



# GRIM CURIO

The world never ended...

S.C. Barrus

**Blurb:**

The world never ended. 500 years after three cataclysmic events, the last city on earth struggles to survive. Now it's time to find a new home, on another planet or in another dimension, before humanity is gone for good.

**v2.0.0****FAQ****What is this?**

This document is the current working copy of my novel in progress called *Grim Curio*. It is a collection of the readable portions of *Grim Curio* starting at chapter 1. This document will be updated one per week.

**Where can I learn more?**

If you want to learn all the nitty gritty behind the scenes secrets, [then visit my blog](#).

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## GRIM CURIO

by S.C. Barrus

The world never ended. When flood came, many survived. The sufferers shuffled about from place to place, some finding shelter, others not. When fire came, some survived. It blazed over continents fueled by primal fear, justice and revenge. Fire has no conscious. When radiation came, few survived. The survivors were not a chosen people. They lived in the correct geographical locations with mountain ranges and northerly winds and had access to a little infrastructure to support a small, terrified wallow of survivors.

Years passed, the pockets of humanity dwindled. Some starved and died, others fought and died, and others fell to indiscriminate forces: massive storms, poisonous air, and not a little stupidity.

But the world never ended.

###

*Refuge, the final city. Hardy. Tenacious. Resilient. The city winks, a last twinkling on a massive spherical cemetery.*

*Though neighborhoods are quite, some brave the toxic air and hurry along narrow streets. They walk with a purpose, a fierce determination, their eyes covered with reflective lenses, blessed with clean air by filtered respirators.*

*They walk from rusted steel hovels and rusted steel communes to rusted steel workshops, schools and rusted steel warehouses. A lucky few are headed down, down to Zone 2 or Zone 3 — 2 for study, 3 for sanitation, energy production, food and water distribution.*

*Zone 1, north-east side, night. Three masked figures skulk along corridors without speaking. Their hearts beat heavy. Filtered air whiffs a rotten tinge. Duffle bags carry*

*small spore bombs, and they handle them gingerly. They hurry away from the great steel warehouses, some abandoned, others tirelessly guarded. They paint a line south-west towards the heart of the city, towards the markets, brothels and cantinas.*

*Zone 1, center city. There's a cramped space, a small room with ventilated air where patrons can remove their masks and watch a tiny stage and listen to the feminine crooning of the beautiful Astira Lockhart. The crowd is silent, mesmerized by her sultry seduction, her titillating high notes and oozing, suggestive low tones. They drink fungal wine, bitter and pungent, and they puff psychoactive fungal smoke from steel pipes, an earthy musk.*

*"Another drink?"*

*James Braxton keeps his eyes on the singing wonder and checks his pockets, empty. "Just one more." His cup is filled. The thick brown liquid froths and he takes a drink and moans despite himself. If only every night could be this good. He wipes foam from his short beard with a sleeve. A long breath, a short comfortable sigh, then he downs the wine in gulps.*

*James rises, picks up his mask from under his chair and turns casually to exit. He mills with the crowd as he backs towards the door, eyes attentive to the aged proprietor and the broad shouldered bouncer. Timing is everything.*

*Mask in hand, he waits. A man comes between him and the bouncer, James steps back, and the man alters course, bumping against the bouncer. As the man apologizes drunkenly, James slips around, snapping his mask in place. With a quick motion, he spins the steel wheel of the hatch, pulls it open and hops into the exit chamber.*

*"Hey." The bouncer turns, but it's too late. James spins the wheels to the second door, the redundant system not allowing both doors to be open at once, and he saunters into the street.*

*The wind blows, and when the door opens and the masked bouncer's head appears. James has Vanished.*

*Pleased with himself, leaning round the corner of a dark ally, he turns and startles. Three shadows in the night, close enough to touch. They look at him through black, reflective lenses and he looks at them, his eyes equally masked.*

*They stare at one another for a long while and James sees the bag, sees their defensive posture and the way they glance from him to the cantina. His jaw is set, his*

*hands shiver. He shakes his head, pleading, and they nod, point to him, then throw a thumb in the opposite direction.*

*For a long moment he stands and glares, and one figure has a knife and another has a pipe and James has nothing, is more than a little drunk, is more than a little high. His shoulders fall, and he turns and rushes homeward.*

