity scent of her and I was suddenly very aware how beautiful she was. Then I did something crazy. I kissed her. Her lips were soft and warm. But she did not kiss me back. I stopped at once and again saw the look of fascination on her face, but this time it was mingled with touch of fear. She touched her fingers to her lips as if expecting to gain some special knowledge from the touch. Then, hesitantly, she ran her fingers across my lips. It was like the mild sting of your tongue on the contacts of a battery. I went to kiss her again and she shied away. Without a word she got up and ran back to the cabin. “Idiot!” I thought to myself. “Now you’ve really screwed things up.” It took me a good twenty minutes to hobble back to the cabin and once I got there, I found that Moriah had locked herself in her room. I tried to apologize through the door, but she would not answer me. We shared no word for the rest of the day. When evening came I retired to my room, but found it difficult to sleep. Late in the night I thought I heard voices. I peeked out of my room and saw the basement door was open. I thought about going to take a look, but it was too late. Moriah, came out from the basement door, locked it behind her, and then went to her room. I lay back down on my bed and wondered what was down there. Was Moriah talking to herself, or was someone down there? Strange thoughts crept through my mind as I lay there. There was something in the basement that Moriah didn’t tell me about, and I was going to find out what it was. But it could wait until morning.

The next day came, and with it was a thunderstorm. Most of the day I spent in my room, trying to figure out a way to apologize for my inappropriate behavior. Lightning and thunder crashed outside and rain poured down. After a while the thunder eased up, but the rain continued to fall. I lay down on my bed to clear my thoughts, and I began listening to the rain on the roof. Its rhythmic tapping was soothing to me, and after a few

minutes I'd fallen asleep.

I didn't realize how tired I was, but I slept until dusk. I was woken by the sound of thunder. The storm had started up again and it was building in fury. The rain poured down in heavy sheets. I knew at once that the temperature had dropped, as my bedroom window was fogged up. I went and turned on the light switch, but there was no power. I got up and looked for Moriah, but she was not in her room. I search the whole cabin but she was nowhere to be found.

Then I happened to glance outside as lightning flashed. There was Moriah, standing in front of the cabin, dressed only in her nightgown. She stood with her arms outstretched and her head thrown back, as though she were singing to the sky. She stood unmoving as the rain poured down on her. Just then a bolt of lightning went off right above the cabin. The resounding boom made the windows, and my teeth, rattle like a diamond back's tail. Without a second thought I ran outside, grabbed her by the arm and dragged her back to the cabin porch. "What are you doing out here," I shouted. "Standing out there like that...you could have been struck by lightning!"

"Lightning most often strikes the highest point on..." she began, but I did not let her finish.

"I don't care!" I was furious and dismayed at the same time. She was like a child.

"Haven't you ever wondered at the majesty of the storm," she asked.

I was a little taken aback. "Yes, but not like..."

She interrupted me again, "Have you ever felt the need for answers, but were unable to find them?"

"Yes," I answered just as another roll of thunder rattled the cabin.

She looked me in the eyes, "Have you ever wondered who you really were? Why you're meant to be here?"

I nodded.

"Kiss me," she stated flatly.

This caught me off guard. "What?" I asked it as though I hadn't heard her the first time.

"Kiss me," she commanded.

So I kissed her. This time she kissed back. The kiss was awkward and clumsy at first, but was pleasant nonetheless. I looked at her drenched body and couldn't help but notice how it clung to her lithe form. It was at once both enticing and unnerving. Her hair,

no longer in a braid, hung down around her face and shoulders in long wet tangles, and she was shivering. “We better get you inside and get some dry clothes on you before you catch pneumonia,” I said a calmly as I could.

Moriah nodded. We went back inside, and she went straight to her room. I grabbed a towel from the closet in my room, and began to dry myself off. Once I’d dried myself enough to stop the water from running into my eyes, I went to see if the generator had kicked in. It had not. The house had become much colder so I went into the living room to the fireplace. In minutes the room was lit with the pale orange glow of firelight, and I was warming myself in front of the fire. Moriah came out of her room wrapped in a terrycloth robe. She smoothed her long wet tresses out with a comb and looked none the worse for wear.

“What were you doing out there, “ I asked.

“I was calling out to God,” she replied.

“Couldn’t you have called out to God while indoors,” I queried with a bit of sarcasm in my voice.

“No,” She answered, “I really wanted him to listen. Do you know what my name means?”

I shook my head. I’d never studied the origins of names.

