

Bricktown was a settlement of some two thousand souls, not far to the north of the ruins of The Great City. Not a wealthy town, it was named for its primary export, which were made from the fine clay on which it was built. For miles around the land which wasn't given over to digging up clay was farmland, and at the centre of the disturbed earth was the walled settlement itself. The wall wasn't large; not much taller than head-height, but it was thick and sturdy enough to provide a serious barrier to any would-be raiders, being built from the bricks for which the town existed, and was riddled with loopholes through which the town guards could fire. As with most walled towns, a few of the buildings lay outside of the wall's protection; the odd shed or shack, and, on a nearby hill, an old lookout station.

The lookout was not much more than a two-room building, made from the ubiquitous red bricks, with a roof of matching terracotta clay tiles, and an observation tower looming above it on metal stilts. This particular tower had been extended; its roof removed in favour of a tall, metal, pylon, reaching hundreds of feet into the air. Outside was a small grave with a little slab of stone inscribed with the legend '*Dr. Herman Stephen Neighman; healer, cybernetics expert, genius. 39 T.T.Y. - 120 T.T.Y.*'

A figure was walking down the dirt trail which linked the lookout to the town. Tall, graceful, and statuesque, with almost exaggeratedly feminine proportions. Auburn hair tumbled down to her mid-back, her skin was fair and flawless, with a dusting of freckles across her nose and cheeks. Her eyes were an unnaturally vivid green, lending to the slightly unsettling nature of her mathematically-perfect facial features. She wore a skin-tight black bodysuit made from a shining, synthetic, material, unzipped enough to show off her more-than-generous cleavage, with high-heeled, knee-high, boots. She carried an old doctor's bag in one hand, and, in spite of the scorching desert sun, not a drop of sweat was visible on her porcelain skin.

The woman strode into Bricktown through the front gate. The guards on duty exchanged looks as she swept past them.

"Uh, miss!" one of them, the shorter of the two, a man in a leather jacket and forage cap raised his hand to hail her.

"Hm?" she whirled around on her heel like a clockwork figurine, one eyebrow elegantly arched.

The guard was momentarily distracted by the effect of such an abrupt turn on her jiggling bosoms.

"I... uh, that is... uhm, can I ask who you are and what your business is here?"

"Oh, yes, of course." her manner was curt, with a veneer of politeness. "I'm Dr. Neighman's assistant."

"His niece, in fact." she added, as though it had just occurred to her. "Our project has concluded, and I'm going to be renting a room in town until I can get a ride to my next port of call."

The guard exchanged another glance with his taller compatriot.

"The- the doctor? The guy holed up in the old lookout?" he gestured back up the path from which the woman had descended, "I never knew he had an assistant working with him, especially not some... uh, someone like you."

"Yes, well, my uncle and I are very private people. *Were* very private people, I mean. Sadly uncle Herman has passed away."

The guard pushed his cap back on his head and adjusted his rifle strap.

"Wait, the doc's dead?"

"That *is* what 'passed away' means, yes."

The taller guard; a man in a stetson and old army jacket leant against the arch of the gate and rolled his eyes as he lit up a cigarette.

"What happened?" the guard in the forage cap pressed the matter.

"Old age. He was eighty-one, you know."

"It was hard to tell, what with all the implants. I mean, I guessed he was getting on in years, but I had no idea he was *that* old."

"Well, he was, and now he's dead."

"You don't seem too broken up about it."

"We weren't close."

"You worked together in a two-room shed for like, three months, and you 'weren't close'?"

"As I said, we were both very private people."

The taller guard took a drag on his cigarette and blew twin streams of smoke from his nostrils.

"You still ain't told us your name, ma'am." The smoking man piped up.

"No, I haven't. Is it necessary?"

"Not really, but it's mighty suspicious; you materialisin' outta nowhere, tellin' us the doc's dead and you won't even tell us your name? A body might get to supposin' any number of unsavoury things."

"Very well. My name is Hermione Neighman. *Dr.* Hermione Neighman."

"Your uncle was called *Herman*, and your name is *Hermione*?"

"I was named for him. Our family is justly proud of his genius and expertise."

"...But you weren't close?"

"No. As stimulating as this conversation is, I have things to do, so, have I satisfied your curiosity? May I proceed?"

The guards looked to each other again. The taller one shrugged to his partner.

"Yeah, I guess." said the shorter guard, "carry on."

Hermoine whirled back around just as abruptly as the first time and walked away from them with her metronomically regular stride.

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The cloudless nights of the desert wastes were cold once the heat of the day had been leached from the rocks and sand. The night-shift guards at the gates of Bricktown wore heavy coats of wool and fur over layers of clothing, they smoked and stamped their feet, hands shoved deep into pockets to escape the chill. In areas where moisture gathered, frost formed. A few of the thick-walled buildings still had lights burning in their small windows; in the absence of electric lighting oil lanterns and candle light flickering through the cracks in the shutters.

Before the war, the site of the town had been a remote suburb of The Great City. A nuclear blast-wave followed by fire, gang war, and two centuries of weather and decay had erased almost every sign of the picket-fenced housing estate from the surface of the Earth. However, far underground, sewerage pipes, metro tunnels, and maintenance passages, though partially collapsed and flooded, still wound their way for miles, unseen by human eyes.

At the bottom of one of the deeper clay pits, the cold ground cracked and crumbled. From beneath, a large, heavy, circle of metal was heaved up and tossed aside. Where the clods of sticky clay fell from it they revealed the words '*Municipal Sanitation Works Access Point*' inscribed in the middle. From the hole left behind, long pale-skinned arms reached out; fish-hook claws raked the freezing mud as a face appeared, dominated by two huge eyes like circular pools of ink, and a gaping mouth bristling with pencil-like fangs. A relatively small,

bulbous body followed, then the legs which, like the arms, were distended and spindly, and ended with feet whose toes were more like fingers, tipped with wickedly curved talons. A crude belt wrapped around its bulging gut, holding a hook-bladed machete

The spidery monster turned and reached one arm back down the hole from which it had emerged, helping up another pallid mutant, this one more reptilian, or maybe piscine, through the opening. One-by-one, more mutants emerged; some were so pale as to be almost translucent, with organs faintly visible beneath colourless flesh, some had gigantic eyes, like those of the first horror to emerge, others lacked eyes altogether, some had long, multi-jointed limbs, some were short and squat, a few had rags draped almost hap-hazardly about their bodies, but most were naked. They bore all the hallmarks of creatures well adapted to subterranean living, and all were armed; a variety of blades, blunt implements, and more than a few guns, albeit home-made and mostly in poor repair.

