

Craig A. Peters  
whocraig@tpg.com.au  
@whocraig

## ETERNAL DEATH

by Craig A. Peters

9,900 words.

Version 1.02

I was inside a barrel. *Literally* stuffed inside a barrel that is, moving across the countryside on the back of a wagon. Every time the wagon went over a bump, the barrel would jump and I would hit my head on the hard wooden lid. Every time I hit my head on the hard wooden lid, I would cry out in pain and my captors would snicker and chuckle. Then the wagon would go over another bump.

I'm sure the driver was aiming for the bumps on purpose. *Oh look, there's a big one*, he was probably thinking. *That'll teach her, the infected little cow.*

I tried to be brave. Being trapped inside a barrel isn't as bad as it sounds. Honestly, I'm a small girl for sixteen years of age. It would have been more cramped if it had been my sister who snuck away that night. There was a crack in one side, so I knew I wouldn't suffocate. I could see the dirt road fade away behind as the wagon travelled onward. The village seemed to far away now.

I told them if they let me go I would run away and they would never see me again. They

could tell their superiors they delivered me as they were ordered to. Nobody would know otherwise.

They didn't go for it.

I threatened that if they didn't let me go, I would infect them. Then I would hunt down their families and infect their mothers and their wives. I would infect everyone they knew with the Eternal Death unless they let me go.

They didn't believe me.

I pleaded with them. I wasn't dead. I was a living, breathing girl, innocent of nothing apart from curiosity. I had a family. No doubt my father and sister were distraught right now. Couldn't they have a heart and let me go?

The wagon went over a particularly large bump and as I hit my head on the barrel's list for the twenty-third time (and yes, I was counting), I realised there was no point. I was never getting free.

I started to cry. My legs were stiff and sore. The lump on the top of my head had grown as large as the bumps the wagon drove over. A sharp, vicious splinter had worked its way into my right index finger.

I needed to stand. I needed to stretch my legs, to walk and run and jump. I needed to be free. I hadn't actually done anything wrong. They didn't care. Nobody cared. I was tainted and had to be thrown away like a dirty rag. Who I was and what I had done before infection meant nothing to them. It didn't matter that I was alive. That the Eternal Death wouldn't set in until my natural life ended. Nothing mattered to them except the infection itself.

To them, I was no longer a person. I was the infection. I was the Eternal Death.

The barrel started to tilt. It didn't fall over, so I guessed they had secured it to the back of the wagon. The low hooves-on-dirt thumps turned into a loud clip-clop of hooves on a stone-paved road. The ramp, I presumed, which they needed to take to get to the top of the wall where they would throw me out. There were no more bumps, so instead I counted the clip-clops, but I lost count somewhere around one hundred and twenty clips and one hundred and twenty-one clops.

Then the wagon levelled off and came to a stop. I stopped my crying and held my

breath, trying to be as quiet as possible. Maybe they would take my suggestion. Maybe they would leave me and drive away, and I could sneak off to a quiet part of the world to live as a hermit. It wouldn't be so bad. I would grow vegetables and drink fresh water from a nearby creek. A kind-hearted villager would bring me supplies once a season, leaving them at the door to my cabin. I would meet no one face to face. The villagers would develop myths of my mysterious beauty. Young men would—

I hit my head on the lid one last time as the two guards jerked the barrel off the back of the wagon. After a moment they set the barrel down somewhere. I had never seen the top of the wall up close, so I didn't know what it truly looked like. They didn't allow anyone this close to the wall. It wasn't guarded, but nobody would risk going near it anyway. What if you fell in? What if one of the infected dragged you in?

I could hear the crackling of torches and I wondered why. It was the middle of the afternoon. There was a shuffling as someone else climbed out of the wagon and approached the barrel. I could see his bright blue robes through the crack. He was a Divinator. There was a ruffling of parchment before the Divinator spoke.

"Pax of Crossed Hills, as a result of physical contact with the infected, we find you unclean," he declared. "You are to spend the rest of your existence within the Crescent, without possibility of release. May the Light have mercy on your soul."

There was a mechanical noise as though he pulled a lever and a moment later, the barrel dropped. I screamed. As the barrel fell I seemed to hover in the centre of it. The light from the crack was gone and darkness surrounded me. I pushed my feet against the barrel's bottom, braced my arms against the sides and pushed my head against the lid.

Whatever it was which guided the barrel's straight fall downward curved flat, and soon the barrel was rolling horizontally. I spun around and around, and just as I passed the line from a little dizzy into sick-to-the-stomach, the barrel hit something hard and came to a sudden stop. I collapsed into a pile at the bottom and panted. But I didn't cry. I refused to cry.

\* \* \*

"I can't believe they still use those barrels," said an old woman's voice. "They're dangerous. Someone's going to break their neck one of these days."

"That's probably what they want," said a man's voice.

The barrel lay on its side and through the crack I could see only grey stone. "Don't worry!" said a second male voice. "We'll have you out of there soon." He pushed hard at the barrel and rotated it. Now the lid was flat on the ground and my head crushed beneath my body.

"Upside-down!" I yelled.

"Sorry!" the man yelled back and with some grunting he turned it the right way up. There was a creaking and more grunting, and finally the lid peeled away. I stood and relished the space to finally stretch my legs. A thin man helped me climb out of the barrel. It was not until my feet met the solid stone floor that I stopped to take a closer look at the tall, thin man. When I did, I screamed for the second time that day and ran as far away as I could. Unfortunately I was trapped at the end of a long room, so *as far away as I could* was only a few feet, with the barrel between me and the strange, tall, thin man.

