



# HEVUN'S REBEL

C.M WELLER

Book one of the Hevun's Child trilogy

# Hevun's Rebel

## by C.M. Weller

Copyright © 2013, C.M. Weller.  
Cover art by [Bespoke Book Covers](#).

ISBN 9781310100765

First published:  
Oct. 28, 2013 by C.M. Weller.

This eBook is licensed for your personal use only and may not be resold or given away to other people. Please help support indie authors by purchasing a copy for each person. Thank your for helping me continue to write great stories for you to read.

Find other great stories at [www.CMWeller.com](http://www.CMWeller.com)!

Sahra was on the opposite side of the station to Ore Processing when it blew up. She, like all the other tunnel rats, closed her hands over her ears and stayed rigidly stock still until the echoes died down. Alarms, shrill and piping to human ears, were still filling the air with their near-musical noise.

She knew what to do. Follow procedure, and maybe nobody would get hurt.

No smoke in the air. Good. She had to take herself and as many other tunnel rats to the nearest checkpoint. Sahra re-oriented herself and hollered, "Ullyully uxinfree!" At the top of her lungs. Human code for 'come out of hiding and follow me, I know the way'.

Important things had to be communicated quickly or they wouldn't be communicated at all.

Sahra crawled slow and patient, hollering, "Ullyully uxinfree!" At every tunnel seam. Those following her, big or small, joined the chorus once they were on her tail.

Once out, they lined up with their carts disconnected from their body-harnesses, neatly by their left sides. Sitting down with their ankles tucked under their bottoms and their hands on their heads. They had to remain that way until a supervisor got to them and told them what to do.

Disobedient slaves got shot.

Sahra was starting to get pins and needles in her hands and feet when a supervisor turned up. She knew better than to look at them. Looking was a sign of aggression.

"*Well. Two dozen little rats all lined up in neat rows,*" said the supervisor. Their boots stopped roughly in the middle of the area where they were all parked. "*Who lead you all to this place?*"

Sahra felt more than saw the forest of hands pointing towards her. She tentatively raised her clumsy-hand to don't-shoot position just

past the top of her hair.

*"Stand, animal."*

Sahra stood, still with her clumsy-hand just above her head. Still with her eyes firmly on the supervisor's boots.

*"Report."*

Sahra was still not very good at the language of her masters. It was easier to speak creole, but the masters never liked things being done easy. In order to refrain from 'um's and other rude noises, she spoke slowly. *"The essploshun, aftuh, foller orders, me."*

Some of the older ones were trying not to laugh.

She tightened her better hand into her hair and did her best to keep the clumsy-hand raised, even though it shook. *"Shout out, me. Go to safe, me. Wait, me."*

Some of the not-so-older ones were also trying not to laugh.

Sara felt her face fill with even more heat.

*"Hands down, animals."*

Sara was glad to drop hers, but she didn't sit. Even the spongebrains knew to only do what was told.

*"You. Ugly yellow-hair. Come to the front."*

Sahra picked her way to the front. Kept her fingers knotted together and her gaze down to boots.

*"Look up at me."*

The supervisor said it in perfect creole.

Sahra began quietly crying. I'm sorry, Mama. Here I come, God.

Inch by careful inch, Sahra's view climbed up the supervisor. Past the funny ankle of all the masters. Past the real-knees and the twitching tail. Up past the belt and the ammo. Up past the merits and medals, and the weapon in the grip of one casual set of claws. Past the collar and finally to her face.

Males had a crest of spikes. The females occasionally dyed some of their scales interesting colours. This one did not.

"Report again in your own language," said the supervisor.

Sahra tried not to panic. Keep to the facts as she knew them. Tried not to trip over her own rebellious tongue. She failed on the last one. "Somepin done 'sploded an' aftuh it were over, I call't an' made m' way t' th' clos't chicken point an' sat m'self down. M'm."

Giggles escaped a few of the sitters.

The supervisor's empty claws poked her in the ribs, squeezed an arm, and finally turned Sahra's head this way and that. "*Always thought the really pale ones were dangerously inbred...*" she murmured. She hissed between her pointy teeth. A noise of disappointment. "*Gather your carts, all of you. Line up and follow me to the weigh-station.*"

Sahra dashed through the smirks and giggles of the other tunnel-rats and scooped up her cart. Someone had filched a few things off the top while the supervisor had been busy with her. Soon enough, if Sahra knew patterns like she thought she knew patterns, the cough-calls would begin.

"(cough-stoopid-cough),"

"(cough-dirt-dumb-cough),"

"(cough-spongebrain-cough),"

*No I aint, thought Sahra. I just aint good at showing I aint.*

She did her best to keep her eyes on the tunnel-rat in front of her

and her feet clear of those behind who were hell-bent on making her look worse in front of God and everybody. Sahra never looked at the elderly male who sorted and weighed her haul. She never saw the one who roughly pressed her better hand into the cleaner-grubs, and then onto the palm reader. And after that, it was up to her to take off the harness and hang it on a hook, then take off her clothes and run herself through the cattle-scrubber.

All her fellow rats ignored her, now. Shrieking and cavorting through the cold sprays of soap and chemicals and recycled water. Sahra did her best to scratch the dirt off as the conveyor belt took her from one end to the other.

Mama always said, *We may be low, but we know how to stay clean.*

Sahra picked up a fresh sheath at the other end, struggling into the itchy, cheap fabric that had been washed a billion-and-forever times and had never once lost its bite. Suffered through the rough handling of another supervisor as they checked her hair for crawlers.

And then, lining up against the wall while a very bored supervisor scanned their faces before sending them all to quarters.

They all marched in neat lines until they were in the areas where only the slaves went, and then it was a mad tangle of arms and legs and shrieking bodies as they all ran for their homes. Sahra was not the fastest. Not by ages. There was never enough food to go around and the babies got in first and the elders got it next and by the time it got to those in the middle, the bully got the bigger share.

But at least it was good to be home.

Mama was mending clothes and didn't even bother to look up at Sahra's "I'm home."

Three of the elders were trying to make the info-station work again on bits and bobs and sneaked parts that could've been worth their lives if they'd gotten caught. A cluster of girls were playing with each other's hair and Darvan was leaning against the wall near Sahra's

favourite sleep-nook.

"Where you been, spongebrain?"

"Workin'."

"Oooh, claw marks," Darvan poked them.

Sahra didn't even bother showing pain.

"They feel you up? Musta decided you're too scrawny to eat. Tu'atta love t' eat all kinds'a rat."

"EY!" said one of the four fixing the info-station. "You call 'em the masters or else they eat you. They got eyes an' ears ev'rywhere. Show respect."

Sahra clambered into one of the little spaces she knew where Darvan couldn't poke and quietly worried if anyone would notice if she wound up gone for good. Between eleven older sibs, five younger ones, and this years' Papa, Sahra wondered if she could just run off and live on her own for a change.

Except...

She had no idea how to do it.

She needed Mama for cooked food. She needed the masters for the credits to even get food. Or shelter rights. All her earnings from her work went to her family's account, and as far as she figured, it would stay that way until she turned twenty and got placed somewhere else.

Mama must have finished up her sewing, because Sahra could hear the noise of the little kitchen. Clattering and clunking. And orders.

"Karl, Leyna. Table. Darvan, dishes. Kara, Laura. Chopsticks. Elle, Fai. Tidy up. Judi, chairs. Paul, tools! Mari, Netta. Wash up the littles. Sahra?"

Sahra emerged from her hiding. She knew her job before Mama

announced it. "Here."

"Babies. Tod?"

Tod was Seventh-Papa. A name he had only amongst Sahra and her sibs. It was the only way to keep it straight, what with the masters trying different things all the time. "Yes?"

He was also the only human in the house who was not a Johnston. Everyone took their family names from their Mamas.

"Keep an eye on the littles and the babies and keep them out of trouble."

Everyone had a job, except the babies. They were too young to understand. The littles, Una and Tessi, were still in training and not strong enough to help with the babies. Even though they still tried to.

Sahra praised them whenever they did good things.

Tom and Ben tried to climb her, even though they were getting too heavy for Sahra to carry them like that. They didn't understand that things changed or didn't want to understand and enjoyed making Sahra hurt.

She got a wet washcloth off Mari, because there was already four people in a bathroom meant for two at most, and gave the twin boys a going-over before sitting them in their tall-chairs. David was easier. He was still working out what legs were for. And he was lighter and smaller, so there was less of him to wash.

Sahra seated him, too, and gave the washcloth back to Mari with a quick, "Thanks." She hurried to her place while her elder sisters ended their babble of conversations one by one.

Only the babies and littles got tall-chairs. Everyone able to sit still for a whole meal got padded boxes, and some were taller than others. Mama and this-years'-Papa just got pillows.

Sahra watched the dishing-out. She could tell who had a good day or a hard day by how much of what they got. And she could tell the same about who'd been less than good during the day.

It was stoo for dinner. It was always stoo. The only things that changed about stoo was the stuff that had gone in it.

Tessi and Una had caught some evriyong, a pest everyone said that the masters had bought with them in the long-ago. A lot like humans had bought rats, by accident.

Humans liked the taste of evriyong and the masters liked the taste of rat. It should have been fair, but no human was allowed to keep evriyong, not like the way the masters bred rats.

Sahra counted how many of which bits went around. Just like chicken, everyone had a favourite bit of evriyong.

Seventh-Papa got three necks. Mama got two. The babies and the littles got theirs all mashed up so Sahra couldn't tell.

Darvan, Sahra noted with triumph, only got the gristly forelegs. And he hated gristly anything.

Sahra got mostly broth and vegetables, but Mama somehow saved her two tails. The thanking and the blessing was pretty ordinary, tonight. Just the everyday wording. Nobody had done anything really interesting, then.

They all ate quickly and quietly. Sahra had to focus on finding things to chew out of her bowl while watching the rest of her family so she wouldn't get trouble for drinking her dinner too early.

"Sahra, we eat our food, we do not play in it."

Except there wasn't much in there to eat. She put her chopsticks down and picked up her bowl, drinking the broth quietly.

"Sahra..."

"Tod," snapped Mama.

Sara finished the broth and showed Seventh-Papa how little was left in her bowl.

"You're excused," he grudgingly allowed.

The info-station squawked and sputtered, making half her family jump.

"...blow for freedom," said the low voice of someone. "our agents... (sizz) ...victorious."

Everyone was looking at everyone else. Sahra sat there with her mouth open and her hands pressed flat on the table. She'd never heard anything like this before. No-one was allowed to get up without Mama or current-Papa's say-so. It was the rules.

"Tonight... (whreeee) ...ore processing centre, killing... (dattledadattle) ...oppressors including the vicious freak known as Eon. Celebrate, for tonight our.... (hiss) ...struck at the heart of the Majestrix herself."

"Someone turn that off," said Mama.

"(swowr) ...been known that the decadent... (zzwish) ...entertained herself in base ways with the shape-shifter--"

Seventh-Papa stretched over and pulled a wire out. The info-station gave a final shriek and fell silent.

Chills played up and down her spine.

"What wuz that?" Sahra asked.

"(cough-spongebrain-cough)," managed Darvan. Then he smiled and said, "Excuse me. Gristle."

Mama puckered her mouth at him, but did no more.

"Just a bunch of idiots tryin' to change the natural order," said Seventh-Papa. "Pay it no mind. All of you."

"But he said they were the ones blowed up ore proc'ssing..."

"Butts are for smacking if some little girls don't shut their mouths. We didn't hear nothing about nothing. Understand?"

Sahra tried to think of a better way to protest that didn't start with a 'but', and had to shut her mouth. "Yes'm," she lied.

She watched the rest of her family eat while she filled up on water. Seventh-Papa knew something he wasn't telling. Mama knew more. And she was scared. The elder sibs knew enough to be scared, too. Except Darvan.

\*

Lockdowns were the worst. Family credit quickly shrank into debt and everyone got in everyone else's elbows and drove each other mad. At least this one was over quick. Just a day. Enough to halve the family credit because all anyone could do was sit, talk, or eat.

Sahra didn't talk much when she was at home. Home was the place for sleep and washing and going potty. Nobody wanted to talk to her except Darvan, and he only wanted her to talk to make her look dumb. So Sahra hid until the all-clear whistle blared through quarters and then did her utmost to be out of the door and away from everybody.

At muster, they put on her harness and gave her a necklace. String with a funny-looking card hanging off. They lined them up from youngest to oldest and showed them the ways they'd be going.

The map showed the whole ore-processing place. And the tunnels around it.

Sahra didn't know why they were sending rats through blowed-up tunnels, but she reasoned she'd at least get good pickings. Even mass

credit would be good. Lots of loose bits.

They had her going real close to ore processing, and strapped some other stuff to her head.

*"...ore should be cool enough to approach,"* said one supervisor.

*"I almost feel sorry for these dumb animals."* said another.

*"Do you want to waste sensors seeing if this mess is radioactive? The animals are replaceable. We can always breed more. And the ones going really close aren't that useful, anyway."*

Wait. What?

They pushed her on and ordered her in.

What did they mean, *not that useful*? Sahra felt her cheeks heat up again. How could she have a chance to be useful if nobody let her try?

Sahra stuck to the path the Masters had set her, wincing a little at the sharp bits she couldn't work loose and into her cart. There was no light. Sahra expected none and was more than used to finding her way around by feel.

The inside of this tunnel was sharp and crumbly. It hurt her fingers to scrabble it loose on the floor, but it was better than hurting her knees and legs crawling over it. It smelled of old fire and didn't echo at all. Not even when she gave a whoop to see if anyone else was near.

The answering whoops were small and far off.

Sahra yelped and crashed halfway down a slope that the masters had not put on their map. She spent a heart-stopping minute sorting out which bits were tangled in what before managing to crawl up the gritty, stinging slide.

Some of her finds were falling out her cart. Damn it. But she didn't want to go fetching if they had half a chance of falling back out again and the masters wanted this done quick.

She'd come back on a free-range day. Yeah. And take her time. And beg for knee pads.

Sahra froze. Something outside the sloping tube was making a noise. Not like water pouring. Like... sand and scattle and someone making bubbles in their drink... all mixed up. And something knocking. In a pattern Sahra didn't understand.

Her heart tried to leap out of her chest as she realized she was alone in the dark with something on the outside of her hidden place trying to get in. Something neither human nor master.

"AIN'T NO HAIN'T GONNA GET ME!" Sahra hollered at the top of her lungs. She scabbled out of the tube and a painful sprint beyond it before stopping to listen again.

Distant knocks, and not a lot else.

Stop and think. Haints were something Darvan used to scare Sahra of the dark. Except Judi had given her the magic words to make her not scared at all. Or at least, she had after some weeks of the whole family listening to her cry in the night. Haints were made up stuff.

Think of what could be real.

Rats could have got loose. They messed up everything they got into. And so did evriyong. Or it could've been both, having a fight in a bunch of wrecked stuff.

Damn it. She missed catching some dinner!

Too late to go back, now.

They took off credit for backtracking.

Sahra scrubbed and scratched a path for herself, wishing it wouldn't hurt, and wondering why it was getting slippery as she went onwards.

Her hands and legs were throbbing by the time she came out the other side. She took a look at them while the masters checked her cart

and the other things they put on her.

Her hands and legs were red with blood.

And dripping.

One of the higher masters noticed and made a squawk of disgust. "*Clean that animal up.*"

A young male, judging by the newness of his boots and the sharpness of his claws, grabbed her roughly and scrubbed her hands and legs with harsh-smelling stinging stuff.

Struggling would get her worse, so Sahra did her best to stay still and let him. He patched her hands and legs with bandages and sent her through the cattle-scrubber early.

After that, another master took her off to sort fruit from the station gardens. It was all horrible stuff the masters liked and no smart human would even try to eat. And not just because they made humans sick. Anyone stealing off the masters was bound to get shot.

All she had to remember was that the black ones were good and the red ones were bad. All other colours passed down the line to other sorters.

Once she figured out a quick way of doing the job, she got quicker. It was almost kind of fun. Except for the really horrible smell from the red ones.

Her stomach growled way before the lunch siren. Really loud.

Water and breakfast had not been enough. Sahra ignored her noisy insides and kept sorting fruit. Her face heated up at the thought of it, all the same.

Er, yuk. The red ones squished if she grabbed them too hard. And their juices smelled even worse. Ugh.

Better not get it on both hands, then.

Sahra focussed on only using her clumsy-hand, her stained-bandages hand, to find and move the squishy red ones. Her more able hand found and moved the black ones.

The masters were laughing. Possibly at her. Sahra hated the hg'ssh, hg'ssh noise they made when they did it.

*"Hey, little white one."* Called one of them. A younger female, from the sound of her voice. *"Are you hungry, little white one?"*

And since she was the only really pale and really small one in the sorting line... *"All'us hunger, me,"* Sahra managed.

Now three of the masters were going hg'ssh, hg'ssh at her.

*"Want some of our lunch, little white one?"*

Hg'ssh, hg'sssh, hg'ssh, hg'ssh...

Sahra had been taught the polite answer by rote, even then she tended to get the phrases jumbled up. *"For slaves people, Master's food not good, all the time, slaves people food, good for masters not."*

Loud hg'ssh-ing, this time. And lots of it.

Sahra knew she'd said it wrong. Her face got hotter and hotter and her eyes stung something criminal, but she never stopped working.

*"Look at the pretty color she turns."*

Male slaves had it worse, Sahra guessed. Until what Mama called 'secondary characteristics' made themselves public, all slaves were female until further notice. And no slave dared correct a master. Right now, nobody could tell her this, since her eyes stung worse and her face felt hotter and hotter. All she wanted to do was crawl into a small, dark place and hide until the feeling went away.

But a good slave, a proper slave, did what they were told until there was no other option but 'stop'.

*"How the pale feathers show, now."*

*"Pity they never figured out how to turn them red full time..."*

Sahra's stomach roared. It actually hurt. But not as much as the masters' hg'ssh-ing. Some of the others on the line were snorting into their chests as they sorted.

A fat, heavy tear dropped from her face and splashed the moving belt.

*"Careful, little white one. You might get your salt on the fruit."*

*"You'll spoil it."*

She felt like her whole self was turning red. And her stomach was eating her from the inside. She made her hands move faster. Attacking the black ones and rejecting the red ones like she secretly wished she could attack the hg'ssh-ing masters.

*"The more you red her up, the faster she goes!"*

*"Insult her some more!"*

*"How do you insult her more? That's a tunnel rat. They're already dirt."*

A fourth voice barked, *"Just what do you lowers think you're doing!"*

*"Sorry Matrach."*

*"We made her work faster, look."*

*"You are all stupid lowly males! Stupid." the Matrach snapped. "You have no idea how to train them properly! Idiot males!"*

Two more tears threatened. Sahra wiped them with her dirty-hand before they could fall, and batted away a red one before it got out of her reach.

*"If you'd kept that up, you'd've spoiled her trust. And then we'd have to end*

*her. Waste!"* The Matrach was almost screeching with rage. *"You have to train the young ones like you'd train a dog. With treats and kind voice."*

"Yes, Matrach."

"Sorry, Matrach."

"Be silent!"

Sahra noticed her hands were shaking. So much yelling. She never liked yelling. Everything was getting worse.

"There, now, little one. Be still."

The Matrach was right beside her!

Sahra, terrified and starting to worry about wetting herself, froze in place. Only her eyes moved to watch black ones and red ones alike go slowly past her. Tears fell. Lots of them. Her breath got faster as she felt the Matrach's claws on her head.

Wait.

She was... patting Sahra.

"There, now. Calm yourself," she soothed. "Take a step away. It's all right. Relax."

Sahra could not make herself calm, but she could and did take a step back and relax her arms.

The claws still soothed Sahra's hair. "Good. Good girl," the Matrach cooed. "Pretty girl. There... Want some food? I have good food for Yoomin. See?"

The other claws held a cheap paper cup full of mealworms. A master treat.

Sahra panicked. *"For slaves people, good for masters not, all the time, Master's food not good, slaves people food!"* She rattled it off in one breath

Still the claw brushed through her hair. Still the other claw wiggled the cup in a tempting way in Sahra's tear-blurred vision.

"You are a very good girl. *Good Yoomin*... I say 'okay'. I say, 'you eat'. It is an order."

Sahra's clean hand, her able hand, was shaking like a newborn koni as she reached for the cup. She closed her eyes the instant she touched them, expecting the claws in her hair to tighten and hurt her or worse.

The claws left her head and gently gripped her hand, making Sahra take a pinch of wriggling worms, and then brought them to her mouth.

"Eat, good girl."

Sahra chewed. They didn't taste poisonous. They tasted very good.

"See? Good food for *Yoomin*. Good food for good girl. You eat."

Sahra opened her eyes, taking them a pinch at a time with her clean, able hand.

The Matrach kept the cup in one claw and moved Sahra's dirty hand with the other. "*I see. You won't eat with dirty hands. I always said you were cleaner than anyone thought...*" She made Sahra hold the cup with her dirty hand and dug in her belt-pouches. "Easy, now. I'm going to clean that hand. Good girl. You can eat more."

The Matrach made her sit on the floor and helped her place the cup on the ground. Sahra was allowed to watch the Matrach's claws as the high-ranking master changed the bandages and washed Sahra's hand again.

"All better. You feel better, good girl?"

Sahra, mouth full of tasty worms, nodded while she swallowed and then said, "Yes, Matrach." At least she couldn't mangle that.

"You do good work, *Yoomin*. No matter what those idiots had to say."

Sahra kept munching worms. Then she made the big mistake of talking. "I does as I'm told, m'm."

The Matrach startled while the others hg'ssh-ed as quietly as they could.

"What's your name?"

"Uh. Sahra. Sahra Johnston."

"How many older sibs?"

Sara gave up on eating so she could count on her fingers and toes. "There's Leyna an' Karl, an' Darvan, an' Kara an' Laura, an' Elle an' Fai, an' Judi, an' Paul, an' Mari an' Netta, so... 'leven?"

"*Nobody with the time to teach her to talk...*" she muttered. "You may eat all you can hold. Good girl."

Sahra snatched up the cup and got as many worms into her mouth as she could before anyone could change their minds.

"Good girl," cooed the Matrach. "My superior wants to do some tests on you. Come with me. Keep the cup."

Sahra kept her eyes on the Matrach's boots. On her way out, she heard one of the lesser masters mutter, "*Those were my damn mealworms...*" in a tetchy voice.

"May I ask, master?" Sarha pleaded.

"Ask."

"M I gon' catch trubbul f'r eatin' this?"

"He was just a Kady. And a male. I take what I want from my lessers."

Sahra suddenly felt very thankful that this Matrach had not decided to take anything from her. She ate the worms quicker, just in case, and

when they were all gone, undid and ate the paper as well. It wasn't as nice, but she was that hungry.

*"I got her, Barba,"* announced the Matrach.

Sahra gawped. This place was so... white. And everything that wasn't white was shiny. And everything in-between had lights in them.

*"Sit it in the examination bed,"* said the Barba. It was a surprise to see a male's crest down their tail. Males didn't get to the higher ranks, most of the time.

The Matrach patted something that looked like a bed. "Sahra," she cooed. "Hup!"

Sahra scurried to obey, watching her feet the whole way and watching her hands when she was climbing up. No wonder the Matrach wanted her clean. This whole place would show up dirt like crazy.

"Lie straight like a rod," instructed the Matrach. "Head there. Good girl. Stay still."

Sahra froze again. She closed her eyes tight and listened to the machines making noise and the masters talking.

*"I was almost ready to believe the instruments used were defective..."* said the Barba. *"But this is the fifth, and it went the closest to the epicenter."*

*"May I humbly submit, Barba, that this might be an unsafe mystery. Something that can wait for better instruments?"* The Matrach sounded a lot different, now. Scared.

*"The Majestrix herself, long may she reign, asked us to gather as much data as we could without loss of life."*

*"All our previous data from ore processing mishaps include dangerous radiation levels,"* said the Matrach. *"To exercise all caution, we must wait for better ways to gather data."*

*"These children should be suffering radiation sickness. This one should be dying. Yet she had the appetite for a cup of mealworms, and ate the cup."*

*"Ate... the cup?"*

*"It was paper."*

*"...Gods of Wonder... Yoomins **will** eat anything."*

That's 'cause we're hungry, thought Sahra.

The Barba sighed, a rattling hiss. *"Send it to the feeding chambers, then. I'll humbly submit that we need better quality data."*

"You can move, Sahra. Go eat. Good girl."

Sahra ran out of there like it was on fire, heading straight for the inside pathways that humans like her had to use when the masters didn't want to see them. It was early for lunch, but maybe if she was early, then there'd be more for her. She'd heard the early ones in got a bigger lot of stuff on their trays.

Having seen the bright clean of the masters, it surprised her how the human paths were dirty in ways she couldn't describe. They were swept, she knew. Wall, floor and roof, they were swept. But some dirt just stayed there that no broom would shift. Places where hands and feet somehow marked it forever, because the walls and floor were not the gleaming blue of everywhere the masters went, but a sort of yucky grey.

And it smelled sorta like sweat.

There were others waiting for the feeding room doors to open when she got there. Large others. Brown-skinned ex-pets from maybe four years ago, when the masters liked the brown-skinned ones to make their places prettier. Sahra slowed. Sometimes thrown-away pets could get mean. Mama said that every skin kind got their turn, sooner or later; and nobody liked going back to the grind when the masters were done. Because being pets was the good life.

One of them noticed her. "Aaaw. Look. A baby rat."

"Ain't you off early, little rat?"

Sahra shrugged.

"Why you off early, rat?"

Sahra lifted her bandaged hands to show them. One of the others winced.

"Oooh, that had to hurt..." said one of the men. He still had stripes from when someone had bleached him.

Sahra nodded.

"Don'cha talk, honey?"

That was always a danger sign. When they called you sweet names, they were just about to get sour. Sahra thought, bit her lip, and -God forgive her- shook her head.

"Poor thing," said one.

"You move on up in fronta me," said another, gently shoving her forward.

Six more times, that happened. Then she wound up under the gentle hand of a hugely muscular woman with a dizzying pattern of polka-dots. "Stick with me, little. I'll keep you safe."

The Matrach master who'd calmed her before had done so like Sahra was a pet. These people calmed her down as if she was theirs. They were human mountains. They were changed to fit someone's decorations. Or *to be* someone's decorations. And they could still see a skinny, scared little kid and protect them from any kind of danger.

Sahra was barely six, but she already knew that when she stayed quiet, she could become invisible. So she stayed quiet and listened. She wanted to know what ex-pets talked about.

And what they talked about was just as boring as the things regular grownups talked about. Their work, fashion, rumors about some of the higher-up masters, rumors about some of their fellow humans, children, relatives, rationing and bedmates.

Not that Sahra could do any better. She had no chance. Half of anything she said, no-one listened to or nobody understood.

Sometimes, it was easier to just not bother.

Others gathered behind the big, brown ones. Some were mean, Sahra could tell by the complaining. And the way the woman-mountain gripped her just a little tighter.

There was a long line of people by the time the doors opened. The woman-mountain picked Sahra up and walked in wide steps to the ration counter at the other side of the room. She snatched two trays before she put Sahra down.

Sahra didn't need coaching to hold the tray with both hands.

The servers, all almond-eyed and shaved bald, glared down their noses at Sahra. She was the only one there that they could glare down at.

"Little's with me," said the woman-mountain. "Pile it on. Weren't you little, once?"

"I used to be a pet. Then I grew up," said the nearest one.

"Then look at her. She's starving. Feeding her is your job. Do your goddamn job."

Sahra gasped. She'd said the G-word!

The servers scowled, and were very exact about measuring the food with their ration cups.

Sahra's tray was full of cylinders by the time she got her spoon. They wobbled as she walked. Sahra couldn't help grinning. Her guard

couldn't help a few giggles, either.

There was the green stuff, the orange stuff, the brown stuff, the yellow stuff, the red stuff, and a standard cup of water. Sahra started with the green stuff, just to get rid of it. Mama had said it was supposed to be good for a body, but Sahra's tongue kept arguing.

"Yeah, I don't like the green stuff either," said her guard. "Try it with a bit of the orange stuff. Makes it taste a bit better."

Sahra tried a bit of green stuff with the orange stuff. Wow. That made it okay. Her whole family ate this stuff in order, green first, and then after that anything they liked better. Sahra brought the green stuff and the orange stuff together and mooshed them into one big ugly lump.

It was so much better than making herself eat the green stuff on its own for her own good.

She tried samples with her resulting goo. The brown stuff went sort-of okay. The yellow stuff didn't go at all. The red stuff made it taste interesting, but she didn't want that kind of interesting all the time. She wound up swapping between the brown stuff with her mix and the red stuff.

She finished those four colours and gobbled up the yellow stuff for after, then gulped down her drink.

"Easy, there, little. It's not a contest. You don't get more for eating it all before anyone else."

She scraped up the little bits left on her tray, first with her spoon, and then with her fingers. Her prize for all this fast eating was a huge burp, which made half the table's worth of people stop eating so they could stare.

"Pard'n."

"So you do talk."

Sahra looked down at her tray. "...don'wanna..." she mumbled.

"Doesn't always come out right, does it?"

Sahra shook her head.

"My brother used to garble-talk. We worked out it was 'cause he didn't get much in the way of practice. See, the only way to get better at talkin' is *by* talking. You know what sounds right and what doesn't, don't you?"

Grudging nod.

"So practice sounding right."

"Mama 'n' m' sibs 'n' m' Papa all tell me t' shut it," Sahra muttered.

"It doesn't have to be at home. Or at work. Little thing like you, you can find somewhere nobody goes during time off. Practice there."

Sahra thought about the tunnels, and the sharp place and the slope. It was full of strange noises there. No rats would come near, and the masters didn't want to come near because of the thing they called *radiation*. Even though they couldn't find any, from what she could tell from their words.

"Any lunch time, you can come and talk to me. I understand garble-talk. I can help."

"M'name's Sahra. 'Syours?"

"Dotti."

"Can't be 'cause of... th' marks?"

"No, Sahra. I was Dotti before they turned me dotty. My last owner thought it was hilarious."

"Whassa hill-are-ee-us?"

"It's fancy for 'funny'. But before we go teaching you fancy-talk, let me tell you a li'l secret."

Dotti leaned in, bending herself all uncomfortable to whisper in Sahra's ear. "Keep sounding stupid when you talk to your uppers. They'll never guess you're smart."

Out in the halls, where anyone could hear them, Dotti had spoken in easy words. Here, in the rising babble of people talking and eating, Dotti said more fancy words than plain.

"You do it, too."

"Yup. The best slave is just the right kind of stupid. Smart enough to follow orders, but too dumb to figure out we outnumber them."

"Out numb'r," Sahra whispered.

There were always too many people to count. Anywhere she worked. But no more than three Masters anywhere at any time. Sure, Masters had guns and claws and sharp teeth that could crack bones... but if everyone stood up at once...

"I see *you* get it," said Dotti.

"Th' problum, but..."

"Yes?"

"Th' problum is... gettin' ef'ryone t' stand up all th' same time."

"Damn straight."

Sahra couldn't wring any more bits of goo off her tray, and no more drops of water out of her cup. And the cup had some kinda yucky wax on it. She couldn't eat it, it'd make her sick.

"I need t' go lookin' fer sumpin. Zat okay?"

"Yeah. You go."

Sahra picked up her tray, spoon and cup and dumped them in the right places before scurrying for the tunnels as fast as she could go. She ignored all the people laughing at her run. She didn't care. She had a safe place to hide.

Her bandages helped against the sharp floor of the tunnel, but not a lot. She was going to catch trouble for it, but now was the time to find things out. Before people got her doing other things. She found the slide-tube, the one that had messed her up and scared her, last time. There were still noises. Knocking. They weren't as scary now as when she'd fallen and got herself all cross-wired. There was a flickering orange glow. Not fire, because fire would have gone out one way or another. There just wasn't a lot to burn in this place.

Sahra sniffed. Old burned things. Metals and things. Charcoal. Something greasy and oily and foul. And something off. Like rotten meat.

This was about where ore processing was.

This was where people, masters and the strange thing known as Eon had been blown up and had died.

The orange flicker came from lines in an almost-rectangle on her less-useful side.

The 'haint' was still knocking in a pattern. Sahra knocked the 'open-up' pattern on the lit rectangle. If anyone was alive, out there, they'd know to open it up for her.

No opening door. Just the same pattern as before.

She felt the door and found the catch. It was finger-hurting work, and tough to move, but she got it to shift enough so she could shove open the little door.

Sahra had only seen ore processing once. It used to be a big place, with hot ovens for metal and carts that ran on rail tracks. Everything that used to be standing up was leaning against other things or had

fallen all the way over. Rails that used to stretch over places where other tracks and carts went underneath, were now bent and dribbly-looking.

Sahra poked one.

Stone cold.

Someone hadn't been able to get out on time. Something had fallen on them, and something burned them. Sahra cleared her throat and said a prayer. She said it slowly and carefully.

"God and the angels, rest this soul. Rise them up from the darkest hole. Keep them safe and whole and snug... in thy gracious loving hug. Amen."

\*

Pain. It was an old companion. Eon was used to it. He had been waiting days for rescue, tapping out a standard emergency code by balancing his semisolid weight on a loose piece of wire. He'd been metabolizing things he hadn't ingested since the earliest days, when he didn't know that some things were not properly food.

He left the bones. They must have had family. That family would want something to bury.

He'd absorbed the radiation that had flooded this area as a result of the explosion. He'd even found a way to metabolize the heat. Now he was scraping carbon and using the thin light from the remaining lamps to turn the foul air into oxygen and create sustenance for himself.

And now, someone was sharing this space with him. Not a proper rescue. Just one very grubby little slave.

Eon stopped tapping and pulled what was left of his mass up and over the ore feed tube between them. She had found a body he hadn't

reached, yet.

He didn't know slaves had a religion.

He watched in stunned disgust as the girl kissed her hand, and then patted a carbonized hand.

It hurt to have a voice.

The girl turned. Wiry stock. Young. Possibly underfed, but who knew what rations decided was enough. Pale one, under the grime. They hadn't been in fashion for years. It was difficult to do anything decorative with their hide.

She gasped, her mouth open.

"...moosh puppy..." the human whispered with a grin.

What?

"Goo' boy. Goo' boy. Justa minit. I'm'a gitcher some stuff t' eat."

Moosh... Puppy?

Racing bare feet pattered against the deck. The little slave returned, arms loaded with loose slag nuggets. They were coated with her blood, but he was that hungry. He was unique. He could metabolize anything. Sometimes, several times over.

"Goo' booooooyyyy..." the little human cooed. "C'm on. I'm good people. I'm nice." She stretched less to offer him the next piece. Coaxing him to come closer. "I know what'cha are. Y'ur a Mo-she-can sssuh-lime dog. Only a li'l one. That makes you a moosh puppy."

Oh. The slime dogs. Of course he looked like them in his native state. They were - according to his own research - his genetic cousins. Less and less close, what with the Tu'atta messing with their genetic makeup.

And, given that the Majestrix, who had previously sworn her love

for him, was not rushing to his aid... All he had was this little human.