The moon was new, so it was only starlight that the creeping hoard had to worry about as they advanced on Bricktown. Slipping from clay pit to clay pit, rustling through the leaves of the orderly rows of crops in the fields, the pale mass advanced. Like a river diverging at its delta, the mutants split into groups as they drew closer to the town, some groups slowed, taking up position behind rocks or dunes, out of sight of the town guards, others quickly skittered around to the other side of the settlement, keeping to cover.

The gates of the town were closed and barred, and the guards stood on low platforms behind the wall which allowed them to look over and glance around the landscape every so often. Other guards patrolled the streets, toting hurricane lanterns which cast just enough light to peer into the back alleys. Slowly and soundlessly, several of the mutants advanced on the town, crawling on their bellies, smeared with cold mud to blend into the ground, hugging the terrain, freezing in place at the sight of a guard's head poking up. At the base of the wall the advancing monsters, chosen from amongst the mutant army for their long limbs and nimbleness, began to scale the fortifications.

Ricky adjusted his rifle strap again. He wasn't happy to have been stuck with the night shift, especially considering he'd already worked the day shift earlier, but the captain set the schedule and there wasn't anything Ricky could do about it. He'd gone back to the guard-room to grab a sweater and his overcoat from his locker and just had time for a bowl of hot broth between shifts. That had been four hours ago, now the short man was freezing his ass off at the south gate. He huffed into his hands and rubbed them together. His only solace was that his friend Tom was working the same shift. Ricky glanced over at Tom; tall and lean, he was wearing his stetson hat with a long trench-coat over his army jacket. As usual, Tom was slouching against the wall, smoking.

Ricky pulled his forage cap down on his head, hopped up onto the platform next to the gate and raised his lantern as he looked over the wall. He just had time to register a horrifying face, like something from the depths of the sea, before a blade slashed his neck almost to his vertebrae, and he fell backwards, blood cascading down his front. Tom gasped at the sight of his friend

tumbling to the ground. He looked up to see the spindly monster now stradling the top of the wall, its arm pulled back with a long knife held in its clawed hand, before the arm snapped forward. Tom's cigarette fell from his lips and he managed the start of a strangled cry which swiftly became a quiet gurgle as the mutant's knife flew straight into his throat. The tall man sagged to his knees, watching helplessly as the thing crawled down the inside of the wall head-first like a lizard; its talon-claws finding easy purchase in the brickwork.

All over the settlement, guards died gurgling and gasping as the mutant infiltrators crept over the wall and bloodily yet silently dispatched the men at the gates, before unbarring the entrances to let their cohorts through. Soon more guards died in the streets as the mutants spread out. Wooden shutters were quietly pried open with long claws and sharp blades, windows were levered up and muffled screams drifted out of the red-brick huts.

The room was dark, and didn't light up much more as the shutters swang back with a barely audible squeak of the hinges. The ghost of a silhouette was cast on the floor as a lop-sided humanoid shape loomed at the window against the moonless, cloudless, sky. There was a whispering hiss of wood sliding against wood as the sash window ascended, and the mutant crawled inside. It moved to the side of the bed and drew an ancient bayonet from the rawhide strap across its uneven shoulders. With a frenzied thrashing motion it plunged the blade again and again into the sheets.

"*Excuse me*, who on Earth are you!?"

The white, lumpen, monster recoiled with a yelp as a lantern flared in the corner of the room, revealing an empty bed, now with the sheets shredded to ribbons. Dr. Neighman sat, fully dressed, in a chair in the corner of the room. She put the lantern back on the small table next to her and stood up.

"What are you doing in my room?" she addressed the mutant again.

Gathering itself, the mutant sprang across the room at her; bayonet held high, ready to strike. Without flinching, or even changing expression, Dr. Neighman lashed out with the back of her hand, dashing the weapon from the mutant's grip, and grabbed its throat. Hoisting the struggling creature into the air by its neck, she walked forward to pin it against the rough, plain brick, wall.

"I shall repeat," she enunciated slowly and clearly, "who are you, and what are you doing here?"

The mutant gurgled and gasped as he gripped her forearm to support his own bodyweight.

"Ch- Chacktor, of the Mag-*gkth*... of the Magvor tribe." The mutant choked out. "We come to *kck*... to s-slay the normies! T-t-to please the crusader! The-*grk* doom of B-Bad Water! The leader of the... *crk* hill folk! We hear him on the radio, and we seek him so we may..."

"We?" Dr. Neighman cut off the mutant's ramblings.

As if in answer to her question, the sound of gunfire and screaming began in earnest outside.

"Oh, I see." The tall woman concluded. She fixed her gaze on the struggling, deformed thing in her grasp, and her neon-green eyes flared like welding sparks. The mutant screamed briefly as twin lasers bored into its forehead. The flesh scorched and charred for a few seconds, before the front of its skull burned to carbon and its brain boiled.

"Revolting creature." Dr. Neighman's lip curled with disgust as she cast the body aside, and grabbed a scrap of bedsheet on which to wipe her hand. Suddenly, a shriek of terror resounded through the boarding house, soon to be joined by more screams and the crashing of furniture being upturned in violent struggle, punctuated with the occasional gunshot. The door to Dr. Neighman's room vibrated as someone on the other side began thumping on it.

Dr. Neighman sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose.

"For God's sake." She jammed the back of the chair under the door-handle, then took her doctor's bag from under her bed. Holding the bag in one hand, she headed to the open window and hopped out, turning mid-air and grabbing the window sill with one hand on the way down to slow her descent. Her room had been on the second floor, so once she released her grip her fall was only a few feet. Her heels clicked on the wooden sidewalk as she headed for the nearest gate out of town.