The man, and I use the term loosely, was unlike any man I had ever met. His body was far too thin to be natural. I could have placed both of my hands around his waist with fingers touching. His arms and legs were too long and his fingers thin and bony. Even his head was long and thin, with a pointed smile and thin, dark eyes. His skin was dark and wrinkled, and it clung to his bones like a wet rag. He looked like a man who had his insides sucked out, leaving him shrivelled and dry. A dirty grey robe hung off his body like a clothes line. He stepped closer and I saw his eyes were cloudy and grey, yet he must have been able to see out of them for he seemed intent to examine every part of me.

"Curse the Darkness, she's alive!" exclaimed the woman. She appeared much more normal looking, at least compared to the strange tall thin shrivelled man, though not entirely healthy. Her skin was corpse-grey, apart from her left arm which had a blueish hue and didn't match the rest of her body. She had wrinkles showed her age, her eyes were dull and sunken, and her dirty blond hair was a tangled mess.

The third one, a man standing beside the woman, looked just like some kind of intermediate stage between the other two. Pale skin, some rotten flesh here and there. It seemed he had his eyes closed as he faced me, smiling like an idiot. He held something small in

his hands and pointed it in my direction, but from this distance I couldn't quite see what it was. "Don't be daft," he said. "They don't send us live ones anymore. Not after what happened last time."

"You say that as if they know what happened last time," said the woman. The two stood just a few yards behind the first man and watched me with a curiosity that made me nervous, like a crowd watching a street performer.

Once again the shrivelled man took a step forward and I backed up against the wall. There was nowhere else for me to go. He let out an exasperated grunt and strode towards me. I froze as he grabbed my head with his hard rough hands. His needle-like fingers pressed into my skull as he held my head still and pulled down the skin below my eyes with his thumbs, examining the whites. I don't know what he saw there, but he nodded and hmm'd to himself.

"Do you breath, girl?" he said. I was too scared to answer. His hands were warm but hard. I couldn't take my eyes off his skeletal face and shrivelled dry skin clinging to his cheek bones. "You do, don't you? Breath, girl!" he commanded.

I clamped my mouth shut, glared into his eyes and held my breath.

"Breath!" he commanded again, shaking my head.

My heart pounded in my ears. My lungs ached. He squeezed my head and I bit down on the inside of my cheeks to avoid opening my mouth and screaming. I stared at him so hard I imagined he might die from my gaze alone.

But finally I couldn't hold it in any longer. I gasped for breath and he let go of my head, taking a few steps back. He looked at me with wide eyes. "You really are alive..."

"You've probably scared her witless now," said the Woman. She shuffled towards me and took me by the hand with her blue arm. Her hand was cold and stiff, but her grip was gentle, so I allowed it. "Don't worry, dear. We're here to help. That's our job, to make your transition as painless as possible."

She led me around the barrel towards the centre of the room. "What's your name, dear?" she asked.

"Pax," I said after a moment. "Who are you people?"

"My name is Zell," she said. "This is Griff, and the stick-man over there is Wain." The

too-thin man frowned and looked away.

"We're Custodians, you know," Griff said with a smile. His teeth were yellow and green and I hoped he would never smile again. "We took the role of caretakers for the Eternal Death. Our job, specifically, is to welcome the new comers. To make sure their entry into the Crescent is as smooth as possible. There used to be more of us. Much more... but bodies rot, you see. Our souls may be immortal, but our bodies still decay and that takes some management. Perhaps you'd like to join us?"

"Oh Griff, at least let her settle in first," Zell said. She led me to a low slab of stone in the centre of the room. "Now, Pax, lie down here."

Griff and Wain joined us at the slab of stone. Wain had taken out a long, curved dagger. Griff pointed the small, slimy object in his hand to me and I saw that it was an eyeball. "It still works," he said, noticing my gaze. He held the eyeball between his thumb and forefinger and pointed it towards my face. For a second he raised his eyelids and behind them I saw only empty sockets. "I can still see. Funny how the Eternal Death works like that. Lost the other eye a while ago, though. All it can see is black now. I have no idea what happened to it..."

"I told you!" Zell said, elbowing him in the side. "You left it at the tavern. You and your silly tricks."

"No, no..." Griff pointed his eye at Zell and shook his head. "I'm positive I had it when I left. I remember, because I had to push the door open with my shoulder. Had an eye in both hands, you see."

"You had to push the door open with your shoulder because you were too drunk to work out how to push it with your hand," Zell said.

Griff jerked his head in a gesture that I guessed would have been a roll of the eyes, if he had them. "Don't worry, girl. When we kill you, it'll be quick and painless. And there's be hardly any scarring."

It was at this point that I realised how much danger I was in. Wain stared at me with narrow eyes, dagger in hand, and gestured to the stone slab. Zell shook her head at her companions. "Look, you've gone and scared her again. Don't worry about Wain, dear, he always looks like he wants to murder people. There's really nothing to worry about."

"It'll be a quick death, I promise," said Griff. "And if its not, well... then I owe you a drink. But its necessary, you know. We can't have the living wandering around the Crescent. It'll cause all manner of trouble."

"They'll eat you alive," Zell said, nodding towards the slab. "Now, then, down you go."

