



**THE DEVIL'S  
BACKBONE**

**EMPYREAN  
BOOK I**

**L. KENT GASKILL**



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Empyrean Book I: The Devil's Backbone, a novel by L. Kent Gaskill

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*This book is dedicated to my fiancée, Lisa.  
Thanks for keeping me focused on the road ahead.*



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## PROLOGUE

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“My god Ms. Bishop, this plan of yours is dangerous, foolish and utterly insane! Do you know what they do with citizens in the Outlands? Skin them alive! They’re animals, Ms. Bishop, animals!”

The travel agent had been irritatingly pompous for the last ten minutes and was steadily working his way towards outlandishly irrational. His eyes and mouth were stretched wide like a caricature of a donut and she wanted to stuff a cruller right down his throat. But she hadn’t been released from two years at Lockeford Institution to blow her freedom on such a trivial little man. That he was right seemed irrelevant.

She looked at the e-paper with the brochure photo on it and sighed. It depicted a gorgeous horizon full of mountains sprawled against an ocean of sunset. It was beautiful, but also very dangerous. It was also unfortunate that this was the place her heart was telling her to go.

Trying to get a state approved agent from the Office of Expeditions and Wayfaring to approve a passport for a trip he considered suicidal was proving to be vexingly difficult. It seemed that getting outside the city limits these days required nothing less than a court approval, and she was hoping to go quite a bit further than that. Her plan was to venture to the border of, or maybe even into, Zone 7, an area firmly within what the Outlanders referred to as The Badlands. She personally considered the name more of a lark than anything truly threatening, although she had to admit, tensions with these Outlanders had been making things difficult of late. The situation had moved well beyond just a passing irritation. Their exploits had resulted in daily terrorist threats requiring entire sections of the city to be put on lockdown. Citizens were now required to submit to an ID scan for the most mundane of things, like picking up a new dress from the Sky Mall, or a carton of B-milk from the corner store. Aerial drone spot-checks could happen at any moment, and if a citizen intended to travel more than seven or eight blocks they would inevitably encounter a mobile checkpoint. But no one questioned the necessity of these requirements or blamed the government for implementing them; everyone knew who was to blame.

Luckily Sadie held a Premium Plus Citizen's account and was able to move efficiently enough along the floating upper highways that wove between the giant skyscrapers of the congested central core. But the challenges of the city didn't stop there. New York was an onion; peeling back the layers revealed a class system that progressively worsened the further out you went. If Sadie left Manhattan and crossed into one of the outlying areas via road, bridge, or subway, she would be treated like anyone else, and that meant dealing with checkpoints at every major artery entering Jersey City, Union City, the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island, where the government obligated workers, the modern day villein, lived. From there on out the checkpoints made movement around the New York metropolitan area a veritable nightmare. If she had any desire to enter the outskirts of the city, an abysmal slum that spread out many miles in all directions, she would be contending with entire districts overrun with gangs.

Protecting the outer slums was the toughest layer of the New York onion—a giant wall under watch day and night by the city's private military (of course some said that the slums weren't protected by the military at all, that they were in fact used by the military as a buffer zone to isolate Outlander attacks before they penetrated deeper into the wealthier central core). Beyond the walls were the Doldrums, the city's ever-expanding refuse pile. And finally, beyond this wasteland came the Outlands, where insurgents terrorized anyone associated with the UCSA, the United City-States of America. It was into this madness that she wished to travel.

She had expected some resistance to her request—Premium Plus Citizens rarely left the Manhattan core, let alone the city proper—but she could see that from the agent's point of view she may as well have been asking for a ticket to the moon.

“Why is this so difficult? There must be a way.” Her tone was cutting as she tried to push the man into a corner with sheer bravado.

“I'm very sorry Ms. Bishop, only members of our military dare to go there, and they travel in heavily armed garrisons. How shall I put this, the Outlands are like the Wild West. There's no government-sanctioned police to keep these rustic riffraff in line. Apparently the Outland people even have some sort of barbaric, roving militia that enforces the *law*, whatever that is, by cutting off appendages. And then you're saying you want to go flitting about, maybe southwest into The Badlands, which the ORA controls almost implicitly, and maybe traipse around and soak up a little of that desert sun in the arid regions of Zones 5 through 7. Ridiculous.”

According to the old state name conventions he was referring to New Mexico and Nevada. Zone 7, specifically, was Arizona. The reason he was sputtering so vehemently, nearly spitting on his desk, was because the militias who were tied to the anti-governmental terrorist cell, the ORA, or Outlander Revolutionary Army, were based there.

“So what, I'm a goddamned Premium Plus Citizen, and a ranking member of EMOS Corporation, I do important work,” she said, jabbing her finger at the brochure, “and that's where I want to go.”

Donut-eyes held his horror for a full ten seconds before blowing out his defeat in a big *harrumph*.

“Used to work, Ms. Bishop, *used* to. Now look, I cannot, as a professional you see, be a part of this plan to end your life by what I can only call vacationer’s negligence. Besides, your Citizen insurance policy would not cover it. I see right here in your file that you were in therapy for quite some time. You’ve been *flagged*; you’re seen as a *risk*, and thusly unfit for travel. I doubt I could get you past the Unity Walls.”

“But I’m a Citizen, you don’t have the right to stop me from traveling, and what’s this about a risk?”

The agent looked at his watch and shook his head. “I said you’ve been *flagged*, and the new legislation, Bill H.R. 10-5508, gives all city-state agents of the Office of Expeditions and Wayfaring the power to deny any travel requests deemed outside their clients purview, and since it’s lunchtime and I’m getting nippy, I must ask you to leave.”

