

Somehow I'd always expected dying would hurt. I wasn't quite sure why; it just seemed a logical connection. As much as we struggled against it, as much as every living thing tried to avoid death, I'd sort of assumed it would be painful. Despite having euthanized more animals than I was comfortable remembering, and seeing that it was a gentle thing, I'd assumed that the subjective experience must be agonizing, full of drama and fear.

The reality, for me, was a great deal less impressive. I failed to recognize how much danger a stranger posed, and turned down an offer without considering what the consequences of doing so might be. Then the world went black, and I had just enough time to feel like I was falling before my experience of the world turned off entirely.

That quick. That simple. There was no pain, and I didn't have enough time to process what was happening and arrive at the conclusion of terror. Things just...ended, like someone walked away halfway through writing a sentence.

It was, in a perverse way, almost disappointing.

The next thing I knew, the world was completely different. My clinic, with its familiar shapes and sounds, was gone. In its place was a broad plain, jagged and harsh, cut by cliffs and canyons. There was no light above, no hint of a sun or moon in the sky. If it was sky; the blackness could just as easily have been a ceiling. Ten feet above my head or a thousand, it didn't seem to matter.

The only thing that stayed the same was the person there with me. He was pale, the sort of nearly-albino pallor that suggested he seldom if ever saw the sun. That pallor stood in sharp contrast to the unrelieved black of his tailored suit, a suit that looked like it cost more than some cars. I might have been wildly off-target with that guess, but somehow I didn't think so.

"What the hell just happened?" I demanded, looking around in a panic. I might not have felt afraid before, but it was catching up to me now.

"Good day, Doctor Swanson," he said with a polite smile. "To answer your question, what just happened was that I woke you up. What happened before that was a heart attack."

"I'm dead," I said numbly. I felt like I should be arguing the point, like I should be in denial over it, but I wasn't. The truth was that it wasn't a surprise. That sudden blackness had *felt* like death; it had a sort of undeniable finality to it that I couldn't put into words.

"For some meanings of the term, yes," he said. "Your vital functions ceased. You were legally declared dead by a competent authority and cremated. In that sense, yes, you're dead. But *you*, the thinking entity which calls itself Bailey Swanson, still exists. From that perspective, you are no more dead than you ever were."

I took that in for a moment, looking around. In all directions things seemed the same, as far as I could see. It occurred to me to wonder why I could see him; I wasn't sure, since things were otherwise dark.

"If I'm dead," I said slowly, "then where is this? And who are you?"

"This world has never had a name," he said. "Or rather it has had a great many, none of which can claim any real superiority over any other. The simplest way to describe it would be as the place behind the scenes where things go to be recycled once they no longer belong onstage. And I, Doctor Swanson, am the person who killed you, and who arranged for you to come here rather than proceed to oblivion as most of the dead do."

"Oblivion," I said, fixating on the one part of that explanation I might have understood. "So...there's no afterlife, then? Things jut end?"

He smiled again, a slightly different smile than before. "An interesting question, and one which I am not equipped to answer. Perhaps there is an eternal life waiting for you after you pass beyond my reach; I have no more way of knowing than you do. But I, personally, would not bet on it."

I took a deep breath and slowly let it out. I felt like my mind was working strangely, fixating on some things and letting others pass almost without noticing them. He'd dropped some bombshells there, said some things that were huge and important, but I focused on something else completely. "You arranged for me to come here," I said. "Why?"

"Because I do regret your death," he said. "I felt that it was the most expedient way to achieve my goals, but I feel no actual ill will towards you, and I do respect your professional integrity. This, then, is a compromise. Your old life is gone and you cannot get it back, but you may be able to survive here in some form."

I opened my mouth to ask what he meant by that, but he cut me off before I could. "Pardon me, Doctor Swanson," he said, "but my time here is limited, and there are things you need to know if you would have any chance of surviving in this environment."

I wasn't happy about essentially being told to sit down and shut up, but I did it. This person—or thing, or whatever—had killed me once for being too dumb to take him seriously. It was a pretty convincing argument for paying attention to what he said now.

