



Return to Isis

Jean Stewart

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by

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For my Susie

CHAPTER ONE

“A woman,” the burly trooper sneered.

“She ought to be breeding, not going around acting like a man,” the other one grunted in agreement.

They gave her the once-over, their eyes lingering boldly on her breasts and crotch.

She kept her eyes down, as required, hating this demeaning ritual.

They were Regulators and she was a Computer Technician, both of equal rank in the rigid caste system of Elysium. The Regs were the police brawn that bullied a decaying society into order, while the Computer Techs maintained the machine intelligence network that provided the brains. For a Computer Tech to be also female was an anomaly, but these two had seen her and her tool box in this government building many times before. They knew her story and so tolerated her.

Two years ago, she was the beggar who had hustled a meal by repairing the Procurator’s car, which had died in the street. The man had been late for an appointment with a superior, when

she had passed by. Looking over the shoulder of the harassed Computer Tech, she modestly suggested that he vacuum the road dust from the unit. An educated guess which impressed the official. The Procurator had been ecstatic when his sleek, electric car started. He had called her ‘his Idiot Savant’ and put her on his staff.

The Regs knew the oft-repeated story, but they still made a big production out of checking her identification pass, her caste bracelet. Dumping the contents of her tool box and searching for concealed weapons also seemed to give them some perverse pleasure.

Even in her carefully hidden annoyance she was patient, since she knew this charade of who-was-in-charge would end soon. The Equipment Preservation Program was top priority. After all, the Procurator himself had sent for her to accomplish this difficult task.

The Elysian rulers didn’t like the fact that a woman was so gifted at overhauling the ancient CD ROM units. However, when they had need of a repair, they called her. And they always made her pay for the way they needed her, for the way they had to set aside their asinine rules on gender-function.

“She’s too hard-looking for me. Look at her—built like a damn serf.” The large, intimidating Reg reached to his pants and casually re-adjusted his balls. Whit wasn’t sure if he was showing her or himself that he had them.

The smaller of the two Regs squeezed her right biceps, while oh so accidentally brushing her breast in the process. She quickly decided that this weasel-faced man was the more dangerous of the two policemen.

Whit knew there were special rules from the Procurator, protecting women such as herself, women with necessary talents, from the routine gropes and even forced sexual acts most Elysian women endured. But the way this Regulator’s eyes strayed over her told her that he regularly broke those rules.

“She’s gotta work out to be like this,” the Reg commented.

He was right, she did work out, exercising for hours alone in

her tiny room, trying to blast away the deadly lack of humanity she lived with each day.

There was no honest consolation in Elysium. Heartfelt confidences were routinely for sale. Friendships were officially discouraged as “sentimental and frivolous.” Whit talked to no one, nor had she read a book, heard a musical instrument, or contemplated a painting, in two years. She had long since been ground down by the hateful narrow-mindedness of this place. Exercising to exhaustion seemed to be the only way she could cope.

And if the strong muscles were repulsive to these oafs, then she would get even stronger.

“Why aren’t you working yet, lazy Cunt?” the weasel-faced, little man barked.

That was her permission to get started on her task.

Quickly, Whit moved past them to the empty office area. She took a screwdriver from her tool kit and began disassembling the housing on the computer. From the corner of her eye she watched the large Reg leave, while the smaller one set up a chair at the entrance to the room. She became engrossed in systematically checking the archaic machine. Within minutes, she had found the loose card, and tightened the right screw. The computer was operational again.

And now she could accomplish the actual purpose of her work in Elysium.

Whit rapidly typed in her password, switching all keyboard functions to the hidden micro molecular electronic device she had installed in this computer during the first repair, months ago. The Decency Scanner, which policed all computer usage in Elysium, would continue to read the test program running on the standard, almost ridiculously simple CD ROM. She would be safe for several moments, safe to at last link up with the satellite suspended in space over a century ago.

This particular computer, the Procurator’s own, was on-line with the Regulation Bureau main frame, where the police files were stored. Every piece of information the police had was stored

in those files. And she had serendipitously guessed the access code—Stud #1, the nickname imprinted on the vanity plates of the Procurator's beautiful Corvette, a leftover relic that had been rendered functional. It had been an easy guess, really. She had discovered that most of these men had computer access codes which involved some exaggerated description of their cocks.

After two years of subservience, her moment had finally come. She knew the code she needed to use, she was working on the machine that could link with the main frame itself. Two years of undercover effort was coming to a head.

She glanced at the door and saw the Regulator lovingly wipe a polishing cloth over his ceremonial Roman sword. Sweet Mother, how they loved all things Roman. They chose to think of themselves as the second Roman Empire. Whit found it laughable. What they actually were was a bad imitation of the Third Reich.