Seated impotently in her lilac chair, Sadie felt more than a little deflated by the bureaucratic nonsense she was facing, but instead of giving up, she summoned her reserves and switched tactics.

“If you won’t help me, I’ll just have to contact my lawyer. Maybe you know him, his name is Baron Bufty, and I’m told he works for a very prominent law firm.”

The atmosphere in the agent’s office practically disappeared into a vacuum, and for a moment, Sadie wondered if the waif-like agent might choke to death. His cheeks bulged, followed by a coughing fit. She picked her purse off the floor, and just as she began to rise from her chair, the agent waved his hands to stop her.

“Look, Ms. Bishop, you must try to understand the situation from my perspective. To get you to where you’re asking is no easy task. Phoenix airport is a no fly zone, total state of emergency, LV is a ghost town, and Albuquerque no longer takes flights because of its unfortunate proximity to all that Badlands hoo-ha, and—”

“How is proximity an issue? They have a security detail, don’t they?”

“Yes, but a security detail doesn’t stop the ORA from shooting down the planes. The only other options are Dallas or Austin, but it

would be easiest to charter secondary transit from L.A.”

“Perfect, that’s it then, I’ll charter a—”

“Yes, but there’s just one problem.”

“And what’s that?”

“There is no secondary transit . . . at least not any *legal* transit.”

Sadie stared at the agent until he let out a blustery sigh, which told her he didn’t much like what he was about to say.

“There is a less . . . *conventional* way to do this.” He leaned closer, lowering his voice to a whisper. “There’s a place beyond the Downs, across the Hudson, decent people don’t go there, but for a small fee I could perhaps give you the address.”

He opened his desk drawer and fingered through a pile of papers before locating a business card. As if worried it might sully his reputation by contact alone, he passed it to her, touching it only by the tips of his fingers.

Sadie couldn’t help but shake her head. “Madness. When did this country stop being a country, anyways?”

The agent chuckled. “Well Ms. Bishop, as memory serves, I believe that particular decision was ratified on a positively balmy May afternoon, in the year of our lord, two thousand and fifty-two.”

# CHAPTER I

---

## A TINGLE ALONG THE BACKBONE



Sadie Bishop walked the dusty backbone of the Devil's Highway with the creeping certainty that she was lost but not alone. Behind her was a glimmer of light from one of the many dilapidated mausoleums that clung at the highway's edges. Housed within were the derelict worshippers of a lost religion, and beyond this outpost was their church, Las Vegas. Once painted in Technicolor by booze soaked money and adrenaline, its bloated opulence was now a faded stain on the desert wash.

The sinner's mecca was quiet tonight—every night. It was no longer a place where glamour and greed held sway over the collective memory, but a skeletal sprawl of burnt-out cathedrals, forsaken by even the most devout of followers. The gambling dens were empty. The show houses had fallen silent. The fabled strip had begun its

descent back into the sands of conception.

To the rhythmic padding of her shoes against asphalt, Vegas receded still further beyond the curve of the earth. What lay in wait beyond was the desert. And the highway. Always the highway, that endless strip of tar and asphalt cutting a dark slash along the northern edge of The Badlands.

The destinations along that road had once sparkled like uncovered pearls in the minds of the dreaming traveller, and the road itself had been home to nomadic caravans of motorists, the jet set of the road. But destinations were a luxury now, and the dreamers all but extinct. Sadie walked that broken yellow line as it snaked along the Devil's Backbone with a different kind of dream, one born of a much darker compulsion.

The road offered her no companionship, only the edgy discomfort of her own soul, which caused her to stab at the surrounding darkness with her eyes. The uneasy canvas of her imagination made the movements of the night creatures, as they brushed against the dry branches of creosote, sound divergent and somehow out of tune with the world. What was worse, she couldn't remember how long the wild pack of dogs had been following her—or if they were really there at all. Perhaps they were just some dubious trick played on her by her own treacherous mind, that same bit of treachery that had driven her to this blasted stretch of highway in the first place. More and more, she began to suspect, that she was no longer the sole occupant of her body, and that something devious and dim had taken root deep inside the tangles of her mind.

This was not her place, this world beyond the realm of civilization. The Outlands, she now understood, had never been in her heart at all. It was a place dreamt of only by her Shadow.



**H**er awareness of that treacherous presence had been roused shortly after her inexplicable compulsion to leave Manhattan. Before that

it'd been but an inkling, little sensations worming their way into her mind like the seductive notes of an unwanted song: the sweet smell of a desert bloom; the touch of a cactus needle prickling against her palm; sometimes the sun on her skin warming her with an unusually dry heat. And then she had started seeing things, half glimpsed visions of a world unknown. When it grew hot, and the ground baked the soles of her feet, the air rippling above the pavement formed an ethereal window onto a mysterious world. Through the atmospheric waves she would catch glimpses of a desert landscape, cracked and foreboding, punctuated by giant fissures that cleaved the land. What unfathomable wonders haunted those interior worlds, the visions never revealed, they only tantalized her with promises whispered from their depths. Sometimes from the corner of her eye she would see a statuesque woman, her skin bronzed by the desert sun, standing resolutely atop a high precipice, her golden hair and long coat billowing wildly in the dusty breeze. Turning to that silent figure would inevitably cause her to flicker and disappear, as if the sun had refracted strangely within her eye. Finally, at the Lockeford Psychiatric Hospital, she had started hearing the voices.

