



DOUBLE AGENCY

A NOVELETTE BY
CELYN Q. INGERSOLL

Celyn Q. Ingersoll

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents portrayed in this novelette are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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PROLOGUE

THE ARTIST considered how she might immortalise the glow rippling through the digesters' gills. Their great fungal plates had, far above, joined into a phosphorescent cap, sucking glacially down the skyscraper that thrust from the canal's opposite bank. Acrylic wouldn't suffice to convey their ghostly light—careful overcoats of thinned oil, perhaps?

When she'd volunteered to invade, they'd issued her with new armour. It'd hiss out of a reinforced chamber strapped over the small of her back, squirt out of pinprick holes in the articulated column anchored over her spine, wrap her in a gel that coalesced into a lattice of woven plates the shade of scorched mulberries. The stuff was harvested from servant-forms' protoplasm; all traces of soul had been carefully withdrawn so the R&D girls would be able to sleep at night, yet from time to time the Artist felt the plates squeeze around her in a lonely hug.

She was a one-woman force marker, counted among a jealous elite with esprit out to *here*, of a kind who set general staff to swooning. Except there wasn't any action in this place, nothing to hit—the witchy bitches in H.E. had gone and blown their hole into this reality's timeline three relative centuries too late—so being an invader meant being stuck

with make-work.

Tonight, that make-work lay across the moon-dappled water: An underground mall yawning from the canal wall like a severed artery, healthy little patches of cadmium-red bushes woven around mangled rebar like bandages. There'd been no need to preserve these abandoned commerce tunnels, so the engineering corps had snipped right through them when they'd sliced the canals out of the earth.

She clambered across a corroded pipeline and rappelled down into the opening. Regulation demanded she carried her service rifle even on petty errands like this one, but, despite rumours of a resistance movement, this reality had never given her reason to use it. When the Iron Spire—gargantuan earth drill, armoured carrier, and opulent headquarters in one—had punched up into the middle of this city through a breach between realities, they'd expected a fight. But the humans they found clinging to what remained of the vast network of automated infrastructure were in no condition to resist, and none of them had seen nor heard from any living person outside the city's hinterlands in decades. What passed for their government hadn't surrendered so much as shrugged and handed over the keys.

Her armour's lights chased away wet midnight black, revealing rust-shuttered shopfronts, railings, seats, way-finding marks, dead cameras. Little whispers, too, of the city's former glory: An automated logistics chute hanging half-open in an expression of permanently dumbfounded shock, empty drone bays, just-in-time feedstock looms that'd seized up a generation ago, material synthesisers with corroded, yawning sockets where AI cores once hummed.

The central atrium was a deep well of floors stitched together with long-broken escalators and faux marble stairwells spiralling down into implacable black. Above, she knew, soared the condemned building. Below: A swollen, invisible, immaterial cyst that clotted and poisoned the city's ley-lines. It wasn't something one could touch, only feel, but over many generations the city's misery had collected, settled, and congealed in places like this; boils filled with psychic pus that couldn't drain until the glass and concrete splinter above was completely

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dissolved.

Some of the smaller blights pocking outlying districts had already healed. A few hardier citizens had been able to cross through and settle there, but the metaphysical sickness still seeping from carbuncles like this one meant that most couldn't so much as approach the city's core. Being this close to the source would already have broken the hardiest of the other allied species—they'd've thrown up, fled choking back towards open air. These awful places, suppurating throughout the city like pox, had forced the bulk of their forces into a scrambled evacuation back through the Breach.

But not her, not the Artist. Where most of her world's inhabitants buckled under the spiritual corrosion seeping through the city's bones, those called up out of the deep caverns—loathed flayers, servant-forms, ooze-winged fliers, flesh-clouds, artery-weavers—were adapted to it, within living memory had even fed on something like it. They were those whose creators had stuffed them into the deepest, darkest corners of an obscure reality like a sack of unwanted kittens. Those who, invited into the light, had gratefully accepted new bodies and pleasant hungers. Those who, her among them, had accidentally become the occupation's lynchpin.

A rusted metal ramp that was once an escalator would be her way down. She had sightings to take, a report to give. Make-work was still work.

1

THEO'S WIFE was eating his mind.

"Your people could drive the best of us mad," he reminded her. "The cruelest experiments this world ever devised would seem a gentle stroll."

"Yes, but I want to know what it's like," insisted Anna, his wife. "I want to try it!"

Theo made no reply. Raindrops pelted against glass behind thick pleated curtains. A crack of dusk-light spilled in from the street outside and blanketed their apartment in a soft cerulean wash. Wall hangings swayed gently in the dehumidifier's draft, potted plants' little leaves stood silhouetted behind a snarl of hastily discarded clothing strewn in a trail up to the bed.

Anna nuzzled against the tree trunk of Theo's neck as they lay together in the twilight. She wore a fluffy white rabbit fur choker that stood out against her deep violet skin, matching bands wrapped around her wrists and ankles. She'd had them specially made, a little treat she'd discovered on a stroll through the back country of Theo's psyche: A human woman's bare crotch crunched down to two hundred and fifty-six colours, painted fingernails parting wet vulval lips, a white fluffy

band decorating her wrist, and the kind of breathlessly hard little erection a boy can feel only in his tender years. Theo had long forgotten it but she treasured such details as other women treasured void-jewels harvested from the petrified organs of dead star gods; she adored making Theo happy in ways he didn't have to understand.

"I liked seeing it," continued Anna, after a while. "It made me tingle."

Theo stretched. He was careful to not dislodge the tentacle that nestled wetly under his right ear. Countless minuscule filaments spiralled from its suckers, pushed through his skull into the depths of his brain. Marriage ingrains unexpected details—how your spouse breathes in sleep, the muffled sound of their urine, their gait from afar—and likewise Theo recognised Anna's mental shape as she grazed upon his thoughts.

"Hypodermics, flashing lights, and writhing?" he asked, incredulously. He chose to leave unspoken that the vintage B-movie actress's thrashing had been unconvincing and that the needles touched no vein he knew. "Doesn't seem your usual thing."

"My husband thinks me ignorant of my own tastes," came Anna's shattered, haunting mind-voice. She smiled haughtily, lips motionless.

"But since you asked," she continued using her physical mouth, "I imagined you doing that to me. Not filming a bad thriller with me in it, I mean. Brainwashing me. Overwriting me. It made me wet. It's making me wet now." She grabbed his wrist and pulled his fingers down to her crotch, cooed as she tasted how her slickness provoked his arousal. "See?"

"I do." Theo resisted the urge to seek out the hard little nub near the top of Anna's vulva. "But your mere existence is an affront—"

"Thank you!" Anna purred, flattered at her husband's uncharacteristically kind words.

"—and not only do you read and eat thoughts, you can plumb terrifying psychic depths, remake personalities, erase and mould memories at will. You're a mind-flayer, sweetlet. What do you imagine such brainwashing would do?"

“It would make me love you.”

“You already love me.”

“Mmhm!” Anna planted a happy kiss on her Theo’s lips. “More than anything.”

“Forgive my confusion.” Theo flexed his finger upwards, and was rewarded by a soft squish and a gasp from his violet wife.

“I—ah!—I don’t have to make sense, beloved. That’s not the point.” She savoured for a moment the satisfaction Theo felt at having made her gasp so, fed upon its nourishing affection. “The brainwashing would *force* me to love you.”

“You choose to love me?”

“No,” shrugged Anna, “I think I would melt back into raw void-stuff if I tried to stop.”

She narrowed all three of her eyes—the two pearlescent orange ones that matched those of a human body plan, plus the crystalline pseudo-eye in her forehead—and swung her leg up and over to straddle him. She kept her face close to his so she did not have to pull her tentacles from his neck and break her connection with his mind.

Theo let himself feel tremendous affection for his little mind-consuming horror, the enemy diplomat who had first introduced herself as “*Anauzys Oiqaa Saithauchna, if you please*”, the terrifying monster who had declined to devour and remake his personality as so many of her species did to the men they took, his wedded wife, and—he added, forming a particularly vivid mental image—the woman who might like to ride him into their mattress for the second time that evening.

