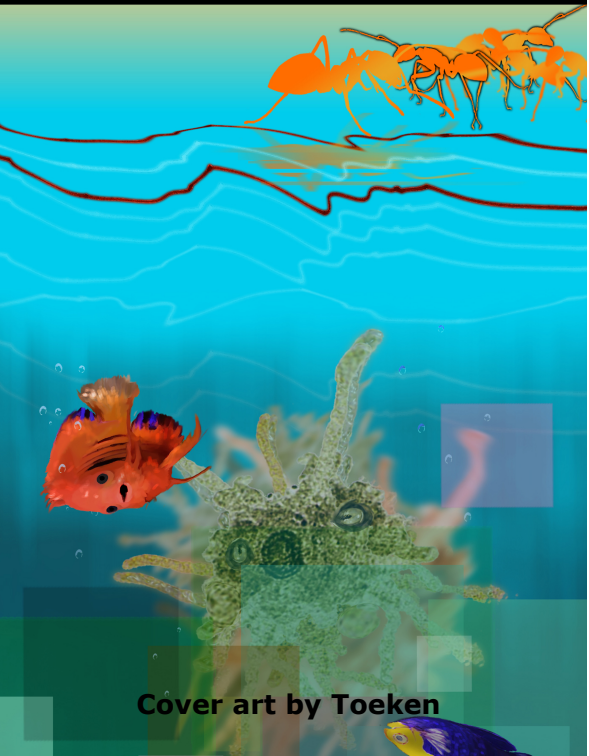


THE FUTURE FIRE

SOCIAL POLITICAL & SPECULATIVE CYBERFICTION

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Cover art by Toeken

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“La révolution et la libération des femmes vont de pair. Et ce n’est pas un acte de charité ou un élan d’humanisme que de parler de l’émancipation des femmes. C’est une nécessité fondamentale pour le triomphe de la révolution. Les femmes portent sur elles l’autre moitié du ciel.”

—Thomas Sankara (1e 8 mars 1987)

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The Future Fire (<http://futurefire.net/>) is edited by Djibril al-Ayad, with associate editors Regina de Búrca and Valeria Vitale; assistant editors Cécile Matthey, Bruce Stenning and Trace Yulie; occasional guest editors Kathryn Allan, Emma Bridges, Fábio Fernandes and Lori Selke, and copyeditors Brian Olszewski and Hûw Steer.

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Editorial

Djibril al-Ayad



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We have a diverse, inspiring and beautiful slate of stories, poems and art to share with you this month. We're writing and painting and singing about revolution, about resistance, about cooperation, endurance, quiet rebellion (and loud rebellion!), about fellowship. We're telling tales of how having somewhere to hide, having safety and security, makes it easier to help others in turn. And all these stories of hope and anger and love and persistence are also filled with gladiatorial combat, angry ghosts, hidden paradise, eco-pocalypse and utopian posthumanism, psyberpunk music, superpowers, surviving witches, long-suffering lycanthropes, and many other speculative fiction tropes that we love (and more that we didn't realize we loved). Stories of the unreal giving us hope and fuel to keep going in the real.

Not that we needed reminding, but it is good to remember what people are struggling for—what we don't dare stop fighting for—things like justice, safety, bodily

autonomy, fair treatment (and not just “more pay”). We also know, but need to remain alert to, those who shout loudest about “identity politics” while with their other hand plotting to take away our rights based on identities they don’t like.

If this struggle in the news just this week, and you may wonder if I’m alluding to just one of them, but—there is no fight for justice without fighting for all of us: there can be no white-feminism, trans-exclusionary feminism, misogynist labour struggle, health justice that ignores disability and race, any true social justice without full intersectional representation. (I mean, no one can do everything all the time, and we’re all allowed to prioritize our protest sometimes, but the least we can do is not deny rights to marginalized groups through our activism.)

Our little contribution to the fight for a better world is to platform social justice issues, under-respresented voices, and beautiful, radical stories in these pages. We always love to see the more unusual, experimental, avant garde forms of speculative fiction and art. If you have ideas for work we might like to see, voices we might be missing, people we should collaborate with, we’d love to hear from you for these or any other reason. You know where to find us.

Djibril al-Ayad, July 2022

Comment on the stories in this issue on the TFF blog:

<http://press.futurefire.net/2022/07/new-issue-202262.html>

Song of Your Life

Nicole Lungerhausen



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You make two attempts to sing the song of your life as the keepers herd you and the other recruits from the holding cell to the arena. Unfortunately, neither attempt results in your death.

The first time, the keepers apply their pain prods to your sore and bruised torso and plaster your mouth with tape. The second time you make a mighty hum in your nose and throat until another recruit, a lanky Tralkall with a missing tail, shoves you against the passageway wall. Her speed and strength surprise you. The wait in the cramped confines of the holding cell has been long, the availability of food and water meager and unreliable.

The recruit thrusts her face into yours. Dust clings to the hair lining her pointy ears and coats the wide wedge of her nose. Even her thick eyelashes are coated with dust. Homesickness wraps itself around you and you long for sand. Sand that rises and falls in soft, undulating waves as far as the eye can see. There are many uses for sand. Layer it in a filter for hydroponics. Add liquid and use sand to build a house. Introduce vibration and sand removes flesh from bone.

There is no sand here, wherever it is the Dominion transport brought you. Here it is all tall smooth walls and narrow passageways and keepers with pain prods and dead eyes. And dust. Dust that crusts your ears, lodges under your fingernails, coats your mouth. You hate dust.

No one wants to hear you, the Tralkall says in fast and choppy Dominion speak. Her scent, a mix of foul breath, dried sweat and dirty fur, makes your eyes water. Besides, it won't work, she continues. Her golden-yellow eyes flick to the keeper watching you both. The keeper's expression is filled to the brim with boredom, but their grip on the prod hanging at their side is tight. There are no easy deaths to be had here, the Tralkall says. Broken or whole, they'll make sure you stay alive long enough to enter the arena. She leans in and drops her voice to a

confidential tone. My advice? Keep your mouth shut and turn into pain.

Your shaky grasp of Dominion speak makes it hard to parse the Tralkall's meaning. Is she telling you to prepare yourself to inflict pain, or gird yourself to endure more? Either way, what bravery you mustered to sing your life song is overwritten by a different feeling. The recruit draws away from you.

Pathetic. She sneers at your tears, the snot dripping from your nose. Your family would be ashamed, she hisses, shoves you back into the marching line of recruits.

Your family, you think as you reach the passageway's end and trudge up a flight of metal stairs, would take you in their arms, carry you to the communal bathing pool. *All experience matters*, is what your fathers would say as they bathed and cleaned your body with tender, patient care. *Another verse for your life song*.

You will never see your fathers again. The thought leaves you feeling as cold as the short length of pipe a keeper thrusts into your hands and as hollow as the helmet they shove onto your head. *Never mind. Focus on what matters*. Your fathers' voices start up in a calm, steady tempo. *Sing your life song*.

A metallic rattle, followed by a loud whump, makes you jump. A keeper rips the tape from your mouth while overhead, on catwalks skirting either side of the narrow passageway, keepers prod you and the other recruits forward into a vast arena. White-bright lights make you wince, but that's nothing compared to the sound of the crowd. Its savage roar slams into you with the strength of a sudden sandstorm.

When your eyes adjust you see the champion in the center of the arena. Nine feet tall and wrapped in a thick

layer of muscle, she is the largest person you've ever seen. Her skin is a darker ocher than your own, closer to the rich red-brown of the arena ground. She is at once a part of and separate from her surroundings, the way a rugged mesa juts up from a flat desert plain. Spying you and your fellow recruits huddled together, the champion swings a spiked mace in wide arcs. Upper arm muscles lengthen and ripple, and even at this distance the weight of her footfalls make the arena ground shiver under your feet. Tattoos cover her bald scalp in a dense, inky cap of indecipherable symbols. They march across her wide clavicle, disappear under the neckline of her tunic, then reappear to encircle the bronzed skin of her bare arms and legs.

This is Steks, the Creator of Cadavers, the Master of the Melee, the Slinger of Skulls. Steks is the reason you, a short, slight sand shaper from a planet recently fallen under Dominion control, are here. You are no eager volunteer recruit, no vanquished warrior ready to demonstrate fealty to your new masters, no matter what propaganda the Dominion has spewed forth in the lead-up to this event, Steks Versus the 100.

Steks ate her way out of the womb. Steks is the Dominion's longest-surviving, most favored champion. Steks's kills are written on her body. Rumors the other recruits whispered to each other in the holding cell where all there was to do was wait. Steks raises the mace over her head and bellows at the crowd. The crowd roars back and you wonder what placement your tattooed name will warrant on the champion's body.

The gate you and the other recruits were herded through closes with a rattling clang. Behind you, someone retches and there's a grim satisfaction in

knowing you aren't the only coward in the bunch. You squeeze the pipe in your hand. You couldn't goad the keepers into taking your life, but you can run heedless into the fray and die before you know what hits you.

We taught you better than that. Your fathers' voices swell up in your thoughts again, their tone urgent, marked by strong accents of disappointment and dismay. *Who will do this but you?* You push their voices away. It's too late. You recall your exchange with the Tralkall recruit. What's the point of singing your life song if no one wants to hear it?

Three long, loud horn-like sounds make you jump, interrupt the internal bickering with your fathers. The crowd howls like a great hungry animal and Steks Versus the 100 begins.

You're not the only recruit hoping for a quick death in the arena. Most of the recruits cry out and rush forward at once; in the desperate panic of the herd, you lose your footing and tumble to the ground. Someone steps on your back, your head. Your skull strikes against the inside of your helmet, and darkness sweeps over you.

When you come to, a pair of familiar golden-yellow eyes stare back at you. The eyes, frozen forever in annoyed surprise, belong to the Tralkall recruit's head, a head no longer attached to her body. A mewling noise escapes your lips and you scramble back until your shoulders hit something cold and hard. One of the arena gates. You pull and yank on the gate, but the keepers on the opposite side smack your hands with pain prods. The arena crowd jeers, as you whimper and stumble away from the gate, cradling your stinging hands to your chest. Your knees give way and you sink to the ground and watch Steks.

You watch Steks wrap a recruit in a tight embrace and squeeze until their chest wall collapses. You watch the champion caress another recruit's cheek before grasping their chin and using her mace to crack open their skull. You watch as Steks, with two lazy motions, tears the legs from another unfortunate recruit's torso.

What a horrific life song this giant woman must have. What a blessing you will never have to hear it.

You watch Steks even though you know you should look away. You watch Steks, fascinated by the ferocious joy that seems to power her towering frame and get stronger with each death she creates. You watch Steks because there is nowhere else to go, nothing else to do.

Not true, your fathers' voices rush back into your head, loud and quick and lively now. Sing your life song. Sing as much as you can, dearest son—

You shake your head. Stop it, you say aloud as Steks, with messy, bloody gusto, takes the life of another recruit. Leave me alone! The Dominion keepers lounging against the nearby arena gate laugh at you with the pitiless ease of those who believe they will never be in your place.

It takes forever and no time at all for the hacking and slashing to cease and the last dying scream to escape the last dying someone's lips and the fighting to be over. Well, it's over for everyone but you and Steks. The crowd goes quiet with anticipation. The champion's chest heaves and blood drips from the hem of her tunic and falls on someone who used to be alive but is now a pulpy, disordered heap of blood, flesh, and bone. Titters of laughter ripple through the crowd. 99 recruits down, one to go. And who is left but the weakest and smallest one of all. What a joke! What a treat!

The crowd cheers and Steks wipes her forehead with the back of her hand and locks eyes with you. A thought slips through the confines of your fear: right now, there are not one but two captives in this too big, too bright arena of blood and nightmares and noise.

A captive audience at last! Your fathers' voices crescendo to a sustained note of joyful relief. It makes you want to laugh, cry, and scream all at once, so it makes sense when you open your mouth what comes out is a song.

As Steks stands motionless on the other side of the arena, you stand up and sing your life song. The way your fathers taught you. *Start at the beginning*, they would say every anniversary of your birth, after they gifted you new bars of music to which you would add the lyrics of your life, *and there's no need to rush. When the end of life is near, sing as much as you can, for as long as you can.*

You sing your name and parentage and commune family. The crowd caterwauls. It chants the champion's name over and over, in clashing counterpoint to your song. Steks shakes her head, rolls her shoulders. Mace gripped in both hands, she breaks into a jog.

You sing, though you can only manage a single, sickly tone, about the day you emerged, thin-skinned and helpless, from an artificial womb. You sing about the thrill of sledding down whistling sand dunes, though your heart syncopates at the dust clouds billowing behind Steks as she lopes toward you. Though you strain to hear your voice over the sound of the crowd, you sing about your first love and the day he broke your heart.

When you get to the verse in your life song about your induction into the sand shaper guild, Steks's shadow falls across you.

Breathing deep into your belly, you sing about the guild member chorus, how they wrapped you in a cocoon of polyphonic sound, how right and good and easy it felt to be infused with the wisdom and knowledge of ancestors who harnessed their voices to shape the structures of your world. As you sing, the ferocity drains away from Steks's face and is refilled by an expression so bleak and twisted, you have to shut your eyes. Just because the death you've longed for is here, doesn't mean you have to look it in the eye.

You sing. The death blows still do not come. The crowd's howling falters. It stumbles into syncopated gasps and shouts before petering out into confused silence. You stop mid-note, open your eyes. There stands Steks the champion, slumped into one hip. Her meaty hand loosely grips the handle of the gore-coated mace. She stares at the ground like a lost, bewildered child.

I'm going to die here, she says. Alone. Her voice is high and light, her Dominion speak touched by an accent you can't place. I will never see my home again. It doesn't matter how long I fight, how many I kill. Their promises are lies. They'll never let me go. Her gaze slides up to meet yours. When I heard your song, I knew it, though I do not understand your language. I knew it like I know my true name. The champion releases a long, shuddering sigh. The mace handle falls away from her hand and clatters to the ground. Steks begins to weep.

It is an ugly, wrenching sound. It makes you want to cover your ears, run and hide. *Focus on what matters.* Your fathers' voices are a gentle nudge to your heart.

You forget about your life song. You forget about the crowd, which is stirring from its confused silence. You forget about your own fear and suffering and watch this

giant, sad woman cry her giant, sad tears. You reach up and touch Steks's forearm.

Tell me your life, you say. Steks frowns and bends down so she is eye-level with you, as if it will help her better understand your halting Dominion speak. Her tears have cleared a trail through the blood mask on her face to reveal a graceful tattoo. It reminds you of the long, sidewinding path a snake makes as it slides across sand. Not alone, you say as the crowd begins to murmur darkly. Tell me your life. Much as you can, long as you can.

Steks stares at you. Your throat and chest tighten and you wonder if you've just made the last and possibly most horrific mistake of your life. Then the giant woman smiles and something that crumpled inside you the day the Dominion took you from your home world lifts its head and you know even if you had all the time left in the world, no music or lyrics could capture the way her smile makes you feel.

In a shaky voice, Steks tells you about the trade winds on her home world, and how they swish through the palm trees and lullaby people to sleep. She tells you about who she comes from, a race of dolphin riders who tame the waves. Her voice steadies and her expression lights up with pride as she speaks about her tattoos, which don't commemorate deaths but rather are lines from the most beloved of her people's 17-line poems. She takes your hand in hers, tells you her true name, the one the Dominion took away when they conquered her home world and forced her to fight in the arena many years ago.

The crowd murmurs. Where is the slashing? Where is the ripping and tearing? The crowd does not like what is happening in the arena. Why is the last recruit standing instead of squealing and bleeding and begging for mercy?

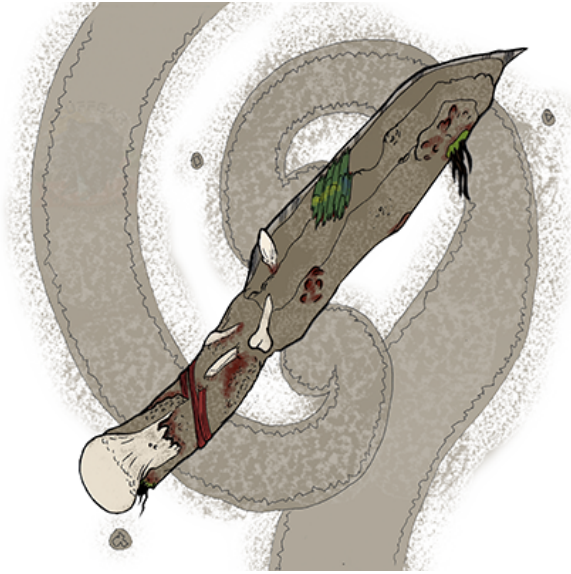


Illustration © 2022, Fluffgar.

The crowd shifts restlessly, becomes louder. No, the crowd does not like this at all.

A screech, freakish and wild, explodes from behind an arena gate and pierces the air. Before the sound fades away, a second screech echoes from another gate, followed by another. Steks's whole body stiffens and her words dry up. The crowd answers the screeches with a bloodlust cry that makes your whole body hurt. Steks turns her worried face to the crowd and the arena lights make her skin glow and that's when you see hope.

Hope is mixed in with the blood and dirt smeared across the wide planes of her cheeks and broad forehead. You glance down at the ground and your breath catches in your throat. Hope is there, too. It winks up at you from congealing pools of blood like thousands of scattered secrets. Hope, hiding in plain sight ever since you stepped into the arena.

Your fathers shake their heads. *If it was a glassmouth snake, you'd be dead by now.* You laugh, squeeze Steks's hand. She draws back, eyes wide with confusion and fear. You should be afraid, too, but you're not. For the first time since the Dominion abducted you from your home world you're as calm as a flat expanse of sand, unwritten by the wind.

Listen and watch, you say. You swallow and part your lips, sing two low notes at once. It's an overtone, rich and glossy and vaguely unsettling in its close harmony. The sand particles in the arena's packed dirt floor vibrate and rise into the air. They peel away from Stek's face and chest and legs and hands. They lift up from pools of blood and gore. When thousands and thousands of sand grains have coalesced into a swirling mass in front of you, you change the overtone's pitch and begin to shape the sand, using blood and brain and bone to bind the grains.

It doesn't take much of your polyphonic singing to make a shard dagger. It is sharp but clumsy, thick in some places where it should be thin. Far from perfect, but that's to be expected. You're an architect, not a warrior.

The crowd is apoplectic now. You inhale through your nose, exhale through your mouth on an overtone pitched so high it makes Steks wince. The shard dagger twitches in the air, then spins end over end and slashes through the crowd packed into the arena's lower levels. The cries of surprise and fear that ripple through the crowd thrill you.

Steks picks up her mace, sweeps the blood and sand-caked spiked end up into the air with lusty yowl. She gestures at you with her chin, glances over her shoulder. The universal gesture for have my back and I'll have yours. This time when she smiles, there is a fluttering in your chest that has nothing to do with fear.

The new, impromptu verse gives your life song a different mouth feel. Your singing is heavy and blunt and tastes like iron. When the crowd roars, you roar back, your voice as full of ferocious joy as Steks's smile. Your shard dagger vibrates at the ready, even as the three chimes sound to signal the start of a new round, even as every gate in the arena rises and a horde of ravenous, sharp-toothed horrors leap from their cages.



We Were Ghostless Against Her

Ioanna Papadopoulou



Illustration © 2022, Sarah Salcedo.

We told ourselves we were going home. The home of many, many generations ago. Our forever home. Nobody told us that the ones who never left would see us as foreigners, ostracising us from their communities. Nobody thought this land of never-ending sun, which burnt our flesh as we worked its fields, was also the ancestral home of another people, and when they left, their ghosts stayed here and hated us for coming to replace them. And we were defenceless as our own ghosts stayed in our old homeland, near the Black Sea. Maybe our ghosts, those poor lost souls without family and culture, tormented the ones who went there to replace us as theirs did to us.

But I don't know. I will never go back to the home I was born in. I only have this land, the one my tongue and faith dictates to call mine. It doesn't want me and I don't

like it, but it's the only home I have been left to claim, so I must.

"Son," my mother calls and I am up on my feet immediately, rushing to her side. "Can you give me a hand?" I hold the box she lowers from the attic and then help her climb down. "I think these belonged to the old inhabitants of the house. I saw some old carpets there too. We can use them for the winter, when the first colds start."

Mother is a woman of logic. Not that she doesn't have faith. She is loyal to our God, always praying before sleep and lighting a candle for all our dead, but her faith isn't emotional like mine. Father, when the sweet man was alive, always said my faith was so strong when he looked in my eyes, which he said were windows to God for others. It convinced me to train to be a servant of that same God.