"The primary thing to keep in mind is that this is a hostile environment," he said. "It was designed with the explicit intent of wearing things down, including people. The residents may be genuinely helpful; it is unlikely, but possible. Everything else should be treated as a threat. Second, as I said earlier, this place was designed as a sort of cosmic recycling center. It breaks things down and builds them up again in a new form. You may find yourself changing into something other than what you have been, as this process is applied to you. If so, do not worry excessively; it is a natural part of life here. The more you can embrace and make use of these changes, the better you will do here."

He smiled at me and tipped his hat, then turned and started to walk away.

"Wait," I said.

He paused. "Keep it brief, please, Doctor Swanson. I do have an appointment to keep."

"What am I supposed to do?" I asked.

"That question cannot reasonably be answered without reference to purpose," he replied calmly. "And I do not know what your purpose is. Do you?"

"I don't even know what's happening," I said, a little desperately. "How am I supposed to know what to do?"

"Ah," he replied. "If your goal is a greater understanding of your circumstances, you should stick to the left-hand path ahead. Beyond that, I am afraid you are on your own. Good day, Doctor Swanson."

He walked away, and the darkness swallowed him within a few steps, leaving nothing behind.

It wasn't until he was gone that I realized how much his *presence* had been insulating me from the full reality of this place. Once he was gone, it was easy for me to understand what he had meant about it being a hostile environment.

The first thing I noticed was the wind. It was a constant presence, sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker, but never really *stopping*. That wind was an assault on every sense, a constant, unrelenting attack. It was bitterly cold, piercing my coat and chilling me to the core; my fingers started to feel numb after just a couple of seconds of exposure, and my teeth were chattering despite a coat that had been sufficient in even the cruelest of Maine's winters. The sound was almost as bad, a howl, a roar, sometimes even a whistle, but never silent. The wind pelted me with dust, with sand and grit, like standing in a low-intensity sandblaster; it threatened to push me over, robbed me of any confidence in my balance.

In a way, the inconsistency of the wind was worse than if it had been stuck at the highest intensity. It made it hard to get used to it, hard to adjust. I couldn't even brace against it, since it seemed to swirl around me, hitting me from a different direction every few seconds.

Looking around, I saw that it *was* pitch black, a darkness somewhere between a moonless night and being trapped in a dark closet. What little light there was was intermittent, inconsistent. Every few seconds the darkness overhead crawled with light, a little slower than lightning, giving me just enough time to look at my surroundings. I couldn't quite take a second look at anything in those brief moments of illumination, leaving me with nothing but frightening, nightmarish afterimages dancing in my vision. It was like seeing a monster or a man with a knife while walking home, except that I couldn't do a double take and realize that it was just a tree or an oddly shaped rock.

From what I could make out in these moments of half-light, I thought my initial impression had been correct. I was standing on a vast plain, stretching in all directions. Except that *plain* implied flat,

even ground, and this was anything but. I could make out hills, enormous cliffs that towered overhead like the skyscrapers in Boston. They *weren't* skyscrapers, they were obviously stone cliffs, but there was the same sense of being dwarfed, the same inconceivable scale. Here and there the ground dropped away just as steeply; I couldn't see how far down these crevices and canyons went, but if the scale was comparable to the cliffs above me, the fall would be enough to kill me and then some. The result was a harsh, dangerous sort of terrain, where a wrong turn might mean hours of backtracking, a false step a lethal fall.

In keeping with that desolate atmosphere, the ground was rocky, dry, and barren. Here and there I saw a patch of scraggly grass, or a stunted bush, but in a way that only served to emphasize just how desolate things were. The fact that life could survive here, that it was possible for plants to grow, but in most places they *didn't*. Like the sound of water dripping in a cave, they didn't so much fill the emptiness as emphasize it.

For a moment I just stood there, thinking about what to do. I seriously considered just lying down and waiting for one of the less helpful residents to find me, at which point I would presumably be dead in every sense of the word rather than just some of them.