*Time stretches, the sound of the cantina, the crooning and the cheers feel so melancholy. From a quarter mile away, James hears the boom! His breath escapes him and he struggles to remain standing. A few more dead. What's a few more? The world has gone to hell, and all he can think about is a theory, a dream of escaping to someplace... different.*

*####*

*From: Susan Ericson - Director, Office of Stability*

*To: University Personnel*

*Re: Update on Nihilist Situation*

*Colleagues,*

*You're no doubt aware of the Nihilist epidemic and the movement to remove them from Refuge. Ten years have passed since this directive was initiated, and we're pleased to announce that the Nihilist factions is thinned to near extinction. However, there are a few exceptions.*

*The remaining factions are small but dangerous and unpredictable. Their remnants have a toe hold, entrenched within the populace of the north-east side. If you're stationed in a north-east warehouse, be proactive in following all security procedures. Do not work without a government aid on site.*

*The Office of Stability and The Justice Department are working to quell the remnants of this extremist, inhuman movement. If you have any information or see any suspicious activity, do not hesitate to contact us. Remember, humanity survives with a very thin margin for error. It takes all of our due diligence to maintain our fragile stability.*

*Regards,*

*Susan Ericson*

*Office of Stability Director*

###

A pebble plinks over the cracked cement floor. It hops under conveyer belts and tubes, past pumps and upright two-thousand gallon processing tanks. It's tiny sound echoes through the abandoned factory and Nat lazily walks after it. She climbs and crawls with her good arm, brushing dust from her palm, and when she reaches the pebble, she kicks it again.

Her mask is off, lays near the entrance, and Nat inhales the air. It still smells of dry, old food paste — a little sweet, a little salty, a subtle tinge of rot. When she breaths a bad whiff, Nat's freckled nose curls. She breaths through her mouth and continues on.

When she grows bored, she wanders from the factory floor to the cobwebbed halls, and hazy sky-lit offices. The beams of light catch her interest for a while, and she studies the blurry line where light dissolves into shadow.

She sits on a cold metal desk, legs spread, good arm hanging relaxed, malformed arm — skinny, twisted and pained — clutched tight to her chest inside her shirt. For a long while she does nothing but enjoy the silence and watch the dust motes drift through the air.

She grows bored. Nat picks up a chair with one arm, smashes it against the window between the office and factory floor, watches the dangerous diamond display of shimmering gems.

She carefully holds a shard of glass for a long while, then presses the edge against one of three usable fingers on her right hand. What would it feel like with just a little more pressure? Just a little cut, just a little blood. But after a long contemplative moment, she decides no, not today. She needs more courage for that.

###

*Shoom-thunk!*

Nat hops to her feet, shaken from dreamworld. She stands still and tense and listens. From across the factory floor a twisting metallic noise squawks. The inner hatches wheel spins. Nat holds her breath, frozen, and the door screeches open.

At the edge of her vision are a collection of upright tanks. She darts, squeezes, holds her breath and makes herself small. She can't see much. The tanks block her view except a sliver, and through that, on top of a conveyor belt by the hatch, her mask.

Her breath grows heavy as her palms sweat and eyes dart around looking for answers. If someone sees it, they'll know, they'll find her and do... something. There's no escaping without it.

She closes her eyes, tries to calm her breath, and pulls her shank — a knife made from sheet metal and a dry fungus-fiber handle — a from under her twisted left arm. Damn it, this place is hers, her secret, her sanctuary, and someone is breaking in and ruining it.

Footsteps.

Tight between cold steel tanks, Nat maneuvers for a better view. One masked figure enters, then another and a third carrying an empty duffle bag. Their faces are covered with expressionless respirators and soulless black goggles. A gang? Nihilists? Just a group of kids exploring? She doubted the third.

The lead figure pulls back a hood, unclamps her mask, and lowers it from her face. Dreadlocked black hair frames her dark skin. Her eyes are electric. She breaths hard and turns to the others, then spasms into a nervous, excited fit of laughter. "Woooo!" she cries. "We did it. Did you see? We fucking did it."

Nat's eyes spread wide, her heart flutters. She knows that face. Sarah. Oh Calamity, Sarah!

Sarah slaps the second girl hard on the shoulder. "Boom!" she shouts. "It was perfect. They knew it too, they knew this was right, it was their time to go. My hands are shaking. Look at them. My whole body is tingling. I love it."

