

# The Drysau Ceudodol Trilogy

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# BOOK ONE:

## Eve's Apple

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events in this novel are products of the authors' imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is entirely unintended and purely coincidental. Readers are advised that it contains some explicit adult material and a few scenes of violent nature. In addition, biblical imagery is used in ambiguous ways.

Book One and Two of the trilogy were developed from 'The LaPorte Caves', posted by Anonymous between 2016 and 2017 in an online forum, and were revised, edited, and extended to Book Three by Peter Benton with permission.

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## About the author

If you think of googling the author's name, stop right now. There is nothing to figure out.

The author has considerable stakes in walks of life where frivolous absurdity would be met with consternation and therefore intends for one uncertain Peter Benton to take the brunt of whatever blame readers may assign for any indigestion the consumption of the books in this series may cause. Peter's contribution thereto is hereby acknowledged.

Perhaps you may consider putting this tractate aside in time before you get lost the way Yours Truly did when, beset by light-minded intent while spinning this yarn, he found that something intangible rocked the secure perch of his gender experience. Throughout, the question lurked: what exactly was it? Perhaps you, dear reader, will find the answer.

But before you join in, the following disclaimer for the Unsuspecting seems fair:

*“If you dive into these pages, make sure you find your way back out.”*

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## Glossary of Old English Terms

Brothor	Brother
Cildra	Children
Deofol	Devil
Dryw	Druid
Englaland	England
Faeder	Father
Holh	Hole
Modor	Mother
Munt	Mountain
Paradīs	Paradise
Swustor	Sister
Wicce	Witch

*But the hot Hell that alwayes in him burnes,  
Though in mid Heav'n, soon ended his delight,  
And tortures him now more, the more he sees  
Of pleasure not for him ordain'd: then soon  
Fierce hate he recollects, and all his thoughts  
Of mischief, gratulating, thus excites:  
Thoughts, whither have ye led me, with what sweet  
Compulsion thus transported to forget  
What hither brought us, hate, not love, nor hope  
Of Paradise for Hell, hope here to taste  
Of pleasure, but all pleasure to destroy,  
Save what is in destroying, other joy To me is lost.*

*Paradise Lost, John Milton 1667*

## *Prologue: The Rupture*

“*B*ring in the wretched wicce,” he ordered.  
“You shite-faced, small-cocked,  
hypocrite wanker scum!” the subject of  
today’s proceedings duly announced itself  
through the rough-hewn door. Four equally rough  
minions, slick with mud from head to toe, fell in with  
their prey. And what a prey it was. They struggled  
mightily to drag in a striking beauty half a head taller  
than them. Hell was she strong, almost too strong. On  
the path from the stockade, they staggered along like a  
party of drunken sailors, slipping on muddy ground,  
falling over themselves, pushing forward off and on as  
she jerked the four sturdy men around her back and  
forth despite having her hands and feet tied up with  
half-inch thick rope. If they weren’t, these men would

already be dead. Her screaming from an inexhaustible well of expletives, by themselves calling for damnation, made it all too obvious that she was guilty beyond reasonable doubt.

It wasn't just the unbecoming strength, clearly not ordained by God for her gender. The deofol in her manifested also in the sinful temptations of her opulent shape and the utterly shameless way of exposing her attractions in unbecoming dresses, which inevitably roused boundless distractions for all men around her to the point of inciting vicious fights among suitors vying for her lascivious attention, back then when she was still in good standing with the colony.

"Morwen, Morwen, Morwen, has it finally come to this? It pains me to see you like that." The honorator presiding over the proceedings, a gaunt, hawkish man pressed his lips together to a thin, hard line to gird himself for the unpleasantness that lay ahead. Why did it have to be Morwen? From the way the ravishing beauty took stock of the line of men before her, men, who at times were playmates or mentors, friends, and eventually lovers, yes, all of them once were, one would not guess that it was she who was the one to be arraigned, her fate to be weighed.

"Burn in the hell you made up for yourselves, you cursed lot of miscreants. Why only are you useless, tottering fopdoodles so possessed with destroying what is good and beautiful in this world, posing as 'learned men'?" Having spat out these last words oozing with disdain, she threw her head back defiantly, shaking her long, strawberry-blond hair. Even when disheveled after a day in the reinforced stockade, it still glowed with a silky shine in the few streams of light lurking through the thin, reed-covered roof of the provisional court hut, hastily arranged for some semblance of due process from the old world.

The head of the council raised a hand to silence her blasphemous retort. "Don't make it any worse for yourself. You stand accused of consorting with the deofol and making yourself available for his wicked designs. You were warned twice to not go near this seat of evil. But now that you have made plain your allegiance to the Anti-Christ our hands are tied: the full weight of punishment for your infraction must be applied. Moreover, you did so under the auspices of the renegade colony of the Unrepentant. You give us no cause for leniency."

Rhys hated this, the council, the torturing, the wailing, the punishments. But as the undisputed leader of the colony, he was left with no choice. The very existence of his flock was at stake. The council had to stand strong against this evil.

Above all, he hated what Morwen reminded him of, what his manhood, once again threatening to enter a state of painful arousal, was sorely missing ever since he came to be acquainted with untold depths of sinful pleasure by what could only be the work of the deofol.

The woman Morwen knew what he was talking about in more than one way: burning at the stake for once. But she also knew what torture wormed its way through his mind: as she struggled, part of her dress, loosely draped over her bosom, fell away and exposed the full, mature, and generous breast of an extremely well-endowed forty-year-old in the full bloom of nursing. One wouldn't know it from her face reflecting the innocent beauty of a tender maiden, another sign of how she was possessed by the evil that had cursed the colony for years now.

She was all too aware that the man named Rhys couldn't help but to have his attention trapped by that single magnificent areola and stopped struggling to give him a better view. With that flicker of madness the



consorts of the Horned One were often possessed by, she arched her back to create an impossible protrusion of her feminine fullness. One torture deserves another, she thought, and let it work its magic on the council members' composure, every single one of them.

"Enjoy the view, councilmen?" she teased – the ungodly impertinence!

"Cover her, for God's sake!" Rhys huffed to the four jailers. Their hands trembled when they obeyed. It had been a long time since they had laid their eyes on such voluptuousness.

Her wicked awareness of the stiffening that took place among the men in the room was as insulting as it was infuriating. The seven judges turned away from the sight to avoid the worst but failed because the rough brown linen of her dress did nothing to douse their fantasy aroused by a single glimpse of the shape that still lurked all too prominently under her dress. Every one of them had vivid recollections of their own fill with her, and they conspired with the glimpse of Morwen's ample reminder, however brief, to have the men squirm and tacitly adjust their loins to accommodate what should not be, must not be.

Morwen was a rare woman, the worst of them all. She was a member of the first party arriving here, then in her late teens. Even then she was a frequent cause of commotion among the men, so much so that Rhys questioned the wisdom of taking her along. But a small colony like theirs needed prolific procreation to have a chance at survival, and Morwen had all outward signs of harboring the goods. Strong limbs, long and sinewy, wide hips promising a prolific career in childbirth, supporting a body that appeared lithe but proved surprisingly strong when one of the adolescent boys was foolish enough to engage her in a wrestle. Breasts that made an ample and firm impression even under the

loosest of garments and were frequently commented on as capable to nourish a whole gaggle of infants.

But since she allowed the deofol to indulge freely within her in the renegade colony, the personified evil had unrestrained reign over the lustful urges of men who caught sight of her. So much so that the colony had lost a number of men to wiccen like her. The colony was in a fight for survival, justifying extreme measures.

“Are you ready to save your soul and confess to having engaged in sinful indulgence with the deofol, to have given in to his beckoning repeatedly? It is easier on you if you repent now. You know what awaits you.” That was the worst part: when they remained defiant, and Morwen was the type, Rhys knew.

“I don’t regret anything. It is men like you who are benighted enough to declare our blossoming as the work of the Horned One, you stupid fools. If it had been, God would have us driven out of Paradis already. That should tell you that it is God himself that is speaking to you through our beauty.” Smart, too, that one. Morwen knew her scripture. But it surely wasn’t God allowing her to voice that blasphemous impudence.

“Save your poison, woman, you will have several days to reconsider your stubbornness before we proceed any further. You know it gets worse the longer you wait; we’ll talk again tomorrow. Take her back,” he ordered the jailers.

It didn’t make sense to torture her now, Rhys knew from prior experience. As the jailers resumed their struggle to contain the woman, Rhys glanced at a body that wasn’t just ample but also as hard as the defiance that resided in it. One on one, she could easily kill a man with her bare hands in short shrift – or with her even more powerful and dangerously long legs that could sweep all four of the jailers off their feet when given free reign. A wicce like Morwen wouldn’t flinch

now when the instruments were applied to her. She might even laugh.

A couple of days in the stockade would change that, Rhys knew. First, there would be a restless pacing, then the sweating and handwringing, the rattling at the cage, the shriveling of her body as the deofol discarded her flesh while keeping the soul in his clutch, torturing it with need. Sometimes that alone made a hardened wicce ask for a quick redemption, and Rhys sorely hoped that Morwen, who once was like a daughter to his beloved wife, would be one of them.

It was difficult to get hold of one of the wiccen from the renegade colony on the coast. As a group, they had grown in size so as to be nearly unassailable. No one in their sane mind would go anywhere near their lair. Even when caught alone in the woods, it took half a dozen of the strongest men to restrain them if they could even catch them. Killing them was out of the question, swords simply didn't cut deep enough, and somehow these wiccen had dispensed with pain through the dark magic the deofol offered to them.

However, the council took solace in the knowledge that the pact with the deofol came at a price; the Horned One always got his pound of flesh from those who turned their back on God. The wiccen were frequently overcome with a stupor, and it was then when one could safely collect them from the forest floor like the foul fruit they were, except that their foulness was poisonous in the way they could make a man's virtue stumble. But eventually, a wicce would not survive the repeated bouts of delirium that were the price for harboring the evil until it devoured her soul. If the righteous could only hold out long enough with the help of the Almighty, the scourge, Rhys figured, would eventually consume itself.

This was how they got hold of Morwen, presumably overcome by such a stupor when out to lure men into the wiccen's lair, and with them many women, too. Among all the wiccen, she was the most effective, and that was why they often sent her to roam near the colony to draw in those of weaker faith. The more important it was that they finally got a hold on that most powerful of all lures. Mindful of that, no man was allowed to see her alone lest he might succumb to her well-honed wiles.



“Faeder, faeder...,” his youngest, the happy soul, screamed, storming out of the hut to greet her father.

“Go, Alys, fetch your brothors and swustors, don’t always let modor hunt them down, she has enough on her back with the household.”

Rhys stepped into the house, a small peasant cottage with a thatched roof in the style of their former home in the old land, erected with rudimentary comfort according to the constrained resources of the new land. Without access to proper craftsmen, he never got the chimney drafting properly to prevent a light layer of soot from settling over the sparse interiors – one of many reminders of the improvised existence they were resigned to. Yet it was their land, and only theirs, free from serfdom under a liege lord squeezing the last drop of lifeblood out of them. He kissed his loyal wife, the light of his days, to whose patience he owed so much.

“What happened at the council?” she asked with poorly concealed concern.

“She remained defiant, you know how she is,” he told her with an exasperated sigh. Caitrina knew indeed. Ever since her cousin succumbed to ‘Eve’s apple’, as the colony came to call it, it was Rhys’ wife who cared for

Morwen during her orphaned teenage years and grew close to her like to a daughter. The thought that Morwen had ended up in the clutches of that evil must torment that poor woman on top of all the other burdens she carried, Rhys surmised.

“Isn’t there anything you can do? You are the council chief.”

“But I am also the Dryw with responsibility for the entire colony. Our stand against that evil yellow poison is difficult enough. I persuaded the council to give her a reprieve twice already. If I am seen as relenting or granting any more favors, the gates of hell could fully open. We are losing women at an alarming rate as it is. If we can’t stop the bleed by making an example of those who test God himself only a few old men would be left, and that would be the end of everything we fought and sacrificed for.”

“I know. I trust the judgment of the Almighty and I hope yours is just as wise. Let’s pray on that over dinner.” That was his old Caitrina, the comforting one he once fell in love with, not the aberration she had become when she herself was once possessed by the spirit of Eve’s apple, as every woman here was before the Rupture.