Then I shook my head. I might die, but I wouldn't just lie down and take it. I had to at least *try*.

My fingers shook as I unzipped my coat. They felt clumsy, wooden, barely responding to my commands. I couldn't bend them, not really. Too cold.

I pulled my scarf out from the inside pocket of the coat, then zipped it closed again with my shaking fingers. It hadn't been cold enough to need a scarf before I'd come here, but I'd gotten in the habit of carrying one years ago. They were useful for so many different things.

Right now, it was useful as a facemask. I tied it around my face several times, then tied it off. The result was clumsy, and I was sure it was ugly as hell, but it did what it was supposed to. It put a layer of cloth between my face and the outside world, kept the dust and grit away from my skin. When I pulled my hood up and cinched it down tight around my face, the only exposed skin was a thin strip around my eyes. I drew my hands up into my sleeves, clenching and relaxing them in an effort to keep them at least marginally flexible, and it was almost bearable.

Almost.

I was standing on a narrow path, a strip of dirt about twenty feet wide. To the right was a cliff, jagged stone a hundred feet high. To the left the ground dropped away, sloping steeply down for around fifty feet before it *plummeted*. Both of those options left a lot to be desired.

That gave me, essentially, two choices: forward, or back. Or stay here, but I'd already decided against that.

I went with forward, the same direction he'd gone. I walked carefully, slowly, stepping only when there was light, testing the ground before I put my full weight on it. I hadn't forgotten that warning about the environment here being *hostile*.

A few hundred feet further along, the path I was on forked. To the right, it turned down and looped around the edge of the cliff. To the left, it ascended the side of another mesa, a steep climb up, even with the many switchbacks worked into the narrow trail.

I stood there for a moment, then turned left and started climbing.

I went to the Badlands National Park in South Dakota once, when I was a kid. I hadn't thought of it in years, but now I found myself remembering it with shocking intensity. The memories were vivid, somehow more *real* than my current surroundings.

As I walked, I found myself thinking about that with a sort of bitter amusement. *If they thought those were bad*, I thought, *they should have seen this place*.

As simply as that, I found my own name for this place. It was the Badlands. In a way, it seemed appropriate. Not only was the geography similar here, at least in the broad sense, but there was something about the term that seemed *fitting*. This was the Badlands, the bad *place*. It was a place where everything worked against you. It was offensive on every level, grinding you down.

I wasn't sure how long I'd been walking. Time seemed not to have much meaning, here; there was only the next switchback, the next climb, the next step. When I tried to think of something beyond that, the Badlands were quick to punish me. A stone turned underfoot, or broke off in my grasp, threatening to drop me off the edge and into the abyss. I couldn't see how far down it was. The light didn't penetrate to the bottom.

It had been a while, though. Hours, at least, though I hadn't made as much progress as I felt I should in that time. I was cold, and the footing was poor. It seemed like for every two steps I took, I slid one step backward. I was hungry, and thirsty, although both feelings were distant. I couldn't take the time to think about them, couldn't focus on them. The wind seemed to be *waiting* for me to be distracted before it spun around me again, trying to snatch me away from the cliff.

It was hard to tell, but I thought I was about halfway up when I caught a glimpse of motion. Something ahead, beside the path.

The light flicked off. I stood where I was and waited.

When the light came on again, it was gone. I waited through another cycle, but there was still no sign of whatever it was, and I couldn't just stand there forever. My teeth were already clenched

together, but I ground them a little tighter together and started forward again. I picked up a stone, about the right size to throw; it was a pitiful weapon, but better than nothing.

I saw it again halfway up that section of path, and again at the next switchback. It was a narrow figure, somewhere between a human and a lemur, all long limbs and corded muscles, without an ounce of fat on its frame. Each time, it vanished after I'd just barely glimpsed it.

The third time, I'd finally had enough. "Hello?" I said. My voice came out dry and weak, my throat so dry it hurt to talk. I swallowed twice, trying to moisten my throat, and then spoke again. "Hello?"