"I don't think anyone followed us," says the second girl, unmasked. A brown patch of rolling skin and fine hair is stamped to the left side of her face. Not familiar. "What about

that guy? I thought we were caught, I thought for sure we were caught. Do you think he followed us? I don't think he followed us, what do you think?"

"It doesn't matter," Sarah. "If I am the last on earth, I shall take my own life and the world will finally be clean. I feel so good."

The third girl, older than the others by maybe ten years, drops a duffle bag and falls to the ground holding back sobs.

"Oh quit it." Sarah walks over, kicks her playfully on the ass. "Get up will you. We did great."

Nat watches with apprehension. She knows Sarah, but not like this, whatever this is. She knew her as the shy girl from school in Zone 2. Sarah had shocked everyone when she stood mid-lecture and denounced reproduction. The class went still, shocked at the taboo, then everyone condemned her at once. But not Nat.

Deeply curious, a little allured, a little frightened, Nat followed Sarah from a distance through Zone 2's corridors. Halls wound like roads, the ceiling shrouded in dark dripped condensation. The air, clean. As she neared, she noticed a boy from class, Jarrad, also followed Sara, leering with ill intent.

Nat kept distance, watched them from the edge of an ally. She sucked in air, built confidence, then peeked past the corner. Jared had tackled Sarah, was over her, his whispers carried along the wall, "For humanities sake, I'll make you reproduce."

Nat's face twisted as she snuck closer. Her hidden makeshift knife, clutched with her malformed arm, now in her hand. She screamed, charged, then stopped abruptly as Jarrad, young like her, looked back. Nat gasped. *I know you*, she thought, squeezing the knife.

She had meant to kill him, truly. She didn't even like him, but she knew him. Instead she shook and he turned on her. "What?" With a cornered scream, Nat buried the knife into Jarrad's stomach. His face twisted, and a silly squelching sound burped from his mouth. She pulled the knife, pushed him away and he fell, gripping his stomach.

Nat lifted Sarah. For a long moment they each looked in the others eyes. Nat's heart fluttered. Then Sarah broke away and looked at the boy. "If he lives, he'll turn us in, have us killed."

Sarah held out a hand, motioned for the knife.

"Wont," he gurgled.

"Will," Sarah.

"Wait," Nat.

"Don't get cold feet now sister, we're committed."

And Nat handed Sarah the knife, and Sarah drew it across Jarrad's throat, and he spat and sputtered like a broken faucet. Sarah handed the knife to Nat, the blade red. "Don't say anything. Run, but don't follow me." Then Sarah ran. After a dazed moment, Nat ran too.

They blamed the murder on the disappeared Sarah, and Nat never saw her again. Until now.

"Someone's in here," whispers the girl with the brown patch. Her voice echoes in the expansive room. Her eyes search as she grips her pipe like a club.

"It's just adrenaline," Sarah.

"I heard it too," the older one rose to her feet. "Look, over there." She points at Nat.

Instantly Nat dashes out from her hiding spot toward an exit on the far side. Footsteps *tap-tap-tap* quickly behind her. She slams against a closed hatch, twists the handle to open it. Tears well. Her mask! Hands on her, grabbing at her, throwing her to the ground. Nat gasps.

A face over her, young with the patch of brown, wide eyed and terrifying. "You followed us," she says, and Nat shakes her head. A knife enters Nat's vision. It twists menacing in the air, and Nat shuts her eyes and shakes her head.

"Sarah, please," Nat shouts.

"What the fuck? She knows you."

"There's no way out of this one, girl. We're not people who fuck around."

"Sarah," Nat moans.

And then, Nat peaks open an eye and there she is. Older now, matured, a strong expression. "I know you," Sarah.

"Please don't, Sarah."

“Get off her for Calamity’s sake.” Sarah pulls girl with the knife. Nat can breath again. Sarah reaches down, grabs Nat by the wrist and lifts her up. “You’re the one, aren’t you?”

Nat nods.

“What are you doing here?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“I come here sometimes, skip school, stay away from home. That’s all, I swear.”

“You hang in a place like this? By yourself?”

“What are we going to do, Purity?” the girl with the knife asks.

“Just hang on.” Sarah sucks in a loud lungful of air then exhales hard. She looks Nat in the eye, and for a moment there’s sympathy. “You didn’t see anything tonight, did you?” Sarah... Purity? asked.

“No.”

“And you didn’t hear anything?”

“Purity, we can’t let her go—“

“I’m talking to the girl.”

Silent.