They waited patiently, almost casually, for me to lie down on the stone slab and allow them to kill me. Wain tapped his thin little foot on the stone floor. Flickering light from the large candelabra lighting the room glinted on the dagger as he turned it over in his hand.

The only exit from the long room was at the other end from which I had entered. I could make a run for it, but then what? All I knew of the Crescent was what I had seen on a map. It was a grand crescent-shaped city cupping the north edge of a completely circular lake. They say at its peak it was beautiful— an arc of shining light above a lake of sparkling blue. Then the Eternal Death crept out of the lake, out of nowhere. Before anyone knew exactly what was happening everyone in the city was infected. The city was walled off and, ever since, the new infected have been dumped inside, never to be seen again.

"Oh come on, girl," said Wain, glaring at her.

"Well, look, give me a minute," I said, taking a step back from the slab. "This is a lot to take in at once. Death isn't something you should rush into... This isn't exactly how I imagined my life would end."

"Oh deary, don't think of it as an ending," said Zell. "You're Eternal now. Your death will go on forever."

I didn't know what she meant. Nothing was forever. Eternity didn't exist. I couldn't even picture what it might be like to live forever. I turned to glance at Griff and his decaying body. He smiled, then popped his eyeball into his mouth and move it around with his tongue for a moment before pulling it back out again. "Got to keep it moist, you see," he said with a grin.

"Where are we anyway?" I asked. Besides the large candelabra hanging from the ceiling the room was lit by sconces lining the walls. At one end was a raised dias within which sat my barrel. Embedded within the wall beyond this was a large round hole.

"This is the palace," Zell said, gesturing around the room. "This used to be the throne room. Must have been grand, back in the day. Can you imagine? They say the walls were

shining white once, colourful banners and tapestries hung from the ceiling, two great shining thrones sat the end of the room. Now everything has been destroyed."

"Not destroyed," Griff put in, stabbing his eyeball at Zell. "Repurposed. It was necessary."

"Oh, I don't doubt it was necessary," said Zell with a sigh. "Still sad though. The Eternal Death effects everything. Not just people, but animals, plants, buildings, even the air itself. The city is dying, but the Eternal Death will never let it fall. It will be here forever, slowly decaying into... well... the Light only knows."

If the walls were once white, it didn't show. They were grey and dirty now, and covered with countless years of death and grime. The air was stale and the faint smell of mould and decay hadn't left my nose since my arrival. At first I had attributed the smell to these three, but now I suspected it came from everywhere around me. If I stayed here too long, I would smell the same too. I had to get out.

"But the Light, girl, are you going to stand there all day?" exclaimed Wain. "Come on!" He lunged at me and grabbed my arm. I spun and punched him hard in the chest, wrenching the knife from his hand as he recoiled in shock.

"Don't come near me!" I shouted as I waved the knife before me.

Zell looked from me to the knife and chuckled. "Dear, do you think you can threaten us with a knife? We're already dead."

I backed up towards one side of the room. The three of them were behind the slab on the opposite side with the exit to my right. "From the looks of things, you seem to lack the ability to heal. Tell me, will you miss your fingers if I cut them all off? Or a hand? Want me to poke your eye out so you match your boyfriend there?"

Zell's smile faded. Griff aimed his eye at me and frowned. "You won't last long out there alive. We need to kill you first. It's for your own good."

I pointed the knife at them as I edged towards the doorway. They looked concerned, but remained still as I backed out the room. The doorway led to a long corridor so I turned and ran. The corridor led to another large doorway which finally lead outside.

Beyond the building they had called the Palace was a large courtyard with a circular



garden filled with dead plants in its centre. I didn't stop to admire the view, but ran straight through the middle. A large gate sat open, marking the edge of the Palace grounds and the rest of the city. I noted no guards as I ran through, but kept running regardless. They would be after me, guards or not. I couldn't let them catch me.

\* \* \*

The city beyond the gates was dull and grey like the palace. I ran left and right, weaving through wide streets and narrow alleyways with no care of direction or destination. When I felt I couldn't find my way back to the palace even if I wanted to, I finally stopped to rest.

I was in a narrow street with a line of shops to the right and some kind of garden or park to the left. Grey, decaying people wandered the streets as if they were alive. Some looked well preserved, others had bones protruding or limbs completely missing. As they passed they stared as if I were the decaying one. I rarely saw smiles, but withered, sad faces and tired gaits. When I saw the upper half of a man's torso pulling himself along the cobblestone road, I averted my eyes, turned and entered the park.

The grass was brown and crunched under my feet. A row of plants sprouted shrivelled leaves and withered, dried up flowers. Dead, grey trees grew brown, rotted apples. I entered a clearing in the centre of the park and collapsed onto a small wooden bench to catch my breath. The sunlight itself seemed infected by the Eternal Death. It shone dull brown instead of the glowing golden light I remembered.

I stuck out. My skin was still pale and clean, my hair was fiery red, my dress was green, and much brighter than anything I saw around me. I knew it would be far too easy for the Custodians to find me, so I knelt and pulled at the brown grass until I reached bare dirt. Taking large handfuls of it, I smeared grime all over myself.

I covered my dress with dirt until it was more brown than green. I covered my arms and legs, and spread dirt over my face until I was just as dirty as they were. Finally I took the knife in one hand, pulled my hair taut with the other, and cut it as short as I could. It was rough and messy, but so was everyone around me.