Anna blushed a deep crimson-purple as Theo’s thoughts trickled through her filaments. How could she so much as consider devouring his mind? What if he couldn’t be put back together, afterwards?

Theo couldn’t read or understand mental matters as his wife did, but a man married to a mind-flayer has more opportunity for practice than most. A part of him slipped beyond the edges of her attention, and while she was distracted by carnal pleasure a camouflaged ensconcement within his mind formed a plan.

2

A CARPET of cold soupy fog slunk past Theo's ankles as he stepped out onto the pavement. Rain drummed on his hood. At least he could stand in it now; the brackish sludge that used to pelt down past the blurred tapestry of ultra-bright billboard screens ate away at skin. He'd treated enough rain-strike to last a lifetime. Only so much one could do with alkaline wash and painkillers; surgical touch-ups were out of most casualties' reach.

He brushed past the line of tall ferns growing in the gutter; the fresh scent of growing things was slathered over the old smells of sodden concrete and clay. Chunks of asphalt thrust from the fog, torn apart by the alien flora's enthusiastic roots. Most roads had been replaced by a web of drowned avenues connected by scooped-out canals. Anything that boats or the old elevated rails couldn't move was strapped under the great pulsing dirigibles that dragged themselves along the gleaming crimson arteries slitting the sky.

Habit had him check for telltale spots of chalky lichen on the old warehouse across the street before he set off uphill. Nothing. Good. The little white flakes always showed up before the main fungal plates began

to form. They'd sprout like mushrooms on bark before unfurling their gills and locking to each other in a living quilt. After that it was over for the unfortunate structure. The mushroom-sheets would digest brick, reinforced concrete, steel, glass, plastic, anything caught in the long melt. They were still devouring the central district's dead skyscrapers, the proud monoliths that once blocked out the sun now slumping like half-burned candles in the distance. Once their meal was finished the fungi would starve and rot away, leaving only mineral-rich soil.

He'd yelled at Anna when he'd first realised what the engineered growths were doing. Eating the buildings. Erasing them.

"You're digesting our world! Everything we've done!"

"Not digesting! Not this time." She'd grinned as though he'd whispered a naughty little quip into her ear. "Healing. Reclaiming diseased tissue." Her finger had stroked his cheek, tracing an angry tear's track. "We got here just in time."

Anna had suggested then they move to one of the new habitation complexes that'd finished growing around Greenyard and the Mews, their exteriors all gleaming alien wood twisted in on itself. Said her position would let them jump ahead, they'd get whatever they applied for, no waiting. Theo had held out. He could tolerate the living buildings, but he and his nightmares drew the line at sleeping inside any structure that could cough. So, against the security corps' objections, he and Anna had stayed in his pre-invasion apartment made of plain old fired brick bound together with ground up shellfish and sand.

The bridge's artificial bone gleamed wetly in the morning light as he crossed. Two small splotches drifting upriver on the flood tide caught his eye. Squinting over the guardrail, he made out patches of gleaming purple-black ichor poured into the shapes of two women: Servant-forms, supine on rafts of their own protoplasm. Rain beaded and slid off their oil-slick surfaces. Mosaics of countless tiny light-tiles glistened and flashed across the parts of their bodies the other could see; the two were chattering to each other like cuttlefish.

As they drifted closer he saw that the one on the left had chosen to form herself into the shape of a wide-hipped woman with long hair that

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fanned out in the water behind her. The other had taken on the shape of an athletic teenage girl with bob-cut hair, still waiting in vain for her breasts to show up. Both had adorned themselves with the peculiar head-frills from which arose their nickname among humans: ‘Maids.’ He’d heard that it came from depictions of old-world domestic helpers. However it had originally started, the idea behind the nickname had spread like wildfire among the servant-forms, and these days it was nearly impossible to find one that didn’t sculpt herself in some interpretation of a long-extinct domestic uniform.

The huge yellow eye in the older-looking maid’s belly swivelled suddenly, its slit pupil aimed towards Theo. She flashed a rapid orange and yellow sequence to her companion. A golden eye opened in the younger-looking maid’s raft and gazed up at him.

A heartbeat of silence passed, then both waved to him. Theo waved back until they’d passed out of sight beneath the bridge. He wondered where they were going today, what they were tasked to do. Whether they were married. Probably not; maids who decided they were mated to a man didn’t like working distant projects, didn’t like being away from their husbands. They were as obsessive about their home lives as they were about everything else they set themselves to. Being married made them less useful, Anna had once said, but she’d also shrugged and added that even the servant-forms deserved to know love. Otherwise what was the point of all this?

He crossed under the elevated rail stop and hauled himself up its slick steps. Faced toward the bay where drowned cargo ships emerged during low tides like dead giants and let the wet breeze ruffle past him. Waited. He’d been thorough. Had his ducks in a neat little row. It was time for necessary risk.

The tram grumbled to a stop and hung exhausted on the rails. Its doors hissed open and a cool air-conditioned breeze rolled forth: Old humanity’s greatest middle finger to the natural world’s tyranny. This was his last chance to decide whether he’d take the sensible path back down the stairs or double down on his folly.

He boarded.

3

THE GUARD'S hands shook just a little when he recognised Anna, but he managed to keep himself together long enough to run his sniffer over her bag and wave her through the chancery staff entrance. She couldn't blame him: It was his first shift, and Anna had been pulled in on voluntary rotation last week—setting the example that rank was no excuse for rust, if nothing else—to perform his mental dive. Where better to run a background check on prospective human staff than from inside their own heads?

The lad was married to a shy, red-eyed wing-form who'd snatched him when, in a mistake typical of this world's men, he'd sprawled out to rest in one of the forest district's clearings. Naive: Where he could see the sky, the sky could see him.

His memory of the moment his wife had plummeted from the heavens to claim him had a sharp, jagged taste, torn into scraps by adrenaline. Everything washed into a soft blur as intoxication from contact with the thick black fluid that coated all wing-forms set in, which had taken the edge off his terror as she flew him back to her eyrie, clutched in her talons. But all that was nothing to the memory of his

astonishment when, after she'd finished raping him, he'd been carefully dried, fussed over, and cooked for. The warmth that'd bloomed in his chest as she'd watched him eat, fidgeting nervously, had finalised Anna's decision to clear him for duty.

Anna swept into the vaulted onyx atrium of the main hall, past the statues—"Shattered Amygdala, Ascending"—and paused in front of a reflective panel to smooth out her iridescent silk gown. A reflection of a tall, violet-skinned, hourglass-shaped woman stared back at her. She turned her head to check the mess of short tentacles sweeping back out of her skull; as she wished, they hung in a rough hairline behind her neck. They stirred and felt about of their own accord, undersides lined with the pale luminescent suckers that, in her previous body, Anna used to latch onto prey before driving in her feeding filaments to suck their tiny frightened thoughts dry.

She turned a corner, deep in thought, and barrelled into two masses of rubbery black slime. Anna sunk into them with a damp slap, suffocated and blinded in their protoplasm before she stumbled back with a wet sucking pop. Her two oily, purple-black obstacles pulled themselves back together into the guise of women emerging from gooey plinths. One was tall, wide-hipped, heavy-breasted, and had formed gorgeous silky waist-length hair for herself. The other was short, impish, with a certain boyishness to her slender body and her hair sculpted as a neck-length bob.

The tall, long-haired girl's surface lit up in a radiant patchwork, flashing by too fast for Anna to catch. Anna pointedly cleared her throat, and the servant-form considerably slowed her signalling down to what must have seemed a crawl.

"LIASON RECOGNISED," the girl flashed in an incongruously bright hue. "COLLISION APOLOGY; QUERY: LIASON DAMAGE?" Anna's position must have fallen within the web of influence these two had constructed for themselves, she realised, for them to have recognised her so.

"Quite unhurt, thanks to you," Anna replied with her voice. "Yourselves?"

“RELAXATION REASSURANCE,” signalled the smaller one.
“TOPIC SWITCH: HUSBAND.”

“Oh, you’re married?” Anna asked. It was unusual for servant-forms to make small talk. These two lacked the languid, almost smug mode of movement that characterised the senior servant-forms who’d allocated themselves to the chancery. Perhaps they were constructors on their way to a repair? Cleansers?

