

SARAH TOWNEND

The Beauty Parlour

As Skip pulled the last steel whisker out and through the final cheek-pad hole of her face, Rhea yelped. Sixteen bores had been pierced either side of her philtrum, through each of which a short length of fishing wire protruded. It had stung a little, but her quest for beauty was never painless. Skip knew how it felt. He'd given himself facial fur using a similar technique when he had transitioned to kangaroo.

Rhea stood and surveyed herself in the salvaged Baroque mirror which hung on the far wall of the beauty parlour. The mirror, seized most likely from one of the museum raids which had taken place long before the Dust had got so bad, shouted back a reflection of pure beauty. Morphed from kitten to lioness in a little under three hours, Rhea's new form was nearly complete. She was a riot of fur and tail and paws, the cat who had got the cream. After thrumming out a purr and stroking her thread-whiskers, she sat back down, placed her hands on the table, palm side down, and tilted her head at Skip.

"Claws next," she said, her aquamarine cat's-eye contacts almost glowing with feline demand.

Skip nodded. He was tired, but he knew this customer was worth the effort for not only did she pay well, but she was also the hostess of the Unmasked Ball, and she'd promised to reward him with a ticket in exchange for a successful cross-species transformation. Skip was the best beautician in the district and Rhea was the most influential—and also the most demanding—of the Beauties.

“How long are we going this week, with the nails?” he asked, proffering a display wheel of mounted acrylic and natural keratin talons which ranged from guitar pick to nightmarishly Kruegeresque in their sharpness and in their length. Rhea took the samples in her hands and ran her finger along each blade-like claw—firmly enough to leave a linear indentation on the skin of her finger pad, but not firmly enough to draw blood.

“Oh, let’s stick with two inches. I’m not brave enough to go longer,” she replied. “I love the way they would look, but it’s impossible to wash my face without injuring myself. You know, I’d slice open a cheek—or worse.”

“I understand. I rarely went longer than a half inch myself when I was feline. It wasn’t practical. I kept scratching solar units, which made them totally inefficient,” said Linux, a second customer, an energy engineer, a friend of Rhea’s.

“Yes, I can imagine,” Rhea replied, despite not having a clue about the ins or outs of photovoltaic energy or biodome construction. She had gotten this far on looks alone.

Linux flashed his finger stumps at his friend. “Now that I identify as Philippine Cobra, I’ve done away with talons completely. I’m thinking about a semi-permanent finger binding next. Clump them all together with bone staples so I can strap my arms down against my torso and be done with upper limbs altogether—just for the ball, just for one evening.” He stood and lifted his T-shirt to reveal a taut stomach, shelled in overlapping black scales. “One hundred percent snake, well, ten percent waterproof adhesive and reptile leather.”

“You’ll have to go over to Millia’s for binding or webbing,” said Skip as he filed and prepped Rhea’s nail beds. “We don’t do anything that requires anaesthetic here.”

“Oh, I know. She did my neck hood, and a fabulous job she did too,” said Linux, cupping his hands behind the yellow and black skin wings which stretched from his shoulders to his ears, fanning out either side of his neck.

“I can see the appeal of going reptilian. Julian from dome thirteen has gone iguana and the scale work the tattooist has done down his back is to die for,” said Rhea.

Linux flicked out his forked tongue and reached for Skip’s

portfolio of his influencer sketches and of drawings of his most recent work. Once Skip had finished Rhea's claws, Linux was going to enquire about non-surgical options to enhance his dentition. He had wanted all but his canines cracked and pulled and then all four remaining canines built up with loaded faux-venom chambers, ready to spray on compression, but he knew tooth removal was a permanent modification and might limit future transitions. He knew he'd like to be a large mammal of some sort again in the not too distant future—perhaps a polar bear or one of the other Arctic creatures who were some of the first to go—so he wasn't quite ready to give up his bite altogether yet.