"My daughter's," Mina whispers in the air. Mother shivers as our ghost stands close to her but unable to see her. "I knitted them myself for her," she says. "When I was pregnant."

I watch our ghost kneel next to the box and her see-through face go hazy as tears gather in her eerie, uncanny flesh. Mother picks one of the knitted baby clothes and lifts it.

"Is it well made?" I ask her, completely unaware of women's textile skills.

She nods. "And made with love," she mutters. I study the way her hands caress the wool, examining its details, seeing through her fingers. My eyes move to her left where Mina's face appears right behind Mother's shoulder. Her colours are faded but she still has grey hair,

sun-kissed brown skin like ours and dark, nearly black eyes.

Just as I expected, her sorrow turns into anger. She moves her hand through my mother, making her jump and move away. “Oh, that felt weird,” Mother says.

Mina smiles as Mother shakes from the discomfort, trying to calm herself from the ungodly intrusion into her body. Her eyes turn to me, knowing I am the only one who can see her. “Tell her not to touch my daughter’s clothes,” she demands threateningly.

We have been in the house for just a few months but already Mina ensures our days are filled with accidents, spoiled food, and any other small and petty misfortune she can manifest. I take Mina’s knit from Mother’s hands, fold it carefully and place it back inside the box. “Go and get some fresh air,” I urge her.

She nods and glances around the room, wondering whether she has missed something. She is ready to ask me something but I am lucky there is a knock on the door. “Foteini!” My aunt, Melina, calls, and Mother rushes to the door. Before she has the chance to invite her in, Melina pulls her out. Mina closes the door with her bony ghost hand and we are alone.

“I want you to leave,” she tells me, as she does each day since we arrived in the village. “This is my house.”

“The Government gave us this piece of land to grow grain as part of the population exchange,” I answer her as I do each day. “Your family is never coming back. There is no point for you to fight us.”

She laughingly mocks my answer. This is a pattern we repeat each day, priest and ghost of two different religions. “I was part of the Empire. Not some meagre tiny government.”

And I narrate to her again that the empire has fallen, broken up in many different countries and two of them exchanged people, as if they exchanged objects, so there would be two countries with one main religion and language each.

She curses in her tongue, which is so familiar to me. I used to hear it in our old home. So many of our old neighbours spoke like that, it feels natural. I know everything she says, of course. I am bilingual, as she is, but I block their meaning. I no longer need to be bilingual in this land, not for the sake of a ghostly old woman, whose own faith has departed without her.

I walk out of the house as her insults grow louder. She switches between the two languages, forming half sentences.

“My family. I want my family,” she cries in between her curses. “Why aren’t *they* here?”

All sense gets lost from them, eventually. I close the door behind me as I hear her cry.

I can’t hate her but I also can’t comfort her. I hate her people, her faith. I hate her people so much I find my faith shaken and desire to punish her for the soldiers who pushed us away from our homes. But my hate is always polluted by the memory of *my* family’s dead. If they are ghosts, like Mina, they are trapped in a foreign land, just like her. And my faith isn’t logical like Mother’s, but emotional, and I know that Mina is a test I must endure, to prove to my God I am a truly good man and worthy of calling Him my master. I even suspect that I am a test for her.



On my way to our village's church, I see familiar faces from my past life, the same ones from the old neighbourhood, or rather what has been left of it. Like us, each family lost members on the journey to this new home. We lost Father, whose body we had to leave in an unmarked grave before we walked through the border. Like our house, the village is full of ghosts of men and women who hate us.

I, alone, see them all.

Their ghostly, uncanny flesh mingles with ours. They glare at us, interfering any way they can in our attempt to survive and heal. Like Mina, they don't forgive us for being here. I hear their voices constantly, mocking my friends and neighbours, our customs, our names, our faith, our clothes. Everything we are and do, they hate and ridicule.

I reach our church and go inside. The ghosts who followed me, whispering their vitriolic hatred towards me, wishing for my penis to fall off so that I can never father children or for my mother to grow ill and die, stop at the door.

In my church, I am free of them, the only solace and peace I get from the strange ghosts that plague this place.

"Iordanes," Father Paisios says. I rush towards him and kiss his hand. "Help me with the candles."



The moment I exit the building, I hear them again, talking amidst themselves.

"The injustice," they all whisper.

"Our families lost and these faithless strangers have taken over our fortunes."

"My son used to live there."

“My grandchildren used to play in this garden, as I did when I was a child myself. This is our land, we lived here for generations. They are strangers.”

They are right, I know. Their bones are here. Their memories and legacies are etched on our newly occupied houses. They are right; we are naked against their past. Our legacies and memories were left behind, next to the Black Sea.

It isn't their fault. It isn't ours either. “Go find and haunt the politicians that decided this,” I snap at one who passed through me, on purpose.



I reach our house and find Mother and Melina sitting at the table. Her two surviving daughters and my only surviving brother are seated next to them. The smell of a freshly baked pie reaches my nostrils. The smell travels me back to our old house, to another time. The windows are large and have yellow curtains adorning them. There are paintings on the walls and vases with flowers on the table. I have my own room, with my books and my bed. My father will return home in just one moment and somewhere close my little sister is about to come skipping into the room.

“Your mother made the food wrong,” Mina criticizes. Her mouth is right next to my ear, making me shiver from her chill. “Not the way any of the women of my family make it.”

I open my eyes and smile as my mother takes the pie out of the oven. “Smells wonderful,” my brother compliments.

“It does,” I agree, causing Mina's snorts behind me.

I sit at the table and dutifully kiss my relatives as my mother serves us. Once she is seated, I kiss her and, as the oldest man and priest-to-be of the family, I put my elbows on the table, clutch my fists together and lower my head against my knuckles. The rest of them mimic me and I begin praying on our behalf.

Mina makes her appearance again, as always eager to interrupt the moment. As I pray in our language, she prays in hers, tempting me to make a mistake in my words and suck out the simple family joy of the meal. I speak slowly and the prayer ends. Immediately, she finishes too and comes to watch us eat.

“What a terribly ugly family,” she mocks us. “And what terrible food.”



The night has three possibilities. Mina either roams the house, causing small accidents wherever she can, walks the fields and disrupts the crop's growth, or sits on my bed, infecting me with nightmares of the way we were taken, of the journey and Father, who died for no reason. Of my youngest sister, barely five, who died at the first refugee camp we stayed in.

Tonight, she does all three. She begins by infecting the crops, then I hear her breaking things in the house and, finally, she enters the room I share with my brother and stands on top of me, piercing me with her gaze. “Why do you do this?” I ask, even though it is futile. There is never going to be an end to her pain, nor to ours.

“I am a ghost,” she replies. “What else is there to do but haunt you? You! You! The ones that stole my family.”

Like a well-rehearsed dance, I repeat the story of how the empire fell, how the people were exchanged and she ignores me. Too tired and too sleepy, I roll around, hiding my face under the pillow and try to sleep, ignoring her muttering hateful sounds. I pray under my breath, wishing for strength, kindness and understanding to not be cruel to this old and helpless woman, who is so desperately missing her family.

She sits on my bed, so much like my grandmother used to when she was alive and we still lived by the Black Sea. But instead of Grandmother's warm touch, her rough skin but tender touch, Mina's cold hand chokes me. She fills me with her bitterness, her sorrow, telling me what I already know. Her pain is real and valid.

"Will this be for the rest of my life?" I ask her. "Don't you wish for heaven, Mina? I know your faith also calls it heaven. Do you not wish for rest?"

Her hand pauses over my body and her pain ceases pouring into me. "Heaven?" she asks and her voice sounds childlike, like my little sister's when she didn't understand what I was saying. "Is there such a thing for me? Is there such a thing for you? People treated like objects?"

This is new. A rare chance for us to speak honestly, shedding the prejudice we feel for each other. I move the pillow away from my head and sit up. I watch our knees, next to each other. "I think so," I tell her. "My God is forgiving. Isn't yours called the All merciful?"

She nods. "But why did this happen then? What part of this is mercy? It's not for me, not for you."

Taking a chance, I let my head rest towards her ghostly self. This time there isn't a chill, but a cool breeze. This time, her pain doesn't turn into vindictive

anger but it's shared. "Do you think my family might live in your old house?"

I doubt they would have swapped us exactly, but I still nod.

"And they lived? They didn't die like your father or your sister?"

"I hope so," I tell her and I mean it. I hope her daughter, her son-in-law, her nieces, her nephews, and all the children they each bore didn't die. "Do you forget on purpose who we are each day? What happened?"

She doesn't answer. She only stands up and walks away from me. Did I offend her? Did I break whatever treaty we briefly formed?

For the first time since I met her, I fall asleep without the sound of things breaking and the house creaking.



She isn't in the house when I wake up. Nor walking in the fields. I start to roam the village in search of her and, to my surprise, all the other ghosts stay away from me. Their hateful words don't reach me. My feet take me to church and I unlock its doors. The building is old, converted to belong to us and I move to sit on the wooden benches.

"Iordanes? Are you well?" Father Paisios asks me. He comes into the main body of the church, still in his nightgown.

I nod. "Yes, Father, I just needed to come here."

He doesn't question me further. He rubs my head and squeezes my cheek and leaves me as he goes to resume his personal worship. The church is big and still unfinished. The walls are half painted as our fate dictates and half as they were before our arrival. I turn and see the

ghosts lingering around the building but never entering. Father Paisios and Mother would say the power of our God keeps them away, but I know that's not it. Our God would welcome them. Their pain prohibits them from entering, from seeing the change over the place they once prayed in. Perhaps their funerals took place inside those walls.

Far away in our cities and villages by the Black Sea, our churches are being changed to suit those that were sent to make their homes there. It would break my heart too seeing our culture erased from those buildings, or even just masked.

I turn my eyes to the ceiling and the half-finished painting of a face looking down on me. How could they look up here? If I magically went back to our old home, I don't think I could look up at the ceiling and stand the absence of the pictures. Why would they stand their presence?



Mina still isn't home when I return. Mother is happy, telling me of how this is the first day she feels really at home here. It isn't true but I smile encouragingly. It is a lie we all need to believe and the sooner we manage it, the best it will be.

"And I got the hang of the stone oven and the well too. No inconsistency in the fire, no failed attempt to get water out. It's just been a good day that it feels—and I know it is silly and wrong to say it—but it feels like the house is accepting us too. It always felt like..." she pauses, trying to find a word that isn't filled with superstitions.

"There were ghosts?" I add and she nods, smiling.

“I was afraid you would scold me if I said that, Iordanes.”

I shake my head. “No, never.” I move closer and kiss Mother’s forehead, the way she used to do it to me when I was still a boy, as my father did to all of us when he was the man of the family and, even farther back, when my grandfather did. “The food smells lovely,” I tell her. “Did you bake bread too?”

When Melina and my cousins come, followed by my brother, we all sit together and pray, for the first time without Mina trying to trip my words up.

The food tastes beautiful. The moment is one I thought I would never live again. Nothing exists to spoil it and I am suddenly happy; just for the duration of our meal, I have forgotten all the terrible things that happened to me, us. With Mina gone, wherever she is hiding, there is no constant reminder of the terrible past that haunts both the living and the dead of this village.

It is years later when our ghost makes an appearance again. I am now the priest of the village, a position which gives me respect, even amid the native population—the ones that were always here and always belonged to this country, as they like to remind themselves—who are forced to speak to me whenever I bring forth the issues our village faces.

For the first time, I see a ghost inside the church. I approach slowly, fearful that Mina is back, this time to haunt me in the church, instead of the house. She doesn’t lift her eyes; I am not sure if she recognizes me. Her body is fainter than ever before, as if she is made of mist ready to evaporate.

“Mina?” I call her name and she looks up, startled, as if she doesn’t understand the sound of her own identity.

Our eyes meet and then understanding flickers as she watches my now manly face. She lowers her gaze again and the known sound of her crying, her agonising pain reaches my ears. I am again, as I was all those years ago, filled with mixed feelings of pity, bitterness, and empathy. I hate her again, not because her faith makes her belong to the people who exiled us from the Black Sea but because in her pitiful state, she mirrors my own.

“I can’t leave,” she says. “I always take a wrong turn and am back facing the graveyard where my bones are.”

“Where did you want to go?” I ask and wish she could have stayed away. The thought makes me feel ashamed because I know where she wants to go and like me, she can never find that place. It no longer exists.

Home.

“My family,” she says. To be guarding her own people, her descendants. Her home is there, on their side.

I look up. A drawing of my God looks down on me from the basilica ceiling.

“Do you remember what happened?” I ask her, dreading that our old loop of conversation will start again.

She nods. “They were exchanged,” she says and the words feel wrong in her mouth. The verb she should have chosen was “stolen”, “taken”, “exiled”, but she uses the one history books aim to establish and doesn’t include the misery of everything that happened to us, to them.

I look away from the basilica ceiling and lower my head to rest on my hands as I sit by her. I get cold slowly, and when I look up there are more ghosts inside the church, ones that never tried to leave. I watch them hug Mina, whispering their prayers to each other, and the

sight again is reminiscent of ones I have lived through. A show of empathy and solidarity in the absence of all hope.

All those ghosts only have each other. Only they remember the place they used to live. Its name, its smells, and sounds. They coax Mina to stand up and their see-through bodies become a mass as they walk out of the church.

I look up to see my God again and I remember the lost souls of my family, praying they have reached heaven. My father, whose body I have tried to find but the unmarked grave is impossible to locate. My little sister, who died just as we reached this country. Her bones I have managed to bring closer to my mother at least, who leaves a flower at her grave each day. My brother, who moved down south and we never heard from him again. In my heart, I know it isn't lack of love which has kept him from writing to us.

And I think of the ones who died there, back home. I stare at the face of the ceiling, suddenly unable to see my God in the picture, unable to find my faith as I stare at the painted eyes. An image shakes me. It enters my mind and I am unable to stop it. My grandmother and her generation. Her parents' generation. All my dead. The ones that are my direct link to the creation of all the universe. So many of those souls are back at the Black Sea and I can see them in my mind. Their bodies are like mist and they are all walking at the seaside. I see them in their endless parade on the sand, the water washing over their non-existence. They are also trying to find a way out of that endless cycle.

They need an escape. As Mina and her dead company does.

Their feet walk slowly over the sand, just small steps and their faces are blank expressions.

Trapped. Like Mina and her dead compatriots.

I shiver from the cold and I am violently sick at the thought. My breakfast comes out of my mouth and spoils the floor, sticks on the wooden benches and some of it even destroys the bright black of my clothes. I stare at it. A yellow-orange mixture, with bits of solid food recognizable but having lost all their taste and beauty. The stinking of the food is a violent comparison with the smell that made me crave it in the morning. The memory of the warm and sweet flavour shares nothing with the odious heat that emanates from the vomit.

I stare at it, fascinated and disgusted. I see the entire story in the expelled half-digested food. My history. My grandmother's, my mother's, my father's. Mina's and her family's. We were all spewed out, like food. A terrible mixture of things which had lost their real shape, odour, and taste and none of us, of those who remembered the journey and the loss, were appetizing to eat again. That was why the natives hated us. Not because we took their jobs or caused problems in their economy, not because we ate differently than them, sang different songs and danced different dances. They could celebrate those things we brought with us.

It was that they could see, as I could with the food, that we had been vomited out and they couldn't stand that. We hadn't come, as so many others might have arrived in new places, full of dreams of a better life or desire to make a home. We were half digested and wretched all over their world, so clearly traumatised and pained they couldn't ignore it.

I hesitate. I am disgusted but still move my hand onto the vomit and feel it. There is nothing that can stop my tears. For the first time in all my life, I feel a desperate loneliness and purposefulness because the world isn't fair. It wasn't fair and no one, not a single person has apologized to me, to my mother, to Melina and her children, to our dead.

To Mina, either.

None of those people, who decided this forceful exchange, who caused our genocide, first through blades and then by vomiting us out like bad meat, has apologized. And they are both to blame, I suddenly feel that strongly. Both sides, I hate the same. The ones who took us and weren't prepared to help us. I hate them as much as the ones who killed us and forced us away with their weapons. None of them cared enough to see us as real human beings.

I try to grasp onto my faith, to find a way to expel that anger and hatred but my God is nowhere to be found within me at that moment. All I can do is cry. All I can do is scream and feel those horrible emotions which have always been there, spoiling. Like the bacteria all over my vomited-out food.

"You need to clean this," Mina says behind me.

She stands alone, none of her other ghosts have re-entered the church. I see them all standing by the door.

"I am so sorry," I whisper. "I am so sorry this happened to you."

"You are not at fault," she whispers.

I shake my head even though I agree that I don't bear the blame for what happened. "Someone must cry. Someone must apologize and those who should, never will."

She stays silent until she puts her hands over my body, through my flesh and I am cooled down. It feels the same as when I have a fever and Mother puts a wet cloth over my forehead. It is painful but also relieving at the same time. Her presence, her impossible touch feels the same. A necessary relief that cannot be anything but slightly painful.

“Get up now, boy. You need to clean this. What if someone wants to come and pray?”

I nod and obey her. She stands and watches me as I bring a bucket of water, a cloth and scrub the orange-yellow mixture off the floor and the wood. The smell is harder to get rid of. I soak flowers in water to cover it but it is still there. It will take a long time for the smell to vanish.

“Your clothes too,” Mina says and I start cleaning them but soon give up, deciding I prefer to change into the spare robe I have in the back room.

When I return, Mina is again outside. I follow her and all the other ghosts, in a similar parade to the one I envisioned for my own relatives on the shores of the Black Sea. We reach their graveyard and each of them goes and stands at their place of eternal rest. I walk amid them, reading their names and giving their faded forms an identity again, even if it is only their name and age.

“I will not forget you,” I promise them as I walk in circles in this graveyard, completely empty of people but full of souls. “I will not forget that you existed too.”



Unspoil

Louise Hughes

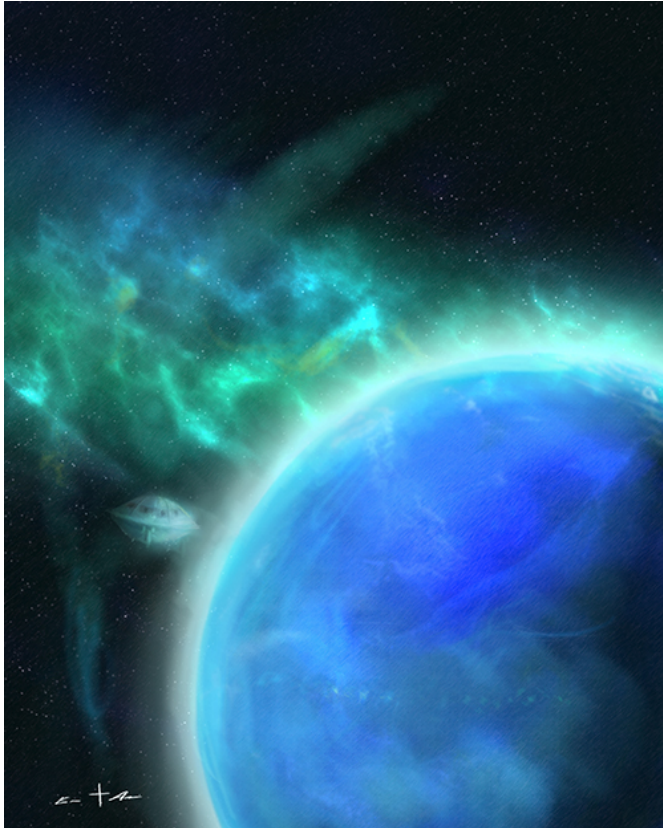


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A week into our planetary survey, we ran out of ginger biscuits. Karin announced it through the intercom and when I ignored her, banged her fist on the bulkhead between the cockpit and the carto lab.

I didn't look away from my screen until the hatch opened and her head popped through.

"Brigitte," she said. "Biscuits."

“I bought you, like, eight packets on Central. Eight isn’t enough?”

“Did you hide some?”

“No.”

“Well, then it’s not enough.” She waited for my response. “And, I think we’re going to have to go down there.”

I dragged my feet down off the desk. This was turning into that kind of conversation.

“Really?”

She leant against the closed window shutter, fingers hovering over the switch. “I know. I know. But I mean really this time. We need to go down there.”