The tall one’s throat broke into a high, almost musical piping that could only have been laughter. The small one stared at Anna, deadpan.

“STATEMENT INCORRECT,” signalled the tall one, still giggling.

“REGRET INTENSE,” flashed the other.

“THIS-GROUP ALL UNWIFE,” clarified the tall girl. Her bouncy shotgun personality didn’t match her body at all.

“-REGRET-INTENSE-,” repeated the smaller one, emphasising each grain of meaning with a bright backing flash. Anna quietly marvelled at how the girl had used the little frills the servant-forms so adored to offset her pretty face and athletic frame against her absolute lack of chest. Avant-garde! A bit of an artist, this one.

“TOPIC CLARIFICATION: LIASON HUSBAND,” continued the busty one.

“LIASON HUSBAND OBSERVED,” added the flat one. They’d recognised Theo’s face; had they seen her together with him in the past, or received an image of him from other servant-forms who had? “THIS-GROUP GREETING EXCHANGE>LIASON HUSBAND.”

“My Theo?”

“Theo,” mused the small maid, using her throat-voice to taste his name in a single bite.

The tall maid drew his name out and rolled it through her body.

Anna had no doubt that their whole work sections would shortly know her husband’s name, its pronunciation flashed far and wide across inky caverns, deep water rigs, aerial anchor-lines. Gossip protocol. She sighed.

The short maid broke in. “OBSERVATION: LIASON OCCUPIED; THIS-GROUP CONTINUE; THANK; BREAK.”

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And with that, she burst off down the corridor.

“-THANK!-“, emphasised the busty one, beaming. “TH/E/O OBSERVATION: THIS-GROUP ALL ENJOY.”

“I—thank you?” Anna wasn’t used to compliments about her husband. Other flayers mostly provided concerned comments on how ill-behaved he must be in his unmodified state and friendly inquiries as to when she might get around to customising him.

“BREAK,” flashed the tall one, and slid off after her companion.

“=REGRET=INTENSE=,” the latter flashed as she caught up, emphasis so bright that it glared off the walls.

Anna gazed after them. What would it be like to be able to remake her body at will? What might she choose to look like, if she could? She craned her neck and looked down at the swell of her breasts beneath her robe. A diamond-shaped window had been cut in the centre to expose a little flash of flesh; a recent fashion trend. She knew Theo liked her breasts—that was why she had been given them—but an older, vestigial part of her still couldn’t comprehend why. She thrust her shoulders back so they’d bounce. Nope. No idea. Still an absolute mystery.

But still, she remembered how they were able to make Theo feel, his base animal need filtering into her filaments, satisfying her hungers in a way that torturing small subterranean creatures in her old body never had, and she felt herself grin.

She hoped those two girls would eventually be able to find husbands. It was wonderful to be married.

4

DISTANT SEABIRDS aired their grievances. Above Theo loomed fatigued tower frames wrapped in a confusion of bright climbing leaves and phosphorescent creepers, concrete titans bearing the cracked remains of a vast highway across their immense shoulders, dark stains weeping from between their ancient joints. The fleets of automated repair drones had finally dwindled to nothing in Theo's lifetime, so the newly-arrived flora was merely hastening the inevitable. The problem with technology effective enough to take for granted is that after a few generations nobody remembers what to fix; humans had optimised themselves unto extinction, dug their own graves faster and cheaper than ever before.

A shutter in a little brown building was open. Inviting light spilled forth from the glass door, gleaming off the wet pavement. Thick vines clawed their way up the rusted shutters either side and formed a living archway. Someone had lashed together salvaged railings and a few pieces of rot-impervious alien wood into a little bridge crossing over the moat that had formed in the flooded gutters. A pictogram of a dog with wings had been sketched with indelible marker on a jagged piece of scrap plastic with the word "CAFÉ" underneath. Theo smiled. He took

comfort in these little pieces of the old normality.

He turned past an enterprising sapling that clung to a cracked wall. A few minutes' walking brought him to the foot of old concrete steps and a wheelchair ramp that snaked up to heavy double doors banded by strips of frosted glass. The sign proclaiming opening hours had been eaten away by rust, yet not one iota of that awful institutional pea-green had faded from the building's walls. Between its two wings wound an overgrown road leading to the disused ambulance bay where they'd sometimes sit and smoke when a moment could be snatched. There must have been a time when that bay had been used for something other than smoking, but he couldn't remember it.

Theo pulled his hood back, let the drizzle settle on his hair. He closed his eyes and threw himself back to the little hospital as he once saw it every night, a curled-up umbral creature crouching in swirling oily smog. He saw himself slip down the old brick path that wound past the single patch of long-dead grass, past the neighbouring building's filth-caked walls, and around to the discreetly labelled staff entrance.

In his mind he walked past the warped back desk that he'd never once seen staffed, down the narrow, balding stairs that would try to trip up his wide feet, past the entrance to the laundry and service room where he'd had his single fumbling sexual encounter with Marie, a nurse, and into the locker room where he'd transform from a hulking, beaten-down civilian into a hulking, beaten-down doctor. Remembered how he'd run his fingers over the snake-wound staff of Asclepius stitched over his heart; a nervous habit. His coat was always a little small for him, tight across his shoulders and strained across his chest. "Built like a brick shithouse," was how Greg Agner, the trauma surgeon, had described him. Theo had, at the time, reflected that it was a shame his face was built the same way as his body.

Theo opened his eyes. That was the past. What use was a bone doctor among beings who can slip microscopic parts of themselves into wounds, who can rearrange and knit flesh without ever touching a scalpel? Who could become living diagnostic labs, scanners, splints, pharmaceutical synthesisers?

Besides, Anna had said, whatever he was before paled in comparison to whom he was now: Her husband. He'd hated that hospital, hated its scheming director, its cruel politics, its gossip, its paltry resources, the way its faded walls whispered to him that a tired tradesman of broken flesh was all he'd ever be, impotent to stem the tide of injury and suffering that threatened to drown them each and every shift. When she saw his miserable memories, she'd forbade that he ever work again. His new job, she'd declared, was to heal as he had once tried to heal others, for his mind tasted better whole and serene.

As the city was digested around him, he'd experimented with the various little hobbies he'd always told himself he wanted to try. He'd even taken up the long-dead past-time of gardening once plants were able to grow outdoors again. It had settled into a routine: Anna would arrive home in the evenings, they'd eat, they'd fuck, and then she'd drape herself over his chest, nestle a tentacle into his brain, and listen with rapt attention as he went through all the pointless but enjoyable things he'd amused himself with that day.

It was all so inconsequential.

Hence, Theo reflected as he climbed the steps of his old hospital, every man needs a secret life.

5

THE ATTACHÉ in charge of local supply, a wispy younger flayer called Saxa, was leaning back in her chair with her hands pressed over her face. Concerned, Anna rapped her knuckles against the metal office door and invited herself in. Saxa's office was spartan, just an onyx slab with a wheeled stool in front, a chair behind, a view-screen atop, and several locked cabinets bolted to the wall. Communication vines pulsed crimson through a hatch.

"Again, Ger? I swear to our Dread Lady," groaned Saxa, "the feedstock lines will be fixed when they're fixed. You know we can't order the servant-forms about any more." She pulled her hands into her lap but kept her eyes shut. Deep rings had burned in under her eyelids. Even the tentacles framing her face flopped about sluggishly. Poor girl looked as though she'd worked a triple shift.

"I'm afraid," said Anna wryly, "that I hadn't the good fortune to be born as Under-Attaché Gerheld."

Saxa's green eyes flew open. "Madam Liaison!" She jolted in her chair and scrambled to her feet.

Anna sat down on the little stool and gave what she hoped was a

soothing smile. “Thank you, Saxa. No need for the full formalities. It’s not like I’m the Envoy at present.” Thankfully, she added to herself. Her fingers brushed themselves over her neck-pad, where she had to keep the key while she was on duty, next to the cyanide. “Please, sit. Did something happen?”

Saxa returned to her seat, and nodded. “There was a partial tunnel collapse a few days ago in the eastward run under the bay—”

“I saw the dispatch,” interjected Anna. “A minor one, yes? No casualties or flooding.”