Alys stormed into the sole room of the house with her seven siblings in tow, instantly brightening the mood with their excited chatter on the prospect of a dinner of grits and goat milk. These moments were the happiest of Rhys’ days here, and in fact, the only good thing that came out of establishing a colony in this land.

As a converted Christian from a long line of ancient Druids tracing back to before the advent of the Redeemer, the joys of marriage and family seemed inappropriate for him as he wanted to remain pure for Christ – his true love and comfort, save for the occasional secret tryst with Caitrina, albeit not more

than he could receive absolution for. Yet the people of his village still referred to their priest as the 'Dryw' instead of 'Faeder', and the name stuck.

After he led a bedraggled band of refugees to this magic realm, who fled the Southern coast of England from the marauding Danes, the yellow fruit occasionally found by foraging women at the foothills of the mountain seemed like a godsend: whenever they got a hold of it their handiwork proceeded much more speedily as the fruit provided amazing sustenance to them. But it only fortified the women; men wouldn't go near it. Rhys tasted it once and it was disgusting and sickening. Yet his Caitrina swore that it was pure Ambrosia.

When the fruit was in season, the whole colony teemed with energy and blossomed in joy, as was Caitrina. After engorging herself she emerged like from a fountain of youth and acquired an impressive stature, with a bodily strength at times even surpassing his own, yet blessed with womanly attractions and a wicked demeanor that rivaled those that Morwen reminded him of today to devastating effect, and which made it impossible to not lie with her every night and be spent out of his wits, or dream thereof when the fruit was out of season.

His wife was never what most men would call particularly attractive; that was not why he chose her. Rather, he appreciated her kind understanding, quiet wisdom, and the calming efficiency she blessed the household with. But oh, how she had blossomed into a ravishing beauty when the fruit was in season; how often did he recall those early years in the colony with a forbidden yearning. As much as he tried, he could not curb the sinful musings: the prickling anticipation of the boundless pleasures of every single night with her when she was still beholden to the fruit, how his mouth

went dry as she dropped her dress for him, revealing the unearthly bounty of her flesh, dripping with desire as much as he did. Her ferocity under him and more often on top of him only came to an end after their lust was turned inside out in screaming releases of sensual madness.

Accordingly, if there were any riches around here it was children, all miraculously blessed to grow up healthier and stronger than in the old land. There was nary a man left out of such fortune in this colony, and the women didn't look any worse for it. For a time, it seemed like the Almighty had invited them back to the Paradīs, and so they chose that name for the land of the two moons.

It was a test, he now knew, and they failed it – he, her, the other women and men – all of them. And the Almighty made them pay for it now as the shadow of the Horned One fell over the colony. As they were wont, the women eventually applied their gardening skills to the fruit trees and were rewarded – or cursed – with success. Unfortunately, as the damned fruit became more available, that wicked demeanor of women that initially served to enrich the men's romantic lives in the secret confines of their homes extended to a grating unruliness, both unbecoming and upsetting the natural order for the gender cut from Adam's flesh, and was particularly unmanageable when the fruit was in season and the women were too strong to be put in their place by even the firmest hand.

Moreover, when they arrived in this land, the young maiden Morwen was the only one among the women who knew how to read. But the fruit also seemed to increase women's proclivity for scholarly skills, and soon they all knew how to read, while most men did not. As if this didn't add enough to the vexing contentiousness of their dealings with men both inside

and outside the home, they lost all respect for the holy sacrament of marriage, too, causing a general air of discontent in the community.

Worse yet, the occasional fainting spells, at first ascribed to a natural inclination of womenfolk, occurred with ever more alarming frequency. When finally a few women had lost their souls to the evil magic, a loss this fledgling colony could ill afford, the measure was full. A council of learned men established by the Dryw came to the conclusion, after much scholarly debate, that this Paradīs the Almighty had placed them in was nothing but a trial as to whether the Lord's flock had learned from scripture to resist the temptation of the serpent in the form of Eve's apple. As the fruit's season passed and the time for action was ripe, a strict edict was issued forbidding further use of the fruit and ordering the destruction of what should appropriately be known forthwith as the 'Deofol's tree'.

This event marked what the colony experienced as 'The Rupture'. Almost all the recently adult women, who were born here and were insufficiently fortified by the customs of the old land, fled one night in a quiet exodus, taking along many young men beholden to their wiles. From these wiccen arose the scourge that consistently drew men into their lair, and most importantly, also women, many of whom paid with their souls for continuing to indulge in the temptations of the serpent.



The gravity of these events conspiring against the colony weighed on the couple, as it had for months now. Once the children had settled for the night, Caitrina motioned to discuss the latest developments outside the



house, away from their long ears which were all too aware of the adults' lingering worries.

"Any news from the last scouting party you sent into the caves?"

"No. Same as all the times before. All the signs that led us here are erased. Whatever opening they found, it wasn't farther than a day's walk from here, never near our old home. Our sins in this land must have wiped the walls clean. We failed the trial, and this Paradis, I fear, now holds us prisoner to suffer eternal damnation. Adam and Eve were cast out of Garden Eden for their original sin, yet we are locked in with the serpent to be consumed by it."

"Love, don't say that. We have to trust in the merciful Almighty, only he can be our savior. He will provide for us."

He tapped her hand to reassure her. "Of course; I only wished I had never laid eyes on the heathen tales of my ancient forebears, never followed the silver miners into that holh in the munt, never seen the markings there to follow, never stepped out into this godforsaken wilderness, never promised the good people here a land free of strife, war, and plunder only to meet His wrath over our failings."

"What about your wrath? You are truly determined to let Morwen perish in the fire for her failings?" Caitrina asked after an uncomfortably depressed silence. "You know how much the cildra loved her. How are you going to explain this to them?"

He didn't answer. That was so typical, Caitrina found, always leaving the clean-up to the women. Strange, years ago such contentious thought wouldn't have crossed her mind – one of the wretched effects of Eve's apple she chided herself for ever having tasted. That she liked it more than any other pleasure she ever

indulged in was just another part of her guilt of having been weak before the deofol's evil designs.

"If she must burn, let it happen tomorrow. She is only a day off the fruit, and so she won't suffer too much," she pleaded.

"She should be given the opportunity to save her soul by repenting. We owe her that. In a few days, the instruments will be much more effective to convince her."

"Then at least let me try to talk her out of her stubbornness so that she will repent tomorrow at the next Questioning. She trusts me like an older swustor; I am sure she will listen to me. If she does repent, you must promise me to proceed without delay."

"You can have an hour with her two strikes after midnight. I'll let the jailers know. No one will be awake at that time and the stockade is well hidden from our settlement. Still, use discretion, we can't be seen as granting favors."

While Rhys retired to bed, Caitrina stayed up for the night, relying on the whooping bird to keep her awake so she wouldn't miss this one opportunity to save a woman she regarded as much as a sister, or a daughter even, from heavenly damnation – and the wordly one, too, if there was anything she could do about it.



The search party spread out over a large forest area as it had for so many days now. Caitrina had not returned from her meeting with Morwen that night at the stockade hidden deep in the woods. When Rhys was alerted in the morning, he rushed to a scene of utter devastation. The five-inch-thick wooden posts rammed deep into the ground were either ripped out or simply broken off at ground level. The guards were nowhere to

be found. All that was left of their former presence were blank swords out of their sheaths, each one broken in half or bent in grotesque ways.

A week had passed by in fruitless search and without any word from her. On this sixth day, Rhys was wading through the underbrush of a swamp with increasing anxiety. Days of search hadn't even turned up her dead body, and that was bad news. The wiccen did not abduct women against their will. They didn't need to. That left only one suspicion, turning into ever greater certainty with each passing day: that she might have deceived him and fallen in with the wiccen in treachery. Evidently, Eve's apple nestled deeper in women's minds than even he was willing to entertain. Compared to that prospect it would be a relief to find her dead.

The sun had settled sufficiently low to cast the forest in dusk so that the crescents of the two moons could already be vaguely discerned through the forest canopy – a smaller, reddish one, and a larger, more purplish one. He was ready to call it a day and try one more time tomorrow, perhaps in desperate deference to the magic number seven ordained by the book of Genesis.

As he made his way back, he was startled by an ominous form stepping in his way, shrouded in a cloak and too large for comfort. Rhys could make out a familiar shape scurrying to hide behind it. As the monstrous apparition took a few determined strides to catch up with him he could see that it was more than three heads taller than him. It had something of a woman, it seemed, but something greater, too. And it smelled – of flowers.

Before he could call for help, the woman, or whatever it was, threw off her cloak and he froze like Lot's wife facing Gomorrah. Before him stood, both magnificent and mortally frightening in its monumental expanse, the deofol in person, cloaked in the most wicked

womanly perfection, its true nature only revealed by the ungodly muscles of the Beast.

As the woman-beast closed a large, but exquisitely structured hand around his neck, and as he had already surrendered to the judgment of the Almighty, he heard a timid request from behind: “Don’t crush the faeder of my cildra, Morwen, be gentle – I wish to keep him.”

The woman-beast with the most stunningly beguiling features allowed a faint smile to play around her lush lips, at once compassionate and haughty, then squeezed with the greatest restraint she could muster, and Rhys’ world spun into a bottomless abyss. It felt like the irons had been slapped around his throat and the screws were tightened mercilessly. Everything turned upside down, never to be in its rightful place again.

## *You Know Nothing About Weakness*

“**H**ey, you marmot, breakfast is getting cold downstairs!”  
Shit, Mr. Busybody was up and about

already. Embarrassed, Julia rolled out of the wickedly comfortable bed, very much in need of something cold, not breakfast but a cold splash in her face. Howard never had any compunction to impose his rigorous routine of organizing his day on her, though he knew better than trying to rouse her before eight, and certainly not on a vacation. But it was well past eight; she should be showered and dressed. He probably had gone for his morning jog, showered, shaved, changed into his daytime outfit, and was all geared up for communal breakfast with the other guests in the cozy two-hundred-pound-a-night Bed&Breakfast they had spent the night in.

“Honey, I’d rather have room service. Look at my hair, I look like a scarecrow and I need to wash up first.”

Howard pursed his lips. “We took this place because the idea of a communal breakfast with the other guests sounded so charming, remember?” Julia returned a pained expression. “I know, honey, but... please?”

Howard shook his head. “The world would be a lot less complicated if women had no hair.” He hovered in silence for a while, waiting for who would give in first. Julia didn’t let up with her pained expression; in fact, now she piled on even more by looking like she needed to go to the loo.

“Fine. I’ll go downstairs and get breakfast.”

In truth, this wasn’t about hair at all. It was about that girl one floor up, the one usually only seen in

magazines marketing womanly perfection with perfect make-up, perfect dresses, sceneries in perfect light, and maybe, well, yes, perfect hair holding up to whatever breeze might tousle it. She was designed to be seen in communal breakfasts and would attend in time with perfectly coiffed hair, blond too, just to rub it in, and to display her postcoital languidness under the guise of enviable regal composure.

As charming and quaint as their lodging was, it wasn't built for privacy. Julia hadn't found much sleep last night, not with that constant rutting in the room above, the squeaking of the bed springs, the high-pitched squealing of a girl (yes, that one) in heavenly bliss, and the short moans in the pounding rhythm of her mate, penetrating the floor that unfortunately served as their ceiling as well. Usually, she wasn't plagued with insomnia when comfortably spooned against her boyfriend. Even his breath coming out in a gentle, raspy snore had a reassuring quality to it. She always felt settled and content in his presence. But tonight there was a long list of reasons why he didn't have that effect on her.

For one, that noise up there was an annoying reminder that her own love life wasn't exactly exuberant, not in the unrestrained way that battle of love played out above. Howard could pass as a decent lover when he wasn't distracted by his latest work projects or by his perennial dreams of heart-stopping adventure but, unfortunately, that wasn't often, if ever. While he was tender with her between the sheets and said all the right things to stroke her femininity, she never felt like penetrating the inner sanctum of twosomeness, the melting into each other dangled before her in romance novels the color of pink. If only reality was as dime-a-dozen as those stories. And so she

settled for the creaturely comfort her relationship provided.

Unlike the girl above, she couldn't consider herself exactly a sex bomb. Ever since growing into adulthood, she wondered what it would be like, to be able to curl the hottest guys around her little finger instead of watching other more fortunate girls honing their skills in doing that.