As great as Sadie's disdain for the institution, she had found some solace from the dreary interiors and the clubhouse nuts in its colorful gardens. The property's acreage and Edwardian style mansion were inhabited by the owner, a prominent statesman, and his wife, who was a great lover of the Italian villa. The well-travelled debutante had commissioned a small army of renowned landscapers to elevate the grounds to a previously unmatched level of beauty. Three gardens had been sculpted and cultivated from the land, one for each of her favorite countries of travel. Those gardens had nurtured her rise into the social aristocracy just as she had nurtured their growth. Her husband's wealthy friends cherished their beauty, and in turn, they cherished their caretaker. The woman and the gardens, the surrogate for the child she had failed to conceive, were consummately entwined. But this bond between the debutante and her marvelous sanctuary was shattered when her husband suffered a ruinous financial misfortune. The state had taken over, turning the mansion into a

military academy, and the gardens, detached from their matron, had suffered. When the property was eventually sold to Doctor Abraham Lockeford, the gardens and nursery had been restored to their previous glory for the therapeutic value of those under his care.

Sadie's favorite place of escape had been the Italian garden, with its sweeping terraces and stone paths covered by trellises lush with wisteria. These vibrant corridors had made her walks feel secret and safe, especially after long sessions of therapy where her thoughts and dreams were probed and dissected down to the smallest of details. It was on one of these walks that she had first heard the whispers: strange, unearthly words that came to her on the wings of insects, as they hummed about the gardens of the asylum. She never understood them, but somehow they connected with her on a deeper level, anchoring themselves like fishing hooks into her brain, so that at night, she could feel them tugging at her, as if some hypnotic suggestion had been implanted therein.

These experiences had become her obsession—and her secret.

Immediately after her release from the institution she had done the unthinkable, and bought herself an illegal one-way ticket. The entire week that had followed her departure was a blur. First there had been the private vehicles driven by a number of increasingly shady characters between several unofficial smuggling offices; after that, a leapfrog series of flights through a network of off-the-grid airfields; and finally, busses, one after the other, right to the edge of The Badlands. How she had navigated it all, she couldn't say, nor could she remember if she'd told anyone where she was going. It was as if she had entered a trance. Her half-remembered doings made her disturbingly aware of her inability to remember deciding to do them in the first place. The only thing of consistency throughout her journey was the shadow-compulsion driving her endlessly forward.

Her body still felt numb, fuzzy, and not entirely under her control. How long had she been walking? An hour? Two? Longer? She began to claw nervously at the tattoo on her neck, a habit that had rendered her skin a sorry red mess.

Massaging her eyelids, she tried to force the memory of how she

had ended up in Boulder City, but failed to recall the purchase of the ticket, or the bus ride into the desert. She couldn't even remember where she had chartered it. Los Angeles perhaps? She was on the brink of some unseen precipice and she didn't know the way back. The security of Lockeford's institutional walls now seemed disconcertingly comforting, and an awful thought came to her then, one that made the sounds of the pursuing dogs seem even closer.

*You're not well, Sadie Bishop, not well at all. They released you too soon.*

She fought the urge to look back over her shoulder in case the sight of the road back into town posed too great a temptation. What she had left back there frightened her far more than her ignorance of what lay ahead.

A memory, this one recent, began to chew its way out of the bowels of her mind. She forced it down, unwilling to give it breath, but her desire to hide from it snapped something else into place. After all she'd been through over the last two years, the murder of her daughter and husband, then Lockeford, Sadie Bishop now understood how truly broken she was.

*Broken.*

The word worked its way through her mind and came back wriggling.

*No. Split.*

This new epithet resonated with the phantom in her mind, causing her to claw at her neck once again as if trying to dig out a parasite.

*I'm split.*

That word somehow made the unknown road ahead seem even more threatening, and the protosoles of her self-repairing hiking shoes froze in place.

Now the memory flashed through her mind, white-hot and unstoppable: *The twisted metal rod of the corkscrew plunging towards his naked eye; the symbol of the red hand burning against leather; the chilling sound of laughter twisting around a scream.*

Something moved at the edge of the highway, slipping into and out of the murky black scrub before she could register its shape. Primal fear threw her legs back into motion.

*It's mocking you, Sadie. It knows it's won.*

Sadie walked the Devil's Highway, lost but not alone, propelled by something within, something hateful and filled with vengeance. She was a composite, she knew that now, split right down the middle, and although she was a lonely soul on the road that night, her *Shadow* had become her one true companion. It offered her nothing but doubt and distortion. It was a coiled snake, writhing away in the recesses of her mind, hissing at her for retribution, and crying out for its dead child. Her Shadow would never—could never—let go. It had no sense of forgiveness, no desire for self-reflection or internal healing, and all it wanted was blood. It had gestated long enough and now it wanted to hunt.

Until recently it had kept itself hidden, but the further into the Outlands she travelled the more restless it became. Finally, out here, alone, on the Devil's Highway, with no more doctors to clear the weeds strangling up her mind, it had emerged, three miles back on the outskirts of Vegas in the small town of Boulder City.



Sadie sat on the bar stool, staring into her beer stein, while the Nomad read from the annals of his journal. His long, white shirt was cut off at the sleeves, unbuttoned from his collar to his naval, exposing a dark, swirling mass of chest hair. Disproportionately long gorilla arms added to her overt impression of him as a creature recently emerged from the primordial soup, something misshapen and unresolved. But his words were a contradiction to his form. They belied the depths of a nuanced mind and the tangled spirit of a lost poet. He was also utterly insane.

She listened for a while, transfixed, and as he spoke, his passion grew along with her unease. As his words began to disclose the torments of his unraveling soul, her hand absently slipped a corkscrew from the bar top into the pocket of her jeans.