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“Good.” Sarah bites her lip and watches Nat intently. Nat swallows. “I remember you. You were there, that was you. You killed for me, didn’t you?”

Nat nods. She’s amazed by Sarah, drawn into her eyes, intently curious and afraid.

“Fine.” To the others, “We’re letting her leave.”

There are complaints, but they fall flat.

To Nat, “Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

"I don't think you do. Here's the thing. When you piece together what we did, and you will, you're gonna keep your lips sealed, cause if you don't, we'll come to your little commune at night, take you from your bed, hang you by your ankles and cut out your tongue. You'll bleed from your mouth into your nose and eyes. Will you drown or bleed out and die slow? The fun comes from not knowing. So tell me, what're you gonna to do."

"Nothing."

"That's right," Sarah smiles and moves close, places a hand on her shoulder then kisses her cheek. "On the flip side," she whispers, "if you ever feel the need to get down and dirty in the last days, paint the corner of your communes hatch. I'll check it if I feel like it. We could have fun."

###

*James, the clever bastard, is right. The machine worked. All it took, months of labor, a few favors, an obscene amount of power, and I ripped a hole in the universe. The other side droned, a deep heavy note that pierced my body and shook the walls. Through the hole I saw things I can't hope to understand. Seconds later, it snapped closed. The power terrifies me, but I must press on, must see this through. I'll be more careful moving forward.*

Journal entry by Samuel Brookheim

###

Miles to the east is the Rocky Mountains. Nestled on their westward slopes spumes a fungal forest. A mushroom thrives here. It drops toxic white-puff spores which gather about it's base patiently waiting to be carried by a mischievous wind.

And further east, beyond the these mountains rages a storm. Seven hundred miles across, a hulking giant. It lumbers north-north-west. Winds smash against the

mountains and flow down the other side like a tsunami. These edge-winds drudge up months of shed spores and scatter them into the stratosphere.

They drift westward, then fall like listless snow. Down, down they fall in the night towards rusted metal roofs, and streets with a few disenchanting wanderers. A spore scoops left then right, dangling in the air. As it falls, it hangs over a man in black mask with empty eyes.

When the spore's noticed, the eyes behind the mask watch in wonder, then grow wide with recognition. Spore storm. Dreaded. The eyes look up and behold a moonlit blanket of white, falling, falling down. He sprints, but the quiet death falls and brushes against his improperly insulated body, and he writhes with convulsions and dies in little fits. A sad night for some.

In the midst of this, flakes peel from somewhere in the sky and fall amongst the spores. But these benign flecks of dead-skin-like substance are given no thought. They are overshadowed by the now billowing winds and violently undulating puffs of white.

####

Spore rapped against the sign on the outer wall of the room James called an office. It read, "James Braxton, Detective. Anomalies, Curiosities & the Supernatural, inquire within." The sign was a lie.

Some believe spirits wallow in nooks of metal, abandoned factories, ventilation ducts sucking air to lower zones. Some believe they are cursed or that clay baubles cast a pallor of wicked energy over their houses, not James.

James considers himself a rogue researcher, gathering field evidence on the nature of the universe. But he also considered himself poor, which he was. Exploiting a few superstitions had turned out to be rather useful, in terms of income and the occasional glint of evidence.

James sits at his desk unable to sleep. The filtered air whiffed musty and rotten. The *rat-tat-tat* of spores against the window punctuates a vision he sees, the images of three figures in the night, the sound of an explosion. He'd done nothing. There was nothing he could have done, not then.

"Allie?"

“Good evening James, anything I *\*shzzt\** do for you?” It was a monotone female voice pushed through a corroded wire.

“Can’t sleep.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Would you like me to update you on intercepted messages?”

“You know I do.”

“Keywords with new documents. Nihilists, one new document. Disease, one new document. Satellite, one new document.”

“Just read them through to me and I’m going to close my eyes.”

“From Susan Ericson...”

James leans back in his chair and half listens to the constant hum of Allie’s voice. He had dreams of her before, falling asleep like this. She’d talk to him from the body of a woman he met drinking, lean in close, lips touching his ear and she’d say, “Subject, attraction. Am *\*shzzt\** beautiful.”

In this moment though, she said, “The young boy with the disease, aged 7, experienced several episodes *\*zzztcht\** exposed to the outdoors.”

“Wait, stop,” James says. He leans forward, curious. “What’re you reading from, just now?”