However, there were dangers to being endowed with such power. She didn't need to look any further than what happened to her best college buddy, Helena, an immigrant student from Europe. Julia liked to hang out with her in the secret hopes that some of that radiance of classic mediterranean beauty would rub off on her. Besides, being caught up in the whirlwinds around her was easily the most exciting time of her life: gregarious with a megawatt smile, boisterous, not shy to flaunt her figure, the natural center of any social gathering she was. And brains, too. The boys seemed to buzz around her like moths near the light, but the way she was able to slice up a guy's ego with effortless well-placed banter if they came too close intimidated them as well. The weapon was sharp enough for most – save one. So it happened one day that Helena was no more, at least not the one Julia had come to know. Suddenly socially withdrawn with grades dropping like horse poop, she soon dropped out herself and tumbled into one abusive relationship after another until Julia lost sight of her. *Sic transit gloria mundi*, Julia learned in the Latin class of her liberal arts college. Nor was Helena an exception: forty percent of girls had experienced rape by the time they left the college dorms, she had read in a survey, with much of their lives still ahead to experience more of that.

The gossip was that a stud named Stu had raped her in her dorm room. As a guy who spent a lot more time

on his biceps than his brain, he only got into higher education because of being a hulk with promising quarterback skills for the college team to climb up the charts. That, however, gave him immunity from the powers that be. Because of 'leadership aptitude', the common wisdom was. And he did it to 'teach that bitch a lesson', the grapevine rustled, a lesson in the leadership of brawny muscle, it seemed. Yet underneath all that flustered outrage there was a tacit agreement in the air that it may have been warranted even. Girls shouldn't attract attention like that, 'they' whispered in the shadows. Shouldn't have dressed that way, fooling around with the boys, so one heard under the breath. It seemed to Julia that 'they' were the ones seeking solace in being wallflowers. Julia would never admit that she, too, harbored such attitudes in a hidden corner of her mind, no she didn't. But she did appreciate the certainty that Howard wasn't with her because of looks; and also that she didn't need to have her antennas up all the time for steroid-fueled males on the hunt like a PTSD-racked neurotic. If only she was equally certain about what it was Howard found in her. To her, he seemed like a creature from another world: razor sharp, fit, disciplined, reliable, and ambitious, flying straight as an arrow with results to match.

And therein lay another root cause for sleeplessness. Today a rather strenuous adventure was on tap. Absurdly, she had no one to blame but herself for that. What in the world had gotten into her to dissuade Howard from spending their spring break on a safari in Africa, hunting for live exotic specimens styling it in their glorious habitat from the safety of a Land Rover?

No, she had to get stuck on some random pages in a women's magazine about a recently discovered cave in the Welsh hills – and then make the even bigger mistake of telling Howard about it. Unexplored. That



was all it took and the safari was out the window. Stupid. Of course, she could have refused but she didn't want to give Howard any more reason to feel incompatible with her. No need to provide fodder for the soft whispering at work over why the boss fell for the grey mouse she was.

Howard stepped in with a newspaper stuck under the armpit, balancing a large tray with a full English breakfast in front of him, and set the table.

"Happy now?"

"You made my day." Julia blew a kiss on his cheek and dug in. Steaming coffee in hand, today's adventure didn't look so daunting anymore.

"Did you have a good night's sleep? You'll need it." Howard glanced at her over the newspaper.

"So so."

"Doesn't sound like it. Was something on your mind?"

"I don't know, Howard. I have a bad feeling about this."

"What? The cave walk today?"

"You are being nonchalant. This is more like an expedition. Something for Pros."

"A feeling, huh? Bit late for a woman's intuition. Look, I know what I'm doing. Just follow my lead and you'll be fine." Howard turned back to the newspaper.

"Did you know that 72% of the world's population live in an autocracy today?" he read from the pages. "Ten years ago it was only 46%. Things are going to hell in a handbasket. Russia, China, India, Turkey, Iran, almost the entire Middle East, it's like a virus. And they are all so busy to be at each other's throat to not give a shit for the planet going down. At this rate, another ten years and the whole world may be plunged into another dark age. Your home country may be next." Howard nodded at her. Julia's features tensed with simmering

anger. She had never much to be proud of, but at least she could say of herself to be a citizen of the Protector of the Free World. Except for its crappy health insurance. Now it was embarrassing beyond that.

“You’ve always been talking of relocating your company to Silicon Valley, how much more you could achieve there,” she snippily reminded him.

“Well, that place gets ever more corrupted as well.”

Silence settled over the table. Julia didn’t like arguing about politics. Not that she wasn’t interested. Rather, she wasn’t sure she could hold her own in debates with Howard. He was always so able to pull out all sorts of facts from the seemingly inexhaustible well his memory was. Or perhaps she didn’t want to find out that she could in fact and thereby risk contention in a promising relationship she had placed all the frustrated hopes of her thirty-seven years into. With all his adorable traits, he did have a hypercompetitive streak lending itself to heated arguments.

But some facts stared at her all too glaringly. “Has it ever occurred to you that it’s always men?” Julia blurted out into the silence. Howard raised his eyebrows.

“Don’t look at me like that. Just think of it: all these countries you mentioned and so many others, they’ve all been taken over by men who are abusive crime bosses when it comes down to it. And those business bigshots you’re always waxing on about are cut from the same cloth. Women simply aren’t like that. Not unless they have been brainwashed by such men, like that witch from North Korea who gets to play Rottweiler when her brother lets her off the leash.”

Howard shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “It is changing, though, there’s been a lot of progress in enlightened societies towards equality. You can’t deny

that. We just have to keep pressing on and fight for advanced civilization to take hold everywhere.”

“You just pointed out we’re losing; our fight for enlightened values is shut down as colonial arrogance in most parts of the world and as wokeness in the former colonizers. All this proves is that this human rights stuff is just a blip. It will never be stable. Over time the fundamentals always have a way of asserting themselves.”

“What fundamentals? What are you talking about?”

“Men are stronger. It’s as simple as that. Girls wake up to it in their homes watching the parents, later in school when the adorable little boys they used to play with could now hurt them badly if they lose it. So it’s on the women to make sure they don’t. Women can’t escape that fact that when push comes to shove, men can choose to have the upper hand, and all too often they do.”

“Come on now, that doesn’t matter anymore. We have technology and civilization governed by law, not men. We make rules, no pushing, no shoving. These days, it’s about smarts, skills, character, and personality.”

“Is it? Then why do women need safe houses? Restraining orders that don’t work anyway? Illumination and cameras in certain public places? Wonder whether they can afford going to Human Resources? Nature doesn’t care about our laws. When men and women meet one on one, away from watchful eyes, women know that men have the option of force that they don’t have. That knowledge is deeply engrained by a million years of evolution. It doesn’t go away just because of some pockets of enlightenment for a few decades. You men have a blind spot there. Why are politics and business still run mostly by men? Because it seems natural to you that progress is

subservient to conquest and domination, while women are much less prone to think like that. In your ways of thinking, the mere option of force tips the balance, and you men are used to wield it like it's your birthright. Why is the ice of our oh-so modern civilization so thin? Because it affords the weak and vulnerable, like women, a slice of real power. The strong have no lasting interest in your 'advanced' civilization other than a little charity on the side to lighten their conscience if they have one. They take advantage of it, but dispatch it once they see their position threatened. This is what that newspaper article is trying to tell you, but you don't get that because you know nothing about weakness. And so if the thin ice breaks, all your so-called progress is gone in one fell swoop. Look at Afghanistan. Hell, what am I talking about? Look at America!" Julia inadvertently screamed the last words, and now trembled with disgust about her own home she loved so much.

She always seemed to have some anger management issues when it came to social injustices. The force of this outbreak, however, so uncharacteristically eloquent, left Howard stumped. "I really appreciate your social insights but I'm surprised that you can become so animated about this. I hope you don't think of me in such terms, or do you want to make me feel guilty about being a man?"

"How many women have a say in your company? You make all the decisions."

"That's because we are a small outfit, and I happen to be the owner. And do I not ask for your opinion sometimes in matters that affect you?"

"If you feel like it." Julia dropped her utensils and stood up, tightlipped. "Let's gear up for your adventure."

## *My Hero*

Just put her out of your mind, Julia told herself. He's not even going to notice her. Oh yes he did. His head tilted back as he watched the woman make her way up the rock face, periodically adjusting her ropes as she ascended. She moved quickly. "You have to hand it to her, she's got good form," he remarked.

"You mean a good ass," Julia clarified. The woman up there – yes, that woman from the bedroom upstairs, the one whose postcoital languidness she could only dream of – had a trim waist and long legs. She was in enviable shape. Even worse, she was cute. She exuded spunky confidence – the kind of girl who was ready for a fashion magazine shoot as much as for a full day of exertion in the wilderness. And exactly Howard's type. It was for that reason, above all others, that Julia hated her.

"No, I mean a good climbing form. Watch: always connected to the rock on three points, checking the security of a hold before the next move, little slack in her lines. That's how it's done. You should try to imitate her."

"This isn't just about technique; look at her, she's got the body for this. You can't imitate genetics, Howard. If they could bottle whatever she had, I'd buy a whole case."

"You can always improve and even the odds, right?"

Julia scowled. Sometimes Howard's headstrong can-do attitude got on her nerves by making her feel like she wasn't good enough for him.

“I mean your technique. You can always improve your technique.”

She wasn't listening anymore. Instead, Julia was already on her way up the mountain. She tried to match the pace of the spunky woman that had gone before her, but her sluggish body didn't cooperate in the way the object of Howard's attention did. She just seemed built for this: long limbs, good athleticism, endurance, no extra weight.

Julia, on the other hand, was built for knitting. After only a dozen feet, her limbs wobbled like rubber. Beads of sweat collected on her forehead. Luckily, they were going only as far as the cave entrance, an intermediate point another twenty feet up. Even better, that sporty little chick ahead of them passed the cave entrance entirely; she was headed further up the mountain. That would get Julia around having to witness Howard's sickening small talk with her inside the cave.

Get a grip, Julia told herself. It's not his fault that she's cute. You're lucky to have him. Don't antagonize him with your jealousy, that only makes you look more unattractive. By the time they reached the entrance to the cave, thirty feet above the forest floor, Julia was heaving for breath.

“Be patient with yourself. We should do this more often, then you're bound to get better at this,” Howard advised. Julia could only pant in reply. “I can help you get there. Your fitness will improve eventually, slowly but surely, just keep at it,” he assured her.

Howard's encouragements were too frequent to be comforting. She might improve a little with all this strenuous activity, but she would always lag behind, always slow him down. Unlike her, Howard was born with the genes of an athlete and enjoyed the challenges of the outdoors as much as those at work. It was all a competition for him. And whenever she came along for

his adventures, she felt like a wet rag he had to drag behind him, depriving him of his full measure of success.

Julia coiled up her climbing ropes and slid them over her shoulder like a bandolier. She extracted a fleece layer from her bag, then attached the headlamp to her helmet – at least she looked the part. For most people, adventure in this area was limited to a scramble up the side of the mountain, lunch at the top, and a rappel back down. But not for Howard, no, that wouldn't do. He needed to expose himself to danger and survive it like a dog needs to be taken for his walk.

They turned on their headlamps and poured the beams into the darkness. The passage leading into the mountain was partially blocked by rubble – rocks ranging in size from grapefruits to basketballs.

“I think I can fit through if I go sideways.” Howard threaded a leg into the narrow opening.

“What about me?” Her face reddened.

“Oh, sorry.” Howard retracted his leg. “Here, let me clear some rocks out of the way.”

Howard worked quickly. Julia pretended to be useful with the smaller rocks. The opening became passable for her, too. After a time, only the largest of the rocks remained, slightly larger than a basketball. Howard crouched for a better angle.

Julia leaned against the cave wall to watch him. His muscles were not large, but they were lean, toned, efficient. Despite all this talk over breakfast, there was something sexy about a man being strong. Especially when it made her life easier. Her admiration of him swelled as the coiled springs of his limbs slowly expanded, hauling the rock out of the way.

“How's that?” he asked, stepping aside.

Julia pecked him on the cheek. “My hero!”

She wasn't exactly kidding. This wasn't just about him being strong – he wasn't a bodybuilder, after all – but an all-around capability, a jack of all trades. No obstacle ever daunted him. Athletic, smart, confident – the man had it all. And he used it all to take care of her. She reminded herself once again of her sheer luck having bumped into him.