When I finished I knew my look wasn't perfect. I didn't look as dead as some of the people I saw around me, but this way I had a better chance of blending in.

Before leaving the park I took some time to finally pull the splinter from my finger. The relief was amazing, but I hid my smile, hunched over and tried to look as miserable as everyone I saw around me. I shuffled south from the park. I didn't exactly know where I was going, but from what I knew of the Crescent I thought if I walked south I should hit a lake. At one point, in a narrow alleyway, I passed a man's pair of legs which I suspected belonged to the torso I had seen earlier.

Here and there I saw people like Custodian Wain. Men and women whose body had withered so much they looked more like twisted branches of a tree rather than people. Some of them had yellowish-orange limbs, like Zell. I avoided them and turned in the opposite direction when I saw these people.

Everyone outside had at least heard of the Crescent. Little children were told they would be sent to the Crescent if they didn't behave, for that was where naughty, dirty kids were kept. Some bards wrote romantic, fantasised stories about the imagined life within the Crescent. But nobody knew the truth.

I could see it, you know, from the tallest hill near the village. I didn't tell Father, I thought if he knew I went to look at it he would forbid me from visiting the hill. Our village was the closest settlement to the Crescent and from the top of the tall hill just south of town I could see the high wall of the Crescent in the distance. It looked like a grey smudge on the horizon, peaking above the land to either side. It looked so dark and mysterious... of course I knew the stories were all made up. Nobody had ever escaped from the Crescent, so how could anyone know what it was really like? I always wondered what went on beyond that great curved wall, but I never thought I'd ever be here myself.

I hated everything about the Crescent. Even the air smelt dead. There had to be a way out. I had to get back home. I wanted to breath fresh air again, to feel warm sunlight on my skin again. I knew I shouldn't run aimlessly through the city, so I decided to head for the lake. I thought perhaps that I could swim across to the shore on the other side. I had never heard of sucessful escapes, but then why would I? If an infected had actually managed to escape the Crescent and wanted to remain free, the last thing they would do is announce their presence to the world. They would hide in some far-off forest and live a meagre existence away from

civilisation.

If I could feel the sunlight on my skin again, that meagre existence would be enough for me. I'd contact my sister, of course, but forbid her to tell my father. Father wouldn't understand. I knew it for sure. He never did approve of anything I did.

Finally I came to the docks and the lake. Docks and wharves made of rotten wood jutted out into a lake of black water. There were almost no people here. No reason to be here, I guessed, as there were no boats. Nothing but a large circle of black water that stretched almost to the horizon. At the black water's edge the dirt and sand had mixed to form an odd blue clay.

I walked to the end of one of the longer wharves and looked down at the water below my feet. It didn't reflect the sky, or the docks, or even myself. I could see nothing but the darkness within its depths.

I knelt and poked my head out beyond the edge of the dock, staring into the water's inky blackness. Not seeing my reflection staring back at me was an odd feeling. The darkness was so big, and I was so little. I felt dizzy, like I was about to fall in, even though my hands and knees were planted on the solid wooden planks of the wharf.

When a putrid, sick feeling bubbled in my stomach I stood and turned back towards the city to find a woman watching me. Her dark hair was in a braid down her back and several small patches of mould darkened her face, but otherwise she looked as though she had fared well so far.

"Don't do it," she said to me. "People have tried to swim to shore, nobody ever makes it. As soon as they hit the black stuff they're gone. Swallowed up."

"What is it?" I said, glancing back down at the black water beneath the boards under my feet. "I'd heard of the black lake but to see it myself..."

"Wierd, eh?" she said. She strolled towards me. "They say when the Eternal Death first appeared the waters of the lake turned black. Maybe its Death itself. Liquefied Death."

As she approached me I began to tense up. I stepped backwards to the end of the wharf, cursing myself for getting caught in a dead end. I didn't doubt her words, I now had no desire to go near the black water. My only route of escape was past the woman, back into the city.

She must have noticed my suspicion for she paused and held up her hands. "I don't mean any harm. Not long ago I was in your position. They wanted to kill you, didn't they?"

"Who?" I said, watching her eyes carefully.

"The Custodians," she answered. "Crazy, they are. Self-appointed caretakers of the new arrivals, but all they take is life. This has happened before, newbies coming in alive, that is. Mostly the new arrivals are already dead, but occasionally we get a live one and they take it upon themselves to do the honours in killing the poor people. I think they secretly enjoy it. They seem to care more about the thrill of the kill than the people that they're killing. Looks like you escaped, lucky. But they'll be after you. They don't enjoy failure." She looked me up and down and I squirmed under her gaze. "Looks like you did a passable job dirtying yourself up, but you still stick out like a rose in a patch of weeds."

I couldn't sense any deception in her. I didn't consider myself a great judge of character, but then I had never been in a situation like this. I didn't want to trust her, but I was desperate. I needed an ally in this town and she was the first friendly face I had seen. I didn't let my guard down, I didn't trust her completely, but I did give her my attention. "Can you help me?"

\* \* \*

"Of course I can help you," The woman smiled. Her teeth were yellow, but intact. I guessed she hadn't been dead for long. "I can take you to a safe place. The Custodians won't find you, and you can stay as long as you like. Stay until they stop looking for you, at least. After that, if you like, we can show you around. Show you the sights, that sort of thing, if you like. The Crescent really isn't as bad as it looks, once you get used to the smell."