“These words, *Fear is Formless*, do you know what they mean? It’s

difficult to put the idea into words but let me try. There's this feeling, this sudden, panic-induced realization of being lost, strangely similar to the feeling of being trapped. There's this immediate quickening of the heart, a treachery in the guts, and a frantic mental stampede to find an exit of succor. Now, imagine this complicated with fatigue. The mind is forced into overdrive. There's this distinct sense of the floor dropping out from beneath you, and then you fall into oblivion. You have every opportunity to recall every mistake you've made that brought you here, but ultimately you're forced to admit that you've been on this path since the moment your parents dipped pen in ink. Free will was an illusion. And then by some cruel twist of fate you never meet the ground. There's no end. Instead of a final release from misery you eternally feel the jaws of death snapping at you from all angles. And then, because you're trapped in that precarious state between life and death, you begin to hear the Devil whispering in your ear. I've heard the Devil, or maybe it was God, *the Mother*—sometimes it's so hard to ken the difference, and more and more I believe they're one and the same—it told me the truth of all things, the answer to reality itself. It said, 'At the center of the Empyrean lies the Hand that makes the world. Around it, the Coronal River flows in and out of creation. Within the Black Eye is Doom, and there, Fear is Formless.'

He looked up at Sadie and his voice fell to a whisper as if he had entered confession.

"I've heard the voices telling me to run—and so I did. I ran so long and so far that I don't remember when or where I began. Do you know what that's like, to be so lost that you lose yourself along with your place within the world? *Fear is Formless*. I've heard these words over and over again, repeating in the background of my mind. And now that I'm lost, I've finally found the answer to their meaning. My mind is what's *formless*, the *fear* was within me all along."

The Nomad's eyes held a strange, sympathetic sort of madness, and he placed his hand on the pages of the open tome atop the bar. His fingers caressed the leathery paper tenderly like the skin of a lover. Now he rounded on her, bringing the full weight of his

sermon to bear.

"I now find myself capable of things I'd never dreamed. Maybe you know the feeling. Perhaps, you've been so changed by an experience that you've become the conduit for the emergence of your own personal *Shadow*?"

His eyes flashed when he saw the acknowledgement in hers and she dropped her gaze. Too late. That brief connection had been all that the Nomad had needed to advance his campaign and force a confrontation. Sadie's eyes made a full pass of the bar, hoping to find an ally, but any eyes that touched hers quickly darted away.

"You do understand. You wish you didn't, but I see in your heart that you're a believer too. You've sensed the world changing, haven't you? Did you hear the voices? Have you glimpsed the world beyond?"

Sadie pushed her stool away from the bar, intent on flight, but the Nomad easily closed the distance with one of his abnormally long arms. His meaty hand clamped down on her wrist, ending any chance for her escape.

"No-no, don't be frightened, we're lucky you see? We've left the societal prison, the prison of the mind. I was once a *Citizen* too, my head filled with lies. But then I found my purpose. My *Doom*. In time you'll visit the Dome, and in its glory you'll find yours as well. Just remember, no matter how bad it gets, Doom is unavoidable. In the end we're all just beams of light swallowed by the Great Black Eye." He said all this as if it should be of some comfort, but there was nothing comforting about the way his eyes were locked on hers. "You shouldn't worry, Doom is merely the doorway to Salvation."

She tried to twist away, but he held on tight.

Pushing his free hand hard against the pages of his book, he began to preach as if channeling the inscribed words through contact alone. "Every life comes to a precipice, at yours you'll be confronted by Doom, but remember, it's only to the Faithful whom the Mother will reveal her design. At the edge, when the threat of death has you feeling more alive than ever, fear will mark the door to the *Empyrean*. When your fear reaches its zenith, that's when you'll be your most malleable. All possibilities will merge into one, and you'll undergo

the transformation needed to reach the world beyond. Embrace your fear, for it is formless.”

The Nomad’s sermon continued, spiraling into a mordant diatribe of half-constructed thoughts and proclamations. Finally he released her wrist and rose from his stool to claim the entire room for his audience. Sadie watched the patrons shift uncomfortably in the tidal sway of his revelation.

“Now look, look out onto the desert of man, the desert of the soul, and see your brothers who’ve fallen upon this hellish highway. I am a man—just like you—come to his edge in this rathole of Route 6-6-6. Listen and you’ll hear your footfalls approaching the precipice as well. Once we followed the path of self-interest, lapping at the precarious lies of superficial living. Like you all, I felt my life was awash in the waste, my role on this planet dubious and small, but soon I’ll take the step at the edge of the precipice and I will meet my destiny.”

The Nomad’s wild eyes invoked the room, carefully scrutinizing each of the dozen-or-so weathered locals, along with two other dust-footed travelers whom Sadie recognized from the bus ride into town. He took each of their baffled looks in turn before his eyes magnetically snapped back to hers, and once again, he began to channel the mad energy of his tome’s sweat-stained pages as if he were the messiah reborn.

The conversational atmosphere of the bar disappeared and the patrons eyed him suspiciously. It seemed to Sadie that there was murder on more than a few of those faces, or at least the threat of a good bludgeoning with a beer stein. And yet, not one word was uttered against him, not one person dared to challenge his lustful tirade despite the tough, world-worn looks carried by many in the bar that eve. They were either unwilling, or unable, to do anything to quiet him. Perhaps it was the madness flickering at the edges of the Nomad’s eyes that stopped them, or maybe the way he pressed that thick tome to his chest like a shield . . . or a child. What disturbed Sadie most of all, was that his words had so profoundly resonated with her own precarious situation. Here she was, lost and alone, her identity in question, flailing around as she tried in vain to take

control of a life so utterly derailed, and this vagabond had offered her some sort of hope—perilous and strange as it was—hinting that there were answers to the unknown questions burning in her mind. Maybe she wasn't the only one in the bar that night who had found the uncertainty in his or her heart hard to bear. Maybe that was why no one moved to silence him. Perhaps the Nomad had tapped into the collective vein, delivering to this small audience some much-needed promise of absolution.