Allie’s static voice modulates mid word, cut short. “Title: Report. Possible Plague in Clayton. Assistance Requested.”

“Assistance?” He scoffed. “My ass. What did it say, just now?”

“The last sentence read, ‘The young boy with the disease, aged 7, experienced several episodes *\*chrrt\** exposed to the outdoors.’”

“Episodes?” James eyed the thick window, the tan fluff spores rapped against it, collected in the corners. “Go on, what’s it say after that?”

She read, “His outbursts were violent. We observed this incident from afar, so details are hazy. He seemed to calm when returned to his burrow. We were not permitted to examine him, and have *\*chht\** instructed to follow the villages customs, so we did not press the matter.

“The next day we received news the boy was effectively brain dead. Even in this state, exposure to the outdoors insights a mad violence in him. His survival seems unlikely. Due to our restrictions, we could not effectively diagnose the child, but we fear his disease might be contagious. A second child has begun to show similar symptoms.

“We can only hope this isn’t the start of an outbreak. Extraordinary measure may be necessary if the disease takes hold. We must prevent it from reaching Refuge. Experts with power to override restrictions requested for formal assessment. Action must be taken.

“End of document.”

“Formal assessment.” He laughed bitterly. “Good luck with—” He paused. “Wait a minute, do we have anything else related on file? Not from the network, from, uh, Dao-Tai Yen I think.”

“Nothing found.”

“What? Shit.” James walked wrapped in a linting blanket to a cluttered shelf. “I never installed her stuff, did I?”

“Nothing from Dao-Tai Yen.”

“Ok, how long until the next blackout?”

“Estimated six minutes until next blackout.”

“Damn.” James scanned the mess of mini drives, each one the same as the other. He fumbled through them when all went black. The blackout had come early. James lit an electric lantern and continued his search.

###

The winds calmed by morning. The white-brown haze of spores blanketed the street waist deep while the odd gust puffed flurries up and they danced in the air.

The buildings cubes of metal. Metal studs stuck to metal foundations holding metal walls to rusting metal roofs. They were packed tight together as though the density was justified, but it wasn’t. Many rooms were empty.

James busied himself before the red sun rose. His room was an amalgamation of office, bedroom, kitchen, library. It did many things and none of them well. Once an attic above a taxidermy store and workshop, the owner now rented the space, forcing James to live among synthesized animal cast offs. Crow, badgers and coyotes were piled in corners, their stitched gold eyes gleaming.

The metal shelves displayed messes of paraphernalia: etchings, prints, vials of flaky veil residue, strange bones with curious deformities, all things James collected over his illustrious career.

"Bernie," he yelled hoarsely down the stairs. "I'm going out for a while. Will you log my messages?"

"What?" Bernie, the proprietor and resident artist, yelled back from the floor below. His voice was deep, like a man speaking out of a well. His heavy, creaking footsteps neared the stairs. "Are you leaving? Got a job? How long will you be gone?"

"Yup, yup," James said. "Not sure how long." Bernie thumped slowly, carefully up the stairs. "Maybe a couple weeks," James added. He grabbed a backpack from against a wall and the boots and storm suit next to it.

"You get a job lined up or something?" Bernie's big shiny head, scraggly brown beard and massive torso appeared in the stairwell. He was half giant in girth, stocky like a street fighter doubled in width.

"Job? Yeah, something like that."

"You are paid this time?" he asked pointedly.

James hesitated. "I don't know, nothing's certain." He walked around the desk, the piles of synth animals, and stuffed clothing in the bag to cushion gear. Then he grabbed the storm suit and gave it a once over. The full body was heavy, uncomfortable, covered in patches and necessary for any trek outdoors. "Do you have any really good tape I can use?" James frowned at fraying seam on the sleeve.

Bernie raised an eyebrow a fraction. "The tough tape is downstairs. So why don't you know if you're getting paid or not?"

"Because I don't have a client yet, but I'll get one, don't you worry about that."

Bernie was a 'gen-kid', a dying breed. Gen-kids were all the rage before my time, their genes altered at conception in enumerable ways. Some believed they were crimes

against God or nature, and over the years they died off, either murdered outright or slowly killed through prejudicial lack of work, food, anything.

His altered genes gave him accelerated muscle growth, a big mistake. The 'enhancement' forced him to constantly monitor his muscle stimulation. Too much and his body could swell, his own muscles cutting off the vital functions of his organs.