Saxa rubbed her forehead. “Oh, you know? Well, the maids absolutely swarmed the collapse; they seemed to regard it as a direct insult.” The maids. Funny how they’d also adopted the nickname for the servant-forms that this reality’s inhabitants had given. “Repairs finished just after sunset yesterday, very quick, and they’re boring a protective drainage tunnel as we speak.”

“That sounds like them.” Perhaps the two she’d met in the corridor had also been down there beneath the waves, furiously sealing off and routing around the collapse. Difficult to tell with the way those girls allocated themselves to whatever work they felt needed doing. “But you wouldn’t be running on fumes unless—”

“Explosives.”

“In the tunnel?” Saxa nodded. Anna took a measured breath. “Are you certain?”

“The maid who reported it recited the residue’s components to five significant figures,” said Saxa dryly, shifting into a wide yawn. “Sorry! That tunnel runs down towards the main supply caches and from there to one of the shafts feeding the Breach. If the explosion had let in seawater...”

Anna narrowed her eyes. “I don’t suppose you’re going to add something reassuring? That we were moving unstable seized materiel through there at the time of the explosion, perhaps?”

“No such luck, Madam Lias—” Saxa caught herself. “Lady Saithauchna. I threw this across to the law-and-order girls as soon as I heard it. They suspect resistance fighters, but they always suspect

resistance fighters. Been awake all night cross-referencing for anything that might help them figure what in blazes happened.” She gestured to the crystal wafers littering her desk and let out a defeated sigh. “But... nothing. Just our own girls doing routine checks.”

“Strange.” Anna tapped her bottom lip with a finger. “But then, resistance elements survive by slipping around the edges of our attention. Or... perhaps it’s an innocent accident.”

“I don’t understand,” Saxa spat in a frustrated hiss, “why they keep this sabotage up! All we want is to love them, yet they keep trying to hurt us along with themselves!” She let out an exhausted groan. “I was here when we arrived, I saw what it was like. They were nearly gone. We’re helping!”

Anna gently patted the back of Saxa’s hand. The attaché’s skin was clammy with night-sweat; she badly needed a bath and some sleep.

“My husband,” Anna said, “once told me that his people fought bitterly for the right to be miserable in their own way. It was a terrible place, yes, but it was their terrible place. The tension’s not so bad now, with our numbers limited and the story about our ‘peaceful matriarchy’ holding up—especially among their women—but once more of us come through they’ll catch on to the main problem.”

Saxa’s face fell. The fundamental threat. The reason they’d had to invade this reality: Extinction. The great gift they’d received was double-edged: Their new bodies were wonderful and long-lived, but could bear only daughters. With their reality and this one welded together at the Breach, that curse would eventually unfurl itself into the women of this reality as well.

“Do you think we’ll ever... you know, solve it?” Saxa asked, quietly.

“I know we will,” Anna said with a conviction she did not feel, “given enough time. But we are mortal, so time means daughters, and daughters need husbands, if they are to have daughters of their own.” They’d bought themselves precious decades with this invasion, but oblivion hadn’t halted.

“Tunnelling between realities isn’t a precise art,” she continued. “A little slip of a few hundred years put us here; now our worlds are in

lockstep forever.” She shrugged and rose to leave. “It’s done. We’ll make the best of it. Good job, by the way. Pass your work along and get some rest. You’ll be no use to anyone if you pass out on your desk.”

6

“I WON’T ask you not to worry,” Theo said, “I know you can’t do that.”

“That flattery or insult? I ain’t seeing your point.” Nina’s face was masked by shadow. He could just see that she’d let her hair down, running scraggly past her shoulders. She’d converted the cozy basement staff room to a carefully-fitted bar that smelled of ash, cold iron, and oak. The varnished wood between them was immaculate, the mark of a select clientele invested deeply in each others’ good behaviour. They were alone, and outside the closed door, Theo knew, a man discreetly ensured that they’d stay that way.

“I’m asking you to trust me. It’s the right time. I’m the right person.”

“Have you any idea what your lovely wife could do to this place—to me, my people—if your little experiment goes tits up? Have you, further, any idea what she could do to you?”

“More than anyone. She’s not like that.”

“I bloody well hope she ain’t, because I’d be staking a lot on letting you work with that kind of equipment in here. You don’t answer to me...” She pinched the bridge of her nose, eyebrows scrunched. “But! When a drooling vegetable, especially a married drooling vegetable, is

hauled out of a place, there are records. Attention. Questions. Investigations. Inconveniences.”

“You know I’m careful. Besides,” he decided to drop his trump card, “you owe me at least this.”

Flame flashed, then a deep inhalation and a relieved sigh carried on a wave of hydroponic tobacco smoke.

“You’re a right cock to call in your favour like this. Were you anyone else I’d have thrown you out on your ear ten minutes ago.”

“But you haven’t.”

“No. Against my better fuckin’ judgement, I haven’t.”

He stayed quiet, gave her time.

“The audacity of it, though...” she murmured, eventually.

“It’s not so radical. Interrogation with a little extra.”

“Of a flayer, you tit!”

“Anna’s my wife.”

“Anna! You call her Anna? You call Anauzys Saithauchna...”—Nina’s deft tongue stumbled over only one of the exotic syllables—“Anna?”

Theo slathered his grin with every ounce of false bravado he could muster. “She does too, when we’re alone. Says she likes it better. This is the kind of edge I have, you see?”

Nina groaned, long and low. “Fine. I’ll have a boat meet you. But! At even a hair of trouble they’ll turf you out onto the nearest spit of sand and fade. I ain’t calling the Needle’s gentle attention down on any of my people if I can help it.”

“The... what?”

“Your lovely wife’s workplace, such as it is. Of course you wouldn’t know what we call it.” Theo heard her rolling eyes in her voice. “Free agent? Ha! Don’t even know how’n the land lays. Bet you muck it up and end up in the middle of a box tail, five sets of eyes and a flyer draggin’ a string of fuckin’ firecrackers. Gonna end up reading about you in tomorrow’s sheets.”

“You’ve as much deniability as you need.” He shrugged. “You think they don’t already know about this place, what you pretend to do? Remember who... what my wife is. They don’t think like us.”

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“Darlin’, you’ve got big brass balls lumping me into whoever this ‘us’ is.” Nina sighed, blowing a plume of acrid smoke directly into his face. “Fine. You’ll have the chamber, the chair, the privacy. We’ll roll it in under your generous membership fee. And because I’ve come to hold you in such affection over the span of our little chat, I’ll even leave the panic button hooked up.” He felt her glare. “Don’t make that matter. It does break my ‘eart so when couples fight.”

7

ADA WAS enjoying herself immensely, bobbing homewards down the ebb tide with her friend Ida beside her.

Chilly river water dragged through the strands of Ada's long hair, accepting every joule of built-up thermal load she dumped into it. Ida insisted that the length of Ada's hair was excessive to its function as an improvised heatsink, much as she argued that the height of Ada's human-shape and the size of its breasts was excessive to *its* function. Ida asserted that her smaller, flatter human-shape was more 'efficient' in all respects. Ada did not care, for she liked the body she had created. She had only wanted such a body for 23 long cycles, since her creators' lieutenant-species—the mind-flayers—had allied with the goddess who had gifted them their new drives.

How strange it was, that novel part of herself reflected, to have hungers at all, let alone a soul! She looked at Ida, and appended: To have friends.

"SECOND STRUT RADIAL BOLT THIRD POSITION FRICTION BEYOND TOLERANCE SPECIFIED," pulsed Ida.

They had been discussing the day's work, an expedition down the

great plunging shaft hollowed out by the Spire's first ascent. A work party had noticed three mid-cycles ago that several support beams two kilometres down had shaken loose and diverged by seven degrees. There weren't any transport platforms in that part of the shaft so Ada and Ida had oozed down sheer rock wall most of the way. Tremendous fun!

"PROJECTION: ALL RADIAL BOLT FRICTION BEYOND TOLERANCE SPECIFIED," teased Ada, for she knew that Ida was proud of her sensitivity.