*How low we fall when we try to climb...*

Eon acted like a young Moshikaan slime dog. Cautious. Not trusting. Letting her - he could see she was a true female when she crouched - believe that she was a good trainer.

He did eat the grime off her hands when she patted him. And the filth off her body when she lifted him up. It would do him no good to eat her. She was his ticket out of this tomb.

\*

Sahra giggled. "You tickle." She raced from pile to pile of rubble, feeding her new friend bits and pieces from rubble piles everywhere. Just the right size for a Moshikaan pup. She told her new friend the story of a little tunnel rat who found a whole litter that had gone astray. By the time the masters had found out, they had bonded with the boy and they had to use him as their master. And it came with freedom for his whole family!

Maybe they wouldn't let her whole family go, since this was just one, but there was going to be better times and more food and better food with it.

She looked all around the whole room. Up and down and criss and cross. Her friend was looking better for the love and food.

"You need a name," Sahra decided. "Sumpin' easy t' rememb'r. Sumpin' I can say wifout praktiss."

The Moshikaan slime pup squirmed through her arms and tickled as it licked her.

Sahra giggled. "S'imy." She had trouble, sometimes, when some sounds came together. "Tha's it! I'm'a call ya Simy! 'S easy an' short an' I can say it."

Simy burbled a little bit.

The klaxon rang, even in here, it was loud and shrill.

"Oh no! I gots ta work. An' I gots ta leave ya. 'M sorry, Simy. I'm'a come back soon's I can. Promise."

She dashed away, up the tilted tunnel and through the sharp space and through twists and turns an up a high climb and finally to the check-in point she had to turn up at. She was out of breath, but she was also there ahead of the master in charge. And she somehow made it with a lot less grub all over than she should've had from messing around in the wreckage of ore processing.

She kept her view on the floor in front of her knees and did everything she could to get her breathing slowed down again.

\*

Eon considered the girl. She had helped him, true, but she had helped out of a selfish motive. Every slaves' dream - a better life. Yet he had to wonder...

There was no profit motive for prayer. No reason why any slave should say sacred words over remains, which were beyond caring. No reason why she would apologize for moving bones into neat piles, or to a body once she noticed he was eating the flesh off a charred corpse.

Animals didn't do such things.

But he'd been shown why they were animals. Smart animals, yes. Animals that could do very clever tricks... but animals all the same.

Maybe... what he'd been shown was wrong, in some aspect.

Eon physically retreated from that thought, metabolizing the carbon dust that coated everything as he moved. No. There had to be another reason.

Perhaps they were mimicking their more civilized Tu'atta masters. Though Tu'atta faith was a little more complicated than the theism that the damaged child's poetic prayer indicated. Damaged or inbred. She could barely talk. An investigation might prove her deformed or mentally deficient. If anyone bothered to investigate.

It hurt less to move, now. Thanks to the child feeding him whatever she thought a 'moosh puppy' liked. Even though his going was slow, he absorbed and metabolized as much as he could get away with.

He couldn't climb like she did. Not yet. He had to get his strength up. And get it to the point where he could make his upright shape and form enough words to convince someone, yet again, that he was an intelligent being worthy of some respect.

Slapping the little rat around would not help him reach that goal.

Eon felt an inner chill pervade his viscous mass. He needed her. He needed a slave to survive.

He had to treat her correctly, or she would run off and leave him with no resources at all.

Servile to a slave.

Ugh.

A far fall, indeed.

But he would climb back up again.

Somehow. Someday. He would be back on top.

This little inbred rat was just going to be his first stepping-stool.

Rattling in the slag feed tube. Eon flattened himself against the wall and listened. "Simy... Here Simy. Gotcher some stuff."

Ah. His step-stool had arrived.

She had things in her rat-cart. Rubbish, mostly. And one hand held the tails of... four evriyong. All alive and wriggling.

Pests.

She'd bought him rubbish and pests.

Then he remembered. Human slaves were also pest control, because they regarded the filthy little lizards as a tasty snack. Innards and all.

\*

"Hungee?" Sahra dangled a wriggling lizard in front of Simy.

Simy cowered a little. He didn't know evriyong were good eating. In one quick move, she flicked the lizard against a pole, knocking it dead. Then she placed it in front of her friend.

Slowly. Carefully. Simy edged forward and ate the lizard.

Maybe he wasn't old enough for hunting. That had to be it. She whipped the next evriyong for him and let him eat it.

"See, Simy? 'S much better fresh. Can't get nuthin' fresher, right?"

Burple-burple, went Simy.

"Good puppy. Good boy."

She began unloading her cart, in-between whipping lizards. "This stuff? I took it right outta th' master's li'l bin by their desk! They gotta air vent right b'hind. I jus' snuck in real quiet an' put it all in m' cart. An' then I put th' bin back." She grinned. "Stealin's okay if'n it's t' feed sumbody. An' I know ya gotta be starvin'. But Moosh-dogs c'n eat anyfin'."

She ran out of food for him real quick. It made her feel bad. And she had to work, too.

Last time a rat had a big find like this, they took the best stuff first and got caught out fast. And punished real bad. And worse, all the other rats who were faster than her found out first and picked it clean.

She had to be smart about this.

So Sahra started sorting. There was the really good stuff, the okay stuff, the sort-of-okay stuff, the not-very-good stuff and mass credit. Better known as junk. She also sorted out some of the tastier things for Simy to eat and, to her unimaginable joy, some tools.

They had been dropped into a grating she couldn't shift. Yet. Enough time and enough wriggling could get anything loose.

If she had tools... she could get at anything.

For a start, all the sharp stuff on the way in would be gone in a cold second. And those tools looked like Master business. The ones that didn't make a tattle-tale noise.

They needed energy, sure, but these ones looked like they could still be good. Sahra spent the rest of the afternoon wriggling the grate. And cussing.

\*

Eon watched, absorbing as much as his wounded body would allow him. This child was smarter than she sounded - which wasn't hard, considering how she sounded. The more he observed, the more he realized that the gap between her actual intelligence and her presentation was increasingly significant.

This was one of the dangerous ones.

If he were still Overseer, he would have had her on a watch list and possibly isolated for study. But now he was presumed dead, and in an environment too toxic to recover any remains. His only recourse was to watch her himself. And discourage dangerous behavior.

Gently, of course. He was not yet autonomous enough to follow her around. He would have to use cunning to stop her.

Assuming he would need to. That grate was both heavy and well-anchored. She was not getting to those tools any time soon.

And, to be strictly honest with himself, listening to her attempt to swear was hilarious. Humour had a beneficial effect on healing, he had heard. Not that he'd ever wanted to try it. It sounded like a strictly organic thing. Something that required a brain that was not, for instance, almost the entirety of a beings' body.

It still felt better to be amused and be in pain than to just be in pain.

✧

Sahra gave up. They'd be sounding the final whistle, soon. Okay, so. Mix of middling stuff that could be found any old where. Two tiny prizes from her really good stuff, and a big heavy panel that was almost way too heavy for her to lift. In fact, juggling herself and her cart into the tubes again meant that she had to unload and, with her cart stuck half in and half out of the tube, load it up again. Apart from the big panel, it gave it a genuine shuffled look.

She wished Simy sweet dreams and put all her muscle to hauling herself and her load all the way back to the check-in point.

It was tough going, but with the heavy panel on, none of the biggers wanted to beat her up for her haul.

She looked a bit more mussed than her fellow rats, up at roll call. And the master in charge of sorting made a noise at her haul.

"That's it?"

"It heavy," said Sahra. She didn't have to be careful about speaking low. Not yet. "Thought it worth sumpin'. Gots me some other stuff, under."

The young Taan, still growing out of his baby tail, also made a noise, but he was too young and didn't have enough merit to complain. He just let himself be bullied into moving rat-finds from one place to another.

Some rats behind her murmured, "Ooooooh..." at the number as it came up on the scale.

*"You lifted that? Alone?"* boggled the master in charge.

"Heavy it. Lift brothers, me. Strong make, maybe?" Sahra tried. Judging by the laughter from both rats and masters, she'd said it wrong again.

*"How big are your brothers?"*

Sahra gestured with two hands. One side showed how tall Tom and Ben had got, and the other showed how tall David was when he climbed her to stand up.

*"Huh. Move on, move on."*

All her finds tallied, Sahra cleaned off, including extra steps to take off her bandages, and show her hurts to the master at the other end. Where she got new wraps.

She walked home, tired from her work and sorta burning in her muscles. And she really didn't want a bothering from Darvan or a thin serving despite all the work she did.

But nobody should know. About Simy or her secret treasure.

Darvan was waiting at the entrance to their little corner of the slave maze. Had he done something to make Mama send him into the hall? No. He was smiling. He was waiting for her.

"Runt," he said as a 'hello'.

"Duvi," said Sahra. His old nickname, according to Paul. It was also a Master word for 'crap'.

"M'name ain't Duvi, Runt."

"M'name ain't Runt, Duvi."

He swatted at her head, but Sahra saw it coming and ducked. Only then did she run ahead of him so she could wash up and use the privy. Only the other way around.

Seconds after she got to the privy, Darvan got to pounding on the door. Making a fuss. Then some other sibs made a fuss at him making a fuss. And Seventh-Papa got to hollering and Mama got to shrieking and the babies cried because everyone was too loud.

When she emerged at the other end of it, no more than a handful of minutes after she got in, all she had to say in her defense was, "I hadda pee an' poop. Ain't worth this fuss is it?"

Darvan shoved her aside so he could take over the bathroom. Everyone listening heard a tiny little dribble just before the flush.

They knew he didn't need to go. And they thought less of him for the show he'd made.

Sahra got in a hug at Mama's leg before hiding from Darvan in her smallest scaredy-space. It smelled and folks liked to hide bad stuff in there, but Sahra knew how to dump the old and nasty stuff into an air vent she could just barely get open. She neatened up the rest of it so she had a touch more room. Listened to her family argue at Darvan.

*You don't get it, she thought, this is how he wins.*

Sahra hadn't worked out her way to win, yet, but it sure as air wouldn't be by being as big a pain as Darvan.

Dinner was a surprise, tonight. After Mama and Seventh-Papa and the babies got their food, Sahra got a heaping helping full of all the good things. She even broke the rules a little by whispering an amazed, "Thanks, Mama."

"Silence at the table," said Mama. But she didn't sound too angry about it.

It was an odd pattern that Mama danced, tonight. Around the table, back and forth. And making sure Darvan only had the broth and the bad bits. That Darvan was the last to get food.

Darvan was red-faced and almost steaming. He looked like someone had rubbed his mouth over with stink-water. And then offered him more stink-water to wash with.

And he was glaring seventeen colours of hot death at Sahra, including the one that lit up a whole room with its own light because it was hot enough to go all runny.

"I hear more than everyone thinks I hear," said Mama as she put away the big pot. "For instance, I heard that our Sahra earned three days' worth of rations on one cart-load. While Darvan wasted all his hours making goo-goo eyes at some girl."

"Sorta thing'd get you et in my Gempa's day," said Seventh-Papa.

Darvan turned even redder. Heat came off him and bent the air around him. He made worse and worse stink-water faces at his food, but had yet to pick up his chopsticks.

Sahra, though, was eating hers as quick as she could get away with it. No matter how crunchy or hard to chew it was. She never got this many flavours at once, come dinner time. She wasn't going to let it go to waste.

All the others were eating, even the babies. Sara watched Darvan's chopsticks all sneaky, by looking up while she bent over her bowl. He had his hand on them, but he wasn't picking them up. Even his hands were turning red.

"If you're not going to eat," began Mama.

The chopsticks and the hand holding them almost flew up off the

table. The other hand got white fingernails holding tight to the bowl.

Sahra focussed on finding bits to eat. Not that she had much left by the time Darvan got busy on his meal.

He slurped the broth down with as much noise as he could make without catching trouble. Finished with a big belch that made the babies laugh and a mumbled, "...par'n..." that could hardly be heard over the babies' laughing.

Mama gave him the stink-eye and Seventh-Papa growled a low warning. Darvan would only get one more before he caught more than trouble. And he knew it.

Mama would have to feed him a lot more gristle before he'd catch a hint.

And since he was all hot-puss over Sahra, she was going to get it from him, tonight.

While she had jobs to do, she had to stay in view of Mama or Seventh-Papa or Leyna or Karl. The only ones who had any power over him. And that meant trying to check four ways at once. And keeping an eye on her tasks for the night.

Darvan started his play off by complaining about how hungry he still was.

Mama ignored him. Seventh-Papa ignored him. Leyna and Karl pretended to be busy at their own work. Sahra only paid him attention enough to know where he was while she got on with things.

Darvan, as usual, tried to trip up everyone and making it look like it was never him. Sahra had learned early to stay out of his reach. For some reason, this only made him madder and more and more set on getting her hurt.

Stupid Duvi.

She got the babies tucked up and crawled in with them. They might smell, but Darvan wouldn't dare come after her to hurt her if she was in tight with them.

But Duvi had another plan. "Mamaaaaa! Sahra's takin' the babies' pants off!"

"Sahra Johnston!"

Rats, bats and cats, he was clever, sometimes. Sahra wriggled out and started with a clear, "Was not!"

But Duvi had already struck.

Really struck. With his hand on the back of her head. "Crosswired spongebrain," he whispered, and swung again.

Sahra ducked, wishing she had a tiny eye in the back of her head like the Masters did. She bet no master ever had to deal with some sib swiping at the back of their head.

"Duvi lied," called Karl.

Sahra rubbed the back of her stinging head and stopped a grown-up pace away from Mama and Seventh-Papa. They stood together, arms in knots on their chests. Looking down on the two of them.

"Sahra, I have no idea what you keep doing to Darvan to make him do these things."

"Dint do nuffint," Sahra mumbled.

"She's on me alla time, Mama. She don't do nothing but callin' me 'Duvi' an' you know it means rude stuff in master talk."

"Darvan, half this family calls you 'Duvi' and you don't flinch," said Seventh-Papa. "What's so special about Sahra - who rarely talks at all - that has earned your special attention?"

"She's stupid. She don't deserve nuthin'. She aughta get throwed out

for anyone'd want her. We don't need *her*."

"Sahra, put your hand down," said Mama.

Leyna gasped. "Oh God and his Angels..."

Sahra looked at her hand. It was red with blood.

Mama threw a howling fit and dragged Darvan out of their home by his ear. Leyna started shrieking in horror. The babies, drawn out by the noise, cried because everyone who mattered was suddenly way too loud. The littles screamed because everyone else was screaming.

Judi was squealing, "You killed her! Darvan, you useless mutt, you killed her!" over and over again.

Something warm was crawling down the back of her head. She knew she didn't have bugs in there because she scrubbed her hair thorough every end of shift. And one of her sisters made sure by picking her over once a week. She made to touch it, but Seventh-Papa had her wrist all of a sudden.

Everyone else was making noise, even Darvan in the hall outside.

Seventh-Papa gently dragged her into the bathroom. "There's a brave girl," he soothed. "Look at you, not a tear."

"Dunt hurt much," said Sahra. "Jus' stings a bit."

Seventh-Papa picked her up and put her on his knee. "Put your chin on your chest, now."

Sahra obeyed. All she could see was Seventh-Papa's knee and her legs. Papa poked around in her hair like one of her sisters after bugs.

It stung worse when he found it.

"OW!"

"Stay still, now. Almost... got... it..."

"Ayooooowwww!"

"OUT!"

"...ow..."

Wet stuff on the back of her head. Stinging stuff, too.

"You can move now."

Seventh-Papa had a long thin bit of metal with little tiny sharp bits in his palm.

"That were in my head?"

"Almost," said Seventh-Papa. "If it was in your head, you'd be in a lot worse trouble." He guided her back down to the floor. "And I noticed you had the sense to try and sort things out while everyone else was panicking."

Sahra shrugged. "It jus' dint feel like I was dying, is all."

He patted her on the head and let her out.

All the crying stopped when they saw her alive. Except for the babies, who were kind of set into crying by then.

"Darvan is sleeping in the hall, tonight," said Mama. Her voice was all mean and cruel. "Tod, you'll have to sleep in Darvan's bunk. Make sure he doesn't creep in during the night. Sahra will be spending the night with me."

Sahra looked up at Mama. Not understanding.

"He'd have to get through Leyna, Kara and Laura just to get to us, and then he has to dare to get through me."

"But he jus' gotta wait f'r day an' ge' me inna tunnels..."

"He'd hardly fit. Just head for the nearest narrows and you'll be fine."

Sahra murmured her doubts. Once Darvan was set on getting her, he could wait for ages. He came up with plans. And the longer he waited, the madder he got. The madder he got, the more it hurt. If she cried, he crowed until he got caught. If she didn't cry, he'd just keep on getting her until she did. And when he got caught, he blamed her for it.

If he'd just let her alone... He'd see that the one thing that caught him big trouble was hurting her. The rest of it was just everyday noise. Easily looked past.

And maybe that was his goal.

Get attention, any old way he could.

Sahra kept quiet all the way through washing up and tidying up and putting out lights. It was when she crawled across the older girls' bunks that she had to stare.

Mama's hide-away was so pretty. Every space, even the roof that was the floor of the older boys' bunks, had a picture on it. Pictures of family. Gempa, Gemma, all her sibs as babies. Sahra even picked out herself. Seven men. Different Papas. Some were made with black and smears. Some were made with dark brown. Some dark brown and black.

"It's so purty," Sahra whispered, not brave enough to touch them. She was scared she'd mess them up.

"My little waste of time," said Mama. "Always have some time with nothing to do when there's a new baby. I take a little time. Use it for this... uselessness."

"But it so purty. Why you neffer put it up for show?"

"Show is pride. Pride is a sin. Here... they remind me of who I must pray for. And the moments when they needed me the most. And the people who gave me a life to devote to the Lord."

Sahra snuggled down on the side by the wall. "There's more babies 'n folks in the fambly."

Mama's face went sad. "Yes. There are."

"Why's one got a pointy head?"

Mama's eyes got bright. "He flew to heaven before he was born."

Sahra counted. Six sibs in heaven ahead of her. This was why Mama sang soft, sad songs in the morning... She turned her back on the beautiful pictures and wrapped her thin arms around Mama's neck. She began humming. A lullaby she'd known since her first memory. Like all songs her people knew, it was also a hymn.

Mama hugged her back, eyes hot and wet, and joined in.

By and by, humming and hugging turned to sleep.

✧

Sahra opened her eyes to dark. Something was wrong. She didn't move, because moving when something was wrong was a very bad idea. Mama was still beside her. Big and soft and heavy. No lights were on.

Listen.

The air had stopped. There was no always-hum of the air coming through their house.

She moved now, rolling over to shake Mama.

"Mrrh?"

"The air's stopped, Mama," Sahra whispered. "We gotta get eff'ryone up."

Mama shifted, rolling over to shake awake the older girls. Quietly,

because noise at night was bad.

Sahra wriggled out to get the babies. They were still alive. Good. But they didn't like being woken up in the night by anyone but themselves. Sahra did her best to hustle them into the hall.

Duvi was sleeping in a store-nook on the other side of the hall. Someone had lent him a blanket made of scraps.

Sahra nudged him awake, too.

"Wha-at," he complained.

"Air's stopped," said Sahra. She dodged back inside to flick the lights.

No lights.

No power to make the air go.

Everyone in her family was awake. Sahra dodged out again and woke the neighbours up the same way she woke Mama. Darvan up and decided to join in, big surprise.

Sahra learned something, that morning. There's one thing that wakes a whole house, it's the sound of someone moving things around in their kitchen. Or having a conversation. Or an argument.

Darvan did the explaining. Sahra did the noise. He did the bossing, she did the move-it gestures.

Then Sahra had a frightening thought. A spark in her head. A bright idea.

The next house they walked into, Sahra took a breath and hollered, "ULLYULLY UXINFREE!"

It worked much quicker than anything.

House by house, the human families woke up, spread the word, got out into the halls and towards the first check-in point.

Somebody's Gempa, almost too old to really be alive, took it on himself to go to the guard.

Sahra peeked around a corner, keeping low so she could stay invisible.

The guard was also asleep. Leaning so that it would look like he was focussed on his monitors.

He must have seen the Gempa coming through his back-eye, because he jerked up and turned, bringing his weapon up.

*"Curfew! Explain yourself, old one."*

Gempa had his hands open at his shoulders and his eyes looking at his own toes. *"I apologize, master, but the air has stopped and we are frightened. We fear we are punished for something."*

The guard's monitors were dark. Sahra watched as the guard poked at buttons and growled a curse. He sniffed the air and made a master's version of a stink-face. All the more frightening for all his sharp teeth.

The guard tried the comms. No power meant no comms.

Then he walked into the hall past the Gempa and gestured with his weapon. *"All of you. Follow me."*

Sahra found someone who would protect her and held onto their hand like it was her only hope. Only babies and littles got carried. There were too many children and never enough hands.

It was dark. The only light came from the guard's weapon. It shone on walls far away, vanished into doors, and got lost behind too many bodies.

Nobody said a word.

They stopped in a place with a soft floor and a funny smell. The guard got them to sit between wooden boxes that also smelled funny and took the light away with him.

The babies were crying, but very, very softly. Like they knew it was trouble to make noise, but couldn't stop.

It wasn't just her sibs. It was all the babies, all over.

She reached for the nearest one and patted their back. And started on the lullaby.

"Rock mah soul inna bosom of Abraham..." It only took seconds, but others all around her took up the song. She hadn't even reached the end of the first verse and the whole room was singing.

This must be what heaven was like. Only with light and angels.

She hoped Simy was okay.

✧

The air had stopped. He noticed in the instant that the lights failed. The constant hum of the fans dwindled and died in eerie silence. Even the distant hum of the superior sections faded into nothing.

Silence in space was terrifying.

It meant that the air would no longer circulate. Bit by bit, everyone in the station would die. Slowly suffocating on their own waste air.

He was not strong enough to help. He was not strong enough to move very far. Nor, once he got anywhere, was he strong enough to do anything significant. He could metabolize the carbon dioxide into oxygen, keeping the carbon for himself, but he could not make it go anywhere. He couldn't even stretch himself into a balloon and blow it into the air vents.

Music filtered down to him in the darkness. Carried along by the bulkheads. Or perhaps the sheer volume caused by so many voices raised at once.

Human music.

They could lift their voices to do some amazing things, when the mood struck them. Their peculiar words made it all nonsense, but some famous Tu'atta composers had taken human melodies and created something magnificent out of them.

Stuck in the darkness, terrified they were dying or about to die, they sang. A simple hymn, or so he was told, about the fate of their souls. Or the souls they believed that they had. And then, like flicking a switch, it got complicated. One group sang the first verse. A second sang the second, and a third sang the refrain. All together.

It ran chills through him.

A fragment from a children's story rang through his mind. *Look at them all through the darkness I'm bringing. They're not sad at all, they're actually singing...*

All around them the station would be waking up. The Tu'atta overlords would be racing to find lights and sending maintenance people in their pyjamas down dark tunnels with only battery lights to guide them. Desperately fighting against their fate and trying everything they could think of to get the lights and the fans working again.

No power, no docking clamps. No airlocks. No medicine. No food nor water. And no fresh air.

And in the middle of this panic and flurry of activity, the humans were going to sing until they had no more air to breathe.

Sing to their trifurcated god.

Eon wondered which species was the more idiotic. The humans for accepting their ultimate fate with a song on their lips, or the Tu'atta for fighting it with curses on theirs.

Eon found himself worrying about Sahra. His little pale slave.

The smaller ones were often the first to succumb.

He began to wonder if he should plead with the deaf heavens for her life. And if he even could, what could he offer in return?

*Be safe, little one. Breathe.*

\*

There were plants in the boxes. Sahra could feel leaves and sticks. Rough bark and sharp thorns. Plants made the air. Mama said. And the fans took it everywhere.

They were right next to plants.

But why did the air feel so hot and thick?

She was tired. It was the middle of the night. She should have been sleeping, all cuddled up with Mama. And the only thing to worry about was an incident with Darvan in the night.

Sahra didn't know the name of the other slave beside her, but they held her hand when she reached for theirs. She took a thick, hot breath and kept singing.

Her eyes, tired of the endless dark, put her in Mama's bed nook, with the pretty pictures hid away from everyone. The skived paper, some old news-sheets. Some bits off of wrecked books that the masters had tossed. Now she was in Simy's place. The wrecked mess of ore processing. Seeing Simy all alone.

He'd go to heaven all alone. Thinking she'd abandoned him.

And the masters would do what they did with every wrecked station where everyone died. Make it go away with their big fire. Plasma beams. Simy and the wrecked room. Mama's pictures. All the bodies human slaves and their masters alike, all burned up in one bright flash. Not even scrattle left behind.

But as long as there was song, there was hope.

Sahra tried to sing louder. Because it was getting hard.

\*

The higher class fans went on first. Soundless, unless someone with the power to change their very body had altered their hearing to listen for the tiny, subsonic whine that they made. After that, a succession of lower-quality fans joined in the chorus until he was rewarded with the familiar hum of a fully-operational air recycling system.

Air! Real air. It stank of human sweat and bodily gasses, but it was real air.

She was going to live!

They were all going to live.

\*

Sahra's ears popped painfully. She yawned and made chewing motions because popping ears meant the air had moved so fast it was squeezing stuff in or pulling stuff out, and yawning and chewing was what you were supposed to do.

And then a wonderful breeze came in. And sharp lights flicked on. And the whole room sighed as the breeze ate their sweat and made the air cool and thin again.

And on their next breath, without a word to decide, every last human sang out, "AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH-MMMEEEEEEEEEENNNNNNNNNNNNNN!" in thanks. It made her whole chest rattle.

This was the biggest room she had ever been in. And she'd never seen this much green in one place. Big ones that touched the roof and

little ones that looked like they were scared to stand up above their boxes. Some had bright colours on, like the spiky one she was next to. Some were all colours at once. The spiky plant had weird coloured bits made out of too many leaves. It looked almost like a toy.

No slave could touch it, though. She knew without asking. This was something for masters only.

All at once, everyone was standing up. Sahra stood with them. Everyone was going to their homes for whatever sleep they had left.

Sahra's heart was thumping fit to escape her ribs. It felt so good to have air. It had felt so good to have every human singing together, one mind in the dark. And now that feeling was slipping away.

Tomorrow, there would be fights. Over bed-mates, over food, over family. Over what someone said about someone else. Over who got more than they deserved. Over who got less. Over who got what they never deserved.

Over who was fashionable or who gained a scrap of praise or tiny prize from a master, and who was no longer 'in'.

It was all useless arguing.

She found Darvan in the crowd and held his hand. "Jus' tell me what 'm doin' wrong," she said, just loud enough for him to hear her. "I'll quit."

Duvi jerked away from her. "You're breathin'."

Sahra walked slower. Maybe it'd be better for her if she just stayed away from him. Out of range, out of sight. Out of his way.

How could her being alive make him so mad?

\*

Graak surveyed the wreckage. Sometimes he wondered why his own people saw fit to let any humans run loose at all. This was clearly their work, and he didn't need to wait for the radio transmission to confirm it.

The human rebels somehow believed that the occasional explosion would make the mighty Tu'att empire frightened enough to go away and leave them alone.

Stupid humans.

They couldn't even rig a chain of explosives correctly.

The bombs were meant to destroy the entire air recirculation system, but only one of the key power feeds had been destroyed. The remaining attempts at explosives were so primitive that a first-year Taan could defuse it with their eyes closed.

Many Taans were busy at just that task but, thanks to the watchful eye of Om'r Graak Jeshi'ig, they were not doing so with any eye shut. Some, he was pleased to note, barely dared to blink.

Now all he needed to do was catch whichever vermin tried to do this.

\*

Eon had thought nothing could scare him more than all his plans threatening to turn into plasma, care of a Tu'atta battleship obliterating a problem. And then Sahra found something she could use as a prybar.

So far, she had taken off every access panel in the room. Now she had wedged it into the grating where the dropped tools still rested, and had clambered up to the high end. And she was swinging and bouncing on it like a demented kivit. Shrieking in joy when it gave.

He watched in helpless horror as the grating whined loose of its

moorings and bent, ever so slightly, out of its place.

It was too late, now, to make his painful way to the grating and slide through it. Far too late to eat the tools he thought she would never reach.

A slave with tools, no matter how simple, was a dangerous slave.

He couldn't scream, but the metal grating screamed for him as Sahra bounced and jiggled on her springy lever.

One, final groan and an edge of the grating rose up enough to leave a gap underneath.

Sahra let herself down and stretched for the tools.

One small plasma cutter. One adhesion matrix emanator. Simple tools, but incredibly useful. She could take the whole station apart if she wanted to. Re-rig it to her desires if she wanted to.

Or set herself on fire if she didn't know what she was doing with the blasted things.

Eon considered which was more likely and did his best to take the things off of her.

Mute gods, she was pressing buttons!

Pointing them away from her head, thank any luck available, but she was still pressing buttons.

He latched onto her leg just in time. She stood and ran for the light so she could see better. One second the wrong way and he would have been stranded meters away. When he was healthier, such a distance would be nothing. Less than nothing.

Now, it was an infinite gap.

Sahra squinted at the buttons. Tiny things meant for the tip of a Tu'atta claw. Covered in symbols easily read by Tu'atta.

And she still found the on/off switch and tested it with a bit of wire.

No reaction.

Next, she checked the power cells. Held them up to the light. Sniffed them and, in a suicidal move that made Eon cringe, licked the contact points.

"Nuth'n," she pouted. "Not a zap o' pow'r in 'em."

Eon almost collapsed out of pure relief.

✧

Sahra put the tools up high and the power cells next to them. Simy didn't climb that far, yet.

If she cashed them in, the masters would kill her and most of her family.

If she let someone else steal them, then it'd be her fault they and their family died. Sahra couldn't face up to any angels with that on her tally.

If she let Simy eat them, she'd kick herself if she found a way to charge the cells later on.

So her only real option was keep them in here where nobody would dare to go and hope for good fortune at a later date.

Not that she counted on good fortune. Maybe she could figure something out with the circuits that were still going.

Sahra loaded her cart, mostly with ore scrapings from the pointy tunnel, and made her slow way back to the check-in point. She needed to range out. Get more stuff from somewhere else. So her finds didn't point anyone else to her secret place.

And Simy.

And the very dangerous tools.

And the piles of pickings.

And some of the other rats would wonder if they didn't cross paths with her. And ask the wrong kinds of questions.

But she couldn't leave Simy all alone. Maybe she could sneak him along. Riding on her back or something.

And he could eat all the really yucky stuff that no-one wanted to shift. Or the yucky stuff that no-one wanted to touch.

The masters made no comment on her haul, only sending her back for something 'more interesting'.

Sahra only stopped on her way to a different place so she could get Simy. It took her two tries to get him to 'stick put' on her back, and then she was off, climbing up to the higher levels where less rats wanted to go.

The masters lived up there, but they treated the tunnels like a big disposal bin. And it was easy to get turned around if you didn't know your way.

But Sahra liked roaming through the upper levels. She heard all sorts of things. And found some interesting things, too.

This time was very different. Simy made it more fun by getting rid of the really yucky stuff between her and the good stuff. He was a very clever pup.

\*

This was part of the plan. Eon was elated, and grateful that this animal seemed to know the things he needed most without any attempts to communicate.

Some things were not part of the plan. Like hearing what his contemporaries thought of him. Either human slaves talking amongst themselves or the Tu'atta swapping stories, the results were not good.

Nobody seemed to be missing him.

*"I heard some slave stole his own plasma gun and shot him with it,"* said a young female, talking over a vidlink. *"What was the Majestrix thinking? You don't let pets run anything. And you never get so very publicly upset when they die. Duh."*

*"Iistraaah... you can't crit the Majestrix..."* said the female on the other end.

*"So what? She can't monitor every call."*

He could have, in his days as a security assistant. He'd have flagged that female, her family, and all of her friends for interrogation for insubordinate behaviour.

Sahra moved on, picking up things of interest and passing him the rest. She didn't care about Tu'atta society showing thin cracks in its superstructure. She only cared about her immediate goals. Capital gain for self-benefit.

Sahra stopped at another vent. There were no pickings in this junction, nor anything interesting on the other side. Just a small group of decor-slaves listening to an info-station.

Someone was talking in the human tongue.

*"...botage mission (whreeeee)sful. Unfortunately, work crews were able (ssszzzaazz)blish power before the wretched queen of corruption succumbed. Take(fzzzzzz) my comrades. The rebellion will free us all (fweeeeee)ical claw of the hateful Tu'atta. We will elim--"*

Movement outside their room made the slaves shut it off and the group spring apart into casual poses.

"...r'belyun," Sahra mumbled. She didn't sound happy. "They th' ones tried t' kill us all. F'r some queen?" She shook her head and crawled onwards. "They's crosswired."

In that judgement, Eon and she agreed one hundred percent.

✧

After lunch, (Sahra had put Simy back in their secret room before she even hopped out of a tunnel) one of the masters pulled her aside for cable-running duty.

Sahra hated it. The places where cables went never had any good pickings and they were always full of sharp bits and none of the masters were all that ready for her to pick her way through them. And the weight she pulled got heavier and heavier and *heavier* as she went on. And pretty much every last master had got onto the idea that tugging on the cable made rats like her go faster.

But Sahra had thought up a trick to try.

The masters showed her a map - a better one than they had for running her through ore processing - and clipped a cable-holding thing into her harness. Sahra almost jumped into the tunnels, going as fast as she could until she got to a crossway and then, very quickly, bundling up some loops to hold in her less-useful hand. They wouldn't yank her backwards so easy, this way.

She held tight with her less-able hand and leaned on everything with her knuckles, there. It didn't slow her down one bit. The bit that did slow her down was the straight-up climb that looked like three, maybe as many as five whole levels.

There was no way she could do that quick. Down was easier than up, but the masters wanted her to go up, so up she would have to go.

Sahra used her elbows, back and feet to make it up. Sometimes, there were cubby-holes. Sometimes, there were vents. Most of the

times, there were other branches.

And no matter how tight she held her loops, they fell away to nothing before she was halfway there. Now she had to stop and pull for enough slack to get another wriggle up-ways. The Vasht on the other end of Sahra's cable did not like that, if the strength of her return tugs was any kind of sign.

Sahra just made it to the top, both arms stretched out into the tunnel she was supposed to take, when a very strong tug pulled her right off her perch and made her fall down.

Instinct made her stretch out for any hold she could grab. It also made her scream. It was a short fall in terms of time. Not even a lungful of scream in it, but it felt like almost a short, painful trip to heaven. Sahra got her breath back and swallowed her heart down. And blinked thirty times in the dim light because right there in front of her nose was a whole cell recharger.

Right there in a cubby hole she hadn't even looked at before, held it neat and pretty like it belonged there.

Sahra could tell it was meant for humans, because someone had stuck button panel over the one made for masters. One with bigger buttons meant for thick, human fingers.

She couldn't grab it right now. Someone would take it off her.

The cable twitched. Sahra did her best to race back up to the top and didn't tug back until she was safe and braced at the top.

The cable was a lot less heavy on the last crawl to the end.

Maybe other rats had thought of her tricks, too. And maybe the masters had learned them.