Linux looked with admiration and great sadness at the display of images, at all of the hundreds of torn magazine and book pictures and drawings of creatures which decorated Skip's beauty parlour walls. All bar the hardy brown anoles, the cockroaches, the locusts, and a few resilient fish species had been lost since the Great Dust came many years ago. There were thousands of extinct species to choose from, to become, to impersonate, yet so few still alive. All that was left of life was survival and art, but he knew at twenty-three that he only had a short time left until his lungs succumbed to the force of pollution. Not a soul lived to see the other side of thirty. He already felt the crackle and tightness in his chest on exertion, which they all knew was the beginning of the end.

Most of the human survivors had been forced underground, partially due to the thick Dust which whipped up into ad hoc towering, erosive tornados, destroying everything organic in their wake, partially due to the particulate matter too small to see or feel but just the right size to cause almost instant emphysema, and partially due to the power of the new Elite.

When the Dust came, the capitalist society which had reigned eternal toppled like a stack of cards. Overnight, bankers, bitcoin trust-fund kids and sport stars became worthless, fame and money lost value instantaneously, and the new Elite formed. The new Elite consisted of Those That Could: solar panel technicians and bottled gas suppliers, weapon hoarders and hydroponic scientists, engineers, farmers, and the Beautiful. Those That Could rose upward.

As the value of all commodities and all abilities rocked and shuffled over the years that followed the beginning of the Great Dust, so did what the Elite considered to be beautiful. Reptiles, amphibians and mammals all dropped from existence in a matter of months, animal carcasses littered deserted roadsides until scavenged, and scavengers lasted only a little longer, but soon, all who existed under the natural sky became blighted by the perilous toxic dusts. The air held a dryness like no other as the humans kicked Mother Earth into premature menopause; Earth's wildlife, Earth's fruits became desiccated, powdered like trampled sandcastles. The biota of the planet was decimated ten-fold and ten-fold again.

Those That Could built glass-roofed ecosystems with clever ventilation, air purification and toxin extraction methods, and Those That Could survived. And Those That Could, formed allegiances with Those That Had Weapons, and Those That Could and Those That Had Weapons took in Those That Were Beautiful. The Beautiful traded in the Oldest Profession, and together, they formed the Elite.

And the Elite separated from Those That Just Survive.

Beauty had in the past been the slim, symmetrical face of youth and muscle, and those genes still remained, however a quest to become—or to at least imitate—what had been lost evolved. Beauty parlours cropped up in between the glass domes and the Elite and the Beautiful travelled bravely from their places of safety—where the air was breathable and the water was pure—to the parlours for their modifications, to become animal, to decorate themselves with relics of organisms lost and only now present in posters and books and paintings and myth.

“Excuse me Skip, I need a comfort break,” said Rhea, standing and swishing her leonine tail behind her. The tail, a gift from a taxidermist in exchange for tickets, had been anchored into her behind, into the ligaments of her sacroiliac joint, under lidocaine injection. “It’s such a palaver taking this suit off to use the bathroom.”

“Sure. I could use a drink gel anyhow,” replied Skip, wiping sweat from his brow. “You know, we sell beta-carotene supplements—take a high enough dose and your skin will yellow all over from within.

You could give the skin suit the old heave ho.” She peeled down her lioness cloak until it sat, an emptied sack, on the floor. Made from ‘donations’ from Those That Just Survive, it was not only buff yellow, but also soft and downy, and unbelievably pelt-like.

Those That Just Survive were a collective of hardy families who were not Beautiful and who were not Those That Could. They’d fled straight underground when the Dust came. They were the underworld, they were redundant. They had nothing to offer bar their own tissues. They bred like rabbits and bartered with the flesh of their own weak in exchange for foodstuffs and pure water. The Survivors, with their average and below average appearances, and their simple fashions, would never be allowed to attend the Unmasked Ball. And they had no gas masks with which to travel through the Dust in to reach it anyhow. They were trapped in their caves. But their skin was young and supple and Those That Died were peeled and broken apart like scrap heap cars, and those spare parts were offered up to the Beautiful Elite for their costumes and their modifications and their surgeries. In this process of desperate up-cycling, the Elite and the Beautiful worked hard to bring about the look of the rarest animals and the look of the animals long since lost to the Dust.