Ada admired that her smaller friend could form herself into difficult, precise shapes like the radial driver she'd been for much of today. Ada herself couldn't hope to be so precise under normal conditions, let alone while clinging to the edges of a great weave-beam above a void so deep that even her superior multi-spectral sense package could not see the bottom. Not that she'd ever tell Ida this of this directly; it was just too much fun to tease her.

"PROJECTION CONFIRMATION; QUERY: SIGNIFICANCE?" rejoined Ida in a languid stretch of greens and blues, refusing to rise to Ada's bait. "ADA SURPLUS FORM-MASS PRECLUDES NECESSARY CALIBRATION."

Ada formed vocal surfaces in her human-shape's throat and 'laughed' by pushing air past them. She had been making a habit of this lately, liked the way it felt. She let Ida's playful insult sit and turned her attention to the buildings passing by on either side. Most were empty, broken, half-digested, but here and there lights in the windows shined out into the rainy evening.

Ada wondered what it was like to live in one of those homes. Why anyone would. Why not just build your own home out of yourself? She and Ida had twice recently played together at this, when they'd had the mass to spare. They'd worked together to form a cute little cottage out in one of the cleared districts; spent whole short cycles sculpting the little details. They'd slid their woman-shapes around inside it, each taking a turn at being waited upon by the other. Ada jiggled happily at the memory. Practice, Ida had called it. That girl always wanted to practice, always wanted to be absolutely perfect ahead of time. Ada

didn't see the point—how could you know what would be perfect until the moment had arrived?—but she enjoyed their little games of pretend nonetheless.

They floated back towards the bridge where they'd seen that Liaison's husband that morning. It was sculpted of structural calcium nano-tube bone coated with a self-healing gloss suitable for use in outdoor environments, no obvious chipping or fracturing. It looked to need its next full maintenance in 14 mid-cycles, give or take twenty or so short cycles; a rough guess.

A splotch moved across the bridge. It stood out to Ada like a blazing torch on the infra-red spectrum. Curious, she formed a wider heat-eye and pointed it at the bridge. The splotch she'd seen was actually two splotches! It was a person—a human person—hefting a duffel bag with some kind of big warm lump in it. Ada pulled a little mass away from her raft-self to form a curved dish with a big wide eye that scooped enough light to turn night into day and focused it on the mystery figure. Different clothes but the same face as this morning. It was Liaison Saithauchna's husband!

“IDA VISUAL ATTENTION BRIDGE TOP RIGHT SEGMENT,” Ada flashed.

“ACCEPTANCE,” Ida replied. Ada saw Ida open a few of her eyes wide, trying to pierce the night. Precise as her body was, Ida didn't have Ada's senses. “VISUAL INSUFFICIENT; QUERY: IDENTITY?”

“TH/E/O!” Ada signalled, a little smugly. “PROPOSAL: GREETING EXCHANGE.”

“PROPOSAL APPEND: BEACON-SIGNAL; LOW LIGHT, TH/E/O NOT EQUIPPED.”

Both girls lit their bodies up in solid bright blue, then white, then blue again, cycling colour every heartbeat. Atop the bridge, a startled Theo turned his face towards them.

They both yelled his name and waved their radiant arms in greeting. Ada's wide-eye saw Theo's face frowning, worried, afraid. He must've been very surprised to see them again! She waved harder. Could he see her smiling at him? She hoped so. He hurried along to the end of the

bridge and out of sight. Maybe he didn't recognise them? It was quite dark, as Ida had pointed out, and he couldn't see as well as she could. Ada still felt a little disappointed.

Yet, something bothered her as they ceased flashing and floated beneath the bridge. The bag. The warm bag.

—What a horrid, rough, imprecise object, that bag! Was it made out of plant fibre or polymerised oil sheets? What was in it? Ada felt a flash of hot resentment that such a thing should be used by Liaison Saithauchna's husband. If Ada had a husband, she'd be ashamed if he ever used anything so crude. She'd grab it and reclaim it on the spot, use the mass to make him a better one. What would that look like?

She glanced over to Ida, ready to propose this new topic, but her friend was already forming a bag out of living protoplasm; inner lights dimmed in concentration, ribbons of fabrication-slime writhing—she'd already sculpted her copy to be far more handsome than the crude original. Ada clapped her hands in delight and began forming her own version.

8

ANNA AWOKE upon a long articulated chair. Leather straps lashed her limbs to pivoting padded bars in a gentle spread-eagle; her silk gown was hitched roughly up her thighs. Thick bands ran under her shoulders, below her breasts, and over her belly. Small steel rings bound her tentacles to a central ring that pressed coolly around her neck.

She groped at the outlines of memories through a groggy haze: She'd arrived home just after sunset. Theo had already prepared them a light supper. They'd enjoyed the meal and she'd been about to imperiously tear Theo's clothes off when she'd decided to rest her eyes for a moment. Now she was strapped down in this dimly lit room that smelled faintly of bleach and electricity. How puzzling!

A tri-bulbed lamp hung on a jointed armature above her, unlit. Nearby, two steel carts held neatly-arranged trays full of metal instruments—forceps, clamps, scissors, retractors, scalpels—and a squat grey box sat atop a third. A knot of cables spilled from behind it, connected to a small monitor, a keyboard, a device she recognised from Theo's memories as a trackball, and a ring visor just big enough to enclose a person's head.

A door clicked open behind her, then closed with a decisive thunk. Heavy footsteps smacked against hard tiles towards her, banishing the last of her drowsiness. Her belly lurched as she thought of Theo—would he report her missing? He must be so worried. Was he somewhere else, strapped down like this? She should stall, keep them talking, so there would be time to—

“Hello, my darling. Good to see you awake.”

“Theo?” It was indeed Theo, but not Theo as she’d seen him in a long while. He’d put on a clean white lab coat over a smart crisp shirt and dark suit pants, neatly combed his hair, and shaved away his stubble.

“In the flesh,” Theo smiled. “Are you feeling alright? The flunitrazepam should have nearly worn off; it has a much shorter half-life in your species. You might even be able to remember this conversation later.”

“Fluni—whuh?” Her mouth wasn’t quite under her control yet.

“We used to use it for anaesthesia, treatment of insomnia, and rape.”

“Rape?”

“A little joke. It is with hindsight, anyway. In any case, this will be easier if you’re relaxed.”

“Easier? What will be?” Anna discreetly tested her bindings. The straps’ bite against skin kindled a softly glowing ember in her belly that she tried to ignore.

“Your interrogation, of course. I might not have these...” Theo rested a palm against her head, brushing down her hobbled tentacles. “...but we humans do have a few tricks left. Hardly sporting to go down without a fight, and for that we need what’s in your head.”

What was Theo on about? She spent nearly every evening in his mind yet she’d never seen any such thing!

Her face must have made her confusion plain, for Theo let out one of the deep booming laughs she normally so adored. “Please, wife, you know that not all of us are happy to be reduced to playthings.” His face suddenly pivoted into a frown. “We live for our purposes, you know. We need them, wither without them. Even if we hate that purpose, loathe it, if you take it away we’ll look for another.”

"I..." Anna swallowed carefully. "I don't understand. Theo, darling, please..." Her heart was hammering now, her belly twisting in a way she'd never felt before. This was her husband. Why was she afraid? Why had the ember in her belly grown to a flame?

Theo shook his head, patted her arm gently. His voice descended to a husky sigh. "No. You don't. That's your lot's problem, why we resist you."

Theo turned away and began preparing something on one of the carts amid a rustling and tearing open of plastic. Anna's mind raced. What was Theo talking about? He wasn't part of the ghostly resistance, couldn't be. She'd have seen it in his mind. So what was going on?

With desperate clarity she realised: This must be play-acting! She'd dropped that hint to him and he'd decided to indulge her. Her breath still heaved in her chest; she couldn't seem to calm it down. It was a game, she told her quaking body. Why wasn't her heart slowing? She decided that she'd outwit him, force him to concede that this was a farce. Then she could relax and enjoy herself.

"T-Theo? Darling?"

Theo looked over his shoulder. "Yes, Anna?"

"How—your mind... I can see—there's no way—" Her voice still wasn't coming out right.

"How did I hide this from someone who strolls about in my mind as she pleases?" Theo shrugged and turned back to his task. "Simple. You can't be everywhere at once. Same as hiding anything else in a vast space; make it look like everything else. It was all there, but you never noticed."