“Fear is Formless,” he said once again, and took a long, dramatic pull off his twisted smoke. “What do you think? These are the words I will say when I'm confronted with my Doom. I'll say them bathed in fire, roasting like a pig on the Mother's spit. This will be my first sermon to my people.”

In that instant, the weight of his words on the bar's patronage shifted from impotent thrall, to overt mockery. Laughter filled the room, beer glasses clanked against tabletops, and boot soles stomped the floorboards followed by catcalls and whistles and shouts of indignation, many decrying the man's sanity. Sadie dared her own small smile.

The Nomad didn't so much as blink. His cheeks flushed a heated red, and he slammed his sacred tome against the bar top, narrowly missing her fingers. She jerked back reflexively. He rounded on her as if she were somehow personally responsible for the audience's turn, and began to shout, “Holy Mother, I voice my soul, and you shit all over me!”

He looked like he was on the verge of getting violent. Sadie shrank back.

A strange look of recognition then flashed across his face, followed by smoldering anger. “I know you. I know you, *Witch!*”

He began to raise his heavy tome, his arm extending up over his head, his smoldering eyes disclosing his intent to make the tome a hammer and her head its anvil. And then, to her relief, the bartender grudgingly leaned over and rested his hand on the Nomad's shoulder. He spoke something softly to him, calming words no doubt, but the Nomad didn't care for the interruption. He turned away from Sadie,

now fixated on facing off against the bartender. With his attention diverted, Sadie quietly slipped away into the ladies' room. Shouting followed her up the hall as she went, something about the darkness coming to swallow them all, Eve's treachery, and the failure of the economy. A howl of pain, which she hoped belonged to the Nomad, erupted from the common room. She slammed the washroom door behind her, cutting it short.

Unfortunately her escape had come too late. Her heart was beating fast enough to accommodate a solid running pace, and a cold sweat had infiltrated her pores. The Nomad's words had gotten to her, forcing her mind into an anxious, unbalanced state that she would rather have avoided. That odd feeling had returned, the one where she felt not altogether herself.

Sadie turned on the tap and cupped the stream of water in her hands. She splashed her face. The cold water did little to refresh her; she was too numb to feel it. Grimly, she studied the woman in the mirror.

At one time she would have seen the face of an intellectual: a confident woman, successful in her chosen profession, with features that seemed defined by rationality and reason. But the face she had once known was gone, replaced now by a grim mask. Her hair, once long and full, a vibrant chestnut color, had been hastily cropped just below her ears. The ends had split, the individual strands thinned, and its rich color had faded to an ashen grey. She couldn't remember if she had shortened it out of a concern for practicality, or out of apathy. Certainly it was easier to maintain this way, and fitting for days spent wandering the roads and open country around Boulder City, waiting for her revelation to strike. Ultimately it made her look older, and more importantly, less engaging. The ugly tattoo, which swept from the left side of her jaw and down her elegant, long neck to her shoulder, had surprisingly had the opposite effect. It called attention to itself. The freaks had apparently deemed it an open invitation to strike up conversation. The worst part was how it sought to inhabit her face, like an unwanted guest starting a home invasion at the couch before claiming the rest of the common space with an

ever-expanding area of detritus. Perhaps she had marked herself this way as a reminder that she was broken. And just as with her hair, she couldn't remember her motivation. At least her facial features still maintained a soft sort of stateliness, with delicately angular features, lips that may once have been inviting (although, these days, they rarely displayed anything more pleasant than a wry sneer), and a prim nose. Of course—and not that she was really counting—but there were definitely a few more wrinkles than there had been a couple years ago, especially around her eyes. And maybe that's where the greatest change had taken place, with her eyes. Once a shocking, emerald green, they now seemed diminished to a sullen grey. A creeping darkness had set in beneath them, betraying the exhaustion of her soul, as well as something deeper, something unwanted. But more than all these things, what disturbed her most of all was the way her gaze looked back at her from the mirror, challenging her as if it were not entirely her own.

Captivated by her strangely unfamiliar reflection, she didn't notice her hand dipping into her pants pocket to retrieve the corkscrew it had placed there moments before, or her thumb levering open the twisted metal shaft.

It did this without her knowing. It did this without her consent.

Her eyes, detecting the rapid approach of some gleaming, metal object, kicked into focus on the pointed end of the screw. Sadie gasped, abruptly terminating the movement of her hand. Dumbfounded by what she had nearly done, she rigidly held the corkscrew in the air, barely an inch away from the twitching wet dome of her eye.



As the sun set beyond the western ridge of town, tanning the land copper, the stillness of dusk crept in to swallow the long shadows of the afternoon. Sadie was working her way across the large front lot outside the locale watering hole in an attempt to avoid any more encounters with the Nomad. At the lot's far side was the cheap hotel

that hosted the brave and foolish few who wished to venture into The Badlands from the UCSA Army's protected township of Boulder. Of course, *protected* was probably a bit of a misnomer, *temporarily occupied* seemed a touch more accurate. There was a small military outpost at the east side of town, but word was, the troops had cut out to deal with an incident near the Colorado River on the border of Zone 6 and 7. As she walked across the deserted lot, Sadie became acutely aware that the safety net created by the small mobile division was gone.