There was a pause, then a head poked up over the edge of the path. It was roughly human, but with huge white eyes, and no hair at all. When it spoke, I saw long narrow teeth and a long narrow tongue.

"Hello?" it said. It sounded hesitant, like it wasn't quite sure whether that was the right thing to say.

"You've been following me," I said. I had to almost shout to be heard over the wind.

"I'm hungry," it replied, its voice a plaintive wail now.

The lights flickered out.

I wanted to panic, wanted to freak out and throw the stone I was holding and run away. But I couldn't throw my only meager weapon at a target I couldn't see, and there was nowhere to run. There was nothing to do but choke that terror back down and wait.

A few seconds later, the light came back. The creature was nowhere to be seen.

"You could have pulled me off," I said. "You could have just grabbed my ankle and pulled me down."

"Could have," it agreed from behind me. I turned and saw its head poking up from the side of the path behind me.

How had it gotten behind me so fast?

"But?" I said, taking a half-step back before I could stop myself.

"Don't want to," it said. "There's a hole in the path up ahead. That was me."

I blinked, trying to follow this thing's conversation. It should have been surreal, but somehow it wasn't. I was too tired, and next to what had already happened to me, who was I to say that *this* was strange?

I remembered what the person who put me here had said about things *changing*, and thought I might be looking at what he meant. "You were a person, then?" I said, then quickly corrected myself, "A human, I mean."

The head bobbed in a quick, almost rodent-like nod. "I was walking along, just like you are now. Then the path fell out from underneath me."

I shivered at the thought—more than I was already shivering, even. I was acutely aware that the same thing could happen to me at any moment. Would I be quick enough to catch something before I fell? I didn't think so. I was too cold; it was making me slow and clumsy.

"This is a bad path," the creature added. It didn't sound like a warning so much as a statement of fact. It made me think that *every* path was probably a bad path.

"It's the path I need to walk," I said.

It nodded like that made sense. "Do you mind if I walk with you? I haven't talked with anyone in a long time."

The light went out, leaving me blind again. I managed to keep from panicking this time, and my voice was even fairly steady as I said, "That would be good."

When the light came back on, I got my first real glimpse of the thing I was talking to. It was perched on the cliff face beside me, clinging to the stone as casually as if it were just walking along.

My first impression had been more or less correct. It was human in its rough shape, but with very long limbs that ended in very long fingers and toes. It was naked, but I still couldn't have placed its gender; there was no hint of genitals. Or, for that matter, many of the other features I would expect from a human body; there were no nipples, no belly button, no hair. Its skin was grey, with a gritty texture that reminded me of the dirt that had been pelting me since I arrived.

And it had a broad flaps of skin stretching from elbow down to knee, like the "wings" of a flying squirrel.

I tried not to flinch away the thing's appearance, so far removed from humanity that I honestly would have sooner guessed it was some kind of freakish bat. I don't think I did a very good job, but it didn't seem to notice. It crawled headfirst along the cliff face as I walked, looking almost like a spider.

"Do you have a name?" I asked, heading up the path.

There was a pause. "Not anymore," it said. "I lost it somewhere, I think. Now when I think about my name the words get mixed up with the wind."

"Oh," I said. "My name's...." I paused.

"It's okay if you don't have one," it said. "Lots of people don't."

"No," I said. "I have a name. It's *Bailey*."

Why had it been so hard to think of that?

I lost it somewhere, I think.

I shivered again.

The light went out, and I stopped again. In the dark, its voice came from ahead of me. "How did you get here?"

"Someone brought me here and left me," I said. "How did you get here?"

Again, there was a long, long pause. "I ran away," it said at last, slowly, like it was having to struggle to bring the memories to mind. "It was cold, and I was scared, but he was hitting me and then he had a knife and I was...yeah. I had to run. And then I tried to sleep in an alley, and the wind was so cold, but I didn't have anywhere else to go. The next day I kept walking, but things were different, and then I was here."