The skin, hair and nails of the Survivors were all good—all good for bargaining with—as they were all young. No one lived beyond thirty in this time. The Dust, the radiation, the tropical illnesses that spread like wildfire as the planet warmed, and the wildfire and the dust that spread like the tropical illnesses: all of these things kept anyone from reaching death due to age. Time rarely killed the Survivors or the Beautiful or Those That Could. Old age was as much a distant memory as the dragonflies and the snow leopards and the orang-utans and the pangolins.

“Good idea. Add some to my list, wouldn’t you be a darling?” Rhea shimmied to the bathroom and on her return, her talons were fitted and she paid Skip in tickets. Skip thanked her profusely and his tapered pseudo-ears, brown and soft, flapped as he did so.

Rhea and Linux donned their protective suits—yet a further

layer of costume, this one essential when taking on the Dust and solar glare—and pulled their gas mask helmets onto their heads. Skip poked Rhea's whiskers under and in, ensuring not to bend them in the process as the pair got ready to leave.

"The Dust is bad today," said Skip, tucking the tickets into his kangaroo pouch. "Make for home with haste."

"We shall," Rhea replied, voice muffled through inches of filter and tubing. "See you at the ball on the morrow."

The Unmasked Ball came and went. Five hundred Elite from the network of biodome cities met and celebrated and compared their transitions and their costumes.

Each month that the Ball took place, Those That Could tried to outdo each other with their extreme modifications. Ivory elephant tusks taken from a museum long ago were surgically affixed to a young man's upper lip. Brightly coloured toucan bills fashioned from acrylics and resins were welded to the exposed, sanded jaw bone of another. Plumes of feathers mounted to sockets drilled into the soft tissues of a lady's back created a bird of paradise. One young reveller, both his legs bound together and smashed to smithereens, like crushed packets of crisps beneath unbroken skin, tarnished himself with grey body paint; an eel he became.

Each month, the competition grew for most modified and most dramatic transition. Slashes to cheek and neck were made and stitched and healed as a Beauty re-identified as an axolotl. Survivors' teeth were mounted on steel hinges and fastened to foreheads: and so, a megalodon attended the Unmasked Ball.

One half-orbit of the planet about the sun later, the Dust had thickened. The Dust became more corrosive than it had ever been and Earth cried tears of acid and grit.

Rhea barged through the safety lock, pushed open the second door and marched into Skip's beauty parlour. Many of her friends were getting prepared for the final ball of the year, the Christmask Ball, the annual pinnacle of the Elite calendar. Those attending would no doubt pull out all stops to come in their most revered, most

outrageous and most fanciful attire to bring in the end of the year.

“Skip, darling. You simply must see what I have in my bag. I have a look I want... I *need* you to help me attain. It will be worth five tickets—no—I will give you ten tickets. Bring all of your parlour friends along; Christ—bring Survivors! I care not who you bring if you will only help me achieve this look.”

In the parlour room, which stank of epoxy resin and burnt flesh, all the customers turned to look at the Hostess and what she was presenting. “I have found the rarest of images. The most rare of all creatures. You will not believe this when you cast your young marsupial glare upon it, Skip. No one will beat this. All eyes will be on me, as they should.”

She pulled out a folded sheet from her bag, unfolded it, and thrust it forward into the audience.

“There. Isn’t it a thing of beauty? What will it take to make me, this. Say you can do it for me, Skip.”

Skip’s brows rose like banners above his brown eyes. He had never seen anything like it before.