The cockpit shutters slid upwards and the planet below us swept into view. Blue, for the most part. The kind of sapphire blue travel corps were so fond of using on holoboard. A series of archipelagos clung to the equator like dead ants.

There was nothing I couldn’t already see in the portfolio. Nothing the drones weren’t streaming up to us as they hovered merrily through their scan pattern. Nothing that wasn’t plotted on Karin’s maps.

“Is it something from the reviews?”

She’d been quoting them at dinner. Only the 1-stars. The planet had previously belonged to WideScape Inc., a boutique adventure tourism provider. Family run. But it was on the outer edge of their interests and, following the death of the matriarch, the heirs sold off some of their assets. Consolidating their profile, I think they called it.

C-T-Universe had snapped it right up, shuffled it into their vast bank and let it turn for a few years. Now here we were, updating the portfolio for the new management.

“They’re going to stick resorts on all those.” I waved my hand at the islands. “Maybe a few underwater. Some sky cities. Usual sort of thing. The drones’ll flag anything of note.”

Someone had declared war on someone else. All the corps were scouring their portfolios for places far, far away from the conflict zone. No one wanted to share their holiday with squaddies on their way to the front.

The drones flagged two more sites of interest, little green stars pinging to life on my screen. If I didn’t deal with them before the drones moved on, we’d fall behind schedule. Karin wouldn’t be the one accounting for it when we got back. Writing up the bill was my job.

“It’s a mapping irregularity,” she said. She reached for the screen over my shoulder, sweeping my work away with two flicks of her wrist. “See. Here.”

The satellite image she brought up showed the same clear blue sea as the rest, clouds sprayed across like half-eaten mashed potato.

“There’s nothing there.”

Karin stood up, arms folded, smug. “Yes, but watch.” She flicked through the images, bringing up one taken at the end of the survey, and laid the two side-by-side.

The clouds were identical.

“It’s just clouds.”

I really, really didn’t want to get my boots out of the locker. I didn’t want to decide which coat to take, or to have to change my hair to accommodate that most irritating of planetary phenomena—weather.

“The clouds are hiding something. The clouds aren’t real. I mean, they’re good, but... it’s just the water around there. I can tell. There’s something under the clouds.”

“I’m not going down there.”

“Ahhh, Brigitte, come on. I’ll make tea.”

“No.”

“For the rest of the job.”

I hate cooking. It’s completely unnecessary and we were saving up for a proper CopyOven.

I chose the medium terrain boots and Karin had the coats out ready by the time I finished landing Pod on what passed for the coast of the largest island. I hovered just below the cloud layer and invited her up to the cockpit to come and see the small smudge of land the clouds had hidden.

She didn’t even answer the intercom.

The islands were tiny, even for planetary land bodies. They’d be specs of asteroids in space. Dust. They were also freezing. Karin glared at me from the sunlit sand, as I carefully descended from the hatch with my gloved hands stuffed deep in my pockets. She’d come out in a shirt, sleeves rolled radically up as far as her elbow. I pulled my knitted hat down tighter over my ears. My ears didn’t like untreated air. It dried out the skin and then it peeled.

“So, who did the survey last time,” I asked to distract her from my shivering. We started along the beach to find somewhere the cliffs weren’t so high. The sun was very bright. I was going to have such a bad head later. My boots sank into the sand, which made walking feel like I was dragging myself along.

Karin bounded. “In-house people, I think. I’ll check the portfolio.” She pulled out her com and started flicking through with her thumb. “Aye. It was done in-house by WideScape.”

We usually encoded our work with a watermark, but the corps ran it through whatever software they had and

took it off again. From my experience, in-house surveyors used the company watermark and recorded even less of a presence than we freelancers.

“I can probably see who was on their books at the time the survey was done.”

I shrugged as we stepped off the sand, into grasses that scratched my hands. “Doesn’t matter.” The islands, much to Karin’s visible disappointment, were as boring as islands could be. Not like asteroids at all, with their variable gravity and unrestricted star views. Blue sky, blue water, and green leaves so bright they made me wince. There was no subtlety or shade to the colours, the air was sticky, and I tripped over trailing dead branches on the path three times.

“Could do with a tidy up,” I muttered. Karin had suggested we climb to the top of a low hill with a single stunted tree at the peak, and now I clung to the tree for breath, bent over a stitch in my side. “I don’t get it. Why hide this? It’s just an island. It’s not even big enough to build a hotel on.”

The drones would flag it up as inconsequential, worthless, expensive to process...

“It’s beautiful though, isn’t it.”

She stood with her hand up to shield her eyes from the sun, which was brighter than anything our contacts were designed to filter. The sand clung to her leggings, all the way up to the knee, and we’d be finding it on our socks for weeks.

“No,” I said. “Not really. Can we go back inside now?”

“Do we have a shovel?”

“A what?”

“You know, for digging.”

“Why would we need to dig?” The drones could do that, to take samples, but I’d seen people digging with their hands in picture books as a child and didn’t fancy scraping earth out of my fingernails. Sticking my hands into the ground. It was disgusting.

“For treasure.” She beamed at me, arms wide. “There must be treasure. Why else would they hide it on the maps.”

“Maybe there was but they already came back for it.”

“Hmm.” Her arms sank a little.

“Come on. I’ll get the drones to have a look. Add it to their survey.”

She ran down the hill, whooping and throwing her hands in the air, then stumbled to a halt and knelt down in the long grass.

“Aww, look.”

Treasure?

No. When I staggered down to reach her she had her fingers cupped around the head of a small purple flower, shaped like a bell. Unlike all the flowers in pots around our living space, it blended into its surroundings. There was no way for anything to stand out, no way to appreciate their shape and flavour. No clarity at all.

The place was a mess and a muddle. Left too long to go wild.

“That’s the point,” Karin said as we unclipped our boots on the hatch, side-by-side in the shade, as the water crept up on us like hunger. “It’s supposed to be that way.”

“I’ll send the drones over.”

But she clasped my shoulder as she climbed back inside. “Not yet. I’m not finished investigating.”

I swung myself up and slapped the button to close the hatch and shut the hard air out. I wanted to get back to

work, because everything I'd left unfinished was unspooling in my head.

"There's nothing there," I said.

"I know. That's why it's so interesting. Don't you think it's interesting?"

"I think it's cold."

I waved my hand over the temperature controls as the hatch seals engaged. It would take a few minutes to get the air back up to normal, so I stayed in my coat back up to the cockpit. Karin followed me instead of going straight back to her lab. In the continued absence of ginger biscuits or a CopyOven with which to make them, she'd found the breadsticks. She nibbled on the end of one, gesticulating with it like a conductor as she talked.

"Did you log we were going down there?" she asked. The sky outside the windows began to lose its lurid blue as we rose, shifting back into satisfying blackness.

I shook my head.

"Don't send the drones."

"What? Why? I thought you wanted to investigate?"

"I do." She had that airy way about her, like her thoughts were floating invisibly all over the cabin and she was looking for them. "I just don't want, you know, anyone to know I'm investigating."

"But if I have the drones send up some photographs, you can have a proper look, and then you might spot something."

It was impossible to properly take in a place while you were existing in it. Especially if the place was new. We liked to put all the photographs, charts, data readings of all kinds, in projections up on the walls in the living sections while we were working on a survey project.

Karin liked to go to sleep with her half-formed maps over our heads.

“No.”

She stopped my hand on the controls and her fingers were still chill from the planet, still with sand dust clinging.

“Go and wash all that off. Don’t get it on the screen.”

It was bad enough that I was going to have to get the hoover out later. We could not afford scratches on the in-built tech. Not if she wanted ginger biscuits on tap.

“Don’t send the drones while I’m gone.”

I waved her away. “I won’t, I won’t, I promise.”

Even if I did, it would be hours before they got around to it. The drones were busy and their readings kept streaming up to my terminal while I parked us back in orbit. They were focussing on a much larger chain of islands, flagging potential construction sites, shallow lagoons where people could paddle, wide beaches, climbable cliff faces.

Karin grinned. “Go back to your data. I’ll start tea.”

I spent a fulfilling twenty minutes checking the drones’ work. Photographs rolled out across my screen but after the two-hundredth image of a forest path, after I’d analysed the sensor readings and flagged several as safe for clearing and several others for aesthetic protection, it started to nag at me.

She’d left it on the other screen. Two images of clouds. Two identical images of clouds over a boring island.

Why hide something that boring?

According to my criteria it had no aesthetic or development value. I would have concurred with the drones’ assessment and put it far down the list of the

planet's notable features. It had no symmetry, no contrasts, nothing sweeping and the temperatures were in the mid to low range. Any attempt to build on it would probably sink. The ocean around it was barely navigable and full of shoals. The flora wasn't unique. The fauna was non-existent.

It would be tea soon. I could smell cinnamon and cumin and fried onions. I could give Karin a few answers, so we could have some semblance of a quiet evening.

As freelancers, we have to pay for access to the planetary chart database ourselves, and we don't have pro access, so it's slow. I paused the automatic backup upload while I ran the search, for the most basic questions she had asked.

Who?

In-house, of course, which wasn't any help. There was the WideScape entry, complete with dates and purpose ("low development, tourism, business interest"). Dates they'd acquired the real estate, dates of application to conduct a survey, date of approval and by whom granted, date carried out. Everything looked to be in order. Neat, tidy, boxes all filled.

The initial survey had taken ten weeks, which verged on the lengthy side for a world with so little land. That's what in-house gets you. I would have quoted seven, Karin would have haggled up to eight, we would probably have been granted six. We'd been given four for the re-assessment based on the change of use from low development to high.

I found out who they were within five minutes from an archive of the WideScape public page.

“Here.” I put the tablet down on the counter next to the plates. “The in-house surveyors at WideScape when the original survey was done.”

She swept in to perch on the edge of my chair. “Huh. Who are they then? Pirates? Wealthy heirs to questionable fortunes? Any suspicions on why they would want to hide an island?”

I shoved her off with my elbow and raised an eyebrow at the pans on the hob. “No. At least, not that I can see. They don’t work there any more.”

“Hmm.” She spooned out the rice, which was a bit sticky because Karin just can’t get the hang of rice, and there was no point in complaining because we were saving up already. “Was this at the same time as they sold half their portfolio?”

Aha. “No. No, it wasn’t. It was about six months after they filed the survey for this planet. And it wasn’t cost-cutting because they hired two new surveyors within five weeks.”

“Five weeks, huh?”

The curry drowned the rice, and Karin handed me my cutlery.

“Yep. Five weeks.”

“Well, then.” She still had the breadsticks and she dipped them into the curry sauce, waving her knife around as she did so and sucking in air to cool her mouth. “So they were sacked.”

“What?”

“Got to be. Job like that, doesn’t take five weeks to rehire. In-house, man. I’d sell you for that opportunity.”

“Thanks.” I blew on my fork and rice pinged off the bulkhead.

“They didn’t expect them to leave. So either, they ran off or they were sacked. Who’d run off from that job?”

I shrugged. “Company ratings are high. Maybe they...”

“Sacked them.”

“Aye, maybe.”

We munched in silence for five minutes. The lights shifted to twilight and the tablet hid the drone notifications. The charts blossomed on the walls and ceiling.

“I’ll just...”

Karin reached for the tablet but I beat her to it, slapping her hand away with a breadstick.

I checked both of their names in the survey database and found four charts. Before they’d been hired by WideScape. Like us, they’d started out as freelancers and got lucky.

“They wouldn’t quit then,” Karin said. “Bet they could afford a CopyOven.”

“Maybe they liked to cook.”

Jassia and Paolo Neeton. The names weren’t unique enough, even searched together.

“Try including the planets off the charts.”

“Ahh, there you go.”

I laid the tablet down next to my empty plate and flicked my fingers at it, summoning the air-display. Paolo Neeton. In orbit around a planet near what was now the military front. A planet not even WideScape would be able to off-load from their books right now.

He had dark hair, and skin a shade lighter than Karin’s. I had him on mute as he turned the camera to show the slowly turning orb outside his window. Karin

zoomed the image so it took up half the wall, which looked a bit weird with all our charts over his face.

“What’s he doing?” Karin squinted at the video like that was going to help. I unmuted him instead.

Turned out, he was mixing cocktails. Cocktails named after the planet. Blonde-haired Jassia looped her arms around his neck and he let her test one. She spat it out, cursed and kissed him, and vanished back off screen.

Each video was a new planet, a new cocktail invention. They definitely wouldn’t have enough saved for a CopyOven if he spent it all on fancy alcohol in fancy colours, with fancy names. I hadn’t even heard of most of the bottles he held up. Or, they’d already bought a far more expensive CopyOven than we had saved to our wish list.

“In-house,” said Karin, nodding knowingly.

I washed up and she dried the dishes, then we took our cocoa and oranges to the beanbags in the corner furthest from the table. This was where we sat while we reviewed the day’s data. I began arranging the results of my drone surveys on the screen in front of us.

“You know,” said Karin as she dropped like a stone, plate and cup held aloft. “I think I recognise those names from somewhere.”

“What names?”

“The Neetons.”

She had her tablet and charts out now. We had to review the most northerly of the island groups and assess the likelihood of seismic activity. The drones had tagged it as likely based on their readings and it would have to go in the insurance report.

“I think I knew someone with that name in my creche.”



Illustration © 2022, Eric Asaris.

I'd taken my turn at the investigation. It was her move.

"No, more recently. Like, I don't know, written down maybe."

"I'm going to file this island as a potential quarry site. What do you think?"

Karin zoomed in on her chart, but her eyes were focussed on something about two metres behind it. "I think... yeah, whatever."

Fine, quarry it would be then. Good hard rock. The corps preferred to get as much of their building materials in-situ and cut down on transport costs. Half the freight flyers in the region had been requisitioned.

“We should put in to survey for military bases when we get back,” I said. “I’ll have a look at the call-outs later.”

Wasn’t much later left. We had a strict sleep schedule to maximise work potential.

“Here, look. I knew I’d seen it somewhere.”

She had the original job outline up on her screen, with links to the various portfolio files and historical data. It wasn’t that much different from the database record. Originally surveyed by WideScape, now requiring change-of-use survey, charts transferred with purchase, the usual.

“What?”

She jabbed her finger at a flagged note near the bottom. Usually it recorded major disasters or climate shifts since the last survey. We needed to know if a hundred square kilometres had imploded or been washed away so we could prioritise.

As far as I knew, there hadn’t been anything of the kind. One small volcanic eruption and a couple of minor cases of cliff erosion. Nothing the modelling wouldn’t deal with.

“Huh.” She’d clicked on the flag.

“What?” This was deliberate. She’d already read it. She was holding out on me. “Come on.”

She read it over again and I watched her eyes flicker, taking in each word on what was probably a very short note.

“The charts were stolen,” she said, still reading. “They stole them.”

“Who?”

“The Neetons.”

“Stole them. Why?”

“They sold them. This one and several other assets. I remember now, WideScape had to sell them cheap because they’d lost sole ownership of the charts.”

“No wonder CTU’s left them sitting doing nothing for years. Their customers take security very seriously, especially if unknown actors have detailed surveys of the rock your hotel is built on.”

“Doesn’t say who they sold them to though.” She cocked her head. “They were definitely sacked though. That clears that right up.”

We drank our cooled cocoa in gulps as Karin put the tablet down and brought her attention back to the chart.

“I think I’ve identified some potential mineral exploits over here, under the surface,” I said to move on. “I’ll flag them. They might not be interested.”

Tourists didn’t really like mining operations muscling in on their unspoilt wilderness holidays, but if they moved quickly the corp could get it done while the building work was still ongoing.

“Do you think they’re going to use the orbital? Or build a new one?”

I’d established our orbit on the opposite side of the planet because unoccupied and derelict inhabitation makes me queasy. We’ve had bad experiences with unattended system AI trying to hack us and whine about being abandoned.

“I’d be surprised if they don’t tow it straight into the sun,” said Karin with a shrug. “Can’t possibly deal with the numbers they’re looking at on the proposal.”

The lights continued to dim until we were squinting at our screens and I felt a headache coming on. Earlier than usual. Damn that blue refracted sunlight.

As I stood up and stretched, Karin handed me the remote for our audio system.

“Your turn,” she said.

I flicked through the story database and picked something light. Something set among the stars, but cosy. We’d finished an epic deep space adventure with pirates last night and I didn’t have the capacity for anything so involved. Keeping it all in my head when we were so deep into the survey gave me the weirdest dreams.

“If we get a military contract next, I think we should be able to get the CopyOven by the end of year,” I said as I rinsed my face in the sink. Karin’s reflection dragged her pyjamas on in the mirror. “Or do you want to stay back from the front?”

She stepped over and reached for her cleanser. “I don’t mind.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want you...” I turned a little to look at her eyes and not her reflection’s, trying to find the lie there.

“Really, I don’t mind. If you think it’ll be better pay, I’m up for it.”

But whatever she said, I’d keep us off the front line. I’d make sure we were far enough back even if it meant taking less. Karin had grown up on Hetrax. She wouldn’t do a job that meant wearing a uniform. Even those loose blue jerseys and caps some of the corps made their reps wear.

The story started playing as I changed. Karin shuffled to sit up against her pillow. She had the tablet, which was against our rules, and her eyes flickered fast as she scrolled.

“What?” I asked, as I set my hot water bottle to temperature and downed a glass of water. “Find something else.”

“Unspoilt.”

The word was familiar but I couldn’t place it.

She leant forward with the tablet still clutched in one hand, dragging her hair bobble out as she did so. “Unspoilt,” she repeated. “One of those anti-development groups. Setting up camp on uninhabited planets, chaining themselves to construction drones, that sort of thing. Remember, a year ago, maybe two. They arrested them all trying to blockade that planet... what was it?”

“Timant. So you think they sold the charts to them?”

“I know they did. It was in the news.”

I reached for the tablet and silenced the story for a moment while I read. She was right. They’d been caught when a drone spotted their irregular transmission, but the destination was a burner satellite. An investigation found they’d been recruited years before, in a bar on Central. I clicked through the next link to the connecting story. Guilty. Sentencing. Ten years apiece.

Karin punched her pillow and slammed her head back into it, and I held the tablet directly above my head as I scrolled.

“We could just be looking into this stuff because of the flag. Curiosity. Nothing wrong with that.” She turned over and looked right at me.

“I know.”

But it didn’t stop me searching the database.

“Jessia’s on a deep space station, out on the edge. Paolo’s in the other direction, nearer home. A station though.”

“Not on planetary penal colonies?”

“No. Processing stations. I have the charts. Want to see?”

She waved the screen away. “No. Turn it off.”

Karin was right. It wasn’t a legitimate use of the database.

“So,” I reached for the light control. “Should I send the drones to look at that island?”

She reached out and took my hand as the stars winked into view in the darkness above our heads, decorating Karin’s charts with pinprick light.

“No,” she said after a pause. “It was beautiful.”

“But, if it’s a security issue. We need to...”

“It’s not. It’s just a beautiful island someone wants to stay that way.”

“Even if they can’t come and see it because they’re stuck in prison?”

“They’re in prison for selling charts, not hiding an island.” She squeezed my hand. “Don’t worry about it.”

I didn’t understand why hiding a speck of cold nothingness was important but that was Karin. If I understood everything, life would be so dull. Early mornings, the way she looked at a map and translated it into kaleidoscope reality in her head, romance novels, and ginger biscuits.

For her, I’d delete the flight records.

“They were good, those clouds. I didn’t even see them. We haven’t the time, anyway, if you want that military contract.”

“If you want that CopyOven.”

“Endless ginger biscuits.”

She grinned in the starlight and I closed my eyes, our hands still together as we fell asleep.

New Day Dawning

Francesca Forrest

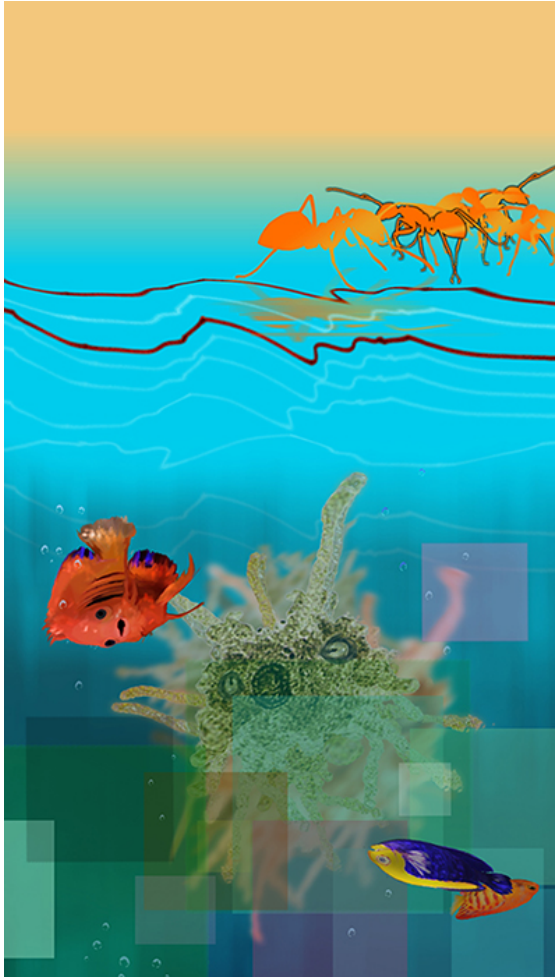


Illustration © 2022, Toeken.