...and maybe Sahra had to keep her face in check or someone would read it and know she found something special. She thought about the fall, but not what she found because of it. Let her heart fight to get out

again. Crawled as fast as she could for the end and a bit beyond.

And did everything in her power to not look back and remember her top find.

The masters didn't even notice, all busy with the cable and fixing things.

Sahra ducked out of their way and back into the tunnel. She didn't use the cable to climb down, not with the masters' claws on it. She used the walls and the cubbies and the cross-paths and the vent edges to get back down.

It was a hard haul to get the big machine all the way to the secret, wrecked room. She couldn't even do anything with it because she owed some keep for second shift. Sahra raced for the check-in point and got a cart, rushing through every place where stuff piled up and hoping it was enough.

She couldn't risk anyone following her. Every rat knew that rats in a hurry went to the best finds they knew. Sure enough, she could hear others tailing her.

They wouldn't find Simy or her stash. Not yet.

Too soon, the end of the shift sounded and all the rats went as fast as they could for the check-in.

Sahra lagged behind, picking up their spills.

She got a demerit for showing up late, something that made her face burn at the thought of it. And she'd catch Duvi's gloating for sure. And Mama's sad eyes, which would be the worst.

Her heavy feet dragged on the floor all the way home. Her hot face gave her hot eyes that leaked in sticky hot wet drops that didn't want to let go of her no matter what.

"Sahra Johnston!"

Sahra couldn't even look at Mama as she ran up to her. She tried to make her voice work, but instead of an, "I'm sorry Mama," all that came out was a rough croak.

And then, miracle! Mama scooped her up in a hug that knocked half her breath out.

"You scared three colours of beans outta me, all I heard was about the fall! Nobody said if you was alive or dead."

"...but I gotta bad haul..."

"You're alive, you're alive, you're alive..." Mama held her tight all the way into their home. Kissed her and sat her on her cushion.

Sahra leaned towards Netta. "Whut jus' happen?" she whispered.

"You got out of a talkin' by th' skin o' y'r nails," whispered Netta. "Don't do nuthin' to make 'em remember."

Sahra nodded and kept her head down for the rest of the night. She didn't get more. She didn't get less. She didn't make any fuss or look at any one or play the game where she tried to guess who had done better or worse than anyone else.

That was the first night she snuck away to visit Simy. She spent an hour talking out her worries to him and doing what she could for her new recharger before kissing him goodnight and heading back to her home.

\*

Eon did his exercises when she was not around. Physiotherapy for a shapeshifter was a little more complicated than lifting weights with a weakened limb. In his case, his weakened limb was his entire body.

He could metabolize anything to his net benefit, but that won him nothing if he didn't use it. He stretched, measuring himself against the

ruined cart rails, or the wall struts, or by the missing access panels. He timed how fast he could move from one place to another.

He tried to climb.

Specifically, he tried to climb up to the high shelf where Sahra placed the objects she intended to keep. Two power tools with matching energy cells, and now a cell recharger. Dangerous things. Harmful things.

One slave with the means to take the entire station apart... probably would.

He was almost there. Not even a talon away from reaching just one...

Eon had to have a goal to stop himself from succumbing to insanity. This goal was simple. Keep the station safe by removing hazardous objects from a human juvenile.

He feared he was already too late. That last talon's gap was more than physical. He was beginning to... not want to get them.

The instant he could decipher her half-articulate babblings, he gained a perspective on the life of a slave. Despite the Tu'atta's insistence that the humans were incapable of proper, full-shaded communication, they did very well. Even with simple words.

Sahra's want of the tools was for a better income. Not just for herself, but her entire family. All eighteen of them. Nineteen if one counted the transient male.

And a twentieth on the way.

He learned of strange things, like the human pecking order. Sahra's surprise at finding a friend in a woman who had only recently been a pet - the highest rank next to freedom that a slave could aspire towards. Of the six siblings who had died at or near their birth. Of the hidden wall of beauty in her mother's sleeping chamber. Of her

brother's unreasoning hatred.

Of her one dream to make her family happy.

One last pulse of pain. One magnificent struggle up to the human's high place. He could reach it all. He could do anything he wanted with it.

He could eat her very dreams.

Devour her hopes.

Metabolize her wishes.

And break her heart. Possibly ruin her trust, and trust was essential in a worthy slave. Doing this, carrying out his plan to remove the tools and their means of maintenance, may well literally kill her.

Why did he care?

This little human, barely useful at all, wasn't worth anything. Easily replaceable. Expendable.

By being expendable, she had found him. She was the only being who had come near. The only one who helped him, even though she didn't know who he was.

The first being who was genuinely glad to see him.

Eon climbed back down. He couldn't bring himself to betray the little human. Let her have this dream, however far it took her. She was smart enough to keep secrets so far. Why should he doubt her ability to keep more of them?

*One way or another, I think I'm going to regret this...*

\*

Sahra stopped in to collect Simy only when she was scrounging.

Made sure nobody saw him. Made sure nobody saw her go get him. Made sure without doubt that she went all over the tunnels everywhere when she was out scrounging.

That was how she met the rebels.

And that was the day her life changed.

Sahra knew she was a few master-paths away from where she'd found the recharger. What she never expected was to hear people talking. Humans talking. They couldn't be masters. Masters had a way of saying things that humans just... didn't do.

A man's voice. He sounded new to being a grownup. "I told you he was unreliable."

"Or she," said a woman's voice. She sounded too calm to be real. "The whole point of anonymous contacts is that we don't know who they are. And vice-versa."

Those were some complicated words. Sahra wished she knew what even half of them meant. "Hide, Simy," she whispered. Simy slipped from off her back and into the trash in her cart.

"And what about the bloody equipment that was supposed to be there?" A thump on the wall with something metal. It made the whole tunnel ring like a bell. "The note said it was in there. Where is it?"

Equipment? They couldn't be looking for her recharger. It was hers! She found it fair and square. And she nearly almost had it working, too.

The woman sighed. "I told you already, they have children doing most of the work around here, including salvage of any damage. An entire recharger's worth a lot in those instances."

Sahra nearly banged her head on the roof of her tunnel. They *were* after her recharger! Well they could just dance for it as far as she had any say in it.

"I'm going to murder whichever little bastard took it," growled the man.

"Julian," the woman sighed, "Put that knife away before someone gets hurt. We need to remain calm."

Sahra had to hold the laugh in with both hands. This tough-guy had the funniest name she had ever heard! She fought to get it held all the way in and crawled closer to where their argument kept on happening.

If they got any louder, the masters might just shoot up the whole sector. They needed getting rid of, and Sahra was the only somebody to do it. She found them underneath her tunnel, and made up her mind to play innocent. "What'cha doin'?"

The man glared hot hurt up at her. "Looking for someone to *skin* over an open fire..."

"Let me handle this," said the woman. She had an old pattern of spots on her cheeks. Tattoos, they had to be. They were turning blue with time. She put on a warm smile like Sahra would put on a shift. "Hello, little one. We're - just lost. Do you know your way around here?"

Sahra shrugged, "Guess. You new?" They had to be new. They were too clean and too fat to be from anywhere Sahra knew. They were almost as fat as the pets. And they had cloth over their arms. Nobody, not even the pets she'd seen, had cloth over their arms. Only the masters had that.

Sahra made up her mind then and there to stay out of their reach. They had to be dangerous.

The woman with the man-short hair and the too-smart almond eyes spoke like she was playing hop-hop with her words. "Yes - we are. We need to find - a certain place. Thirty-seven Jay. Do you know where it is?"

"Three Seven Juliet?" asked Sahra. She'd never heard of 'jay', but she knew 'juliet'. It was a girl's name from way-way before everything.

"This is pointless," the man was darker in the shadows than the woman, but not as brown as Dotti and her friends were before the masters put patterns on their skin. "She doesn't know what you're talking about, and if we let her go, she'll *talk*."

*Like anyone'd sit still enough to listen if'n I did,* thought Sahra.

"Julian, *hush*."

The last laugh at his name and the new one ganged up on Sahra and busted out of her from her tummy up-ways.

"What the hell is so goddamn funny, kid?" snapped the man.

"Y'r name Juliet," Sahra fought to get the words out between laughs. "Assa girl name."

The woman fought to keep her own laughs down, but her dark eyes glittered with them.

"There is a difference," said the man through his teeth, "between *Julian* and *Juliet*."

The woman cleared her throat and wiped the smiles out of her face. "If you show us how to get there, I can give you some candy..."

Sahra bit her lip. Treats were well and good, but she needed something better. "Y'got pow'r cells?"

"...pa-ur?" copied the man.

"Sshh," hissed the woman. "My name is Eva. What's yours?"

Sahra thought about lying. Liars went to hell when they died. And they got hurt when they were found out, alive. Some of them got a trip to hell *real* quick, too. "Sahra."

"We don't have power cells on us, but we do have some other things."

"Y'got tools in 'at box?" Sahra asked. "Kinda want s'm tools."

The man smiled like he wished he had master's teeth. Brand-new and razor sharp in the bargain. "Sure..." he dug one out. "This one's called a 'hammer'. Want to see what it can do to your mercenary little bones?"

The woman clapped her hand over the man's mouth and ripped the tool out of his hands, slamming it into the small box between them. "If you scare her off, it could be days before we see any other help. Every minute wasted is another minute when the Tu'atta could find us."

They were dangerous! They just named the masters. Not even at breath-level loud.

That sort of thing got you burned up alive.

"Just shut up and let me handle this, and maybe we'll live," the woman turned her kind face back on as she turned back to face Sahra. "We can give you some of our spares. Not too many, though. We need them for... something else."

Sahra did her best to give them the stink-eye. "You ain't any of them rebels, is you?"

"No, of course not."

"Good," said Sahra. "They nearly kill't us jus' last week. I been meanin' t' give 'em all a kickin'." She carefully juggled herself and her cart down to their level. "You foller. No talkin'. These tubes make the sound go on f'r effur."

Eva made a face at Juliet. He made a face back, but they followed like good, quiet little mice. All the way to Three Seven Juliet. This was a tube near another piece of the station's reason for being. Sorting ore. She could even see Darvan through the little holes in the metal.

A different thing came out of the box. It looked... evil.

"What'cha doin'?" said Sahra. She knew it in her heart, but she wanted so hard for it to not be true that she had to ask.

"Striking a blow for freedom, kid," said Juliet. He put a thin, shiny rod into the middle of it and it lit up. There were numbers in those lights. They started, very slowly, going backwards.

Sahra thought of the meanest words she had. "Y'all're goin' straight t' hell ya damn crosswired spongebrains."

She smacked the closest one with all the muscle she had and crawled away as fast as she could. Think. There was no way she had any power to stop them doing what they were doing. Especially now. And she couldn't turn up to Darvan with Simy and tools in her cart. And she didn't have time to go all the way down to the old ore processing. But there were ways she could get Simy, and maybe her tools, most of the way down to old ore processing.

"Simy, come out," she whispered, stopping at the join where a small tunnel - too small for any kind of rat - went nearly straight down to their secret place. She dropped the tools, first. Knowing what they paid for, she almost didn't care what happened to them. She hugged him, kissed him goodbye, and helped him into the chute. "Go on home. Hurry. I gotta run."

She didn't look back. There was no time. She was already heading the wrong way from running away from the spongehead rebels. She wasn't going to think about going back. Which meant she had to take three different turns to come out of a wall near the real door to ore sorting. Masters stared at her, but as long as she didn't look at their faces, she was fine. Many chose to ignore rats of all kinds.

Her heels kicked the cart as she ran for the door. Not ten paces away, but it felt like way too far.

"Duvi," she started screaming as soon as she was inside. "Duvi! Duvi! Y'awnoutthere! I seed a bomb! There's a bomb inna walls! Eff'ryone

gotta RUN!"

"Hold up, hold up. What?"

Sahra stared at him for five breaths of forever. She had to talk slow so he could understand? Argh! "Bomb. In. The. WAALLLSS! RUUUUNNNNNNN!"

The Taan master guarding them all was out the door first, setting off alarms as the humans poured out into the hall-paths meant only for the masters.

Sahra's hand gripped Darvan's way too hard , and he gripped her just as fast. Her heels kicked up the cart and scattered her findings behind her. Her legs burned. Her lungs burned. Her heart felt like it was stabbing her with each beat. They got around a corner. Raced for the next one.

There was no planet-shattering kaboom. Sahra heard the start of a bang, but after that, it was a big, loud whine. There was a wall of air that pushed them down and burned their backs and made her ears pop all at once.

The last thing she knew before the dark swallowed her up was the hard grip of Darvan's hand slipping away.

✧

Eon cringed when the bomb went off. Old memories merged with his imagination and supplied too many details. Sahra, trying to make her brother understand and falling into babble, incinerated in an instant.

Sahra, just barely able to drag her brother to the door, roasted alive before she could die from the concussive blast.

Sahra, pierced by shrapnel and bleeding out in the dark.

And him, unable to help at all.

Eon took up the tools into a pseudopod. Contemplated their feel. They were simple things. No need for power greater than the twisting force of a human arm.

She could do things with the recharger, with this.

He could still 'lose' them.

But that would betray her. Even if he was betraying her memory.

It took him hours, but he managed to crawl to her high shelf. After that, it was simple to place her new tools up there. Next to her other ones.

Even if she never came back, it felt better to know they were waiting there.

He hoped she would come back.

He was starting to like her hugs.

\*

A constant note. Loud and everywhere. Inside and outside of her head. The feel of her harness was gone. So was the feel of Darvan's hand. Panic bought her all the way back to real life.

Staring right into the face of a master medic.

Sahra squeaked, or thought she did, and scrunched her eyes shut.

A talon tapped her forehead. Very gently. Tap. Tap tap. Tap tap tap. Taptap.

Light shone in her eyes when she opened them. Sahra blinked and squinted against it. She tried to say, "Where Duvi?", but the sound she heard came as a low *womp-wompwomp* behind the everywhere-note.

She carefully sat up, finding Darvan on another bed near her. He was moving his mouth, but Sahra couldn't hear anything but the note. Sahra waved until she got Darvan looking at her and tried a, "Can you hear me?" even though all she heard was *womping*.

Darvan moved his mouth and shook his head, pointing to his ear.

Sahra stuck her finger in one of hers and jiggled it. Wax, and no blood. That had to mean her hearing would come back soon enough.

Wouldn't it?

She didn't know who to ask. Or how to understand when her ears wouldn't work.

Would the masters kill her? Eat her? Or just leave her to rot somewhere because it was too expensive to waste food, water or air on a deaf slave.

Darvan must have been thinking the same things, because he put his forefinger and thumb in a circle over his heart. *Have faith, it's going to be okay.*

Sahra huddled up in place and hugged her knees, each hand holding the other shoulder. She felt cold and afraid and lost and alone, no matter how many other slaves were in the same, big, too-clean room.

The only sound she could hear was the one note.

A master was walking between the rows and rows of beds. Counting. Jotting down things in a portable data tablet.

More slaves were coming in, forcing the masters to move the beds around and this one Taan to start over. Lots of tunnel rats. Sahra could see their mouths flapping as if they were trying to shout, 'ullyully uxinfree' but weren't hearing themselves or anyone else.

Sahra wanted to know if they all heard the same one note.

Sahra wanted to know if there were too many slaves to just get rid

of. She didn't see any guns, but there were lots of masters fighting with each other. Staring each other down and baring their teeth, and making short, mean moves with their claws.

First, the beds were moved two-together. Darvan nudged up close to her and put his arm around her. Then the beds were moved four-together. Then they were all shoved in as close and as tight as they could get and still more people were coming in.

Some were bleeding. Some were so still that Sahra had to stare to make sure they were still alive.

She started counting, but ran out of real numbers she knew very fast.

"...twenny-twenny-twenny one, twenny-twenny-twenny two..." she was trying to say behind the one note.

Darvan, snugged up against her all kind, said, "I can hear you. What-" and then his voice was gone. Lost on the one note.

Sahra kept counting, and Darvan put his head back against hers. "Hey squirt. Can you hear this?"

"Yeah," she said. "I can't hear me, but I c'n hear you. Howzat even work?"

"Dunno. Lookit the masters. They're fighting over us."

"Can you tell what they sayin'?"

"No. I was never good at lip-reading."

"At what the whut?"

"Lip. Reading. You watch the mouths and guess what's getting said by the shapes."

Sahra felt like a light had come on inside her. Of course it'd be hard to read master mouths. For one, they didn't like being looked at. And

if you did look, then their mouths weren't as wriggly as a humans. They sort of moved like they were saying ba-ba-ba all the time. And humans couldn't see all the colours they used to make their feelings clear.

But if she watched their crests and talons and tails, and the way they moved... Especially when they weren't looking at her...

She could start to guess.

Sahra pointed, for a very short time, at the masters who were still arguing by the doorway. "The one on this side wants us all kill't. The one on that side doesn't, I reckon. Sayin' sumpin 'bout it bein' a waste o' ree-zor-sez."

"Resources," said Darvi. "I get it. Even if they did a breeding program, they'd have to wait for 'em all to get growed up."

Sahra watched the fighting masters, and the scared humans coming together in clumps. Some held each other. Some held on to themselves. Lots were crying. The air was starting to smell all sweaty and smoky.

"Who was th' girl?"

"Girl?"

"Th' one you was makin' goo-goo eyes at when I runned in."

"Kera Matherson."

So that's the one who was helping Darvan catch trouble by not working so much. Pretty enough, Sahra guessed. Too brown-haired to be red enough to be a pet, but not brown-haired enough to make people think she wasn't a snob.

"She purty," said Sahra.

"Yeah."

"D'ya see 'er here?"

"Not yet," he said.

Sahra started looking for her, too. It gave her something better to do than trying to count without enough numbers.

\*

More sabotage. Either some of them were getting better at their bombs, or there was a Tu'att with their eyes wrongly on the throne of the Majestrix - long may she reign.

Graak thought it odd that the warning came from a mentally damaged rat. He'd thought that they couldn't go as far as Ore Sorting. But then, rats inevitably turned up in unexpected places. He remembered getting up in the early morning to calm his nerves with some illicit reading material. He'd hidden it away, like many of his compatriots, in a recess inside the wall.

To this day, he did not know who was more shocked. The three-year-old human he found there, or him for finding it.

He'd bought a lock-box the next day. Graak could not bear to think of those vermin touching his belongings.

He had something of a chain of events, given the accounts of the officers present. The Rebels crept in and planted a bomb at a power line. It didn't have to be advanced to cause damage. The rat, seeking credits, found more than she bargained for and reasoned correctly that family members were in peril.

After that, according to Kadyne Dreel, the rat found her way in and "hollered a mess of gibberish" before humans and Tu'att alike went scrambling for safety.

Leaving only a few fatalities.

Humans too old or too stupid to get out of the way quickly enough.

No real loss.

\*

Sahra had no idea how much time had passed, but being scared slowly drained away and now everyone was bored and tired and almost everybody had to pee.

Other slaves were trying. Some carried a bucket for the men to pee into. Others had a funny cross between a seat with a hole in it and a bowl for the women. They had a hard time because there were so many people and so much pee.

There was even a big cart that was all a big bag held up with struts. The slaves with buckets and seat-bowls kept tipping pee in there and running back to the next person.

Sahra had already tied her legs into a tight knot and was trying to make her bottom into a sealed area by muscle power alone. She, like all the others struck deaf by the blast, was too scared to leave the bed for fear of what the masters would do. She kept a worried eye on the ones with the seat-bowls and tried not to wet herself.

It was getting painful.

At last, the buckets and seat-bowls got to the bed she now shared with Darvan and three strangers. She called down blessings from heaven on all the people fetching pee and wished them fast feet and no spills.

She couldn't hear if they said anything. She couldn't see their faces for the masks they wore.

Sahra did understand why they wore them when the big bag-cart passed by. If there was ever a smell worse than the pee of hundreds of people, Sahra hadn't found it yet.

She huddled up in a corner of the bed, sort-of leaning against Darvan, who had the nearest corner to hers. What shift was it? When could they go home?

When in the name of all the angels was the one note going to go away?

Sahra yawned, now that she didn't have the pain to keep her awake. Even though she was hungry, it was hard to keep her eyes open.

Darvan's voice came through the forever note. "Stay awake, shrimp."

"M tired..."

"Ya know what a concussion is?"

"No...?"

"You get 'em from a big whack t' the head. An' if ya fall asleep? You die."

Sahra was not tired at all any more. "I don' wanna die."

Darvan kissed her forehead, then leaned back so their heads were touching again. "So why'd you come fetch me?"

"You m' brofar," Sahra shrugged. "I don' like what'cha do, but... I be sad if'n you died."

Darvan let her go and hunched in on himself. Watching people, watching masters. Listening to the one note go on, because it was all he could hear. And looking like he was chewing on a very tough, very sour bit of gristle.

✱

Rats - real rodent rats, not the human-child tunnel rats - flooded Eon's chamber. He was glad of them, and flipped a few switches that closed off their egress.

He was not fast, but he did know that rats found his smell to be tempting. All he had to do was sit there and let them approach. And then bite back.

He would have fresh meat for quite a while.



Sahra watched the masters come and go. The Taan went around one last time, counting and making notes. Then she reported to a Vasht who was boss of the room. The Vasht left and came back with a Barba. No. Three Barbas, and they all spent some time arguing before they all left and bought back a Kuin. All medal-ribbons and shiny rank-marks. When she bared her teeth, Sahra could see they were all metal. Her hide had gone white in patches, but she kept her talons sharp and a gun at her hip.

Sahra quickly pretended she was watching a human family near the door and had always been watching them. But she kept secretly watching the Kuin.

The Kuin was not impressed. And unhappy. And getting pretty mad.

That Kuin left and came back with three more, who were also not happy and old and all girl masters. They had another argument and went away again.

Everyone - well, all of the humans - looked at each other like they wished they could hear what anyone was saying so they could figure out what was going on.

Time passed super slow. Sahra's tummy tickled, then pinched, and wobbled inside her as her hunger grew.

She'd missed lunch, and maybe it was heading to dinnertime, but nobody had fed anyone. She felt thirsty and her head was starting to hurt.

Just as she was starting to ask herself if it was okay to eat her own fingernails, the slaves who had taken away all the pee came back. This time, they were taking beds away and lining people up from oldest to youngest.

Sahra lost sight of Darvan after five moves along the line. She finished up near the front with all the other rats, looking around at them as if they knew anything. They just looked back, equally lost about what was going on. Nobody who was standing in lines was bleeding or very still. Those had got taken into another room.

Four different Kuins entered, then some Barbas with the *big* guns, who set themselves along the wall Sahra was facing and made sure everyone could see their guns.

Then came the sparkly masters.

Masters in big clothes. Sparkly clothes. Bright colours and dangly things that caught the light and bits of clothes that just hung or flapped about when they moved.

And the sparkliest, brightest, flappiest one had a whole bunch of human pets. All redheads. Each one had been bleached, and then had something else done to make sure they got freckles in patterns. All were wearing not very much, but it also sparkled and flapped when they moved. Their red hair was all fancy. Done up in tricky knots that made Sahra's eyes hurt just to look at them.

Two were twins. Identical, and had sparkly collars and chains held by the sparkliest of girl masters ever. One carried a pretty bowl and the other didn't carry anything.

The master holding their leashes was the Majestrix herself. The master of the masters.

Sahra looked at her toes.

The Majestrix had funny shoes. With pointy bits that made her taller and showed off her painted foot-claws at the same time. She

went down the line as far as some ten-year-olds, and then slowly walked back, past Sahra, to some littles who were just past being toilet trained.

Sahra peeked. She was talking to the Kuins, who had come over all shy in front of a master half their age or less.

While they were talking, the Majestrix gave something from the pretty bowl to the pet who was not carrying anything. This pet chewed it like they didn't like it but daren't say so, and then held it out on his tongue.

The Majestrix, cool as ice, bent over and kissed the stuff right off her pet's tongue. She was touching lips and everything! And everyone else was pretending not to see it.

Sahra was sure she was the only one who saw that pet shiver as if he wanted to throw up.

Then the Majestrix picked up a tiny little redhead girl and smoothed her hair. Another pet held out a box with collars in neat lines in it, and the master of the masters tapped one with a claw.

The bowl-less twin looked sort of happy to put the collar on the little girl. The little girl didn't look too happy. She was crying for her mama, by the looks, and got handed from one set of arms to another until Sahra couldn't see her any more.

The Majestrix and all her pets left in a cloud of sparkles, all walking as if they had no hurry to be anywhere.

More glittery masters came, and some took a group and some took just one. Each put a collar on the humans they chose.

They were going to be pets? Why?

All the redheads went first. And then all the almond-eyed, dark-haired ones. Then all the brown-skinned. Except for the older ones, they got left behind no matter how pretty the masters thought they

were.

Suddenly, Sahra had some claws around her arm. A younger master, not much older than Paul, had Sahra in her grip and was jumping up and down and dragging Sahra towards an adult. Her father, another rare male Barba, had an argument with - Sahra peeked - his daughter and pulled out his payment card.

This got more bouncing from the daughter, and it got Sahra a collar that they put on a little too tight for Sahra's liking. She coughed and pulled at it for what seemed like forever before anyone let it loose a notch.

Her new owner was bouncing as she moved, tugging on the leash and Sahra's collar as she went. Sahra tried copying the young master's bouncing step, and found it worked best when she kept time with her new owner.

Something made them all stop, though, and the Barba took the leash from daughter, who still bounce-stepped along. The Barba walked all normal.

Sahra didn't understand. She'd just been keeping pace.

Maybe some other masters thought it was funny to see a girl and her new human slave bouncing along in step. Maybe Barba-father didn't like his pets - or his daughters pets - to bounce.

Sahra kept her eyes on the floor and let the leash tell her where to go. She wanted to look around, but this was a master place. There were masters everywhere.

A sudden turn, and the space smelled like soap and chemicals and something like the flowers from the big room where all the plants were, only without the poo-smell of the garden bed. It made her nose itch.

Suddenly, there were humans. Their clothes stuck tight to the skin and were all bright colours and shiny without being sparkly. They

must have been talking, but the second they knew Sahra was deaf they just talked to each other. And very quick talking, too.

They got rid of her sheath like it was garbage.

They put her in a tub of bubbles with hot water in and scrubbed her down until all her skin was red and her fingers and toes were all wrinkles. Then they pulled her out and rubbed her down with fuzzy cloth and blew warm air real fast over all of her.

One ran a fine comb through her head.

The new sheath they had for her was shiny and really white and felt like plastic. Then they put her into a funny chair and washed her hair again, combed it again, and put some really nasty-smelling stuff in it and wound it onto tubes. Others were doing weird things to her fingers and toes. Rubbing the nails with things, poking dirt and bits out of the corners and putting paint on them.

There was a mirror above her. Sahra could see that they had painted her hair orange. She could also see her new master-owner flipping through pictures on a tablet. Barba-father on one side and a different, flappy-clothed master on the other, both pointing at things.

When they were done painting her nails, they strapped her hands and feet down and stuck her head under another thing that blew air around her head.

She would be glad when the chemical smell went away, for all that it smelled like something on fire. Her tummy really poked at her and the humans in charge of painting her laughed.

Her owner was eating something, in her reflection in the mirror. The same something the Majestrix had made one of her pets chew for her.

Funny long bugs with thick back legs. Black ones with long, long curvy feelers.

She didn't want to chew those for her owner. The only black bugs Sahra knew were cockroaches and they were horrible. Someone once said a friend of a friend of a friend of theirs had eaten one on a dare and got so sick they died.

She was never going to eat any black bug. No matter what anyone said. Or chew one for anyone else.

Yuck.

One of the humans in charge of painting her noticed Sahra's face and figured out the cause. Then she put some kind of cool mask over Sahra's eyes, making her blind and deaf.

And hungry and bored.

And scared.

And lonely.

Sahra tried everything to stop the tears coming out. She was already too thirsty and her head hurt from the inside and all she had for company was an angel in her head singing one forever note in praise of God.

And then there was a warm, human hand on her shoulder. One of the strangers painting her had seen how scared she was and let her have a hand as company.

Sahra relaxed. Even though she knew Mama was far away and missing her and Darvan and anyone else caught up in the bomb... Sahra pretended it was Mama's hand, there.

Sahra also wished God would help Mama feel better for knowing Sahra and Duvi and anyone else she missed was okay. And she wished someone would find Simy and look after him. She didn't want him to be alone. Even if she never saw him again.

The mask and the straps and the thing over her head went away.

The humans in charge of her helped her take off the sheath and pressed her against the wall with a sheet of plastic. Cold chemicals prickled against her skin in weird patterns.

*I'm a pet. I'm someone's pet.*

She didn't feel very much above anyone at all. She felt worse than ever than when she was a tunnel rat. Her owner was making her to look pretty and not do a lot else. At least when she was a rat, she was doing something useful.

They strapped her into a frame and did her front and face with dark chemical spots and plastic with pattern holes in. One word that Sahra could read on the painters' mouths looked like sten-sin. No. *Sten-sil*.

Was it what they were doing? Or something they were using?

They strapped her head in so they could pattern her neck up.

Her owner was turning her into a fake redhead. With freckle patterns all over.

Sahra's feet hurt. Her joints creaked. Her whole body felt stiff and she could swear that her tummy was trying to eat up the rest of her insides.

And something on her head was feeling hot in a wrong way.

It took them way too long to take her off the frame and put her hair through another wash and back into the tubes and the weird helmet on a post thing that blew more air all over her.

Her nails were a colour of red Sahra had never known. Not even when baby David had had a bad bottom rash and nearly almost bled because of it. Not even on the flowers in the big plant room.

Her new 'freckles' were also red. A deeper red than blood. They stood out like sores on her skin, but they didn't itch or burn.

They finished blowing air on her head again and took the tubes out

of her hair. Then they marched her into a room full of clothes and her owner and her father.

These were not sheaths. These had wiggly bits and bits with holes in and sparkly bits and dangly bits and flappy bits and way too many colours for Sahra to count. And they were all sizes. Even for grownups.

Sahra had to stand with her feet on special patches and her arms straight out so that her hands were at the same height as her shoulders. A light shone all over her and something got the attention of the flappy male in charge of the whole place.

Sahra's owner did some pointing and jumping at something wobbly and wide and covered in sparkly things and other bits with holes in. It was in a kind of pink that made Sahra angry just looking at it. It made her want to punch someone. It had long tubes where the arms should go and Sahra figured it would snag on just about everything.

But before that... thing... got put on her, the flappy-dressed male put her into tiny little pants like she was a baby, and a really short sheath not long enough to cover her butt. Then the horrible hate-sheath with the cloth tubes to cover her arms. And lots and lots of master's talons plucking at the hate-sheath.

There were holes in the whole thing. Holes made to show off the pattern 'freckles' on her hide.

Next, they fought her feet into weird cloth tubes and shoes made for her feet. Both in shades of the hated pink. The cloth tubes had wobbly bits at their one hole, and made her legs match the sheath.

Sahra would rather look at anything, even black bugs, than look at this stupid sheath.

Barba-father and Sahra's owner picked out some other things. Some flappy and shiny, some almost covered in strips of shiny-flappy cloth. One was plain and looked soft. Some were covered in laces. Some were all wobbly everywhere. One had every colour there was and

more than a few that weren't.

Sahra could not feel the floor under her feet. Could not tell if there was slippery stuff underfoot or not. She could barely walk when her owner took up the leash and began to run with her in tow.

Once again Barba-father stopped them and took the leash while Sahra's owner bounced on ahead.

They stopped at a place that smelled of all kinds of good food and made Sahra sit on the floor while they took a table.

Food came. Master food.

Sahra's tummy was outright punching her, now. She imagined it must have been making a ruckus because talons started pointing and one master at another table put their hand down with some food in it for her.

It was a black bug.

She shook her head.

Sahra's owner got up and talked to a different master behind a sort of long table that went all the way across the room, near a wall. There was lots of pointing at Sahra. She tried to hide from it and peek at her owner at the same time. It didn't work so good. Either she saw the pointing or she couldn't see her owner through the hair that they'd turned into bright orange springs that wanted to tangle.

The next time she saw those stupid rebels, she was going to *bite* them.

A pet bowl turned up, carried by a brown man with bleached zigzags up and down his arms. There was rice and sweet potato, and carrots and beans and a little dark brown meat and red beans and, with a secret move from the zigzag man, chopsticks for her to eat it with.

Sahra's owner put a bib on her. And put on sharp little clips to keep her springy orange hair from going into the food.

*Bless the sweet Lord for this bounty*, she prayed inside her head, the only place she could actually hear herself. Maybe the angel singing the note in her head could take it along. And take the note with her.

And if maybe's got anything done, then Sahra may be the Majestrix herself, next Tuesday.

Sahra gave up on thinking for the moment and got on with filling her angry tummy. All her other problems could wait until she ate.

\*

There were no more rats. And any survivors outside would smell their relatives' deaths in this room and avoid it like death was infectious. Eon flipped the switches back anyway. Just in case there were some stupid rats.

He pressed himself to the bulkhead, trying to pick up the subtle vibrations of slave-news, carried from mouth to rubbery mouth. Silence.

Either he was too far away or, more likely, there was another lockdown until someone figured out what had gone wrong with this bombing.

He could not go looking for her. He was not yet capable of enough stealth to avoid someone claiming him as their own. Nor enough strength to fight them off.

He would have to wait. And while he waited, he did everything he could to make himself strong.

\*

Sahra was figuring the whole house out. There were two masters here. Barba-father and his daughter. Something special must have happened for the daughter to stay with her father instead of going to some female relative. There were a lot of slaves. Most of them were the almond-eyed folk who were fashionable some time before Sahra had been born.

They did all the work. There was a cook and a maid and a body-servant for Sahra's owner, who was just there to help the young master get into and out of her super-tricky clothes. There was a manservant for the Barba-father and a gardener-farmer who grew things in a small room for plants or farmed the insects that the masters loved to eat.

He also kept rats and mice on the dead bugs or food scraps the masters left. The rats and mice lasted longer than the bugs, so there were less of them. And they took up more space because they were bigger.

Sahra noticed something, though. All the humans in this place did not talk with their mouths. They made signs at each other with their hands. They made one to her, a hand flapping in and out of being in half while the back of that hand was stuck up to their foreheads.

They must have named her that.

Sahra was slow with the signs and couldn't get half of them. She watched anyway. When she was allowed to watch.

Her own duties seemed to be being a doll. Her owner spent most of her time playing with Sahra's hair or tugging at Sahra's strange and stupid clothes or swapping useless sparkly things for other useless sparkly things.

Sahra had a doll she'd made out of a piece of rag from Mama's sewing-box. It was a knot in one corner with a clumsy face drawn on the knot with a bit of carbon mixed up with wax. And it had, until she met Simy, been her secret best friend. Well hidden from mean or grownup hands. She shared it with the littles if they were feeling nice

about it and she was feeling nice too.

Sahra's doll didn't have clothes. Or much of a body. Pretty much everything Sahra's doll had lived in her head with the rest of her dreams.

This young master had toy castles and tiny space ships and a whole room full of all sorts of clothes and useless sparkly things. And two beds all to herself, one full of soft things made to look like animals Sahra didn't know.

