Master of Puppets

by Jennifer Donnell

Jamie seized the edge of her seat as Ferdinand drove, her blonde locks cascading out of a burgundy wool men's hat. Though the rock infested road wasn't paved this far away from the surveillance, most of her angst was mental. How long until they'd notice she was gone, she wondered numbly, as the once manicured lawns and trees faded into brush and tumble. Would they come for them immediately or wait awhile and prepare. Once they sent the wrath in full force, would she crack under the pressure.

Ferdinand seemed oblivious to such worldly concerns. Perhaps he thrived on it, as his muscular arm gripped the steering wheel of the old beige car. He'd told her he knew someone who sold cars like this, censors removed, vehicles you could drive anywhere without anyone knowing. Indeed, it seemed eery without the locator beam flashing their location on the built-in screen, atop the dashboard. Admittedly, she still felt as if they were being watched... but didn't know by whom.

The car turned at a sharp right angle, without Ferdinand warning her. Her hands flew from her lap, as the tires ground over the earth beneath them. The brush grew thick and dusty. It must be the turning toward, well, wherever he was taking her. She longed to interrogate whether he had a plan lasting more than a few hours ahead, but didn't want to speak unless they had to, not until they were safe. *Safe*, it was archaic word. Children weren't even taught it now, as how could anyone be ‘safe'. She remembered her Baba's hand stroking her forehead, she couldn't have been more than... two? She was safe then and, from what she remembered, being safe felt good. The memory was strong enough to make her want it again, should that day ever come.

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Ferdinand switched to driving with one hand as the car slowed, the engine puttering when it reached an incline. His free hand ventured over to stroke her cheek, his olive skin warm to the touch. She brushed her lips against the hair on his wrist and closed her eyes. If only this were all.

The worst of their escape was the mind tricks. The Way was so engrained in her subconscious that she often caught herself convincing her mind it was Truth. *The rules were to help them,* her subconscious whispered steadfast. *Why were they bothering to fight, when no one who fought against The Way had ever won*. Ferdinand winked as the car slowed, it triggered her mind back to the car, the emptiness surrounding them, and the reasons they were doing it at all.

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“There's enough food to last here a week.” Ferdinand assured, as a dingy wooden cabin came into view. They were on foot now. He'd insisted on forcing the car into a ravine, using a heavy rock and the last of the gasoline to drive it into a heap of rusted metal. Jamie wished she'd remembered the card she'd left in the pocket of the car door. It was something a co-worker had given her before she left, Jessica. Jessica at work, with the legs that went on forever and the smile of 100-watts. She'd never given her much thought before, assuming she was like the others- unquestioning and willingly naive. It wasn't until a week before she and Ferdinand made their escape, that Jessica had cornered her in the basement of the library and pulled a slip of paper from her knee high tan stockings. It was an index card of numbers and symbols, along with a quote from a historical author Jamie had always read. The look in Jessica's eyes had implied *not to ask*... which she hadn't, knowing the scanner recorded them even at work.

She'd debated telling Ferdinand, but in the end decided not to. Better to keep the slip of paper close at hand and look at it once they left the metropolis. Now, her own stupidity frustrated her to no end. Why had she forgotten something that potentially important? She closed her eyes and could almost make out the first letter... *almost*. Ferdinand smiled, his grin worth more than 100-watts, and took her hand as they trudged through the thick brush to reach the dilapidated cabin. It was the most they'd touched in hours and she felt an immediate tingle through her spine. Whatever happened, it wasn't *all bad*. Even a gentleman in the boondocks, he took the first step and waited for her. The stairs were rot through and looked as if they might collapse at any given moment. Timidly, she joined him as they creaked their way to the balcony. Tall oak trees surrounded their temporary new home, giving an appearance of being tucked inside a cave made of, still growing, wood.

As disharmonious as the aesthetics might have been, compared to where they'd come from, it was the most beautiful thing she'd seen in years.