Anna grinned wretchedly. Plausible! Her husband was putting on such a wonderful show for her. Next he'd turn back from the cart with a silly little hypnosis pendulum or a spiral on a stick or something equally cheesy they'd seen in those old films. She'd breathe a sigh of relief and play along, really ham it up, maybe hang out her tongue while Theo fucked her like the brainless shell she absolutely wasn't. Cheeky man. She'd get him back for this. Yes, any moment now—

Theo turned around. One hand held a syringe, the other a small vial.

"H-Husband?"

“Have you not been paying attention?” His voice was flinty.

With practiced ease, he pulled the syringe’s plunger up, inserted the needle through the vial’s cap, pressed the plunger back down, then drew a measure of clear serum into the syringe’s barrel. There was an unfamiliar logo on the vial, a hollow blue rectangle with its top line pulled down inside to form the shape of a flask. A tiny jet of fluid shot from the needle as he cleared an air bubble, checked the dose with a practiced eye.

“What’s in that?”

“Something to relax you a little. Open your mind. Lower some of the defences we had such trouble with in the early days. Hold still.” The alcohol swab felt shockingly cold, as though he’d run ice over the vulnerable pit of her elbow joint. She’d never thought of that part of her skin as being private before. He pressed his finger gently, probing for a vein, and it was not long before she felt the smooth ache of the needle sliding into her.

She forced herself to remain silent.

“Good,” Theo murmured to himself. “Nice and clean. Easier when they don’t struggle.” He pressed a wad of gauze over a drop of bright cobalt blue blood beading up out of her skin and efficiently taped it down, then wrapped an elastic bandage over it.

Anna’s pulse hammered in her throat. Theo leaned down, his breath brushing over her face. On instinct she strained forward, tried to kiss him. Needed to taste his skin. She needed to show him that she was still in charge. But he just grinned and slid a hand up her thigh, brushed his fingers between her legs. Held them under her nose, glistening with her wetness. She pulled her head aside in shame at her own scent.

“Dirty girl,” he mocked. “I wonder how many other flayers soak themselves like this?”

She whimpered. Showing it to her like that was unfair! What was that about other—

“Don’t beat yourself up. There was a vasodilator in that little cocktail. Same sort of thing they used to use bremelanotide or sildenafil for back in the good old days of the bad old days. People didn’t have a

solution for the world sucking the life out of them so they just used chemistry to force blood into their broken genitals instead.” He shrugged. “So maybe it’s the drug, or maybe you’re dripping because you like this. No way to tell.”

Anna’s face flushed.

9

“WHAT DO you think you’re doing?” Anna’s voice was louder than she intended, but she needed to hear it, needed to convince herself she was still in control.

“Shut up.” His voice was a sharp verbal slap. Her mind reeled. That serum must have done something to her composure, she decided.

He began reading from the old-fashioned clipboard he’d picked up. “Who are you?”

“What... what is this?”

“A baseline. Who are you?” He sounded calm, disinterested.

She decided to see where this would go. “Anauzys Oiqa Saithauchna.”

“Who am I?”

“You’re Theodore Becker. My—” She noticed a trembling deep in her belly. “—my husband.”

“What’s your real occupation?”

“I’m a liaison attached to the provisional administration. A peaceful diplomat!”

Theo rolled his eyes. “Of course. To whom are you loyal?”

“To my husband.”

Theo looked up from his clipboard and smiled. The sun rose in Anna’s heart again. “That’s very sweet of you to say, my darling,” he said. “Who else?”

“No!” She struggled against her bonds. A desperate dark part of her suggested that if she could bruise herself badly on her restraints he’d have to take pity and release her. “It’s true! Theo, my beloved, nobody else matters to me. I’d—I’d give up everything! Please!”

“Answer the question, ‘diplomat’. Surely you’ve been trained for this?”

Theo’s dispassionate tone swept away all hope; the sun inside her collapsed. “I am in the permanent service of the Sleepers in the Temple, and in their long absence a volunteer under Our Divine Majesty,” Anna responded in a small voice. “My administrative rank is—“

“No need for that,” Theo cut her off, “we aren’t running that kind of show. How do you refer to your reproductive opening?”

“What?”

“Your reproductive opening. The one with which you are presently soaking the chair, my sweetest little squidling.”

The term of endearment, mocking as it was, sent Anna’s heart soaring; she found herself clinging to those words as floating wreckage in a storm. “You mean... my vagina?”

Theo shrugged and jotted something. “Good enough. We’ll skip the next question.”

“M—My arsehole!” It was a guess, but she wanted desperately to buy time with which she might figure this out.

Theo cocked an eyebrow. “You call your breathing and consumption opening your ‘arsehole’?”

Anna dropped her gaze, cheeks burning. Stupid; like she could know what he was thinking without her ugly brain-rape tentacles plugged into his skull. Hot tears stung the corners of her eyes. Stupid. Worthless. Her new body didn’t change what she really was, a loathsome little cave-squid.

Theo frowned and put the clipboard down on one of the trolleys.

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“Are you well, little calamari ring?”

Anna shook her head, still unable to meet his eyes. She was barely holding together, couldn’t speak for fear of breaking out into hysterical sobbing.

Her husband’s warm hand was suddenly on her cheek, stroking gently. She pressed herself into it, teeth gritted. A little keening sound escaped her throat.

“Are you going to get rid of me?” she finally managed to ask. Her voice was weak, every scrap of willpower concentrated to keep her from breaking out into panicked hysterics.

“What?” Theo’s voice was shocked, affronted. “No!” He bent down and gently pressed his lips against hers. Anna kissed back, all dignity shucked away by a simple need for touch. Her cheeks were wet; both her human-like eyes were leaking.

“Please, Husband. Please. Don’t.” She was shaking now, knuckles white where she gripped the chair’s arms. “Please. I’m sorry.” He stood up and broke the kiss so she turned her head and kissed his hand instead. “Don’t... don’t discard me.”

Theo clicked his tongue and smiled grimly. “Anauzys. Anna. Whatever else you are, you’re still my wife. I shan’t be rid of you that easily.”

With a pair of surgical shears, he cut her dress away.

10

THE VISOR'S soft eyepiece sealed Anna in a lightless void. Behind her head, Theo's hands carefully adjusted and locked something into place with a heavy click. Two soft cups pressed over her ears and sealed out all sound. She lay for a little while in the darkness and silence with only her heartbeat and breath for company.

A white glow spread in front of her.

"Self-check complete. Welcome to the Federated Medical Deep Therapeutic Conditioning Environment," said a woman's voice, breathy and smooth. "This device is approved for use by accredited professionals only. Discontinue use immediately if you have not accepted the use of this device as part of an audited treatment plan."

A pause, and then the logo began to pulse in time with her heart. "Biomedical sensor synchronised."

"Detecting feedback devices." Another pause, and then the device in Anna's vagina buzzed hard, twice. Anna gasped and jerked her hips. She yelped as her nipples felt the unmistakable bite of a tiny shock, cried out as her clit felt a deep electrical lance.

"Detection complete," the voice continued, "awaiting operator

command.”

Another short pause before a hollow rectangle appeared below the logo. It gradually filled up from left to right, juddering forward in fits and starts. “Awaiting operator confirmation,” said the voice. “Accepted.”

It continued. “Awaiting subject consent.” Consent? Did she have to agree to thi—

“Consent waived. Awaiting operator start.” Anna bid her eyes close but they didn’t obey. “Starting in ten seconds,” the voice purred soothingly, “so you can count with me.”

“Ten.” The number appeared in front of her eyes, flickering between the numeral and word in time with her heartbeats.

“Nine.” Anna wondered if the machine could tell she wasn’t playing along.

“Eight.” Did it matter that she was reading the numbers? Was that ‘counting’?

“Seven.” Anna could hear a strange bass hum under the voice. It sounded almost musical.

“Six.” She strained to hear the hum. Needed to identify it.

“Five.” The gap between numbers seemed longer.

“Four.” The flickering between numeral and word had slowed down.

“Three.” The hum was louder. The closer Anna listened to it, the louder it became.