Sahra kind of liked the one that looked like a ball of fluff with a face and legs.

The other bed in the young master's room was hung all over with cloth so thin Sahra could see through it, and that sparkled too. There were funny-shaped pillows and lots of pretty cloths that the young master slept between.

And a big sort of pillow holding it all up.

Sahra had one big pillow on the floor. It smelled like cat, but not very much like cat. Which made Sahra wonder what had happened to the young master's last pet.

Her owner took off the hate-sheath and put on the soft plain sheath that was like wearing nothing. It didn't itch or poke or, like some really bad sheaths she'd got, crawl with tiny bugs. Sahra wanted to wear this one all the time. And not the others made to be trouble.

She lay down where she was told and let the young master cover her up with a big cloth that was covered in star-shapes of every colour that anyone had ever cooked up.

Barba-father did something the same for the young master, and rubbed her snout with his before patting her head and turning off the light.

Sahra listened for something - anything else- besides the one note.

Did a concussion last as long as the whine? Would she die if she fell asleep? She had one being to ask, and He was not big on answers.

*Dear God, if I should die before I wake, please send someone to help Simy and my mother? They're going to need it.*

✱

Three days. Eon thought he should wait the entire seven before thinking Sahra missing, presumed dead, and looking for a new human - or anyone - willing to help him. Rats - the non-furry ones - avoided this place. Something about 'haints' if he caught the distant shouts correctly.

"Hsst!"

Eon nearly jumped out of his skin. Sahra! In a high vent, naked as the day she was born, smiling and gesturing for him to come up.

"S me. Sahra," she whispered. "Can't make a lotta noise. Y'awnup." She helped him with the one arm that was not keeping her steady and carried him up to a new, cleaner plateau.

For limited definitions of 'cleaner'.

Air vents got dust, which collected in lumps and drifts of fluff, dead skin, hair, and the small vermin that fed in them.

It was a puffy feast.

"Bad news, Simy. I'm deaf. All's I can hear is... one big long note that goes on f'r effur. But I also figgured I'm nearly inviz-dible. M'masters go away a lot an' expec' me t' stay where I was. Wriggled outta them pretty-clothes an' got m'self gone. Ohyeah. I'm a pet now. They prettied me up 'n' all."

There was more light, here. Leaking in from the grilles and guards that let the air pass, but kept the fluff where it was.

"C'n ya help? I wanna get a prop'r work sheath an' then go tell Mama I'm okay an' I need you t' tell me when the shift whistle blows so's I c'n be back 'fore th' masters notice."

Eon stuck himself to her dominant arm. There were chemicals on her hide. Henna. Someone had made his Sahra into a fake, fashionable redhead pet.

All the past arguments he knew flooded back to haunt him.

Pets had better care than in the slave quarters. They had more room than in the hovels that the slaves put together out of any old trash they were allowed to keep. There was less disease. Better food. The Tu'atta could look after a human child better than its human mother. This way, they could get an education. This way, they could be bought up *properly*.

But it still didn't change the fact that someone had essentially used Sahra as an accessory.

A status symbol.

And he was powerless to stop them.

But he could help Sahra do the things she wanted to do - contact her family, find a useful occupation and do something constructive - without landing her a punishment from her new owners.

\*

Mama did a lot of her work in a sewing factory. Sahra could see her from the vent across the room. Her job was to sew an arm-cover cloth onto one side of a short sheath, and pass it on to the next female, who did the other side.

Over and over again.

There was another vent on the wall near Mama's machine. If she

could just get there...

But she couldn't whisper to Mama. Sahra couldn't hear it, but she imagined those machines made a lot of noise. She couldn't shout or a master would come over and shoot them both. And maybe Simy, too.

Sahra couldn't pass her a note. She didn't know how to make letters into words.

The vent was right near where one of Mama's hands slid along, guiding the cloth.

Sahra had an idea.

\*

Ma Johnston was one of the few people alive who still knew her name was Mari. It didn't really matter, much. It didn't change the little MJ she put on her baby-time pictures. She was so used to answering to 'Ma' or words to that effect that Ma might as well be her name.

But there were too many 'Ma's here, where all the pregnant and nursing women worked. And if they weren't a 'Ma', yet, that was going to change inside a year.

Thousands of women were here, or in rooms just like it. Making shirt after shirt or pair of pants, likewise, or skirts or fancy coats for those who wanted to pretend they were higher up than they were. Or were higher up and on a limited budget.

It didn't matter.

She was useful, and it gave her a lot of time for prayer.

Prayers like, *Please let me see all my living children safe again...*

And then Sahra's hand, painted with a pattern of dark brown spots, reached out of nowhere and touched hers.

She gasped and stopped the machine, quickly snapping the thread and setting it loose so she could explain the stop if the Taan in charge should wander by. Bent to peek through the hole to the vent where Sahra's pale face smiled at her in a mask of brown spots and a baffling cloud of orange curls.

The grin turned into a 'shush' motion. She mouthed, "I can't hear, but I can read your mouth."

Ma whispered as she pretended to fool with the machine, "Sahra Johnston, bless you for thinking of your Mama. And bless the angels for guiding you here."

One less child to weep over. One less child to worry about. She was a pet, but that had not stopped her finding her family. Letting her Mama know that she was all right.

"Ain't found Duvi yet. Or nobody else. I'm'a look tomorrow."

"Thankyou," breathed Ma. She would share any good news she got with her mother's network. People she knew would not betray her news or her source to the kinds of people who reported things to the masters. "Go on back, now. Stay safe."

Sahra gave her a little salute and closed the vent.

Ma Johnston re-threaded her machine with a lighter heart. She never expected her God to answer her prayers so... literally. But that didn't stop her gratitude.

✧

Sahra had not found Darvan, or anyone else she knew, this time through the tunnels. She felt bad about it, but it was time to get back to being a doll.

Simy was glad to eat all the dirt off her, but not the spots. If he ate the spots, her owners might guess something was wrong - or get rid of

her.

Getting dressed again was not as easy as getting undressed. Sure, she could hide Simy and the work shift in the vent, but the doll-clothes were hard. Much as she hated the thin baby pants and the tight, short sheath, she had to get them on anyway. And getting into the sparkly sheath with the arm covers was a struggle.

She had it halfway sorted out when she noticed she was being watched.

The young-master's body servant was staring at her.

Sahra tried to swallow her fear and struggle into the hated cloth at the same time.

Then the body servant came over and pulled something that made the whole lot a bit easier to get into.

Sahra signed, *Thank you.*

The body servant signed, *I am Teo. What you do today?*

*Find Mama, Sahra signed. Tell her I live.* The rest, including Simy hiding in the air vent with Sahra's stolen sheath could stay her secret. *I am Sahra*, she signed it with the sounds, not the letters, since she didn't know how the letters went. *The others call me*, and she did the flapping hand on the forehead sign.

Teo frowned as she helped Sahra with the pretty-useless sheath. Tugging and guiding and tying things. *That is bad word*, she signed. *Someone who not know hand-speak called that. They not say that for long.*

Teo, after fixing Sahra's clothes, helped her with the signs. Puppeting Sahra's hands while Teo spoke the words as their heads touched.

"And this one," she said, guiding her into the hand-flapping-on-forehead motion, "is 'yaya'. Very bad word. This," a waving motion

with a tricky bit thrown in, "is how to say Sahra."

They only had ten minutes before Barba-father -signed as a salute- and the young master -a C, even though there was no C in her name- came back expecting them to behave as useful furniture.

Of course, the first thing C did with Sahra's morning outfit was change it.

Sahra was learning a lot of words. Sleeve. Skirt. Dress. Socks. Underpants. Undershirt. Ruffles or frills for the wobbly bits. And there were two kinds of cloth with holes in; lace was the sort with patterns of holes and tulle was the stuff that was made out of six-sided holes. Ribbons were the strips of shiny cloth and laces were the strings that tied some things together. And names for colours she never knew existed. Like shades of red and shades of pink. And other words like Mauve and Fuchsia.

They were a lot like the dresses C had bought for Sahra to look pretty in. Mostly useless, and prone to snag on things.

Sir was fussing about the house. Taking all the valuable shiny things and making sure they were safe and out of reach of anyone likely to pick them up. The house slaves knew better than to touch anything they weren't told to. Almost like he was getting a visitor he did not trust.

Sahra had to hold on to C's hand and stay out of Sir's way.

Things in the main room were made to look nice, but were not expensive, like it was the rest of the time. C's room and Sir's room were locked shut. The rest of the slaves were dressed up in their most useless clothes.

Sahra couldn't make sense of it until she saw who the visitors were. A brown male and an almond-eyed female. Humans. They had sleeves. And shoes. Working shoes, Sahra could see by the wear and the stains on them. Working pants, too. Kept clean for this meeting. Both male and female carried a box between them.

Sahra dared look up at their faces. The female was Eva! She'd know that funny-spot tattoo on her cheeks anywhere! It was all Sahra could do to pretend that she was a stranger and nothing was going wrong.

Sir bought deaf slaves so they wouldn't repeat what they heard to anyone. And no-one human dared look a master in the face so the humans could not read the master's mouths.

Sahra had been trying things, during her training in this house. She found out that she could watch the master's mouths if she didn't go as far as looking at their eyes. If she looked at their eyes, they noticed in a second, but their mouths were safe.

Also, it helped to look as if she were doing something different. Like playing with the lace on this shift's dress.

"Of course you have the money," said the big brown man. Sahra found it strange that he did not have any bleach marks on him. He looked right at Sir or C as if they were equals. He looked like he really hated the masters, but he also knew he had to deal with them to get what he wanted. "The question is if you have enough."

Sahra kept the frown off her face as she watched Sir's mouth, just under her eyelashes.

"Business has been soaring. Of course I have enough. More than enough, given your amusing price hikes." Sir was talking in human! Not in master. Not many masters learned more of the human language than to make sure no slave was insulting them. He made a gesture and his personal slave went off to a hidden place. They came back with a box in both arms.

Sir opened it.

Sahra had never really seen money before. Sure, she found the odd coin - dutifully turned in at the check-in point at the end of the days' scrounge. She had to wonder how brightly-coloured flat sheets of plastic could be worth anything. Plastic was not a good scrounge. It took up too much space and wasn't worth a lot.

C let Sahra off her lap and Sahra used it to get a closer look. So this was master money. Faces of masters and complicated patterns and funny ink that changed colour in the light. There were lots of colours, too. Master-word colours. Mauve, taupe, chartreuse, fuschia, carmine, salmon and aquamarine. Sahra couldn't read the writing on them.

Eva opened up the box she'd helped carry in. It was full of rectangular lumps. A plain, dark brown inside plastic and held tight with silver tape. It smelled weird. Sort of... rotten.

Eva picked her up and sat down with Sahra on her lap. She used Sahra's cloud of curls to hide a desperate whisper of, "What are you doing here?"

Sahra pretended to hug her. Got in real close to the woman's ear. Whispered, "I'm deaf 'cause of you. You an' your boss say stuff 'bout strikin' a blow for freedom, but the only freedom you got is death. Y'ain't gonna get nowhere killin' humans. Y'ain't gonna win, neither. And I owe ya sumpin'." Quick as a cat, Sahra chomped down hard on Eva's tattooed ear.

Eva had to play nice and put Sahra down and shoo her off, back to C.

Sahra could tell she'd drawn blood. This one time, it tasted good.

Sir and the male swapped the brown lumps for the money, though the male insisted on counting it all. Putting colours together in same-size heaps. It took him a while, but so did Sir. Carefully taking out each lump and weighing it in his claws. Sniffing carefully at the plastic wrapping each time. Counting.

Eva was glaring at Sahra. Sahra glared right back. Both kept all their hate only in their eyes. Eva broke first, looking at the henna dots all over Sahra's skin. At the way C held Sahra like a doll. At some of the other slaves, some of them were doing a bad job at hiding their hate for Eva and the male with her.

Nothing was said. Nothing could be said. But Eva still made some

signs with her fingers. Four. Five. Papa. Sierra.

That was a repair node near docks and locks. Sahra nodded carefully.

More secret signs. Three. Day. Second. Shift.

Sahra nodded.

Eva mouthed, "I'm sorry."

Sahra mouthed, "Pass it on."

All while the male and Sir were busy counting and C was busy fussing with Sahra's hair.

The business got done, sealed with a handshake, and both men went away with their prizes. Eva went, too. The night got back to normal, with Sir and C having their dinner and the humans getting whatever the masters decided to let them have.

Sahra was growing to hate evening meal. C sat Sahra up on a tall chair with belts to hold her in and put on a special cap to keep her hair neat and a bib and spoon-fed Sahra like a baby.

Luke-warm, mashed-up pet chow for humans. Sahra had seen the masters buy it. They had a huge section in the store, between the cat kibble and the dog food. It had been five days for her as a pet, and she was already itching for something to chew that wasn't someone's ear.

Not that it didn't taste good. That was the icky part. It was all delicious. The part Sahra hated was that C had to feed her like a baby.

Sahra knew what spoons were for! She was six! Anyone who thought that a human couldn't feed themselves after they got potty-trained had to be some kind of dumb. But the masters thought it was cute, or something. And Sahra had to let them.

Better to be a doll than dead.

If she was alive, she could do something.

\*

The recharger was working. Hooked up to one of the working wires in the abandoned ore processing place. Sahra put the power units in, certain they were facing the right way, and watched the little lights blink.

Sahra was getting used to light naps in the night. She got her sleep in during the early morning, when C was busy with getting ready for her day.

Recharging empty cells would take time. Lots of time. She should have gone back to her pet-bed and the soft and comfortable sleeping-sheath. Night-dress. She wanted to see some progress before she did.

Her eyes closed on her despite her excitement.

She woke to a sickly, greasy, foul smell and Simy poking her.

Her recharger was on fire!

Sahra pulled the power out and blew out the flames, coughing at the smoke. The tears in her eyes weren't just from the smoke. She'd been so close to being able to do something real. And now everything was just junk.

Simy cleaned her off all the way back to C's room. And small wonder he had to. Even she could smell the stink.

C giving her a bath was the worst. Sahra had to sit in a cold tub of soapy water and sharp chemicals and sickening flower scents while C, Sir and Teo rubbed and scrubbed at her.

Still, today was the day Sahra was going to tell off those rebels. And give them some sharp ideas instead of the rotten ones they've been trying all this time.

She got out of the tunnel, changed back into the baby pants and night dress, and folded her stolen sheath and hid it away.

C was still fast asleep.

Sahra tucked herself in and got what rest she could.

\*

It had been a chaos morning for the masters. C had left Sahra in her night-dress and run out the door in a panic. Sir was not far behind. Something - maybe Sahra's burning recharger - had caused a power failure in the night and none of the alarms had gone off.

It just made it quicker for Sahra to slip away.

She halfway took apart the burned recharger to see if there was anything she could fix. It was good and dead.

Bad and dead.

Just plain dead. And a bad thing in all. She stopped back for lunch, given to her in C's room by Teo. And a side of sign lessons. And then it was off to the repair node to meet with the rebels.

Eva had a bandage on her ear. Juliet had his knife out. Sahra, of course, stayed out of their reach.

"So," said Juliet. He'd been told, because he kept his face facing her. "You think you know way much more about striking at the infrastructure. Look at you! You're six. You're damaged. If someone didn't think you could be pretty enough, you'd be someone's dinner. We have been fighting for our freedom for centuries. What do you think you know that you could teach us?"

"I don' even know what innastruckshur is," said Sahra. "But if ya wanna hurt th' masters, ya gotta hit the masters. None o' them was even in ore sortin'. They was out f'r lunch. Ya wanna hurt 'em. Hit 'em

whur they is."

"What?" said Juliet.

"All the upper-ranks go to a speshul lunch room 'bout an hour b'fore human lunch. They gots speshul stuff so's they don't got t' see no humans. The masters, they don' care if'n slaves die. They can breed more. They don't care if ore processing gets broke. They gots other ones. Or they go build other ones. But masters? They care 'bout other masters. Ya hit there, they goin' listen to ya."

Juliet started to try to jump up at her, but Eva held him down. "No. She has a point. She had a point when she bit me. Nobody's going to be on our side for killing slaves. In fact, some Tu'atta like us just for that. I've heard them. They say we're our own best argument against us."

"But she sounds--"

"Like a deaf kid who is trying to say something important." And that was that. The argument was won. Eva turned on her fake smile. "Two agents can be here in another three days. Will you show them the special lunch room?"

"Y'r gonna giff me time t' get on outta there, right?" said Sahra. "I been tolt my ears might come back. Don' wanna be no doll for-effur."

Eva nodded. "We can do that."

"An' I wanna rechargur. Nuthin' like that busted one you left inna tunnels. An' some power cells. Good ones."

"--busted--? She did bloody steal it."

"Anyfint I find inna tunnels is mine," said Sahra. "It's the rules."

"Julian, her knowledge is too valuable."

"She's a damn retard..."

"Only if you listen to how she sounds. If you listen to the words..."

Simy tickled her leg. "Shift change. I gotta go." And she just crawled away. She imagined Juliet was spewing some curses after her.

Let him.

She had to keep up her play-act with C and Sir.

\*

Eon did hear what the human known as Julian had to say about his Sahra. He had a large vocabulary and a creative way of using every last curse known to humanity. Not just speculations on her heritage and sexual activity, but also aspersions of her character, mental abilities, sexual preferences and eating habits.

Most, if not all of them, were physically impossible.

Eon knew that Sahra couldn't hear him. This was a good thing in his mind. That did not stop him from wanting to wreak a very personal vengeance on the man. Give him a reason to regret saying a single bad thing about his Sahra.

*What am I thinking?*

His Sahra? Since when did he claim ownership on anyone?

He was getting better. He hardly needed her to find food. And yet he stayed.

Because she was the only being to voluntarily hold him. Who viewed him with affection. Who was glad to see him. ...who loved him.

That would change the instant she knew who he was. If she ever found out he was the harsh task-master Eon... He would be alone again. And worse than the early days of his existence, because now he knew what companionship was like.

There were thousands of slaves on the station. Few were even likely still alive who could recognize him in his liquid state, let alone when he was pretending to be a Moshikaan slime dog. Paranoia about the unlikely was not going to serve him well.

Serving Sahra, on the other hand... that was oddly rewarding.

\*

The one note was fading away. That was good. On the other hand, it had now been joined by a buzzing hiss like static on the info-station. That was bad. She could at least hear herself. Sort of. There was still a lot of *womping*, but she could hear a lot more, now.

She knew better than to talk around Sir and C. Or even the humans they owned. Except Teo. Teo was her friend.

Sahra practiced alone, as quiet as she could manage, in the half-light of the old ore processing place with Simy. Just as she tried to figure out how to build new things out of old things.

Not many of them worked. The blowed-up bits nearby weren't always good. Some looked okay, but didn't do anything. Others looked toasted, but worked fine. Some actually looked good and worked. Some only had little parts that worked. The working was the important part. Sahra put the actually-toasted bits into her treasure pile. Just in case she ever got back to proper real work instead of being a doll.

There had to be a way of testing them.

Sahra did other important things while the masters were out, like telling Mama about the people she found. She even found Kera Matherson in the hospital for humans. She was all burned up and bandaged and couldn't hear or see Sahra.

Lots of humans were burned or broken and in that hospital. It still smelled of smoke. The smoke that came from burned people.

She hadn't heard much from the rebels after she told them off. Apart from that one mission to show them where the lunch room was. She went with Simy to the node every other day. Checked the hiding places behind the panels.

There was no sign.

Until the day after C got Sahra 'retouched', when she found a single rebel in the node, inspecting panels and hidey-holes. She knew he was a rebel because he had sleeves. And the same kind of funny vest thing.

He looked up at her and she looked down at him.

He had a wide, square sort of face, but all his features were kind of squashed together in the middle, as if they were scared to go away from each other. He also had a shock of orange curls, but his didn't need new dye.

His own eyes darted from Sahra's henna spots to her bright, fresh-coloured hair, to the working sheath she wore. "Eva told me about you," he said, very careful to make his mouth move. "I'm hard o' hearing myself, so I understand. Everyone calls me Smiley." He offered his hand.

Sahra got down enough to shake it. "There was a man with Eva th' first time I met 'er. What'd I call him?"

"Juliet," Smiley said with a straight face. "But his name's Julian."

Sahra nodded. "Awright, you one of them."

"My real name's Marlow."

"Sahra." He only had a small box with him. "I aksed fo' a rechargur. That box ain't big 'nuff."

"No. They couldn't get one. So they sent me along to fix the old one."

"Dunno," Sahra made a face. "'S pretty busted up."

"Yeah? What happened to it."

"Tried hookin' it up an' it caught fahr."

Smiley nodded. "Lead the way, then. I'll follow."

Sahra liked Smiley. Even though he never smiled, he was a friendly man. And though he looked nothing like any of her Papa's, he felt... fatherly. Like he was sort of looking out for her. And he never talked to her like she was a baby.

She took him the easy way in, and almost ran to the old recharger, pulled to bits and all the working and sort-of-working bits all around it like bits of a puzzle.

Smiley sat down and strapped a light to his head. "You've done a lot to this."

Sahra shrugged. "Didn't mess wif th' insides 'till it burned. Tried to figure what went wrong."

Simy got off her leg and climbed into her lap. He was getting big, but Sahra didn't mind. He was never too heavy.

"Hello..." said Smiley. "Who's your friend?"

"This is Simy. He's a mo-she-can slime dog. But I call't him a moosh puppy 'cause it's too hard t' say."

"You found him here?"

"Yeah...?"

Smiley's small eyes got as wide as they could. He kept working. "And he hasn't done anything... mean?"

"No. Why would he? I'm a good trainer."

"An 'e doesn't talk."

Sahra laughed. "Why would he? Moosh-dogs can't talk."

"Yeah. *They* can't." Smiley kept twiddling with tools and bits. "I used t' know the old overseer who was in here. Went by the name of Eon."

Sahra hugged Simy and scrunched in on herself. "I heard stories 'bout him. Scary stories. But you rebels blowed him up."

"Yeah. We did. Only... we've blown him up before and he came back. Nastier than ever."

Sahra couldn't make her voice work, so she whispered. "'D he have a pet moosh-pup?"

Smiley shook his head. "I ain't sayin' your Simy's really Eon. It's just... awful co-incidence. A Moosh Puppy turning up right where the old bastard was s'posed'a have died."

"Simy ain't a Neon," said Sahra. "He's neffur mean. He helps me."

"Of course 'e does. Of course." Smiley moved to pet her like he wasn't sure if he'd hurt her. "You're right. Don't you listen to the ramblings of a daft ole man like me, eh?"

Sahra wiped her face with her arm. "Yeah. You show me how t' fix this thing 'fore I has t' go back ta being a stoopid *doll*."

Smiley made a yuck-face at that. "Is she horrible? The Tu'atta girl that dolls you up?"

"Not too horrible. Just makes me wear stoopid pretty dresses an' baby pants and feeds me like a baby and alla the dresses have got bits that'd snag." Sahra wrinkled her nose. "Some of 'em I can't really move in. Not proper moving."

"Sounds horrible, all right," Smiley had a little half-smile hiding in the corner of his mouth. He undid a piece of metal on the inside that Sahra hadn't been able to get loose. "Aha. Gluck in the cooling fan. Someone didn't set the filters right."

Sahra could see where the filters that were supposed to block skin flakes, hair and other bits of fluff were not set in their proper place. Someone had skipped out on that step and no-one had noticed.

"When it burneded..." Sahra began.

"Yeah?"

"I think it took the power out over a big bit of the station. It messed up the whole day. Is it--? Can we--?"

"Yeah?" said Smiley. He was listening. Really, really listening.

"Can we make that sorta stuff happen on purpose? But... just to the masters? I don't want nuffint like the air turning off 'cause that was scary."

Sahra learned a new word, that day.

Sabotage.

She tried it that night. When C and Sir were asleep, she got into the air vents and pulled a few filters loose. And did the same with a few other places on the same floor.

\*

It had snowed fluff in C's room. It had snowed fluff all over Sir's uniforms. It had snowed fluff up and down the hallway outside the masters' rooms. Other masters were coming out in their night-clothes. Covered in fluff.

Sahra was also covered in fluff, but she didn't care.

It looked so funny.

There were bugs in it, too. Bugs the humans bought with them and bugs the masters bought with them that none of them wanted. Bugs the masters bred for food that had got loose and become part of the

wildlife aboard. Bugs that ate other bugs and some of the things that ate them, too.

Evriyong and cats and flittering skezzits bounced around like... like... a bunch of predators at a feast. The cats were so hepped up they were killing anything that moved, alive or no. And then chasing invisible things along the walls.

Too soon, the fun was over. Officials turned up to chase everyone infested with fluff to a clean-off zone and then to blank, bare rooms where they all wore almost-identical jumpsuits and had to answer questions.

Odd that C kept a grip on Sahra like she was a real doll. Something to help her feel safe.

Also odd that nobody bothered with the deaf humans.

It was amazing. Once they knew you were deaf, they treated you like you were dumb, too.

Sahra started planning her next trick. Something to do with their drinks. Or maybe their food. It'd be a lot of work to figure out the how of it, but it would be interesting to watch the fun.

✧

C had take-home work, because she'd been tired at school. Because Sahra had found out a way to make her alarm peep just enough to wake her and then stop as if it had never peeped at all.

C's take-home work was circuits.

Sahra could not read the book, but she could read the pictures. And figure out numbers. When C was busy with the actual bits, Sahra was looking at the pictures that showed her the things that could be done. Tracing lines of power with her fingers. Imagining how the circuit-boards might feel under her touch.

Of course, it was interrupted by C looking something up, now and again, but it was worth it.

Sahra was figuring out something real funny to do with her almost-broken circuit boards. Something that might just make all the masters sleepy.

The rebels were doing their part. Smiley passed on Sahra's thoughts on sabotage, as well as some places where only the masters went. He also passed on the fact that Sahra could not read the slips of paper the rebellion left in their hidey-holes and had ignored them.

Ever after that, she met someone from the rebellion and talked ideas. Almost once a week.

Things were going badly for the masters. Sahra figured that much out from watching Sir talk with his friends while C watched entertainment in the evenings.

They said things like, rash of bad luck, and, malevolent spirit, and, haunted.

Who knew the masters believed in haints too?

She needed working ears for her biggest trick... and that was going to happen, soon.

\*

Eon was beginning to question his alliances. The Tu'atta had given him a place, and power, and then neglected to enact a rescue in his hour of need.

The humans had hurt him - repeatedly - but this little human cared for him even when she feared he might be the enemy. He had no good reason to harm her, and she had no reason at all to harm him.

He was capable, now.

He could resume his former guise as something not-quite-Tu'atta and at the same time, not-quite-human, and walk right up to his former allies. Regain his former rank, title, and position.

...and make Sahra cry.

*Face it, Eon died years ago, he told himself. That night in Bar'shi'gazel, when the Majestrix so casually left me for another entertainment. She killed me herself with just a few words. All the rebellion did was end the corpse.*

Eon was dead. And glad of it. Past time for a new name. A new identity.

He would be Sahra's Simy. Helpful and clever pet to a pet. Whatever she needed, when she needed it. Her loyalty to him was unwavering, even in doubt and fear. Even when she should have been trapped away from him, she found a way to get to him. Even when she was starving, she fed him.

He owed her more, because she had already given so much.

\*

Her days as a pet ended very simply. Sahra and C both were fighting a dress that was too tight today when it had fit just days ago, brand new.

C said, "*You grow too much,*" in a petulant voice. It carried through the hissing buzz in Sahra's ears without a single womp.

Sahra, blinded by cloth, should have stayed silent. Yet she said without thinking, "*You feed me too much. Of course I grow.*"

And, just like that, the dress came off and Sahra was dragged in front of Sir, then dragged by sir - only in her underthings, which should have been embarrassing, but wasn't - to a room where he and three other Barbas asked her questions she didn't know the answers to for hours and hours and *hours*.

And someone gave her a drink, and she woke up in one of the pallets in the human hospital. Naked, again. She sat up. Someone threw a simple work sheath at her as they passed by.

Sahra was glad of it.

Proper clothes.

Useful clothes!

The humans in the hospital were busy, of course. None of them stopped for Sahra, walking slowly and carefully along until she found a guard.

He was a very young Taan. Not even fully into his spinal crests. Standing all stiff at the door like that was going to make his muscles sore.

*"Excuse please. I go to work now?"* She knew the words were wrong, this time. In her months with the masters, even lipreading, she picked up a lot of the master language.

The Taan went for a superior, leaving the entire hospital unguarded.

Sahra looked around. The only thing stopping her or anyone else walking out and doing whatever they wanted was the fact that the guards would do what they liked when they came back. Usually to someone who didn't do it.

The superior, a hassled and barely-older Kadyne, asked Sahra, *"Can you hear?"*. She had stains on her uniform.

*"Sorta,"* Sahra managed. She was doing more lipreading than hearing, but she could hear the sound of the Kadyne's voice.

*"Put her to work where she doesn't have to listen to anything,"* decided the Kadyne. Then, she up and grabbed Sahra by the wrist and dragged her along.

Sir had walked slower than this Kadyne. Maybe she had more to

prove. Maybe she had other places to be. Then Sahra saw the darker patches on the Kady's uniform coat where higher rank-markings used to be. She had something to prove, then. And was extra mad because she had to say 'sir' to higher-ranked males.

Good.

Masters may be mean to slaves when they got mad, but they also made mistakes.

Pity she had to wait until night time to do anything about it. This Kady had Sahra sorting rubbish into picture-coded and colour-coded bins. It took her some time to realize, with an odd feeling of loss, that this was the stuff the rats bought in from the tunnels.

Good news, though, she could go home at last and see Mama and all her brothers and sisters. Maybe even Darvan.

✧

Simy had not been told to 'go home' but Sahra found him there anyway, and gave him a hug and a kiss for being so good before she went off to sabotage some masters. She could branch out, now, but she only had a little time. She needed her sleep so she could work, the next day. And the sooner they let her back into the tunnels, the happier she'd be.

She would pick a tunnel to go up, by closing her eyes and spinning until she got scared, and find some masters' places and make some trouble.

It was going to become her night-time habit.

Sahra had knotted her tools - all working now, thanks to Smiley's help - into a belt made of old rags she'd found in the tunnels. That belt only left her secret place with her. Sahra crawled quickly and as quietly as she could manage.

She stopped when she found one of the really big water tanks. The tunnel she was using was one of the air vents. A filter at a skinny little window lead to a motor that bubbled air through the water and made it taste fresh. Sahra knew from the taste of slave's water and master's water that the humans didn't get this stuff.

She poked a hole in the filter and went looking for more trouble to make.

She found it in an audio control node, and set it to blast every master's entire set of saved audio files at top volume, all at once, at midnight.

Then she hurried to put her tools and Simy away and get back to bed.

\*

They had her sorting for three more weeks before they let her back into the tunnels as a rat. It was three weeks of masters having lots of sicknesses, sleepless nights, accidents and really dumb mistakes.

Sahra had spent one of her nights swapping shipping labels so a school got something really rude and a rude place for grownups got two hundred copies of *The Tubby Little Puppy*. And that was just the funniest of the things that got changed around.

She had to wonder what the Majestrix was going to do with half a ton of cheap human pet chow. Or what slave processing was going to do with their half ton of sparkly hair things.

That was the first time she wound up in the security office. The first time she met a male Om'r. And the first time she actually worked at sounding dumber than she was. And deafer than she was.

"*Muh hearing no good so,*" she cupped one hand around her bad ear and kept her eyes away from the male Om'r's head at all. "*Be loud if pleases?*"

He did a weird shouty thing that wasn't quite shouting. *"We found traces of you in the cargo bay. The one cargo bay where all the boxes had stopped. We also found those traces on the address slims."*

*"Didja?"* She would have to find or make some gloves. And boots. Maybe even socks. Socks without frills or ribbons, definitely.

The Om'r bought up a map of the room and the surrounding tunnels. *"Were you there?"*

Sahra looked at it, frowning. She shrugged. *"Guess... I dunno."*

*"Did you go in? Knock something down and try to fix it?"*

Sahra thought about the number of lables she swapped. *"Naw. I seed alot little writin'? I mighta touched some, guess. Know better I than move master things."*

Now the screen had writing on it. Master words and human writing. Sahra could tell the difference, but not read the words.

*"Do you know what any of these say?"*

*"There's Sierra. Sierra fo' Sahra." Sahra pointed. "An' there Delta. Delta fo' Darvan, and delta fo' deaf. We bo'f deaf, Duvi 'n' me."*

The Om'r sighed and rubbed spots near his ear-holes. *"I see. Do you know of anyone else who might have been around there?"*

She shrugged again. *"Din't nobody see."*

He growled. *"Be on your way."*

As she ran for the way out, she hear him mutter, *"Useless rats..."*

She had to be more careful with her tricks. Make sure they didn't find her when they found them. Steal the useful things that they wouldn't miss. The things they had lots and lots of. She'd have to go scrounging near the store rooms to see what they had.



She was glad to see her spots fading. The curls, too, fell away and the orange seemed to be taking forever to get itself gone.

Sahra had just found the motherlode.

She took three pairs of gloves that were a lot big for her, three pairs of sort of tough, flexible tubes that could go on her legs if she tied the tops up with rag, and a whole box of slave ration baggies. She hid the box under some junk so she could get it to her little escape hatch near her home. Every night, she was going to sneak one or two ration baggies into Mama's pantry.

There was more than one way to feed her family.

The further she went, the more she found to do. It wasn't just poking holes in filters or stealing. It was crosswiring things in the master's sections. She didn't always know what she was crosswiring, but it took hours of master time away from making sure the slaves did what they were supposed to.

Sahra was getting the feeling that the masters were using more stuff getting money out of the system than they were getting out of it. Now that she'd seen what the masters showed off, what they treasured, and the way they cut corners... she was able to tell that things were costing more than they got.

This whole station was one giant sparkly thing that cost a lot of money and didn't get a lot back. Like the slaves just for show, who only had one job or two, and didn't do them for very long.

Or like the strange, stinky stuff that the rebellion was selling for money.

Sahra spied, when she could. Watching through vents and grilles where the masters couldn't see her. Some of them were taking the stuff. It made them sleepy, or kept them calm.

They spent a lot more money on the tiny bags than Sir had spent on the big ones.

No wonder Sir was looking after C. No wonder he could afford so many pretty slaves. So many flappy, high-class clothes for his daughter... and her living doll. And possibly why he was a Barba, even though he didn't spend a lot of his time at work.

Lots of the high-up masters took the stinky brown stuff. Some took it to help them get rest in the night. Some took it just to get through their day.

Sahra wondered what would happen if one of those big bags was mixed with poison.

\*

She stopped in at the node and was glad to see Smiley waiting for her with the big brown man who had sold the brown stuff. Like before, the big brown man carried himself like a higher-up. He looked down his wide nose at Sahra.

Sahra glared him right back.

"Sahra," said Smiley. "This is High-Admiral Django Ali. He's in charge of the rebellion."

"So," said High-Admiral Django Ali. "You were a blonde all this time."