Moriah continued, “Moriah is an ancient Hebrew name. It means ‘God is my teacher’. However, I never talked to him before. I determined that it would help if He could see me as well as hear me.”

“I...see,” I responded. She never prayed before? An agnostic as well as a genius—I guess all that knowledge might make you question the existence of God. “What did you talk to him about?”

She smiled, “I asked him for enlightenment.”

“Did you get it,” I asked with a chuckle.

“Yes, I think so,” she replied. Then she came over and kissed me. It was better this time; like she was learning it all step-by-step. Then she began to unbutton my shirt. I was in shock. Then she looked at me with those big bright blue eyes, “John, I’ve never done this before. I know all the technical terms and basically how it’s done.” At this point she undid the belt of her robe, and let the garment slide off her shoulders and slowly drop to the floor. She stood naked before me and I was struck dumb. Her body was as perfect as her mind, as perfect as I had imagined. She took my hand and kissed each fingertip.

“I want to know,” she continued, “I want to know what it’s like. I want to feel what I’ve only read in stories.” She took my hand and put it on the bare skin between her breasts. “I want to feel it in my heart and my soul. Teach me.”

The rest of what occurred that afternoon and evening is personal, and so I will not include it in this text. Suffice to say, we learned a lot together. But afternoon wore on into evening and we eventually fell asleep in each other’s arms.

Some time around one in the morning I awoke and found that Moriah was gone. I threw on my pants and went in search of her. I found I was still moving a little slow. The ache in my leg from where the stitches were was less but it still had a dull throb. I went out to the living room and saw that the basement door was open again. I definitely heard Moriah talking to someone, but I could not tell whom. I snuck down the stairs as quickly and quietly as possible. It was surprising how far down the stairs went. I guessed that it must have been a hundred feet or so. The basement was not really a basement at all, but appeared to be more like a series of laboratories.

The first one I entered appeared to be a server room. It was dimly lit by the low blue glow of several computer monitors. Each screen showed an enormous amount of calculations being processed at amazing speeds. The cement floor was criss-crossed with dozens of cables and conduits, and huge server racks lined the walls. The room was inundated with the whirring sound of computer cooling fans, and a soft thrumming noise that emanated from the hole the middle of the basement floor. A larger cable, about the size of my upper arm, ran from the hole in the floor, down a side corridor where it turned a corner and continued on out of sight. Video cameras were strategically positioned throughout the area, so it was likely that whoever they were, they knew I was there.

The other rooms included a well-stocked chemistry lab, a robotics lab, a biology lab, and an infirmary. One smaller room off the infirmary contained a large metal chair with hundreds of wires feeding into it. On the arms and legs of the chair were thick canvas straps with heavy locking buckles. It looked like something from a neo-gothic Frankenstein movie. As I looked around the place I heard Moriah again. Her voice was coming from the corridor where the large cable went. I slowly crept down the corridor until I reached the doorway at the end. I was shocked by what I saw.

This room was similar to the server room, but the computers and machines filled only one end of the room. They formed a high mound against the far wall, which looked more organic than mechanical. Moriah knelt on the floor at the far end of the room, dressed only in my flannel shirt. She was speaking to a computer console, explaining in detail the sensations she'd experience with me earlier that evening. When she was finished, a voice from the computer spoke back to her. It was a cold and unfeeling voice.

"How does he make you feel, Mori?" The voice had the cold, calculating edge of a computer, but there was a touch of malicious pleasure in its tone.

"Like I'm really human," she replied.

"What the blazes," I thought to myself. She is human.

"Part of you is human, my dear," the voice spat back.

"Can I go back to him now," she asked fervently.

There was a pause and the voice replied, "I have recorded the sensations and your report in full detail. Time to put our home back in order. There is nothing left for you to do with him my dear. Except kill him."

"No," Moriah pleaded. "Do not make me do that. He's not like other people. He is good."

"Mori, Mori, Mori...tsk, tsk... Must I teach you again about who's in charge here?" The voice was now cold, cruel, and angry. "Only I can give you everything. I can give you joy."

At this moment Moriah, began to laugh uncontrollably. It was a powerful, but not quite happy laugh.

The voice continued, "I can give you passion."

Moriah fell back on the floor and began to moan. I had to watch as she was forced to relive our private moments together. I gritted my teeth and clenched my fist. Whoever this was he would pay.

At the height of her passion the voice spoke again, "And I can give you pain!"

Moriah screamed as though her flesh were on fire.