“There it is,” exclaimed Winna. “There’s the Santa Marta bloom!” Thirty-five thousand feet down, a pinkish-brown smear drifted on blue waters of the Caribbean: *Trichodesmium terrens*, the novel cyanobacterium poisoning oceans worldwide and bringing hunger and

economic chaos in its wake. Next to Winna, Tomás looked up from his tablet and out the window. Across the aisle their boss, Dr. Sengupta, was pointing out the bloom to the half-dozen assistant and associate researchers on his team.

“So that’s Terrible T, the enemy bringing us all together,” Tomás said. “Little does it realize it’s about to meet its doom.” He punctuated his prediction with a half-smile.

“You think so?” Winna said. It would be wonderful to believe that, but...

“Are you kidding? With a whole conference’s worth of crack teams like Dr. Sengupta’s convening to plot its defeat?”

Ah, sarcasm. It had to be: Tomás was the solo support staff for the junior researchers on Dr. Sengupta’s team and frequently regaled Winna with stories of their jostling egos, ambitions, and resentments. As Dr. Sengupta’s personal administrative assistant, Winna would miss out on all that drama if it wasn’t for Tomás. But if that remark was sarcastic, it meant Tomás hadn’t been serious about the imminent defeat of Terrible T either. Winna felt a familiar wave of embarrassment and frustration. She was always failing to recognize irony and sarcasm. At least Tomás didn’t make her feel like a freak for taking things seriously.

This time, he just laughed, a friendly sound. “I admit, if it was just up to our team, then I’d be putting money on Terrible T, but look.” He passed her his tablet, which was displaying the list of conference participants—research teams from around the world. He pointed to one, a highlighted participant: Káurë New Day, from the Solimões Sodality. Winna brightened.

“The Solimões Sodality! I love the Solimões Sodality.”

The Sodality’s against-the-odds story was so inspiring. Forty years ago the Magüta people of Amazonia had compelled Colombia, Brazil, and Peru to accept a new, sovereign nation-state encompassing Magüta ancestral land. The new state—the Solimões Sodality—had then had the audacity not only to maintain its independence but to become highly successful on the world stage. Sodality medical researchers had developed a low-tech means of neutralizing leishmaniasis parasites. Its eco-agricultural teams had come up with a quick-acting soil improvement regimen for depleted agricultural land. And much of the world was using the cheap, easy-to-assemble emergency shelter its inventors had developed for use after storms and flooding. And those were only the innovations Winna knew about. There were probably others.

Tomás merely laughed again.

Winna shot him a sidelong glance. “You don’t like the Sodality?”

“I mean, it’s a little hard to say I like a whole state, you know? Any country has its good points and its bad ones.”

“Once when Fielding caught me reading an article about the founders of the Sodality, she said something about a footballer, a con man, and a mercenary pulling one over on the world,” Winna said, getting angry all over again, remembering. Stupid, arrogant Fielding.

“Fielding’s a racist idiot. No one on the team likes her—she thinks Jansen does, but even he can’t stand her.”

A glow of satisfaction warmed Winna at Tomás's words—followed by just a tinge of anxiety for Fielding. It was awful to be so unaware of everyone else's feelings.

"Just because I'm not at the Winna tier of support for the Sodality doesn't mean I'm on the Fielding tier," Tomás continued. "For one thing, I'd never disrespect the founders of the Sodality."

"I know—you're nothing like Fielding."

Tomás was more like Winna herself, Winna reflected, even if Tomás could do irony effortlessly and Winna couldn't. Like her, he'd struggled to cobble together enough education and job references to land his position at the California All-Research Hub. Winna thought of her years before the CAR-Hub job—a childhood drifting across North America on the coattails of her father's scams. Tomás had had it rough, too. She wasn't clear on the details, but she knew he'd made his way solo from Colombia to California during his teens—from Santa Marta, in fact, if Winna remembered correctly. So this conference was a homecoming for him. She was about to say something to that effect, but Tomás spoke first, pointing to the name Káurë New Day again.

"The participant from the Solimões Sodality—it's a colonial," he said.

Winna's eyes widened. Colonial humans were another, much less well-received, Sodality innovation: twelve *H. sapiens* functioning as a single being, with a single executive function (located where? in one of the bodies? Winna wasn't sure) governing the input and analysis of all twelve constituents. Apparently creation of a colonial began prior to birth and involved intensive training throughout childhood. It was whispered that bioengineering was also involved, though that theory was

hotly contested and none of the speculation was confirmed or denied by the Sodality itself. Colonials were considered a national treasure, and the details of their growth and development were a state secret. In much of the rest of the world, research into their creation and propagation was banned, but when it came to solving a problem like rampaging Terrible T, evidently the prodigious cognitive powers of a colonial were welcome.

“Ohhhh,” Winna breathed. “What you said before about Terrible T’s doom—if a colonial’s joining the conference, maybe we really will find a way to beat it. Maybe the colonial will arrive with a solution already in hand.” She handed the tablet back to Tomás.

He shook his head. “I doubt it. One thing about the Sodality: it doesn’t pass up an opportunity to toot its own horn. If Sodality researchers had already solved the problem of Terrible T, you can bet we’d have heard.”

Winna nodded absently, her thoughts elsewhere. What was it like to be a colonial? To be twelve minds, linked together—except that wasn’t how it was. It was just one mind, but with twelve bodies. The seeing power of twelve pairs of eyes—could it read and digest twelve different articles at once? And twelve pairs of ears, twelve mouths—could it carry on twelve conversations at once?

“I wonder if the organizers knew the Sodality was sending a colonial and just didn’t care, or if it was a surprise,” Tomás said. “Or maybe they deliberately asked for one. Deal-with-the-devil sort of thing. What do you think?”

“What?” Winna pulled herself out of her musings. Tomás was waiting on her answer. Was he asking for her speculation on the conference organizers’ views on

colonials, or for her own? He'd said *deal with the devil*, which told her where his lay. Winna had never stopped to consider what her own feelings on the topic were. She tried to recall the pros and cons that people typically laid out.

Beginning descent; please make yourself comfortable with seatbelt fastened. The automated voice interrupted her reflection, and then Dr. Sengupta's preemptory voice sounded in her earpiece.

"Winna, I'd like to go over the translator settings."

"Sure, I can do that with you now," Winna subvocalized, signaling to Tomás with a significance glance in Dr. Sengupta's direction that she was now on duty. Tomás nodded and settled back in his seat.

Two hours later, Winna was watching entranced as colorful houses, trees with vivid yellow flowers (guayacán, Tomás told her), and distant mountains slipped past the windows of their hotel shuttle. The exterior walls of the marine research center that was hosting the conference were another feast for the eyes: an abstract pattern of squares of all sizes and colors, flashing here dark, here pale, against a background that undulated through shades of blue and green.

Winna remembered again that this was Tomás's hometown. "Have things changed much?" she asked.

"I never saw any of this when I was a kid," he said, an edge to his voice. "Orphanage was in a completely different part of town."

Oh right: that was the other part of his story. Winna's expression must have telegraphed her chagrin because Tomás's tone lightened as he said, "Impressive building, though; hope we get some minutes to ourselves to look around."

Inside the research center, support staff directed Dr. Sengupta's team to auditorium seats reserved for them, and then, recognizing Winna and Tomás as fellow supports, beckoned them away for a quick run-through of access codes, location of physical necessities, and so on. Winna repeated the directions and information subvocally for her multipurpose to record; Tomás just nodded and thanked their hosts. Winna envied his memory.

A press of people delayed their return to the auditorium. Winna grabbed Tomás's arm. "Is that the colonial, do you think?"

At the center of the crowd, filing one by one into the auditorium, was a group of people, all dressed in black and yellow, mixed in terms of gender and body types, but all of a similar age, and all wearing identical expressions, like a bank of screens all displaying the same image and message—one of serenity and confidence.

"That's the colonial all right," said Tomás, looking more grim than he had when Winna had pointed out Terrible T.

A shiver ran up Winna's spine, but of excitement, not fear. An actual colonial.

At that moment Dr. Sengupta called to Winna—he was still having trouble with the auto-translate interface—and it was back to work. On the periphery of her attention, Winna caught the host's welcoming phrases, which transitioned into statements about This Grave Danger and then to flattering words of welcome for the conference's special participant, Káurë New Day. The screens around the auditorium flashed an image of a striking black-and-yellow bird, *Cacicus cela*—káurë in the Magüta tongue—for which the colonial was named.

When Winna glanced up next, one of the constituents of the colonial was stepping to the lectern, composed, smiling, probably no older than Winna's own twenty-five years, judging from the close-ups of her face displayed on all the screens. Her badge said "Káurë One," and Winna realized the other constituents of the colonial, seated in chairs on the dais behind the lectern, were similarly numbered—two through twelve.

"—delighted to be working with you, my esteemed colleagues," the auto-translate piped into Winna's ear. She switched it off so she could hear Káurë One's own voice and the cadence of the unfamiliar sounds of the Magüta language. When chuckles bubbled up in the auditorium, Winna turned the auto-translate back on. At the lectern and on all the screens, Káurë One was smiling indulgently.

"You laugh because you feel implicated in an accusation of woolgathering or daydreaming, but that's where the human mind draws its unduplicable strength—its ability to make spontaneous connections between things that computers can never dream of bringing together. And from those unexpected connections come unexpected solutions. That's the advantage that a colonial human offers: intuitive leaps, combined with the analytic strength that comes from twelve brains working as one."

The other attendees clapped politely.

Fielding leaned back in her seat and tapped the knee of Jansen. "Jans. Hey Jans. What do think a colonial does when it wants to get laid? Would hooking up with different parts of itself count as jerking off?"

"Hey Fielding, how about you shut up?" Jansen replied in crisp, Danish-inflected English. Fielding rolled

her eyes and turned her attention back to the front of the room.

“—won’t be just an afternoon’s cruise. I know we’ve all seen *T. terreus* in the lab, and some of you will have seen it in the wild already, but I believe we’ll benefit from visiting the Santa Marta bloom together,” Káurë One was saying. “Equally important will be the tours around the city. I look forward to spending the afternoon with you in these two ways, both to better make your acquaintance and to collect varied inputs for our shared task.” She looked out at the audience, and so did the eleven other constituents of the colonial, all smiling. That was creepy—until Winna locked eyes with one of the eleven and received from them... an invitation? She inhaled slowly: she felt sure there was a scent to it, though her nose brought her nothing but hints of deodorants and detergents in the cooled and processed air.

Everyone in the auditorium was rising, gathering their things. Some headed down toward Káurë New Day, others made their way toward the exits.

“Do you want any of us to go on that cruise or one of the tours, Professor Sengupta?” asked Xin, another of Dr. Sengupta’s research fellows.

“No; we’re not getting involved in that nonsense,” said Dr. Sengupta. But his eyes lingered on Káurë New Day. “On second thought, you two should go,” he said abruptly, nodding at Winna and Tomás. “See what you can find out about the colonial—beyond the propaganda in the FAQ.”

(There was a FAQ? Hastily Winna called up the welcome packet on her multipurpose. Sure enough, there it was. *Have questions about the Solimões Sodality*

colonial? This may help. But she couldn't look at it now. Dr. Sengupta was waiting.)

"Yes sir," she said.

Tomás murmured an assent as well.

The two of them made their way to the small group that had gathered around the colonial.

"Let's see if we can get one of the members to come out with us instead of us joining one of the tours," Tomás said. "I know the city. I can definitely show them things no one else will. For 'varied inputs.'" This time Winna couldn't miss the irony.

"Sure, if they'll let us."

"Hello. Are you two interested in exploring the city with me?"

One of the constituents of Káurë New Day was addressing them—her name tag indicated she was Káurë Eight. Her liveliness, the way she tilted her head and touched two fingers to her chin—these all matched Káurë One's attitude and gestures. But Káurë Eight was more generously sized than Káurë One, and where Káurë One's hair had been a black waterfall down her back, Káurë Eight's hair was only just long enough to brush the hinge of her jaw.

"I'm Tomás Ramirez, and this is Winna LeBeau. We'd be happy to explore with you," Tomás said, suddenly all politeness and gentility. "I spent my childhood in Santa Marta; I can show you areas even the organizers probably don't know about."

Káurë Eight's smile deepened and broadened. "Wonderful. A pleasure to meet you both. Tomás, if you lead, Winna and I will follow."

Winna and I. Winna blushed with pleasure and breathed in deeply, as if Káurë Eight carried her own

atmosphere with her, gauzy with moisture, straight from the leafy fringes of the Solimões River.

The three of them watched as a sizable group of guests, including four constituents of Káurë New Day, boarded a shuttle bound for a vessel that would take them out to the Santa Marta *T. terreus* bloom. Other parties, including more constituents of Káurë New Day, were climbing into open-air minibuses for tours of city. Winna noticed that two constituents vanished back into research center.

Káurë Eight stared after the last departing minibus, eyes unfocused. Then she blinked, glanced at her companions.

"I don't often spread out like this," she said. "It feels a bit strange."

"Do you see and hear everything that the others see and hear?" Winna asked, then winced inwardly. This was precisely the sort of question that was doubtless covered in the FAQ.

"There aren't any 'others'; there's only just me," Káurë Eight replied with a smile. "Just like there's only one you, even though you've got ears, eyes, nose, arms, legs, and skin all noticing different things about the world."

"Except our ears and eyes and so on can't go up to people and introduce themselves," Tomás said. "I can't send my nose off to smell perfumes while my ears take in a concert somewhere. It's different."

Káurë Eight nodded. "It's not a perfect analogy," she acknowledged. "To answer the question, yes: I'm aware of everything all parts of me experience, although—"

"You can't really operate when you're spread out over kilometers and kilometers." Tomás finished her sentence

with the certainty of someone who had read the FAQ. “That’s why you have that thing.”

He pointed at the gold choker she wore. Winna remembered light glinting off something similar around Káurë One’s neck when Káurë One had addressed the auditorium.

“That’s right,” said Káurë Eight, as if to a clever student. Her fingers traced the branching pattern engraved on the choker. “This isn’t just adornment. Each one is set for the bioelectrical signature of the constituent that wears it—this one is set for Káurë Eight. It transmits on her frequency and receives on the frequencies of the other eleven.”

“Oh—you’re dependent on technology,” Winna said, disappointed. And yet was that fair? How much did she rely on her multipurpose—how much did everyone?

“Only when I’m spread out. Think of how you understand a friend’s state of mind when you’re with her. What you know from how she carries herself, from the sound of her voice and her movements, from the condition of her hair and skin, from her scent. How you communicate without words. Or think how a baby’s breathing and heartbeat aligns with a parent’s when they’re skin to skin. None of it can happen if you’re apart. We function better together—a healthy ecosystem.” Káurë Eight’s eyes went distant again, and an image flashed unbidden in Winna’s mind: ants carrying seeds to treetop nests and carefully tending them. In her mind’s eye the seeds cracked open to become lush-leaved epiphytic plants, droplets of water beading around their edges.

“Then why split up at all?” Tomás asked. During the conversation he’d directed them down the research

center's access road and to a public bus stop, and now they boarded a bus.

"Trade-offs," Káurë Eight said with a smile. "It's worth it, isn't it, to lose some things, if you can gain others? Especially if"—she tapped the choker again—"you can find a way to compensate for the loss."

Tomás's itinerary involved two changes of bus, but eventually the three of them were walking along a dusty narrow lane, lined by small cinderblock houses painted fuchsia, turquoise, and marigold. The sun glared down, and they lingered in each of the puddles of shade provided by the spreading branches of slim trees that grew here and there along the lanes.

"All this looks new," Tomás remarked. "When I was little, everything around here was broken down—people went crazy during the water riots, smashed things up. That's more like it," he said, pointing to a house with three good walls and a pile of rubble where the fourth should have been. "My big sister would find a place like this, nobody around to give us problems, and she'd spend the whole day doing brain stims. 'You go play; I'll buy us arepas after,' she'd tell me. I always tried to find a way of getting on the roof, if there was one. It was like flying, even just sitting there, because you could see so far. I loved that. Want to try it?" He took a step toward the ruined house.

Was he kidding? Her father's stunts all through Winna's childhood had given her an allergy to this kind of behavior. She glanced uneasily at the woman standing in a doorway across the lane, watching them. A motorcycle carrying a man, a woman, and a tiny child passed them, kicking up clouds of white dust.

"Tomás. You're not a little kid anymore," she said.

“I know, I know. It wouldn’t be a good look for Dr. Sengupta if we ended up in jail. But I wanted to at least tell you about it,” he said, turning to Káurë Eight, “because I just know you haven’t had that experience. Alone and young and up so high you can practically feel your arms becoming wings.”

“No, but I’ve had other ones,” she replied. Tomás didn’t appear to hear.

“I loved being with my sister. I hated ending up at the orphanage.” He picked up his pace, heading back the way they had come. Somewhere near where they’d originally exited the bus, he slowed, studying the buildings (more houses, a restaurant, a grocery shop, an Evangelical storefront church) with a knitted brow.

“If you’re looking for Amiguitos Orphanage,” said Káurë Eight, “You won’t find it here anymore. It closed some years after you left.”

He gaped at her. “How did you—”

“You introduced yourself. You mentioned an orphanage.” She shrugged. “I simply researched relevant facts about you.”

Comprehension suffused Tomás’s face as he realized how Káurë Eight could accomplish such a thing. His expression hardened.

“Shall we get something to eat?” Káurë Eight suggested, looking purposefully at the restaurant. “And you can tell me more about your experiences at the orphanage. They were using the Sasaki-Silva Method. That’s what you didn’t like, isn’t it. That’s why you wanted time with me.”

Tomás gave a single nod.

Sasaki-Silva Method. It sounded familiar. Winna called up information on her multipurpose as they took

seats outdoors in the shade of the restaurant's awning. Tomás insisted that Winna and Káurë Eight try a local dish called cayeye, made from boiled and mashed green bananas.

"It says the Sasaki-Silva Method encouraged greater task orientation and cooperation among students and workers," Winna said, looking up from her multipurpose, "using multisensory stimulation, biofeedback, and transmissions on neuroelectric frequencies."

"Yeah, with everyone wearing receivers like what she's got on—only less fancy. Imagine playing around with that stuff with a bunch of orphans. So sweet, so caring. Accountability? Informed consent? You don't need that shit with orphans." Tomás's caustic tone drew a wary glance from the woman laying out their paper placemats and cutlery.

"You'll be happy to learn that the orphanage was taken to court over that program. That's why it closed," Káurë Eight said.

"But the thinking's still around. Case in point: yourself."

Káurë Eight gave a little laugh. "Colonial humans weren't developed for social control. There are much cheaper methods of obtaining that. It's as I said at the opening remarks: we're for enhanced problem solving. There's no coercion involved."

"That's what they said at Amiguitos, too. And then they'd firehose you with their 'guiding thoughts.' 'We're so happy to have three good meals a day. We're so happy to be with our friends. We're so happy at Amiguitos.'" Tomás's voice rose in a falsetto singsong. He grimaced. "I knew I'd rather have one meal a day and be with my sister in some falling-down house, even if she was lost in

her own dream world. But I couldn't escape the guiding thoughts. They were all around me and in my head. Took me some years to realize I could fight back—broadcast my own guiding thoughts. Let them see how it felt to be on the receiving end.”

A blast of cloying sweetness surged through Winna's consciousness, stifling all thoughts and clamping down on her lungs. She gasped.

“Sorry! I'm sorry,” Tomás said. “I wanted *her* to feel it—wanted her to know how bad it is, but I don't know how to target-send. It goes everywhere.”