"None of us can he'p what th' masters do to us." said Sahra. "Smiley, I'm'a need t' know if'n we can make little circuits to add into th' audio playback in master bedrooms. I wanna scare 'em up real good."

Ali continued as if she hadn't spoken to Smiley at all. "And now you're back in the yoke of true slavery; having glimpsed the relative paradise of the high life. Your work to free your people is the real work, the honourable work. The *true* work."

"Why'd you care 'bout gettin' pets on your side?" Sahra asked. "You was neffur a pet..."

He startled for a moment, and then muttered, "Of course. The skin." He smiled, talking down to her. "Very observant, Sahra. I need such skills as yours to further my cause."

"You was on the infostations. You said blowin' up slaves was furtherin' your cause."

He spotted the trap. "That... was a mistake. Now I see your sabotage efforts are causing a lot more havoc to the enemy."

"They don't wanna fix nuthint, but they don' wanna make no slaves do it either," said Sahra. "It's stoopid-easy t' mess ev'ryfink up."

The mans invisible eyebrows shot towards his hairline. "Sahra... do you have friends?"

"...some...?" A lot less, since she'd been a masters' doll. At least she knew who her real friends were.

"Do you think you can get some of your friends, even your family, to... enhance your work?"

Sahra thought about who she trusted and who she didn't. Duvi had no love of the rebellion since it had deafened him and scarred Kera Matherson. "Some'd prolly wanna bite ya for y'ur mistakes first."

He laughed, showing perfectly white teeth against his very dark skin. "I'd let them, within reason. You left a scar on our poor Eva."

"Good," said Sahra. "Might teach some o' yourn that some blows f'r freedom ain't worth swingin'."

"All right," Ali made a gesture, drawing a line in the air and a border for the conversation. "Tell me about this device you're planning. What does it blow up?"

Sahra thought about this. "Minds," she said. "Ya plug it inta th'

bedrooms' audio playback an' life monitors. When they's fast asleep, it whispers at th' masters. Gets stuff into their heads when they sleepin'. Makes 'em scared of effryone an' ev'rythin'."

"Inciting paranoia?" said Ali.

"We can get recordings of some choice phrases, easy enough," said Smiley. "But the parts..."

"Jus' make one. I found some scrounge'd be good f'r makin' more."

"Found?"

"Yeh. Turns out when th' masters don't like a place, they build a new one onna outside o' th' station. They jus' seal off th' ole place 'sept f'r th' air an' all the 'lectrix. Know where t' look, there's tons o' scrounge."

Both Smiley and High Admiral Django Ali had really funny looks on their faces.

"Whut?" said Sahra.

"You got no idea," said Smiley. "The trouble we have to go through to get parts. And them bloody scaleys just leave it when they don't like a place?"

"Yeah. I been goin' through th' dark places since ya lef' yo' headlight b'hind. Thought I knew all over th' station, but I neffur knew there were this much of it."

"Just... how much?" said Smiley.

"You remembur m' little piles?"

"Yeah...?"

"They big piles now."

Smiley whistled backwards. Sahra was instantly jealous. She couldn't even whistle forwards. All she could manage was a weak,

spitty hiss.

"An' you got enough to make copies of whatever I give you?"

"If I ain't, I can find it."

Smiley reached out to hold High-Admiral Ali's shoulder. "Sir... ya gotta go let me see. We could set up a base in the heart of their nest! No more smuggling. No more wheeling and dealing. No more selling Djaak..."

"Izzat th' brown stuff?" said Sahra.

"Yes," said High-Admiral Ali. "They call it Djaak. It's fermented coffee cut with ground, roasted cocoa beans. We grow them in the outer colonies. The cold worlds where the Tu'att don't go and we can live as free people. It might wake us up, but for them... it makes them... vague."

"Cut?" echoed Sahra.

"Mixed in," supplied Smiley.

"We need mo' of it," said Sahra. "Th' more masters gone loopy on that stuff th' better. Cut some of it wif stuff that makes 'em sick. Cut some of it wif stuff that kills 'em if'n they take too much. Cut some of it wif stuff they can't stay 'way frum. If'n we get 'em t' mess themselves up, we ahead."

Ali looked down on her. "Who are you to boss me around, little girl?"

Sahra looked him in the eye. "I'm the one who been doin' yo'r work for you, alla this time. I been showin' you th' best places to mess th' masters up an' I been messin' 'em up on my own wifout you. I been doin' eff'rythin' I can t' stop our folk gettin' kill't. And at the same time, I also been doin' alla th' work the masters 'spect o' me so me an mine don't get shot. Near as I can tell, you the man wif a fancy title who don' even get his hands dirty. Me? I'm jus' another rat. I'm invisible.

But I know whut's whut."

The silence that came down could have filled the world. Sahra could only hear the whining buzz that was all that was left of the one note.

Smiley looked scared. High-Admiral Ali looked in a worse mood than Mama had when she found out one of the babies had pooped in their bed and painted their walls with it.

Sahra held him, glare for glare.

"Fore I come into alla it, you was your own worst emeny," she added.

Another long, cold silence.

High-Admiral Django Ali blinked first. "I'll have to watch you," he rumbled. So low Sahra could barely hear him. "You'll be after my job."

"I don't give a rat f'r anyfink I get called," said Sahra. "I jus' want th' job done."

That raised Ali's invisible eyebrows again. "And what *is* the job?"

"I hear th' masters don't b'long here. I hear they took us over in th' long-ago. I hear we had our own world called Hevun. Now we gotta fight to get it back. That's what your job is. My fambly ain't safe from you th' way you been goin'. Keepin' 'em safe's part o' my job. Way I see it, if'n I tell you where t' go an' what t' hit an' how... I get bo'f done at once."

"Then you're one of us," decided Ali. "Congratulations, Acting Sub-Lieutenant Sahra Johnston."

Sahra rolled her eyes. *Whatever*. "Fine. I suggest, sir, that y'all make more Djaak and make some of it outright vicious, even if we don' need it f'r finance. 'Cause it's another kind'a sabotage."

"Suggestion noted. Meanwhile, take Smiley into the 'dark zones' and see what you and your friends here can make out if it or them."

Sahra flipped her hand near her forehead. "Yes sir."

✧

Smiley had a spare head-light. He made no claims to the one Sahra was also using. Sahra made no move to look at or even try to use the tablet Smiley busily made notes on. She used Simy's help to strip the panels off the cabinets and dislodging scrap for her cart.

The thing that stood out about the entire place was how neatly both she and Smiley fit. Places made for the masters fit the masters. This place... fit humans.

"This is the oldest place in the entire station," said Smiley. "And... the Tu'atta didn't make it."

Sahra's hair stood on end.

"This was ours, too," she said. Nothing written down here was written in the masters' writing. This was human alphabet.

Sahra wanted to know what they all said.

"How long 'zis all been here?"

"Too long," Smiley shook his head. "Vermin's got in and stripped the insulation. Have t' rewire it all. Build it up from scratch."

"Nearly scratch," said Sahra. "Y'got my piles."

"And the stuff we got t' spare." Smiley started ripping old tangles of wire out of the cabinets. "Could probably do something with this lot, eventually... Get some plants in, we could make this our new home."

"Simy'll clean things if'n you want..." Sahra offered.

"Naw. Just... let him be where he wants to be."

The end-shift klaxon sounded. Sahra dived for the nearest vent.

She could have sworn that she heard Smiley mutter, "and keep it far away from me..."

\*

Sahra could go anywhere she liked in the tunnels and vents. She took four or five of her little whisper-circuits with her in her cart, loaded and hidden under a layer of useless scrap that no older rat would bother her for, and no younger rat would sneak away. She found master's bedrooms and their sound-playback circuits, put in her extra surprises when she felt like it, and when she ran out, she took the long way back to a check-in point and grabbed whatever she could get on the way.

It was amazing what the higher-ups would just toss into a chute.

She knew from listening in with her good ear that they believed there was a clever system that took their rejects and recycled it into something new.

If they knew tunnel-rats like her were involved, they would probably throw a fit.

Sahra also picked up a lot of master-gossip, which she passed on to Smiley in his new-old base after lights-out. What the rebels did with her news after that, Sahra didn't much care. She knew High-Admiral la-de-dah Ali had given her her rank and membership in the rebellion as some kind of joke to himself.

The idea of being someone else's laugh got her angered up even more than when she was a doll.

Which was why she had a sour face when she got home, that night.

"What bit you?" said Darvan. People in the next household could hear Darvan, so of course her whole family turned to look.

Sahra made up a story. "Heard sum Vashts talk--"

"Vashte," corrected Judi so the neighbours could hear. "One Vasht, many Vashte."

"Nyway I heard 'em talkin' 'bout how they's thinkin'v upp'in' quota."

"What?" said Karl.

"I know you ain't deaf," said Sahra.

"Respect your elders," said Mama.

Sahra took a breath and spoke slow, clear, and too stupid. "I overheard some Vashte talking about mebbe upp'in' quota again."

"I heard you, I just don't b'lieve it. They usually do that once a year. What bit them?"

"It's not our place to question the natural order," said Seventh-Papa. "The masters decide and we must obey. For the glory of God."

That was usually the end of it, but Sahra was picking up lots of new thinking from the Smiley. "Papa? If'n we's the only ones as worship God, howcome he puts us low an' makes the masters boss us 'bout?"

"God rewards us for our servitude by taking us to paradise in heaven."

"I heard that's a real place, too."

"In a sense," said Seventh-Papa. "Way back in the long-ago, we thought we could make a place a lot like heaven, and that's what we named the world we came to. And God punished us for being so proud about it."

"When's he goin' quit?"

And that's how she was sent to bed without even watery gravy to eat.



Darvan could not sleep. Sahra had just asked a perfectly sensible question. That was no reason to send her to bed without food when she only got a little to begin with. He wanted to know the answer as much as she did.

It had been hundreds of years. Maybe thousands. When was God going to quit punishing them?

Which was why Darvan was going for his secret stash.

Ever since nobody wanted him for a pet, the masters had had him picking fruit and vegetables in the gardens. He sneaked a few away whenever he could. Most of them went down his throat when it was gristle night. He slipped the babies and the littles whatever they could handle when no-one was watching him.

But now... he owed Sahra.

She'd saved his life. And the lives of all the others who had been able to understand her gabble and ran on out of there. That was important.

So he got down one of his best apples and crept in the half-light through the maze of beds and sleeping bodies to the little hidden nook Sahra liked to sleep in.

Sahra was not there.

Her bed was neat. Everything in its place. Even her cloth-knot doll called, without much in the way of imagination, Dolli. Neat and bare and completely empty of Sahra.

He checked the little's nooks. No Sahra there.

No Sahra with any of her favourite sibs.

Not even in with Mama and Seventh-Papa.

He went back to check again and found her crawling in through a vent.

She had a ration pack in one hand.

He knew he was too loud when he talked. He did not want to wake up God and everyone about this. Not until he got his facts straight. So Darvan signed out, *What the hell do you think you're doing?*

Sahra startled so hard she hit her head on the top of her nook. *I had some stuff to fix up, she signed. Ain't none of your business.*

*You're stealing food,* he signed.

Sahra looked at the ration pack. She couldn't deny it. *Ain't stealin' it for me,* she signed. *I stole it for Mama.*

*What?* Darvan made a face.

Sahra wriggled past him and put the packet in with the others in Mama's pantry. *I been doing this for weeks. Mama's always scared she never has enough for us. I don't want Mama scared.*

Darvan glared at her. *You're a strange kid, Sahra Johnston.* He took a bite out of the apple to show it wasn't poison and gave her the rest. *You think of all of us like this?*

*Pretty much,* signed Sahra. *I got lots of things running to help us.*

*What sort of stuff?*

*Secret stuff.* She finished off the apple in record time and tucked herself in to sleep.

What in the name of heaven did she mean, '*secret stuff*'?

\*

Duvi was up to something. It wasn't his usual something, which

meant getting Sahra into trouble. It was a different something. A frightening, unknown something. A new something that could mean anything.

He started picking her up from the check-in point at the end of the day. He came up to her in the lunch room.

He was using sign when he talked to just her. Because he knew not many slaves got better from being deaf and they were two of them. Anyone spying on them would have to do hard work to know what they were saying.

One lunch, Darvan sat down with Sahra and Dotti and two of her mountain-friends and watched her mash the green stuff and the orange stuff together. If she kept watching her food and not Duvi, she could avoid him. At least until the end of next shift.

Dotti tapped her hand. Sahra always felt slightly ashamed that she'd decided to pretend to be more deaf than she actually was with everyone except the rebels.

"Your brother wants to talk to you," Dotti gestured his way.

*What is your malfunction?* he was demanding in sign.

*I don't know what you're up to. That's always a bad thing.* Sahra signed back. With one hand, so she could still eat.

*I just want to know what you're up to. That's it.*

*You just want me in more trouble. It's what you always want.*

Duvi looked stunned. *Okay. I used to. You saved my life. I owe you big time. Ain't no piece of fruit is gonna pay that off.*

Sahra glared at him. *So tell me what you got against me. Ya can't just hate me for breathing.*

Darvan mixed the green stuff with the orange stuff and tried it. *You're my true sister. I used to hate you for having all the attention when you*

*were little. Took me a while to remember all the babies get attention. Some of our sibs? They have true-sibs. Some part of me expected it to be like twins. But it wasn't. I was stupid. I'm sorry and I want to make it up to you.*

Sahra didn't trust him. He was good at pretending to be honest. She'd seen him do it. *Swear on God and the Angels.*

Dotti, who had either picked up sign or knew it from her pet past, gasped, "That's serious, little..."

Sahra cupped her hand around her bad ear. Another lie. It meant anyone could shout into it and not do much more damage. "How's that?"

"That's a serious swear," said Dotti.

"Yeah. Me 'n' m' brofar in serious bad news wif each overver."

Duvi waved for her attention and put one hand over his heart. *By the promise of the light in the afterlife. By the grace of God and the mercy of his angels, I so swear that I want to help you in your efforts.*

"He ain't kiddin'," said Dotti.

Sahra weighed things in the balance. She didn't trust Duvi, but Dotti was all the way honest. If Dotti could weigh him up and found him fair, then she could trust Dotti's word.

*End of shift. I'll show you.*

Darvan nodded. He could deal with that.

Dotti signed, *What you up to?*

Sahra thought about telling her, *secret stuff*, but decided on honesty. Or as honest as she could get. *Just trying to keep my family safe. Any way I can.*

Dotti raised her eyebrows. *You're six. You should not worry.*

Sahra could only give her a shrug. *Should is not is.*

\*

He was waiting for her when she came out of the cattle wash. This time, Sahra did not feel bad about it. She leaped up into his arms and put her head up to his. "You gotta be quiet," she said. "You gotta be honest. And you gotta keep the secret."

"I already promised..."

"How bad d'you want th' masters to get gone?"

"I dunno. Pretty bad, I guess. Getting tired of waitin' for a deliverer."

"Wouldja kill 'em? If'n you could?"

"You know that's a short trip to heaven. Weren't you all about not makin' Mama cry?"

"What if you could get at 'em, wifout gettin' caught?"

Darvan twisted himself so he could look at her face. "What you been up to?" he mouthed.

Sahra just mouthed, "Follow," and wriggled down.

She chose the larger tunnels so Darvan would follow. She travelled slow, and only checked he was there once.

She ran the same questions past her other recruits. Two of her friends, so far. She got the littles listening in to gossip and playing tricks, and payed more attention to what her other sibs had to share with each other.

It was amazing what people would say around someone they thought was deaf.

Sahra knocked on the sloping tunnel. A code that meant, *I'm coming*

*with company.* Simy and Smiley and whoever was in with him today would not take their weapons out and, in Simy's case, rush to meet her after a whole day of putting up with tetchy rebels and Sahra's grabby fellow rats.

The whole core space had changed since Smiley moved in. For a start, Smiley stole and moved in a lot of plants that also grew food for him and the rest of the rebels. He'd started using strawberries as currency for the rats. Smiley had also added lighting and changed up the controls.

Eva was there, but Sahra did not recognize the male with her.

"Who's yer friend?" she asked as she hopped down.

"Who's your friend?" challenged Smiley.

Sahra picked up Simy in an easy hug. "This m' brofar Darvan. He's changed his mind 'bout me since I saved him."

"This is Raven. He's with us."

Raven had dark hair that he kept long, almost to his shoulders. He had a pretty face and the sort of body the masters used for decoration. He also had pretty clothes that were also not flappy or lacy or anything else the masters used to doll her up. "Charmed, I'm certain," said Raven.

"You talk like a pet," said Sahra. "But you ain't done up like a pet..."

Raven smiled. "Quite right. And just the observational skills I'd expect from the famous Lieutenant-Commander Sahra the rat."

"Nobody tole me I was a lieutenant, let alone no lieutenant command'r..."

"You can hear all that?" said Darvan.

"Darvan's as deaf as I pr'tend to be, outside," Sahra explained.

"What?" said Darvan. "You lyin' to everyone?"

"I find out more listenin' than I do lookin'," Sahra signed as she spoke. "Makes sense for me to let people think I can't hear 'em none. Only pass on the good stuff to m' friends, here."

"Aaaaaannnnnd... done. We should be in on the security feed," said Eva.

Smiley tapped some buttons. "Only got what security's lookin' at. Not the whole lot."

Eva swore and got back into the wiring.

Sahra let Simy ride on her back and got in to the same wiring by a different side. She looked at the coloured wires and the plugs and the sockets. "Ha! Crosswired." Sahra swapped them around and hollered, "Try it now!"

"Got it!" Smiley hollered back.

Eva mock-glared at her. "You have got to quit showing me up at this."

"Got me an unfair ad-van-tage," said Sahra. "I done run these wires."

Darvan was staring at her like she had turned green. "When the hell'd you get *this* smart?"

"All'us this smart," said Sahra, signing along. "Jus' didn't get no chance t' prove it 'fore now."

"...mother of God..." Darvan whispered.

Smiley tapped her on the shoulder. Sahra turned to watch him murmur, "You sure he's going to be any good?"

"He wants to help," said Sahra. "An' he m' true brofar. There gotta be brains in there somewhere. An if'n there ain't... well, he's another pair o' hands."

"Thanks a lot," said Darvan. He was pretty upset. "I've bested you most times."

"So?" said Sahra. "Turn them dirty tricks 'gainst the masters. I know Mama'd be glad we stop fightin'."

"But I hardly know nuffin't 'bout master tricks..."

"So sit and listen," said Eva. "I'm a teacher when I'm not fighting. You have a lot of lessons to learn."

\*

They were late to dinner. Darvan made up the excuse that he'd sprained an ankle and Sahra was the only one to stick around and help him. Mama gave them both broth and they acted at being ashamed. Darvan helped Sahra add the ration bag to Mama's stores and Sahra helped Darvan sneak away into the tunnels.

"How do you not get filthy in these tunnels?" he whispered.

Sahra had to stop and sign, Simy cleans me up. He can probably clean you up, too.

Sahra smiled at the little noise Darvan made at the thought of that. Years of him being mean counted against him and this was just one of many ways she was going to make sure their charts were balanced.

And as long as Duvi didn't know, he wasn't going to try evening things up on his side.

This was the night Sahra learned that there were free humans, care of Eva's lessons with Darvan.

By and large, most of the free human colonies were in the cold places where the masters did not like to go. Places with snow - powdered, frozen water that fell out of the atmosphere - that forced them to farm their food underground or indoors. And given that the

Tu'atta liked to drop bombs on them, underground living was the way to go.

Some colonies were on moons that went around gas giants. All of them had people like the rebels, who wanted to see the masters gone.

And it was also the night Sahra learned about wormholes.

In the long-ago, when the humans wanted to make a mortal paradise, they took a special ship down a wormhole, a shortcut through time and space. They took everything they thought they would need, and the worship of God.

That wormhole was closed forever. Trying to take it on a trip back was a death sentence, because going back, even hundreds and thousands of years later, meant crashing into the firstcomer's ship and dying because of it.

Some still tried. Some went by accident. The wormhole back to Earth, death sentence though it was, was also on the one side of an asteroid belt. One that the masters mined, and one that rebel ships tried to hide in, now and again.

Some foolhardy pilots tried to lure Tu'atta ships into falling into the dangerous patch of space that took them far, far away and never to return. Sometimes, it actually worked.

And this was all supposed to be okay, because the firstcomer's ship was scratched up when it landed in their new home.

Something, or a lot of little somethings, had crashed into it on the way in. Which meant that a lot of little somethings had tried to get out.

All the stuff about it being time travel made Sahra's head hurt. Colony ships travelled faster than light through the wormholes, winding up so far back in time that radio transmissions reached Earth within three days of their departure.

The other wormhole, the one the masters came from, let them come and go as they liked. Proof, some reasoned, that God was somehow on their side.

Sahra quickly put it out of her mind. She had better ideas from the other stuff.

Masters didn't like the cold.

"Smiley?"

"Yeah."

"Is there a way to mess wif th' station temperchur controls so the masters can't un-mess it?"

"They'd notice a sudden drop in the temperature."

"What if we did it real slow?"

Light dawned in Smiley's crowded face. "If we could find the central temperature controls..." he tapped at a bunch of buttons. Screens flashed and showed pictures of places. Everywhere they had a camera to record what the masters were up to.

Interesting that they only had cameras where the humans worked. Not where they changed or washed or lived. Something to think about, for later.

"There!" One screen showed what used to be a control room, but was now a repair node. Low-ranking masters were supposed to go in. It had to have air.

Anywhere the air went, Sahra could climb. "Show me where it at, I'm'a go fix it good."

"What are you gonna do?" Smiley sounded worried. But then, he sounded worried a lot of the time when Sahra was planning things.

"Jus' set it on a slow fall down an' reverse th' command responses."

He boggled at her. "How'd such a cute little kid get so downright evil?"

Sahra grinned. "Get Duvi t' tell ya some o' the stuff he got up to. That'll clue ya in."

It took her two junctions to realize she was being followed. She scurried into a corner at the next junction and sort of landed on them as they came through.

Sleeves. Vest. Tool belt.

One of the rebels.

Dark hair, sort-of wavy and down to the shoulders.

"Raven?" she whispered.

"Yeah."

"Din't nobody tell ya I hate bein' follered?"

Raven oozed into the junction, rubbing his hurts. "Smiley was concerned that you neglected to bring anything with you. How do you do most of your work without tools?"

"Lower-ranks masters is real lazy. They druther do quick work'n good work." Sahra gestured for him to follow. "C'mon. I show ya."

\*

It looked like ordinary circuitry. It looked complicated and tangled.

Sahra was able to pull it all apart in less then a minute.

"No solder, no screws, no joins at all. They all tired an' stuff. All m' othur tricks got 'em goin' slow. So they get sloppy wif their work. Dun hardly need nuffint t' crosswire it all."

"...my goodness," whispered Raven. "And you know they're all like this?"

"Pretty much most. All the older ones they forgot is still good f'r needin' tools. But this is one o' the ones I done busted earlier. They's all fixin in a hurry wif me an' m' friends around."

"Hey Sahra!"

Raven 'eep'ed and flinched.

"Hey Lee," Sahra waved. "You been doin' the whisperers?"

"I got me th' secoority chief an th' Majestrix herse'f."

"Long may she reign," they all drawled with oozing sarcasm. "'T'cha up to?"

"Messin' wif th' tempachur."

"Cool."

"It will be. This time nex' munf."

Both girls giggled, swapped hugs, and went back to business.

Raven shuddered. "If they knew," he murmured. "If they knew they were being bought down by a cadre of tunnel rats..."

Sahra shrugged. "They'd prolly feed us all poison. Rats is dis-poe-za-bull. I only jus' figgured out when they sent me up that tunnel near ore processing? They was sendin' me in ta measure the radiation levels."

"That's horrible."

"It's useful. If it weren't fo' Simy, y'all'd be blowin' us all up, still. An' you wouldn' have this neat base where they forgot it is at all."

"Simy?"

"You seen m' pet Moosh Puppy. He eats rads. An' anyfink elts."

"Does he," muttered Raven. "Interesting."

Sahra got on with cross-wiring the temperature controls. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

"Just a hiccough of doubt. I've never heard of a Moshikaan Slime Dog that would eat radiation. The Tu'atta were never hot on... practical uses for the things."

Sahra grunted anger. "You tryin'a tell me Simy's that nasty ole overseer as died? He ain't a Neon. He ain't neffur a Neon. If'n he was, he'd'a been mean t' alla us way b'fore now."

"Hm," Raven ran his fingers through his tiny little beard. "From what I heard of the old despot, he was never the type to plot. He was always very... straightforward. From what I hear."

"You's a free human, yeah?"

"Yes. For limited definitions of 'free'..."

"What's it like?"

"Well, a child like you would be learning to read. Protected. Kept safe. Your mother would be oath-bound to the husband she wants, and have the choice to have children when she wants. There's work. There's always work. But it's done because of a want to do it. Well. Except weeding. Nobody wants to weed."

"Weeding?"

"Keeping the yucky plants out of our food gardens, dear."

"That happens?"

"Seeds spread. Dormant pieces sprout. It's amazing how it happens."

Sahra rejiggered the wiring some more. "Huh." She spent more time

on finishing the connections than the masters had. And making it all look like it was supposed to be that way. "Any plants that're poisonous to masters that look like th' good ones?"

"No, alas. Our best bet comes from poisoning the Djaak, as you suggested."

Sahra glared at him. "You talk funny."

"I have a love of words. Much as I have a love of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

"Too many words fer things as need get done."

Raven smiled a lopsided smile. "Perhaps. But then, you strike me as someone in a perpetual hurry. There was once a time when the love of words was the only thing that prevented my taking my own life."

Sahra frowned at him. "Whad'joo wanna die fo'? You was free."

"You're six. Regardless of your accomplishments, there are certain things that you would not understand."

"I ain't stoopid." Sahra lead the way back to the core, her task finished.

"Well... humans have a certain... knack... for finding anyone with a weak spot and exploiting that to make them feel weak all over. Even in the free human territories. I was a weedy child, and other... vulnerabilities... made themselves clear early in my life."

"What? Like you sounded dumb?"

"More my choice of sweethearts, but that's far more than enough. It's still a painful subject."

Sahra's face screwed itself up on its own. How could anyone make fun of *anyone* because of who they fell in love with?

Grownups. They had to be crazy.

\*

Simy helped when Sahra slept. The rest of the rebels didn't much care where he was or what he was doing while he was there. All he had to do was avoid the other rats and duplicate some acts of Sahra's sabotage.

It gave him a chance to practice a human shape, because messing with the things Sahra usually messed with was not beneficial in his liquid state. And, sooner or later, he may just need to communicate. And it would answer a lot more questions, should anyone trip over him as he did this.

He still had to keep things simple. Fingers were about his limit. He put his 'feet' into rag moccasins, since copying cloth was easier than unique details in flesh. As for his face... well... he'd done his best, but no-one who saw him would think he had not suffered some kind of injury to the face.

Fortunately, since he worked during human curfew, nobody was in the tunnels to see him.

He took secret time to map the station, in between sabotage efforts; to find what, he did not know. Treasure? Secrets? Some hidden key that would turn the fate of the humans and the Tu'atta upside-down?

A secret weapon would have been nice.

But all he found was the tiny ships.

\*

All the rebels were clustered around a hole. This was almost nothing new, what with Smiley's twiddling, but the weird part was how long the rebels were staring.

Sahra wriggled between them so she could get a view.

It was a baby ship. Just big enough for one person to squeeze into and fly - if they had controls.

"Whut is it?"

"An old escape pod. Prob'ly find it's programmed to head towards the planet and do a soft landing somewhere near help," said Smiley. The way he was swaying around meant he was sizing up ways of getting it out of there.

"These are real small," said Sahra. "Reckon they be small 'nuff t' skip away frum master sensors?"

"Yeah, but... a one-way trip to Hevun -the planet, mind- ain't exactly a tactical advantage."

"Naw, they need controls. Li'l engines. Just 'nuff to get about an' get fuel at th' same time."

Smiley glared at her. "Even if we could do all that, we can't get it out..."

"I'll have t' have a look," said Sahra. "Any ways you can tell if'n there's space on t'other side of a wall?"

"What? Why?"

"'Cuz I reckon I seen tunnels wif them marks on in othur places." Sara pointed out the small space between the baby ship and the wall that blocked it in. "Might maybe be a whole track. Or most of it. That's half the job done right there."

"How do you manage to think this stuff out?" boggled Eva.

"Mama said the masters use the stuff we rats find inna tunnels. I spent years thinkin' how things'd be useful. Guess it stuck." Sahra shrugged. "Might gotta stay that small, I reckon. Them tunnels was made fo' ships this size."

"Gonna be a can of arseholes," said Smiley, which was rebel-

shorthand for, "That is going to be a very difficult job and lots of twiddly hard work."

"How bad'd it be if'n some master tech went missin' on our d'rekshun?"

"If you could get away with it... might could work."

\*

Sahra had three friends and Duvi working on the rebellion. Duvi worked only in the night, and then only for a few hours, but those few hours were spent in intense concentration and dedication to his work. It was mostly putting bits together for Sahra's team of rats, but he did it quickly, efficiently, and without complaint. The rats had Smiley's list and Sahra's instructions to go to different storage bays every time. The also had socks and gloves that stopped Security from dragging herself or her friends in for questioning.

The baby ship had come out of its ancient launch bay and had been stripped down to the frame. Smiley or Raven were roped in to sit in the chair and pretend to be flying it while others tried to fit engineering into spaces it wasn't meant to go.

The chair was slimmed down. The leg room reduced. Elbow-space limited. The frame shaved precious millimeters. By the end, they were raising and lowering the baby ship to see if it would still fit in its bay.

Then the big problem raised its ugly head.

"How are you going to fuel this thing?" said Raven.

Sahra, her growing team of rats, Smiley and Eva all put their tools down to stare at him. Then they stared at each other.

They all knew what was not being said, that the fuel for every ship known to man and Tu'atta kind, was so toxic that it was the only thing entirely processed by robotic automatons. It came in sealed

containers. It went in sealed containers. Tu'atta piloted remote devices to recover it from wreckage before it could pollute local space.

It was the ultimate controlled substance.

No matter how tired, drugged, punch-drunk or - a shock to all humans concerned - horny the masters were, they were not going to let a slave anywhere near the stuff.

Smiley's face screwed up so hard that it could have imploded. He wheeled on Raven, red-faced with anger and frustration and almost a whole month of dreams going down the chute in seven words. "You! You..." he flustered. Tears gathered in his tiny, otherwise kind eyes. "You can just bloody rock me to sleep tonight!"

Which, of course, started an argument. It was one of those heated discussions in which everyone started their point with, "I'm sorry," and it got angrier and angrier from there.

It was tiny Alis, in it mostly for the strawberries, who gave Sara the idea. He had a big overbite, and loved apples despite not quite being able to take a proper bite out of them. Alis, taking a break from scrounging for the resistance, had helped himself to his favourite fruit. He managed the sinking-the-teeth-in bit, and was now quasi-noisily slurping the juice from it while he boggled at the rebels.

"Is there a way t' suck fuel outta a bigger ship?" said Sahra.

All moebius arguments about obtaining fuel stopped. The only noise was tiny Alis sucking on his apple.

"Well... yeah. But you have to have fuel enough to go an get more..."

"Whuddif it was from a ship that were docked right by the egg-sit hatch? Y'd just need canned air."

Smiley started mumbling to himself. Mostly about what bits to fit where, but Sahra could tell it was going to work.

The Mosquito-Class runner was born.

\*

Sahra's new baby sister came along three nights after they started the final welds on the Mosquito. Brand new, she had a pointy head and a squinty expression but Lord, she was LOUD. Sahra knew little babies had to be loud, but this little tyke knew how to screech.

The masters assigned her the name Brae. Sahra wasn't allowed to touch her, just yet, but she would come close and sing softly whenever she could get away with it.

Brae, like David, had sort of reddish-brown hair and grey eyes. She looked at everything as if she were trying to work out how to smack it. Even Mama.

Little tiny babies were frail, Mama said. So she got time off to look after Brae and the babies until such time as Brae could go to a creche with all the other babies and get looked after by other slaves who were somehow good at lots and lots of babies all at once.

This, naturally, lead to a lot of questions from the littles. About how the masters could pick and choose, but humans could not.

Which gave Sahra another idea for sabotage.

Autumn on the master's homeworld was breeding season. She and the rebels worked this out after the rash of fights between males and public indecency charges amongst pairs of masters. Females chose the fathers for their eggs and, once they were laid, pretty much left them in incubators until they hatched. One temperature got girls. The other got boys.

Lots of incubators had been ordered, lately. They had to be shipped in from Sh'gess, a city on the master's homeworld.

Sahra had another plan for sabotage.

And Brae had three years, four tops, five if she were a totally slow learner, before she would be pressed into service as another rat. And all the risks that that held. Sahra thought of all her falls and scrapes and near-misses and even the bomb.

The thought of any of that happening to tiny, helpless, frail Brae was a waking nightmare. "You stay safe wif Mama," Sahra whispered to her new baby sister. "Get good'n'strong. Me? I'm'a do m' best t' make sure you get to want to work. 'Stead a needin' to work."

Brae didn't acknowledge Sahra's promise. She just started grizzling and wriggling her arms and legs around. Setting up for a really big cry.

Sahra gave Mama a hug on her way out. She needed it.



The *Mosquito* edged out of its tiny airlock. The ship a huge shadow above. Good news, there was no slow whistle of escaping air. Better news, the HUD was working and so was the steering. Sahra touched the controls, trying not to move. If she got into the habit of moving too much in these things, then she'd trip herself up when she got bigger. Just little puffs. Taps on the controls. Just enough to move it but not enough to spend all the canned air that was the *Mosquito's* fuel. She had to save enough to come back.

After she drained the big ship's tanks.

Sahra had never seen her station home from the outside, and still couldn't. All the windows faced front-ways. Twisting around to even try and see could knock something loose. And the thing about space, the surprising thing for Sahra, was that there was lots of it. Just when she thought she was close enough to the master ship growing ever bigger in front of her, she'd look at the distance readout and realize there was more ship than it looked.

It was already a mountain. Blotting out the stars. A big, black shape getting bigger and bigger until it filled her whole set of windows and it

was still a long way away from the fuel lines.

Right on target. All she had to do was wait until she was near enough and flip around. And let the rest of the systems do their work.

She sang a few verses of Rock My Soul on the way. Not for any real need, but to check that sound still behaved itself. Another symptom of leaking air.

She'd never sat so still so long in her life. She wriggled in place to stop the pins-and-needles from setting in. She made waiting games with the numbers as they counted down. She kept looking for detail in the dark side of the master ship.

Another thing she learned about space, light and dark were absolute. Pitch black. Blinding light. And very little in-between.

She reached the flip-point and turned her ship backwards to the master warship in one quick motion. Still on target.

The station looked like a big mess. All lumps and bumps and ugly bits and spikes where the ships docked.

And random, tiny, little square airlocks just like the one the Mosquito came from. None of them had been cleared, yet. But Sahra knew that there were at least a lot more places for a Mosquito to leave. Maybe even more baby ships to retrofit.