She knew this Reg had been given the sword in recognition of merit a few weeks back. Merit. The capture of three disease-free girls in the market place. It was rumored that there had been four, but that the Reg had raped and then killed the young woman, really a child, before delivering the others.

Whit shuddered and entered the password. In another second she was into the sealed security files, the complete, detailed operations of the Elysium Regulators. Copying the data she needed, she sent it to the weathered satellite dish on the rooftop. Last week, she had wheedled permission to go up there, claiming the external ventilator filters were awry and causing dust problems in the building's computers. In reality, she had been readying the old satellite dish for this transmission. Whit typed in the last command, and then the uploaded data went zipping through long unused wiring to the satellite dish. If all was going according to her plan, the stream of information was bouncing off its target, an abandoned NASA satellite, and then shooting back down to earth, to Lilith's computer in Freeland.

For a century now, the old NASA satellites had been spinning in space, their capacities largely unknown to the descendants of

the people who had placed them there. Just another sad paradox of the Second Dark Ages.

So much had been lost in 2010, when America had embraced order over reason. Even now, in the year 2093, the two countries that had emerged from the Great Schism continued to move in completely opposite directions.

In moments, the transmission was over. She checked on the green enjacketed Reg. He seemed to have found a stubborn smudge and was very focused on removing it. Whit decided she had time for a precursory safe-check.

She opened the most recent Arrest File. Her eyes moved quickly over the usual long list, until they snagged on her cover name. She read quickly, as her heart squeezed tight with fear:

COMPUTER TECH WHIT HASTINGS, Bureau 4317, Office Park 902, Bethesda, Maryland: Freeland warrior, disease-free. TAKE ALIVE/RAPE OPTIONAL.

Whit looked at the Reg across the room and swallowed hard. She switched the machine from the molecular electronic device, or MED mode, to normal Teledex 586 system, and then removed the MED. The Reg guided the sword into the short leather scabbard he wore around his waist. She had to do something, before the morning print-out was brought to this rabid weasel.

She studied the uniform he wore, the debonair loose trousers, the neat boots, the short-waisted green jacket. He was near her size. She noted that the black plastic pistol sat loose in its holster, as if the Reg had been playing gunslinger again.

She reached into her coat pocket and removed the precious flask of clean water. After taking a long drink, she positioned it for a strategic spill. With a brush of the hand, the water hit the crack in the decaying power cord. Sparks flew, the computer crackled, fizzed. Whit jumped away. The machine made a resounding pop and quickly became a box of flames, scorching the memory chips beyond reclamation.

The Reg was beside her, yelling. Whit pointed at the supply

closet, shouted that the fire extinguisher was inside. The Reg opened the door and hurried inside, back turned.

So stupid, Whit thought, delivering the knock-out blow.

Amelia felt through the soft earth until her fingers met a familiar lump. She dug out the potato and dropped it in the reed basket by her side. Far away, she heard the distant drone of an engine.

She paused, looked up in alarm, and searched the smoky, yellow layers of pollution that hung overhead. A rivulet of July sweat trickled down the side of her tanned face.

There was a sudden flash of light in the east, and a shape was hurtling toward her, lower and still lower in the sky. The glinting, metal craft seemed to be heading right for the potato field.

She sprang up, incensed. Chicago Regulators had already stolen her Spring barley. Now they were obviously returning for her potatoes.

The craft roared closer. As Amelia shaded her eyes to better see, she realized that this particular jetcraft was twisting and darting from side to side, clearly out of control. With a cry of fear, Amelia began racing for the irrigation ditch at the edge of the field.

She dove into the muddy trench as the jetcraft belly-whopped across the earth. The ground shook, dust clouds rolled, jet fuel sprayed into the air. And then the summer stillness fell again. Amelia peered over the edge of grassy weeds, waiting in dread.

These days the jetcrafts were patched-together conglomerations of any usable piece of machinery a mechanic could find. They featured steel, aluminum, graphite, even burned metal areas, for most of the parts were foraged from crash sites. Proving to be no exception, this downed model showed its century of use.

Just as she was ready to climb out of the ditch, the jet door clanked open and a Regulator fell into the dirt. The man stood up and made a high-pitched, cursing sound as the first steps were taken. Amelia slid down into the rank water at the bottom of the

ditch, her stomach cramping with fear.

If this man found her he would kill her. He was not here to steal fresh vegetables. He had just crash-landed, destroying an irreplaceable machine. The Reg's misfortune would undoubtedly result in some harsh punishment by his Tribune, a punishment of ghastly torture. And Regs were known for venting their frustrations on the first woman they saw.