I walked towards her and took her outstretched hand. It was cold, but touching another human being was nice. Comforting, in a way. "My name is Solt, by the way," she said, as she led me back into the city.

"Pax," I replied. "Where exactly are we going?"

"I help run a tavern on the west side of the Crescent," she said. "You can stay there as long as you like. We won't mind at all."

She led me through the grey city, never letting go of my hand. At first I felt like a pet taken for a walk, but with the stares that I received I was soon grateful for her guidance and

protection. They looked at me as I looked at them: some with curiosity, with some fear, some with revulsion. Occasionally some of the Crescent residents would look at me with hunger in their eyes. I hated those stares the most.

The city was a maze and I wondered how people navigated it even before the Eternal Death came. It seemed the original inhabitants had beauty, not practicality, in mind when designing the city. Now that beauty had become a grotesque caricature of what it once had been. We entered a wide, west-facing avenue which looked to have once been picturesque. I tried to imagine what it might have looked like, lined with bright green trees, morning light gushing down the street as happy people strolled along the cobblestone. Now dead brown trees lined the avenue and grey light seeped through the air like a miasma of illness.

I wished I could fly into the air and see the city from the sky as the birds do. Perhaps from the sky some of the Crescent's beauty would still shine through.

The tavern was located at the end of the avenue. It looked to be three or four stories tall. The once-white bricks were now stained with dirt and mold. Dead weeds spilt forth from window boxes. An old and faded sign hung above the wide entry doors reading 'The Maiden's Breath', but someone had crossed out the word 'Breath' and scrawled 'Death' over it in brown ink— or it might have been congealed blood. I couldn't tell which.

"The inside is prettier than the outside, much like the people here," Solt pulled me through the front doors. The room inside was large and warm, lit by a fire at one wall. Small round tables dotted the floor and people sat at them, drinking, talking and laughing— though not at the same time. They didn't look happy, not quite, but some of them almost looked content. I couldn't help but wonder why. They were dead, and would be dead forever. There's no cure for the Eternal Death, how could they laugh as though they were having fun? Their bodies were rotting around them and yet they smiled and joked with each other as though it were the end of the week and they just got off work. The man behind the bar was the only one who didn't look happy. The grey, thin, scarred man frowned and grumbled as he served a muddy brown liquid to the eager customers.

Everyone turned to stare at us as we entered. I didn't like the way they grinned and leered at me, but Solt squeezed my hand, smiled and pulled me to a quiet table in the corner.

"Don't worry, you're safe here," she said. I sat down, grateful to relax my feet. Solt motioned to the man behind the bar, who brought over two mugs of brown liquid. It smelt of mouldy cheese with rotten meat undertones.

Solt sat opposite me and gulped down the drink without hesitation. "It's the only thing we can offer you, unfortunately," she said. "Dead bear made from dead plants grown in dead soil by dead people."

"Thanks, but I'm not thirsty," I lied.

Solt examined me for a moment before shrugging. "Suit yourself," she said, taking another drink. "So tell me about yourself. How'd you get infected out there? We were beginning to think the Eternal Death had been eradicated."

So I told her my story. "I lived in Crossed Hills, the closest village to the Crescent. We're taught about the infected, the Eternal Death, the Crescent, and all of that at school. We all know about it. But they like to make sure nobody forgets, so the Death Parade came to town."

Solt's eyes grew wide. "The Death Parade? I've heard stories but never seen it for myself."

"They have two people, two infected," I explained. "A man and a woman. They're both kept in cages and paraded around the land. *This is what the Eternal Death looks like, learn to recognise it so you can avoid it,*' that sort of thing. My father made my sister and I go to see them. It horrified me. The man looked ancient. His body had rotted much more so than the woman. His lower jaw had fallen off so that he was unable to talk, but he made sad, miserable moans as we watched and listened to their captors give their lectures. The woman appeared newly dead, though I'm not an expert at judging that sort of thing. I haven't seen too many dead people."

I looked down at the table, trying not to picture the sad, fearful looks on their grey faces. "It was horrible. They were living people kept in cages like animals. Well, not living, but alive. You know what I mean— thinking and feeling people. They were innocent. The only crime they were guilty of was catching an illness and yet they were treated like animals."

Solt raised the mug to her lips and stared at me over the rim. "You could say they were treated like dead people."

"No, dead people are treated with respect," I said. "Dead people are buried and honoured and remembered with fondness. These two were treated as something worse than death. They were tortured but they hadn't committed a crime."

"Or they were just dead," she said.

"Are you saying they deserved to be locked up like that?" I replied.

"No," Solt swallowed another mouthful of the foul brown beer. "I'm saying you're still alive. You don't know what the Eternal Death feels like. Eternal Death is a moment. A singular instant stretched into infinity. The moment of death— the instant your life seeps from your body— made to go on forever. We will die forever. The Eternal Death is more torture than anything their captors could have done to them. You'll see what I mean soon enough."

I stared at her and wondered what she meant. Seeing my face, she chuckled. "I'm sorry. It's not as bad as it seems. You sort of... get used to dying. After a while it just feels normal."

"I didn't think they deserved to be locked up like animals," I went on. "So that night I snuck out as soon as I heard my father's snores. The Death Parade had stayed overnight just outside of town. It wasn't hard to find the cages of the man and the woman. The man whimpered when he saw me. I could tell he was in pain, but I didn't know what I could do for him. I hadn't planned that far ahead. Perhaps I wanted to let them out. Perhaps I wanted to talk to them. I don't know."