Next to the hotel was the The Lost Vegas Tour Company, so drolly named by its owner and operator, the singular Farooq "Dookie" Leghari. Once a ship-breaker from the ports of Geddani, the crafty old businessman—who had probably absorbed enough heavy metal particulates through his leathery old skin to eventually turn it green—spent his leisure time preoccupied with the unlikely pastime of expanding his graveyard. Except it wasn't bodies he was collecting, it was old buses, bulldozers, cars and trucks, even the occasional train car, which he refitted or harvested depending on their condition. A good share of the lot had been allocated to the contents of the graveyard, and he had made a fair business selling rebuilt vehicles to the local Outlander community. Sadie had at first been shocked to hear this. It was scandalous for a UCSA protected town, however small, to allow an occupant to trade with Outlanders. But having stayed there several days already, she was also beginning to understand that the strict rules of the city were more *flexible* this close The Badlands. She wondered what had originally attracted Mr. Leghari to the rusted-out auto-hulls. Did they offer him some kind of nostalgia for the aquatic cousins he had worked on back home? She could only imagine. The vehicles were usually recovered from the city area, detritus left over from the ultimate skinning of Las Vegas by its financiers. It was a testament to the society that had built it that it should be used and discarded so casually—and to the parasites went the spoils. According to good ol' Farooqi-Dookie, many of the casinos still had rows upon rows of one-armed bandits still waiting for a wandering shill to crank their cobwebbed appendages one last time. There would come a day,

so Dookie reckoned, that people would return to the city and see the value of all these discarded treasures. When that day came, he predicted, he would be a very rich man, for Farooq “Dookie” Leghari had been the only one with the foresight to tag his initials on the buildings and their contents with spray paint. All told, over the last twenty years, he had *fairly* claimed a solid quarter of the city. Sadie thought he might be insane, but in the Outlands, it seemed the bar for that measure was set rather high.

Sadie wound her way between the auto hulls, looking through the windows of an old, aqua bus with cream trim. The setting sun cast a strange, iridescent glow upon the interior. Its vinyl, cream-colored seats and chrome-plated finishings harkened back to a time long past. It sparkled expectantly, as if its ghostly passengers might reveal themselves at any moment, displaced from some tangential moment in time.

Sadie wasn't sure she much liked Dookie, although he kept his hostel and tour company running as efficiently as could be expected, but at this moment, she wondered if there wasn't some small beauty in his unusual gallery of old hulking shapes. Maybe good ol' Farooqi-Dookie was more of a romantic than she had originally believed.

Several of the corroding beasts lay side by side, their bellies sinking and decaying in the dirt like beached whales. The few feet of separation between them made for a series of crude alleys. Sadie was halfway up one of these when she heard the scuffing of a boot sole on gravel somewhere up ahead. The unexpected interruption cast from her mind any further opportunity for spectral whimsy.

Sadie stopped abruptly as the dusty Nomad stepped out from behind the engine carriage of the bus on her left, blocking her path forward. His white robes hung loosely around him, betraying the raw form of the animal beneath. The lowly sun backlit his strangely alien silhouette, making his face dusky and unreadable. The metal frames of his teashades caught the sun, reflecting it rudely back her way, forcing her to squint.

“You left so quickly,” he said, taking a smooth step towards her. His voice sounded hurt, quavering like wind through a hollow reed.

“Why did you leave?”

Sadie took a step back, fixing him with the sternest, don't-mess-with-me look she could muster. “Well, I thought I'd read a little. It's been a long day and a good book helps calm a restless mind,” she stated matter-of-factly.

“That's not why,” came the low, troubled voice of the Nomad. Was it just her, or did she detect a touch of fear in his voice as well? She had only enough time to half-sputter a response before he repeated his question. His rage was in charge now, and he barked at her violently, “That's not why, *Witch!*”

Seeking to calm the unbalanced man, she began to raise both hands, palms out, in a placating gesture, but the Nomad launched forward. Four quick strides were all it took for him to cover the distance. His arm moved in a powerful arc, the heavy tome fitted to his fist like a hammerhead. It came down, connecting flatly with the top of her skull, and rattled the teeth in her jaw. Sadie stumbled back, somehow managing to keep her footing. Oddly her reeling mind fixated on the book and the symbol of the hand debossed into the cover in red foil. With four fingers and a thumb extended, it looked ready to leap off the cover. The Nomad's other hand shot out and seized her wrist, squeezing it tightly. The bones ground together, sending a bolt of white lightning up her arm.

“I know who you are,” he said, the murderous words seeping from his mouth like a poisonous resin.

He twisted her wrist again, bearing down with enough force to snap bone. She fell to her knees and winced as the gravel and asphalt grated her skin. Then he wrenched her wrist back around, folding her like a doll before him.

“You're that Witch. You don't look like her, not anymore. You're older now, but I can see her writhing beneath your mask.”

He stepped towards her, close enough so she could smell the foul stench of liquor on his breath, and see the cutting mad look in his eyes. He inhaled deeply. “You smell like her too, the smell of death after a forest fire. So tell me, did you come back for me . . . *Witch?*” Sadie was too busy biting back the pain to make any verbal plea;

but she didn't need to, he had already made up his mind. "Eyes talk. You know what yours are saying?" He ground the bones of her forearm together, and smiled as her face contorted. "They're saying that killing you once wasn't enough. But that's okay; I knew you'd come back. Don't you see? That's what I love about you! I get to kill you all over again."

He yanked downward, doubling her over, and then swung the book back up, hitting her squarely on the underside of her jaw. Opposing forces wrenched her shoulder, nearly tearing it from its socket. She grunted wetly through blood-soaked teeth, and fell backward. Dizzy with pain, the futility of escape pulled at her limbs like chains of iron. The inveterate madman had her. She sobbed into the dirt while his murderous eyes worked her over. He breathed deeply, watching her squirm on the ground beneath him, and then he yanked her back to her knees, locking her arm in a vicious hold. She vaguely heard the words spilling from her mouth in desperate, blubbing torrents.