Three mutants ran out of a building in front of her; a many-limbed monster draped in rags, a thing whose multi-lobed, bat-like ears had become so large and taken over its head to such an extent that its face looked like an exploded cauliflower, and a stocky creature, perhaps four feet tall, but almost as broad and muscled like a body-builder, wearing crudely hammered metal armour. The many-armed mutant whipped up two revolvers as soon as it saw her, but again, the doctor's eyes flashed, and a shower of sparks flew from the mutant's face as carbonised flesh and sizzling fat were blasted away from its skull by the extreme heat of the lasers. The thing fell to the ground, its head smouldering like an ember, and its limbs curling around itself like a dead spider.

The eyeless, bat-eared, creature's arm shot out, and a throwing knife flew through the air with deadly accuracy. In one fluid motion Dr. Neighman caught the blade in her free hand and threw it back. The bat mutant flung itself to the floor to avoid the projectile which embedded itself in the mortar of the wall behind him.

Meanwhile, the over-muscled dwarf in armour hefted a baseball bat; the end bristling with long nails and wrapped in barbed wire, and charged the tall red-head. Her eyes flashed again, a spot on the pallid dwarf's helmet glowed cherry red, but there must have been some sort of thick lining since the mutant had no noticeable reaction, and before the lasers could burn through he reached the doctor and swang his weapon at her. Dr. Neighman's arm snapped out and grabbed the bat by its haft below the spiked end. The dwarf mutant grunted with effort, and an

audible whine of servo-motors came from the doctor's arm as she was forced back a step. She dropped her doctor's bag and seized the bat with her other hand as well, but mutant re-doubled his efforts; in the gaps between his primitive armour pale-blue veins could be seen throbbing against his milky flesh, and tendons stood out like tent ropes.

The doctor was forced back another two steps by the over-muscled creature, but she continued to pour the beams of her eye-lasers into the mutant's helmet; the red spot turned bright orange, and wisps of smoke drifted out of the eye-slits. Finally the dwarf drew back with a yell, releasing his grip on the spiked bat and tearing off his searing-hot helmet to reveal a face bubbling with massive warts, and a hair-lip so pronounced that his mouth almost seemed to be split three ways. With barely a split-second of hesitation Dr. Neighman hefted the bat and made a double-handed overhead swing directly into her opponent's head. There was a loud, wet, crack, and the nails sank deeply into the bone of the mutant's skull, sticking fast. He collapsed to the wooden sidewalk, copious amounts of translucent blue blood pooling around him. It dribbled through the gaps in the boards and soaked into the dirt beneath.

The bat-eared mutant yanked its knife out of the wall with obvious effort, and paused to hiss at the doctor, then fled down the alleyway behind the building from which it and its cohorts had emerged. Dr. Neighman had no interest in giving chase, she picked up her bag and simply strode on towards the gate.

A man and woman sprinted past her, each clutching a bundle of possessions to their chests, half-dressed and terrified. The man was looking fearfully over his shoulder, gripping the woman's hand, pulling her along behind himself. They rounded a corner and the man was instantly felled by a hail of gunfire, spinning as he fell amid the little puffs of dirt from the shots that missed. He was dead by the time he hit the ground. The woman screamed and ducked back reflexively; miraculously, none of the shots had hit her, and she sagged against the wall.

Dr. Neighman pushed the woman aside, who sank to the ground, leaning back against the building behind her, with her knees to her chest, weeping as she stared at the man's body. The doctor peered carefully around the edge of the wall, glimpsing a cluster of heavily armed mutants, guarding the gate to prevent any of the townsfolk from escaping. One of them spotted her and she was obliged to jerk her head back as another scattering of lead kicked up dirt and sent chips of brick flying. She clucked her tongue in irritation.

Looking around, the doctor spotted the guard house. The building was two stories, with a squat observation 'tower' jutting another two stories on top of that. The door was heavy and reinforced with bands of metal, and a few mutant corpses were piled up in front of it, giving evidence to a failed attempt to break in, and the windows on the ground floor were narrow, horizontal slits. Every so often a shot would ring out, and a mutant in their line of sight would crumple to the ground. Dr. Neighman considered, then turned to the sobbing woman.

"Come with me if you want to live."

The woman gulped air, and looked from the doctor to the corpse of the man and back again. Stifling a sob, the townswoman staggered back to her feet, still hugging her bundle of household ephemera tightly, and nodded. The pair headed back down the street towards the headquarters of the town guards, keeping close to the buildings to make best use of the shadows.

A long arm, covered in white bristles like short lengths of fishing-line smashed out of a window to grab at them. Another burst from Dr. Neighman's eye-lasers scorched a line of the pearly-white flesh a blistered black-brown, and the gorilla-like limb withdrew with an ululating shriek of pain. It was lost in the screams and howls that were all around them now, along with gunshots, smashing glass and the general din of chaos and slaughter. Figures running through the streets and alleys were glimpsed in the darkness, the night too black and the shadows too deep to make out whether any individual was human or mutant.

Dr. Neighman grabbed a piece of white cloth from the woman's bundle; a shirt, as it turned out, and waved it over her head as she crossed the street towards the guardhouse. The thick, wooden, doorway was set back a little, creating an indentation in the front of the building, so that small, vertical, firing slits on either side could potentially give the inhabitants the opportunity to shoot anyone trying to break in. The doctor ran up to the building, casting all around herself for approaching mutants. She stepped over the sad, little, heap of bodies in front of the door, dragging the woman behind her, and hammered on the thick, heavy, boards, shaking flakes of rust from the metal re-inforcement.

"Fuck off, ladies." Came a voice from inside.

"I beg your pardon!? *How dare you!*" barked back the doctor. "You are supposed to protect the citizens of this town; we are citizens and we require protection! Now open up and *let us in!*"

"The fucking muties already tried that. They had one of their guys who looked more-or-less human try and get us to open up, then a bunch of his buddies tried to rush us. If they hadn't jumped the gun and charged in before we'd finished unlocking the door we'd be dead by now."

Dr. Neighman rolled her eyes and exhaled through her nose.