Anger prickled along Winna's nerves. “So I'm just collateral damage. Great.” Memories assailed her: seven years old and facing down angry men while her father hid in the cupboard space under the kitchen sink. Ten years old, shivering with her siblings by family car as her mother flung their belongings in the back while the bailiffs looked on and her father shifted from foot to foot, hands jammed into his pockets. And then just six months ago, the shame when her father's arrest for peddling deadly vials of Terrible T provided clickbait headlines for weeks.

Not wanting to look at Tomás, Winna glanced down at the placemat. On it, hand-drawn mer-beings—human-shark chimeras, human-dolphin chimeras, human-ray chimeras—faced an enemy: Terrible T, drawn amoeba-like, with angry eyes and pseudopods resembling grabbing hands.

That was the battle they were here in Santa Marta for—not the one Tomás was fighting with Káurë Eight.

Káurë Eight is the body's designation. The argument is with Káurë New Day.



Illustration © 2022, Toeken.

Was that Winna's own realization? She stole a glance at the colonial.

"You suffered a violation," Káurë Eight—Káurë New Day—was saying to Tomás. "But we colonials don't experience anything like that. We're this way from birth: one mind, many bodies."

"But it doesn't have to be that way. Each part of you could be an independent person, only they're—you're—never given a choice. That's even worse than Amiguitos." Tomás's voice was tremulous.

"No one gets a choice about the conditions they're born into. And no, the individual bodies couldn't be independent people—any more than your body could

function without your brain. Early in the development of colonials, fanatics tried ‘freeing’ constituents. The constituents died.”

“So to create colonials, human beings are reduced to building blocks that can’t live on their own? That’s just wrong!”

“You’re the one to decide that? You know what’s right for us? Like the people who put you in an orphanage knew what was right for you?” Káurë New Day’s voice was cold.

Tomás’s lips parted but no words emerged.

“That’s a different kind of thing,” he said at last.

Káurë New Day raised an eyebrow.

Winna traced the outline of the placemat’s Terrible T with a finger. “Why can’t you use your powers for good?” she murmured to it. She remembered her father swearing to her that his Terrible T remedy couldn’t have caused those deaths. “You’ll see, they’ll remember me as a savior in the end. That shit’s got powers,” he’d insisted.

Her father was such a nutjob. Winna’s jaw ached, and she realized she’d been clenching her teeth.

Winna looked up from the placemat to see the hostess smiling at her. Tomás and Káurë New Day had food in front of them, but the hostess hadn’t set down Winna’s meal. Her eyes were on the placemat and Winna’s finger, which was still resting on the fierce face of Terrible T. The woman said something, and not wanting to rely on her rudimentary Spanish, Winna flicked auto-translate on.

“You like it?” it supplied. “My daughter drew it.” The hostess beamed proudly.

“Sí, mucho,” Winna attempted, and the woman’s smile broadened.

A thought was trying to materialize in Winna's mind, something about Terrible T and Káurë New Day both being colonial life forms—something important—but it wouldn't come clear. Would having the power of twelve brains at her disposal bring it into focus? There was only one way to find out. She cleared her throat. Tomás and Káurë New Day looked her way.

"You said that choker was calibrated to Káurë Eight," she said to the colonial. "What happens if someone like me puts it on? Could I share a thought with you—have you access it that way?"

She expected Tomás to explode at her, but he just sat there silently, lips pressed tight.

"That's not the usual way you communicate," the colonial replied. "Probably just telling me would be better." She had that indulgent smile on her face, the one Káurë One had worn, making her introductory remarks. The blood rose to Winna's cheeks.

"That's the thing; I can't quite—I have the beginnings of an idea, but I can't quite pull it together. It's not really at the words stage yet ... It's about Terrible T—*T. terrens*, I mean." As if that would sell the proposal.

"Even if you put on the choker, you won't experience being a colonial."

It was only when Káurë New Day said this—so gently—that Winna recognized within herself this seedling wish.

"But you're right that it would let us communicate more completely." Káurë New Day paused. "It would be hard on the Káurë Eight constituent, though, because while you wore the choker, Káurë Eight would be cut off from the executive function."

Winna inhaled sharply, remembering the fate of a constituent cut off from the whole. “Oh! I didn’t realize—I wasn’t thinking! I would never—forget I even asked.”

Káurë New Day laughed a little. “It’s not like you’re imagining. We learned from those early attacks. We’re more resilient now—autonomic systems in constituent bodies will continue even without connection to the executive function.” She shot a cool glance in Tomás’s direction. “Whether being in a persistent vegetative state can be called truly alive is another matter. But if it’s just a brief while...” She fiddled with the back of the choker, and something clicked.

“You’re playing it pretty fast and loose with this ‘constituent body,’” muttered Tomás. “Wonder how she’d feel about the risks you’re taking—if she were allowed a mind of her own.”

“I thought you wanted constituents to experience freedom from the whole,” Káurë New Day retorted. She held the choker out to Winna.

Winna carefully fastened it around her neck.

The world became incomprehensible. She heard a sigh and thud—and also felt the world swaying beneath her feet and a stiff wind heavy with a scent of decay. Flashes of sunlight on water. Directly ahead, the water was pinkish brown, and on the borders of that brown expanse floated the bodies of fish—but here were the golden walls of the Quinta de San Pedro Alejandrino, and a tour guide speaking—but beneath her hands the smooth, cool surface of a work table and in her ears the voices of colleagues—was that Dr. Sengupta?—and a flood of other images, sounds—were they memories? Something else? Those ants, tending the seeds—no: ants

in floodwaters, banding together, a living raft—*keep the larvae above water! Keep the queen above water!*

Winna stopped trying to make sense of anything, didn't try to direct her half-formed thoughts outward, just flung open her mind and floated.

Until suddenly she was back at the restaurant, blinking, dizzy. She wasn't wearing the choker anymore: Tomás had it in his hand. The Káurë Eight constituent was slumped over on the table, her nose millimeters from her plate of cayeye.

"Why'd you take it off me?" Winna demanded.

"You were getting ready to do it yourself!" Tomás protested. "You came over to this side of the table and unfastened it."

It appeared to be true. Winna was indeed standing beside Káurë Eight instead of sitting across the table from her.

"Well then it must be time to put it back," Winna said, a sense of foreboding rising inside her. "So let's do that." She reached for the choker, but Tomás raised his arm and stepped back, shaking his head.

Foreboding metamorphosed into panic.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Winna kept her voice low. The last thing they needed was for people realize something was up. "Put that back on her! You know this can't end any good way otherwise. The colonial knows what's going on. It knows where we are. There'll be police heading here right now." She took a step toward him. He took another step back, glanced at the restaurant building, and called out something in Spanish ending with "más agua."

Their hostess jumped up from her seat by the door of the restaurant and hurried inside. She reappeared with a

pitcher and hovered nearby, concern furrowing her brow, as Tomás put a hand on Káurë Eight's shoulder and shook it lightly.

Káurë Eight's eyes fluttered open—blank in a slack face—but she didn't move. Tomás carefully lifted her upper body and leaned it back in her chair.

The hostess spoke a few words to Tomás, concerned. Winna took the opportunity to lunge for the choker—unsuccessfully. The hostess glanced from Tomás to Winna, alarmed. Tomás spoke in placating tones, and with evident reluctance, the woman moved away.

Tomás turned his attention to Káurë Eight.

“Here, have a drink.” He held a glass of water to her lips. She drank.

“You know this stunt'll break up the conference,” Winna said in a furious whisper. “But I guess that doesn't matter to you. I guess you don't care about Terrible T causing famines and ecosystem collapse!”

“I do! I do care! But this is important, too,” Tomás shot back, without turning from Káurë Eight, whose expression was growing more and more anxious.

“Happy birthday as an individual!” Tomás said to her. “How do you feel? How does the world look to you?” Káurë Eight flinched minutely at each new sentence. Her head swung between hunched shoulders as if she were a turtle peering from its shell. Tears welled up in her eyes—and Winna felt her own eyes stinging in response. This forlorn creature was nothing like Káurë New Day. Even Tomás looked stricken. He squatted beside Káurë Eight's seat.

“Are you able to speak?” he asked.

Her head drooped. A tear fell onto her placemat, spreading out like another bloom of Terrible T.

“You’ve got to stop, Tomás. She’s miserable,” Winna said.

Tomás bit his lip. “If we could just get her talking a little b—”

Winna made another grab for the choker, this time successfully yanking it from Tomás’s hand. Swiftly she snapped it in place around Káurë Eight’s neck. In a heartbeat the woman’s face cleared. Káurë New Day was back.

“Your ideas are good ones, Winna,” she said, completely ignoring Tomás and everything that had just happened. “The ants that form a raft in a flood—”

“Was that me? I thought all those rain forest images came from you.”

Káurë New Day looked quizzical. “No. Those are all your own. Maybe a nature documentary you watched when young? Something you were shown in school?”

Winna nodded, bemused by the mystery of her own mind. Káurë New Day continued, “The raft the ants form: it calls to mind *T. terreus*, doesn’t it? Other members of the *Trichodesmium* genus can exist both as individual organisms and as colonial ones.” Her eyes unfocused for a moment, then refocused to meet Winna’s. “So it could be that *T. terreus* has an individual form as well. Perhaps, like the ants with their raft, the colonial form is a response to a stress situation. It’s an avenue we can pursue at the conference.” Káurë New Day smiled, and Winna felt her gratitude and—was it possible?—admiration.

“It—It wasn’t really me—I couldn’t have gotten the idea out without your help,” she said.

“It was a good collaboration. We should do it again.”

Winna’s heart soared.

Then Káurë New Day turned to Tomás, who looked poised to flee but hadn't.

"No one's going to come after you," she said. "That would only have happened if you kept the Káurë Eight constituent from reincorporating against her will."

Tomás lifted his chin. "She didn't have enough time to discover her will. She didn't even have a chance to get over the shock of the separation."

"Oh? And how long would that require? I suspect that unless she chose the way you wanted, you'd always say more time was needed. But it's not a true choice if you only accept one answer."

Tomás didn't respond.

Presently Káurë New Day said, "The truth is, we're always working on the balance between the executive function and constituent experience. The challenge you offered was a valuable one. Peace?"

Tomás dropped his gaze.

"I'm not done challenging," he muttered.

"I understand," said Káurë New Day. "But for now?"

"For now," he conceded.

The three finished their meal and headed back to the research center.



The Heart of the Party

Sarah Day



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I put one hand on the drunk man's shirt collar and one on his belt and lifted. His toes scraped along the floor, dog paddling against the worn wood. I held him off the ground easily and walked toward the exit.

"She was *talkin'* to me—" he tried to explain, gesturing over his shoulder at the person in question and nearly hitting me in the face.

"She told you to go away and you didn't listen. You know the rules, man." I maneuvered him around so he faced the small sign hung over the bar, illuminated at all hours by threads of glowing red wire: NO MEANS NO.

"If you're too drunk to listen, you're too drunk to be here."

The door banged open when I kicked it, letting in a rush of cold air. Winter in Burrington City sucked the wind in off the harbor. It smelled like concrete and dead fish.

I put the drunk man on the ground gently and gave him a little scoot away from the door. “Off you get.”

He turned, shoulders and elbows drawing erratic orbits, protesting: “You can’t just tell me—”

Across the street, a half-cohort of Burrington’s Peace and Compliance Patrollers had stopped to watch us, anonymous and identical in their black uniforms. One of them rested a wary hand on the butt of his stunstick.

As a general rule, Patrollers outside a queer bar were bad news. More so since the last election and the softening of P&C oversight regulations. I did not want them to get involved. I squared up, pulled myself to my full height, let the drunk guy get a look at the bulk of my arms and breadth of my shoulders, and gave him time to reconsider.

The drunk man’s gaze wobbled between me and the Patrollers and he decided it wasn’t worth it.

“Bitch,” he muttered under his breath and tottered down the street.

When he was half a block away, I figured he wasn’t coming back and turned to the Patrollers. They were still watching, faces blank. I raised my right hand in greeting, displaying the dark flower of scar tissue blooming across my palm.

All four helmets tilted. I wanted to display some fellowship, that I could be trusted to keep the situation under control. It probably didn’t come across that way.

A flicker of activity wiggled up from the mostly-dead implant nestled in the heel of my hand. I closed my fist,

fingers squeezing the nodule of tech embedded in the scar tissue. The gesture should have activated my network, put a shimmering overlay of my cohort's locations and vitals and equipment across my vision, brought them into my mind like friendly ghosts. But my implant barely worked. A stone-faced technician had deactivated it on my separation day, burning through its circuits and synapses with a strong electrical charge that smeared dark scarring across my palm. Now, all I felt was a tingle of nerve pain, static made physical, the neurological equivalent of reaching out to touch a wall and putting my hand through a doorway instead.

Even with a functional implant, I wouldn't have anyone to speak to. I had always been too queer, too female, too far from all society's defaults for most Patrollers to work with happily, so I had been excised at the earliest convenience, nipped off like a suspicious mole from the Peace and Compliance arm of the body politic.

Staring at the Patrollers across the street, I worried at my crippled implant the way I would work my tongue in an empty tooth socket, trying for the millionth time to activate it. No joy. The frizz of feedback in my hand told me they were still communicating, but the hardware was too damaged for me to hear them. I could guess their conversation, though; they were trying to understand why I'd flash an implant scar at them in broad daylight. Use of networking technology by civilians was illegal, and I was clearly a civilian.

My time in the P&C was behind me, the previous chapter of my life, but it seemed that as the days went on, I could avoid it less and less. This district was full of Patrollers, eight-person cohorts roaming the streets,

questioning pedestrians, searching vehicles, running scanner wands over limbs and bags at random. This much activity in the district was unusual. They were investigating something. If I'd still been one of them, I would have known what.

In this climate, showing off an implant scar, even a legal one, was a calculated risk. I dropped my hand and tried to look boring. Like a civilian.

After a long moment, their posture shifted. The cohort moved as one body, each relaxing weight onto their left hip as some new intel came into their network and integrated as seamlessly as if they'd had the thoughts themselves. One of them had run me through their database, the implant scar and my faceprint and the familiar bulk of chemically-enhanced musculature totalling up to Harper Ferreira, recently of Overcroft, ex-Patroller. They'd know that my implant was a decommissioned P&C model, not an illegal install.

A cool breeze slipped down the street, pulling a snarl of paper trash in its wake. The lead Patroller gave me a brief nod and just like that, they were on their way. I watched them go, the static from my damaged implant fizzling out as their network traffic moved out of range. Not wanting to acknowledge that the silence felt like loneliness, I let myself back inside.

The Free Rein was the oldest queer bar in the district, a long shotgun room capped by a dancefloor and elevated soundstage. The stage was the big draw in an otherwise run-down neighborhood; lots of local spinners wanted to lay their tracks across its decks and projectors. The full deck array let a spinner create holographic light shows along with their tunes, a full multi-sensory experience far more immersive than basic speakers and strobes. The list

of people wanting to play on the decks at the Free Rein was longer than my arm, and Jeremy, the manager, was very selective.

The weight of the Patrollers outside dropped off my shoulders. As much as anywhere in this new town, the Free Rein felt like home. A lot of the local bar management had seen my half-grown-out regulation haircut and gear-accented musculature and told me to fuck off when I came looking for work, but Jeremy had recognized me as a fellow queer person underneath the P&C exterior. He knew I wouldn't look twice at men holding hands or people who were neither men, women, nor fluid, or polyamorous multi-couples out on dates that included a half-dozen people and who knew how many videocalled additions. Jeremy figured it might be useful to have someone on staff who had experience with gold stars and facemasks and stunsticks, and given how many more Patrollers I'd seen in the neighborhood in the last month, I thought he was probably right.

"He go quietly?"

Jeremy was behind the bar, rubbing a cloth over the smooth plastic in the desultory ritual of bartenders everywhere. He was dressed in black, as usual. A narrow lime-green ring hooked through his lip.

"Pretty much." I parked myself on a stool next to the person the drunk man had been harassing, who I parsed as a *she* (although it was always good to hold those assumptions in a loose hand). "You okay?"

"Fine. I told him I wasn't into guys, but he wouldn't let it go." She gave me a bright smile. She was short and curvy, with long pink dreadlocks like organic cables. An iridescent white plastic jacket formed a carapace around her shoulders. *Really pretty*, I noticed automatically, and

then tried not to notice. Bad form to hit on someone at work.

“Sorry about that.”

“Don’t worry about it. He wasn’t shitty, just...” she spread her hands on either side of her glass, holograms flashing off her manicure. “... trying to connect. Badly. But aren’t we all.”

That was so woo-woo sounding, I didn’t know how to respond.

“Harper,” Jerimy said. “This is my friend Ashby Incroyable. She’s a spinner. Gonna play here tonight. Ash, this is Harper Ferreira.”

She stuck a hand out, cool and wet from the outside of her glass, and I took it and shook. She squeezed—then squeezed again, harder, stared me straight in the face. Her eyes were green, unexpectedly light, the color of sea glass. I realized she could feel the implant’s snarl of hardware and scar tissue in the heel of my hand.

“Have we met before?”

My face had been on the newscasts briefly after the accident, but I hoped she hadn’t seen them. “Probably not. I just moved here.” I looked at Jerimy. “More Patrollers out there today.”

His lip curled. “Anyone you know?”

I shook my head.

“Why would you know Patrollers?” Ashby asked.

“She used to be one,” Jerimy said, and the smile dropped off her face like a rock. She pulled her dreadlocks forward over her shoulders.

“You don’t see a lot of ex-Patrollers hanging out in bars like this.” Her tone was cold, pointed, asked *what are you doing here* the same way I’d have once asked to see the ID of an underage drinker.

Shame knit my shoulder muscles together. Despite the nostalgia I'd felt when facing the Patrollers on the street outside, now that I was back in the bar I didn't like being thought of as one, even with ex- in front of it. Sometimes I felt as far from the queer community as I did from my days as a Patroller, like I was playing a concert and half the fans in the hall hated the other half.

"Hey, don't worry about it," Jeremy was saying. "She came over to the right side."

There was open skepticism on Asbhy's face. "When did the Patrollers ever care about the right side?"

"When I was on it and they weren't." I said quietly, training my eyes on a point behind the bar so I didn't have to meet hers. "They kicked me out."

A shroud of silence fell.

"I heard a *rumor*," Jeremy leaned over the bar, forcing merriment into the conversation. "that there's a coupler in the neighborhood. Maybe the Patrollers are looking for him."

I snorted, glad to have a change of subject, even if it was just to ridicule. Couplers were expert networking hackers who ran illegal networks through groups of civilians, allowing them to link their minds together the way Patrollers and members of the military could. They were a kind of Patroller's boogeyman, blamed for everything from infosec breaches to power outages. The most infamous couplers were terrorists who organized cells of networked civilians against the government, or political activists who believed everyone should have access to networking tech. The odds of there being one here, in this little backwater city two hundred miles from the capital, were very bad.

Ashby laughed brightly, standing up from the stool. “Yeah, and I rode here on a unicorn.” Brushing her dreadlocks forward over her shoulders, she jerked a thumb at the dancefloor. “Imma go get set up.”

Jeremy twinkled his fingers at her, rings gleaming in the low light. “Make yourself at home, boo.”

As she bounced over to the stage, I curled my shoulders down toward the bar, trying to shake off my sense of melancholy.

“Hey.” Jeremy touched my arm with two fingers. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” I said gruffly. “I just—it’s hard, sometimes. Like I’m in between everything.”

Jeremy rolled the rag through a clean pint glass, a sympathetic expression on his face. He didn’t say anything, but what was there to say? I wasn’t wrong.

A belch of sound erupted from the speakers, the opening three chords of a dance track blaring out and abruptly dying. The silence was sprinkled with soft, earnest profanity. I spun around on my stool.

The lights over the dancefloor pulsed once, blinding me for an instant with a dreamy, peach-colored gauze, and when they faded, dimming into a sulky violet, the music started again and Ashby stood up behind the decks. She had ditched the white coat.

In the heart of the city’s drab winter, she stood in a froth of pink miniskirt like a dream of spring. The lights on the decks illuminated her cheeks and collarbones, smeared with iridescent paint like crumbled firefly wings. Holograms flashed off the end of every fingernail dancing over the decks. The jeweled studs in her ears and wire piping her tank top flashed in time with the wave of gentle dreamhouse she sent fluttering through the room

and as she listened to the music, she smiled, her mouth stained metallic raspberry.

Posed on the stage, hands working the labyrinth of dials and buttons with practiced ease, she pulsed like the raw heart of the party and I couldn't look away from her.