Life hadn't always been this good. When they had met, Julia had been in the dumps. Her unimpressive performance as a fine arts major in college had led to an even less impressive career as a sculptor. After winding up in massive debt, she gave up on sculpture entirely. She moved to Britain to live with her father, one of the kindest men she ever knew, escaping the debt and the lack of health insurance, and building a new life from scratch, until he withered away, impoverished and in bitterness. His kindness had not served him well. Then she took shelter in Scotland with her mother, another kind soul who could not deal with her former husband's bitterness under the same roof. She enrolled in correspondence courses for computer programming – coding, for short. With all these new apps coming out, she figured, who doesn't make a fortune coding? Well, the answer, apparently, was Julia. She found herself unable to follow rules, unable to think in a structured and linear manner. When she got bored, she became creative. The sculptor in her came out. And when she became creative, she got it wrong. The programs bombed. The apps bombed. And she was fired – six times.

The last crutch was kicked out from underneath her when her mother developed an incurable neurological condition requiring around the clock nursing care.

Defeated by the machinations of a world she was not well equipped for, she found herself moping around the house. Layers of fat become rolls of it. Walking up the



stairs was a drag. So was seeing friends from former jobs – hearing about their boyfriends, their exciting projects, the kale juice diets and Pilates classes. So, she spent more and more time alone – jobless, loveless, and penniless. Her stepdad never wanted her there, and now that her mom was gone he made that very clear. He asked her to move out. And when that didn't work, he stopped asking and started demanding. She ended up on welfare in a dump of council housing surrounded by a few pieces of second-hand furniture. Only a few neglected rose bushes near the fence shared her sorrow. After eight solid months at this nadir, she developed some kind of kinship with the roses and decided to apply her motherly instincts to nursing them. As it happened, on one of these evenings a preppy guy jogged by and took note that she went about it all wrong. When she asked him to show her, he actually did. That turned out to be Howard.

The lesson in gardening led to a first date, and then a second, and from there, everything started looking up. As luck had it, Howard turned out to be a programmer, too. And unlike her, he was actually so good at it that it warranted the fancier title of software designer. He owned a small software company – the only one in town that hadn't yet had an opportunity to fire her. He got her a job, and under a boss who seemed determined to coax out whatever talent she might have. As their romance bloomed, she moved into his house, bigger than anything she had known before. He lent her the money to buy a car – funds that he simply would have given her if she had let him. A nice car even – a fully loaded, late-model BMW that attracted the occasional jealous comment from her new co-workers.

Life split into the one before Howard and the one after. In the Before, vacations had always been the domain of the well-to-do. Even if one could afford them,

she figured one would use them to relax on the beach in order to recharge for the daily grind at work. In the After, her new boyfriend introduced her to the concept of the adventurous vacation. As foreign as this was to her, she took it as a sign of endearment that he prodded her to come along. Yet every time she found herself drawing more enjoyment from his enthusiasm than the experience per se. However, this time, she wished she had insisted on the safari.

Howard glanced into the damp darkness of the cave and took a swig of water. For Julia, the remnants of daylight in their backs had something of a warning in them, in that its absence was to be feared, but Howard was unmoved by any trepidation of the sort. "I wonder why they call it Drysau Ceudodol," he mumbled into the dark void.

"What a weird name. It's probably named after some nearby town," Julia surmised. "Sounds like a Welsh name, since we are in Wales, right?"

"Mmm, you'd think so. But there is no town like that in Wales. There's nothing with that name in the whole of Britain."

"You must know," Julia found. "You're the one who grew up in England."

"Scotland, really, and that's not England. You Americans are really bad at geography."

So true, Julia thought, but not because she was American, from the Midwest, to be precise, but because she didn't really retain much from school while Howard retained almost everything. And therein lay something that always seemed to stand between them: he was better at pretty much everything he put his mind to.

Howard scratched his neck sticking out from under the helmet. "Drysau. Drysau. Might have a relationship with the Scots Gaelic word 'Doras' which means something like 'doors', or 'gateways'. But Ceudodol?"

What could that possibly mean? Funny words they have here. Maybe ask the innkeeper at the B&B later, she seems to know a lot about the local lore.”

“Reminds me of ‘citadel,’” Julia offered, unsure of whether she had said something stupid.

“Ha, you’re right. Why didn’t I think of that?” Howard shook his head. “Door to a citadel – maybe it makes more sense once we see what’s inside. Let’s go.” Julia procrastinated for a moment to bask in pride: she had thought of something before Howard did.

The reprieve did not last long. She stared into the darkness ahead of her, and then longingly back at the shimmer of light from the entrance. Maybe small talk with that chick out there would have been the lesser evil. She didn’t like any of what a cave implied: gloomy silence, clammy air, tight spaces, and certainly not dark ones. A friend had told her that she was a bad match for Howard, too much of a homebody, not prone to adventure. But she couldn’t let herself be scared. She couldn’t afford to leave an opening for another woman, like the one from the bedroom upstairs.

“Yes, let’s go find out, together.” Julia yanked her climbing harness tight and stepped forward into the darkness.



“Um, maybe we’re here?” Julia guessed, pointing at the map of the cave, that is of those parts that had been explored. So typical for Howard to have maps in the 1:25,000 scale, as detailed as possible. Always so prepared, the man – always with top-notch equipment, no expenses spared. But for Julia, all these details were just confusing.

“And why do you think that?” Howard prodded in the tone of a patient teacher.

Julia adjusted her headlamp and looked around. Limestone walls blazed white in the light, perspiring with the moisture oozing out of them. She turned to look down the passage, hoping for a sign, a landmark. But the unforgiving blackness simply swallowed the beam. The other direction offered only more silent blackness.

“Looking around won’t do you any good,” Howard chided. In this eternal darkness, even the sound of his voice appeared ghostly and made Julia shiver. “You need to work with the map and use your reason.”

“But I don’t know how,” Julia retorted glumly. She wrapped her arms around her chest to ward off the cold sending its tentacles deeper toward her bones. “And I’m tired. And this cave is creeping me out.” In the distance, they could hear the oppressive silence being interrupted by a ghastly and unnervingly steady dripping of water slowly falling into a pool.

“You can do this,” Howard prodded. His voice sounded empty somehow.

“No, I cannot,” Julia crossed her arms and glowered. With that gesture she felt even less attractive than usual, childish even.

“Julia...” Howard sounded exasperated.

He had a right to be exasperated. She should have known better than whetting his appetite with the fantastic story of a historian digging around in long forgotten records of some magical cave, once believed to harbor a path to paradise. After decades of dogged search, he claimed to have found it: a vast network of tunnels and caverns so convoluted it had geologists scratching their heads about how it could possibly have formed in this part of the world. Its total length easily surpassed that of the previously largest cave Ogof Ffynnon Dhu with its mere thirty miles, and that with huge sections remaining unexplored. Part of the cave

had recently been opened to tourism. A good couples' activity, the pages had suggested, presenting her with pictures of happy, fit couples exploring underground worlds of breathtaking beauty. But now, her breath was taken not by beauty but by claustrophobia, and by exhaustion creeping into her arms and legs. And her head hurt like hell from the anxious effort of trying to match the endless twists and turns of the caverns to the squiggles on the map.

"Try again," Howard encouraged her. "Where do you think we are?"

Julia tried to concentrate on the map illuminated by the stark beam of Howard's headlamp, only to become distracted by how it seemed to float magically in the cavern. She might as well have stared at a honeycomb.

"I think we're here," she pointed out. "Because it's a four-way junction – after two three-way junctions." She explored his facial expression. "I'm wrong, am I not?"

"Yes," he replied in resignation. He wordlessly pointed at the opposite end of the map.

She knew he was right. Howard had a knack for abstract thinking. He knew what he was doing.

The path ahead turned into another near-vertical scramble, about twelve feet in height. Howard scampered up quickly and turned to wait for his mate. Julia put her arms on the rocks and heaved herself up, only to slide back down again. Her biceps felt like rubber. Come on, Julia, don't be such a pussy! her mind complained. She strained her arms again and managed to scramble a few more feet, huffing and puffing, belly-flopping onto the next ledge like a harbor seal onto a rock.

Howard kept waiting for her at the top. "You do not look like a happy camper." He watched her patiently as she patted the dust from her thighs.

“I’m just mad at myself for being so weak and clumsy.”

“You’re not weak and clumsy,” he retorted.

“Compared to that girl out there, I am. That’s why you were staring at her because she would be a lot more fun to be with in here.”

Julia had secretly hoped that Howard would refute her, but he just turned and kept walking. After a few minutes, he stopped again to consult the map with a frown on his face.

“What is it? You look worried,” Julia asked anxiously.

“This doesn’t look like it appears on the map. I think it is better if we backtrack at this point. If the map isn’t accurate, we could get lost.” Without waiting for Julia’s opinion, he turned around, but soon stopped again. “I could have sworn there was a left turn here – the map shows it, too.”

“Are we lost already?” He didn’t reply, and that was very much unlike him. Howard always provided an answer if he had one, sometimes even if he didn’t. Julia started sweating cold.



Searing pain. It coursed through Julia’s body as though she had been pounded by a hundred bricks. Even trying to piece together what had happened was painful. First she recalled that they had come out at an exit different from the one they entered when something or someone pushed them over the edge from behind. Then she recalled the endless horrifying tumble down a deep slope.

Daylight. It bludgeoned its way through her closed eyelids with unwelcome brightness. A colony of bees seemed to have nested in her head. Julia forced her eyes

open and saw the steep rockface they had careened down rising high above her. That one could even survive something like this! They must have hit their heads hard enough to be unconscious for hours despite the helmets.

How did they end up like this? Fragments of memory rushed back in. Her turning increasingly frantic and Howard growing irritated about his inability to chart a way out, they had been debating which way to turn when it seemed the cave was exhaling, brushing them with a gust of wind blowing into one of the tunnels. Tired and exhausted, they abandoned their attempts to backtrack and decided to follow the cue, whichever opening it led them to. With Julia close to panic, anything was preferable to being stuck any longer in this damp, convoluted dungeon. As soon as a faint shimmer of light became visible, they hastily scrambled toward it, throwing all caution into the wind. That anyone might appear out of nowhere from behind to throw them downhill wasn't the kind of thing to happen in Wales!



She looked around and found Howard strung out beside her on a forest floor. Branches and a bed of crumpled leaves had softened the impact. "Howard, honey?" she screamed panic stricken. His eyes struggled open and tried to focus on her. "Are you o.k.?"

He moved his limbs, expecting any damage to reveal itself. "More or less," he grumbled. "Just some scrapes and bruises."

Above them, the rock slope towered over their heads at a steep angle. The gaping hole some fifty yards up must have been the one somebody had pushed them out of. Right below it, the slope was almost vertical.

Climbing back up in their present condition was out of the question.

Now Julia took a closer look at how beat up she was herself. The scrapes and bruises didn't surprise her in the least, but as she stood, she realized her ankle was sprained. Her neck and shoulder were competing for which won the first prize for hurt.

"Somebody ambushed us up there. Did you get a look at them?" Julia shook her head. How could anyone be prepared for something like this?

"We could have died. Let me see whether I can call for help, although I have no idea where we are," Howard said, pulling out his cell phone which had cracked but still seemed to be working. "Strange, I have absolutely no reception. Here in Wales? We are not completely out of the way."

"So, what do we do now?"

Howard inspected his equipment, or what was left thereof — headlamp broken, backpack ruptured, contents missing. "I'm afraid we are on our own here. I can't understand why anyone would ambush us like this for a few cans of food and ropes. They didn't even take the cell phone or the money. Let's get out of the woods and find some creek to follow downstream. Can't be more than a few miles. In this area, it shouldn't take more than an hour to find a network of a place with a phone. Then, we call for a taxi back to the inn."

Julia looked around more carefully. Something about the forest seemed unfamiliar to her as if it were a mere rendering of the forests she was used to, subtly off in ways she couldn't quite name, just not quite real. The pine trees, for example, their needles were colored not a deep green, but a purplish-green. Had she ever seen a tree in that color? "Howard, this place feels strange to me. I'm getting worried."



“I’m sure we’ll be fine,” Howard sought to assure her – always such a worrywart! But he, too, knew deep down that something wasn’t right. Panic, however, was the wrong way to handle this. As the one with all the experience, it fell on him to keep his nerve on both of their behalf.