More Mosquitoes to drain the masters' ships. And fuel the rebels' ones instead.

One Mosquito could fuel itself and take one human on short, careful trips. One Mosquito could fuel five others, which could fuel five others, each... And keep anything spare for the colony vessels when they came.

There were tanks for the toxic fuel. And robots, too, of course. Old ones, left behind by masters long past. And anything old could be made good as new with her and her rats to see to it.

She looked over the bubbly mess of the station. "This is my station," she said. "It's a human station. And it's been taken for so long we forgot it's ever been took. But I'm doin' what I can to make sure it gets took *back*. 'Till we win or there ain't no more fight left in me. Amen."

Maybe God heard her. Maybe the angel still singing in her bad ear took it to God in its own way. The important part was that *she* heard it. Clear as crystal. This was her heart-oath. Something she had to do.

Brae was part of this station. So was Sahra. And Mama, and any number of Papas and sibs and Gempas and Gemmas... too many people to count. And the masters.

But the masters had to go.

They didn't belong here and they were taking everything the humans had come here to enjoy. Or turn into a living paradise. All the stories were the same. The humans came to an empty world and built it up. Then the masters came and took it away. Even the masters agreed on that.

They wouldn't give back anything they took easy. Sahra knew this. And getting them to go away without killing anyone was a problem.

One she'd have to solve.

Later. Now, her problem was finding the one little airlock that worked once her tanks were full. Without using any of the expensive-toxic fuel that now filled the *Mosquito's* tanks to the very top.

Sahra crossed her fingers and hit *Retrace*. Or the button that Smiley said she had to push to get the *Mosquitoto* retrace its steps.

Despite Eva's best efforts, Sahra had a problem with reading words. She could see the letters, but getting them all together to make sounds was hard.

Harder than crosswiring master circuits, anyways.

Sahra thought back to Smiley showing her the button. Remembering the letters. Romeo, Echo, Tango, Romeo, Alpha, Charlie, Echo. Yes. The same letters in the same order. It was the right button.

She found the shape of a gun on the underside of the master's ship. Many times the size of the *big* guns the guards used to keep the Majestrix safe. One of those could wipe her out in a second. And maybe blow a hole in the side of the station. Or maybe right through it.

Those guns must never fire.

\*

Security Chief Om'r Graak Jeshi'ig had been having a bad week. Mysterious forces were at play, he was certain. Things had been getting progressively worse ever since the terrorist rebels had blown up the executive lunch room. He had escaped with one bleeding tympanum and some minor scarring thanks to a paperwork emergency that had made him five minutes late.

His old boss had said, *Don't waste time thanking your gods for serendipity.*

He'd also said, *Look for what's there.*

Which was why, when other, more privileged females had been prone to blame accidents on malevolent spirits... Graak had achieved promotions by doing a brilliant job.

To think, he'd spent years cursing that shapeshifter and his exacting attention to detail. Now, it made sure he kept his rank in spite of the mishaps occurring throughout the station. Everything everyone wanted to attribute to malevolent spirits, Graak tried to examine until he found the real cause.

And, since none would volunteer, he used himself as a test case.

Tired and punch-drunk despite the early hour of the morning, he dialed up a standard stimulant in his office's food printer. It did a moderate job of imitating real food. If one wasn't fussy.

Too salty and, at the same time, somehow too sweet. But still a hot cup of stim, and that would do for now.

He'd set up a full-time monitoring of himself during his off hours. All audio and video. He got the computer to edit out the times when there was no movement or sound but that of himself breathing.

There was lots of still time on the video, all the same.

Something had made his personal alarm go off at random moments, and shut off the instant he woke up. But that wasn't the interesting bit.

The interesting bit was the hours of still time that the computer swore blind had audio.

Rather than dismissing this as a glitch or an anomaly, Graak ran the audio only through various enhancement programs.

Next, he diverted himself with the business of the day.

There was a remarkable upswing in violent outbursts between males. Disputes between females of equal rank were also on the rise. Strange things were going missing. Numerous reports of human voices in the walls after curfew. A ship at dock lost a small portion of fuel while powered down.

Enough to fill two of the smallest variety of fuel tanks. Coincidentally, some of the items that had gone missing.

That gooey blue weirdo had told him, *There's no such thing as a coincidence.*

All he had to do was stay focussed and put it all together. Difficult when the temperature controls were doing the exact opposite of his commands.

Exact... opposite.

"Computer... *lower* the temperature by twelve degrees." Graak said. If he was wrong, all it would do was put him into a mild torpor. If he was right... then things would improve markedly.

And he would have an edge on all others.

Graak checked the daily reports while the system adjusted itself. Thefts with no DNA trace. Mysterious illnesses sweeping through various sections of the station. Sleeping disorders were rife. Many more people were getting caught possessing Djaak. There was a ring, somewhere. He still had trouble tracking the leader down. If there was a leader. For all he knew, the Djaak was coming in by several different avenues. Or being created somewhere in the labyrinthine mess of the station.

He didn't have enough soldiers to patrol everywhere. Nor enough cameras to watch everywhere.

But somehow, someone was watching him

He knew it. He could feel it. Sneaky eyes in the sides of his vision. They watched because they knew... something. Someone had an edge on him. He needed an edge against them.

Graak would not be reporting his discovery of the environment controls glitch to anyone. He needed them - whoever they were - to be working under the same detriments as everyone else.

He couldn't trust anyone. All his officers would be effected, so he would have to pick a crime scene at random, and sweep it himself.

But first, he had to go back to his quarters and put on the thermal underwear he saved for breeding season so he could keep his mind on his job. No female ever approached him during mating season.

Nobody wanted an abandoned male. That was the kind of stigma that stayed. The kind of thing that others judged him by, first. And,

naturally, the kind of thing that made him the ideal kind of suspicious bastard needed to be chief of security on a station like this. He channeled all of it into his work, did better than any female of equal or higher rank, and week by week, was just barely able to hold onto both rank and job.

And, he had to admit, the Majestrix thought it was all amusing.

And so long as he was amusing in this hive of humans, he could stay. Because heavens forbend that he was anything of the ilk, closer to home.

Changed, and looking like he hadn't bothered to stop, Graak stalked the halls. Even without the sight of humans, he could smell them. He could smell their mammalian scent through the perfumes that some poured over their human pets. He could hear the smaller ones crawling in-between the walls.

Disgusting.

But vital for the smooth running of the Tu'att Empire. Vital for the continued status of the Majestrix, long may she reign.

She could extend her fact-finding tour and debauchery as much as she liked, as long as industry still got what it wanted. And the tourists would visit the more... family friendly areas where the Majestrix went and think they gained status by osmosis.

Meanwhile he, who had rubbed more than shoulders with the Majestrix, got to fight for his post every other week. And the humans crawled everywhere around him. Stinking, sweating, puling, puking, messy beasts. Useful only for their adaptivity. Useful for doing all the odious tasks that no Tu'atta would lower themselves to do, any more.

He hated them, but if the humans suddenly and perpetually went away, then Tu'atta society would collapse.

Sometimes, he swore, he could hear the humans laughing.

Graak swallowed his distaste and entered one of yesterday's crime scenes. Nothing had come in, somehow removed three high-class miniature propulsion units, an entire box of plain white socks for humans, and a packet of self-sealing bolts... and left no evidence of its passage.

Make that, apparently no sign.

There were drag-marks on the floor. Almost imperceptible marks, indicative of some unknown someone methodically dragging out crates to look inside each and every one.

Similar to the parcel misdirection case.

He sniffed.

Humans. Young ones. The older ones smelled a lot more. There was hardly a trace of these little ones. No wonder his hormone-addled contemporaries had thought no-one had been in here.

And only humans lacked the mental capacity to read. And their young, the Rats, didn't even try.

Rats were small enough to fit through the air vents, which went anywhere inside the station. And yet, nobody reported any Rats turning up covered in the kind of debris that wound up in the air vents.

Everyone knew that human young were filthy creatures. If left to their own devices, they would literally perish in their own grime.

The scene was the same all over the station. Storerooms had been raided by humans who left no trace. Strange things no human would be interested in were taken.

Someone was covering their giggles in the fifth such storeroom he was examining. On all fours. Sniffing about like a canid.

He stood, brushing off his knees, and glared down the younger

female at the storeroom door. "Something *amusing*, Kadyn?"

"Perhaps you should enlist some tracking dogs, sir."

"I have already applied and been rejected four times. The station and the Majestrix -long may she reign- have both informed me that the budget does not stretch as far as allocating canines into our system. Thus, I must rely on my own senses."

"May I ask what your senses have told you?"

"Humans are getting in. And they are not leaving trace, somehow."

"Humans? They're always trailing filth."

"Someone must be sending them in with some kind of protection. But why these odd items?"

"...sir?"

"The list, Kadyn. Surely you have enough brains to concoct a list out of those stolen objects?"

"...um..."

"Or were you too busy watching a pair of brainless males fighting?" He'd heard the scuffle, of course. He'd ignored it.

"The list, Kadyn, of the missing items... has enough parts to build a small vessel. Everything but the hull plating and the decks. Someone's building a ship and using Rats to fetch the parts."

"Um, Sir?"

"Yes, Kadyn?"

"The, um, Majestrix sent me to fetch you? She wants a report?"

He vented a low growl and marched as quickly as he could along the shortest path to the Majestrix's suite. She rarely left it, unless one of

her favourite resorts was experiencing the correct seasons, on that filthy planet the humans called Hevun.

She was bathing in milk and, from the scent, eleven different herbs, spices and unguents that would not cause the milk to curdle. The Majestrix owned a bathtub the size of an exercise pool and an exercise pool that filled an entire room.

Graak stood at careful parade rest and looked into the middle distance. Much as though the Majestrix appreciated the male gaze, she did not like his male gaze in the sight of so many gossip-prone slaves or so many members of her entourage.

"Our instruments detected no trace, but your majesty is already aware of my opinion of our instruments."

The Majestrix, in a move calculated to provoke a reaction, presented her tail to a human servant to clean it for her. "And what of your famous nose?"

"Humans have been in all of the effected store rooms, your graciousness. They left no DNA trace. No prints. But they left their scent."

"And of course you can't trace them." She let down her tail so the servants could work on a leg.

"Humans smell alike," said Graak. "Once their paths cross..." He left the rest for her to deduce.

"Such a pity," the Majestrix sighed. "And this will naturally lead to another petition for dogs. What can they possibly smell that you can't?"

"The difference, your grace."

The Majestrix sighed and turned herself over in the milky, scented water. The servants rushed to attend each limb. "So tiresome," she breathed. "You know I'm allergic to dogs. They make my eyes mist and

my skin itch. And I simply hate to itch."

"Of course, your majesty."

"Even the hairless breeds make me come out in the most hideous rash. It's so dreadful. My people have to make sure there's not even a trace of dog everywhere I'm scheduled to go."

She plucked a fat grasshopper from the bowl of one of her twin redheads and gave it to the other to chew for her.

It was the only moment where Graak felt any sympathy or pity for a human.

After she kissed the pulped grasshopper from the humans' mouth, she sank back into her bath. "So many people in high society back home have dogs. It's simply tiring to go back and wait while they make certain I don't get sick."

"Yes, your grace. I understand. Our instruments are not sensitive enough to detect the humans' pitiful amounts of DNA. And since dogs are not a viable alternative... I humbly submit that we need the most sensitive scientific instruments from our homeland."

"Oh! So tiresome," said the Majestrix. "They haven't stolen anything terribly important at all."

"M'lady, they have enough parts to build a small ship. The only thing they haven't stolen is the hull plating."

"And what good is a ship," yawned the Majestrix, "if there's nowhere to launch it from?"

"I bow to your higher intellect, your majesty." Graak bowed to match his words. "But are we certain there isn't a forgotten launch bay that we have, perhaps, erroneously sealed off from ourselves?"

"When you find out," she said, "do let me know."

He had been dismissed. He bowed and backed out of the room.

So. He had to go shopping and spend his personal funds on something that would do the job of a Rat, and not, say, fall down any vertical shafts and smash. He found a toy and hobby place and spent twenty minutes interrogating the staff until he found someone with enough brains to actually come up with a coherent answer to his odd questions.

He went back home - a tiny space in the rear of his offices with barely enough room for a cot, a food printer and basic amenities - with a remote-control car, a camera, some unidirectional flexible tracks and a number of servos and signal boosters.

It was some work putting it together, but he had time to spare in his off-duty hours. As an abandoned male, he had less social life than the humans. He was expected to turn up for formal ceremonies, or guard the Majestrix or one of the other higher-ups under threat, but other than that, his life was empty.

At the other end, he had a peculiar device that did not resemble the original toy car in the slightest. He would test it out in the day, when the Rats were swarming the tunnels. And with that thought in mind, he added the station security emblem to every possible side.

That should keep the Rats' sticky fingers off of it.

Graak began his investigations in the outer areas of the station, in a dry dock hangar and one of the older air vents. He could hear them laughing at him. Even when there was no-one to see to laugh.

He didn't care. He had to find out what those stinking humans were up to.

For a large portion of the air vents, nothing was there but fluff and the rare, lost Rat. Or an occasional creature looking for something to eat. It took him days, recovering the spy-bot at the end of his limitations and napping in hostels or enlisted bunks along the way. He combed and criss-crossed the exterior areas of the station. He used every pathway he could find that was near the exterior, but could find nothing that his fellow Tu'atta could not access.

His ship theory was dead in the water.

And since no human traders were caught with the missing parts, there was nowhere the parts could go.

He found some angry higher-ups waiting for him. Radiating anger and disappointment. "Ladies," he said as politely as he could manage, "Do forgive my tardiness. I have been on a special mission from the Majestrix herself - long may she reign - and I have yet to report my findings."

They had to pay obeisance to the Majestrix. They had to wait until she had finished with him. And, knowing their holy leader, long may she reign, she was going to take her sweet time.

✧

Sahra had to wonder why all the tunnel rats had to report to the security office. She had her suspicions, but it never paid to look guilty around the masters. She'd run out of her initial box of ration baggies and started on a second, also stolen from a random supply store.

She also knew that her rats knew about playing stupid for the masters. They knew to derail, distract, and dissemble with the best of them. Even little Alis was a master.

All she had to do was wait.

Masters were going in with baskets of something. Rats were coming out with bread rolls.

Huh. The Om'r in charge was trying bribery. No matter what, he still wasn't going to make any friends with her rat patrol.

Still... food was food. The Om'r was keeping her away from a good days' scrounge and maybe catching some evriyong for the pot. One little roll didn't make up for a whole pot of dinner. And it did not make up for lunch, which Sahra missed because the masters wouldn't

let her go eat.

"Sahra Johnston," said the Om'r by way of a greeting. *"This is the second time you've been in here."*

Sahra kept her eyes on the basket of rolls. One would not survive the cattle cleaner at the end of shift. More than one would not do so, either. She was glad evriyong were waterproof. She had to eat the roll he gave her here. Or close to. Letting it go to waste was worse than shameful.

He picked up a roll and played with it. Flipping it back and forth in his talons. Sahra followed the motion with her eyes only.

*"Do you spend much time in the air vents?"* he murmured.

Sahra held up her hand around her bad ear, leaning it forward. *"I hear not it, I-am-bad."*

He raised his voice, *"Do you spend much time in the air vents?"*

*"Knowin' not, me. Get cart-full, get time, sometimes. Go hunting. Neffur counted, me."*

*"Do you sometimes take things you find in big places?"*

Sahra did her best shocked gasp. *"That big no-no! Tunnels only! Bad girl take from go-out!"*

The Om'r stared at her. She stared at the bread roll. Her stomach growled. Things beeped or pipped for attention.

Now the roll was rolling in his claws. *"How far do you go? What interesting things do you see?"*

*"Go where scrounge is, me. Looking very bad. Look not, me."*

*"Have you kept anything you found in the tunnels?"*

*"How-I-do?"* said Sahra. *"Nowhere keep in... Masters search me."*

He growled at that. A noise of frustration and doubt. *"I've checked your records. You've found things of good value."*

*"Big family has me. Must work good for eat."*

*"You find very good things after we sent you close to the old ore processing complex."*

What was he getting at? Sahra screwed up her face and said, *"Master?"*

*"Did you find anything... special?"* The way he said 'special' ran chills up and down her spine. Did he already know about Simy?

Sahra remembered that haul. *"Broken bits of master machine? Um. Ore chunks? Um. A bit ole piece o' plating that was all burneded and bent up? Some normal junk?"* Sahra added a shrug.

*"Nothing else? Nothing you might have... hidden away?"*

Sahra thought about losing Simy to make tears come to her eyes. *"I understand not. What is good answer?"*

The Om'r sighed and toured around his big desk to give her the roll. *"Good-girl. Good-girl."* He flicked his talons at a Vasht and that master took her back to the slave areas. There was hardly any time for tunnel work, but she had to try anyway.

And she had less than no time for sabotage.

At least during the duty cycle.

And only an hour or two after lights-out.

She was going to have to come up with something extra-special to do to that Om'r to balance the scales.

Wait. Was that revenge? Revenge was forbidden. Revenge would definitely point to her and her rat patrol. And that Om'r was already suspicious of all tunnel rats for something.

If something happened tonight, Sahra knew who he'd blame.

Damn it.

It made her guts hurt to think that someone like him could get away with making so many people go hungry. Put so many families behind quota. Make so many do with less, or without. All because he wanted to ask a bunch of dumb questions that anyone with a grain of sense could avoid.

A bunch of questions to every last tunnel rat in the station.

Now the sweet bread roll became a heavy weight in her stomach.

Who else had seen? What had they seen? How many actual people did she not know were part of the rebel plot? How well did the rebels explain to the rats they enlisted that those rats should keep a secret?

How easy was it going to be for the masters to find all the secrets? Not just the strawberries in the stations' heart, but their forgotten history and the *Mosquitoes* and the tricks and Simy.

Would they bother with bullets? Or finally declare the entire station lost and burn it all with a fire hotter than the sun?

Seventh-Papa caught her worrying as all her family sat for dinner. "Worried, sprout?"

"Jus'..." she started. And then stopped. Mama and Seventh-Papa and all the bigger sibs were scared of the rebellion. She had to think about saying it right.

"Yes?"

"When God punishes his people... He sen's a say-vee-ur, right? To fix it all up?"

"Savior. Yes. He does. When the time is right."

"But... is it wrong to kind of... help the say-vyur? Before y'know who

they is? Start fixin' some fings b'fore they does?"

What she got was a lecture on religion. About how someone had to be certain of God's rules before they started interfering with things. And how it was a blessed soul who recognized a savior before even God made it clear. And how none of those kinds of folks stayed alive for long around the masters. And how she was almost even and far too young to be worried about anything like that.

"Moses started as a baby. Jesus started as a baby. They was say-vyur b'fore they was sevun. They was say-vyur b'fore they was six. If'n anyone knew... they knew. I reckon they had t' be worried." She sighed. "I reckon... they'd'a been glad if'n sumbody were there t' help even a li'l."

Seventh-Papa looked mad. Mama looked about to cry. "All we can do is keep the faith that the savior will come," said Mama. "We have to be patient, and believe that God will send His savior, soon."

Sitting and waiting and obeying the masters hadn't done any good. Sahra wondered if being mad at God was blasphemy... or a sin..

Thin stoo, tonight. For everyone.

Sahra blamed herself. Then she blamed the male Om'r master who held every rat until he'd finished asking questions. She blamed the masters for even being here at all. She blamed her people in the long-ago, so in love with peace that they didn't lift a finger to protect it.

\*

The Rats knew nothing. He had to throw out that interview chair, simply because it was soaked in the sweat, stink, tears, snot, and -yes- even the urine of an uncounted number of filthy human young.

Useless.

They knew. He knew they knew. But how to prove it? And what did

they know? Graak had precious few secrets, and nothing he was ashamed of. It was one reason among many that he made such a good security chief. No way to blackmail him. No leverage. No family to hostage. No daughters to ransom. Or sponsor. No potential for bribery, either. He had nothing, wanted nothing, and owed nothing.

Rather a lot like this case.

Persons unknown, very likely the tunnel rats, had entered storerooms all over the station, stolen enough parts to make a small ship, taken it nowhere he could find and, apparently, done nothing with it.

Graak did not close the case. Until he found out what was happening to those parts, who took them, and why, the case would never be closed.

He'd just have to watch it grow colder until such time as some actual evidence turned up.

Meanwhile, he had to do something about the unseasonal rash of mating behavior amongst his officers. He knew it was related to temperature control on the station. He also knew he couldn't send a memo to all of them, because word would get out.

He sent a private message to his trusted subordinates. The ones he personally valued, regardless of their heritage or how much money their relatives attempted to tip the system with. The ones who did good work.

It read, *You might find thermal underwear most efficacious at assisting you to keep your mind on the job.* And included the address of his tailor, who did discrete fittings and said nothing to no-one.

It did give away his secret, that of being notoriously unreachable and unflappable, but it gave it away to those people who he needed to also be unreachable and unflappable. The rest, those who got their rank through bribery and nepotism and knowing the right people, were free to fumble along on their own merit. But mostly the lack

thereof.

For now, it was all he could do for his benefit.

\*

Sahra was hungry. Her family was hungry. About the only one who wasn't hungry was baby sister Brae, because she got everything she needed from Mama.

She'd already crept two extra ration baggies into Mama's pantry, and now she crawled as fast as she could around all the good dump-spots. Filling her cart with all the good stuff she could find. It still took too long to get it counted and herself sent back to the tunnels again.

It took too long to get to the secret heart and find a crowd of scared rats in the places where the firstcomers used to have row after row of screens and buttons. Lots of rats, Sahra knew. Many more, she didn't. She was shocked to see a few bullies in the bunch. They were just as shocked to see her coming in, let alone a few of the rebels salute.

All of her enlisted rats stood straight and saluted.

Sahra returned it and found Smiley. "What's bin hap'nin'?"

Smiley saluted and said, "Cap'n... your troops want to know we aren't compromised."

Captain? Really? "Does High-Admi'rl Ali know 'bout this?"

"He knows you're doing excellent work," said Smiley. "G'wan. Talk to your troops."

Sahra turned around and stood on a work desk. "Awright, let's make this real easy. Hands up anywun who said anyfink 'bout this place."

Silence. Not one hand went up.

"It awright. We ain't goin' be mad ifn' anywun did."

Still nothing.

"Right. Then we all ain't got nuthin t' worry 'bout. Anybody got new tricks?"

"I fought 'bout sticking summa that Djaak inna food printer system?" said one of Sahra's bullies with a nervous hand in the air at don't-shoot position. "Would it work?"

"Heat doesn't destroy Djaak," said Smiley. "Can make it work better, sometimes. We'll just have to make sure it's the pure stuff..."

"Goo' job, Jani," Sahra smiled. "Lesse whut it does to 'em."

\*

Too many troops were going home. Too many raw, green recruits were coming in. Needing training. Making stupid mistakes. Mishearing orders, following the orders from the wrong superiors, and otherwise slowing down everyday operations to a painful crawl.

Graak's newest Taans looked like they were still growing into their joints. They were all recruits from a charitable orphanage that took in abandoned male children, according to their papers.

"You've all been told you're worthless. That nobody will value you. Today, you turn that to your advantage. You use that against those who think you are stupid." He nodded to a trusted Vasht, who began handing out thermal underwear. "This is one of your many weapons against those people. Use your eyes, use your brains, use the cunning that saw you to this age. Use reason and logic. All at once. Only then can you be victorious against the forces of ignorance."

Only three sets of eyes lit up at the thermal underwear. Graak would keep an eye on those three. They were going to be clever enough to earn promotion.

"Also, avoid the food printers. I have reason to believe the system

has been... compromised. Eat from a food printer at your own risk."

Some, not the ones who figured out the why of the thermal underwear, covertly laughed and scoffed. Those idiots were going to go nowhere. They'd be lucky if they lasted a month.

Whatever had adulterated the food printing system made some diners addicted to eating. Many a previously respected officer quickly became torpid, overweight, and demoted. Few seemed to care, as long as they could eat.

The continued mystery of the slowly-draining fuel reserves on docked ships had one clue. Identical markings on the fuel lines of the afflicted vessels.

Tool marks.

One of his more... imaginative Matrachs had theorized about vampire ships, so Graak had given her the missing parts list and also the task of coming up with a theoretically sound model. One that fit all known information, including the information that the humans had no access to any secret launch bays. So far, she had been working so hard at it that it was effecting her health.

And so far, she had no plausible answers, either.

No sensors ever saw anything like a vampire ship. No maintenance crew found the other theory, a camouflaged Waldo designed to sip at the fuel reserves. Yet the marks kept appearing.

And other things kept going wrong.

Misaligned air filters worked loose, raining accumulated fluff and pests down in random areas of the station. Make that, random Tu'atta-inhabited areas of the station. No human areas were ever so afflicted. Water tanks became contaminated, somehow, spreading sickness and disease.

Voices whispered in the night as the Tu'atta slept, with no

identifiable source. They whispered disjointed truths, about knowledge and murder, about plots against the fitful sleeper. He knew, because he finally isolated some of them in his own footage of his slumbering self.

Alarms went off without being set to do so. Frequently in the middle of the night.

Food stores were found full of evriyong.

It was almost as if...

Graak shied away from the thought, *as if some malevolent spirit wants us to go away without harming the humans...* but it lurked there, all the same. Were he in a better state of mind, he would have dismissed the idea out of hand.

Everyone knew that only the Tu'atta had worthwhile deities. Why else would the Tu'atta be ruling? If the humans even had a faith, then their deities were not doing them any favours.

He sent his Taan crew out to investigate and resolve today's disasters and went on a slow patrol around the main concourse. People were tense. He could see it in the way others carried themselves, hear it in the murmurs they thought he couldn't overhear. Smell it in the air. Feel it in the subtle vibrations of the deck under his feet.

One little spark was all it would take to set this powder-keg off.

And it was his job to keep it spark-free.

\*

Simy could feel something was up. He didn't want to stay very far away from his human. His Sahra. Even when she was at home, he kept close to her. Hiding in the walls.

Something big was coming. Something bad.

As Eon, he had developed a sense for the mood of an installation. The mood of this place was turning... sick. Sahra's tricks were building up and driving the Tu'atta slowly crazy.

If it all spilled over at once, the entire station could go insane. Well, the Tu'atta portion of it. The formerly important portion of it. The bit that he used to think was necessary for civilized life.

The bit, now that he thought about it, that he was taught was necessary for civilized life. By the Tu'atta. Who also helpfully supplied him with a definition that boiled down to *not the way the humans do things*.

But he'd seen and heard different things to what the Tu'atta told him.

They said, these are uneducated animals. They said, they don't understand civilization. They said, they are only useful under limited conditions. They said, they are helpless without us. They said, we have scientific proof that they are lesser. They said, we have theistic proof that we must help them.

Then they did not educate them, nor civilize them, nor let them be useful. They did not let them be independent, nor allow them to rise beyond a point, nor let them help themselves.

They said the humans had no faith. But they had a different faith, one alien to the Tu'atta.

They said the humans had no culture. But the culture persisted where the Tu'atta could not or would not see.

They said the humans were inferior. But a human child and her friends were pulling the Tu'atta apart without spilling so much as one drop of human blood. Or, for that matter, killing very many Tu'atta.

She had caught and held tight to the idea that Tu'atta were

replaceable when they died. The living had to be cared for. Rehabilitated. And that had a steeper price than new recruits.

And then they had to spend more on new recruits because the soldiers with more experience needed medical attention, psychotherapy, sleep, better nutrition, a mate and were otherwise not paying attention to their jobs, so more people were needed to do less.

More people needed food, wages, air, clothes, accommodation, transportation, training, information, recreation and, because Sahra's little tricks were still tricking them, more treatment, more assistants to help them to do the job they were signed up for in the first place.

As far as Simy was aware, the assistants' assistants had assistants. And it was looking like they were needing - no small surprise - assistants very soon.

Gossip amongst the Tu'atta held that some evil spirits wanted them to go away. Some were even planning to go AWOL. Some were planning on resigning in shame.

Alarmingly, many were opining that the entire station should be blown up as a bad idea.

He had no idea how to communicate this to his Sahra.

At first, it had hurt to have a voice. By now, it hurt to think of her look of betrayal when she discovered that he'd had a voice all along. He'd even stopped practicing both his human shape and Sahra's brand of sabotage.

He was sure some other human had spotted him.

Discovery was tantamount to death, because it would kill Sahra's soul.

He knew she believed she had one. Constant exposure to humans meant that he now knew more about them, their culture, their beliefs and their habits than any 'learned' Tu'atta who had to base their

research on whatever their teacher told them to do. And never, ever, contradict their respected teacher. There were still Tu'atta doing papers on how the humans were lesser beings because their red blood cells lacked nuclei. About how the humans were unlikely freaks of nature because they therefore lacked DNA and shouldn't exist.

Simy knew such things were flights of Tu'atta fancy. The evidence pointed him in directions the Tu'atta never looked.

And therefore, he had to do what he could to keep the humans safe until someone figured out the truth. Which may well be an eternity.

Keeping the humans safe meant slowing down the rats. Slowing down the rats, alas, meant getting Sahra off her little stationary crusade.

He didn't know if it would work, but he had to try. For the first time in months, he made his human shape. Leaned carefully over her sleeping form, and spoke softly.

"You have to be careful," he said into her ear. "Please. Tone down your tricks before the whole station goes mad."

Sahra murmured in her sleep and rolled over, making him retreat into the tunnels.

Would it work? Could it work on humans?

Only time would tell.

\*

Norm the Shadow wasn't wanted by the masters because he could only see things clear, up close. Sahra and the rebels found him useful for doing the neat, tiny work in the circuits they made to create their tricks on the masters. Norm the Shadow liked making the circuits and all the other rats contributed to his daily hauls. In return, he got more rats enlisted into the rat patrol. They all found more tricks to pull.

More places to pull them. More things to use. More places to hide. More places to use.

It was getting big. They had almost every rat working on the station... working to sabotage it. They only left out the snitches.

Norm the Shadow didn't get much involved in anything more than the circuits. The others figured out what they were doing with them and he figured out how to put it all together and make it go every single time.

Right now, he was working on a tiny chip no bigger than his thumb. Put it in a master's nursery unit, and it would mess with the temperature settings. Those who wanted to hatch a girl got a boy. Those who wanted to hatch a boy got someone somewhere in the middle. And the readouts would stay the same.

Since most of the girl masters on the station were getting ready to lay an egg, there was a time limit on these. He had a process that was almost quick enough, but the rats wanted more. Lots more. What Norm the Shadow needed, he decided, was another him. Or someone like him. Someone who could see really up close. But the masters tended to get rid of the close-visioned folks unless they could fake seeing normally long enough to find a place to belong.

It was Norm the Shadow's biggest worry, before the rat patrol ganged up to help him out. They were even talking to the rebels about making sure he 'vanished' in their direction. The rebels would have him making circuits and chips like this for as long as he wanted. And that was just fine by Norm the Shadow.

Right now, the other rats were discussing what Eva kept saying was 'socio-political ramifications of systemic breakdowns' and what the rats all called 'tricks'.

"They all good," said the white blur that was Sahra. "I know they all good. All's I'm sayin' is they gotta wait a bit. The masters is all in a flap, but we need t' get 'em flappin' the same way. We need a message."

"Like, 'let my people go'?"

"Yahbut... sumpin' as makes kinda sense. Sumpin' as puts the fright of God up 'em. Sumpin' as gets the grownups thinkin' a say-vyer is comin'."

Norm the Shadow did something he didn't usually do. He made a contribution. "Meany meany tech el up har-sin."

"What?"

"Meany meany tech el up har-sin," Norm the Shadow repeated. "It's a story from the really long-ago. When the angels and all were with God's people. God's people was being kept down an' all? So an angel wrote the words of fire on a wall f'r all the big bad higher-ups to see. Meany meany tech el up har-sin. It meant, you been weighed in the balance and found wanting."

"You have been weighed and found wanting..." Eva repeated. "Words enough to frighten them."

"We got chemicals that can ignite..." suggested Smiley.

"We need something with a time-delay factor. So people could put it on walls without burning themselves," said Raven.

"And someone to translate," added little Alis. "We be writin' in human, yeah?"

"Somewhere big. Somewhere public. Somewhere that's goin' scare th' pants off of 'em."

"Got a big restaurant opening happening next week. Can we come up with the flaming paint by then?"

\*

It came down to little Alis and six other rats including Sahra. Little

Alis, because he was skinny and small and light and the other six to hold him up on ropes because they were small enough to fit into the only way in that was near a wall.

Sahra had one foot braced in a side-vent and her arms wrapped in cabling. She could just see little Alis making the marks.

Yankee. Oscar. Uniform.

Hotel. Alpha. Victor. Echo.

Bravo. Echo. Echo. November.

Whiskey. Echo. India. Golf. Hotel. Echo. Delta.

Alpha. November. Delta.

Foxtrot. Oscar. Uniform. November Delta.

Whiskey. Alpha. November. Tango. India. November. Golf.

Little Alis used the hand-stamp for a stop and sealed up the paint and put the brush and the stamp in the bag that would stop them all from burning up on their way back.

"Yeev," prompted Sahra.

"Ho," the others, all pulling at once. Wrapping new cable around their wrists and bracing to go again.

Ten 'yeev's and 'ho's, and little Alis was able to climb up himself. Ari wrapped up the bag and the paint in a fire blanket, just in case.

"Ullyully uxin free," Sahra whispered.

Rats, rope, chemicals and tools were all gone in minutes.

\*

It was all over the station in seconds. What didn't pass through Tu'atta mouths went easily through the humans'.

An angel had written words of fire on the wall.

Graak, among the first on the scene once the screaming began, was already hearing that some had actually seen the angel. One had even looked into the eyes on its wings.

Eyes in wings.

"My fault," confessed the human guest of the Majestrix herself, long may she reign; one of the traders from the elusive free colonies and suspected drug runner, smuggler and thief. "I told them it was the writing of the angels' fiery hand... and they all wanted to know what an angel looked like."

"No doubt you also provided a translation of that..." he boggled at the burning words, "writing?"

"Human alphabet. The free traders still teach their children. It says, *you have been weighed and found wanting*. It's... a passage from our holy books."

"Humans have a religion?"

"Oh yes. It's quite complicated. Our god is three entities in one. The all-seeing father, the forgiving son, and the ever-present spirit. Then there's the angels, which I've mentioned, and--"

Graak held up a hand. "Enough." He hadn't heard anything about how it was supposed to work, but it was already making his head hurt. He had had a bad night on a long string of bad nights. He had had to get food from the printer because all the restaurants and vendors had sold out of anything worth eating. It was either ration baggies or human chow... or printed food.

He could tell by the hangover that he had made a very, very bad decision.

The flames burned bright, without apparent fuel. And it didn't burn hot enough to activate the fire suppression systems. Which was a good thing, considering that the fire suppression systems would have automatically killed the Majestrix herself. Long may she reign. Since the first thing the clever space-based fire suppression systems took away from a conflagration was the air it needed to burn.