Bending low, he pressed his lips against her cheek and spoke. "I am your Doom, I am your Salvation, chosen by the Mother to send you to the Black Eye." She didn't see him anymore, what she saw was the desert, fading away before her like an apparition in the dawning light, and with it, her unknown purpose.

*Not like this*, she thought to herself, *Please, not like this*.

The idea that this was where she would meet her end, as another ghost for the Geddani ship-breaker's Mausoleum, caused something to buck so aggressively in the back of her head that she physically rocked backwards.

Her strained shoulder let out an audible *pop*.

She waited for the pain, but all that came was a fuzzy disconnect. She looked down dumbly from the absurdly twisted muscles of her shoulder to the Nomad's hand on her wrist. A long moment passed where she was unable to react, confused by the realization that she had lost autonomy over her limbs.

The Nomad looked uncertain as well, as if the dissonance between her silence and anticipated screaming was too hard to reconcile. Now

unsure of his ability to strip her to her God-fearing core, he twisted her arm all the more violently. But the screams never came.

Her free hand fell into her pocket, gripping something wooden. Her thumb, which was no longer entirely hers, brushed cold metal. She had some vague understanding that some unseen puppeteer was secretly working her strings from a dark place offstage. A familiar levering movement brought out the coiled screw, and then an icy will gripped her own. Her Shadow made its move.

A hand—*whose?*—shot out with slick surety, and the corkscrew penetrated the Nomad's eye. He fell back, landing on his tailbone while clutching his oozing socket. A wild scream ripped from his voice box. Her thoughts flashed back to the bathroom, the corkscrew a hairsbreadth from her own twitching oculus, her momentary hesitation followed by horrific understanding, and then, finally, control. This time, however, control did not return.

A repulsive cackling filled the air.

Her Shadow wasted no time. It fell upon the Nomad, driving its shin into his throat and pinning him to the ground. It pointed the corkscrew towards his one remaining eye.

He froze.

The words that came from her lips were not her own. They were pure venom poured from the Shadow-mind's twisted soul, a source so vile that they left a deeply bitter taste on her tongue while salting the gaping hole in the Nomad's skull.

"I'll let you keep the other one," she hissed, and spat in his face. A long strand of saliva dripped into his wound. His face contorted in protest, but her shin reduced his cry to a wet gurgle.

The Nomad was no longer gazing upon a lamb; he was staring in abject horror upon the wolf. Despite the confusion tangling up his mind, he was a creature of perception. He understood the deceptive way the world appeared, that dark things dwelled beneath mundane surfaces. She was not the woman he had thought her to be. The shock of his mistake was written plainly on his face.

Sadie's Shadow rose to its feet and pointed in the direction of the setting sun. Why it let him go was debatable, as the Shadow wasn't

prone to mercy. Perhaps it figured collecting the one eye was payment enough for his indiscretion.

The Nomad collected his bible with one hand, and while massaging his throat with the other, he slowly rose to his feet. He studied the Witch a moment before turning to flee back in the same direction he had come. As he disappeared around the engine compartment of the bus, he shouted, "Your Doom is coming! The Repo Man knows you now, and no matter where you go he will find you!"

Although Sadie had never heard it before, there was something about the name, Repo Man, that filled her heart with dread.



Why her Shadow had led her here, away from town and towards the border to Zone 7, she couldn't fathom. The wild dogs on her back-trail had cut off her retreat, and now her only option was to continue forward. She was furious at herself for embarking on such an asinine venture, furious and wildly afraid. Her sense of time was muddled, her jaw and shoulder throbbed, and her head was pounding, but at the moment her biggest worry was whether or not she could keep it together without any help.

Maybe the institution had taken a greater toll on her than she had realized. Cutting deep into her psyche, maybe the doctors had released something secret and evil. Maybe this was how she would finally lose her mind—that was, if she hadn't already. Sadie slowed to massage her shoulder; it ached with a brutish fury.

At the very least she hadn't had to endure the full force of hammering the head of her humerus back into her shoulder socket. Her Shadow had done that willful work. Jarring but muted, the pain had gone off like a firecracker down a storm drain. Still, she felt drained. A bone-deep fatigue was on the verge of overtaking her. How long before she simply collapsed from exhaustion?

The *snap* of a twig in the scrub not far from the road grudgingly forced her to quicken her pace.

The last four years had been something of a crucible in her life, and her inner world had been in such turmoil that she had rarely cast a thought to the world outside with its seemingly endless stream of calamities. But she had to admit, she was getting a good dose of it now. Perhaps that was partly why she was here, for too long she'd been too well insulated by the social structure of the city, and had lost sense of how far the ground was from the two hundredth floor of her penthouse high-rise. She didn't feel guilty about her social position, she had sacrificed a lot to win it, but she was aware on some level that, while she'd been working her way up the corporate ladder, a large number of people had been selling their Citizens' rights to earn their way out of the state's collective debt. The climb for position in the newly branded UCSA, the United City-States of America, had become desperate. And now, out beyond the safety of the Unity Walls, she was finally beginning to see her true value. No one cared about her out here. No one needed her. She couldn't expect anything from the Outlands except for it to try and take everything she had left. Through bleary eyes she contemplated the small cluster of lights off in the distance, and realized that anyone out here was just as likely to be a threat as a friend. It was all some kind of horrible reality check. The only question was, whose reality was it, hers or her Shadow's?