"So stand ready with your guns, and if we transpire to be a cunningly disguised hoard of mutants you can shoot us as we come in. For god's sake, this woman is with child!" She gesticulated at her companion, who looked confused, but kept her mouth shut.

"Janice!?" came a different voice from the guardhouse, "That true? You and Dave expecting? Where *is* Dave?"

"I'm afraid David is no longer with us," Dr. Neighman replied dispassionately, while Janice began to cry again, "and if you want Janice here to join him, then I suggest you continue to hold this asinine conversation through the *god. Damned. Door!!*" She punctuated each syllable of her



final point with another reverberating blow on the door, hard enough to shake loose a little shower of brick-dust from overhead.

There was a half-whispered conversation from within the guardhouse, then the first voice replied.

"Okay, wait a sec."

There was a rattling noise, then a loud clank. Dr. Neighman pushed on the door, which gave a little before coming to a hard stop.

"Hold your horses, lady! Still got the big chain to go. That's what got the mutants, too."

Another rattling of metal preceded the door being opened just enough to admit the two women. As they hurried into the building, the door was slammed behind them. An array of nervous-looking men stood in a third-of-a-circle with a mixture of firearms pointed directly at the two women, which they shakily lowered as it became apparent that the pair posed no threat.

The interior of the building had bare brick walls, with stone floor tiles and a ribcage of wooden beams across the ceiling to hold up the story above. The whole of the ground floor was one large room, with brick pillars here and there to provide extra support. One area had long tables with benches, and an open kitchen at the back of them. There were about a dozen guards in total, half were standing at the window slits, rifles at the ready, taking occasional pot-shots as targets presented themselves. The oil lanterns hanging from the ceiling beams were mostly unlit, with those which were active turned down very low so as not to spoil the shooters' night-sight, making the room dark and shadowy. A spiral staircase in the middle of the room led up to the next floor, and a huge hearth was set into the back wall, currently unlit, but with firewood in the grate.

An older man with a long beard and beer-gut dressed in fur hides gently took the hand of the crying woman. He led her to one of the benches at the back of the room next to the kitchen area, while a younger man with long, dark, hair down to his waist and denim overalls brought her a cup of some hot beverage or other. No-one bothered to stop Dr. Neighman when she climbed the staircase up to the second floor. This floor was also one large room with just a corner partitioned off for the lavatory. Half the room was taken up by beds arranged in rows, the other half was filled with lines of lockers for personal effects, and on this floor windows were larger, and filled with glass, albeit with bars on them.

Peering through the windows she could make out shadowy figures in the darkness patrolling around on top of the wall, every so often one of them would stop and raise a weapon to take a shot at some poor soul. A few of the buildings across the town seemed to have caught fire, and some still had muzzle-flashes coming from them. It seemed that the citizens of Bricktown were putting up quite a fight; the sturdy construction of their homes enabling them to hole up, and forcing the mutants to take the town through numerous, tiny, sieges.

The doctor climbed back down the staircase. Heels clicking on the stone tiles she walked up to the man in charge; a burly, shaven-headed, man wearing old military fatigues with a great fur cloak over the top, which brushed against the floor as he walked. His authority was indicated by a shield-shaped brass badge on his chest depicting two crossed rifles over a stylised sun.

"You there," The bald-headed man looked up as Dr. Neighman addressed him, "are you the guard captain?"

"No, I'm just the lieutenant in charge of the night-shift. Why, who are you?"

"My name is Dr. Neighman, concerned citizen."

"Citizen, huh? I've never seen you before, and I think I'd remember a... face like yours." his gaze flicked briefly to her ample cleavage.

"I'm new here. You *are* the man in charge, though?"

"Yeah, I'm in command, what do you want?"

"Are you aware that there are still a considerable number of townspeople holding out in their own homes? If you and your guards could link them all up together we..."

"You think we haven't thought of that? We don't have the ammo; we're down to our last few rounds each. Frankly, we'll be lucky if we can hold out 'till morning."

Dr. Neighman raised an eyebrow.

"You don't have an ammunition stockpile!?"

"Of course we do, but the armoury's locked," the lieutenant pointed towards a large trap-door in the corner of the room; it was solid steel and looked to be very securely installed, "and the captain *insists* on keeping the key on his person at all times."

"And the captain is...?" the doctor spread her hands in invitation of response.

"Missing. He doesn't live in the barracks, he's got his own house right next to the council hall. We sent a volunteer to try and find him a little while ago, but we haven't heard back from him yet."

Dr. Neighman took a deep breath, pinched the bridge of her nose, and exhaled in a long, slow, sigh.

"If you people's brains exploded it wouldn't mess up your hair. Right, fine, what if I went and found the captain's key, or even the captain in the unlikely eventuality that he's still alive? Do you think *then*, that you might actually be able to try and do the job for which you are paid and *defend the town*."

"You know what, lady; fine. If it were anyone else I'd be real reluctant to let 'em go out there alone, but you've persuaded me. Go ahead; knock yourself out." He waved at the guards on either side of the door. They took a good look through the firing slots, then unbarred, unlocked, and unchained the iron-banded door. They pulled it open just enough for the doctor to fit through, and the lieutenant pressed a bolt-action rifle into her hands and bundled her through.

"It's the house with the red door with the guard seal above it." he instructed her. "Next to the council hall, you can't miss it."

The door slammed shut behind her, and Dr. Neighman slid back the cover of the ammo compartment. Three bullets; only half the maximum load. They really must be short on ammo, she thought, closing the cover and working the bolt, chambering the first of the three rounds. The council hall had a bell-tower almost as tall as the chimneys of the kilns used for firing the bricks, and it was visible against the starry sky from anywhere in the town.

Small as the settlement may have been, in the dead of night the unfamiliar streets seemed like a labyrinth. Even with the council hall belfry for navigation the doctor found herself turning into dead-ends, and down streets which seemed to lead her away from her goal. Through blind good fortune she encountered mutants only in ones or twos, and a burst of laser-fire was enough to either kill them or send them scurrying away, and by now the only humans left in the streets were the dead bodies lying here and there.