“What is it? What are they meant to be?” He could tell it was something like a human, for it had a face, and all the parts of the face were where they should be, if somewhat compressed and clouded with sagging skin; it had elements of Shar-Pei dog, folds of horseshoe bat, facial hair of a piglet. Hair sat on the top of its head like that of a sheep—white, yet wispy, like smoke.

“It’s...it’s some kind of mammal, humanoid, I’d say, but most peculiar,” he replied, his chin cupped in his hand, his thumb and forefinger poking at the corners of his mouth, his brow now screwed, lost in thought and consideration.

“Can you do it? To me? Do you think you can?” asked Rhea, keen as mustard.

“Where did you find this photograph?” he asked.

“My guard ransacked the Survivors who live to the east of the Apricot Desert,” she replied.

Pulling up a chair, she reached for the myriad tray of hair weave samples, searching for something to match the greyness of the image.

“Held them up at gunpoint, demanded they fill his sack with keepsakes; something for us to look through of a dull, dusty evening.

I'd instructed him to go out and forage for inspiration, and this is what he came back with."

Linux hissed from the corner, "It's an old person, Rhea. A 'geriatric'. Long before the Dust came and the planet could breathe—and we could breathe outside without our masks—in the great Apricot Desert, people lived double, treble what we live now. Rumour has it, some managed until they were one hundred. Can you believe it?"

"That's what I thought," said Rhea, cheeks flushed with excitement. "I've never seen one in such detail before. Look how the eyes nearly slide under drooped lids, see how there is the same white, wiry hair as on the top of the head sprouting like clouds of dust from the ears and the nostrils. Isn't it marvellous? Do say you can do this to me, Skip."

Skip took the photo from her hand and brought it close to his face. The crowd waited, breath baited, for his answer.

"I'll have a go," he replied, fumbling through his drawers of accessories, piercing tools, glues, searching his refrigerator for sheets of fresh-primed skin ready for grafting, sterilised needles for stitching, tattoo inks for blemishing and marking and pocking and furrowing. "I'll do my best."

He stripped back her yellow make-up, pulled off her lash extensions and unthreaded her steel whiskers. He scrubbed near raw her yellowed hands and dissolved the bonding chemicals anchoring claws to her nail beds. He worked, folding, cutting, charring and stitching, to try to recreate the look of time and age that she'd presented as the other customers sat and watched Skip with wonder, surrounded by his constellation of tools and materials.

As Skip reached completion, the spectators erupted a volcanic fever of applause, the ash of which resonated in Rhea's eardrums, an opiate snare. Skip swivelled her chair around for all to see his creation.

She looked ancient.

Skin folded over on skin, some prosthetic, some her own, some borrowed, her face corrugated and creased akin to a brain coral. Her hair stood curly and white like the Dusts laced with sharp ice crystals that came in the winter. Her hands, now covered in brown liver spots looked better than anything Skip had ever achieved

before when transitioning customers to leopard or Dalmatian or Friesian cow. Rhea looked marvellous: a thing of time and of many winters witnessed, an epoch of generations collected.

As she stood to examine herself in the full-length mirror, she gasped. Never before had she looked so rare.

“I wish the ball was tonight, I don’t know how I’m going to contain myself for twenty-four further hours,” she said, hugging him tightly, placing a ream of golden tickets into the palm of his furry hand.

Skip, swollen with pride, blushed and thanked her for allowing him to work on the canvas she had provided him with. He helped her back into her safety suit and slid carefully her gas mask, all tubes and filters and inches of Perspex and glass, back over her newly old skull.

“Journey safe, home with haste, my most precious piece,” he said as he opened the air lock for her, the audience clapping majestically as she left.

Outside, the Dust was spinning, a zoetrope of grit and particulate pollution. The air was custard-thick as she set off on the treacherous journey back to her biodome.

Plodding onward, full of glee and following the route her feet knew by heart even in the blinding desert smog, she could just about make out the wall of hexagonal panels in the distance which she would need to enter.