Which meant that this... angel... was guilty of attempted assassination of the ruler of five star systems.

And since he could not arrest, punish, or execute a figment of human imagination, he had to believe that something else had written those words.

Preferably a *someone* who he could track down and then eat their throat out.

The restaurant was cleared, now. The words still burned on the walls and no amount of personal effort with personal extinguishers had managed to put the flames out. Short of sealing the area and vacating evidence and air, there was nothing that would put them out.

There were human traces, here. Explained by the presence of the Majestrix's current favourite human guest. And her pets. And her entourage's pets. And some other high-class visitor's pets.

There was little smoke from the flaming letters, but they still smelled of chemicals. He couldn't name them, but he knew there was some variety of trickery going on.

The handprint, though... The handprint perplexed him.

It was larger than a human hand could ever grow. And it had too many fingers.

Nothing alive could make a print like that.

Therefore, nothing alive *had*.

Which meant that elaborate trickery had gone on without leaving a trace. Were it not for him isolating the sources of some, he too would be almost be ready to believe a malevolent spirit was at work.

"We're being judged! We're being judged by their gods!"

Graak straightened up and ran for the door. One of the higher commanders, guest of the party for the opening of the restaurant, had stripped off her uniform and was now running, naked, down the main concourse.

"They know! They know our secrets!"

Graak gestured for some trusted lowers to go catch her. "This must be a trick," he announced to the gawking audience. "The science officer and her staff can verify that this is the result of technological trickery."

"Om'r," said one of the Taans he'd set to guard the restaurant entrance, "That... *was*... the science officer."

*Gods of mercy, come out of hiding...* Graak did a subtle breathing exercise to calm his anger. "*Find* someone who *can* search for evidence and get them to *do* so. Run."

The young Taan fled.

Three Vashts finally tackled the naked science officer and threw a blanket over her nudity. Nothing could stop the spread of gossip, though. The head of the science division running naked down the main concourse and screaming about spirits.

That sort of thing got around.

Faster than light.

It was doubtless already going through the slave quarters.

An angel's flaming hand. Writing words that were both warning and portent of doom. Human words. Reflecting a story from human

mythology that, frankly, Graak was wondering if the blasted mammals hadn't pulled out of thin air.

They were probably mimicking their masters and betters much more reasonable faith with their fabulous imaginings mixed with nightmares and horror stories from the Tu'atta's own, ancient pasts. Yes. That had to be it.

The Majestrix -long may she reign- had owned a young human who would not sleep until someone had verified that there were no demons hiding behind the curtains.

The fabrications of infantile minds. Turned into something that burned without fuel. And made no smoke.

\*

Sahra kept her head down as she ate her lunch. Only Darvan knew she could hear the grownups talk. He was lipreading a lot better, though. His gasps and laughter were happening at the right times, instead of a pulse or two behind.

Angels!

The word was all over.

Angels had found the Tu'atta to be wanting, and had warned them thus in words of fire!

Eighty feet tall!

They'd seen the angel!

It was two hundred feet tall!

With wings of fire!

And eyes that burned out the unbelievers' with their very gaze!

And the chief of science herself went completely mad and tore off her clothes!

Sahra had had to hide her laughter by pretending to choke on a lump. Just the idea of a naked master was hilarious. What the master was screaming about as she ran, naked, through a very public place was faithfully repeated from ear to ear. Even Dotti took time to tell Sahra with her hands.

*She said that they are being judged by our god.*

No doubt God and the Angels found the Tu'atta wanting. They had to have seen. They had to know that no Tu'atta followed the holy rules of peace.

But the hand of the angel...

Sahra and six others knew that that hand was the one of little Alis. With the help of Sahra and the others.

And in a very few months, the masters would find that they had been cursed with a rash of male children. Instead of a mob of girls, which the masters valued, they would be getting sons.

Less valuable sons. Unwanted sons. Indecisive, unreliable, unstable sons.

How many would be upset?

How many would think that this was a curse from the human's God?

Sahra decided to scope out the nursing creche, tonight. She had to see how tricky it was going to be, getting more letters of fire to happen where the masters nursed their babies.

The grownups were talking along the right lines, though. Was this the sign of an impending savior? Were miracles at hand? Were they going to throw off their oppressors' chains and regain their kingdom

under the benevolent eye of God?

Some were even discussing 'helping' the savior along. Little things. Leaving pins in the clothing. Adding bad things to the masters' food. Singing repetitive hymns while they worked. Creatively obeying direct, if vague orders. Creatively disobeying direct orders.

Being just the right amount of stupid. On purpose.

And she knew Mama had heard about it when she started screaming names. Sahra heard her before she saw her, up at the front where the trays and the spoons and the cups went away. Screaming out the names of all her sibs except the babies, and even her name.

Sahra pretended deafness, and Dotti tapped her hand for attention to point Mama out. Then she waved to Darvan and they both made their way up front. Both hurrying to finish the stuff left on their trays on the way.

Other Mamas were rounding up their families, too. Which meant all the women were calling names everywhere. Sahra could see Dotti doing exaggerated signs for her family.

Groups clumped together. "What's happ'nin'?"

"The masters are going to be angry," said Mama.

"But what 'bout the say-vyer?"

"Shush! If they hear us plotting, we're dead."

The masters weren't there. They were never anywhere near humans when they ate. Anyone who spent a lot of time in the tunnels knew that. "But--"

"They have ears everywhere."

"But--"

"Snitches," said Mama, and that was the end of the argument.

Snitches. Sahra and her rats had sorted out who the snitches were amongst the rats, but... they had no way to tell from anyone older. And since anyone could be a snitch, nobody could really trust anyone. There were supposed to be some snitches who even snitched on the snitches.

Sahra wrapped her arms around the littles and said, "So whadda we do?"

"Whatever we're told. And only what we're told."

That was how Sahra knew her own Mama was not a snitch. Exactly following orders was the only kind of rebellion a threatened slave had.



Graak knew a great secret. There were no snitches. No one human ever constantly betrayed their fellows for a better life. He had a group of them who were bribable, and each within their limits. All of them would commit small betrayals for food, for a blanket, for a little extra that was so abominably pitiful that Graak could easily afford to pay them off.

The highest currency amongst his little group of traitors was tea. One sachet of fermented, dried leaves was enough to make them say anything. Though he was careful, now, to offer lesser bribes first, and pay them off with the tea, afterwards. They would lie until their tongues fell out if they knew they could get tea for it.

He also knew not to contact them directly. He sent one of his staff to go collect them, and then interviewed them out of sight for less than half an hour before sending them back with whatever wealth he decided their information was worth.

Not one of their informants earned their tea, today.

It was unfortunate in the extreme, but there were times when nobody knew anything.

And all that came out of the humans he employed was nonsense about a savior and judgement from their weird god. Three gods for the price of one. Only humans could come up with something so... disorganized.

Graak sent the last of them away, empty-handed, only to find a nervous Taan vibrating with anxiety outside his office door.

"What is it?"

"Sir? There's... a disturbance in the slave feeding room."

"A riot?"

"No sir."

"Then what kind of disturbance is it? Spit it out, *male!*" Graak almost instantly hated himself. He had once vowed he would never use his own gender as a pejorative... but that oath had broken the day he found out that it was expected of him to do so. And necessary to maintain respect amongst his fellow Tu'atta.

"They're... they're sitting still, sir."

In the end, he went down to see.

Every last slave had finished eating. The feeding room was clean. And every last slave was lined up neatly. Against the walls, between the tables and bench seats. Kneeling with their hands on their heads and waiting for orders.

The silence was terrifying.

They were all just... waiting.

Not one of them moved as he and the Taan moved between the lines, inspecting them. He picked a paler slave. "You! What's happening?"

"We follow the law. We follow orders. We wait for escort and

assignment."

The Taan actually bought out a small reader from his pocket. *"It's in the rules, sir. See? All slaves must wait in an orderly fashion for escort and assignment once a task is completed."*

Graak looked. It was a real rule. A rule that was never rescinded and, in fact, had never been followed in his lifetime. The slaves knew where they should be, and they went there. They knew what they should be doing, and they did it.

But today, all sense of autonomy had fled.

Following an ominous vision of his future, Graak checked the rules and, yes, that escort was to be conducted by the forces of security. Already stretched to the snapping point by actions and inactions of his fellow Tu'atta alike.

He was going to have to apply for more staff. Not even a week after receiving the last batch of academy-fresh green sticks and enlisted male orphans. Of those, all of them needed further training before they could climb halfway towards being merely hopeless.

He assigned some of those green sticks to the job of escorting the humans to their appointed check-in points. They couldn't muck it up by much.

\*

Sahra knew the tactic. Obey the rules when they slowed things down. Disobey just enough to be annoying, but not enough to earn death. Be slow. Be stupid. Be deaf. Be harmless. Be lesser.

Sometimes, you had to fight those who kept you down by being weak.

Sahra dawdled as she walked. Going slow, getting almost tripped up and slowing others down. Giving some an excuse to stop and gawk.

And, in one feat of genius, falling into a screaming fit when she tripped up into a guarding Taan. She howled and howled that she didn't want to die. And the more the Taan tried to soothe her, the more she howled.

It made everyone stop and stare for ages.

The Taans were not allowed to have the big guns, but they did have pain sticks. Five of them hurt themselves and wound up flopping on the floor before one had the bright idea of just carrying her, kicking and screaming all the way, to her check-in point. A few of her fellow rats had the same idea. It only stopped when the masters ran out of arms to carry the struggling rats and one of them figured out which end to hold the pain stick by.

They were late for check-in of course.

The masters waiting took one look at the Taans and the screaming rats and blamed the junior officers. They had to hand everyone treats to get the noise down and stop waves of panic.

It was the quickest she had ever been strapped into a cart rig.

Nobody on the rat patrol went searching for scrounge, they went to one of the many secret places the rebels were busy taking over.

"What're we gonna do?" one of the rat patrol asked when they got to the meet area. "We ain't gonna meet quota!"

"So we don't," said Sahra. "They know we ain't goin' make quota. They figger we'd be tryin'a get to all the best stuff. So we get the big stuff. Mass credit. li'l bits o' metal. Stuff we only go for when we desp'rit."

Lila, one of Sahra's old bullies, was the first to stop staring with her mouth open. "I get it. Coz we isdesperate!"

"Take yer tricks, team five," Sahra gave out orders. "Team three, sortin' cartloads. Team one, spyin'. Team four, bash up some'a that

paneling fer mass credit. Team two, noise patrol." Which was scuttling through the tunnels with rattles, making enough noise for four times their number and then some. "Brains, in an' thinkin' fast. We need more plans fo' next time an' better."

Sahra and a bunch of the real wiley ones, including Lila, settled around to their best seats to talk. Sahra picked out a different spot, every time, gathering Simy in her arms and stroking him.

"Dang it," said Cerl. "Alluv our best stuff goes all crosswired on us."

"Those fahr letters shoul'da put the fear a' God up 'em."

"We need spooks they's afraid of."

"No. They know how t' handle their spooks. Our spooks make mo' sense cuz'uv...um... cause we want them to be scared of us," said Lila. "We want 'em to think our God wants 'em gone."

"Exac'ly."

"Wha' bout plagues?" asked Fae. "Eva was tellin' all 'bout how God freed up the chosen people in the way-long-ago. He sent down plagues. Like... locusts an' blood rain an' all sortsa stuff."

"Masters'd eat the locusts," mumbled Jen into his hand.

"Awright, so some plagues're worse'n others," said Fae, counting on her fingers. "Um. Lessee. Wat'r turned t' blood. Plague o' frogs. Plague o' lice. Plague o' flies. Disease. Boils. Hail o' fahr. Locusts. Darkness. An' then th' death o' the first-born." She held up seven fingers. "We need seb'n of sumpin' as gonna scare up the masters."

"Sumpin' unnatural?"

"We already got a whole buncha boys cookin' up inna in-cube-eight-ors. That can be one...?"

Sahra spoke since the first time she took her perch. "When they gonna hatch?"

"Coupla months. Why?"

"Then it's curse numb'r seven. We gotta work up to that."

"An' to make 'em look like curses... we gotta make sure they stand out. So fo' a week, we undo ev'rythin' but the whiperers an' the incubators," said Sahra.

"So we need six mo'."

"We could breed up sum evriyong. Lots an' lots. And set 'em loose."

"Sure, we catch 'em live anyways. All we need is a tank and a load of crickets."

Eva, sitting quietly since they'd gathered, spoke up. "We already breed crickets and mealworms. They need less space and they have more protein. Adding some more cricket farms isn't going to stretch our resources."

"We need some impossible things. Like the hail of fahr."

Eva smirked. "Let me tell you a few things about the pranks you can pull in artificial environments..."

\*

It was happening all over the station, but Graak went to the nearest one. Every rat at the check-in point was similarly afflicted. Each human child was stiff and twitching. Chanting in unison. Human words.

*"Wet weather, yellow weather! Wet weather, yellow weather!"*

"How long has this been going on?"

"We called when we couldn't frighten them into stopping."

So, not that long, including the time it took to have an argument

about what to do next and calling the authorities.

Graak's own comms were full of chatter and, somehow, the synchronized chanting of the human children all over the station.

"What are they saying?"

"Wet weather... yellow weather."

"What sort of nonsense...?"

The children, to a rat, slumped to the floor. The chanting over the comms stopped cold.

Graak had just enough time to ask, "What the hell is going on?"

Then it rained.

It rained yellow fluid.

Not paint, not urine, not any liquid he knew on sight or smell.

It did, however, stain Tu'atta skin and make everyone look sickly.

A nearby wall caught fire. Burning without fuel, or smoke, but a chemical smell that almost overwhelmed the stink of the yellow rain. Then it blended with the stink of the yellow rain and made Graak feel nauseated. He did his utmost to keep his gorge from rising.

My, those letters were familiar.

Human scribble that allegedly meant, *You have been weighed and found wanting.*

\*

Just like in the old stories, curses made things tough for slaves. They had to be scrubbed down with chemicals that made them all itch and burn. And the next day, they were all pushed hard to do their work.

Everyone came home tired.

Everyone smelled of the yellow rain.

Mama pretty much boiled up some random packets grabbed blind from her stores. All her sibs were too tired to talk. Sahra cat-napped between the babies jumping on her and tried to look forward to freedom.

The chosen people in the stories went through a lot before God helped set them free.

Seventh-Papa didn't come in. He was probably re-assigned. Mama didn't worry herself, and none of her sibs were that scared for him. In a few days, there'd be a new Papa. Someone who would have different rules.

In the meantime, they could talk at dinner.

Not that anyone wanted to, tonight.

She, Darvan, and whomever her rat patrol enlisted this week would have to cook up the next miracle.

The evening prayer was simply, "Lord, look after us in this time of trial."

The instant everything was cleaned up, everyone crawled into bed. Except Sahra. She wriggled her way into Mama's hiding-hole.

"Mama?"

"It's going to be okay, Sahra. We'll weather all of this. They need us alive."

"I know, Mama. It's just... It's miracles, isn't it? That must mean th' say-vier's comin', right?"

Mama sighed. "None's had the hubris to announce themselves. One man says he's the savior, and the masters would just shoot him."

"So... it's safer to be wifout a say-vier? I don't want nobody t' die."

Mama managed a smile. "Go to bed, sweetie. It'll be all right, tomorrow."

It didn't take long for the rest of her family to fall asleep. Sahra crept out, embracing Simy on the way, and passed on Mama's opinion.

There was a lot of work between now and the next miracle. They had to make sure everything was going to be ready on time.

\*

Simy did not try again. He knew his little experiment had failed by the way Sahra was doing the exact opposite of what he told her.

It seemed one adage of the Tu'atta had some truth in it. *You can't tell a human what not to do.*

He tried subtler manipulations. Making anxious noises whenever she and her brain trust came up with something alarming on top of all the other alarming things they could cook up.

They were escalating.

Fissioning off each other and creating increasingly insane ideas.

Nothing he did was working to slow them down at all.

Maybe... just maybe... he should be doing more to help them. It wasn't as if anything was going to stop them at all. And, frankly, it would be much easier to help rather than hinder.

So long as he could help keep Sahra safe.

\*

The black-haired pale human frowned sympathetically. "You don't

look very well. Are you all right?"

Graak fumed. He had not been able to remove the unhealthy colour from his hide for a week. It had even soaked through his uniform and stained him all over. "My health is not important. We've had another case of burning letters. Associated with a phenomenon."

"Oooh. Really? Sounds fascinating."

Graak glared and, without looking, activated the playback.

"Wet weather, yellow weather?" the human tilted his head. "Odd thing for children to say. Did you know we have a verbal challenge that sounds very similar? We call them tongue twisters. They're made up out of phonically similar words."

"I don't care."

"Really? We have some good ones."

"Corvid..."

"Raven."

"Whatever. I need to know *why* these humans are doing that."

"I'm no psychiatrist. My only range of expertise is farming and driving a ship. The rest, unfortunately, is mounds upon mounds of trivia."

"Then what... trivia... could explain this nonsense?"

Raven pulled at his chin hairs. "Well... given the burning words... I'd thought you were in a lot of trouble."

"Really."

"Oh yes. When the Egyptians enslaved God's favoured people, He sent seven plagues against the oppressors. Culminating in a curse against the first-born."

"Seven. Plagues. I thought threes were significant in what passes for your culture. No offense."

"They are. But sevens are holier." Raven turned a palm upwards in a helpless gesture. "Seven days in our week, and the sabbath is meant to be a day off. According to ancient holy law."

"We can't budget for slaves to have days off. Too expensive."

"I'm sorry," said Raven. "I was under the impression you wanted information. Not an argument."

A large shape loomed in the door. Another one of the traders.

"Oh, Captain; my Captain," Raven smiled. "I may be unavoidably detained."

"I have some spare blood of the innocent will pour."

"What?"

"I said I have some spare time and money. I'll be in the casino."

"No," said Graak. "You said you had some spare... 'blood of the innocent will pour'."

The trader captain smiled. "I didn't say anything like that."

Now Raven was slumped in his seat. "The blood of the innocent will pour out for all to see," he said, mouth moving like that of a puppet. "The dead and the righteous cry out for justice. The oppressors will see how much blood they have spilled..."

He jerked, sat up and stretched. "I'm sorry. I must have dozed off. That was very rude of me."

Graak stared. "What in the name of the gods is *wrong* with you?"

"Sir?" said Raven.

"You had a funny turn," said Graak. "Saying things about blood and justice."

"Why would I say anything of the sort?" frowned Raven. "I'm doing fine."

Graak naturally suspected some kind of conspiracy, but couldn't prove it. He did seize both of them and drag them forcibly to medical to see if there was anything that could be verified or denied.

The main concourse was in a stir. Random humans all over were spouting the same gibberish. Not just children. Adults. The elderly.

The blood of the innocents that the Tu'atta punished will flow.

The air filled with the scent of metal before he saw the first rivulet.

Thick, dark, viscous fluid. It looked like human blood, but it was a wall that was bleeding. It certainly smelled like human blood.

The human traders were kneeling and babbling to themselves. Asking that... angels passed them by? Graak sneered. Human nonsense had no bearing on the case. He scanned the fluid and found it chemically identical to human blood.

There was no DNA to trace, because the humans didn't have DNA to find in their veins. One of the many reasons why they were lesser and deserved slavery. Everyone knew it.

People were starting to panic.

Graak organized a quick evacuation of the area. He had to get everyone out before it turned into a riot.

And then one of the walls caught fire.

*You have been weighed and found wanting.*

✱

The Taans had worked out how to use the pain sticks. Everyone was a lot more careful about throwing tantrums. They did whisper or cough words in the masters' tongue, much like they used to insult Sahra without getting caught out.

What they whispered were a few choice phrases that their whisperers also used.

*"They know."*

*"Murder."*

*"They know your secret."*

*"Death."*

*"They're laughing."*

And so on. No one rat overspoke another. No one rat said anything twice.

Some masters, Sahra could tell, were cracking faster than others. The boys, especially, were nervy and jittery. Looking onto shadows and breathing quickly and startling at every small noise.

Sahra almost felt sorry for them. They didn't have much in their lives. Most of them were abandoned at hatching and had subsequently lead a life of crime before the military gave them a hope at a longer future. And then they were sent here, to a place riddled with curses and malevolent spirits, and possibly under siege by an alien God.

But then she looked at their claws, and their weapons, and their pain sticks and their sharp, sharp teeth. The masters had all those weapons.

All the humans had were their faith and their brains and a bunch of tricks.

Then she didn't feel sorry for them at all.



Six days had passed since the last 'curse'. Graak was on his guard. So far, the last two curses had been a week apart. And today was the seventh day. He breakfasted on instant food, reconstituted with water from a small still he'd installed in his tiny living space.

Something told him this would not be a simple 'curse'.

He'd barely got rid of the yellow colouring in his hide. The halls still reeked of human blood. Whatever happened next... it would not be easy to clean up.

He dressed, as usual, in his uniform. He didn't bother with much in the way of civilian clothes. He never had much respect as himself. Uniform spotless, he strode out for the morning meet.

There were four officers waiting on parade. Picked out in the assembly space according to their rank and number.

Graak broke protocol and gestured them inwards. "What the hell's going on?"

"Sir," said a Taan. "I bunk with a lot of others in security and... the rest of my bunk-room's sick."

"Sick."

"Yessir."

Graak checked. Almost all of his staff were down with some mysterious ailment. He found through a quick search that the able station crew were down to less than the minimum necessary for smooth running of the station.

They would have a tough time keeping things together until the crew recovered.

His comms squawked into life. The voice of the four-star Kuin in

charge of everything. Tagri'idan. She, like him, had taken paranoid precautions with water and food. "There is a disturbance in my meeting space."

Graak flinched with his other able staffmembers as his own walls lit with human scrawl. "Let me guess. Letters of fire, combined with an astonishing volume of sickness calls?"

Other departments were calling in. He could hear the clicking as they queued up against a higher power.

"It's happening in meeting rooms all over the station, isn't it?"

"Exactly, ma'am."

She sighed. "Get on with it, then." The call disconnected, leaving him with multiple messes to catch and not enough hands to catch it with.

And words of fire on his own walls.

*You have been weighed and found wanting.*

\*

The humans called it *Murder Week*, because it was the week they could all get away with murder. With almost all of the masters sick, they had no time to stop their slaves doing anything they liked.

Even Mama just walked into a storeroom and walked out again with two boxes of ration baggies for her pantry.

Even though the holy law said, *thou shalt not steal*, almost everyone with skin was helping themselves to what they liked. Crops went missing from the plant rooms. Food went missing from the masters' farms. Bottles upon bottles of alcohol vanished from the shelves of bars and pubs.

Some even stole the jewelry off their sickened masters' sleeping

bodies.

And weaving through the chaos were the shockingly-sober rebels, claiming victory and asking for donations to the cause. Each carried a bucket and many slaves, not knowing what to do with their new-found wealth, threw it in the offered container.

There were other riches, though. One night, everyone had a Tu'atta delicacy called *steak*. It was a master food that was also good for humans, though it was better for humans if it was cooked longer.

Darvan presented Mama with a master's necklace, and hung it on her head like a crown.

Mama cried just to look at it. "Give it to the rebels," she said. "You know what the masters would do if they found me with this."

"So make sure they don't find it," said Darvan, still a little loud for all the healing his ears were doing. "Sahra can help. She done hid her pet for near to a year."

"Pet?"

Sahra had the sense to swallow her mouthful before she spoke. "Dangit, Duvi! Sometimes I could outright just *smack* you."

"Um," said Darvan. "Oops?"

Karl, as the eldest man in the house, laid out the law. "Go and call it in. Might as well see what's been taking food off'a us."

Sahra didn't argue. Just went to her best nook and opened the hatch to the little tunnel where Simy liked to hide. "Y'awnout, Simy. We done been busted."

\*

Simy dawdled on his way into the relatively open space of Sahra's

favourite sleeping nook. He knew some kind of retribution was going to happen. He did not resist Sahra's hands, nor her slightly-uncomfortable squeezing grip.

She didn't want him to go. She didn't want what was going to happen next, but she had to obey. There were rules in her society about obeying the eldest male. He wrapped himself over her left shoulder and squeezed in response.

"This is Simy," she croaked, her voice barely audible. "I love him."

The assembled family boggled.

"You found a Moshikaan slime dog?" said the mother.

"...yes'm...?" Sahra squeaked.

"Do you know what happens t' someone who tames one of those?" said one of the elder males.

"...'es..." said Sahra.

"You coulda been freed..." said an older sister.

Sahra clung tighter to him. Salt water fell from her eyes. "...ut th'n I wouldn' be w'f y'all no mo'..."

"Aaaawwww..." said the mother, lunging forward to scoop her up in a hug, with him squashed between them. "My poor little sweetheart..."

Simy wriggled out from between them. Even though it was nearly impossible for him to get crushed, he didn't like the sensation. The other humans stared at him as if he might start spitting up gold. He felt like he was presented on a platter with a bed of lettuce.

Simy cooed nervously.

"M' rat patrol knows 'bout him," said Sahra. "Um. He don't like bein' crowded, none."

"Your... rat... patrol."

If he was confident in talking, he could have warned her about saying too much. Instead, he draped himself across her shoulders.

"Um." Sahra backed off from her mother. Stood in the middle of the circle of her family. "I'm... sorta kinda involv'd... wif th' rebels."

The mother crossed herself. "God have mercy."

The eldest male stepped forth. "What do they have you doing? Running messages? Planting bombs? Drugs?"

"Naw, none o' those," said Sahra.

"Par'n m' bad words, Mama, but she's a gol-dang stra-tee-gi-cal genius. I'm jus' a Lieutenant, but I gotta salute 'er. She's nearly a whole dang admir'l."

"Darnit, Duvi!" Sahra made desperate, cut-throat motions with her hand while he was talking.

"How long?" managed the mother.

"Um. You 'memb'ur the ore processin' thing?" said Sahra.

"...ye-es?"

"Since jus' aftur then."

Their mother crossed herself for the third time this evening. "Jesus, God and the Angels... My little girl..." she shook her head. "Are you mixed up in these... curses?"

Sahra bit her lip. "Would it be bad?"

There was a long silence. The entire family shifted awkwardly on their feet, except for the littlest ones, who kept trying to pet Simy.

The mother began crying. The big, fat tears that could not be

stopped. "Sahra Johnston," she said at length, "I don't know whether to kiss you or smack you."

*Murder Week*, indeed.

✧

Many were still down from the mystery stomach bug. The station's entire industry had ground to a halt and essential functions barely limped along. Graak had only half his guards, but six of the best were guarding the Majestrix.

Sooner or later, whatever this was would strike at the very heart of the empire.

He also had a list of the 'traditional' curses and the ones that had so far struck the station. They didn't match, of course. An exact match might have been something of a boon to his fellow Tu'atta. A plague of locusts would have gone down a treat, right about now.

The morning meet went off without a hitch. No further letters of fire appeared.

This was the seventh day. Something was going to go crazy.

Everyone else recognized the pattern. They knew that this was the seventh day since the last 'curse', and that they were overdue for a new one.

Even the criminal element was keeping itself in check. Which made Graak uneasy. When the criminal element quit working, it was because they knew something bigger and nastier was going to go down.

Everyone was going through the lawful motions. Waiting.

And so was he.

A snapping noise startled him and made a civilian shop-owner scream. More snapping noises. Like the small fireworks used in demon-banishing ceremonies. All over the main concourse. One by one, vent guards fell from their places.

And there it was. The curse. The plague.

Thousands of evriyong poured out of the vents. Maybe even millions.

Graak ran for his office, punching up views on his monitors. It was all over the station. Vermin. And, he noted, a vermin that the Tu'atta found abominable and disgusting. Much like the Egyptians found locusts or lice.

Pestilence and vermin. Those, he noted, matched.

Then every blank wall burst into flame.

The same words of fire.

*You have been weighed and found wanting.*

\*

Once again, there was plenty to eat. The male Om'r security chief had solved the problem of thousands of evriyong everywhere by getting every human not already someone else's pet to capture the pests. It was a week of plenty.

Second-Papa was back, and he was very relaxed about talking at the table. But just in case they did not mention anything to do with the rebels.

Tonight, like the last three nights, was evriyong stoo. And there was no need to ration any bits because even the babies managed to come home with at least one lizard. Mama even cut out the gristly bits, setting them to dry in case of a later food emergency.

Duvi kept looking over at them as if he were figuring ways that Mama would never be that desperate.

"Crazy news, I been hearin'," said Second-Papa. "Haints and spooks and the holy spirit hisself been rainin' down judgement on our overlords."

"We ain't 'lowed t' talk about that," said Laura. "Could be snitches anywhere."

"Don't smell no tea in here," said Seventh-Papa. "Must mean there ain't no snitches in this house."

"Tea?" said Sahra. "Whazzat?"

"Fermented leaves, steeped in boiling water, and then drank all down. Some have it with a slice of lemon. Some have it with cream. Some add sweetner. Me? I don't see the point. God gave us water and that's plenty."

"Euw," said Tessi at the description of tea.

"Have you drunk some?" asked Sahra. Was her true-father a horrible snitch?

He must have seen the look on her face. "The masters put me with a snitch for a few years. She made me drink some. Tryin' to teach me it's good. Y'know. Like they do." He paused for effect. "Made me puke mah guts up *and* shit through a straw."

"Da-an..." said Mama.

"EEEEUUUWWW!" Sahra shrieked, along with the littles and the babies and even Mari and Netta.

"Never touched tea since. And you can never make me take any."

Sahra breathed relief. She didn't want a snitch in her family.

"You look a little too relieved there, Twinkle," said Second-Papa. He

didn't have a good memory for names and called all small children 'Twinkle'. He called elder children 'Sweet-thing' and grownups either 'Pal' or 'Hun'. Pal for the men and Hun for the ladies.

"Snitches are bad," said Sahra. "They dob you in for any ole thing, jus' so they can get a li'l more. It's wrong to trade people f'r luxuries."

"Dang straight," said Second-Papa. "Don't you sweat none, Twinkle. Your true-daddy's true-blue."

But a snitch could say the same thing. She was glad Mama's secret-shiny and Simy both were hidden and safe. Something that big? A snitch would practically kill themselves to tell a master.

She didn't want to test him, either. Best to let him think everything was normal. Pretend she was just another slightly-dull child slave among thousands just like her.

And fall back on old habits.

Listen. Watch. Learn. Think.

\*

Another week. Another disaster due. Graak stared at his ceiling and contemplated the novelty of rolling over and pretending he was dead. He did not want to deal with another curse. It was becoming a monotony. The curse would blindside him with its novelty, then there would be calls from all over the station, demanding his presence to personally unravel that which mere instruments could not.

His nose had a reputation for solving crime that he could do without, today.

And tomorrow, despite his best efforts to find anything, he would have to organize cleanup and deal with the inherent problems therein. That, combined with battling the everyday hassles of keeping all citizens on the orderly path to prosperity, made him a weary, weary

man.

And, just when things got back to normal... he'd get hit square in the face with another curse. A curse he couldn't explain, had to clean up after, and still do his job.

Thus, he fought to get out of bed. He dawdled over breakfast. He opened the floor in the morning meet in the hopes that someone had anything to say to delay his appearance on the main concourse to deal with whatever mess was happening this week.

And he still arrived on the main concourse ahead of time.

It was raining skin flakes and small parasites. Trash littered the floor. Shopkeepers and citizens alike were struggling with the vent panels. Which were mysteriously sealed shut.

The traditional method of waste disposal was not available.

"There should be words of fire," he said aloud. "Isn't this enough of a curse?"

Someone shrieked. He ran to investigate. The victim had been pouring a glass of water, only to find that the water was raw sewerage.

Every water tap was now delivering sewerage.

The wall behind him ignited with a soft *fwoomp*.

Tired of life, right at that moment, Graak turned to face them. They were the same as always.

*You have been weighed and found wanting.*

✱

Once again, the rats were on the main concourse instead of in the tunnels, dragging their carts behind them and gathering all the trash they'd tossed out the night before. Sealing the vent hatches shut was a

stroke of genius from Raven that meant that the masters could not clean up for themselves.

And, once they figured out *why* it was raining fluff, the masters were really upset that they couldn't dine at the restaurants without at least three rats staring at them with soulful eyes. And some of the really small rats kept wanting to play in the fluff instead of working. And some rats kept spreading fluff and gunk on any surface they touched... and they liked to touch anything they found interesting or new.

And, since rats hadn't seen a lot of the station outside of the tunnels, pretty much everything under five feet high got coated with sticky, grimy hand-prints.

Sahra's hardest task was keeping a straight face about it, pretending a curiosity about the masters' space that others actually had.

And, since any master's attempt to stop her and the other rats touching everything they could reach made the rats stop doing anything and throwing a crying fit... they pretty much had to let the rats do what they wanted so that they could do what was needed.

More than a few rats were sneaking little items into their carts that didn't belong there in the first place. Sahra did her best to stop them, because she knew what the masters would do when they were caught.

"It's okay," one of her lieutenants whispered into her actual good ear. "We got a plan."

She lead her to a forgotten vent behind something decorative and pried a corner open. It was just enough of a gap for the little things they were filching.

"See? Funds fer the cause."

"That's outright dangerous," whispered Sahra. "Y'all be careful. Real careful."

"We got about a hunnert vents like this in roundabout spots. Ain't

no master goin' notice."

"Super careful," Sahra added. "I don' wanna be tellin' yo' mama how an' why you done got shot."

Nina grinned. "Gotcha."

Now her hardest job was not panicking every time she saw one of her rats sneaking stuff. And, since just about every slave alive was filching valuable stuff, Sahra snuck coins off of tables and put them in her less-able hand until she got near a special rebel-vent.

Of course, the lower-value coins became salvage for that special-brand-of-stupid game she kept up at all times. She let the word get around. Keep a few small and very inconsequential shinies in the carts because the masters *expected* a certain amount of petty thievery from the rats.

If they were going to rob the masters blind anyway, they might as well do it *properly*.

Then Lila started singing an old hymn full of blood and violence, about vengeance against the oppressors and the sort of really horrible things God did to the bad people. Only she sang it in the Tu'atta tongue.

Sahra joined in with the chorus as she filched coins and picked up trash. She hummed along during the verses, since she didn't know all the words, just yet. The masters didn't dare make them stop, and the ones paying attention were making horrified faces at some of the lyrics.

Good.

The more scared they were of God and his Angels, the less likely they were to want to rile Him up by hurting His favourite people.

The Om'r security chief stalked by like a haint turned flesh. Sahra did not flinch. Did not act guilty. Just curious, like any other rat seeing

who was passing.

He passed her by. Looking for something - or someone - else. He was too busy to bother with another rat.

The Vasht around the corner, however, wasn't.

*"Surprise inspection, rat,"* said the Vasht. *"Show me your hands, then empty your cart."*

Sahra had been keeping track of her coins. Anything above a half-claw piece went into the vents as soon as she could get near one. Her cart was full of groat and half-groat coins. Her hand held a single talon coin.

The Vasht took it and put it in her pocket with a low growl.

Sahra emptied the cart on the floor with the rest of the trash. Some of the groats and half-groats got themselves lost in the fluff on the floor.