Turning into an alleyway, Dr. Neighman passed a house with a door which had been smashed in. She heard screams coming from within and a crying baby. She paused in front of the wrecked door, and looked up and down the alley, chewing her lower lip pensively. The screaming suddenly rose to a crescendo and was silenced with horrible suddenness, but the crying of the baby continued. The doctor's brow furrowed and she ran inside, shouldering her rifle as she did so.

Bullet holes in the walls and a couple of pale, malformed, corpses crumpled on the floor told of a stiff resistance; the corpse of a man, pistol still in hand and throat slashed, lying in the hallway, told of how it had ended. An oil lantern had been knocked over and a pool of burning oil was merrily charring the floorboards, and an interior door further down the hall had also been kicked in. The doctor approached this second doorway and saw a bedroom, splattered in blood. Two mutants stood, hunched over the bed; the mutilated body of a woman was sprawled across the bed; entrails strewn about and chest cavity opened as though she'd been undergoing unimaginably crude surgery. A baby was lying on the pillow next to her head, still bawling.

Without waiting for the mutants to react to her presence the doctor put a bullet through the back of the lop-sided head of one of the creatures, her eye-lasers burning into the pallid flesh of the

other. The burned mutant squealed like a pig and span around; its eyeless face dominated by a gaping, fanged mouth and two quivering slits of nostrils running up to the monster's forehead. The huge, fatty, cysts all over its body had prevented her from burning through to anything vital. She switched her aim to the mutant's head, but it leaped across the room at her before she could re-focus, twin knives grasped in its hands. The doctor ducked to the side and caught the mutant across the side of the head with the butt of her gun, knocking it out of the air. While it lay stunned on the ground she brought her boot down hard on the thing's neck. There was a snap, and the mutant spasmed, then lay still.

As a doctor, Hermione had seen her share of blood and guts, but even so she found the awful tableaux in front of her distasteful, and her face was contorted with revulsion as she picked her way across the bloody floorboards to pick up the crying infant.

Now she faced a dilemma; should she take the child back to the guard headquarters and have to start her journey to the captain's house all over again, or should she try and complete her current task with a baby in her arms? Casting about the room, she found a large basket with a handle, containing some blankets and a small pillow. Evidently this was what the deceased couple had used to carry their child. Dr. Neighman slung the rifle over her shoulder by its strap and carefully laid the still-screaming baby in the basket, taking care to tuck it in well against the sharp chill of the desert night air. A tiny, blue, woollen, cap was on the dresser, and she gently pulled it onto the infant's head before heading back out into the street, past the burning oil puddle, which was now a blaze which promised to consume the entire house in due course. She turned towards the bell tower and headed down the alleyway.

At last a series of twists and turns led her to the small square which lay at the heart of the town. A bonfire had been created in the middle of the open ground, and all round it a ring of wooden stakes had been erected, each with several human heads impaled on them, and the decapitated carcasses were being thrown onto the fire by the assembled mutants, filling the air with the stench of roasting flesh. The double doors of the council hall were missing, and the windows; much larger than those of most of the other buildings, had been smashed and more human corpses had been strung up across the front of the hall.

By the light of the funeral pyre Dr. Neighman could make out that one of the other buildings around the square did indeed have a red door with a large, brass seal over it, bearing the same crossed-rifles-on-a-stylised-sun as the lieutenant's badge. The door was hanging off its hinges, but there looked to be some sort of improvised barricade of furniture further inside the hallway. The windows, although broken, had also been hastily blocked up from within, and there were several mutant corpses lying in the smashed doorway. Nevertheless, there were at least a dozen mutants milling around in the square, and Dr. Neighman was very glad that the infant had apparently cried itself to sleep.

The doctor realised that what she needed was a distraction. A part of her idly considered simply giving the baby a good poke and running around the back of the buildings while the mutants came to investigate the shrill bawling. She immediately dismissed the notion as soon as it

occurred to her; she hadn't abandoned *that* much of her humanity, instead she turned to the buildings around her. The town market was right next to the square, and the row of small warehouses which separated the two areas had been broken open by the marauding mutants. The whole market was littered with refuse; anything edible had been either eaten or despoiled, household goods had been smashed and strewn all around. Apparently one warehouse had been full of linens, and bolts of fabric were lying about the place, many partially unspooled and reames of cloth were draped everywhere, or trampled into the dirt. Lurking in the shadows she scanned the wreckage for anything useful. A pyramid stack of barrels caught her eye, with words stamped on the sides just visible in the light of the bonfire filtering through from the town square; lamp oil!

A handful of mutants were still shuffling around the market area, rummaging through the debris for anything of value which hadn't been destroyed, but there were far fewer than in the town square. Gently setting down the carrying basket, Dr. Neighman crept forward, hunched low. The stalls were simple constructions; a broad table with a cloth shade overhead to keep the desert sun off the traders and shoppers. Most had been upended and smashed, but even lying on their sides they provided ample cover for her to make her way to the first mutant; a rat-like thing sitting on the ground, pulling half-mashed root vegetables out of the dirt into which they had been trodden.

Carefully, she advanced as the long-snouted mutant chewed on a filthy tuber. Standing directly behind it she struck hard with the butt of her gun at the base of its skull, drawing a snapping sound like a handful of twigs breaking, which was lost in the ambient noise of bedlam still coming from the rest of the town. The mutant slumped forward into its own lap. It had a pistol at its side, but after a quick inspection the doctor decided that the cobbled-together lump of flimsy metal looked more likely to explode in her hand than successfully put a round into the target. She did, however, find a long butcher's knife tucked into its belt, which she took with her as she quickly moved on.

Two mutants quietly fell, gurgling with their throats slashed. That left only two more; one was a particularly bulky specimen on all fours, grubbing around in a pile of debris while the other squatted nearby, defecating noisily. Dr. Neighman recognised the distinctive profile of the squatter; it was the blind, bat-eared, mutant which had run from her earlier. Dr. Neighman crept nearer to the pair. Just a few feet from the kneeling mutant a high-pitched mewling noise came from the entryway between the square and the marketplace; tucked away in the shadow of a building where she had left it, the baby was beginning to wake up again.