The cursing Reg came nearer. Amelia found herself listening to the odd voice, wondering at words she didn't recognize. Then, all at once, there was a deafening blast and a body plowed into her, dunking her in the ditch water.

Amelia lurched out of the shallow water, sputtering, her ears ringing. The body against her rolled clear, right into the mud bank.

The Reg cap had been lost in the fall and long, dark hair fell wet across straight, broad shoulders. Gray eyes stared back at her.

Moments slid by. Both were speechless.

The Reg finally glanced up at the sky with a nervous expression. Suddenly, Amelia was no longer afraid.

This was no Regulator, despite the uniform. This was a woman! But women were serfs, they were either Farmers or Breeders, depending on whether or not they had been exposed to the disease. So why was this woman wearing a Regulator's uniform? Was this an escape? Amelia's mind braked in confusion.

There was no escape from Elysium. The Border made sure of that.

Whit rose painfully, ignoring the Farmer, and limped to the far side of the ditch. She tried to scale the bank but froze halfway up, hissing with pain. Amelia stood, and before she knew what she was doing, pushed the slim hips over the crest, into the grass. Eyes wary, the injured woman looked down at her.

What a face this woman had! High aristocratic cheekbones, sculpted hollows below them, a fine, thin nose. Inner strength showed in the set of her full lips, the fierce look in her grey eyes. She did not look feminine, not at all.

The word echoed through Amelia's mind again. *Escape*. On an impulse, she scrambled out of the ditch, helped the woman up and declared, "I have hiding places."

Whit shook her head, protesting, "They'll kill you." Amelia searched the sky. "I'm dead anyway. You landed in my field." In an official monotone she stated, "There are no accidents."

Whit almost smiled at that, then caught herself and gave Amelia a measuring stare. "I can't take you with me."

Take me where? Amelia thought. *Take me to my death? I just told her the crash alone had already condemned me. The fact that she came here makes me part of her crimes.*

Amelia swept her eyes across the scene before them. The heli-jet's fiery remains were strewn across Baubo's farm and its fragrant brown soil. The jet fuel had no doubt ruined part of the land. So much for the potato crop. So much for everything she had ever known.

Amelia sighed. Then she took Whit's arm, draped it around her shoulders and began the walk through the apple orchard.

"I mean it," Whit said, with a grimace of pain. "I can't take you."

"I think it is me who is taking you."

"I can walk," the strange woman insisted, trying to free herself from Amelia's grasp.

"Your knee is injured."

As Whit shook her head no, she caught her foot on a vine and gasped. After that, Amelia gradually felt more of the taller woman's weight shift onto her shoulders. Whit stayed silent, studying the grove of trees ahead.

In the distance, they both heard a heli-jet approaching.

Whit thought quickly and said, "There should be a cluster of rocks nearby."

"Behind the house," Amelia replied, and thought, *How does she know about the group of granite boulders near the Border?*

"Take me there," Whit commanded.

"The house will be the first place they'll look," Amelia said simply.

“Are you going to argue over everything? Take me there!” Whit insisted.

“No!”

Whit stopped and faced her angrily. “Then we part company, Castewoman.”

Amelia let go of Whit’s hand, shrugged off her arm. Whit limped a few steps, then turned and demanded, “Which way?”

As the heli-jet passed overhead, they both instinctively ducked beneath a tree and hid. The engine sounded labored from years of wear, and though the copter hovered crazily over the potato field, as if about to crash, it successfully landed. They heard the engine chug and then die.

The woman looked at her desperately. Amelia pointed the direction, then watched the stranger’s ragged, uneven gait. In spite of herself, her anger dissolved. She caught up and ducked under a flailing arm.

“I don’t need help! At least go try to hide!” Whit snapped.

Amelia glared at her.

Whit shook her head, muttering words Amelia had never heard before, words spoken like curses.

Amelia steered them through the scrub forest, winding through saplings. She thought she smelled the harsh, unwashed scent of a man. Maybe it was only the stolen uniform this strange woman wore. All the same, the hair at the back of her neck stood on end.

Whit pulled Amelia to a stop, scrutinizing the small, square structure. “You live in that?” The voice was flat, disgusted.

Amelia fumed. This stranger obviously had no idea what it had taken for her and Baubo to build their house. They had spent months digging in the old, abandoned landfills around Chicago. They had risked death by lurking around a government construction site. Baubo had made her stay silent in the wagon while she sweet-talked the laborers, bartering corn whiskey for concrete. Amelia could still remember the laborers eyeing her longingly, then scuttling away when they saw the AGH tattoo on her wrist.