Julia’s bad feelings crept further up her spine. The ankle didn’t get any better with the walking, staging its protest with a painful swelling. For good measure, the first-aid kit was lost with some of the equipment. Eventually, she needed her arm over Howard’s shoulder for support as they limped on, making scant headway toward an uncertain goal. Progress was so excruciatingly slow that it evolved gradually but surely into an ordeal. Howard kept checking his phone, again and again, willing it to connect by stabbing at it more forcefully.

“Still no reception. Maybe there is something wrong with the phone after all.”

“I’m not sure whether it’s the phone, honey.”

The more Julia looked around, the more foreign the environs appeared. The hills of Wales don’t slope like that, Julia thought. The sunlight is somehow paler. And strangest of all, in Wales almost nothing is further than an hour from some sign of civilization – a road, a cabin, a farmer’s field, a forest worker’s truck. They walked for many more hours over rugged terrain, often stumbling, slipping, and holding on to each other for support – nothing but wilderness.

They were still walking when the sun dipped low on the horizon and their shadows grew long. The condition of Julia’s ankle deteriorated with every step and walking became excruciating; that ankle needed rest. She cursed herself for having whetted Howard’s appetite for this damned cave in the first place. What wouldn’t she give for being home now on her couch and

finishing that scarf for him over any more of this. Night would be here soon and nothing to eat. Thirst reminded them that it, too, could become more than a mere nuisance.

At last they came across a still pond. Fruit trees surrounded it, dangling their boughs over the water. If they hadn't been in such a bad state they would have thought of it as idyllic, enchanting even.

"We need something to eat, too," Howard voiced once his canteen had been filled with water that appeared fresh enough. However, just to be sure, he added a disinfection tablet – always so prepared, the man.

Julia's stomach grumbled in blunt agreement. Her pack had been torn off her shoulders during the tumble out of the caves, lost somewhere down the mountain, or more likely stolen by the jerks that pushed them off the edge. It had contained all the food – for both of them. Since the attack, they had consumed nothing.

Some splotches of yellow caught her eye, and she pointed to them. "That tree appears to have some fruit on it."

"I've never seen a fruit like this before, looks kind of exotic. Something like this shouldn't grow around here. The trees are odd, too. The bark is smooth and shiny, almost metallic."

"That's what I'm talking about, honey. We're not where we think we are."

Howard didn't reply. Instead, he pulled a bulbous, yellow lump off a branch and sniffed it. "No idea whether it's edible."

"You know what? I'm getting too hungry to care, Howard."

Howard took a tentative nibble. He spat it out in disgust. "It has black seeds in it that taste bitter, like... like a steak burned to a crisp. Can't be healthy."

Julia took an even smaller, timid nibble. Then a bigger one. The flesh of the fruit was sweet, rich, inviting. The black seeds melted in her mouth with a prickling sensation. She took a large bite. Her taste buds came alive. "I don't know what you are talking about, it tastes fantastic," Julia replied.

What an understatement. When she swallowed, contentment flooded her body. It satiated her immediate hunger, but then something deeper as well, something she couldn't name and didn't even know she could experience.

"I don't know about this, Julia. It could be toxic. If you absolutely have to, eat only what you need to keep going."

Although Julia's ears heard him, her mind paid no heed. Julia polished off the first piece of fruit and bit ravenously into a second one. Only minutes later, she was on her fourth. A sticky river of juice ran over her chin. Her limbs seemed to come alive with new vigor. Her sprained ankle and battered shoulder hurt less.

Howard, meanwhile, searched the forest for other things edible. He found none. Finally, he gave up when it became too dark. "We should get some sleep. There will be more opportunities to find food, and I expect to finally hit some sign of civilization tomorrow, we're not in the Amazon here."

The couple huddled into a cleft between two trees. He raised an arm, inviting her to come close. She burrowed into him. The woods were full of noises – strange ones, bird songs that seemed unfamiliar, and an eerie whooping sound that she was certain she had never heard before.

"Are we going to be o.k.?" she asked, nestling her face into his.

"You bet."

She listened to the noises of the night with sharpened ears and wide eyes. "What about bears and wolves and stuff?"

"This isn't America. There haven't been any dangerous animals in Wales for centuries, silly," he chuckled and nudged her with a little squeeze. Always so informed, the man. She snuggled into the warmth of his chest for assurance. She was lucky – so lucky – to be with a man who was capable and strong enough to handle anything. Where would she be without him? He always knew what he was doing. She slept soundly that night in his soothing embrace. If she hadn't, her grasp on reality, already tenuous, would have been fully torn apart by two pale globes appearing in the night sky, one smaller and reddish and the other larger, more purplish.

When morning came, she awoke refreshed and energetic. As Howard groaned and clenched his hungry stomach, Julia scrambled up a small hill and gazed at the surrounding landscape. The clouds hung low and she couldn't see too far. The weather forecast hadn't said anything about that. But she could make out a swamp in the distance. The desolation was palpable.

"Not a sign of habitation anywhere," she noted. "Isn't that strange?" Once more, Howard didn't respond. Yet somehow, the lack of an answer disturbed Julia less than before.

"We better load up on whatever provisions we can," she said as she scrambled back down the boulder, no longer limping.

For Julia, more provisions meant gorging herself on another seven pieces of fruit and stuffing a half dozen more into her fanny pack and her pockets. For Howard, it meant nothing. "We might be lost, Howard, but I have to say, I feel great! I feel like I could walk forever."

Howard felt the sting of envy. "How can that be, that you can eat that stuff, even like it, and I can't?" Julia only shrugged her shoulders. "I'll take some for you, too; if worse comes to worst, you may just have to suck it up, honey. Let's go." 'Suck it up'? She never talked to me like that, Howard noted.

It seemed like Julia would get her opportunity to walk forever. With every passing mile, Howard stumbled a little bit more, walked a little bit slower. He needed sustenance, they both knew. Julia suggested he try the fruit again. He forced one down with a pained grimace on his face. But it clearly did him little good. In fact, it seemed to be making matters worse for him: within an hour, his forehead was feverish to the touch, and he had an oddly vacant look in his eyes. He vomited the fruit back up.

Julia, meanwhile, began to suffer from a different condition. As she walked, she developed an odd sense of vertigo, as if she wasn't really in her own body.

"The fruit may be toxic," Howard cautioned her. "Its effects on you seem to be different from what it does to me, but in both cases, toxic. Don't eat anymore."

"You're right, I shouldn't," she replied, plucking yet another from a low-hanging limb. "But the taste is really hard to resist. My head feels a little woozy, but the rest of me feels simply fantastic!"

They dragged their way across a hanging valley: ridges on either side and a sheer drop-off ahead. They headed toward one of the ridges. As their path steepened, Howard huffed and puffed even more. Julia found herself out ahead of him, forcing herself to pause periodically so that he could catch up. After scrambling up and over a boulder, she could no longer hear Howard's footfalls behind her. She backtracked and found him at the base of the boulder, leaning against it, winded.

"I need a break," Howard admitted.

"No, you don't, silly. You're always the one with all the endurance." She offered a hand, reaching down to him. "Come on." That tone!

He grabbed her hand for her to pull. Her arm, which had always been flabby tissue and bone, swelled slightly. She tugged – and produced more of an effect than she had expected: Howard had to scramble to keep his feet under him as she dragged him up the slope.

"Wow, you've got one hell of a pull in your arm. I never knew that," Howard marveled. A smile spread across Julia's face. Howard was right, with these outdoor activities she became more athletic; she was getting the hang of it just as he had foretold. There was hope for her after all.

Around midday, they had to pause as another bout of vertigo hit her. Something about the fruit was affecting her system, and not in a good way. She bent over, hands-on-kneecaps, and counted to twenty. The sensation slowly passed. When she looked up again, she rejoiced. "Look, there are footprints, Howard!"

It was the first sign of civilization since the fall from the cave. They were of reassuringly human origin, following the stream down, in the direction Howard and Julia had taken. The prints in the mud consisted of two distinct sets, one smaller and shallower from shoes, one unusually large and deep, and farther apart from bare feet. Julia pointed at the deeper ones. "Whoever made those prints must have been a giant," she remarked.

The prints disappeared once they crossed onto harder ground. Julia and Howard kept walking. She could hear Howard's stomach grumble periodically. He would need food soon or he would start wasting away. At least she didn't need to rely on his strength for support anymore, rather the other way around. By the evening, they had made it over the ridgeline and part-

way down the other side. The couple found a place for their second night in the wilderness, near a waterfall surrounded by a grove of the fruit-bearing trees.

"I'm getting ever worse," Howard sighed, crumpling to the ground.

"I wonder why I feel a lot better," Julia countered. She stood and stretched her frame in the dappled rays of dusk.

"You look better, too," Howard noted.

"You think so?" Julia examined herself. Was it true? Perhaps the exertion was causing her to shed a few pounds. Either way, the important part was that Howard liked what he saw.

"Why don't you try washing up?" she suggested. "That always makes you feel better. It might take your mind off the hunger as well."

Howard scampered to the pool at the bottom of the waterfall and stripped out of his clothes. His skin reflected a patchwork of bruises from yesterday's fall. He dipped a toe in. "Darn, it's cold." Rather than climb in, he crouched at the side of the pool and bathed, using a handful of moss as a sponge.

Julia joined him later, dipping a toe in as well. The water felt nice and comfortable. "Thought you said it was cold?" She was glad to slip out of her dirty garments and even more relieved to finally get her bra off. It had been killing her for some reason. Julia waded up to her thighs toward the sheets of water coming down and let it cascade over her body. Her skin came alive under the waterfall's caress. Julia had never remembered a simple shower feeling so good. She ran her hands appreciatively over her body and liked what she found. Julia could no longer deny that something was different with her. Arms that had been unable to throw a baseball sixty feet now had a little bit of muscle tone. A midsection that had always been well-padded was now

less rounded and left her hips more accentuated. Her thighs and butt, which had always felt huge and flabby in her hands, now seemed more compact, firmer. Her skin, too – where were the bruises and scrapes she had sustained only a day before?

And, finally, her breasts – hadn't they always been a B-cup? Looking down at her chest now, she could see that the falling sheet of water became warped by protrusions that were noticeably larger – perhaps the size of her fist, perhaps a C-cup. The water beat against her breasts vigorously. That should be painful, Julia thought. But her nipples didn't know it, instead they hardened and sent a pleasant warmth throughout her body.

When she emerged from the waterfall, she saw Howard clutching his stomach in discomfort. She commiserated for a moment, but then became distracted by the adorable dimple on his chin, the playful curls of his hair over his eyes. He looked good to her, sexy. Her nipples hardened more, pointing toward their quarry.

She sloshed her way across the water, the sound causing him to look up from his misery. His eyes locked on her body. His lips parted slightly as if he needed more air. The mere sight of her had never caused this reaction in him before. Her spirits soared. The water on her bare skin cooled in the breeze and her skin tingled pleasantly. Her nipples stiffened further, basking in the warmth of his gaze against the coolness of the evening air, aching for his touch.

He stood up slowly, entranced. They were only inches apart. His lips..., so... kissable, were just above her nose – lower than they ever had been. Starvation doesn't make anyone shrink like that, does it?

She wasn't the only one to notice. "You seem taller," he whispered. Above, the leaves of the fruit trees



rustled their approval. Julia took his hands and smoothed them over her butt and thighs, inviting them to linger there. The way he squeezed her newly toned derriere roused a tingle in her sex. "And somehow more substantial," he added.

Julia nodded, biting her lower lip. "And hornier, too." She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed herself into him. Her no longer so small breasts flattened less than they should have against the sturdy muscles of his chest, thrilling at the pressure in the embrace. Howard's body swayed under the vigor of her affection but her firm grip steadied him. "Poor honey, we need to find food for you, soon. You're starting to waste away."

"I know," he admitted. "But right now, I don't care. Just look at your shape! You are so beautiful it hurts – you could make me forget all the other pain. I can't hold back, Julia, I can't help it."

"Are you serious? You haven't eaten in two days and all you can think of is getting laid out here?"

"I can't remember ever having wanted you so badly." Indeed, she could only think of the term desperate urge when she glanced at his erection.