"So what's the gig?" he asked.

"Students in Clayton are calling on an expert to evaluate a disease that's spreading. I'm not so sure it is a disease. I think it's something else entirely. But if I get there too late, whole village might be nixed and my opportunity to prove it will disappear. Can't miss out on this one, it's too important."

"Nixed? For what?" Bernie absentmindedly started cleaning, picking up jars and scraps, which made James self conscious.

"Stop moving so much," James said. He grabbed a jar of veil residue from Bernie. "I'll take care of the mess. A kid's gone brain dead, and they seem to think it's a virus. The students are afraid it might reach Refuge and spread. They're calling for experts, and if there's any doubt, you know what they'll do."

He nodded slightly. Bernie's every motion was measured, a contrast to his huge body. "What does that have to do with you?"

"I found a similar case from a about fifteen years back. Another village in the fringes lost a hole generation of children. They all became husks, screamed in the daylight, all the same stuff to what's going on in Clayton. In the children's bedrooms the researcher found veil residue. But she came in after the fact, she never witness how the veil residue was produced herself."

"The sandy stuff?" Bernie motioned to the jar James had taken.

"Something is happening around those children," James continued. "Maybe the disease itself is bending reality or maybe it's something else, but there's more here than meets the eye. If I'm right and this is the same thing from before, then something is causing the layer between realities to fray in Clayton, and I need to see it."

James looked at the mess of supplies. He was driven, thirsted to hurry to Clayton, to see for himself what Dai-tai Yen had almost seen: the veil — the lubrication between reality and the layers of the universe that pressed against it — worn thin, dissolving into flakes as something pushed against it or even crossed over.

“So what,” Bernie said dryly. “Are you going to go out there in this weather? Then what? You going to save the village? I just don’t see it. I think you need to sit down and think about this a minute.”

“I’m going.”

“I got that. I’m just saying it’s not the smartest thing you’ve ever done. You’ll be risking your life out there.”

“I’ll manage. I’ve dealt with—“

“Look out the window, James.” Bernie voice didn’t rise, but it pressed. “There is a sea outside of spores. That shitty suit of yours gets a cut, you’re dead. You get on the wrong side of whoever they’re sending out there, you’re dead. There’s got to be an easier way to make a buck.”

“Bern,” James looked Bernie in the eye. “I’m going.”

James spent a long while checking and double checking his supplies. He debated which instruments he could carry — not many — packed bags of food paste and an atmospheric water generator. When finally ready, he walked to the stairs, took a deep breath, then headed down. “Damn it.” He ran back up and grabbed his snapper coil from his desk.

Downstairs, Bernie stood next to a massive synth bear, frozen mid growl, and watched James climb into his storm suit. James clasped in place the respirator and moved to head out of the shop, but Bernie called out behind me, “Find a client first, then get to work. Not another mess like last time.”

James gave a thumb up then opened the first hatch to the exit chamber. The door shut behind him and for a while he was alone. After a few quick breaths, James opened the second hatch and a cotton wave of toxic spores spilled over him. He began to wade through them heading south when Bernie’s voice crackled in his headset.

“Before you get out of range, just want to say be careful. Ok.”

“Thanks, Bernie.”

“Over and out.”

####

Six exhaust towers rise out of Refuge like religious spires. The bad air from zone 3 — side effects of food processing and sewage treatment — and bad air from zone 2 — side effects of the politicians, students, scientists, mechanics and researchers — are sucked through ducts and up and up past earth and concrete to the open air of zone 1, blessing those who live near with muggy polluted air.

Near the base of the northern tower are squat, make-do communities living on piecemeal scrapes of necessary technology. Ramshackle communes jut at strange angles, rooms pasted to rooms pasted to rooms with doors not more than hanging curtains covering rough-cut holes. Scavenged ventilation systems pipe air into welded and re-welded steel walls which rattle, beaten by the spores carried on the wind.

Inside the walls huddle small families in tight confines. They're waiting out the storm, checking and double checking their family's supplies. Some weigh the risk of donning storm suit and venturing out for more food pastes. None do. They'll wait for days until their plight becomes desperate.

Even tonight in the storm there are two dressed to the gills in full storm suits puffy with external pressure from the built-in filtration systems. Two wade through the spores in the street with a purpose, side by side, their heads high, their stride long. One wears a backpack, the other carries a small collection of electronics, tasers, clamps, wires and a battery. They march towards the hovels following lead connecting a young girl named Nat Rosenbaum to an extremist cult called The Cleansing Sisterhood.