The house was a mish-mash of another century, suspended in concrete. Once, there had been enough oil to make plastic, enough plastic to be thrown away. The countless old containers, empty now of detergent or juice, provided the insulation of ready-made air pockets and sealed winter from them when it came. Strips of torn and dented vinyl siding had been hammered into a slanting roof. It looked grotesque, but the house was warm and dry.

“Where is Baubo?” Whit asked hurriedly, looking around.

“Those are her burial stones.” Amelia nodded her head at the circle of rocks surrounding a mound of green grass.

Whit covered her heart with her hand. To Amelia it looked like some sort of salute. *How does this stranger know Baubo?*

Twigs cracked in the brush nearby. The man-smell came again, rank, close. Amelia glanced back apprehensively. Suddenly, a fine, rope net soared through the air, then fell over them. They were wrenched off their feet before they could do more than cry out. In another second the huge Regulator was towering over them, laughing lasciviously.

“One diseased and feeble-minded peasant, and one Freeland warrior, virgin clean.”

Freeland warrior? Amelia thought confusedly. This coiled knot of tense womanhood next to her was a Freeland warrior? *Could Baubo’s tales be true?*

“You’ve been rolling in mud and you both look like pigs.” The Reg kicked Amelia, growling, “Are you the dummy? I don’t want the slow death because my organ got into dirty pussy.”

He reached beneath the mesh and seized Amelia’s arm. She clutched the net, frantically, uselessly resisting.

And then the warrior woman said, quite wearily, “We have no AGH in Freeland, idiot.”

Freeland! Amelia thought. *It was no myth!*

The Regulator dropped the Castewoman and grabbed the warrior, obviously overwrought with lust. The net fell. Amelia immediately began scrambling to get out of the tangle, but the other Reg grabbed her from behind, laughing, and pulled her

against his body and hard organ.

Whit wrestled with her own would-be rapist, trying to pull the gun from her holster. Smacking her hand aside, the Regulator grabbed her gun and flung it away. Not giving up, she reached for her short sword, but the Regulator wrenched it away from her, laughing as if this were great sport.

Ignoring the pain in her wounded leg, the warrior woman landed a series of hard snap-kicks to the shins and knees of the barrel-chested Reg. He stopped laughing. He snarled, swinging his sword angrily. Whit danced aside expertly. The Reg lost his balance and the sword went all the way to the ground, its razor-sharp blade parting the nylon net inches from Amelia's body and the Reg holding her.

Whit continued her attack with spirited yells, kicking the guard in the head repeatedly, until a loud and final "Ooof" came from him. The beefy Regulator collapsed, and Whit sank to the ground in pain.

Twisting free from the grasp of the Regulator who was holding her, Amelia slithered through the opening the sword had made in the net. She scrambled to her feet and stomped her captor's ankle with all the power she could muster. Next, she lunged for the pistol that had been knocked from the warrior woman's hand. But before she could grab the gun, the Reg was upon her. He spun her around so she was facing him, and for a moment Amelia stood frozen, held by his menacing gaze

As the Reg raised his sword to deal a death blow to Amelia, the warrior woman moved swiftly behind him. Like a jackhammer, she kicked him in the back, in the right kidney, then in the left kidney, launching the man forward. Amelia's fist met his nose before she realized she had moved.

They went round and round for several minutes like that, the two women landing blows from either side of him, darting clear of his sword. He was far more powerful, but they were faster—hitting vital areas and leaping aside before he could counter.

Amelia found her body streaking through motions with a will of its own, unleashing graceful strokes of violence she had not

known she could produce. More than once, the Freeland warrior glanced at her, eyes wide with amazement, as Amelia began to mimic the warrior's own fighting style.

Then the Regulator bellowed and threw his sword at Amelia's head. She reeled away, but the fire across the top of her right arm told her he had made enough of a hit. She went dizzy, and felt herself crumpling to the ground.

The grass was soft and damp against her cheek. She opened her eyes and saw the Regulator grab the warrior's foot as she snap-kicked. He dropped her, roaring with triumph, as she attempted to twist her leg free from his strong grasp. He struck the warrior woman senseless, then quickly unzipped the front of his pants, sniggering with glee.

Amelia saw the sunlight slanting through tree branches above them, saw the sword lying a few feet away, gleaming. Her own blood colored the metal edge, calling her.

Somehow, she was standing behind the man. She raised her good arm, clenching the discarded weapon like a dagger.

The Freeland warrior opened her eyes and focused on the man ripping off her clothes, then on the plunging sword.

*We hope you enjoyed this
Bella Appetizer.*