"You slipped through the cracks," I said. How old had he—or she, I supposed, but somehow I got the feeling of a he from it—been when that happened? Young, I thought. Probably not even to puberty. He seemed like he was still there, somehow, the mind of a child in the body of a monster.

"Maybe. Yeah."

"How do you live here?"

"I stay by the cliff," he said. "There's things to eat. Not much, but some. I can't go out too far, or the wind gets too strong and I can't fly. But close to the cliffs it's all right, mostly."

That sounds awful, I thought.

I didn't say it, but it must have shown in my expression or something, because he said, "It isn't so bad here. You get used to the dark and the cold eventually. And...there's something good about it. It's like, you fell, but now there's nowhere further to fall."

"You don't have to worry about what tomorrow's bringing, because yesterday brought it," I said. A friend of mine had said that after the doctors told her the cancer was terminal. At the time, I hadn't quite understood.

"Yeah. That. And the things that were bad before, whatever made you come here, it can't hurt you anymore. Watch out, that hole is just up here."

With that warning, I slowed down, beyond my already glacial pace.

The gap in the path wasn't too large. Five feet, maybe. Under normal circumstances I could have jumped it easily.

Now? In the dark, with my muscles numbed and weakened by the endless cold, in the Badlands? Maybe not.

"I don't go much past this," he said. "There's things up higher, and this is where...yeah."

"Okay," I said. "I think I have to keep going."

"Yeah," he said again. "Good luck. If you want to come back and talk some more, that'd be cool."

I swallowed hard, then took a couple long steps forward and jumped.

The light flickered out as I left the ground, and for a long moment I hung there in the dark, not knowing whether I would fall or not. The wind, for once, was quiet, just a soft whistling through the canyon.

Then my feet hit stone on the other side, and I let out the breath I'd been holding. I was, for the moment, safe.

Except not, because a moment later the ground started to crumble under my heels, where I'd landed too close to the edge. I windmilled my arms, grabbing at the cliff, but I was already leaning backwards and I knew that it wasn't going to be enough, that I was going to fall.

Something hit me hard in the back, knocking me forward. I fell onto my hands and knees, listening to the rocks tumbling down the cliff.

When the light came on and I looked down, I saw him several hundred feet down, falling fast. His false wings snapped open, catching the air and spinning him out into a long, steep glide out of sight.

I watched him go with a vague feeling of jealousy and then kept climbing, panting with exertion and fear.

One of the maddening things about the Badlands, as I learned fairly quickly, is how *inconsistent* it is. There's no logic, no fairness in how it treats people. Five people might walk safely across a bridge, only for it to collapse on the sixth. The wind might hold one person up and smash another to the ground, with the two standing right beside each other. If there's any logic to it, it's a logic that human minds can't begin to fathom.

In the Badlands, the only thing you can rely on is that nothing—*nothing*—can be trusted.

In some ways, that's what wore me down the fastest. More than the pain, the cold, the constant danger, the hunger, more than any of it, it was tension. It was always having to look twice, having to test everything. There was only so much of the constant fear, the paranoia, that a person could take before things started breaking.

The top of the mesa was a city, of sorts. There were just a few shacks, cobbled together out of what looked like sheet metal and tarps, or cut into the stone. Back when I was alive, I'd have said that it was more pitiful than most of the tent cities I'd seen. Here, it was the only sign of civilization I'd seen, which automatically made it a haven of luxury.

I was very, very cautious as I approached it. I hadn't been here long—no more than a day, I thought—but I was already getting a sense of what the Badlands were like. There was no safety here, no respite. That was the whole *point*. And you couldn't survive here without, in some way, *belonging* here.

The kid who'd saved me was one thing. He was a scavenger, living on the outskirts, barely more a part of the Badlands than I was. But these people were different. They'd obviously been here a while, and they'd scraped out some kind of stable living there.

My instincts from my old life and my growing understanding of this new one both told me the same things. First, these people would be hard, mean sons of bitches; nobody else would have made it this far down here. Second, they would expect the same from me. They hadn't managed to hold on to this by assuming the best of people.