"Harper?" she called, voice amplified and blurring eerily into the bassline bleeding out of the speakers. "Can you grab the needle-nose pliers from my toolbox and bring 'em up here?"

Pliers in hand, I crossed to the elevated soundstage. The pressure-pad tiles of the dancefloor lit up beneath my feet, each step blossoming out a Mandelbrot set of stars and lightning. I climbed up beside Ashby.

"Thanks." Taking the pliers, she got down on her back and rooted around under the decks like a mole. I waited, trying not to check out her legs jiggling under the miniskirt.

"Sorry I got weird about you being a Patroller," she said quietly, shoving the pliers into a snarl of wire.

"I didn't notice," I lied.

She laughed a little. "Thanks. It was rude of me. I try not to prejudge people."

"To be honest, I'd rather people were rude to my face than behind my back."

"Yeah, well, Mom said that if you sound like an asshole speaking the truth, it's not the truth that's the problem." She gave me a searing smile from under the decks and my heart contracted painfully. "That should do it."

She stuck a hand out and I pulled her to her feet easily. The clasped hand became a second handshake. "Sorry again. It doesn't matter who you were then, it's who you are now."

I felt a grin break over my face like waves over the seawall.

“See something you like?” Jerimy asked me as I came down off the booth, his tone conspiratorial, heated, completely uncalled for. I busied myself filling a pint glass with water.

“Dunno what you’re talking about.”

He gave me a sly grin, batted his eyelashes at me. “Then look again. How long’s it been since you saw someone?”

Longer than I cared to admit. I gestured toward the entrance with the glass, sloshing water on myself. “I’m gonna—no one’s on the door.”

I dropped onto the bouncer’s barstool and put myself entirely into the task of verifying IDs and patting down anyone in bulky clothing, trying not to think about Ashby’s curving lower lip, her heels drumming against the floor as she wiggled in the mess of cables.

The bottom dropped out of the evening and the daylight drained away. The bar swelled to capacity. Ashby Incroyable went on at about ten, the stuttering beats she laid across the dancefloor bursting out of the building and into the street. I tucked my chin into my collar and leaned against the wall, sternum rattling in a comforting beat, my toes bouncing against the lower rungs of the barstool.

The songs she played couldn’t properly be called songs. *Songs* implied a temporality, an inception point and conclusion. Each track she played overlapped with and blurred seamlessly into the next, like emptied glasses on a good night of drinking. When the crowd on the street died down, I gave into temptation, shutting the front door and moving my stool inside, watching the entrance with

half an eye and the stage with the other half, my body pulsing.

Ashby was an expert in her craft. She used the speakers, projectors, and algorithms built into the decks to blend light and sound together, illusions of flowers blooming out of the dancers' arms and shoulders as the beat swelled, bursting into frizzy petals as it crescendoed. The dancefloor pulsed like a sunburst, illuminating bright shoes and sparkling toes.

Ashby looked perfectly at ease as the focus of the dozens of people, grinning and exchanging waves and clasped hands with the dancers on the floor. I thought of how I'd felt in a Patroller's uniform, how being perceived by the populace as a source of authority had centered me, acted as both a lodestone and a rudder. I remembered feeling a sense of purpose similar to Ashby's obvious comfort behind the decks. I missed it.

A frizz of static danced out of my busted implant. Someone was transmitting, strongly enough to penetrate the invisible haze of signal that hung perpetually in the atmosphere. I scratched my palm and went back to the music.

The beat shifted and the crowd on the dancefloor responded in unison, moving seamlessly into a configuration of hands and hips and open mouths, forming an organic fractal of their own. Their feet hit the floor in syncopated rhythms, hands reaching up into the cooler air. I could feel the impact in my own feet, the shift in temperature, the euphoria. The dancers moved in perfect unison, an array of psychedelic geometry blooming up out of their limbs, and I rocked to the beat along with them. Their joy and exhilaration flooded

through me, all of us here and happy and safe together. For an infinite moment, I imagined myself included.

Ashby gyrated on the stage, her hair sweeping back off her shoulders. She was perfectly framed behind the decks, sweat sheening her skin, glittering with holograms and sparkle like she'd grown out of the dancefloor herself, an electronic goddess with shimmering fractal lights as her raiment. I was staring. I didn't care. She belonged up there, surrounded by strangers she would say just wanted to connect with someone. The heart of the party.

Then I saw the ports studding the sides of her neck, cables snaking down through her hair and into the decks, and realized what was happening.

I wasn't imagining what the dancers on the floor were feeling. I was actually feeling it. I recognized Ashby's ease, that effortless sense of connection, because I had felt it before.

"There's a coupler in the neighborhood," Jerimy had said. *"Maybe they're looking for him."*

In my mind's eye, I saw Ashby sitting at the bar, pulling her dreadlocks forward to obscure her neck when she learned I'd been a Patroller. Hiding the ports.

Good guess, Jer, but wrong gender.

Ashby was the coupler. She was, at this moment, networking the dancers on the floor together in the kind of synchronized link that I had had with my cohort in the Patrols.

Panic leaped in my gut. I thought of the Patrollers ambling easily up the street, the fuzzy hiss of their network traffic brushing against the ruined hardware in my hand. If I could feel her broadcast in my implant, anyone else with an implant would too.

I tried to slow my breathing, one long inhalation for every measure of music.

“Harper? You okay?”

Jeremy was staring at me oddly from behind the bar. The music swelled.

“Ashby’s the coupler! We have to cut the power before someone picks up the signal!”

He squinted, cupped a hand around his ear. “What?”

Shaking my head, I turned around and waded onto the dancefloor. The beat surrounded me, caught me up like a fish in a tide, but I kept plowing forward, heading for the luminescent figure on the stage. The concentric rings of dancers parted to let me through and healed seamlessly behind me.

“Harper!” Ashby swayed to the beat flooding out of the decks, loose-boned. She was wired into the table, a spider in a web, the dark cables lacing up over her breasts and into the ports on each side of her neck. She took one hand off the decks and clasped mine. “I’m so glad you’re here! We’re all together!”

Her skin was sweaty, feverish. I was practically liquifying from the sensation coming out of my half-dead implant; I couldn’t imagine what it would be like to jack in directly. She looked high out of her mind.

“Turn it off!” I shouted. “You’re broadcasting on an open channel!”

She blinked at me. “What?”

I held up my hand and tapped the dark web of scar tissue where my implant resided. My fingers were twitching with the beat. “I can hear you!”

Her face went from euphoric to stricken. She slammed a command into the decks and the music faded and died.

The pulsing itch of nerve pain in my hand finally quit as a chorus of shouted complaints arose on the dancefloor.

“I don’t understand,” she murmured, weaving her fingers through the cables at her neck and tugging them out with little umbilical pops. “An open channel? I thought I wired it all up correctly—”

“Burrington City patrols. Everyone stay where you are and remain calm!”

The amplified voice rattled through my already-overworked implant. I shook my hand and swore, massaged my trembling fingers.

A flash of light and smoke came from the front door. Someone screamed.

“Come on.” I tugged Ashby’s hand. “They can’t find us up here.”

We climbed down off the stage and darted back to the bar as a cohort of eight Patrollers clomped into the Free Rein.

“They’re looking for you, Ash,” Jerimy hissed. “They’ll want the coupler even more than they want a bunch of networkers.”

They stared at each other across the bar, both so pale I thought they might pass out.

“Don’t panic,” I said quietly. I looked over the cohort and tried to calculate how many hours Ashby had been playing. “They’re here illegally. They need a 409-B order to bring a whole cohort into a business, and they haven’t had time to get one. If we don’t get stupid they might just leave.”

I was just talking to keep them calm. We were fucked. The amount of illegal hardware plugged into the decks right now, and undoubtedly mirrored in ports and implants in the populace on the dancefloor, was enough

to get all of us arrested regardless of whether they had the right paperwork.

“Everyone in the middle of the room, now!”

The voice was male, gruff, amplified. My implant buzzed halfheartedly in response.

“You three, step away from the bar!”

Heads down, Jerimy and I joined the crowd of silent people on the dancefloor. Ashby trailed behind us, dragging her feet. Most of the Patrollers had their visors down. The ones whose faces I could see were all men, all white. *Great.*

My stomach knotted. There had never been a good time to be queer and in prison, but the last election had made everything worse. I surveyed the crowd, which was clearly made up of liminal members of society. Depending on their personalities, they looked terrified, self-righteous, numb.

I checked over my shoulder to see how Ashby was doing. She was gone.

Shit.

“Here’s what’s gonna happen,” the lead Patroller was saying. He was a burly guy, roped with thick musculature that mirrored my own. His face was half-screened behind a visor. “We’re looking for an illegal networking operation and the coupler running it. We’re gonna screen each of you for illegal hardware. Those of you without implants or ports will be released. Form a line out here, we’ll do you one at a time.”

I looked at the crowd in the throbbing purple light. Some had been dancing barefoot. I watched their toes curl against the floor, reflexively trying to disguise the ports embedded in the soles of their feet.

“What’s your name, officer?”

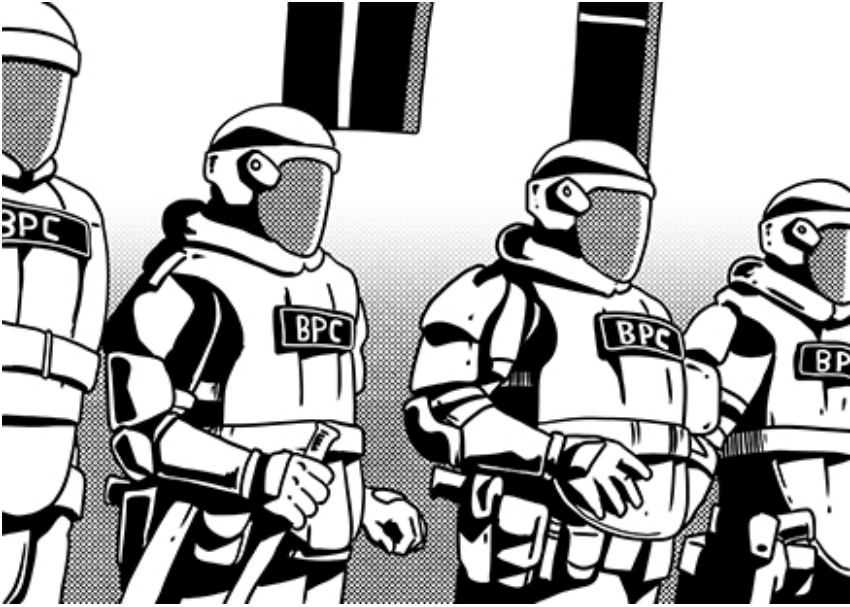


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Jerimy's voice filled the air above the dancefloor, filled the gaps between bodies, filled every empty space in the room. He shoved past me and stood out in front of everyone.

I craned my neck, looking for Ashby. Did she even care that all these people were about to be arrested because of her? If she did, would she give herself up?

Should *I* give her up? The thought was a glass of ice water poured down my spine. Everyone in the room was probably thinking the same thing.

Except Jerimy.

"You need a 409-B to bring your whole cohort into the bar," he said with a confidence he must have sucked directly out of me. "Where is it?"

The Patrollers shifted en masse, all of them refocusing on Jerimy's narrow frame. I recognized the subtle shifts in posture and my stomach dropped.

“Hey now, princess, aren’t you smart enough to be scared of me?” The lead Patroller stepped forward, his threat as quiet as a shark gliding over a coral reef.

Jeremy drew up taller. “You’re here illegally. All of you need to leave.”

I thought about Ashby, hologram butterflies flinging away from her fingertips. Ashby, who just wanted to help people connect, to build bridges where there were only chasms of empty space. Ashby squeezing my hand.

Even if I knew where she was, I could never give her up.

The Patroller punched Jeremy in the stomach with an armored fist. The air went out of Jeremy like groceries blowing out the bottom of a wet paper bag. He hit the ground on his knees as the Patroller drew his fist back again.

“It doesn’t matter who you were then,” she’d said. *“It’s who you are now.”*

Seeing my friend on his knees, I knew indelibly who I was. I was songs in two genres played at once, blending together like Ashby’s music. Patroller and queer.

“Stop!” I thrust myself out of the crowd before I had time to make up my mind not to, put two hands on Jeremy and pulled him back toward me. His back crashed against my legs and I looked up over him at the oncoming Patroller. “Fucking *stop*.”

When the Patroller’s fist came down, I blocked it awkwardly, deflecting it down and onto Jeremy’s shoulder.

“Look at me,” I said before the Patroller could unrack any of his weapons. “*Look*. I’m Harper Ferreira, from Overcroft. I was one of you once.”

It was a gamble, a hope that my name would be recognized, that I could speak lyrics to his song in my tune and still be understood.

“Please.” I found where his eyes must be and pierced the visor with my gaze. “Be peaceful. This doesn’t have to get out of hand.”

The flicker of recognition went across the cohort’s network, and I saw the man in front of me see me, assess, integrate, decide. The corner of his lip curled up.

“If you were a real Patroller, you’d stand aside. If you’re not in a uniform, you’re the same as the rest of ‘em.”

Animosity was in the air like smoke.

“*Pigs*,” someone spat in the darkness behind me.

The Patrollers reacted to the crowd reacting. I heard the snap of a stunstick activating and shifted my hips to redistribute the weight of a gear belt I no longer wore, wishing for cover.

Music exploded out from the decks, a thudding array of sounds that gave birth to a host of different colored lights. Guns snapped up out of their holsters, scanning across the crowd, looking for something to fire at.

Someone screamed, then everyone screamed, then everyone was running, breaking for the exits.

Except me. I had both hands on Jerimy’s shoulders and was pulling him back across the dancefloor, away from the Patrollers and their guns, as he wheezed and tried to push with his feet. I got my hands in his armpits and lifted, spinning him around, one of his arms over my shoulders, pulling him with me toward the soundstage, toward the relative shelter of the decks, toward Ashby Incroyable.

She was silhouetted by neon green light, lurid and botanical, swaying to the beat instinctively. Her fingers danced over the buttons. She dialed a knob and a *bwap* of bass nearly knocked me down.

“What are you doing!” I shouted as I hauled myself and Jerimy up beside her on the stage.

“Making a distraction!” she cranked another knob and an explosion of multicolored streamers burst out onto the dancefloor. “They can’t all get arrested ‘cause of me!”

Jerimy leaned against the decks, sucking air back into a collapsed diaphragm. Patrollers were caught in the fracas on the dancefloor, clutching weapons tight to their chests, headed toward the stage. In moments, they’d be on top of us.

A shot rang out and a light behind my head burst in a pop of vaporizing glass. In the resulting shadows and screams, I inhaled a lungful of escaping colored gas and coughed it back out again. The vapor blurred, disappearing into the clear air, and gave me an idea.

There was a knife in my boot, and slicing my palm open only took an instant. I hissed against the pain and shook welling blood out onto the stage. The raw metal nub of my implant’s port gleamed in the low light, a dark carbon-colored wart in the tan flesh of my hand.

Ashby looked horrified. “What the hell are you doing?”

I groped on top of the decks with my uninjured hand. “Give me an inline cable.”

She passed one over, face white. “Harper, you’re bleeding—”

“That’s because I’m the heart of the party,” I grunted, and shoved the cable into my palm.

Connecting to the decks with a damaged implant was a bit like trying to run a three-legged race with a sprained ankle and a crutch. I could do it, but it hurt, and it sure wasn't pretty. My hand throbbed with current, all my muscles spasming in an attempt to close my fingers. I pressed it against the tabletop and breathed out hard through my nose as Ashby's illegal network sucked me in.

I felt the dozens of contact points from the people on the dancefloor, the ports on their bodies responding to the network emanating from the decks. They engulfed me and I swam among them, people's minds flaring around me like lighthouses in the dark sea. Beyond that, I could feel the monolithic hum of the Patrollers' network, as solid as a bank vault, impermeable unless you had the key.

My P&C-manufactured implant recognized the Patroller network. A flurry of signatures and credentials danced between them, happening so deep in the firmware it felt as minor and reflexive as blinking—

And then I was in, the shouts and cacophonous reports of the Patrollers and their hardware briefly deafening me.

Finding the specs on weapons, gear, uniforms, body dimensions and health checks was as easy as thinking. They opened to me like library books, and fast as electricity I took that information and passed it back through my implant and into Ashby's illegal network.

I had closed my eyes in the flurry of data, but when the projector lights changed they flared so bright I saw them through my eyelids. The multicolored plants blinked out for an instant and reappeared accented by dark paramilitary black and silver and blue.

When I opened my eyes, the dancefloor was covered in psychedelic light effects, blooming digital plantlife, and Patrollers. The hardware information I'd pulled out of their network fit seamlessly into the projectors' virtualization software, throwing picture-perfect replicas of helmets and armor and guns over everything it recognized as a limb or a face or a hip. The partygoers looked as much like Patrollers as the real Patrollers did. Everything was covered in blooming flowers and ferns.

A shocked silence fell over the dancefloor.

The crowd lurched to a halt, examining their gloved hands and arms, checking out their reflections in the visored faces of their companions. The riot of light-generated greenery made it hard to tell where one person ended and another began. I'd just been in contact with all the implants in the network, so I had a rough idea of where the real Patrollers were, but even still I had a hard time discerning the real thing from the fake.

Finally someone giggled, triggering a roar of confusion and delight.

"What did you *do*," Ashby hissed.

I shoved my bleeding palm up against my mouth and spoke into the transmitter.

"Everyone, *run*." It blared over the speakers like the voice of God and chaos erupted in the bar.

It quickly became impossible to tell what was real and what was a projection. I saw a Patroller tackle another Patroller, both of them flashing genuine-looking badges. I saw a person grab another's gloved hand, only to have the hand blur and melt away like smoke as the projector lost focus. Flowers bloomed out the barrel of a pistol, and birds exploded from the sparks of an activating stunstick. There was a shouting tangle of people down on the floor

because someone had confused their real feet with the boots projected on top of them. Everyone looked half Patroller and half organic, their identities as mixed together as my own.

The traffic in the network was overwhelming. I dropped out of it, my hand tingling and brain buzzing as I yanked the cable out of my hand. I staggered against the decks in the astounding silence, the cacophony of other minds and devices lost to me.

But Ashby Incroyable was there instead, her hands on my shoulders, her soft plum-colored mouth covering mine, and for a moment that lasted an eternity, I wasn't alone.

"That was amazing," she said. "You hero. Now come *on*, before they figure it out."

She gripped my hand and we jumped off the stage to join the throng of people heading for the emergency exit, leaving behind the Patrollers still tangled in projections and their own gear.

"Nice job, Harp!" Jerimy ran past, breath regained. He gave me a cheery salute and pushed the fire exit open in front of us. Ashby and I erupted into the bruise-colored city with everyone else escaping the bar.

On the way out, my implant died, sending a last ghost of sensation crackling up my palm. The loss hurt, but I squeezed Ashby's hand and, on the other side of the bloody mess of hardware and scar tissue, she squeezed back.



A Door of My Own

Tim Pratt



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I found my room when I was eight years old, running from my foster mother when she was drunk, screaming, and flicking cigarette ash at my temporary siblings. I ran to the closet, thinking I should hide, but mostly thinking *I wish I could go somewhere safe*. For some reason I reached out with my left hand, the one with the key-

shaped birthmark on the palm. The door opened, but instead of hanging coats and a tumble of smelly shoes I found a bare room, the floor beautiful blonde hardwood, the walls paneled in oak. The room looked huge (I shared a smaller one with three other kids), and when I was older, I measured it: fifteen feet by twenty feet, three hundred square feet all my own. I looked behind me, down the dark hall, toward the screaming. I stepped through and shut the door.

It was dark in my room, but quiet: the sound of my foster mother cut off instantly when I shut the door. On the other side, the closet door was light, hollow-core, with a plastic knob that looked like brass. From this side, the door was heavy wood, and the doorknob was a faceted crystal thing of glass. I stayed in the room that night until I had to pee, then crept out. I closed the door behind me, then opened it to check, and this time, there was nothing there but the closet. I felt a sudden surge of despair that I remember clearly even now, a dozen years later. I'd been given a miracle and walked away from it.

The house was dark, and after I went to the bathroom, I climbed into the bed I shared with my foster sister, who asked, "Where did you hide?"

"In the closet," I half-lied.

"We looked for you in there."

I shrugged. "I'm good at hiding."