After popping her shoulder back into joint, her treacherous other half had receded back into the gloaming of her mind, and Sadie had slowly come back to herself. But the pain had intensified. *Just one more feather for the camel's back*, she thought grimly. At Lockeford she had encountered a patient named Meade, a stocky woman in her mid-thirties with a bleached mohawk, horn-rimmed glasses, and a taste for camo tank tops. A *motives* addict, Meade had said that there was no greater physical or mental pain than coming off of *heavies*. Sadie had wondered about that. What about childbirth? And that was just one side of the coin. Sadie had lost her family, and shortly thereafter she had lost her mind. Now that had been pain, pain that years of institutionalized therapy had done little to remedy. Yes, she knew pain, she could handle it, but it was her sanity that she couldn't trust.

The pinheads at Lockeford had done a bang-up job on her. After being diagnosed with a rare, psychosomatic form of schizophrenia, she'd been approved for a groundbreaking type of therapy—which in hindsight had probably been more experimental than groundbreaking—and with nothing left to lose, she had signed the waiver. They had written the program in the very neurons and synapses of her brain, somewhere between her lymphatic nerve and her hippocampus. Its name had sounded pleasant enough: *Orca*.

The Orca wetware had several therapeutic levels. On the highest level it allowed her to create and enter simulated environments, what the program architects referred to as “safe rooms”. Sadie's favorite was a beautiful abyss lined with stunning choral reefs. Swimming within that abyss was the Orca itself, her virtual confidant and friend. The second highest level of therapy ran in the background of her mind and produced familiar sensory stimuli that calmed and relaxed her as she went about her daily life. For Sadie, one particular sensation she felt was a cooling sensation, something she referred to as *feeling aqua*. On the lowest, and least intrusive level, the Orca software simply modulated brain chemistry, adjusting its levels to keep things moving along at an even keel, almost like an antidepressant but without the need for pills. It was this wetware she figured she had to thank for fighting off her sinister compulsion to cripple her vision. Back in the washroom, the Orca program had activated reflexively, as it did in times of intense mental distress, dropping a cool, clean shroud of *aqua* over her turmoil. Immediately afterward she had activated her favorite safe room, and a second later she'd been buoyant, floating in a vast, undulating chasm of warmth, reassurance, and protection. Only after a leisurely swim in the Orca's calming waters had she been able to slip back into her skin, and feel like her body was hers once again.

A cool breeze picked up, sending a shiver through her. The feel of the night air on her naked arms was chilling, but warmly reassuring.

She absently scratched at the web-like tattoo on her neck and wondered how many times she had lost control and never known it. In the bathroom, the Orca program had been able to push her

Shadow aside, but during the Nomad's attack it'd been ineffective, leaving her in a kind of mental limbo. She'd been forced to watch from the backseat of her mind as that nefarious offshoot of her consciousness piloted her every move. When she had finally regained control, she'd been walking the highway's center line, and Boulder City had been long gone. This latest episode had her questioning the wetware's effectiveness, and the idea of being unable to escape that sensory-deprived nightmare, if it ever happened again, was terrifying.

Sadie Bishop had always prided herself on being in control. Growing up she had managed to build a disciplined body and mind, and losing control of herself in this way was the cruelest sort of joke. In one way her Shadow had saved her life, saved her from the Nomad's lunacy, but it sickened her all the same. Not the bloody result so much as the brutality of its intent. During the act she had felt it, the pleasure it had taken in the Nomad's suffering, the way it reveled at the sight of his blood and the sound of his agonized cries, how it shivered with excitement, licking its lips and gripping its groin—*her groin*—with lustful abandon. Maybe she'd been saved from the Nomad, but her Shadow had raped her for the trouble. The parasite within her mind had proven itself capable of doing things that she could never have done on her own, of what else it might prove to be capable, she prayed never to learn.

As she walked, she became cognizant of something large and square rubbing against her thigh in the right pocket of her jeans. She reached in and pulled out something leathery and square—the Nomad's wallet.

The world shifted beneath her feet.

It was beyond comprehension; after gouging out his eye, her Shadow had actually taken the time to pick his pocket. This one act, more than anything else, broke reality off into the realm of the surreal.

It started as a giggle. A moment later it had blossomed into an irrepressible bout of laughter. Even when the dogs began to howl, she couldn't stop herself. It had never seemed so clear to her as it did in that moment, that it was all just a joke, a colossally sick, practical joke. The words spoken by the Nomad had inadvertently spoken

some truth of it, and now she was finally getting in on it. The sad truth was she had undergone this entire venture into the Outlands to fulfill some purpose she had not previously understood; she had come here to die.

Sadie Bishop was now walking a line between Vegas and The Badlands, tapping the vein of a burnt-out highway that penetrated deep into the heart of the desert waste. And as fate would have it, her road was far less certain than the lowly centerline suggested. In fact, fate was joyfully waving to her with one hand, its pecker firmly gripped in the other, wearing little more than a boner and a smile. Arising from the road's false horizon, two moons struck her momentarily blind. Lost and on a road that was leading her to some seemingly ill-fated end, Sadie quickly stuck out her thumb and hitched herself a ride.

The driver of the ancient boat flashed its taillights and rolled onto the shoulder. A blue-silver passenger door swung open and the cab light came on.

Sadie wiped the tears of laughter from her eyes, and peered inside. The driver shot her a smile from across the bench and waved her in.

Sadie landed on what was once a white leather seat, now discolored and yellowed by time and wear. Without delay she became the co-pilot of a '69 Buick Electra.

Spinning wheels gripped asphalt and Sadie was on her way, riding the Devil's Highway on towards her Doom.

## END OF PREVIEW