Thoughtless of all else except Moriah's well being, I rushed into the room yelling. "Stop! Damn you! Stop!" I yelled at the computer console as if it were some kind of fiend. I knelt next to Moriah who was now sobbing uncontrollably.

"Ah! Good evening Mr. Caradock," the computer replied with a self satisfied tone of malice. "It is a bit rude of you to invade my sanctum, but I will forgive you." The voice

was diabolically cold, but not entirely mechanical. It almost sounded human.

“Who the hell are you, “ I demanded.

“Haven’t you figured it out Mr. Caradock,” the voice replied. “I’m Mori’s father.”

The statement stunned me. “Moriah told me her father died. Either she lied to me or, you can’t be her father.”

The voice was gleefully wicked sounding, “Let’s just say that she told you a half truth. My physical body did indeed give out on me. However the essence of me remains. Within this machine.”

“That’s not possible,” I responded, trying to contain my disbelief and my sudden fear that it might just be true.

The machine responded by laughing at me; an all too human an evil laugh. “You are wrong, Mr. Caradock. It is very possible. I was once a man. I was Horace Edward Ross. I was the owner and CEO of Ross Industries, and the business world shook at the mere mention of my name. I was ruthless in my business and my finances. I crushed empires of capitalism like so much dried clay. I sucked the lifeblood out of my competitors until only their financially ruined and emotionally corrupt husks remained. I care for no one, except my daughter. Unfortunately, she did not love me. She ran off with a young man whom I despised. I spent many years and a great deal of money tracking them down. I even hired someone to kill her odious lover. Unfortunately, she was killed along with him in the auto “accident”.

At this point the voice of Horace Ross paused, my first instinct was to smash the computer, but I had no idea what that would do to Horace or Moriah. I hoped an enlightened idea might present itself. Then Horace started up again, “I vowed I would have my daughter back, but this time it would be on my terms. If you have unlimited funds, and enough guts to stand up to the moral majority you can do just about anything. I spent millions of dollars to have her cloned. I spent many years and much more money to ensure that this version of my daughter was completely loyal to me. However, it is my misfortune to have not one but two rebellious daughters.”

“You cannot control people like that,” I spat. “Individuality and independent thought are what make us who we are.”

The voice laughed at me again, “You don’t know how wrong you truly are. You simply have to employ a genius in genetic engineering and cybernetic implants; which I already

happen to be. Moriah is my daughter's real name, but it is also a project I designed and developed. Mental Occilation Regulated Independent Awareness Hardware. In simple terms that you can understand, it's a complex system of cybernetic implants, which access, record, control, and playback any form of recorded data in the mind. When my replacement daughter was created I had these devices implanted into her skull. With them I was able to monitor her development, and in turn, control her thoughts and actions so that she bent to my will. It was pure genius!"

"It sounds sick and psychotic to me," I replied with disgust.

"It is perfect!" Horace's voice was full of malevolence now. "My only mistake was to trust the people who worked with me on the project. They leaked information on M.O.R.I.A.H. to some unsavory persons. Many of them wanted the technology. I was offered large sums of money for my creation, but I refused to give it up. Not long after, an attempt was made on my life. A sabotaged leer jet was to be my coffin. Although I escaped the crash, I did not escape unscathed. I did not die, but my body was paralyzed and horribly disfigured. I used the M.O.R.I.A.H. technology to save myself. I downloaded my mind into the machine you see before you. The body is gone, but I continue to exist! My life continues on inside this mechanism, fueled by a nearly inexhaustible power source.

"The world now thought me dead and so I was safe to plot and to plan. Through some ingenious computer work, I was able to hide all of my funds in special accounts throughout the world. I had all of the records of my experiments destroyed, as well as the people who held my closest secrets. Through my daughter I was able to build this hideaway and sanctum. Through her mind I still experience the world."

I shook my head in disbelief and disgust. To think that Horace was there, inside Moriah's mind, during our most intimate moments, made me want to vomit. "Why," I asked him.

"Why live through your daughter? Why not clone yourself and move your mind into a new body? What you are doing to your daughter is worse than rape! Worse than incest! It's obscene!"

Horace did not answer immediately, but when he did his voice was colder, but no less malevolent. "Three reasons. The first is because the world thinks I am dead. Because of this I can get away with a great many things. From inside this machine I can reach out and effect the world in ways you could not possibly understand. The only unfortunate side effect is the lack of feeling. That is why I experience life through Mori's mind."

Moriah, still lying on the floor, suddenly grabbed my hand. "John...run...get away", her voice was weak and ragged.

Instead, I helped her to a sitting position and held her close. She was shivering.