This eruption of mad desire had Julia dripping with expectation in no time. She had never been ready that fast. It usually took a half-hour of fondling to get her into that state. I've never turned him on like that either, she thought. I don't remember him even staring at other women like he does now. Despite all the trouble, this trip has its upsides, doing wonders for our relationship, putting some fire under it again.

The kissing, at first tender, turned frantic when their entangled bodies sank to the ground, his hands greedily probing her newfound swells all over. Soon she pulled his clothes off and crawled over the sinuous firmness of his body under her. His manhood, as erect

as ever, bumped insistently against her stomach and fanned her desire into overdrive.

He should be thinking about finding food. Instead, all he wants is to sleep with me!

Another bout of lightheadedness came over Julia, but she shook it off for this precious moment. She lowered herself onto his begging shaft with natural ease, surprised at the feline fluidity of the motion. As his throbbing stiffness filled her, an urge to scream with happiness came on. And eventually, she let herself do just that, let it all out; they were so deep in the wilderness, only the trees would bear witness – or so she thought.

The lovemaking, if one could at all apply that term to the madly unrestrained physical passion that played out over several hours that night, was wilder than they had ever experienced together.

When they were spent and Julia bedded down for the night, her hands coursed over her body and for once she was satisfied with what they encountered. She gripped the layer of fat that covered her thighs. Still more padding there than she would have liked, but Rome wasn't built in a day either. Howard was spot on, as always: the strenuous activities these last days did her a lot of good. Didn't he say she seemed taller? Nah, who had ever heard of anything like that. Must have been the uneven ground.

Her body felt heavy and ready for sleep, but there was this whirlwind in her head: the vertigo attacked her with a new level of ferocity.

"Are you going to be alright? Your cheeks are flushed and your eyes are rolling back into your head."

"I don't know," Julia replied. "This vertigo is pretty intense. And you... you're looking more emaciated than you did yesterday." Howard didn't answer. Bad sign, Julia realized. Perhaps she should have been more

mindful of saving his energy. As she closed her eyes, she listened to the strange whooping calls of an unknown animal echoing off the hills and cliffs. My screams during our little tryst must have carried all over the valley, she figured. Good thing there was no one out here to hear us.

She couldn't know how wrong she was. As her screams of pleasure traveled up and down the hills, new footprints in the wilderness were formed, closing in.

Drifting in and out of consciousness in a strange kind of halfsleep, Julia heard male voices. "Look here, I've never seen a woman like that. Look how stunted she is," remarked one of them with concern. "By the heavens and the two moons, what were they doing out here? He's all banged up," said the other. Julia did not understand them all that well, half suspected what they were saying.

I'm not stunted, Julia wanted to object. If anything, I'd still like to shed a few pounds. But when she tried to set them straight, nothing came out. She could barely move her eyelids, let alone her jaw. By the time the two moons were mentioned, vertigo had already strengthened into a deep stupor. Her brain gradually filled out with cotton wool.

"She seems to be in some sort of coma," the other voice opined.

"We'll need to carry them out," the first decided. "But they are too heavy for us."

"You got that right," the second male voice said. "I'll go get my little sister."

That doesn't make sense either, Julia's mind objected as it took its last gasp for clarity. I must not understand them properly, those Welsh people speak a funny dialect.

Then she quickly plunged back for good into the depths of her stupor.

## *Weak as Men*

Julia's first sensation was the comfort of a bed beneath her. She forced her eyes open but had so much trouble focusing that everything danced around like disordered pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Once she had asserted a modicum of control over her eyes the next problem was to make sense of what she saw as her brain seemed to be doused in particularly bad liquor from a drinking binge. As things gradually sorted themselves out in her memory, she glanced around the room. Cold fluorescent lights glared down on her with anonymous institutional charm. The whiteness around her reflected a calm cleanliness – perhaps of a hospital? However, the usual gadgetry assuring patients they were in competent hands was missing.

Relief flooded her nerves – they were saved, they were going to be fine. She wept a bit as the anxiety of the last few days came crashing down on her. One by one the events lined up: there was the brief exhilaration to finally have made it out of the cave, only to be ambushed by unseen assailants, then the catastrophic fall where she and her boyfriend careened straight down a steep mountain slope, and which must have knocked them out for hours. When they came to, they found themselves stranded in a strange wilderness, stumbling aimlessly to get back to civilization with nothing to show for it but a deteriorating condition, although in different ways: for Julia intense bouts of vertigo due to all the strange fruit she was eating, and starvation for Howard. And through it all, there was that unsettling sense that the wilderness seemed just a

little off – odd colors, sounds and sights, familiar in some respects but faintly alien to Julia as well.

Ha! Julia laughed to herself, looking back on it. She had almost convinced herself that they had landed in a dreamscape or something of the sort, or maybe the whole thing was just delusion brought about in a state of delirium because of a concussion. These are the tricks your mind can play on you when you find yourself disoriented and alone after a traumatic experience, like some form of PTSD I suppose, she chuckled to herself. But now, thank heavens, she was in a hospital room that was, by all appearances, normal. She was out of the woods – literally.

Howard was not in the room. Instead, a hospital employee stood next to her in hospital scrubs, observing her like an alien specimen.

Julia tried to sit up, but the grogginess prevailed. “Doctor, where’s my boyfriend? Is he o.k.?”

“I have trouble understanding you. Come again?”

Julia repeated the question more slowly and pronounced. The guy may be a foreigner, they are sometimes hard to understand. Desperate for staff, Julia guessed. Who would want to work for the NHS these days?

“You must be a foreigner. He’ll be fine.” The man stole shy glances at her, showing none of the authority she expected from a proper doctor. “And it’s obvious I can’t be the doctor. I’ll get her for you now.” He stuck his head out of an opening and announced that the patient had come to.

The curtain was momentarily darkened by a large shadow before it separated to reveal the most enormous woman Julia had ever seen. From her reclining position, Julia found that she had to crane her neck backward in order to meet the woman’s eyes. She stood perhaps seven-and-a-half feet tall, and proportionately

as broad. She wore a full-length white lab coat. Given her size, the coat gave her the look of a refrigerator, with matching arms and a head attached. Julia felt sorry for the woman. What female would want to be built so large?

“How are you feeling?” the doctor asked. She cradled a clipboard and jotted a few notes. She, too, was difficult to understand.

“Fine, I guess. I don’t remember much after passing out next to my boyfriend.”

“By the two moons, where do YOU come from? Your accent, never heard that before. Well, first things first. Here is your diagnosis: you overdosed on fruit from the Venus tree,” the doctor explained. “You were delirious for a week and you had a fever. The fruit has that effect when consumed raw in large quantities.” At least that was what Julia guessed she might have heard.

“I’m sorry, I’m not sure I understand what you are saying. Do you know what happened to my boyfriend?”

“The male consort attached to you? He’s been taken care of in the Men’s Wing. He was near total exhaustion when they found you. He was so despondent over your condition that he had to be sedated. I’ll order the nurses to take him off the infusion so you can speak to him and calm him down.”

The mention of the fruit sent a pleasant shiver through Julia. “What was that stuff, anyway? When I was surviving off that fruit, I felt... fantastic. I had more energy, was dropping weight, felt whole and content, at least for a while.”

The doctor laughed. “You seem to be saying that you had a good experience with the fruit. Of course you did. That’s why it’s sold in concentrate.”

“You mean, I can buy it in stores? Not in the stores I know of.”

The doctor scrutinized her, incredulous. “You couldn’t have been that removed from the world to not know that. You never had your Firmation, dear? How could you! It’s only the most important provision of all time, an absolute must for every woman’s fortification since time memorial.”

Julia had never heard of this F—something before, maybe it was a communication problem. Their speech was just odd. The confusion must have shown on her face.

The doctor studied her once more. “You don’t know anything about this, do you? How is this possible? Where do you come from, the wilderness? Some obscure back-to-nature cult?”

“No, we are from Edinburgh.”

“I have never heard of such a place.” The doctor reached into a supply cabinet, extracted a gold-colored can, and popped the lid. The familiar aroma of the fruit filled the room – much more intense than she had experienced in the forest. “You are telling me that have never seen anything like this?”

The aroma sent another pleasant shiver through Julia. “Never. I don’t understand. If drinking this made me feel the way I did in the forest – it would be sensational!”

“There is nothing sensational about it, it’s been known for centuries. The black seeds are removed and cold-pressed to produce a fragrant oily syrup. It contains the equivalent of about twenty pieces of Venus fruit per one-cup serving.”

Julia raised her hands. “Hold on! Am I hearing this is even more potent than the fruit, has been around for centuries, and has been kept a secret all this time? How?”

The doctor let out a light chuckle. “Are you sure you have your wits together? The world as we know it is

based on Firming. Without it, I'd be just as weak and vulnerable as men are. That's simply unthinkable."

"In what world exactly would a woman see men as weak," Julia muttered, still convinced that there must be a misunderstanding due to the language barrier.

"Have you ever lifted weights before? What's the most that you can lift? Two hundred pounds? Three hundred?"

"My boyfriend tried to get me into that. I think the most I ever did was seventy-five, maybe?" Julia offered sheepishly.

The doctor shook with thunderous laughter. Julia must have shown hurt on her face because the woman's tone instantly softened. "Hard to believe that I have to tell you this, but... look, you weren't dropping any weight. Rather, you had taken the first steps to become like this." The woman held the panels of her coat apart for Julia's inspection.

Underneath the coat, the woman was wearing something that could only be described as some form of underwear. Its design was apparently not meant for coverage but rather to draw attention. But if the skimpiness of her attire was a surprise, that was nothing compared to the rest of the view. The woman's body was unreal, so much so she looked like a growth hormone experiment gone terribly wrong. Instead of the copious amounts of fat Julia expected on a normal woman of that size, she was composed of nothing else than incredibly solid, voluminous muscle. Calves as wide as footballs led up to thighs resembling those of a gladiator hewn into marble by Bernini. Her abdominals were the size of apples, and Julia couldn't even think of a piece of fruit to compare to the woman's mammoth, firm breasts.

"I usually keep the coat on to avoid distracting the nurses during work hours, but since it's just us



ladies..." The doctor slid the coat off her shoulders. Her biceps were so large that even on her extended arm Julia would not have been able to get her two hands around them. Her wide shoulders were capped by globes of muscle, each connected to a Trapezius that truly deserved that name. Back home, if a heavy-weight boxer saw a body like this in the other corner, no one would blame him for throwing in his towel before the bell rang. And if it hadn't been for the sympathetic expression on the woman's flawless, beautiful face, Julia would have wetted her bed at the grotesque sight resembling something out of some muscle-fetish cartoon.

Something isn't right here, Julia thought. She began to wonder exactly what sort of hospital she had landed in. With cans of this 'Firming' around, it seemed more like an illicit research lab for doping supplements or worse, genetic engineering, than a true hospital.

"Firming is about more than just size," the doctor elaborated further, oblivious to her patient's shock. She draped her coat over the chair and resumed her professional duties as if unaware of her state of undress. "Without Firming, you are susceptible to diseases carried by germs and viruses, as you undoubtedly know. Any exertion will tire you quickly, and you need a lot of sleep to recover. Your skin will wrinkle with age and turn sallow. All sorts of aches will creep up on you and your life expectancy will be as short as that of men."

I feel like I'm in the middle of a futuristic infomercial, Julia thought.

"Sure you don't want to try some?" the doctor asked, holding up a can.

Every cell in her body screamed YES. Before the fruit, she hadn't known it was even possible to feel that good. However, all it took was a look at the side-effects

in form of the doctor's shape to sober up. "No, I want normal medical care, like I could get in any other normal hospital, not some sort of freakish experimental Frankenstein-supplement that is probably not even approved. What you are doing here looks to me like illegal experimentation on human subjects in some secret facility. Maybe some unsanctioned secret service or military ops? Look, I won't tell anyone about this, just let me go home, please?"

The doctor seemed unsure of what to think of this. "That may not be possible. I have a Politesse who needs to speak with you."

The curtain separated again, and another monster of a woman entered through it. If the Doctor had been concerned that a show of skin would distract the men, this woman seemed to share no such compunction: a short-sleeved stretchy top clung tightly to everything it covered but left the abdomen bare. Hip-hugging 'boy short' bottoms, also of elastic material, were clearly suited to terrorize perpetrators by what they didn't attempt to hide.