The next day at school I stared at the birthmark palm of my hand. If it even is a birthmark. It looks like a crisp black drawing of a skeleton key, the perfect oval of the bow placed just above the heel of my hand, and the shaft of the key extending through the center of my palm, straight up to the base of my middle finger, with three rectangular teeth pointed away from my thumb. The key

looks like a tattoo, but I've had it since I was found in the maternity ward of an Oakland hospital with no record of my birth—like a cuckoo egg left in another bird's nest—and who would tattoo a newborn? The key has remained perfectly proportioned as I've grown, too, instead of distorting as my flesh stretched and changed, which doesn't seem possible, whether it's a birthmark or a tattoo. I used to tell myself it was my inheritance from my secret parents. That they must have had a good reason to abandon me, but they left me with a gift, and maybe someday they'd come back for me, and know me by the mark they left behind. My mother must be a sorceress, my father a magus, royalty from another world, hiding me in this world until it was safe to come back for me... That fantasy that sustained me for a while. Never believe anyone who says fantasy is frivolous. It can be a wall holding back despair.

By the next year, I was in a different foster home (the other mother crashed her car while drunk and went to jail for a while), and I was sure the secret room had been a dream. My new parents weren't drunks, but they were strict and religious, and it was all “say yes sir and no sir” and “girls are vessels of sin” and talk about rescuing me and the other kids from our base and bestial natures. Apparently little black girls like me were especially base and in need of salvation. They wanted to change my name from Nallah to Natalie, but even though “Nallah” was just what my first foster mother named me, I was attached to it, and held it in my mind. I didn't own much, but I owned my name. (And my key.) That house was all prayers and washing mouths out with soap, and one Wednesday when they wanted to drag me to church again I reached out with my left hand and thought *I wish I could*

go somewhere safe and stepped through the door to the kitchen and ended up in my secret room again, but just for a minute. *Those* parents would look for me if I disappeared, I knew, so I didn't linger—just paused in the doorway long enough to realize the room was real again, and to think about miracles.

I began to practice. The combination of the key and ferocious intent could make any door lead to my private room. Locks were irrelevant—any door would open for me, locked or not, and not *just* to my room, either: my birthmark really was a skeleton key. By the time I was ten or so, I could get to my room whenever I wanted. I filched candles, matches, and a blanket, and went into my room whenever I needed an escape, or just a quiet place to do my homework. The room was never very hot or cold, but a constant cool temperature, like a deep basement or a cave.

I had to keep my power and my refuge safe and sacred, and never let anyone else see me go inside. When you grow up in the foster care system, you learn how to keep things to yourself, from candy bars to hair ties to secrets to socks, so that was all right. The room was a great solace. The only problem was, no matter how long I hid there, I always had to leave eventually, and re-emerged from the same door I'd entered through. I could get a little privacy, a little quiet, a little breathing room, but it was always only temporary.

When I was almost sixteen, and my foster father “accidentally” walked in on me in the bathroom for the third time, I decided having a room of my own meant I would never actually be homeless, so I ran away.

When any door can take you to a secret room no one else can enter, it's not that hard to live on the streets. I

didn't have what you'd call a finely developed sense of ethics back then. (I didn't fully comprehend the criminal possibilities of my powers, though, until I met Dwayne. But I'll get to that.) I'd go into a store during working hours, find a door—to the stockroom, an office, even a bathroom stall—and push my way into my secret room. Then I'd while away a couple of hours reading by battery-powered lamplight. After the store closed, I'd emerge from my room into the shop, grab whatever I needed, take it back to my room, and sleep until morning. Then I'd just stroll out of the shop once it was open again, a perfect secret shoplifter.

One night spent in an IKEA furnished my room with a cute bedroom suite—no assembly required, since I just lugged the display models inside. Sure, my room didn't have electricity or plumbing, but after I went to a fancy camping store and got a camp sink, camp stove, and a portable toilet, I was pretty much set. (Emptying the toilet reservoir was super gross, but I mostly used bathrooms at the library and stuff during the day, so I didn't use it often.) I considered a generator, but it would have been too loud, so I settled for battery-powered lamps and paper books.

For a year or so my life was pretty sweet. My thieving skills meant I could get new clothes on the regular and pass for a kid with a normal home life, and I snuck into the gym or went to public pools to take showers when I got too ripe. During weekdays I'd stay in my room or in empty places (but never too far from a door, like a rabbit staying close to its burrow, I guess) until the afternoon, so nobody'd hassle me about not being in school. Then I'd read at the library, go to the movies, take walks, and case stores for future acquisitions—places with night

security guards or motion-sensor alarms were too scary, but I just wore a hoodie and a bandana for the ones that had cameras. When you can disappear through any door, even locked ones, it's not so scary to break the occasional law. I had clean clothes whenever I wanted them, and after I'd worn anything for a few days I passed them on to other people on the street—that made me feel better about all the stealing. I shared around a lot of stolen food, too. I didn't do too many drugs, mostly because I was afraid of getting too loose and sharing my secret. Not actually sleeping outside spared me a lot of bad shit. I got mugged once, but they just wanted my money. I'd steal fancy clothes and sell them at the used clothing store for cash, mostly. I guess I could've robbed a bank or something, but it seemed like a lot of trouble and potential heat, and my needs were modest.

I had friends, mostly local kids and other runaways and drifters, but... Look, I read all the usual stories and watched all the usual movies about people falling in passionate wild love, but it was like watching something in a foreign language. I never felt things like that, for anyone of any gender, and wasn't interested in having sex with anyone but myself, and even then I just rolled with the sensations—I didn't make up a story in my head to go along with the good feelings. One day I was sitting on Shattuck Avenue in Berkeley with this crunchy girl named Sandy who'd come down from Oregon to get away from the rain, and she was talking about how this guy she hooked up with sometimes had hooked up with this *other* girl behind her back. "It's not like I even care about them doing the *thing*, you know? It's the fact that he lied to me. Such a dick. That's what he was thinking with, anyhow."

Sandy was very chill, and I admired her a lot for her courage and calm and self-assurance, and also I was a little high, so I said, “I don’t get it. I never feel that kind of, whatever, attraction to anybody. I think being abandoned as a baby and having messed-up foster parents... maybe I’m broken inside.”

She shook her head. “Nah, Nallah.” Then she giggled, and said it a few more times: “Nah, Nallah, nah, nah nah Nallah. You’re just ace, babe.”

“Ace?”

“Asexual. It’s like being straight or gay or bi except you’re not sexually attracted to anybody, or not many people anyway. It’s a range, like anything, I guess. Maybe you’re aromantic too. Get on Tumblr and look that shit up.”

At the library the next day I poked around and went down a few link-holes and learned about people who were asexual, and I just thought, *whoosh*: relief. I had a name for what I was, and I wasn’t the only one, and that meant I could stop worrying about it. There was even a name for the kind of non-sexual crush I had on people occasionally, notably Sandy: a squish. That sounded right too.

Worrying less about myself gave me more time to worry about my room. I thought about how weird it was. I wondered *where* it was. I found a nice phone sitting on a train seat one day, and almost took it to the station agent, but then I stepped through a locked employees-only door and into my room. I looked at the phone’s GPS, but there was no signal down there at all. Maybe it was way out in the country. Or deep underground. Maybe it was on another planet. I had no way to tell. When I opened the door, I only ever came out where I’d gone *in*:

it never opened on any other local room or vista. There were no windows, but...

I did my thief trick at a hardware store, and got a sledgehammer and a pickaxe and a regular axe and went to work on the wall opposite the door. I didn't get far, though: under the wood paneling, there was just stone. Not concrete, stone: gray and dense and unyielding. I chopped at it with the pickaxe until my arms burned, and all I did was knock out a few chips. I could steal a jackhammer, but if I was underground, I'd be digging forever, and it would just make my room a dusty mess in the meantime, and also jackhammers were probably hella heavy.

I considered taking an axe to the door when it was closed, or even just drilling a peephole to peek through, but if I broke the magic, I'd be trapped in the room, and when my stash of granola and peanut butter ran out, I'd starve to death. I thought about killing golden geese, and decided not to interrogate the miracle too closely. But sometimes lying there in my nice Swedish bed at night, I'd think, *What if my real parents never find me? What if I'm just me, on my own? What do I do?*

I thought about going to a center for runaways, about trying to get my GED, or about taking up music or art to give me a purpose, even though mainly all I liked to do was read. Maybe college was a thing I should do, someday. Or I could leave the Bay Area and just set out to explore the world. It would be pretty cheap if I never had to rent a room. Sandy was talking about going down to Mexico. That could be cool. Maybe I could break my forever rule and tell her about my room. I didn't have a passport or anything, but she seemed to think that kind of

thing could be worked out. I resolved to ask her about it the next time I saw her.

But the next day she was gone. I asked around, and people said she'd hooked up with a guy who was going to Burning Man and had an extra ticket, so she'd tagged along. Maybe she'd come back here from the playa, or maybe she'd travel somewhere else from there, but either way it was clear I wasn't a priority for her—I didn't take up space in her head like she did in mine. My squish was squashed.

I tell myself that's why I fell into working with Dwayne. He met me at a vulnerable time and made me feel important and special.

That was the summer the fascists and white supremacists were bringing their sad displays of cognitive failure to the Bay Area for demonstrations, and I was hanging with some anarchist friends keeping tabs on the fash when some heavy shit went down in Berkeley: bear spray and baseball bats and tear gas. I got separated from my cohort in the chaos and confusion, and when some skinhead cosplaying like a post-apocalyptic road warrior in black body armor came out of the stinging smoke and tried to grab me by the hair, I spun away and decided retreat was the smart move. There was a supply shed near that corner of the park, so I straight-arrowed at the locked door. I usually do a quick scan to make sure I'm unobserved, but even though I'd just caught eddies of the gas, my eyes were blurry and teary. When I opened the door with the key on my palm and slipped into my room, someone followed after me, right on my heels.

He slammed the door shut before I could, and leaned against it, pressing the heels of his hands against his streaming eyes. He didn't look like the fash, but he didn't

look like my people, either: he looked like a club promoter who'd wandered into the wrong kind of party. Long hair, silver necklace, shiny shirt, tight jeans, kicks that probably cost a few hundred bucks. He took his hands away and blinked at me, and he would've been real pretty if his eyes hadn't been streaming and red. "Ah, wow, I'm glad you found this place, it was getting crazy out there." He glanced around at the bed, the desk, the camp toilet, the cooler, the stick-on-the-wall battery powered LEDs that illuminated the space. "Weird. I thought this was a garden shed or something."

"You have to get out of here," I said.

"Oh, totally, but I'm going to wait for the shit to die down..." He looked at the door and frowned. "You know, I can't even hear anything, you've got some wicked soundproofing in here. Do you... live here? In the gardening shed? Did you find some groundskeeper to cut you a deal under the table? I knew rents were getting bad in Berkeley, but damn."

I had no idea what to do. I didn't get a scary vibe off him... but how many dead or assaulted women had felt exactly the same thing, shortly before getting dead or assaulted? "This is my room, yes, and I'd like you to leave."

He winced. "Okay. I didn't know I was following you home, I'm not—sorry. I just thought I was ducking for cover. Can I borrow a scarf or something to put over my face?"

I didn't take my eyes off him when I went to the bed and took a silk scarf patterned with blue flowers from the tangle on the bedpost. I balled it up and threw it at him.

He tied it over his face. "Thanks. I'm Dwayne," he said, voice muffled.

“That’s nice.” He winced, and I felt a tiny bit bad, so I said, “Be safe out there.”

“Will do.” He tried to tug open the door, but it wouldn’t work. Interesting. “Is there a trick to the lock, or...”

It crossed my mind that he could be trying to trick me into coming close, but my room was so small he could have cornered me easily if he’d wanted to, and I could tell he was genuinely straining at the door. I darted over, touched the knob, and pulled open the door. The running protest had moved on, and there were only a few stumbling stragglers in the distance. Dwayne stepped outside, and before he could finish turning for a last look or word, I closed the door, and slid down the wall to sit on the floor and tremble. That had been a close one.

Closer than I realized.

I left the shed around two in the morning, because it struck me as a bad idea to have my exit known to someone. I crept around to a quiet alley and went into my room again through a door behind a shop. That precaution is why it took Dwayne two whole days to find me, I think; I’m sure he started out by hanging around the park and maybe even knocking on the shed door.

He did find me, though. I was at the library, using one of the computers, when he sat down next to me. “You’re a hard woman to find.”

I glanced and did a double-take when I recognized him. He was wearing a tight t-shirt and his eyes were blue and pretty now that they weren’t streaming tears. “Oh. Hey.”

“I’ve been trying to figure out how to say this, so I’m just going to say it: are you magic? Because I went by

your shed, and there was a guy in there with some shovels, and there was no bedroom in there at all.”

I shrugged. “You must have had the wrong shed.”

He snorted. “How old are you?”

“Eighteen.” I lied automatically.

He nodded. “You’re not, but you will be in a year or so, I bet. That’s enough time for us to get your shit together. So how does it work? Your magic room?”

“I have to go.”

Dwayne sighed. “Look, I’m not hitting on you or anything here. Even if you weren’t jailbait, I lean in a different direction, okay? But you opened a door to a room that wasn’t there later on, and I’m in the business of considering possibilities. I asked around, and I know you’re on your own. I can help you get your paperwork straightened out, get a GED, a passport, all that.”

I frowned. “Why would you do that?”

“Because you’re magic, and we could make a lot of money together.”

I shrugged. “If I’m magic, I don’t need money.”

“Okay. Then we could have a lot of fun together. Have you ever been to Europe? Australia? Does your magic let you, poof, flit from here to there?”

I’d never been farther south than Monterey or farther north than Sacramento. I shrugged. “No.”

“There you go then. You opened a door to another place. I can help you open doors to lots of places.”

“You seem very cool about the fact that magic is real,” I said.

He nodded. “I’m a pragmatist. I saw the thing, I believe the thing. Just think about it, okay? We could work wonders together.”

I took off, made sure he wasn't following me, and went into my room to think. I thought for about three days. It seemed stupid and dangerous to let a stranger into my confidence, to tell him my secrets in exchange for vague assurances, but... what was I doing with my life otherwise? I'd just turned seventeen, and I'd eaten a cupcake with one candle in it, by myself. Tomorrow was going to look a whole lot like today, and the next day would be the same. I could change my life, if I wanted, and though I didn't need Dwayne to make that change... I figured I could at least hear him out.

I found him in the library. He must have been going there every day, hoping I'd return. "So what's your pitch?"

He grinned. "Tell me how the magic works first."

"I open a door, and if I want, it leads to my room. When I leave my room, I emerge from whatever door I entered through."

"So the room is always the same, but you can enter it from anywhere?"

"You got it."

"Does it really work on *any* door? Like, how about metal bars like in a jail cell? A garden gate? A cat flap?"

"Anything that swings open, in or out. I've tried it with sliding doors and it didn't work."

"Huh. So if you ended up in a prison cell with a sliding door, you'd be stuck, just like anybody."

I nodded, even though I could unlock any door at all, so no prison could hold me if I didn't want to be held. Nothing stayed closed to me. I was pretty sure I could unlock *anything*, from a mailbox to a bank vault, but there was no reason to tell him all my secrets.

"How do you do it?"

I showed him the birthmark tattoo on my palm. “I think it’s a gift from my real parents.”

He whistled. “My parents didn’t give me anything but a couple of savings bonds. That’s it, though? You can’t fly or turn people into frogs? You’ve just got this one weird mutant power or whatever?”

“If I’ve got hidden talents, they’re hidden pretty well.”

“Where *is* the room, anyway?”

I told him about my experiments and my total failure to figure out the room’s location.

He nodded. “So, just hypothetically, if I took you to visit a friend of mine down in LA, you could open a closet door in his house, and put a suitcase in your room, and then if we flew to Toronto and checked into a hotel room, you could open the closet door there to your magic room, and bring the suitcase out again?”

“Oh, shit, you want to smuggle drugs,” I said.

He winced and looked around, but that corner of the library was deserted. “That’s the idea, yeah. No danger at border crossings. You work for about ten minutes on either end of the trip, and the rest of the time, you’re a tourist, all expenses paid. What do you say?”

“You’re going to set me up with a fake ID and stuff so I can travel?”

“No way. First rule of my business is, everything that can be legitimate, should be. We don’t want anything that’s going to draw a second glance. I’m not going *anywhere* with you until you’re eighteen, and we’re going to dress you fully professional so you look more older anyway. We’ll get your GED, we’ll get you ID, a phone, an actual address... You’re an investment, Nallah. What do you say? Want a job?”

"I'll do one job," I said. "I'm sure you can make one job pay off the investment. And if I like it, then we'll see."

"Fair deal." He offered his hand and I shook it.

Dwayne was true to his word. He sent me to meet with a lawyer in Oakland, and a bunch of wheels started turning: the court declared me an emancipated minor, I studied for my GED with a tutor and passed, I got an apartment in El Cerrito (with a bed and everything, though I still slept in my room), a smartphone, a driver's license, and a passport. I saw Dwayne maybe four times in the next year. At the first coffee meeting, he noted my new dress and told me I *had* to stop thieving, and set me up with a salary from his bullshit consulting company. Later we took a long walk around Lake Merritt talking about how my first job would probably go down, and then we had a fancy dinner to celebrate my eighteenth birthday. Over softshell crab and champagne, he said, "I think you're squared away. The first job is no pay—that's in exchange for the apartment, the legal shit, all that, okay?"

I nodded. "And if I want to do more?"

He grinned. "Then you get to be rich, Nallah."

We took a plane down to Los Angeles. My first time flying, and I spent most of it looking down through the window in delight. "I wonder what would happen if you opened the bathroom door up here into your room?" Dwayne mused.

"I've done it with a car door before, when I needed to get away from a creepy guy who was following me one night. I came out later when the car was parked across town. First I opened the door a crack and peeked to make sure I wasn't about to step out onto the highway going

eighty miles an hour, though. I don't like using doors that *move*, if I can help it. I like knowing where I'll come out."

We went to some apartment in Tarzana, where Dwayne let himself in with a key. There was a metal briefcase, locked, on the table, and Dwayne handed it to me. "There you go. Stash it safely." I found a closet door, stepped into my room, and closed the door. I tried to open the briefcase, and the key on my palm cooperated: the case popped right open, and it was absolutely stuffed with baggies containing pills of various colors and sizes. I closed the case and stepped out. "All good."

We spent the next day in the city, wandering around, seeing the sights, doing some shopping. Our cover was trust-fund boyfriend and arm-candy girlfriend, so we held hands and smiled at each other. Dwayne was funny, charming, and breezy, telling stories about places he'd visited and people he'd met; being in his company was no hardship. When it was time to go, we stashed our purchases in my room—"You're saving me tons of money in checked bag fees," Dwayne said—and caught a plane to Vancouver. We went through customs easy, then took a cab to *another* apartment building. Dwayne kept watch while I stepped through a broom closet door and came out with the case, then he told me to sit tight in the lobby. I read on my phone while he went upstairs to run his errand, and he returned a while later with a different case. "Be a doll and stash this for me?" When I peeked inside that one, it was full of dog-eared cash.

We ate a great meal in Vancouver, stayed in a hotel (he got the bed, I got my room), and then caught a plane back to San Francisco and took a car to the East Bay. Back at my place, I ducked through the closet door and returned to him with his case. He popped it open on my

coffee table, took out a wad of money and tossed it to me. “I know this trip was supposed to be pro bono on your part, but call it a bonus.”

I knew he was trying to tempt me into doing another job. I knew it, and I was tempted anyway. “It went pretty well, huh?”

He leaned back on the couch and beamed at me. “It was amazing. The possibilities are endless. With your ability and my connections, we’re unstoppable. The cops, the DEA, nobody would ever catch on—we’re totally outside their conceptual universe, you know? They can’t stop us, because they can’t even imagine us.”

I took a breath and let it out. “So when do we do it again?”

Over the next year, we did six more trips, roughly every two months. We went to London, Ecuador, Finland, Ecuador again, Spain, and Hong Kong. After a while, I didn’t even look in the cases he gave me anymore. I put the money he paid me in a safe in my room, though the “salary” I drew was fine for my meager expenses. When I complained about the whirlwind nature of the first couple of trips, Dwayne started booking longer jaunts so I could have time to be a tourist, and he even left me in Spain to travel by myself. I rode the trains and wandered all over Europe for six weeks, looking at old stuff and filling up my brain and senses.

I discovered something new about my power while I was in Prague.