"The woman approached the bars and motioned me over. She pleaded with me to let her out. She wanted to return to her family, she said she missed them more than she could bare. I edged closer without really thinking. Then her mood fell. She spat, and admitted that she wanted to infect her whole family with the Eternal Death so they could all be together in misery for the rest of eternity. She was mad, I guess her brain had rotted more than her body. But I didn't realise that until it was too late."

I stopped to take a breath and stared down at the table as I continued. "She lunged at me. With an arm stuck through the bars she caught my wrist, and for one terrifying moment she held on tight. Her hand was cold but her touch burned."

"The Eternal Death," Solt murmured.

"I screamed in pain and that's when the guards came. They separated us, but wouldn't

let me go. They punished the woman then and there, right in front of me. Whipped her to shreds. They made me watch. They wouldn't let me go. I never saw my family again."

"Horrific," Solt shook her head. "But here in the Crescent we get to choose our family. You're not alone, Pax. Don't worry, we'll make you feel right at home. But first, dinner." Solt took my hand again and led me towards the back of the room.

"Now that you mention it, I'm starving," I said. "You have food?"

A moment passed before Solt answered. "We do now."

\* \* \*

We passed through a doorway behind the bar and down a flight of steps into some kind of basement. Crates and boxes lined the walls and a small round table sat in the middle, with several chairs surrounding it. In one corner of the shadowy room was a metal cage just large enough for a person.

I froze on the bottom step upon sight of the cage. Solt pulled at my arm but I wrenched it free. "Why can't we just eat upstairs?"

"Don't be silly," Solt said as she turned to me. "We'd make too much of a mess."

I realised too late that there was a man behind me. I hadn't even heard his footsteps. Before I could react he had pulled by arms back and tied my hands behind my back in one swift movement. It was clear he had done this before, perhaps many times. I struggled but he was much stronger than I was. He picked me up and carried me on his shoulder to the centre of the room where he set me upon a chair and tied my waist, chest and arms with yet more rope to its high back.

Solt stood in the shadows near the corner of the room, watching the man work. He came before me and I saw he was a large, burly man with bruises and sores all over his body. The left side of his mouth was ripped open in such a way that he had a permanent smirk. I tried my best not to look at his face.

He grabbed my legs but I aimed for his groin and gave him a stiff kick. Solt's eyes flashed as she watched us. He grunted and recoiled, and the half of his face that still had lips scowled at me. He strode closer and slapped me hard in the face. "There's more where that came from if you keep fighting," he growled.



"Go easy on her, Dunn," Solt said from the shadows. Her face was unreadable but she had never taken her eyes off the two of us. My face stung as he tied my left leg to the chair. Once it was secure, Dunn took my right leg and stretched it out onto a second chair, tying my foot to the other side.

Once he was finished he stood with his hands on the second chair, keeping it firmly on the floor. My right leg was on display for all the room to see, and I could do nothing about it.

Finally Solt came out of the shadows and stood beside us. She gazed not at my face, but at my exposed right leg. Her hungry eyes made me want to turn and run. "Look... for what its worth, I'm sorry. I like you, Pax. I feel bad, I honestly do. But we've been here for a long... long time."

"What are you going to do to me?" I said. The quiver in my voice betrayed my fear.

"You don't understand what its like here," Solt said. "You've too new. In time, you'll feel like us. Soon the hunger will set in. And the thing is, fresh meat is hard to find around here. It's been such a long time since we've had access to fresh, living flesh. Being undead, we don't *need* to eat... but..."

"You're going to eat me?" I said.

Solt finally looked me in the eyes. "I'm sorry, Pax. Yes, we're going to eat you. But don't worry, we won't eat all of you. I mean, you're one of us now. You can't die..." She sighed, pulled up a chair beside mine and lightly stroked my leg. I hated her cold touch, but I was too afraid to say anything about it. "It's the Eternal Death. It kills your body but not your mind. Your soul remains trapped inside your decaying shell, complete with all its mortal wants and needs. Your desires, they never go away. We are people, Pax, just like you. We want happiness and satisfaction, the same as everyone on the outside. But its been so long... and some desires grow stronger than others. We haven't had something as satisfying as you cross our path in quite a while. To put it simply, living meat is a delicacy we couldn't pass up. Do you understand?"

I stared into her eyes, trying to find compassion there. "No. Why is it important that I understand?"

Her eyes narrowed for a moment before she turned away. I saw nothing in them. "I guess its not." She climbed the steps and knocked on the basement door. When it opened a

crack, she nodded and another man slipped into the basement.

He was shorter than the other and in a much neater state of decay, yet his right hand didn't match the rest of his body. His skin was pale and white apart from this hand, which had the bluish tinge I had seen on several people here. He carried a variety of metal tools including a knife, a saw and a large needle.

He stood near me, gazing down at my leg before looking me in the eyes. "I'll sew the wound up, scarring will be minimal. It will hurt... but only for a few hours."

Dunn reaffirmed his grip on the second chair. "Should we gag her?"

Solt shook her head. "No, let her scream. She deserves that much." The smaller man nodded and knelt before me. He pulled out a long leather belt from a pocket and wrapped it tightly around my upper thigh, where my leg met my torso. He pulled it tighter and tighter until I could feel my leg beginning to tingle.