*"There have been complaints about rats thieving tips."*

*"Tips?"* echoed Sahra.

*"The coins."*

*"Coins is good credit,"* said Sahra. *"We find, we get food."* It was the best kind of stupid to be. Completely unaware that she was doing any wrong because that's how they trained her. She'd been taught that finding coins was good.

*"You leave coins on the tables,"* snarled the Vasht.

*"They left b'hind. We pick up the left b'hind. Is good."*

She could see some emotions playing across the Vasht's face. Disbelief. Anger. And the creeping realization that this rat, and possibly all the rest, did not know that taking coins from a table was any different from finding them in the tunnels.

"*I find now?*" asked Sahra. "*I find good.*"

The Vasht rumbled a groan. "*Go find.*"

Sahra crouched down and scooped her earlier finds back into her cart, with as many coins as she could grab back in there as well. Judging by the exasperated noise that came out of the Vasht, Sahra was doing a great job of driving the masters crazy.

This would probably be the only day they could freely steal anything. Tomorrow, the shop owners and the customers would be warned. They'd have measures in place to stop the rats from 'being good' in the wrong direction.

She filched a five-talon note off the next table and hid it in her less-able hand. Better make the most of it, then.

✱

Another week. Another day of waiting for the weight to drop. Waiting for the inevitable. While there were still rats on the main concourse picking up trash from the last week.

All the rats stopped. Froze as still as statues. Stood on their toes and stretched their arms up.

"The sweat of the innocent will fall," they chanted in unison. "The sweat of the innocent will fall."

He picked the nearest one up and shook her. She remained stiff and chanting. She remained stiff to the point where she fell to the floor when he put her down. Still reciting the words.

Graak smelled it before it came. A rain of foul-smelling salt water, reeking like humans did at the end of the day. Soaking everyone on the concourse and making the rats snap out of their trance and run around shrieking. Their carts scattering the debris they'd gathered, wherever they went.

A set of curtains he'd hung to discourage 'angels' burned off its hangar and revealed the burning words.

*You have been weighed and found wanting.*

✧

Sahra picked herself up quick from where she'd dropped, because the sweat-rain was turning all the fluff still on the floor into a really stinky goop. Even the masters hated the smell. They were doing what they could to plug their nose-holes just as fast as the humans were pinching their noses shut.

Eugh. They had not thought this would happen. It was the worst smell since the last time a master forgot what was in the taps. They were still trying to fix what the rebels had misrouted.

In the meantime, they were taking water by the bucket from the masters' water system, and using slaves they usually used for other business to do so.

Which meant that the regular work of the station was slowed to nothing because of a human curse.

Now with the sweat and the fluff making everything stink, living on the station would be very unpleasant. Maybe even horrible. Not nearly half as horrible as living as a slave. She'd seen the higher-ups places. Just one of their rooms could house two human families with plenty of room to spare. The space they called 'quarters' was maybe four or five of those put together, not counting the slave bunk-room.

Sahra, who regularly slept in a space she could barely fit into, had no sympathy for the masters who would be assaulted by smells in their beds. In their spacious bedrooms. Which were big enough for two human houses at least.

Slaves lived with smells every day. The rats more than most, because they picked up the things the masters took away. Then there

were the sorters and the gardeners who turned poop and organics into mulch that grew the plants that gave them air and food.

And the people who sorted the food, throwing the already-rotted stuff back into the mulch. Master food, especially the fruits, smelled nasty to human noses.

As far as Sahra was concerned, the masters were just getting a little feel of what it was like to be a slave under their own rule. She picked garbage out of the spreading, stinky slurry with her toes and the hand that wasn't holding her nose against the smell.

Masters were yelling at each other, sounding funny with their nose-holes plugged. Sahra, pretending to be deaf, had to keep her face straight while other rats with better hearing were struggling not to laugh for other reasons.

*"You girl! Over here!"*

Sahra heard, but since she was looking elsewhere, she acted like she hadn't.

*"You! Hey! YOU!"*

That was too loud for her to not hear. She jerked around like she'd just heard with a *"Whuzzat?"*

*"You!"* The shopkeep pointed straight at Sahra. *"Over here."*

Sahra dawdled her way over, picking her way through the muck.

*"Give me all the coins you have in that filth! You owe me!"*

*"No coin, me has,"* Sahra tried. *"No coin, me find. Days, days."*

The shopkeep picked her up, spilling her cart out into the muck. No coins fell. No coins had been there to fall for the best part of a week.

*"No coin, me! No coin, me!"* Sahra shrieked as the man shook her.

A security guard turned up, almost as if by magic. Not any of the hundreds of young Taans tripping over their feet. Nor any of the young-for-their-rank-but-at-least-competent Vashts. It was none other than the chief of security, Om'r Jeshi'ig himself. Sahra sort of curled in on herself and hoped he hadn't been paying attention to all the other times she'd started something. Or stolen something. Or got involved in something rebel-related. Or actually was involved in something related. Or... Or...

*"Is there a problem?"* asked the Om'r.

Sahra started to cry her way around, *"No coin me! No coin me!"*

*"This motherless rat won't return the money she stole from me!"* The shopkeeper shook her for emphasis, making her cart rattle and spill some of the few things that were left.

*"NO COIN ME!"* Sahra bawled.

Om'r Jeshi'ig, whose family name translated out to something near 'motherless', glared at the two of them before consulting his info-reader. *"I see there are numerous attempts on your part to reclaim coins from rats. Almost on the hour, it says here."*

*"No coin me! No coin me!"*

The shopkeep put her down, but kept a grip on her neck. *"So what? These thieving rats are ruining my business. I have a family to support."*

*"No coin me! No coin me!"*

*"There is a fine for nuisance reports, citizen K'zech..."*

*"No coin me! No coin me!"*

*"I can't afford to have rats in here stealing my merchandise and my money as well as fines for reporting them!"*

*"No coin me! No coin me!"*

"*You get a fine for reporting innocents, regardless of their species, and this one,*" he gestured to Sahra, still shrieking 'no coin me', "*Clearly has none of your valuables on her.*"

"*No coin me! No coin me!*"

Citizen K'zech insisted on digging through Sahra's scrounge for anything remotely valuable.

And since most of it was food wrappers left behind by everyone until there was nothing left, there was nothing of value in her cart.

"*Well, citizen K'zech?*" prompted Om'r Jeshi'ig.

"*I-apologize-to-the-station-for-the-waste-of-their-time-and-resources,*" growled citizen K'zech, letting Sahra go.

Sahra retreated half a step and knelt in the stinky muck with her hands on her head, still wailing, "*No coin me! No coin me!*"

The Om'r growled. "*I am going fine you for the hours I waste on fixing this one back to a working state. Understood?*"

"*Yes sir, Om'r motherless.*"

Sahra caught the Om'r snapping his head around and snarling soundlessly at the retreating shopkeep. He must have got that a lot, to not bother with it so much. Sahra didn't give him too much trouble on the way to cleaning up her legs and her bottom from the filth all over the floor.

She did ask, "*What motherless?*"

"*I am one of the many abandoned males who struggle for survival,*" he said as if that was the end of it.

\*

There had been a guard on all incubator creches since Graak

realized that the final curse could be enacted at any time. Especially since they had been largely unguarded with all the other curses going on.

Now he watched over all of them. Forgoing sleep in the night so he could ensure that nothing happened. Their readouts all showed healthy bio-signs. Temperatures normal. Motion proper.

Today... most of them would hatch.

Today was also the seventh, seventh day.

The last curse. The worst curse. Was the seventh.

A curse against infants.

Station-dawn turned, and with it came the first batch of anxious mothers.

They would be better guard than any other.

Of course, he checked their identities against the long list of expectant parents before relaxing his guard. He didn't want to fail at the last barrier.

The wall across from the exit flared.

*You have been weighed and found wanting.*

How? He'd watched. Except for the week in which nobody could have reached the eggs, he'd had a guard posted at all hours.

Then the outraged screaming started.

"A male! A worthless *male!*"

The temperatures had been set to guarantee females. He knew. He was as familiar with the operating lights of an incubator as anyone who expected their young to hatch.

Every last expected female... hatched as a male.

He and this station were cursed, indeed.

\*

Sahra was battling with the understanding barrier. She got it, but nobody else could figure out why it was important.

"They abandon their sons."

"So? Dead Tu'atta ain't our problem."

Sahra tried not to growl. "Y'don' get it. Dead Tu'atta don't do nothing. They don't eat nothing. They drink nothing, they don't wear nothing. Alive Tu'atta need stuff. They cost money. These babies is jus' goin' be mulch if'n we don't act."

"Why would we save a bunch of baby enemies?" grand poo-bah Ali made an unkind face. "They're the *enemy*."

"We's tryin' ta make it too much bovvur f'r them t' even be here, ain't we?"

"...ye-es...?"

"So raisin babies takes up lotsa re-sources, don' it?"

High-falutin' mucky-muck Ali shook his head. "I liked things so much better when we were just blowing them up."

"It's a workin' stradurjee. Ifn't it weren't workin', you wouldn'a made me a... what'm I now?"

"Rear Admiral."

"Yeah, that. I'm gettin' stuff done, ain't I? There's word that the whole station thing is a bad idea and spendin' too much money. I hear folks talkin' about leavin it t' rot."

"But our planet is still a *holiday* resort."

"Reckon we could take it back better wif alla the stuff the masters be bound t' leave behind." Sahra grinned as she petted Simy on her lap. "Sides, we can use them emeny babies."

"As...?"

"Duple agents. Raise 'em Christian - on stuff we stoled - an' get 'em to go deep cov'r fer us and mess things up for the masters."

"That's a minimum of five years..."

"I were six when I found you."

"And now you're a seven-year-old Rear Admiral," said his high-and-mightiness Ali. "I admit, your strategies have merit, but spending five years on this?"

"Mebbe better. Make one or more of th' masters spend five years on it."

"What?"

"Masters spend the money fo' the upkeep, but they goin' hire slaves t' do the ack'shul keepin'. Tha's when you put yo'r people in t' raise 'em proper on the masters' Talons."

"And how do you plan on convincing the masters to do all this?"

"We just done scarin' 'em up real good. I reckon summon should go have a chat wif the Majestrix," and then she added sarcastically, "long may she reign."

✧

The Majestrix Tarqa never slept alone. She also had yet to produce an heir, because selecting a proper sire was serious business and she would not allow herself to become gravid -or ruin her figure- unless

the sire was one whom her beloved people agreed was a good sire. Which meant he had to hold some degree of public favour under her. Gods and Goddesses help anyone who sought to gain favour *over* her.

The secret that few knew was that when she didn't have a male in her bed, she shared it with a human. Her Nanny. She was old for a human, specially selected when the then-princess was a day past needing her mother. Whatever her original name was, it was now forgotten. She was Nani. Now and forever.

She was Tarqa's kindness and warmth in her youth. The source of her care when her allergies erupted and she could not be seen in public for fear of a reaction. Now, she was the Majestrix's secret indulgence. The instant Tarqa realized the human was approaching the age of infertility and therefore execution, she excluded Nani from the rules and devoted a hefty sum to the human's upkeep.

Nani was now the oldest human anywhere. Her hair had turned whiter than her skin and she needed soft, warm spaces to be comfortable.

Tarqa dreaded the day when Nani would eventually die. She could not go to sleep without someone keeping her warm and safe for the night.

Which was why it was such a shock to hear the old woman saying, "My daughter! My daughter!"

Tarqa opened her eyes to an unfamiliar light. Which turned out to be a small child, glowing in the darkness. She, too, was all white like Nani.

"Our God speaks to you, and you do not listen," said the child. Her voice sounded... strange. Like it was everywhere all at once. "He has blessed you with sons in a gesture of mercy, but you leave them to die in the cold."

"Sons aren't a blessing," she tried to explain.

"You refuse a gift. Our God will be angry. He will punish you further."

"No! No more plagues! No more curses! What must I do to gain his favour?"

"Save the children. Save all the children."

Then a dark fog descended on her until the morning.

There was no trace than anyone had been there. No hint that anything had happened, beyond a mild headache. And then one of her walls gently ignited in human writing.

Writing she knew too well.

*You have been weighed and found wanting.*

Naturally, she ran to Nani. "Did you see the little human girl, last night?"

"Last night, I slept. You murmured in your sleep and I soothed your brow. I saw no little human girl. You must have dreamed, my darling."

Only Nani could get away with correcting the Majestrix like that, because Tarqa recognized that the old woman did it out of love. Everyone else, human or Tu'atta, had motives and agendas.

"I saw a little girl, around six years old. Maybe as old as seven. Her hair and skin were white. Her sheath shone... it barely covered her body. Almost shameful... She was so thin. So frail..."

Nani gasped. Tears were in her eyes. "My daughter... You just described my daughter..."

"I didn't know you had family..."

"I had four sons. They went to other families to raise. And one daughter. Nobody wanted her... and she starved to death. Of all my true-children, her fate hurts me most. I didn't tell you, my darling, for

fear of bringing darkness into your world."

Tarqa rubbed her muzzle against the human's cheek, gently licking up the tears of her caregiver as if doing so would stop her sadness. "I will not let any more children die. I promise."

And, in a rare display of urgency, she ran naked to her work desk to compose an edict to protect all the innocents. No matter the cost.

She had Nani's sadness and an angry god to worry about. Neither of those things should stay.

\*

It was the first station-wide public address in two languages since the way-long-ago. Sahra listened to both parts, making sure the translation was accurate. It wouldn't be the first time someone chose to alter the message for the less-bright amongst the audience.

For once, it matched.

"It has been a horrifying seven days for all of my people, and my heart goes out to each and every one of you. We appear to be under siege by an angry god, and thus must stand together until such time as this god can be... reasoned with. As part of our reparations to the divine, we are guaranteeing the safety and security of all abandoned children in *all* the Empire's established realms. We henceforth decree that any child without a family shall be guaranteed food, shelter, and safety. It is a crime to attack or harm an orphan. It is all of our sacred duties to feed, clothe and shelter any orphan. To that end, I am establishing the Holy Grace Charitable Orphanage, where all abandoned children are welcome, and all caregivers who donate their time will be... specially reimbursed from my own purse."

The masters around her gasped, they knew that the Majestrix's purse was big enough to fit whole planets in.

Her fellow slaves didn't react. Slaves didn't earn anything.

"And, to make things fair, and show the angry god that we are willing to listen, slaves will be chosen at random to also care for the abandoned children. They, and their children, will be freed. They will be given holdings appropriate to becoming self-sustaining. They will be given means to travel. Their children will be given an education equal to the highest born amongst my people. At the very instant that their charges are capable of looking after themselves."

The excitement in the air dropped. It would be five to ten years before that particular ticket paid off. And Sahra could guess that children weren't allowed to take care of abandoned Tu'atta babies, despite the fact that they helped with their own baby siblings since they were old enough to carry them reliably.

She would encourage Mama to put her name in. And any of her Papas that she happened by. And any Gempas or Gemmas. Not that many were around. The masters like to kill their slaves off by the time they were sixty, and deemed no longer fertile.

The oldest human Sahra had seen was a white-haired lady she found sharing the bed with the Majestrix. It took quick thinking and a lot of frantic sign language to get it through to the lady that Sahra was there to change the way things were without hurting anyone.

She said her name used to be Rizo. That Sahra should remember that. That nobody was alive now who did.

So Sahra told Simy, after she was done haunting the Majestrix. Because Simy would remember long after Sahra, the rebels, and everything else had been forgotten - win or fail. Moshikaan slime dogs lasted for very, very long times.

And, to make sure, she got one of the more literate members of the rat patrol to etch some words into a wall in their centre base.

*Remember Rizo. They took her name. They killed her family. She spent her life caring for a child not her own. The masters took everything from her. This is why we fight back.*

And the walls were going to remember, too. For as long as the station stood.

It wasn't much justice, but it was all the slice of it Sahra could get.

*We need more justice, she thought. That's why we fight, too.*

Justice was hard to get when you had nothing but your own wits.

Freedom would not help Rizo, with her family gone or dead. All her friends dead by decree. She was pretty much set on dying of old age in the Majestrix's care. And possibly being tortured by master medicine into surviving one more day because the Majestrix couldn't deal with life without her nanny.

Sahra didn't even try to entertain helping the old lady into heaven. That would be cruel. And maybe turn the Majestrix back the other way.

There was nothing more she could do. And there was little that felt worse about that.

Other business.

There had to be other things to do against the masters. Maybe other words to set the walls on fire with. Something else. Something special. Something that would make them run home and never come back again.

Stealing money out of closed stores did little good. Stealing food and merchandise did little good. Most stayed through fire, bugs, disease and all. Some were leaving, it was true. More and more shops on the concourse were going out of business. More and more civilians were leaving.

But not the military. The military stayed. The military got more military in - untrained, clumsy new recruits - to deal with the trouble Sahra and the rebels supplied.

She and her *Mosquitoes* could only put bombs on military vessels when they were docked. Which didn't do much for the return trip. And timers didn't like going through wormholes. Neither did receivers.

Maybe blowing up military ships counted, even if they blew up without too many militia on board.

It was something she'd have to talk about.

✧

"It's plan B," said Ali. "We're making our own *Mosquito*-class vessels for our 'military escorts.'" A nasty grin showed up white against his dark features. "Instead of draining fuel, they'll plant a bomb on the fuel lines and just... wait until they can't hear us any more." His hands mimed the results.

"That's downright nasty," Sahra opined. "You know t' stick to the military ones, right?"

"Damn straight," he said. "Once you hit the civilians, you invite a guerrilla war. I'd rather have them out in one go than having to wait until they die of old age."

"Nor have 'em go on like th' Hatfeelers an' Coys."

"Exactly. Short, sweet and decisive. Just like this one." Ali showed off a brown, plastic-wrapped package.

"Djaak? I thought we was all over that."

"This is a special blend, with three common allergens pulverized to powder and mixed generously in. To them, it'll seem like the hand of God has struck them down."

Sahra grinned. "That's gonna be right messy. All over the place. You should promote yo'self again."

Ali laughed. "Anything to keep you from sneaking up behind my 'throne'," he joked. "Any improvements? Critiques?"

"Just a li'l thought..."

"Do tell."

"Does ipecac work onna masters like it works on us?"

Ali's eyes widened and he reeled as if struck by a really slow giant. "Oooohhh... you are *evil*. I *like* that in an Admiral under my command." He kissed her forehead. "Angels bless you, I think we have ourselves another curse. Well done."

Sahra smiled on the outside. Was she really evil? Was going to hell the only way to reclaim Hevun? And how did that weigh up against one blessing from a man who liked to blow things up?

\*

There were no words of fire for this curse. Just an astonishing array of disease. Rashes, closing windpipes, vomiting, mucous, fevers, dizziness and, in extreme cases, death. It was worse than decimation, and seemingly random. There was no way to tell who was going to fall over sick, next.

Which made every living hour a terror.

Graak muscled through it, doing his utmost to keep the fear from gnawing at him. Even though five out of eight subordinates he called on to perform a task would almost instantly fall from whatever it was.

Even the shopkeepers were prey to this plague. Every other pace along the concourse resulted in him assisting civilians, medics and his own soldiers alike. Even up to his elbows in small consecutive disasters, he noticed a few strange specifics about the mystery illness running riot on his station.

It did not hit any children below the age of sexual maturity. It did not hit any of the dedicated sobrietists. It did hit quite a lot of people he had arrested for carrying Djaak before the drug became so widespread that having some became little more than a misdemeanor.

He left his lessers to deal with the ensuing mess and loaded a list of the afflicted into his personal data reader. Then he gave himself a warrant to search all their residences. Given some of the afflicted's attitudes towards his heritage in relation to theirs... he performed those searches with added gusto.

Djaak.

In every last one he searched.

Graak did not wait for higher orders. He put out his own order for victims of the mystery ailment to be suspected of taking Djaak and their quarters were to be searched while they were occupying medical. It was a potential waste of resources and he would likely catch all colours of hell for it, but not if he was victorious. Thus, he assigned his most useless officers to victim cleanup and his most sharp-eyed to the search and seizure.

Then he found a dedicated sobrietist in sciences and asked politely that they test the Djaak under biohazard precautions for anything suspicious.

Heavens forbend that he accidentally got the sobrietist ill with the suspected vector. That would doubtless land him in even more trouble than he was already in.

But so far, his results were beyond synchronicitous.

Five hundred illnesses so far. Five hundred little packets of Djaak hidden away in the predictable places. And thousands to go.

He joined the search once he had finished with the sobrietist. His results kept climbing. One thousand. Two thousand. Three thousand.

Along with finds of an astonishing array of contraband. All seized pending the victims' survival for later prosecution. It was going to be interesting to see what profits he gained as a direct result. The payments to keep various scandals out of public notice, the attempted bribes to let the charges slipped by, the subsequent payments to avoid bribery charges... Some of the victims were from a very high bloodline, indeed.

Lots of it would go straight to the Holy Grace Charitable Orphanage. Graak did not fund his existence on confiscated moneys taken from attempted bribers. Contrary to rumour, he did not own a small resort-planet somewhere in the binary solar system of K'g'desh; bought with payments to avoid public charges.

He lived so frugally, the public would love for him to have a resort planet. Or otherwise secretly corrupt. All his spare money went directly to other charities dedicated to helping out abandoned male children. That funding would have to be divided again, now. Bribes were usually divided equally amongst his chosen charities. The payments were divided according to etiquette. A percentage to the stations overall funding. A percentage to the Majestrix, long may she reign. And the rest according to his personal wants.

And what he wanted to do, was give it all to various charities.

Now that the Majestrix -long may she reign- publicly backed her own charity home, fifty percent of the remainder would go straight to the Holy Grace Charitable Orphanage. The other fifty percent would be distributed as evenly as he could manage.

A one-star Kuin turned up in his shadow.

"Yes?" he said.

"Kuin Tagri'idan wishes to see you at the utmost importance."

Having found his three thousand, two hundred and fifty-fourth baggie of Djaak, Graak submitted it for evidence and sent a Taan with it to his sobrietist scientist for further analysis. "I am always available

for matters of utmost importance."

They took the fast transit to operations, where Tagri'idan was looking both somewhat ill and very ticked off. Her office smelled of vomit and excrement, the latter of the two wafted inconveniently from her office ensuite.

"I have informed you previously that possession of Djaak is a misdemeanor," she growled. "Yet you have thousands of arrest warrants based on possessing Djaak..." She sipped water. It smelled - albeit subtly - like slaves' water.

She, too, had noticed that the slaves did not get sick.

"Of all the collapsed victims of this... plague," said Graak, "One hundred percent have significant amounts of Djaak. As well as... quite a few interesting examples of contraband." He loaded his list-so-far into Tagri'idan's monitor.

"I do not want you arresting everyone who is ill," she said. Her innards gurgled.

"If everyone who is ill is taking D'jaak and has a collection of contraband, they are flouting the law. Anyone who flaunts the law is subject to charges. Regardless of their family... or their rank."

"You'd try to arrest the Majestrix herself, long may she reign."

"If she was flouting her own laws, and failed to heed my warning. Yes."

"Then I must report myself. I have been taking small amounts of Djaak in a medicinal capability. To help me sleep."

"But not in excessive amounts," noted Graak. "I will have to search your quarters for contraband."

"I'm aware."

"I must, therefore, respectfully ask that you remain in your office

until the search is completed."

"...not that I'm capable of leaving it right now..." she breathed deep and gripped her belly as her innards gurgled dangerously. "Go on. Perform your duty."

Graak bowed in respect before he left. Tagri'idan was one of the few who knew the rules and followed them as best she could. Even the ones that contradicted themselves.

✧

Once again, the slaves were celebrating. The masters were too sick or too few and too busy to bother with disciplining the humans. Sahra didn't share any of that joy. She hung back in corners and watched. Nobody here thought it was evil to poison the masters with the drug they loved the best. Most of them didn't even know it had happened that way.

Some were singing joyful hymns about the downfall of enemies.

Some were thanking God and his angels.

Some were just enjoying the moment. Eating stolen food and drinking from stolen bottles. Gemmas and Gempas slated to die that day were thanking the air for another day with their grandchildren.

One such Gempa found her hiding in a corner and watching the world over her arms while she hugged her knees.

"What's the matter, Little? It's steak for dinner. Well, for those who still have teeth to chew it."

Sahra bit her lip. Gempas and Gemmas had little to trade for, when it came to snitching. Could she trust this one?

Time to test. "What wouldja do if'n you knew someone'd done sump'in to make the masters sick?"

"Child, I would bless that someone beyond the end of my days. I would speak up for them in the halls of heaven, even if there were already twelve others to defend them."

"Even if someone said it were evil?"

"One voice in a choir can say something different, Little; that doesn't mean they're going to be heard."

"Some of th' masters are dyin'..." *and it's all my fault.*

"Sweet thing, they been makin' *us* die for hundreds of years."

Sahra stared at him. "That don't make killin' them right."

He had a funny smile. Sort of sad and amazed and happy at the same time. "You're -what- seven?"

"...yeah...?"

"You must be an old soul, to be so grown-up inside your head. Listen to another old soul." he leaned close and murmured in her ear. "God gave us rules, and the devil came up with situations in which we'd have to put those rules down fo' a while. The thing is, it's up to us to choose to pick 'em up again after we're done."

"Even 'Thou shalt not kill'?"

"Especially that one. Come on, Little. Some fellers up on the eastward side stole us all a master treat called 'ice cream'. I remember my Gemma telling me it used to be a human treat. We gotta hurry before all the good flavours get took."

Sahra took his hand as she got out of her nook. Ice cream may not solve her problems, but it sounded like it had the promise of making her feel better about things for a little while.

Someone close to the ice cream thieves was singing a new hymn. Not any tune Sahra had heard before.

"God bless the rebels," they sang, "Fighting to be free... Break our chains and bring the rains that make the masters see... We need our freedom... We need to make this fuss... We're not just fighting for this station, we fight for all of us..."

Another blessing from someone who knew the 'miracles' were rebel-made, at least.

Sahra got a scoop of something brown and cold with lumps in it. It tasted of nuts and sugar and cream and it got all over her hands because the thieves had stolen ice cream, but nothing to eat it out of or with.

Nobody cared. They had something usually made just for the masters. Even if it got all over them, like it got all over David and Mama too, they were going to enjoy every last drop. Because it was made by them, but they had never got close to getting any, before.

Slaves made this station. After a shell got put on by the masters, it was slaves who put in the floors and tunnels and ran cables and put up walls and carried all the heavy things for masters to install.

It was slaves who grew their food and killed it if they didn't want it alive and cooked it and served it and cleaned up after their mess, but never, ever, got to eat it. Sahra was glad in the case of some of the bugs, but the principal remained.

It was slaves who made the clothes, who cleaned and prepared, who did everything the masters didn't want to do.

They'd earned this.

Even if they had to steal it, first.

It still didn't make it right. It wasn't near halfway to fair. But what else was there? Submission got them slavery for so long that hardly anyone remembered that they owned the planet Hevun. People who fought back on their own got shot. Fighting back together may not be right, but it was the only way that seemed to be working at all.

All of her rat squad had overheard masters who thought they were talking alone. Of those masters, none wanted to stay. Some had to stay, some were forced to stay, but all of them would leave if they had a chance. Even some of the businesses were closing on the main concourse.

If there was a better way to help them along, Sahra had yet to find it.

And so had all the rebels and the rats and the surprise grownups who turned out to be real rebels at heart. Of everything they had tried, this was all they had left.

Sahra prayed that it was going to work out in the end.



Graak liked to stare out the windows nobody else bothered with. An ancient habit from a crueler past. The windows nobody bothered with, he reasoned, had no-one there to make his life a misery. The view was not important. It just gave his eyes something to do while his mind raked through the ashes of yesterday for glimmers of genius.

Words of fire were still turning up, but the incidents were random and not precipitated by oracular utterances. Without the predictions, however briefly in advance of the event they were, the spectacular events were somehow *more* frightening.

At least the first seven had an inkling of preparation.

It was why a very younger Graak much preferred the adults who warned him before they hit him. He had a chance to brace for it, or even run away if he was lucky. He'd learned not to watch the treat in the claw, but rather the other claw, or their laughing friend.

Attack could come from any angle. Especially if there was bait.

So far, this human god had not offered bait. If it was a god and not some complicated trickery from someone after the Majestrix's throne.

The humans could not possibly have cooked all this up on their own.

And, for that matter, there was a special breed of concerned citizen who felt they had to show the flaws in a system by exploiting them. Usually for their own profit.

So what flaws were there in the mighty Tu'atta empire and this station in particular?

He had to force himself to avoid the learned response of, *Nothing*. He had to make himself think. He knew humans were involved. Their scent was all over every curse/miracle that had happened. Add that to the fact that humans were literally almost everywhere, and he had his weak point.

The humans. Someone was using the humans and they were forbidden to disobey a Tu'atta.

And they had definitely been told not to say anything about it, too. Humans could lie on command if they were taught... and they could be taught earlier than anyone believed.

Right. Humans were the key. But who was turning them? How could he find the claw manipulating them? No. He was asking the wrong question.

Who was getting rewards from all this nonsense? What profit was there in driving all but the most determined out of the station?

His eyes kept drifting back to an anomaly on the hull of the warship in the window. Or, more correctly, the rear portion of the warship. A tiny little thing, looking too much like a kink in the fuel line.

How many engineers had missed something like that?

Was that the cause of the mysterious intermittent power drain? A kinked fuel line? The problem that had been plaguing them for the longest time was caused by some lazy engineer's incompetence...

And, just when he was beginning to compose an angry message to the engineering corps, the apparent kink broke off and drifted away. Fuel did not leak like that. A severe enough leak to break up pieces ended up breaking the entire ship.

Something flared, and the mysterious debris changed course.

It wasn't a piece of debris.

It was a tiny vampire ship.

Sucking fuel from military vessels for some other need.

Sabotage!

Whoever had this technology couldn't have made many under his watchful eye. He'd have to check with his records. He was going to have to visually inspect every image of every military vessel that had docked over the time everyone had been complaining.

And in the meantime, he would take... measures.

He had no staff to keep personal watch on docked vessels, and the cam-analysis programs were not clever enough to spot tiny discrepancies on a space vessel. They were, after all, only good for tracking people someone else identified. If he suborned pilots, passengers, and anyone with a window to look out to keep watch for the splinter-ships. And then, speed up the response system so that soldiers and ships alike would isolate and capture one.

He needed them alive for interrogation.

To think, that all he had to do was watch the problem area to discover the nature of the problem.

And ready the shipboard troops to scramble, the next time one appeared. Which meant making sure his junior task-force was at each and every observation port with a hot-wired comms unit in their ready claws.



Sahra clamped her *Mosquito's* back to the fuel line. She'd done this dozens of times, before. It gave her time to think up new tricks to play on the masters. The Tu'atta. They couldn't hear her thinking it, out here. All she could hear was her own breathing in her mask and the contented burbling of Simy under her knees.

Lots of people were leaving. Civilians. Sahra could see some passenger ships docked, across the way. She'd heard lots of Tu'atta griping about the station, lately. About curses and bad luck.

One had run down the main concourse, naked, screaming about the judgement ahead.

Whichever trick was working, it was really working good.

Sahra watched her tank levels crawl up, so slowly. Some days, it took a little while, other days, it took forever. There was no clock inside the *Mosquito*. There was no room.

Ships were passing close by. Close enough that she could see the windows and the Tu'atta inside. If she stayed still while they passed, maybe they wouldn't notice. Sahra only moved her eyes, going from the passing ship and its windows to the fuel gage.

*Come on... Come on... Fill up you stupid slow thing. Hurry!* Not that she could launch with the ship in the way, with all those people at the windows. Staring and pointing.

Right her.

Crap.

The people staffing the civilian ship would be coming up with excuses, then looking out themselves and talking to the captain. Who would then radio the soldiers on the ship that Sahra was currently stealing fuel from. Who would then do--- what?

Check their sensors? The *Mosquito* was too small to be picked up by Tu'atta sensors.

Send another military vessel on a flyby?

Maybe she could be gone by the time that happened. They had to wait for the civilian ship to clear out of the way first.

Eighty-four percent.

Eighty-five...

Sahra stared suddenly at a master in a space suit. No human was that shape. His body-speak said he was just as shocked to find her there as she was to be looking at him.

No time for thought. She hit the panic button.

It shot a hole clear through the Tu'atta in a space suit and unlatched the *Mosquito* from the military vessel.

Eva's voice came over the comms. "We've got the emergency signal. What's happening?"

"Done been busted. Can't retrace. Gotta go man-yool." She pressed her fingers on the controls and shoved her foot down on the go-faster button.

She hadn't done *this* before.

Sahra found out quick that the *Mosquito* could go places that other ships couldn't follow. Even the suited masters couldn't catch her. Either she bumped them with her ship's pointy nose and wrecked their suits, or blasted them with her engine exhaust, or just outright shot them because they were in her way.

A few random shots actually hit master ships. Did some damage.

Sahra shot away from the station. Get some distance. Maybe hide in the asteroid belt or use it to play dodge and come back in by the quiet

side.

But they seemed to be waiting for that.

A Striker boxed her off from going into the asteroids. Another came up underneath her like a deadly landing strip. A third got in on the other side. A fourth on top.

Sahra felt more than saw the fifth, behind. A looming shadow waiting for her to fly straight so they could open fire.

They were the only ones who could, without hitting another ship.

Good thing for Sahra that she hadn't quite figured out *how* to fly straight, yet.

Every tiny place where she thought she could go turned out to be swarming with suited soldiers. All with the big guns and all under shields she couldn't shoot through.

She kept trying, all the same.

Then she realized where they were herding her *to*.

The wormhole.

The certain-death one that lead, by and by, to heaven. One more unremarked scratch on the firstcomer's ship. Maybe a smear of blood and whatever Simy was made of.

She hit the comms. "They's herdin' me to the wormhole. Tell my Mama what they done. Tell her I'm sorry. An' tell my rat patrol to keep on fightin'. We needs t' keep on fightin'."

"God watch over you," said Eva. There was nothing else to say.

Sahra reached down to pet Simy, and really leaned on the go-faster pedal. Was this suicide? Or just making it get over quick? Sahra suddenly didn't care. "Our father who art in hev'n... hallered be thy name--"

Something happened, just as she went into the one patch of space nobody wanted to go. The *Mosquito* bucked, and she had the briefest sight of glowing purple smoke and bright colours painful to her eyes, all through blue before something squeezed all her air out of her and it went dark.

*Please wait, I gotta...*

## Thank you for reading this free book!

I hope you enjoyed reading this first book of my "Hevun's Child" trilogy, I would love for you to read the next two books, and even hear your thoughts about it.

If you're interested in reading more of this series, or to get my contact details and let me know what you thought, please visit my website at:

[www.CMWeller.com](http://www.CMWeller.com)

As an indie author, word of mouth is everything, so if you enjoyed my book, or even if you didn't but you can think of someone who would, I would be ever so grateful if you can tell some friends about me or make a post on your blog, or social media website to let folks know.

If you have a book review site, please contact me as I will give out free copies in exchange for reviews.

Thanks once again!

C.M. Weller.