“T-w-o-“, said the voice, invitingly. Anna felt as though she were falling back into reality’s softest blanket, but she resisted because she wanted to concentrate on the hum. If only that voice and its numbers would be quiet! Where was the last number?

“One.” There it was! Finally, Anna could lie back and concentrate on the relaxing hum uninterrupted.

It rippled slowly, stretched languidly, flowed and layered like thick silken cream. A sonic tapestry that tickled just a little. Anna chuckled triumphantly. The audacity of this machine, to think that playing a little buzz in her ears could alter her mind! She was a magnificent and powerful mind-flayer so there was no harm in experiencing all this, letting it in, being able to experience the changes for herself. Yes. Yes. She

could say “yes” as many times as she liked and only what she wanted would change. Yes.

Little sparks of light appeared in front of her and danced back and forth. She followed them with her eyes. Amused herself chasing them. Sometimes they’d follow her gaze and other times they’d dart around as though daring her to follow. She found a good rhythm—lead, follow, lead, follow, lead, follow—and fell into flow. More sparks appeared, different colours. Shifting. She adapted. Easy.

The hum spoke to her without words. She had to listen closely and carefully to catch it. There were images, or patterns, sometimes only a glimpse, sometimes lingering slowly so she could pick out the little details that the hum pointed out to her. She felt little tickles across her skin, sometimes a brief rumbling in her crotch. She laughed delightedly. This was fun! She couldn’t remember why she had been apprehensive, if she’d ever been apprehensive at all. Stupid word, “apprehensive”. Too long. “Scared”. Much better. She wasn’t scared. She was happy! Happy and relaxed.

Theo’s voice was whispering something all in pieces to her. She writhed. His voice felt like his tongue on her clit. She felt herself lick her lips and buck her hips. Saw things that made her cry out, made parts of her sleep, made her pussy squeeze, her womb ache. She didn’t have to worry about anything, anymore. The hum, which was Theo’s voice, was taking care of everything.

Yes. Who cared how long she’d been in here? She felt cold air against her nipples, bit her bottom lip as the exquisite tickle of electricity tapped out secret messages only her body understood. She pulled in a deep breath through her nose. She’d never before noticed how rich her sense of smell was. There was just a hint of Theo’s mouth-watering musk under her own pungent cunt-smell and aroused sweat.

The hum repeated something to her over and over like the beat of a drum. She felt it behind her chest, wanted to move to its rhythm, dance like the patterns danced. Felt her body jerk rhythmically against the straps. The leather felt amazing against her skin. Every square iota of flesh flooded her mind with the most delicious sensations. But looking

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at it that way was silly, wasn't it? Her mind and body were the same thing. Yes. Yes. All she had to keep doing was to say 'Yes' with as much of her body as she could, say 'Yes' to Theo's wonderful hum-voice deep inside her mind-flesh. Yes. Yes!

She threw away the concept of time. Had no need for it. She patiently learned what she needed to learn and patiently practiced what she needed to practice like the good girl she wanted, needed, couldn't help but to be. She let the images inside, let the hum inside, let the patterns inside, let the beautiful dirty words inside, made room for them, put them in the right place, remade herself the way she wanted, which was the way he wanted.

And so when the hum slowly dwindled to nothing, when the patterns faded to black, when the woman's silky voice came back and told her she was ready, when she felt Theo's hands on her face and heard the click of the release mechanism, felt the cooling sweat on her body and the puddle of juice dripping between her legs, saw the blackness of the visor lift away and beheld her beloved Theo's face, she knew exactly what to say.

"Hello, Master!"

Her Master's face broke into a smile. "Hello, little pet."

11

THEO STROKED her head and began reading off his clipboard. Anna jealously wished he'd drop the stupid thing and use both of his hands on her instead.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I'm Anna. It's my real name and the name I like best!"

He raised an eyebrow. "Why do you like that name best?"

"Because you gave it to me, of course!" It was true. Her Master had, long ago, playfully dubbed her 'Anna' after deliberately mispronouncing her name ten or so different ways. She'd rebuked him but loved it. While she was pretending to be a real person with responsibilities she was called Anauzys Whatever-Whatever because they wouldn't take an 'Anna' seriously, but fuck them!

"Who am I?" he continued.

The question felt ticklish inside her head. Anna giggled. "You're my Master, of course. Your name is Theo!"

"What's your real occupation?"

Anna thought for a moment. In the outside world she was a territorial liaison, a kind of political officer, but her Master had asked

about her real occupation. Easy! "I'm my Master's hole."

"Of course. To whom are you loyal?"

"To my Master!"

"Who else?"

What a silly question, Anna thought. She stuck out her tongue and blew a raspberry. "Nobody. Fuck 'em. Fuck 'em all. Master only."

"How do you refer to your reproductive opening?"

What an important way of putting it! Anna cheekily wriggled her hips, showed her 'reproductive opening' to him as best she could. Liked him looking at it. Decided to play a little. "What would you like me to call it?"

Her Master gave her a stern look. She giggled again. "Answer the question," he ordered.

Anna wet her lips with her tongue. How kind her Master was to insist that she say it. She carefully enunciated, savouring the mouthfeel. "My Master's... cunt." She squeezed her muscles down there for good measure. Her Master chuckled and shook his head in disbelief. She had surprised him! She felt a sudden rush of happy pride.

"And your breathing and consumption opening?" he continued.

Anna slowly slid the tip of her tongue all around her lips. They felt so deliciously sensitive! Breathing and consumption opening indeed. That wasn't what it was for! "Depends what it's doing, Master. Right now it's my mouth..." She opened her jaw wide, stuck her tongue out so he could see right to the back of her throat, "...and I can say things that make my Master feel good with it. If you'll let me, I can make it a hole for my Master's cock, or use it for other things that will please my Master." She grinned naughtily. "It's versatile."

"Yes it is." He put the clipboard back down. "Alright, little pet, I've got a surprise for you."

12

THE SURPRISE, it turned out, was a little square of papery stuff that her Master wet with water and slapped onto her inner thigh. She was still strapped down so she couldn't playfully trap his hand between her thighs; instead, she contented herself with watching the patch dry and making the chair wet.

Her eyes followed her Master's hands with eager anticipation as he peeled the little damp square off her thigh. There, glistening wetly against her soft violet skin, was a little scan-square with the words 'OWNER INFO' neatly lettered underneath. An aching warmth settled in the bottom of her belly. He'd marked her. Her Master had marked her! There was the evidence, on her inner thigh, nestled right next to her swollen cunt.

She wanted more, wanted him to mark her harder. Maybe he'd like to burn a sigil into one of her buttocks like humans used to do to their cattle? She found herself biting down hard on her bottom lip at the sudden image of herself walking around nude, collared, with her Master's cattle-mark on her naughty violet rump. Would he do that for her? Her head lolled, vision blurred. She was so happy that it felt like she

was passing out.

Her Master's thumb slipped past her lips but before she could suck on it like a good girl he pulled her jaw open. There was a clear bottle of water in his other hand.

"Here. Drink."

He poured the water into her mouth a little at a time and she swallowed greedily. She felt the moisture spread out through her body in a rush as full consciousness returned, hadn't noticed how thirsty she was. Felt a wave of gratitude; her Master was so good to her! *That's how they get you*, a different part of her mind noted. *Make you dependent on them for basic needs. Like we planned to do to their whole civilisation.* But it was saying some irrelevant shit that didn't matter so she ignored it.

"Hey." Her Master's voice snapped her back to reality. Important. Focus. Listen to Master. "You with me, little pet?"

"Always, Master." She nearly split her own face in two with a sudden smile. Couldn't help it. It was true in the best possible way.

He plopped his hand down on her head, pushed it roughly from side to side. "Good girl. Tell me if you feel faint again."

A supernova went off inside her. She was a good girl! She strained to push her head against his hand as hard as she could, wished her tentacles were free so she could caress his wrist with them. This was so nice. Maybe he'd slap her later, too? That'd also be nice.