The bat mutant's head whipped around in the direction of the sound, facing the crouching figure of the doctor as it did so. The eyeless creature toppled over backwards, still freely and loudly voiding its bowels, it pointed directly at the doctor as it did so, screeching at its companion. The larger mutant rose to its feet, all four of them. In the darkness, the doctor hadn't been able to get a good look at the thing, but now she saw the hulking beast had a centauric body-plan with four elephantine pillars of legs, a broad torso with an overdeveloped musculature, a heavy layer of fat over the top, and thick, leathery skin. It gracelessly lumbered around to face the doctor, its

club-fingered hands grasped the haft of a spear. It was draped in thick, quilted, cloth like the barding on a mediaeval warhorse, with an ancient ballistic vest on the torso. Its face was completely covered by a hood with eye-holes crudely cut in the front, and curving horns which seemed to be part of the mutant's head, sprouting from its temples and angled forward like those of a great bull.

The doctor's eyes flared, but the padded material covering the mutant evidently had a high flash-point as nothing happened beyond twin wisps of smoke drifting away from a spot on the creature's flanks. It lowered its spear directly at her and charged. She lunged to the side tucking into a combat roll and springing back to her feet. As the beast scrabbled around to face her she shouldered her rifle again. The mutant thundered towards her. A fraction of a second before impact she squeezed the trigger, planting a round through the monster's forehead, and sending a fountain of brains out of the back of its skull. The momentum carried the corpse forward, bowling Dr. Neighman head over heels, missing her so narrowly that the edge of the spear blade sliced a tear in the thigh of her cat-suit.

Picking herself back up, she realised that she'd put her hand directly in a pile of mutant faeces. Grimacing with disgust she wiped her soiled hand as best she could on the quilted material of the centaur mutant, only to realise that the fabric itself was already indescribably filthy. She looked up to see the bat-mutant fleeing around the corner towards the town square, screaming at the top of its lungs; already a couple of lumpen figures, silhouetted in the light of the bonfire, were peering through the entrance. A shot rang out, raising a small cloud of splinters from the up-ended wooden bench next to her, then another, sending a bullet whipping past her in the darkness.

Still keeping low, the doctor picked up her rifle and sprinted over towards the amassing hoard of mutants in the entryway, flashing lasers in an effort to keep their heads down. She reached the place where she'd put the baby down, skidding to a stop just long enough to grab the basket by its handle, then taking off again in the opposite direction. As she picked up speed, she felt a hammer-blow impact on her shoulder-blade as one of the mutants landed a shot by blind luck. The low-powered round failed to cause much more than superficial damage, but it did make her stumble, causing her to drop the basket. It tipped over and the baby, screeching like a banshee, rolled out in a tangle of blankets.

*"Is there no end to the inconveniences you're going to cause me, you stupid child!?"* She barked as she scooped up the cloth-wrapped bundle. She awkwardly juggled the rifle and crying baby around in her arms as she ran, finally managing to get the gun slung over her undamaged shoulder by its strap.

The streets were more-or-less deserted by now; most houses were either barricaded or had obviously been ransacked. Here and there burning houses illuminated the aftermath of slaughter and chaos, but only dead bodies bore mute witness to her desperate sprint. She didn't risk a look backwards, but she could hear the clamouring of the mutant hoard on her heels, and every so often a pot-shot would fling another round past her.

Using her limited knowledge of the layout of the town she tried to circle around back to the square, hoping that most or all of the mutants which had previously blocked her progress were now behind her. Not the distraction she'd had in mind, but if it worked, it worked, and she was fairly sure that she was gradually out-pacing the mob. She turned down a long alleyway which arched in a curve, but as she rounded the bend she saw to her horror that a stout, brick, wall terminated the alley in a dead-end. Without the baby cradled in her arms it would have been a trivial matter to pull herself over; even the basket would have helped, but as it stood she'd have to rely on a riskier manoeuvre.

She'd built her body from scratch, and knew it was capable of some extraordinary feats of acrobatics... *theoretically*; she hadn't exactly had much chance to practise. Picking up even greater speed she ran up the wall to her left, kicked off and leaped across the alleyway, launched herself from the opposite wall and flew over the dead-end with a summersault; screaming infant clutched tightly to her chest. She landed on the other side of the wall, catching her foot on one of the sacks of garbage which someone had piled up at the foot of the wall. It tripped her and obliged her to twist as she fell to avoid crushing her precious cargo, instead she landed painfully on the rifle slung across her back, her gigantic breasts cushioning the baby. She climbed back to her feet, pausing for a moment to check on the child's well-being before deciding that the relentless, piercing, scream probably indicated that it was fine.

Minutes later Dr. Neighman arrived back at the town square, and just as she'd hoped, there were only a couple of mutants left hanging around, and a blast of her lasers downed one and sent the other running for its life. She slowed to a jog as she approached the broken red door to the captain's house.

"HELLO, IS ANYONE STILL ALIVE IN THERE?" She called, stepping over the mutant corpses and into the hallway. A barricade of what had once been rather nice furniture, at least by the standards of the tiny nowhere town, was a few feet further down from the front door.

"Okay, that's close enough." a voice came from somewhere behind the barricade. Dr. Neighman noticed the twin barrels of a shotgun poking through a small gap between the upended table which formed the core of the barricade and one of the chairs piled on top of it. "Who are you and what do you want?"

"I'm a volunteer from the guardhouse. The lieutenant sent me to collect your keys for the armoury."

"What's his name?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"If the lieutenant sent you then you must know his name, right?"

"What!? No, I never asked his name!"

"Well, I tell you what; you just turn right around and come back once you can prove you're with my guards. Bring me the name of the lieutenant and *then* I might consider trusting you with the keys."

The doctor's face ran through an array of expressions, from incredulity to outrage to stunned shock, before finally settling on anger.