The guard which stood up on the balcony did not seem to be present. *How odd*, she thought, *that the Dust is so thick, it obscures the guard*. Was the guard lying down up there, snoozing in his safety suit, under the protection of his gas mask helmet...whilst on duty? She would certainly be having words with security about staff taking absence without leave, napping on paid time. Rhea placed one foot in front of the other and bee-lined toward the port under the familiar hexagonal structure. She needed to parade impetuously her most magnificent transformation from lioness to ‘elder’ in front of her community before dealing with lollygagging guards.

Out of nowhere through the thick of the evening, a hard clunk to her head came. A Survivor with a club of sorts, manufactured

from layers of swathes of wound and bound leathered skins, took a strike, knocking Rhea out cold on first attempt. The Feral tucked his baton into a crudely fashioned belt pocket, knelt over his prey and tugged and tugged and unscrewed and unhooked the connectors on Rhea's gas mask and ripped the device off and away from her head before placing it into his sack. Grabbing next her boots and the trouser cuffs of her outer suit, he lifted and tipped the young old girl upside down. The suit peeled away from her lifeless body, and out of it she slid, paste from the tube, onto the white-hot sands of the desert. Rolling up and bagging the costly protective gear, he grinned a smile that only the Dust would see; this one would be his best find yet.

His own appearance, worthless by all current standards, had taken a battering an hour before as he had stepped outside of the Survivor's cave to take on the guard that had returned for a second time. The guard had returned after an earlier theft of skins and nails and photograph albums to request that further sacks be filled with knick-knacks, entertainment for the Elite. The Survivor had snapped and had taken a swipe with his club, knocking the guard to the floor. His average face had taken a chemical peeling from the acidic reflux spit-up of the desert and his lungs had pulled sharply upwards and inwards, as scorched toes in the bath do, at the heat of the Dust they'd inhaled.

But it had been worth it, as with one swift blow of the club he had fashioned from remnants of human fabrics, he had taken down the guard. The guard had then provided him with a gas mask which he had donned and used to venture out and into the Dust and out toward the second guard who was manning the nearby biodome. Then, the Survivor was blessed with winning a third gas mask and Dust suit even less rudimentary than the other two.

The feral Survivor ripped out the purse of coins and tickets from the Beauty's bag and stormed off into the Dust, to his cave, to share news and findings, to launch the next round of attack—that night, the Survivors would snowball the Elite. Three masks would become six, twelve, twenty-four, and the Christmask Ball would become theirs.

And the young old girl's hair blew in the wind as the dust whipped up, a writhing vertical snake of sand and grit, a maelstrom of particulate smog. Her hair spread out and into the Dust and melted like licked candyfloss. The layers of skin that were hers and layers of skin that were not hers un-bandaged, melted, dribbled and blew away, and were carried off into the air with the cosmic grime.

The dust and the sand blasted against her cheeks and her nose caved in, a fallen pyramid, releasing her un-mummified ghost to the ether. The vile force of ruined nature, acidic and potent, lifted off the cartilage and sinew and tendons and fat that lay underneath her skin. Up, up, and away it all went, dissolving into the Dust. The weather took years from the girl's face, tens and tens of years, until her skull was all that remained of her head.

Fatty brain corroded, liquefied into sludge, and slid out through her ear canals. Neurone rivulets vanished on contact with the hurricane of pollution that chipped and gnashed and bit at her remnants. On her neck, solar lasers breaking through the Dust burned and teased away young and old and young again skin, layer after layer, until a passing locust swarm moved in to tidy away what the weather had yet to claim.

Her body—all accelerated and modified tissues and trims, all falsely aged arms and legs and torso—followed suit, layer after layer rubbed clean.

Bones and titanium piercings were all that remained of her on the floor of the Apricot Desert as the Dust settled, satisfied, well fed. Never before had she looked so rare.