The body filling this undersized outfit was more than the equal of the doctor's: carved calves, ballooning thighs, powerfully rounded abdominals, a voluminous bust, and arms swollen with lethal muscle. Disgusting, Julia thought.

The officer wasn't wearing a gun or anything in the way of equipment commonly used for maintaining public order; there was just some kind of golden band spiked with an assortment of colored pebbles tensing around her extraordinary biceps. Perhaps weapons weren't necessary with such a build. The only outward sign of an official capacity was the hint of a uniform consisting of taut garments in the universal colors of authority: imperial blue and black with a silver badge doubling up as a belt buckle. Julia began to wonder

whether she had indeed been taken in by an exhibitionist cult. But then, why wasn't this ever in the news? No self-respecting British tabloid would miss something this grotesque!

The officer eyed her with suspicion. "What is the reason for you to look like this?" she asked sternly.

Julia glanced at her skin. The bruises were back. She had slept for a week, the doctor had said, which implied she hadn't eaten the fruit for a week, too. "We were ambushed by someone who pushed us down the hill when we came out of the cave we were exploring."

"I'm not talking about the bumps and the bruises. I'm talking about this." The officer waved her hand dismissively at the length of Julia's body. "It looks to me that you might be an escaped convict, except I don't know your face."

"WHAT? Me? A criminal?" Julia's unknown flushed with outrage. "I never got more than a parking ticket!"

"I don't know her face either. And she says she's never heard of Firming," the friendly doctor sought to appease. Julia could only react with confusion to the exchange. Maybe she didn't understand them correctly? What was she missing here?

The officer raised an eyebrow. "I am supposed to believe this? Since your face is unknown, do you have papers?"

"She says she is from a place that sounds like... 'Eat'n'borrow'." The doctor frowned and checked her notes again to be sure, then shook her head. "Her dialect is strange; I have never heard it before." Same here, Julia thought.

"We took a vacation and did some caving in the Drysau Ceudodol caves here in Wales. We were attacked and got lost, then I passed out from the fruit, and then we were taken here," Julia tried to explain. And I'm going to get out of this stupid hospital, she told

herself, out of this stupid room with the stupid doctor that doles out bodybuilding supplements as if they were medication.

"The what? I have no idea what you are talking about. So, no papers, then? Well, there needs to be an investigation. Name?"

"Julia Higgins."

"That's strange. Nobody here has two names. Where were you born?"

"I am originally American, St. Louis, Missouri." If they didn't know Edinburgh, they surely had heard about America.

The officer was taking notes now. "How do you write that?"

"It is spelled es-tee-dot-el-oh-you-ai-es."

The police officer showed no sign of comprehension. She was still waiting for Julia to utter something that made sense. Julia felt a bout of panic coming on.

"You know, the biggest city in the state of Missouri in the United States? Em-ai-es-es-oh-you-ar-ai?"

No reaction. Something was really, really wrong here.

"And where is that land supposed to be?" the officer asked in a softer tone, at this point in the interrogation more concerned about the mental health of the patient.

"I said that already, the U-ni-ted States of A-me-ri-ca. Don't tell me you don't know about that either!" The officer looked at her with increasing compassion.

Julia assessed the officer's arms, packed with more muscle than most bodybuilders dared dream about. The rest of the officer's body, Julia knew, had similar proportions, as did the other woman visiting her. It didn't make sense. As she looked into the sympathetic eyes of the officer, a renewed terror began to gnaw at her gut.

The officer turned to the doctor. “Maybe she is still delusional from the intoxication?” The doctor shrugged her massive shoulders.

“We may need to keep her in custody for a while,” the cop concluded. “She seems to be in a state of crisis.”

Julia just about had it – she wanted to scream at this absurdity. I need to come up with an escape plan, she figured. Fast. “Excuse me, I need to use the bathroom.”

Luckily, the bathroom the doctor led her to had a window she might be able to squeeze through; unluckily, it wasn’t on the ground floor. Julia peeked through the door and found the doctor had left. She bolted out, rushed down the stairs, found the entryway, and burst through it into freedom.



The city streets were full of people: men only the size of her boyfriend, but women as big as the doctor. Huge, frightening piles of muscle, the women turned toward Julia with quizzical expressions on their faces as if they were viewing a circus sideshow oddity. The men were equally confused but it showed differently. They looked up to the women and drew closer to them as if seeking protection or guidance.

No, this wasn’t a cult, maybe a movie production she had been co-opted into as an unwitting extra? Where could you find actors like that? Who would ever go to see a movie like that?

No, no, no, this clearly wasn’t a set either, with cameras and someone who would shout “Cut” to end this nightmare, and that made Julia want to scream all over again. I must find Howard, she exhorted herself. He will know what to do. He always does.

She heard the cop calling out her name and began to run as if her life depended on it, maybe it even did.

The street signs were completely unreadable. Wasn't this Britain, for Christ's sake? More confused stares turned her direction. Two hulking women pointed at her and began speaking in elevated voices. Where to turn? She had to get out of here.

Julia ran again, harder than she ever did. She didn't know where she was going. She didn't even keep track.

Another block went by, and another. There was shouting behind her. It was the cop, three hundred yards away, asking bystanders whether they had seen Julia. Yes, they had.

Julia bolted off the main drag into an alleyway. The sound of her panting filled the tight space. After only fifteen or twenty paces she noted a darkening of the alley behind her. The cop had run three hundred yards when she barely had entered the alleyway!

Julia came across an even tighter intersecting alley and seized the chance to dart into it. The alley was too narrow for the cop. Maybe it would buy her a few precious seconds of freedom. I have to do something, she urged herself. I have to get away! If that hulk of a woman gets a hold of me.... She didn't dare to finish the thought.

By now, Julia's whole body ached from the exertion. A week without fruit had diminished her; she was just as easily winded as always, though not as overweight. She burst out of the narrow escape path back onto the open street. Without breaking her stride, she turned to see whether her pursuer had emerged. She hadn't, thank God.

Before she could turn her head back, she collided with something very solid, like a rock wall – BRUTAL. The impact flattened her on the pavement, a helpless bundle of flesh and bone contorting in agony from the violent encounter. She didn't try to get up again – she was done trying, let come what may.

Panting and dazed, she raised her head. High heels, an unlikely eight inches at least, caught her gaze. A woman? Julia wondered. A wall couldn't have been more unyielding.

Incredibly powerful hands hoisted Julia by her armpits. It was indeed a woman, perhaps twenty-six or twenty-seven years old, another enormous build. Her face was remarkable, too: high cheekbones, dirty blond hair, well-tanned skin with a striking olive hue. Her eyes were sage in both senses: green, and wise.

Fear gripped Julia. She hadn't been touched so far by any of these women, but now she experienced first-hand how freakishly strong they actually were. She kicked her feet for purchase but found them suspended in midair. The muscles of the woman's arms were as large as loaves of bread. She was holding her up for examination, arms fully stretched out, judging her like a dress. Worse yet, they looked as if they did just that, nothing about them acknowledging her weight. Julia went slack in utter disbelief. Even a strong person would show signs of exertion at holding a 150-pound object at arm's length, wouldn't they? Were these women human beings, or some kind of alien monsters?

"Are you alright?" the woman asked, gently concerned.

"Pl... please. I need help. I'm not from here. I'm from the United States. I'm American, but I live in Scotland with my boyfriend," Julia blurted in utter confusion.

The woman looked just as confused. "Where's that?"

"It's home," Julia sobbed. "And that's all I want – to go home, to find my boyfriend and go home."

"You poor thing. You look terrified."

"I'm so scared. The police want to arrest me."

"One can't simply arrest a woman," a voice behind her droned. It was the cop, who apparently had caught up. "In view of the facts, we consider it advisable for her

to be in the custody of a Sovereign Lady, someone who can protect her while her situation is investigated and resolved.”

Julia’s legs swung freely as the woman turned to face the cop. She was in no hurry to relieve herself of the weight, keeping Julia suspended without a scrap of effort.

The brief pause in the conversation gave Julia a chance to assess the woman who held her more closely. She wore an ivory linen top with suit-like lapels and buttons down the middle, as well as matching ivory linen pants. The outfit looked somewhat professional, had it not been for the hem of the top, which stopped just below the breasts. It left the entirety of her midriff on display. The expanse of skin in the middle was a hilly terrain of baseball-sized abdominal muscles that should have been scandalous in any office, perhaps even qualifying as an unusual form of workplace intimidation.

The contrast to Julia’s body couldn’t have been greater. Having been off the fruit during the week of her slumber, her body’s shape and condition had deteriorated to their previous flaccid state. She was terribly winded from the short run. Her feet, legs and other parts already hurting from the fall before all ached with exhaustion.

The blond woman appeared to consider the police officer’s statement. “I can take her in. You know who I am. And her male companion, too. After all, men always require special supervision.”



From there, matters evolved on a more orderly path. The woman, whose name turned out to be Ruth, accompanied Julia and the police officer back to the



hospital. Julia would be discharged the proper way this time – not by running down the corridor like a headless chicken, but by filling out paperwork, in triplicate, as usual.

Julia followed the doctor back into the examination room. She signed a form she could not read, but they explained to her it was a ‘Consent for Release Into Care of Sovereign Lady’.

As she did so, Julia couldn’t help but steal a glance at the golden can of Firming sitting on the countertop. I just found out that I am marooned in some weird alternate world, Julia thought. How can I possibly be thinking about the damned fruit?

And yet, the inviting aroma of the yellow fruit wafted around her. Her body yearned for it. “Do all your patients take this... what do you call it, Firming?”

“Except for you, my patients are always men, so no,” the doctor replied, “they’re not compatible with it – fortunately, I’d like to say,” the doctor chuckled under her breath, turning to jot down some notes, still clothed only in underwear. She seemed oblivious to the impropriety of it.

Julia took the opportunity for a closer look over the doctor’s otherworldly backside: glutes shaped like basketballs, thighs as thick as telephone poles. My God, these muscles – so hyper-masculine, so distasteful. To think a woman would look like that!

“Since by your own account you never had your Firmation, I would recommend about twenty-five gallons as an initial dose. That’s the equivalent of about eight thousand pieces of the raw fruit, which would kill you if you tried it that way.”

“And imbibing twenty-five gallons of whatever liquid wouldn’t? What are you trying to do to me? And what makes you think I want to look like you? No, I would

never want to look like that,” Julia blurted. “Can’t you give me something else, like normal medicine?”

The doctor turned to her. She had a look of surprise on her face. “Women don’t ever need anything else; other medicines are for men only.”

“I’m sorry,” Julia professed sheepishly in view of the frontal display of the doctor. “I just want to feel like I did in the woods – a little thinner, a little more energetic, and perhaps a bit more satisfying sex with my boyfriend, that’s all. Maybe I’ll just go back to eating the whole fruit, just really small amounts.”

“No, you won’t. The whole fruit is toxic if you are not fully Firmed; it causes vertigo, and eventually, a coma. And it is so addictive you’ll gorge yourself to death on it. That’s what you almost did in the woods. To enjoy its benefits, you would need to transition with enormous amounts of fruit that you could never consume in time before you succumb to its side effects. You need to stick to the concentrated extract from the seeds, my dear, which gets you over the side effects too fast to die.”

“But if I drink the syrup in the quantities you want to prescribe to me, I might get like you.... Maybe I’ll sip just a little bit?”

The doctor shook her head. “If you were an adolescent, you could try the juice without the seeds in it. However, for adult women, the fruit juice alone is already too addictive. The extract from the seeds is even more so – by orders of magnitude. In historic times, the colony that first settled this land was almost wiped out because the women killed themselves en masse by gorging on the fruit. If they hadn’t figured out the seed extraction process a few years after arrival, nobody would live here today. But since then, our civilization has been thriving. Going off Firmed isn’t an option anymore, besides, it is too addictive. Had you not been found in time, you would have killed yourself out there.

Surely you feel the craving right now, maybe that is the cause for your obviously confused state. You need to Nourish, my dear.”

Julia’s every muscle, every bone, shuddered in agreement, while a thousand ants crawled over her skin.

“Take a few sips now and you’ll soon find yourself finishing the can. And then do everything to get another. And another after that. You won’t stop until you’re fully Firmed. That’s the beauty of it: once you start, you develop extreme cravings to ensure that you finish your transformation – and survive to fulfill the destiny of every woman.” The doctor waved a hand over the frightening expanse of her body.