"I'm sorry; you want me to run back and forth through a town actively in the process of being *over-run by mutants* to ask some petty functionary his *god-damned name* before you'll hand over a key that can't possibly be of any use to you here!?" her voice began to take on an hysterical edge as she built up momentum. "Were you dropped as a baby, or were you hurled with great force!?! I don't give a quarter-teaspoon of monkey jism what your underling's stupid name is!! I don't care what *your* name is, either; just hand over your armoury keys and I'll get them back to the glue-munching retards you inbred backwater cretins call 'guards', and they can clear out the mutants!! *Why does everyone in this god-forsaken, irrelevant, genetic sump of a town seem to have no greater cause in life than to throw pointless obstacles in front of me!?! Obviously expecting any kind of help is just pie-in-the-sky wishful thinking, BUT WHY CAN'T YOU SHAMELESS OXYGEN THIEVES JUST GET OUT OF MY WAY AT THE VERY LEAST!?!?! AND WHY WON'T THIS DAMNED CHILD JUST. SHUT. UP!!!!!!*"

"All right lady, jeez. Calm down. What is it? Time of the month or something?"

Dr. Neighman blinked. She carefully placed the crying baby on the floorboards.

"I'm going." She turned on her heel and clicked down the hallway to the smashed door.

"What?"

"I'm going. Fuck this town. Fuck that baby, fuck the guards, fuck the townspeople, and fuck you in particular. I won't have any problem breaking the mutant blockade on my own. I'm heading out into the desert, and I'll sit up on a sand dune and watch this place burn to the ground and laugh and laugh and laugh."

"Wait, wait, wait."

"No, fuck off."

Just as she stepped out onto the wooden sidewalk she heard a metallic jingling sound. She turned her head and saw that a set of keys on a ring had been pushed through the barricade and now lay next to the baby.



"Look, I guess it really doesn't matter much now, anyway. Might as well give the keys to some random stranger. Just... just tell me you'll help the guys at the guardhouse, please?"

Dr. Neighman chewed her lower lip in contemplation for a second or two. She noticed that a few mutants had turned up at the entryway to the square again. She shouldered her rifle and fired her final shot, which made them duck. With a resigned sigh she stalked back up to the barricade, picked up the keys and gathered the baby, which was still screaming.

"Oh, very well. *I'm too empathic for my own good, that's my problem.*" She left the now empty rifle propped up against the wall and strode out.

She walked towards the market-place, where the mutants were gathering again, a couple of them pointed at her and began gibbering excitedly in their guttural language. A couple of shots rang out, but she ignored them. Her eyes flashed and the barrels of lamp-oil, perforated by her earlier shot and now leaking profusely, ignited. A fraction of a second elapsed as the fire burned back to the source of its fuel, then the barrels erupted in a blast of wooden splinters and a wave of flaming oil.

Mutants fled squealing, while others lay dead or dying, shards of wood riddling their fish-white flesh. Some were on fire, and ran in directionless panic, or rolled in the dirt trying to extinguish the flames. The wooden stalls, barrels and crates, the reams of cloth, and much of the other flammable debris were now burning, adding to the chaos, and pools of flaming oil lay all around. Taking advantage of the distraction, Dr. Neighman once again broke into a dead sprint and ran right through the middle of the sprawling mob. Flashes of laser-fire punished any who tried to stop her, and she fled down a side-street. Finding her way back to the guard headquarters was considerably easier than finding her way to the square, since all she had to do was re-trace her steps, and a few minutes later she was standing outside the squat box of a building.

The door opened as she stepped over the body-pile and she stalked through the opening. She thrust the still-screaming infant into the arms of the first person within reach; the long-haired young man who had tended to the woman earlier.

"Here, I found this." she announced perfunctorily, before looking around for the lieutenant. He came sweeping down the spiral staircase, his fur cloak billowing behind him.

"Where's the captain?" he asked, "Did you find him?"

"Still holed up in his home, as far as I'm aware. He passed me his keys and that was that."

"He didn't want to come back with you?"

"No idea, I didn't ask. I assume he'd have said so if he did, though. Anyway, here you go." She tossed the keys to him, and he caught them one-handed. The lieutenant hurried over to the corner of the room and knelt beside the steel trapdoor. He turned the key with an audible clank,

and the burly man grunted with effort as he heaved open the solid slab of metal. It slammed into the stone floor as he released it and descended into the darkness below. Dr. Neighman clicked over to the opening, hands clasped behind her back, and peered down. As the lieutenant lit the oil lamps, she could make out a ladder leading down into a room whose walls seemed to be made of large blocks of stone rather than brick, and which was filled with rows of racks full of rifles. There were large, armoured-looking, lockers of ammunition all along the walls, which the lieutenant was opening up, gathering numerous boxes under one arm.

"Uh, 'scuse me, ma'am." A pudgy, middle-aged man in a blue jump-suit with a puffy jacket over the top tapped her on the shoulder. "I uh, I need to get to the hatch."

Dr. Neighman stood to the side and the pudgy man knelt down as the lieutenant climbed halfway up the ladder and handed the boxes of ammunition to his subordinate. While the lieutenant returned to gather more ammo, the man in the jumpsuit moved away to distribute the boxes amongst the rest of the guards. The doctor stepped back to the hatch and called down to the lieutenant.

"I don't suppose you could pass me another rifle?"

The shaven-headed man paused momentarily in his activity.

"What happened to the one I gave you?"

««««(((⊙)))»»»»

The purge of the town was a bloody affair; the mutants fought almost to the last man, but they were no match for the superior weaponry of the guards, especially once they started passing out weapons and ammunition to the townsfolk. As the guards swept the town they searched every house for survivors, any who were still in a condition to fight were handed a gun and a box of ammo, and the mutants were soon heavily outnumbered. Once the sun started to come up the surviving mutants went to ground wherever they could, and the fight became a hunt as the townspeople searched every attic, basement, closet, and cubby-hole to winkle the monsters out of their hiding places.

The sun was high in the sky by the time the methodical scouring of the settlement was complete, then the job of clearing away could begin. The bodies had to be disposed of; a mass pyre for the mutants, and individual burial for the many townsfolk who had been slaughtered. Often whole families were found murdered in their own homes, sometimes children would be found alive, hidden away in cupboards, trunks or under beds mere yards away from where their parents had been butchered like animals. All told, not far off five hundred citizens; almost a quarter of the town's population, had perished, mostly in the initial massacre, and half as many again mutants. Added to this, the time it would take to clear up the debris and repair the damage meant that it would be days before the town could even begin to properly mourn the dead.