Walking up to the settlement, I saw a handful of people moving around. Using that term loosely; most of them looked only a very little bit like what I was used to thinking of as people. At the very least, most of them had open wounds, most of which were obviously festering. Others were more dramatically warped, the way the child had been earlier. Here was one with a leg cobbled together out of bits of scrap metal and stones; there was a woman with three arms, one of which looked like a spider's leg. I was too far away to make out many details, still, but even at a distance, even at a glance, they couldn't have passed for human, by and large.

As I got closer, they started turning to face me, hands going to weapons. Those who weren't already weapons in themselves; several had teeth and claws. They were chipped and broken, but I'd spent enough time working with animals to recognize the threat they posed.

I tried to seem nonthreatening as I walked into the city, and it seemed to work. They didn't attack me, anyway. It probably helped that compared to them I *was* nonthreatening. I didn't have a weapon, having dropped the rock I was carrying a ways back, and physically I'd never exactly been imposing.

I was almost to the center of the town when one of the residents grabbed me by the arm. She looked like a human teenager, emaciated to the point of being almost skeletal. But her fingers were too long, fading from flesh into something shiny and black, and a snake protruded from one of her eye sockets.

"Hey," she said, a long forked tongue flickering out of her mouth. "You're new, right?"

"Yeah," I admitted.

She nodded, the gesture more in the shoulders than the neck. "Thought so. You've got the look. Listen, you should talk to the man. He can answer your questions." She turned me to face one of the shacks and pushed me forward. "Go on now," she said.

I stumbled forward to the shack indicated. It was one of the larger and better ones, cobbled together out of small stones mortared together with some sort of mud.

I stepped inside and found myself staring at a machete from about six inches away. "What are you doing here?" the man holding it demanded.

I held my hands out to the side and very carefully didn't move. "I'm new here," I said. "Some girl told me I should come to you with questions."

There was a momentary pause before he lowered the machete. "All right," he said. "Give me a moment." He walked a few feet away and bent over, visible only dimly in the intermittent light coming in the door. After a few seconds of muttered cursing he got a lantern of some sort lit, giving me my first look at him.

He looked more human than most of the people here. His legs were too short and thick, his skin an unhealthy shade of greyish brown with necrotic sores on his face and solid black eyes, but nothing too extreme. He could pass for human with sunglasses and a long coat.

"It's customary to provide some form of payment," he said, sitting in a crude wooden chair at the table with the lantern. There wasn't a second chair. "Whatever you can. So you know."

"I'm a doctor," I said. "Or I was. I could look at those sores on your face."

He looked at me curiously. "Were you really?"

"Yeah," I said. I hesitated. "I worked on animals, not people. But...."

"But I'm not a person anymore. Yes. Fair enough, then. Ask your questions."

"How do I get out of this place?"

He smiled, showing blocky teeth like those of a horse. "Well, you're direct," he commented. "Most people beat around the bush a little first."

"But they all want to know."

He snorted, the sort of wet, heavy snort that requires either very specific circumstances or serious illness to pull off. "Of course they do," he said dryly. "Who wouldn't? But there isn't much of an answer. The vast majority of those who end up here will never make it out."

"I didn't ask how *not* to leave," I said.

He nodded slowly. "Of course. Do you know anything of what this place is?"

"I heard that it's a sort of recycling center," I said. "Somewhere that things go to be broken down and repurposed."

"That's as good an explanation as any," he said. "Well, it shouldn't be a surprise that it uses *escape* as an incentive. If you want out, you have to let it *change* you."

"I don't understand. How does that work?"

He sighed. "There are a few exits," he said. "Not many. They aren't accessible to you as you are now. You would need to be able to fly, or breathe underwater, or something else. Even after you reach the exit, there's usually a guardian, a challenge, something to keep people in. If you want to survive past that, you have to be strong or smart or lucky. Most don't make it. Even if you do, you won't likely be back home. There are many, many worlds that touch on this one, and while leaving is almost certain to be a step up, you'll probably still be in a strange place."