Julia grimaced. “So, it’s all or nothing. Either I abstain entirely and look like this...” she grabbed a roll of fat in her hand, “... or wind up guzzling the concentrate and end up looking like that.” She peered with trepidation at the human monstrosity before her.

The doctor nodded her head, whereon the play of inch-thick cords of neck muscle left Julia feeling queasy. “It’s your choice, but as a medical professional, I’d recommend you consider undergoing Firmation. More than ninety-nine percent of the women here do, and the ones who don’t are either mentally ill or have been convicted for a capital crime and are precluded for reasons of public safety.”

“Well, I’m not in the ninety-nine. I’m not mentally ill, I haven’t done anything, and I am still going to abstain.”

“I see,” the doctor replied, non-plussed. “It’s freely available everywhere for adult women; obviously you are one, so you can always change or mind.”

“I won’t,” Julia insisted in defiance, having steeled her will. “I just want to find a way home.”

“Well, then I have some good news for you.” The doctor parted the curtains. In walked the police officer and Ruth, the woman who volunteered to take her in.

The police officer spoke first. “Please don’t ever, ever wander out into the streets un-Firmed and unsupervised. There is very little Advice on protecting women from abduction or abuse because the government doesn’t see the need to issue any: normal women just don’t need that. Since we have no authority to detain women other than in exigent circumstances, and Ruth here is willing to take responsibility for you, the Office for Public Order didn’t object to letting you go. Just be sure to stay close to Ruth and any other women in her household, while you are here.”

“Your freedom of movement will not be limited by us. That would be unworthy of a woman,” Ruth interjected. “You can leave for your home as soon as you are ready. You said you were caving before you arrived here? That is very interesting. There are records telling of people traveling through caves to colonize this land, but it has never been possible to verify whether that is really true. If you believe that this is what happened to you, we can retrace your steps. My daughter can help you with that, but it needs to be done soon before your scent vanishes. And in the meantime, I had my personal assistant see to it that your gear is repaired as soon as possible. He’ll even do it while he has a day off.”

A deep wave of relief washed over Julia. She found herself crying – tears of blissful relief – even as she tried to speak. “Th... thank you, Ruth. I hate to cause you all this trouble. Your personal assistant – please extend her my apologies for ruining her vacation day.”

Ruth laughed. “He won’t mind. He’s just thankful to have a job.”



The remainder of the discharge went by on double-quick. Julia had to sign another form releasing the hospital from all liability for not putting her on Firming, in triplicate, of course. The doctor announced that she was also in charge of Howard's care, and she volunteered to take Julia to him. Her heart leaped at the prospect of finally reuniting with him and leaped further knowing that he would figure out a way to get home, whichever way that was.

As the doctor led Julia to the Men's Wing, they passed other patients in the hospital. The women and teenage girls – every single one of them – were enormous, simply rippling with muscle. The men, sized normally, seemed like dwarfs next to them. It was like a cartoon world from a comic series.

Julia also noticed some of the photos on the walls – apparently some kind of employee gatherings. All physicians were female. Some of them one would rather not get too close to, but one of them, standing all of seven feet tall, hugged two of her male nurses, one in each arm. Her arms were wider than the men's thighs. And – Julia did a double take to believe it – the men's feet were not touching the ground. She held them as if it was the most normal thing in the world. All the while the men had wide, silly expressions on their faces. Being manhandled like this was evidently not frightening or insulting for these men, Julia realized. This absurd mismatch of physical strength – here, it was entirely normal.



As luck would have it, the doctor had several priority patients to address before she could see Howard. That gave Julia a chance to visit him first, alone. Unlike in

her own bed, various medical contraptions held watch over him.

Howard had barely come out of sedation; in his daze, he hadn't been cured yet of the misperception that they were in a hospital in Wales with an unusual number of foreign staff.

„Hi, honey, how have you been?“ Julia greeted him.

“I don't remember much from when you passed out, except having a really weird dream: that a young girl built like a quarterback carried us both away. I have truly no clue how we got here.”

“I don't think it was a dream. They are doing some kind of experiments on the women here,” Julia intimated cautiously, trying to ease him into revelations to come.

“Are you making some kind of joke?“ Howard wondered as Julia relayed her observations.

“No, I'm serious. It must be some kind of different reality, there cannot be another explanation unless we are both locked into the same dream. But there's some good news, too. A local family has offered to take us in. They are going to get our gear repaired. And they'll help us to find the cave exit we came out of by retracing our steps. We'll start tomorrow. They'll even give us food for our journey back to our homeworld.”

Howard chuckled. “Did you hit your head in the fall?“

“Not more than you. Otherwise, clean bill of health. They had to flush the toxins from the fruit out of my system, but no lasting damage. I've been discharged already.”

“I see,” he replied. But his tone told her he didn't really.

Julia pursed her lips as Howard's eyes wandered over the empty hospital room. Didn't he notice that things seemed a little bit different here, that the signs and the labels were entirely unreadable?

“Howard, there’s something else...” Julia hesitated. “Somehow we ended up in a very weird place. The women here – they are all seven to eight foot tall. And they have muscles that are just unreal.”

The smile faded from Howard’s face. “It’s no longer a question in my mind. You either hit your head too hard, or you suffer from hallucinatory aftereffects of the damned fruit you consumed in such large quantities.”

“Howard, the doctor said I was fine. You should have seen her, over seven foot and built like an ox.”

He looked at her head. “I knew I never should have let you eat that fruit.”

“Honey, my head is totally fine. I know what I saw out there in the hallways. I’m just trying to prepare you so that you don’t make a scene when one of these women walks into the room. They’re huge and scary and gross. Just be ready for that.”

But Howard wasn’t listening. He had hoisted himself out of bed and was in the middle of another objection when the door swung open.

On the other side stood the doctor – seven-and-a-half feet of large, densely packed muscle lurked between the open panels of a white doctor’s jacket. Howard gasped and slunk back in shock. The doctor didn’t seem to notice.

“Well, aren’t YOU feeling a little better, young man!” The doctor smiled enthusiastically, lifting him by the armpits to inspect him from all angles before placing him back on the hospital bed, a massive, sturdy contraption, with motors for raising and lowering the head and feet. A half-dozen large pieces of equipment were attached to the bed, some as large as a picnic cooler. “Your pulse is a bit elevated, though.”

“I... I didn’t see you measure it,” Howard stammered.

The doctor seemed puzzled. "Measure it? What for? I have ears! Now I see your color is a little off, too. Maybe it's the fluorescent light. Let me take a closer look under daylight."

The doctor grabbed two handholds on the bed and hoisted it – occupant, equipment, and all – in a smooth, swift motion. She walked it toward the window as if it were a laundry basket.

Julia watched her with wide eyes. Like every woman in this world, this one's size was grotesque and frightening. Yet she was very sweet: a pleasant disposition and that calm confidence that was the unmistakable signature of power. I don't want to look like that, Julia assured herself. I would never want to look like that. But there was something about the way this doctor carried herself – an air of superiority, of unquestioned self-assurance...

Howard reeled with confusion. "This... isn't this really heavy, doctor?"

The doctor stopped in mid-stride and gave him a thoughtful glance. "I don't understand why you would wonder about that." She let the bed bounce up and down a few times. "480 pounds with you in it. I wouldn't call that heavy at all." She seemed to be in no hurry to put the bed down again.

Howard struggled to find his speech. "N... n... no... no... this... can't be real."

"What's his problem?" the doctor asked Julia, cradling bed and man in front of her.

"Honey, don't be intimidated by her. She's really nice."

The doctor finally placed the bed by the window. "How could I intimidate anybody? I'm not even that built anymore," she confided, a little embarrassed. "These days I top out at barely twenty-two inches around my upper arm; I wouldn't even want to show it



to you. I hope to retire soon and then I'll have the time to work on my figure, to get back to where I was in college. You should have seen what I looked like then. Guys were all over me," the doctor with the angelic face of a twenty-four-year-old reminisced.

Howard's face turned white as death. "Oh no," the doctor exclaimed, perplexed. "Your man seems to be in shock."



"I'm so glad you're alright." Ruth rose to greet Julia in the reception area where she had been waiting. "And you must be Howard."

"Howard's a little catatonic right now. They had to put him right back on a sedative after a panic attack."

"As they always say, it's their sensitivity that makes men so charming. And this is my daughter, Mindy."

Julia turned to find a seven-foot-tall, bored-looking teenager slumped in a reception room chair. She sported a plaid flannel shirt that had been tied in a simple knot. Panels of cloth that would normally have covered the entirety of a man's chest seemed challenged to cover just the girl's enormous breasts. A dark chasm of cleavage plunged downward toward the knot, and below it, intimidating balls of abdominal muscle were stacked upon each other. Voluminous thigh muscles exploded out of a small pair of jeans shorts, themselves filled to the brim.

"Come over and say hello to our house guests," Ruth instructed.

"Sure, mom," the kid groaned.

Mom? Julia thought. The daughter appeared to be around eighteen years old, and Ruth appeared to be all of twenty-six or so. However, on closer examination, Julia was reminded of the sageness and maturity in the

woman's eyes. Maybe Ruth really is the girl's mom, Julia thought. Maybe this 'Firming drug' slows aging?

The girl had taken several of the hard candies from the reception desk and had balanced them on her well-defined abdominals. The girl stood up gingerly, her eyes fixated on her midriff the entire time. She flexed those abdominals, further defining the muscles, turning them into little shelves that held the candies steady until she was nearly vertical.

"Knock it off, Mindy, it gets stale," the mother scolded.

"Fine," the girl groaned, relaxing her stomach and allowing the candies to tumble away, into her hands. Mindy offered one of the treats to Julia. "You want one?"

Julia accepted the gift and rolled it over her hand. The candy was silvery and shiny.

"She can't eat those, Mindy," the mother chided, taking the candy away from Julia and putting it back in the bowl. "They're candies with a filling of flavored Firming," Ruth explained to Julia, "encased in a metal shell, so that men can't eat them. They are not good for them."

"So?" Mindy cut in. "She's a woman, she just has to spit out the shell. She doesn't have to swallow it." The girl popped one more in her mouth and closed her jaws with a squeaky crunch. The metal seemed to be giving her no more trouble than a bubble gum shell. It must be a very thin coat of metal, Julia figured.

The doctor pulled the hood of a windbreaker over Julia's head and cinched it tight. "You and your consort are free to go. Good luck to you. I hope you find your way."



A bright day welcomed them as they stepped out of the hospital. Julia wondered why she should wear a hooded jacket in this weather and thought about taking it off. But the doctor must have had her reasons.

As they left the building, Mindy pursed her lips and blew the shell out with the sound of a firecracker. Thirty yards away the bark on a tree splintered.

"Mindy, how many times have I told you not to do that?" her mother scolded. "It's terrible for the trees. And if a man gets hit, we can only hope that his neck is clean and we get away with a fine."

"You never let me do ANYTHING," the girl snapped back at her mother.

I didn't see that correctly, Julia surmised as she followed the two enormous women to the parking lot. Nobody can eject something from their mouth with that much force, in any world. And what does it matter whether a man's neck is clean or not? What is the significance of that anyway?

Having been off the fruit for a week now, Julia's old aches and pains had resurfaced. Her ankle still hurt like hell, and she found herself limping even as she forced herself to keep up.

They passed other families who were on their way into the building. Julia began to feel eyes on her and realized belatedly that she was the subject of confused stares, and they weren't coming only from one person. They were coming from everyone.

"Mom," she heard a teenage girl ask, "why is that woman so small? Did somebody do something to her?"

Julia turned in time to see the enormous mother slap a hand over her daughter's mouth. "This is a hospital, young lady. There are lots of sick people in there. It's not polite to stare at other people's misfortune."

"But why is she walking funny?" the girl asked.

"She could be injured," the mother whispered.

“What does ‘INJURED’ mean, Mom?”

“Quiet, child,” her mother responded. “It’s something that happens to men sometimes.”

“But why did it happen to HER?” the child insisted.

“I don’t know, honey.” The mother shrugged in resignation. “I don’t know.”

Julia averted her eyes from the pair and limped on, clamping down on the pain in her ankle. Bright afternoon light beat down on her black windbreaker, still cinched at the hood.

Julia had her answer for the purpose of the windbreaker. It’s not the weather that this thing is protecting me from. It’s the embarrassment.