I was so terrified I forgot how to speak. I stared at the three of them in the eyes, silently pleading, but they ignored my looks.

He took the knife and held it against my leg, just below the tourniquet. For a moment I hoped it was all a joke. Some elaborate initiation ceremony. They were just scaring me because I was the new girl. In a second they will laugh and set me free. *You should have seen the look on your face, Solt will say. I knew all along that you wouldn't go through with it, I'd say.*

Solt watched me with a dark expression. The smiling, trustworthy face that had lured me in was gone. Dunn didn't bother to hide his grin, on both sides of his face. The surgeon didn't look at me at all, but kept his focus on my leg. When I started crying they ignored my tears.

They also ignored my screams when he started cutting into my leg. He cut through my flesh to the bone, then put down the knife and picked up the saw. There was fire in my brain and I screamed, and screamed, until my vision blurred. I forgot where I was, I didn't know what was happening. My entire world became pain and screams.

I knew there was activity around me, but I didn't care. All I could feel was the pain. The surgeon poked and cut and sewed and burnt, and I screamed all throughout. At some point they untied me and dragged me to a cage in the corner of the room. I was too confused to fight

back. The big man, Dunn, threw me inside where I collapsed on the floor. He slammed the cage door shut and turned a key in the lock. "You should taste nice. Young girls like you always taste nice." He leered at me through the bars for a moment before he chuckled and left me alone.

I felt so dumb. So foolish. I shouldn't have trusted them. I shouldn't have trusted anyone. I shouldn't have gone outside that night. I shouldn't have disobeyed my father.

It was the first time the Death Parade had ever come to our village. Crossed Hills was so far from the capital that, most of the time, they ignored us. But this time they didn't forget, and Father made sure we visited the Parade the minute it arrived. He always said knowledge was power, so to know the Eternal Death was to be protected from it. But the sight of those poor souls trapped not only in cages, but inside their decaying bodies, it stuck with me. Even now, in my own little cage, I can still picture the man and the woman. The sadness in the man's eyes, and the longing and pleading in the woman's.

I had been too trusting then, too. I shouldn't have gone near them at all. I should have kept my distance.

*But they're people like us, I had said to my father. How can we keep people in cages and parade them around like animals? How is that right?*

*They're not people, not anymore, was his reply. Don't think of them that way. They are a disease. They are the Eternal Death personified now. They are our knowledge and power and protection.*

But I wasn't satisfied. I rarely was. I had to see it for myself. Then I became the one locked up in the cage, infected, waiting for death. I thought I'd be locked up in that cage forever as they cut me up into pieces. Next an arm, then another leg, then maybe my other arm. Perhaps they'll eat my torso last. I'll be a head on a shelf, able to only watch as they drag another poor living girl into the basement to eat her next.

I wondered how many more had called this cage home. I wondered what had happened to them. I had seen no head shelf. Was there a cupboard somewhere with heads arranged in a neat line side by side? Or did they eat the heads too? They say that up north they make soup out of snelk heads. Would that be my fate? To become head soup?

\* \* \*

At some point I fell asleep. It wasn't intentional, so perhaps 'lost consciousness' was a better description. I dreamt I was back in the village. I wasn't locked inside a cage, trapped in the Crescent, but gazing at the city from afar. From my spot atop the grassy hill just outside of town, I looked out at the distant wall and wondered what lay inside.

Now I was lying on the ground. The grass nestled up around my neck. My legs were outstretched. My hands gripped the ground as if I might fly off if I weren't holding on. I stared up at the great blue sky. It was so bright I couldn't keep my eyes open for long. Then a cloud passed over the sun. I watched the clouds pass by with not a care in the world.

I had two legs, of course. I could feel them, move them, bend and stretch them. My leg itched, so I tried to scratch it but my hand passed right through it and I fell back to reality. I awoke with a start. My invisible leg itched like crazy and I could do nothing about. Do you know what the greatest torture in the world is? An itch you cannot scratch.

I don't know how long I cried for. Within my cage in the basement I had no way to judge the passing of time. I was tired. The pain my leg was still there, but it had shrunk to dull embers rather than the roaring flame of earlier. I wanted to pass out again, but I knew I couldn't. I had to get out. If I stayed there I would be allowing them to eat me. I could not — would not — walk willingly into death. I had to escape. I had to fight back.

Bending my neck, I braced my shoulders against one side of the cage and kicked with my good leg against the cage door. It rattled but remained closed. I kicked again and again. Finally on the fourth kick the cage door flung open. The clang echoed around the room and I scrambled to hold the cage door closed in case someone heard. I held my breath and waited, but nobody came.

When I was sure I was safe I eased the cage door open and pushed myself out. Now that I was free I tried to push myself into a standing position, but standing on one leg was harder than I thought it would be. My brain expected my other leg to be there to support me. When it wasn't, I went tumbling to the ground. I hurt my arm as I fell, but I had no time to worry about that. I couldn't worry about anything except escaping. I told myself I could worry about everything later. I would save up my worries for when I was safe, and free. Then I could go through the list and give each problem just the right amount of worry it deserved. But for

now I needed to get out of this place.

I crawled, dragged and pushed myself across the room and up the steps. I could hear nothing from the other side of the door. It wasn't locked so I pushed it open and dared to peak through the crack. Solt stood behind the bar wiping down the counter. Her back was facing me, her attention elsewhere. I couldn't see the rest of the tavern, but the room seemed quiet. It almost sounded empty. The scarred man who stood behind the bar when I had first entered was nowhere to be seen.