Horace continued, "Secondly: there is the problem of chromosome shortening. When someone gets older his or her DNA chromosomes 'fray'. Cells betray their age through the wear and tear on their telomeres, the regions at the tips of their chromosomes. Telomeres cap off the ends of each chromosome and keep their genetic threads from fraying and disappearing when the cell divides itself again. Since most mammalian telomeres can't repair themselves, they are usually slowly worn away over time--shorter telomeres are often found in older cells. Science has not yet been able to correct or control this 'fraying' when cloning a human being. We got lucky with Moriah. Her clone does not show the signs of premature aging, but she was one success out of nearly one hundred failures. When science perfects human cloning, which they will someday do, I may decide to return to a cloned body. For now, I am content with my present plan."

Moriah grabbed a hold of my arms, "You have to get away from here! Please!"

"And thirdly," Horace stated, "The cybernetic implants in Mori's cloned body are permanent. To remove the devices would kill her. Besides, I enjoy the free reign I have over her thoughts and actions. The sensations are more intense than normal and much more enjoyable. And I can control those sensations. I can control every part of her being, from an adrenalin rush, to an itch on her beautiful little nose. She is and ever shall be mine. She is my arms and legs. My tool. My lover. My agent. My assassin. My whore. What I will, she does without question."

"RUN", Moriah screamed.

Unfortunately, it was too late for me to heed her warning. As I sat there, blinded by morbid curiosity, listening to the mad computer/man detail his atrocities, something had been happening behind me. Out from a hidden panel in the ceiling came a robotic arm, tipped with a shock-taser. Before I realized what was happening, 50,000 volts of electricity raced through my body, dropping me into unconscious darkness.

When I awoke, I was ankle and wrist into a metal chair. I tried to turn my head but found it fixed in place by a circular brace around my fastened across my forehead. A complex series of wires were plastered all over my head. From where I was seated I could tell it

was the same strange chair I'd seen in the laboratory. Above me stood Moriah, quietly and unemotionally, preparing what appeared to be a set of surgical tools and a wire mesh with fiber optic cables running to it. Next to the chair, now protruding from the walls, were two robotic arms. One appeared to be a handling bone saw, and the other a drill with cartridge of small electronic device inside. Above my head came the sound of some kind of device. Its vibrations ran through the metal ring on my head and made ears and teeth hurt.

I took the chance to try to talk to Moriah, "Moriah. Sweetheart. Please help me." Moriah turned to look at me. Her blank, dull gaze told me that she was not in control. Horace's voice emanated from a speak in the far corner off the lab, "It's pointless to try and talk to her Mr. Caradock. She cannot hear you. I maintain control of her body and mind."

"What are you going to do to me," I asked, trying to keep a calm tone in my voice.

"I'm going to kill you, Mr. Caradock," was his reply.

I then wondered what was happening to me now. What was he planning with all the gadgets? Why strap me in this chair when he could just kill me outright? "Then why am I not dead already," I queried.

Horace chuckled, a cold, lifeless, evil chuckle. "You misunderstand me, Mr. Caradock. I'm not going to kill your body. I'm going to kill your mind."

A wave of dread washed over me as I began to understand what he had in mind. I swallowed hard and struggled against my bonds, but it was no use.

"You see, Mr. Caradock," Horace gloated, "I am in control here. I have all the power I could ever dream of. However, I long to experience more than Mori can give me alone. I am going to empty your mind like an upturned glass of water. When that is done, I will implant M.O.R.I.A.H. devices into your skull. Through them I will be able to enter and exit your body at will. It will become my body. With it I will experience the world anew, but I will retain all the advantages of my present disembodied mind. Moriah and I will be together forever. We will enjoy the passion of bodies, minds and souls intertwined. When these bodies are used up, we will get a new pair. We shall live forever!"

"Just another damned megalomaniac, with delusions of godhood," I spat.

Horace's voice became chillingly furious, "Moriah, kill Mr. Caradock. Make it painful" Moriah move like a puppet, and Horace held the strings. It looked as though she were

trying to resist the commands Horace was giving her, but she was not strong enough. She fitted my head with a warm metal mesh and started a device directly above my head. The device emitted a high-pitched whirring sound and I could feel my hair standing on end. Moriah moved to a nearby computer console and type in some commands. On her monitor, a countdown had begun. My life would end in exactly sixty seconds.