Once again, I found myself casually disregarding profound revelations about the world to fixate on the immediately important information. He'd just mentioned multiple worlds, and I ignored it completely. "That doesn't sound like a good plan. Too many variables."

"True. The other alternative is to count on someone else for your escape. People don't come here often, but occasionally someone wants a monster. This isn't a great place to come for one—the residents tend to be unpredictable, at best—but if you want something strong enough and nasty enough to tip the scales, you could do worse."

I considered that for a moment. "That would still require you to be strong, though," I said. "You'd have to stand out enough to be worth their time."

"Yes," he agreed. "Of course, you can't really get *out* with either of those ways. By the time you've changed that far, you're only barely *you*."

"But I don't want to change," I said plaintively. "I want to stay human."

He looked at me like I was an idiot. "Have you looked at yourself recently?" he asked.

"No. I haven't had the time."

He nodded like he'd expected that, and went to the lumpy sack on a stone frame that apparently served as his bed. He picked something up from the floor nearby and carried it back to me with obvious care. "You break this, and I break you," he said, handing it to me.

It genuinely took me a second to realize it was a mirror. I didn't recognize my own reflection. Not at all. My face and hands were covered in blood from small cuts and abrasions. The skin was grey and gritty, the dust and dirt of the Badlands embedded into it. I tried to brush it away, and succeeded only in smearing blood and grime across the skin. The Badlands dirt seemed to be a part of my skin now.

"That's after, what, a day?" he asked. "Less? Face it, girl, you're *already* changing."

"Bailey," I said. "My name's *Bailey*."

"Good for you," he said. "But it doesn't change the facts. If you want to stay human, you might as well off yourself right now, because you're as close to that as you're ever going to be."

I frowned and set the mirror on the table. The shack was silent for several seconds.

"Okay," I said at last. "How do I go about *changing*?"

He shrugged. "It's not really something *you* do," he said. "This place will do it for you. You let it in and it'll give you what you need to survive; keep that up long enough and you'll be a monster before you know it. But if you want to speed the process up, you could get to know the place. Learn to feel its rhythms, understand what it is and how it works. Limbo always takes as much as it gives or more. The better you understand it, the more you'll be able to do what it wants; the more you give it what it wants, the more power it'll give you in return."

"Limbo?" I said. "You mean the Badlands?"

He gave me an oddly evaluating look. "You already gave it a name? That's a good sign for what you want. It suggests you've already got something of a connection."

"You talk about it like its alive."

"And I'm not convinced it isn't," he said. "But it doesn't really matter. Whether the place is alive, or there's a person in charge of it that makes decisions, or it's just an automated process, the result is the same. Some behaviors are rewarded; others are punished."

I nodded slowly. "Okay. I can buy that. I think I only have one question left, then."

"That's good," he said dryly. "I was about to start charging you more."

"What about you?" I said, ignoring his joke. "If you know all this, why haven't you tried to leave? Hell, how *do* you know all this?"

"What makes you think I haven't?" he said seriously. "I got close enough to see the exit, and I know this place well enough to have a good idea of what it was going to cost me to get through it. As to how I know...well, how did you think I knew what people are looking for when they come here for monsters? One of the easiest ways to wind up here is to summon something and have it drag you down with it."

I was not sure how long it had been. More than weeks and less than years. A coherent perception of time had been one of the first things to go. I'd recognized that first day that looking beyond the moment was risky, that it left me vulnerable. Giving up the capacity to fully conceptualize time was a logical next step in that progression, one that bought me a vastly heightened degree of focus.

I slid forward to the edge of the mesa, slow and silent. The light still flickered, but I had very little appreciation of it. Light and darkness were much the same to my eyes. The right one still required light to function, but the left had been gouged out by a wind-carried stone a long time ago. The replacement, which had grown out of bone and dirt in the empty socket, saw better in the darkness than the light. Between the two, it didn't matter to me much at all.

"I think I'm ready," I said to my pet. Barely the size of my hand, it was a sort of lizard with scales like jewels. I didn't know what it was, whether it had been a person, or a lizard, or some creature that I didn't know. Maybe it was a creation of this place, born wholly of the Badlands. Regardless, it was a good listener and it didn't eat much, which made it a good pet.