Without making a sound I edged the door open and crawled through. I followed the left wall, dragging myself forward with my arms and pushing with my leg. As I reached the halfway point the pain my arm became too much. I stopped to catch my breath — and that's when I noticed Solt staring straight at me.

"Hurry, Pax!" she whispered across the room. "The others will be back soon. Hurry!" She jerked her head towards the front doors. I added *Why would Solt aid my escape?* to my list of things to worry about later.

Somehow I managed to find strength I didn't know I had and crawled towards the front doors. It was open, so I crawled through and rolled down the steps. Finally I was outside, but not free yet. I had to keep moving.

The street was wide and there were far too many ways I could have turned. The choice was almost overwhelming, so I decided instead to make no choice at all. I stayed on the main road and kept to the left.

Like a worm I inched my way forward along the side of the street. I gathered dust, dirt and grime as I crawled. My clean green dress was grey, like the rest of the city. Finally I fit in. After a while I developed a rhythm. Left arm, right arm, leg push, breath. Left arm, right arm, leg push, breath. I thought of nothing else but the rhythm. Left arm, right arm, leg push, breath.

I didn't know where I was going, but I knew that I couldn't stop. I had to go somewhere. Anywhere.

Then in the distance I saw him. Wain, the Custodian who had scared me so much when I first arrived. With his stretched out, too-thin body and wrinkled skin, he had looked so alien to me. So unlike any person I'd ever seen before. But now, somehow, he looked normal. Almost

welcoming.

He stood on the opposite side of the street looking back the way he had come. I stared across at him and knew what I had to do. They were right, the only way to survive here was to die. Staying alive made me a target.

It took me a few minutes to crawl across the road. At one point I crawled right into a slimy puddle, but I resisted the temptation to wonder what it was and continued to crawl.

At last I crawled to his feet. When he saw me he knelt down and sighed. "Oh girl, what did they do to you?"

"I'm ready now," I said, catching my breath. "I'm ready to be killed."

He looked at me with pity in his eyes and nodded. When he moved as if to pick me up, I shook my head. "No, I can stand. Just help me up."

He gave me his hand and pulled me upright. With one arm over his shoulder I hopped down the street. It was nice to stand upright, and even though I was tired and the muscles in my leg were on fire, I forced myself to hop all the way there. We must have looked like quite a sight. A long-dead shrivelled man with a dirty one-legged woman hopping beside him. But after a while, we made it.

The idea of death used to scare me. I always imagined myself living a long and happy life and dying in my sleep at a ripe old age. But at that moment, re-entering the palace, I welcomed death. I longed for it. I wanted to be comfortable and safe and content. I wanted the Eternal Death.

Zell and Griff greeted us with smiles as we entered the throne room. Wain helped me onto the stone slab in the centre of the room. It felt good to lie down, finally, and I relaxed. "I'll get the knife," he said and turned to leave.

Griff smiled down at me, aiming his eye at my face. "Don't worry, dear, it's really for the best. We'll bleed you. It'll hurt a bit, but it's the best way to kill you. There will be almost no scarring and your body will decay much slower." He moved his eye down my body and aimed it to where my leg should have been.

"I told you they'd eat you alive," Zell said with a shake of her head. "I tried to warn you."

"Now Zell, that's enough," Griff said, poking his eye at her. "I'm sure she feels bad

enough as it is."

Wain returned, carrying with him the long, curved knife. First he stood at my head and held the knife near my neck. Nobody spoke. The room was quiet as he dragged it across my skin. It stung, but it was a welcome pain. The beginning of my new existence. This was a pain I wanted. Next he stood to my left and cut along my inner forearm. Finally he moved to my right and did the same. They waited with me, and Zell held my hand as the blood seeped from my wounds.

An odd sort of calm came over me. Lying on the slab with the life draining from my body made me feel like those days lying on the hill, staring up at the clouds. I forgot my list of worries, I forgot to think of feel, I simply existed. I think at some point I fell asleep. I was unaware of the exact moment of death. When I awoke, I didn't feel any different.

Wain smiled down at me. "It's done. You're dead now."

"Thank you," I said. I sat up and noticed the large glass jar at the foot of the slab. Small channels in the stone had carried my blood down the slab where it collected in the glass jar.

Zell smiled and nodded when she saw my questioning glance. "Blood is a valuable commodity around here, specially fresh blood. This will help pay for a new leg, just like my arm. A nice blue replacement leg."

"Soon you'll be as good as new," Griff added.

Wain cleared his throat. "I, that is, we'd be honoured if you'd join us. We need more Custodians around here."

Zell clapped her hands. "Oh yes, good idea! You can help the new ones like we do! Perhaps you'll do a better job of convincing them death is a good option than we did."

"Okay," I said. "Thank you."

I couldn't say I was happy. The Eternal Death casts its grey shadow on everything here, even happiness. But I was content. I had a home and a family again. I fit in.

I decided I would help them. Nobody would ever have to go through what I went through. Not again. I didn't abandon my quest for freedom. In fact, I made it my focus. I will tour the city, getting to know it more and more each time. One day I will find my escape. I know I will. After all, I have all the time in the world.

I will leave the Crescent and feel the sunlight on my skin again even if it takes me one hundred years.