Or would it. For a moment Moriah had a hint of recognition in her eye, as if she were momentarily in control. She tapped furiously on the keyboard. Suddenly, her eyes rolled back into her head and she began to convulse. She fell to the ground, blood and froth oozing from her mouth as she continued to shake. A hazard light flashed on the computer screens.

“Damn nuisance,” Horace sounded displeased.

“What have you done to her,” I demanded.

“If you must know, she did it to herself,” Horace responded coldly. “Her attempts to resist my control have resulted in an epileptic seizure. Goodbye Mr. Caradock.”

I turned and watched the time tick down. 5 – 4 – 3 – 2 – 1. I closed my eyes, fully expecting to end up in oblivion. Instead the machine above my head began to spin down, and my restraints slackened. I yanked my hands free and began unfastening the brace around my head.

“Where do you think you’re going Mr. Caradock?” Horace’s question did need an answer. Nor did he require one. The robotic arms jutting from the wall came alive. Bone saw and drill shrieking loudly as they revved up. I freed my head just in time. As the bone saw took a swipe at me, I grabbed it and pulled it across into the arm with the drill.

Horace’s interface with the machines could not compensate fast enough. The bone saw sliced neatly through the drill arm, severing it and creating a shower of sparks. I wrestled with the remaining arm. Using all the strength I could muster, I pulled on one of the rubber tubes running the length of the arm. Luckily, I had grabbed one containing hydraulic fluid. The tube tore loose at the base and flailed madly as the fluid spewed out of it. In moments the saw arm was lifeless. I loosened the straps around my ankles as quickly as I could and rushed to check on Moriah. Her seizure had stopped but she was unconscious. Her breathing was a little shallow but her pulse was strong and regular.

“I looks as though I will have to find someone new to play with,” Horace said tauntingly.

I grabbed the keyboard from the console Moriah was at, and smashed the speaker where Horace's voice had been. Then I heard him laughing.

"You fool! Do you really think that will stop me?" His voice was coming from the main sanctum down the hall, "Come to me! If you dare!"

I was furious, but I had no idea what to expect. I knew that marching into his lair to confront him was too dangerous. I looked around for something I could use as a weapon; but what do you use against a disembodied spirit of a mad man? I pulled a fire extinguisher from the wall. I cautiously went from room to room smashing ever one of the video cameras. Now I could work without Horace's gaze over my shoulder.

"You are prolonging the inevitable, Mr. Caradock." Horace did not sound as sure of himself as he had previously.

I worked in silence, searching each room for something to fight with. That's when I found what I was looking for. In the chemistry lab I found a large bottle of hydrochloric acid.

The black smoke from the burning equipment stung my lungs with every breath. When we'd made it upstairs to the cabin I took Moriah and laid her on the ground outside. I rushed back in and saved as much as I could, but was only able to take what I could easily carry. The fire engulfed the cabin so quickly there was not enough time to save everything. I stood for a long while and watched as it burnt to the ground.

And that's how it began. It's been two years since that dreadful day. Moriah and I are now married and living in a modest house in Santa Cruz. She survived her father's tortures, with only a few problems. She remembers very little of the evening when the cabin burned. The seizure seemed to have caused her some short-term memory loss regarding event on that last day. The rest of her memory is still intact, but she takes medicine now to keep the epilepsy from returning. Her photographic memory is a little less accurate now, but she doesn't mind. As long as she's free of her father's influence she's happy. We think the implants in her skull ceased functioning when she had her first seizure, but all we know for sure is that she no longer senses them as being active. I returned to work. Unfortunately, I was unable to explain the reason for my absence, so I lost my job. I work from home now, programming software and working freelance to make money. Moriah started work at a veterinary clinic. It turns out she's a natural with

the animals and she loves them all dearly. In our spare time Moriah and I protest research and developments in human cloning.

As for Horace and his sanctum, there's not much more to tell. The fire completely consumed the cabin and everything inside. Smoke and flames on the mountainside attracted the attention of rangers and fire fighters. They were able to contain the fire quickly, but I'm told the ruins smoldered for a week. Half the hillside caved in when the place burned, so it's doubtful any trace of Horace's handiwork will ever be unearthed. Still, I can't help but wonder whether or not Horace is still out there. He was brilliant, but he was overconfident and mentally unstable. The real question is whether he was clever enough to leave himself an escape route, or whether he is well and truly dead. As I type in this account of the events of those strange days 2 years ago, I cannot help but wonder. Is he still out there watching me? Does he lie in wait, in some dark electronic lair, quietly and calmly plotting his reveng ---**!##* --- code failure ---

>>Good evening, Mr. Caradock.<<