###

"Nat, I need you to talk to me," said Georgia. The patter of spore knocking against the roof put Georgia on edge, but it didn't seem to bother Nat.

Nat sat crossed legged on her sleeping mat. She hadn't been ignoring her mom, but she wanted solitude to contemplate. Nat looked up and searched Georgia's face. Georgia wouldn't understand, Nat knew that. She had never experienced what Nat was going through now.

Georgia was a nervous woman, but persevering. Her husband died young. His lungs gave out after years of breathing noxious air. He spent his last days maintaining their

little cell in the commune, welding new metal over rusting cracks, installing their own filtration system, building a cache to stow away valuables out of neighbors prying eyes. Now Georgia was alone, and her daughter was slipping away from her.

"I am talking to you," Nat said calmly.

"Why haven't you been going to school?"

Nat was a little surprised, but Georgia was bound to be notified sooner or later. Nat saw the emotion, the slight fall of her mom's eyebrows, those tired lines spiderwebbing under her eyes, a nervous frown. She saw the emotion, but the effect on her was lost somehow. That pang of guilt she used to feel as a little girl had matured into a small quiet space. Nat was much more comfortable these days.

"I don't think school makes a difference," Nat said. "I don't see a point."

"No." Her mom shook a finger at her. "No. It does make a difference. How do you think kids leave this place? They get jobs down below, they get taken care of. That's a difference. You don't want to spend your whole life like this, do you?"

"No," Nat said. "I don't."

"Then what are you thinking?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I don't want to tell you."

"If you miss any more days, they tell me you won't be eligible for Zone 2. That'll affect the rest of your life, don't you understand. One more day, and you're stuck up here—"

"Like you."

Georgia flinched. "Yes," she said. "Like me."

"Fine by me. I wouldn't be compatible down there anyway."

"For Calamity's sake, why not?"

"Because I won't reproduce," Nat said calmly.

Georgia froze.

"I don't believe in it, so why should I?"

Georgia's hands shook, her eyes searched. "Because... because without it our family will die, Nat. Not just our family, humanity lives by a—"

"A thin margin?" Nat recited the propaganda. "There's no room for error? No room for someone who doesn't do their part? I've heard it, mom, and I just don't care. Maybe it'll be a good thing if the family ends with me. No more still births, no more deformed or messed up kids just in the hopes that one will come out right."

"Shhh." Georgia looked nervously over her shoulder. "Someone could hear you." She crossed her arms and looked at Nat with quivering frown. "So what then? You're going to become a fatalist?"

"No."

"Then what, Nat?"

"The earth is our mother, and we raped her. In return she destroyed us, but a few of us cling to her like a tumor. We suck out the last of her life force so we can suffer a little longer before we die. I think that's sick, don't you?"

"I don't want to hear this talk, Nat."

"Why? Does it scare you?"

Nat's mom eyed her. "Yes. It really does." Just then there was a pounding on the entrance. "Shit. We are not through talking about this Nat."

Nat shrugged and Georgia walked out of her room for the last time. Nat pictured Sarah in her mind. *Sarah was always strong*, she thought, *it's about time I am too*. Nat realized that she wanted to be a part of it, wanted to be seen as a girl powerful and unafraid. Nat wasn't fatalistic, she was a nihilist. Only now began to realize it.

###

Nat lived in a commune, a patch-work of rooms welded together around a central entrance hub. The entry was where all the complexity lied, with it's ability to keep the toxins out and the people. Most couldn't live with an entrance chamber all there own. So when the stability officers entered the commune, neither Nat nor Georgia were aware.

They walked with authority while other residents ducked away and watched from the shadows. Children were gathered up, whispers turned to frightened, morbidly curious looks. Only one man approached them, something of a commune leader, and as he stared down their still masked faces, the man quivered and said, "There are no nihilists here, I assure you. We've been vetted again and again, there's no need for any unpleasantness."

"Georgia Rosenbaum," said a distorted voice. It was genderless, mechanical, frightening.

"What?" said the man. He looked from side to side, confused and frightened. "Why her?"

"Georgia Rosenbaum," the voice said again. The person in the storm suite rolled it's shoulders preparing for aggression.

"She hasn't done anything."

"Sting him."