I was in my room, feeling weirdly homesick and lonely and estranged from myself. Europe was amazing, but I felt so foreign and distant and weird and isolated, and I was suddenly homesick for my shifting crowd of friends and my old familiar haunts. I was thinking

particularly of a sandwich shop I adored on Shattuck Avenue, craving their fried chicken sandwich, when I opened the door, expecting to emerge into an alley in Prague at nine in the morning to find some decidedly non-fried-chicken-sandwich breakfast.

Instead, I stepped through the bathroom door of the sandwich shop in Berkeley at midnight. I stared around at the dark restaurant, then whimpered and retreated back to my room, shutting the door. I pressed my forehead against the wooden door, breathing hard, and when I opened it next, I found the alley I expected.

I did a lot of thinking. I thought about what Dwayne had said, about how the cops couldn't stop us because they couldn't even imagine us. Did the way I used my power represent a failure of imagination on my part? When I was little, the first time I found my room, I'd done so in fear, emotion overwhelming my conscious thought. But even then, I'd held on to a basic understanding of how doors worked: if you went through a door, and came back out the same door, you'd end up back where you'd started. But maybe my power didn't work that way. Clearly my ability had nothing to do with the actual spatial geometry of the world. So maybe...

I practiced. I concentrated on places I'd been before, and stepped out of my room, and over time, I perfected my technique. If I didn't focus, I'd just come out wherever I'd gone in, but with effort I could go anywhere from my room, through any door I could remember: to hotels in Ecuador, shops in London, even airplane lavatories.

I began to wonder if I was limited to places I'd been, or if that was more constrained imagination. I spent a while on my laptop, looking at street view photos of cities

I'd never seen, zooming in on doors, looking at them, studying them, and though it took about a week of failures, I finally stepped out of a door in the Ice Hotel in Jukkasjärvi, shivered in the cold, and looked up to see the coiling flicker of the Northern Lights. I'd never been there before.

The world, it seemed, was mine. I could work for Dwayne without even boarding a plane. I decided not to tell him about my new ability, though, just as I'd neglected to tell him I could open any lock, although I liked him and was grateful to him, he was a criminal, and I knew deep down I was mainly an investment for him, even if I was also a friend. I was comfortable with the work I was doing, but if he knew I could do more, he would consider possibilities I might find less amenable. Instead of stepping through a door to the States, I got on a plane in Spain at the end of my sojourn and flew home like usual.

One morning I was in my shower when I started thinking maybe there were *other* limitations I'd burdened myself with. I had to go through doors, I was pretty sure, but what was a door, really? I'd stepped into my room through garden gates that were just a few metal bars in a wooden frame on hinges: that was just barely a door. I'd gone through car doors. Maybe I could be more liberal about my definitions. Maybe sliding doors had failed because I'd *believed* they would fail.

I thought hard, pushed aside my shower curtain, and looked into my secret room.

A Door of My Own

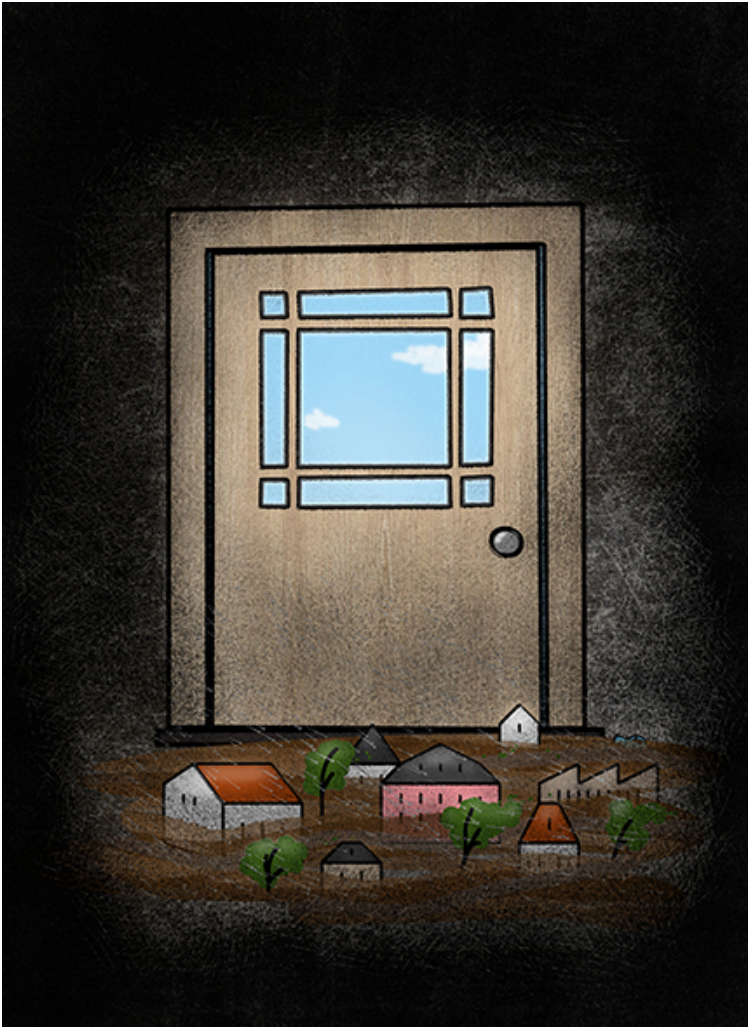


Illustration © 2022, Carmen Moran.

For two weeks after that, I tried to open doors in empty air, without success. I walked through an archway into a rose garden about fifty times, trying to make the transition through the opening work as a magic door, and that didn't work, either. I needed to open *something*, even if it was just a scrap of hanging cloth, and I had to pass from one place to another, in order to trigger the transition. I thought of something I'd read once,

somewhere: “A door is the difference between inside and out.” I couldn’t do what I did without doors, but all doors were open to me, and unless someone dropped me in the middle of the desert or the sea, I’d be okay. I could do anything.

But what did I want to do? I didn’t need Dwayne to see the world anymore, and one day, I told him I wanted to retire. He nodded like he’d been expecting it. “I’m setting something up with a new client. Would you be willing to do one last job?”

He didn’t say “You owe me that much,” or threaten, or cajole—any of those things would have made me walk away then and there. Instead, he asked me like a friend, so I said, “Of course.”

Dwayne got us tourist visas and we flew to Moscow. After a brief pause in an airport bathroom for me to duck through a stall to my room and grab a briefcase full of cash, we took a series of long truck journeys, driven by various taciturn men, paid in cash along the way. “Where are we going?” I said.

“I’m not even sure. Direct to the source.”

“For what?” What kind of drugs came from the countryside in Russia?

“You don’t need to worry about it. You’re just in charge of transport.” Dwayne was preoccupied and cold, but I told myself his bad mood was just jitters about new business partners and jet lag.

We ended up outside a group of low dark buildings surrounded by razor wire, with armed men posted all around the fence. Dwayne went inside alone, with the money, but returned with two men lugging a crate half the size of a coffin. They loaded it onto the truck, and our silent driver took us away again. Dwayne was sweating,

but he grinned and gave me a thumbs up. “I think this is going to work out.”

“What’s in the crate?”

“Wholesale quantities, Nallah. If this is my last trip with you, I need to lay in some stock, you know?”

I decided that was plausible. We stopped off at some cruddy cinderblock house in another part of the countryside. The driver helped Dwayne unload the crate, and they put it on a little padded furniture mover and rolled it into the house. Dwayne sent the driver outside and summoned me in. The place was empty except for dust and rat turds, but there was an interior door, so I opened it, and we manhandled the crate into my room. Even on wheels, it was heavy, and a beast to move. Dwayne hadn’t been inside my room since that first time, a gesture of respect I’d greatly appreciated, and it unnerved me to have him in there now, even for a moment. “Okay.” He straightened and stretched his back. “That’s that. We’ll ride to the airport and head to the states. You ever been to Montana? Beautiful country.”

“Mind if I use the bathroom first?”

He shrugged and left, and I shut the door after him. I went to the crate and tried to see if I could open it, but it was nailed shut, not locked, and in the absence of a crowbar and time, I couldn’t figure out a way to see the contents. I peed, then came back out, and joined Dwayne for the return trip.

We slept on the plane to New York, caught a connecting flight to Chicago, then rode on a small plane to a Montana airport. Dwayne went right to a dirty brown pickup truck in the parking lot, plucked a hide-a-key from inside a wheel well and gestured. “Your chariot, madame.”

“This is weird, Dwayne.”

“Sure. New business partners, not my usual crowd, but their money spends fine, and you’ll get a nice big payday for your last ride. All you have to do is open one more door, and you’re done.”

I didn’t trust him, but I didn’t distrust him enough, so I went along, and that’s how I ended up getting sold to a goddamn militia.

We drove way out into the country, down dirt roads, stopping in the middle of nowhere. A big soft bearded man in fatigues greeted us, blindfolded us, and stuck us in the back of an RV. “It’s okay,” Dwayne murmured, “they’re just being careful. I do this kind of thing all the time—you just don’t usually come along for this part.”

I was fucking terrified and wondered why I had to come along *this* time—why couldn’t we have pulled out the crate somewhere along the way and loaded it into the pickup and sent Dwayne to do this part alone?

After maybe an hour of jostling, someone grabbed me and pulled me out of the RV. I stumbled along blindly, finally being led up a set of stairs and into a building. Dwayne pulled off my blindfold—why did his get to come off first?—and I looked around.

I was in an office with stuffed animal heads on the walls, and a big fifty-something white guy with a nose that had been broken a few times sitting behind the desk, staring at me. “So this is the magic girl, huh?” His voice sounded like he gargled with broken glass every morning. He wore a weird military-looking brown uniform, with skulls and lightning bolt patches on the shoulders. He rose and walked around me, looking at me in a way that made me want a shower. “Show me,” he said.

Dwayne prodded me and pointed to a door. I shrugged and opened the door to my room. The man let out a long, ragged exhalation. “Impossible.”

“Let’s get your merchandise.” Dwayne went into my room, put his hands on the crate, and pushed it out. I closed the door after him when he emerged. The man lifted a crowbar, pried off the top of the crate with nail-squealing efficiency, and peered inside.

He lifted out a gun that glistened with grease, then another, and then grenades, and then some kind of stubby rocket, and I said, “Dwayne, what the fuck!”

“Sorry, Nallah. Business.”

The man handed Dwayne a briefcase and said, “You’ll be driven back to your truck.” I started to follow Dwayne, but the old man grabbed me by the arm. “Not you. You work for me now.”

“Sorry,” Dwayne said again. “You’re the one who wanted to stop working with me.” He walked out, and the motherfucker was *whistling*.

I jerked free of the man and ran toward the nearest door, but he grabbed me by the hair, making me scream. He dragged me close and spoke softly into my hear. “Before you hide in your hole, I’m going to explain your new reality. You’re going to do what you did for your boyfriend for me, but we’re going to move a lot more than he did. We’re going to move people, too. You’re going to be a great asset for our work. It’s important work, *vital* work, and if you do as you’re told, you won’t get hurt. You’ll realize soon enough that it’s your natural state to serve the white man.” He gave my head a wholly unnecessary jerk, and I howled. “If you don’t do what you’re told, you’ll be persuaded. We need you alive, but not necessarily whole. You don’t need both hands to open

a door.” He let go, and I scrambled away, heart pounding. He chuckled. “Go to your room. Get some sleep. We’ll start work in the morning. I suggest you come out at 6 a.m. I trust you have a clock in there. Dwayne told us how your power works. I’ll have someone posted in here at all times, watching the door, and you’ll have to come out eventually, or starve to death. But if you come out late for work, you’ll be punished.”

I ran to the door, went into my room, and slammed the door shut. I threw up in the portable toilet. My body was buzzing and vibrating with terror hormones, and I hugged my knees to my chest, trembling. If Dwayne had done this to me earlier, before I figured out how to open my door to other places, I would have been fucked.

He’d *sold* me.

After I calmed down, I concentrated as hard as I possibly could, and eased open the door.

I saw the isolated quiet of a campsite in Sonoma, as viewed through the door of the women’s bathroom. I let the door swing shut again, confident I wouldn’t accidentally, unthinkingly return to that militia office.

After I drank some water and ate a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and examined my fury from all angles, I began to plan.

I didn’t know where Dwayne lived, but I did know what fancy restaurants he frequented. Once I’d acquired a few useful items via my old thieving skills, I called a whole bunch of restaurants to “confirm my boss’s reservation.” I finally got a hit, and hung out around a French bistro he’d taken me to twice, watching him go in, and later, come out. I was dressed down in jeans and a hoodie, just another anonymous bystander. I observed as he walked to his car—a Tesla, naturally—and got inside.

I stared closely at the car as it drove away, then stepped through the nearest door and into my room. I waited a few hours, just to be safe, and then stepped out of my room—and through his car door, into his passenger seat. The car was parked in front of a fancy apartment building in San Francisco, and I looked in the glove compartment. His registration was in there, and it listed his apartment number. No shell companies or false ID here: if it can be legitimate, let it be legitimate. If you don't tell many lies, it's hard to get caught in one. And you can build up a lot of trust to tell a *big* lie, apparently.

I went into the building, smiled at the doorman, and asked if he'd heard the good news about Jesus Christ. He shooed me away, but I'd gotten a good look at the door to the stairs, which was all I needed.

I returned to my room, then stepped into the stairwell. I climbed up to the fifth floor and went down the hall to the address on the registration. I listened at the door and didn't hear anything, then used the key in my hand to unlock the door and slip inside.

His apartment was nice but not palatial. Probably trying to avoid the prying eyes of the IRS. I crept through silently and found him in an office, sitting with his back to the half-closed door, working at a computer. I darted away, went through a closet into my room, and then opened the door again, but only a crack: this time, it opened onto his office. I sat on my bed and waited.

I didn't have to wait long. He pushed open the office door, stepped inside, and did a double-take when he realized he wasn't in his hallway. "Come on in." I pointed the shoplifted pistol at him. "Shut the door behind you."

"Nallah. I'm so glad you got away, I was so worried—
,,

“Shut the door.”

He looked at the gun and obeyed. He pressed his back against the door, standing as far from me as he could get. The room didn’t seem so big, suddenly.

“You sold me,” I said.

“Nallah, they threatened my life, okay? I had to deliver you or die. I’m so sorry. I should have warned you, but look, you managed to escape, so it worked out—how’d you do it?”

“I hid in my room for a while, then snuck out. I just got lucky.”

“You’re so resourceful. I always admired that about you—”

“I think I’ll turn you in,” I said. “Tell the cops about what we did. Get some kind of immunity deal.”

He shook his head. “You’re not thinking straight. They wouldn’t believe you, so you’d have to show them your power, and then, what, you think those guys in Montana were bad? Think what the government would do with you. They’d send you into enemy territory with Seal Team Six hanging out in your secret room to kidnap or assassinate world leaders. No, if I were you, I’d take some of the money I gave you and bug out. Find a nice remote part of the world to live in, so those militia guys can’t find you. Stay safe.”

I sighed. “You’re a piece of shit, Dwayne.”

“I told you the second time we met: I’m a pragmatist. You should be a pragmatist too.”

“I could just shoot you.”

He shook his head. “You aren’t a murderer.”

It annoyed me that he sounded so sure. I threw him a scarf. “Step away from the door. Blindfold yourself. You know how to do it. You’ve done it lots of times.”

“Nallah, what, are you going to be a one woman firing squad here? You can’t be serious.”

“Just do it, and you’ll walk out of here alive.”

He sighed like I was disappointing him and wrapped the scarf around his face. I walked to the door, keeping the gun pointed at him, then twisted the knob. I opened the door, and nudged him in the side with the pistol. “Walk out.”

He complied. “Nallah, what’s the point of this? You don’t want me to see what door you go through next?”

I looked out the door after him for a moment. The guards on the gate at the Russian compound hadn’t noticed him yet, but I didn’t think they’d be happy to see him when they did. He was inside the fence, and that didn’t seem like the kind of place he should be wandering around without an invitation.

“Why is it so cold?” he said.

Those seemed like fitting last words. I shut the door on him and went to bed.

I waited another week before I opened the door into the militia commander’s office, in the deep hours of the night. It had been long enough, I thought, for them to give up on me reappearing, but I kept my gun, just in case there was a guard stationed. The room was empty, though. I found a laptop and a bunch of hard copy files that seemed sufficiently incriminating and put them in my room.

I had a lot of gas cans and a lot of strips of cloth. I didn’t know much about arson, but I was pretty sure I’d do some damage. I lit the fuses, then stepped into my room.

I stepped out again into an empty Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms office I’d seen in a photo in a

news story. I left the laptop and the files with a brief note of explanation on the desk. The office belonged to some high-ranking agent. Good enough.

I hid out for a while, moving to a new city every day, just in case, and I watched the news. Dwayne was just a line here and there about a “missing entrepreneur,” but the militia thing was a bigger story. The ATF raided them and found their compound a smoking ruin and the membership in disarray. The basic spin was that they were so incompetent they’d burned their own compound down while trying to stockpile weapons.

I started hanging out in Berkeley again, and tried to figure out what to do next. I’d lived a life of crime, and it hadn’t made me feel good. I’d seen the world, and that was great, but wherever you went in the world, you were still yourself. I had power without purpose. My parents were never coming for me. I didn’t have a destiny, so I needed to make my own. What should I do, though? I had a room of my own and no meaningful work to do in it.

One night, sitting in Barclay’s pub eating a plate of drunken goat cheese fries, I watched the muted news on the big screens over the bar. There was live footage of terrible flooding on the gulf coast, in the aftermath of the latest hurricane. A news helicopter showed people standing on the roof of their house, waving for help, as the flood waters rose.

I squinted. They’d crawled onto their roof through a dormer window, it looked like. A window was basically the same as a door...

I left money on the table and went through the bar’s bathroom door into my room, then swung my door open again. Rain lashed in through the frame.

“Hey,” I said to the people stranded in the heavy weather, standing against the backdrop of dark waters and darker clouds. “Come in where it’s dry. I’ll take you somewhere safe.”

I saved them, and after that, I had a purpose. I still do. Sometimes I help refugees. Sometimes I transport emergency supplies. I can’t save everyone. I’m only one person. And there are places I can’t reach: deserts, battlefields, collapsed mines. I know my limitations. But I know my possibilities, too.

Anywhere there’s a door, I can open it and take people to a better place.



We Don't Always Have to Toss Her in the Deep End

Jordan Hirsch



Illustration © 2022, Cécile Matthey.

What if when she drowns
she grows gills
sprouting out of her hands
because keeping them busy
has always been
what's allowed her
to breathe?

She'll sink down
to the depths,
into what was supposed to
kill her, an environment
unsuitable for life, and
she'll live anyway.

Kicking stronger in the current
than she's ever kicked before.
The sea salt burning and
cleansing her wounds: the ones that
slice her arms, her legs,
her torso, her breasts.
The ones the world gave her
when she said,
"I am me."

Her eyes will begin to see
in the dark, light
filtered down, down,
down enough to make out
shapes and the half-truths
that drifted down with her from
the land up above.

Her eyes will adjust.
Her eyes will adjust.

What if her hair grows long,
like in all those stories
she's read, flowing behind her,
interlaced with shells and pretty
stones rounded smooth
on the sea bed?

Will we say she's beautiful?
Will we say she's strong?
Will we say she's thrived
given her circumstances?

Will we forget it was us
who threw her overboard?



Reasonable Accommodations

Nicole J. LeBoeuf



Illustration © 2022, Cécile Matthey.

Long before it rises in the evening,
the moon's already full, has been for hours.
One out of every twenty-eight mornings
I wake up mostly cervine with a sour
disposition. It's gonna be one of those awkward
days again. At least my boss is patient.
He understands that business casual's hard
to pull off with hooves. I can't wear patent
leather shoes or any clothes at all.
My boss says that's OK, but draws the line
at walking on all fours. It's not professional.
I've learned to go upright and, lest the tines
of my antlers damage the ceiling tiles,
keep my head down, just like everyone else.



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Guidelines for submissions

The Future Fire welcomes submissions of speculative fiction and poetry with progressive, inclusive and socially aware disposition. We are particularly interested in feminist, queer, postcolonial and ecological themes, and writing by under-represented voices.



- Fiction (up to 1000 words): pay \$10 per story
- Fiction (up to 17500 words): pay \$20 per story
- Poetry: pay \$10 per poem
- Illustrations: pay \$10 per story illustrated (+\$10 for the image we use as cover art).



Submissions by email. Responses within 45 days.
No multiple or simultaneous submissions, please.



All guidelines at <http://futurefire.net/guidelines/>