While the rest of the town was busy carting bodies to their respective gathering points and digging the endless new graves which were required, Dr. Neighman had managed to talk the local blacksmith into letting her use his workshop, since he'd be closed for the day anyway. She was stripped to the waist, the upper half of her catsuit tied around her hips, and had detached her left arm, which lay on the table nearby. The shoulder-blade which had absorbed the impact of the bullet had a slight dent in it, and was currently on the anvil, being hammered back into shape by the doctor.

She picked up the shoulder-blade with tongs and placed it back in the fire. She pumped the bellows until roaring fire heated the metal to a dull red; about as much as could be managed given the advanced alloy from which the piece was made. Moving it back to the anvil she resumed trying to beat it back into shape.

"Helloooh you're naked!" Dr. Neighman turned to see the woman she had saved standing in the door, trying to look anywhere except at the doctor's huge, naked, breasts.

"Hmm? Oh, well, nevermind. They're not real, if that helps at all."

"I, um, I suppose they couldn't be, could they?" she looked down at her feet and kicked at some small piece of detritus, "If it's not too personal a question, what *is* real? On you, I mean."

"Parts of my brain." The doctor put down the hammer, and used the tongs to adjust the position of the shoulder-blade on the anvil, then picked up the hammer again.

"Really, is that all?"

"It's more than I'd like." A few more hammer-blows finally finished the work, and the doctor switched back to the tongs, picking up the piece of metal and submerging it in the water-trough with a hiss of steam. "Flesh rots," she elaborated.

"Oh."

Dr. Neighman withdrew the shoulder-blade and carried it over to the work-bench where the rest of her arm lay. She glanced over her shoulder at the woman.

"Was there anything specific you wanted?"

"I, uh, just wanted to, um, introduce myself. We didn't exactly get to talk much last night."

The doctor set about re-attaching the shoulder-blade to the rest of her limb assembly.

"I suppose not. Sorry about your... about David." The doctor realised she didn't know exactly what the woman... Janice, was it? What Janice's relationship had been to the man.

Janice sniffled and wiped at the corners of her eyes.

"My husband, yes. Thank-you. I never caught *your* name?"

Dr. Neighman turned to the mirror she'd set up and began to re-attach her left arm. She'd designed her arms so that they could be removed and reconnected with one hand.

"Doctor Hemione Neighman. You're Janice, correct?"

"Janice Wilson, yes."

"Pleased to meet you, Janice. Sorry it couldn't have been under better circumstances. Could you pass me that, please?" The doctor pointed at one of the tools hanging on the wall next to Janice, who took it down and crossed the room to hand it to Hermione.

"Me too."

"Out of curiosity, What happened to the infant I retrieved?" The doctor attached one of the connectors and handed the tool back to the townswoman, who returned it to the hook she'd taken it from.

"Little tommy? Oh, he's lucky in a way; his mother's sister and her husband have said they'll take him in. He'll be well looked after, and he's much too young to actually remember... w-what happened." again, she sniffled.

The doctor began re-connecting the electrical systems in her limb, causing it to twitch and spasm.

"Well, that's good to know, at least."

"So, I heard you were looking to leave town soon?"

"That's correct. I'm leaving on the next... *ah!*" minor feedback from her arm caused the doctor to gasp. "...the next merchant caravan willing to take a passenger."

"Oh."

"You sound disappointed?" The doctor's arm began a series of callisthenics as it calibrated itself.

"I don't know, I suppose I was hoping you might hang around for a little while."

"Don't worry; I'm sure you'll be fine. If there's anything good about tiny, nowhere, towns such as this one (no offence), it's that there are support networks to spare. Grief usually kicks in anywhere from one to three days after the incident and lasts for a year or longer, but it does get better eventually. Trust me, I'm a doctor."

"Uh, Thank-you?"

The doctor's arm finished calibrating, and she began to secure the flaps of synth-skin back into position. After a few moments of silence Janice spoke again.

"So, where are you going, anyway?"

"The Tech Mine. The... stress-test of my body last night brought certain areas for possible improvement to my attention. I intend to offer medical services in trade for any extra cybernetics I might want." She finished re-sealing the artificial skin, and turned to look over her shoulder at the bullet-hole in the mirror. She'd used a hot iron to try and re-shape the skin, and had managed to cover the hole, albeit leaving a discoloured patch. She sighed at the imperfection already marring her new, perfect, body, and pulled the top of her catsuit up, sliding her arms into the arm-holes and zipping up the front just enough for decency's sake.

Janice smoothed out her skirt.

"I guess self-improvement is a worthy goal."

««««(((⊙)))»»»»

Samelek had no eyes, but he could feel the hated sun on his milky skin. He crawled through the uniform rows of plants, screaming in his silent voice, and seeing with his ears all around himself. He had been the last of the Kin to escape from the normie town, and he could see that there was no-one within range of his scream-echoes. The normies had been busy gathering up the dead and tending to the wounded when he had slunk over the wall and fled into their farm fields, and presumably they'd be occupied with that task for a while yet; they had so many to bury. That, at least, was a comforting thought to Samelek as he crept forward.

He swivelled his enormous ears to focus his hearing-sight to the front and silently screamed again. The picture in his head that the echoes made told him that he was heading in the right direction; the pit was just ahead. He didn't know exactly how many of the kin had escaped, but he knew that the attack had been a disaster. That machine-thing had been something to do with it, somehow, he was certain of that; the others had said that to them it looked like a woman, but the echoes had told him that it was full of metal parts. The echoes were much harder to deceive than eyes, and Samelek was glad that the flesh-spirits had not seen fit to give him any.

The sides of the pit were slippery with clay, and the mutant slid down to the bottom. He stood up and ran to the entrance back to the underworld. As he climbed back down into the darkness he

knew that the Kin Fathers would want a scapegoat for the loss of so many of their children, and it just might end up being one of the raid survivors if another target didn't present itself. The machine-woman would make an excellent dumping-ground for the Fathers' ire. Slinking down the ancient tunnel, Samelek briefly wondered if she had any idea what would be coming to her once the Kin Fathers declared her a kin-foe, then he decided he didn't care.