It was so hard to find food. I didn't *need* to eat, I couldn't starve; I'd learned that the hard way, back in the beginning. But food was power and power was what I needed, so I found food. I hunted and I scavenged, and while it had often been tight, somehow I scraped together enough for my pet as well.

It amused me that I'd kept a pet, after sacrificing so many things. It was something to talk to. The first boy I'd met in the Badlands hadn't been exaggerating that. He'd done me a good turn, warning me like that. I tried to honor that by helping out other new people when I could, showing them the ropes or helping them out of a hard place. Sometimes I forgot and ate them instead, but I figured that couldn't be helped. It was so hard to remember.

Even more than that, though, my pet helped me remember who I was. I'd cared for pets once. It had been important to me. I wasn't entirely sure why, but that wasn't surprising. I'd lost a lot of the mental functions I'd once had. I just had to assume that I'd had a reason for it back then, and continue to do so now.

I stepped up to the edge and gazed down into the abyss. With my Badlands eye, I could see exactly how deep it was, unlike the first time I'd looked down into the canyons. Three thousand, seven hundred and twelve feet. I was very good at gauging heights.

One thousand and four feet above the ground, a tunnel opened in the side of an otherwise blank wall. I'd started down that tunnel, and gone far enough to feel the shift in the Badlands around me. I'd seen the texture of the darkness lightening up, heard the wind quieting down, and I'd known what it meant.

Somewhere down that tunnel was an exit. A place where the Badlands ceased to be the Badlands. A way *out* of this hell.

Since then, I'd been getting ready. I'd been eating, stockpiling power, stockpiling weapons. This was the final exam. The Badlands had made me what I needed to be, given power and stripped away weakness. Now I just had to prove that I was capable of *using* it.

In theory, this was what I'd been searching for all this time. This was what I'd wanted, what I'd *needed*.

But now that I knew where to go, I'd spent a while putting it off. Maybe a week. Maybe more. And even now that I'd come back, with the intention of finally ending this torment one way or another, I was hesitating. And I knew why.

Deep down, I suspected I couldn't.

Almost no one made it out on their own. I'd asked all sorts of people, everyone I could get to talk to me and who might know anything. The stories changed with every retelling, every person I asked had slightly different information, but that detail always stayed the same. Almost no one made it out.

I didn't feel fear anymore. Not the way I used to. There was no visceral reaction, no piss-yourself-and-run-away terror. The Badlands had gotten rid of that a long time ago. But I could still experience fear on some level, could still recognize intellectually that I was afraid. And I was afraid that I was not one of the lucky or talented few who would get to leave.

I was afraid that if I went down that tunnel, there was nothing waiting for me but death.

"You know," I said to my pet, stroking its neck and looking at my destination, "I used to think I wanted to die. I even tried to do the deed myself a couple of times. But now that I'm actually looking at the decision, I find I'd rather not." I didn't remember much from before...*before*, but I remembered that. I didn't know why I'd attempted suicide, but I had.

It occurred to me, as I stood there, that that boy had warned me about this too. He'd said something about how you could get used to the Badlands, how it wasn't so bad after a while. At the time I hadn't been able to see how that was possible, but now I did. Things were bad here, but they were a bad that I understood. I knew the Badlands. I had food, had a decent life. Risking that, even for the chance at being *out*, was a scary thought.

Recognizing that was just what I needed to give me that final push. I tucked my pet away in my coat where I wouldn't lose it and stretched my neck, getting ready for what was next.

That boy really had done me a huge favor, the one and only time we'd talked. I'd have to remember to thank him for it if I ever saw him again. What had his name been, anyway? I couldn't quite bring it to mind.

Names could be slippery things, down here in the Badlands. Hard to hold onto. I'd lost mine somewhere along the way, I thought. I'd lost a lot of things.

I turned back to the mesa's edge, and jumped out into the darkness.