She realised she was panting, sweating, slick, slippery wet all over. Her Master was reaching behind her, releasing the row of steel bands that held her head tentacles at bay. It felt good as they stretched and began to feel around again. Her Master put his face right in front of hers, looming over her. He smelled delicious. Seemed very worried. What about? She needed to kiss him. Did. Leaned forward, brushed their lips together, opened her mouth. Coaxed his tongue inside her. Quivered, drunk on the taste of his spit. Her tentacles were all over him, caressing his neck, scratching his scalp, hugging his head. She kept her nasty little thought-gobbling filaments inside their suckers where they belonged.

Her Master broke the kiss, exhaled hard. She was disappointed that he wasn't kissing her any more but he did look very relieved. She had no

idea why. Stole another little peck on his lips. Hopeless little animal. Naughty. Wanted that slap. Wanted his hands on her by any means possible.

"That's the hard part over," he said. "Time to take you for a spin."

She didn't know what he was talking about but that was okay. No need to know everything; her Master could do the thinking for both of them. He unbuckled the straps and slipped them from her limbs. She flinched as pins and needles flowed under her skin but then her Master's firm hands were rubbing the places where the straps had pressed into her flesh, made the fizzing sensation disappear. She liked the marks the straps had left, liked that he could see them on her.

"Alright," he began. She looked up at him, hanging on his every word. "Slap yourself."

A sudden stinging was across her face, a refreshing throbbing cut across her cheekbone. One of her hands had risen of its own accord and, as ordered, slapped her hard across the face. She gasped. She was a little disappointed that it wasn't his hand that'd slapped her but she was also tremendously proud of how quickly and well she'd obeyed.

"Again, Master?"

"No, that will be sufficient." His smile was deliciously smug, sprinkled with just enough contempt to make her feel very small and very owned. "Now choke yourself."

Her hands were on her windpipe in a moment, finding the soft sensitive elastic part that she so adored his tongue upon. She slid her fingers around until she found the part that felt right, then carefully squeezed her own windpipe closed. Tried to inhale. No breath came. She smiled happily, proud. Looked up at her Master. Hadn't she done a good job?

"Good girl," he said. "Now hold it."

She did. Body started burning, begging for air, blood thumping in her ears. Wondered if she would keep holding her grip if she passed out.

"Okay," said her beloved and kind Master, "release."

She gasped in a horrendously undignified manner, coughed, spluttered as her body sucked in all the air it could. She doubled over in

the chair in spite of herself, and then her Master was crouching in front of her, hand on her chin forcing her eyes to lock with his.

“Too much?”

“Just enough, Master.” Pushing up against these limits exhilarated her.

“Take a moment.” He grinned, though his eyes were careful and piercing. “That was just a test. I want you alive. Don’t ever do dangerous things like that unless I order it, and never do anything that will actually endanger your life even if I order it. Understand?”

“Yes, Master. I understand, Master.” She felt tears prick her eyes. Her Master was being so kind to her, so much kinder than he needed to be. She was so lucky!

“Ready, sweetling?”

“Ready, Master.” It was true and would always be true.

“Legs up. Show me your cunt like a good girl.”

She gripped the chair’s arms, swung her legs up into the air, pulled them back so her knees were next to her ears. Felt so proud to be able to obey like this. A flash of inspiration bid her reach in between her thighs so her shoulders were in front of her knees, and then use her arms to push them further back so her heels were behind her ears. She looked down at her swollen drooling hole and rested her hands either side of it. Joined them, thumbnails touching at the top and fingers pressed together at the bottom so they formed the shape of a heart framing her shameful slit. Looked up. Smiled contentedly.

Her heart leaped when she saw how pleased her Master was with the display. “Well done, little pet,” he said, with such a genuinely satisfied smile she thought her heart would burst. “Now... here.” He gently brushed his fingertips up her glistening lips, letting them just penetrate her enough to pick up a coating of wetness before sliding up and bumping against her erect clit where it poked demandingly out of its hood. She yelped; sparks of pleasure arced up her spine.

He brought his fingers up to his eyes, examined their wetness, clicked his tongue. “Look at this. You’ve made a mess.” He pushed them against her lips. “Clean up.”

She was pleased to be useful, sliding her lips softly around her Master's fingers one by one and gently sucking away all her dirty, messy juice. She finished each digit with a hard suck so his fingers would be clean of her filthy spit afterwards. Why did she ever mind this taste? It wasn't unpleasant, even a little sweet, and the condescending look her Master gave her while she was cleaning him would have been worth it even if she did taste bad.

"Alright," continued her Master, "get those legs a little more forward. I like this tucked-back pose but I don't want you getting hurt when I fuck you." Pouting, Anna complied. Who cared if she got hurt? The important thing was that her Master felt good. Nothing else compared to that. Let everything else burn!

Good to his word, her Master shucked his clothes, revealing his cock last of all. She couldn't take her eyes off it, powerful and erect, thrusting out in front of him. How could any woman—no matter her species—resist such a thing? It was impossible. She whimpered and wriggled herself in a pathetic attempt to entice him, pulled herself open, showed him the slick inviting hole he owned. She needed this. A sucking wet emptiness yawned under her womb and only he could soothe it. She needed to make him feel good. It was what she was and had always been for. The other things she did were a pretence, a game, a play for idiots to watch. Only this mattered.

He rubbed his cock over her cunt, made it nice and slick with her juices. She felt a small flash of smugness at how convenient she was. He lined himself up and she held her breath, then exhaled it in a long low moan that turned into a bubbling squeal as he slid slowly in and clicked his cock-head past her cervix, nestled it in the very back of her cunt, behind her womb. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she panted, shaking, trembling, trying to stop herself from coming on the spot.

But come she did. He didn't seem to care that she thrashed and twisted beneath him, just steadily fucked her into the chair upon which her mind had been corrected. He seemed amused at her contortions, her curled toes, her haggard breath as she squeezed and cried out and bucked in orgasm after melting-syrup orgasm. Reflected off the

shattered shards of her mind's mirror was a sublime joy at being able to provide her Master with such entertainment while he used her. His firm thrusts slapped his loose, heavy ball-sack against her bottom, spanked her with his hips.

Eventually his pace shifted, his moans became guttural, his hips faster, his cock harder. She heard herself begging.

"Please, Master, please, come in me. Please come in me, Master. Please. Please. Please!"

He obliged, roaring as he hilted hard, slammed himself against her very back wall, painted her insides as white as her mind. She felt her greedy cunt's walls pulsing, pulling on him, coaxing every drop they could get out of his cock until he fell against her with a satisfied groan. She squealed with delight and nibbled his ear.

A pale river of thick semen began to spill from her stretched cunt-hole when he pulled out of her with a wet schlick. She cried out as it trickled down and threatened to lose itself between her buttocks. She quickly cupped a hand beneath her slit and caught her Master's precious seed, so relieved that she had noticed in time to save it. Once she was satisfied that she had caught almost all of what her cunt would spare, she carefully brought it up to her mouth and licked her palm clean with big lapping strokes of her tongue, savoured his taste mixed together with hers. Sighed. Happy. The happiest. Looked up at her Master, who was swaying a little on his feet, his cock still slick with her juices and—there!—a little bit of his cum beading from his cock-head. She gracefully swung her legs down like a dirty ballerina, pivoted neatly to her knees, and pushed her Master's softening cock down into her throat.

She closed her eyes, sighed through her nose in deep satisfaction, gently swirled her tongue around his shaft and head to clean him. Once she was satisfied—though she may have spent a little longer cleaning him than was strictly necessary—she pressed her lips in a tight seal around his base and sucked hard while she pulled her head back, leaving his magnificent penis absolutely clean. She sank down into a low kneel and swallowed. Opened her eyes. Her beloved Master gazed down at her with soft, kind eyes.

“That’s my good girl.”

“Yes, Master. I am!” She wiped her mouth with the back of her wrist, licking it in case she’d caught any extra juices there. Sighed contentedly. She felt so relaxed, so complete.

“Kneel up on the chair.” Her Master’s command made her heart leap. She was to be useful again! “Grab the back with your hands and tilt your arse up for me.”

She did, shivering with delight, and as he lightly gripped her throat while sliding into her cunt from behind she wondered who could possibly be a happier woman than her.

13

ANNA SHIVERED under her fluffy robe, then leaned back against Theo and stole his body heat.

“Able to speak yet?” he asked.

Anna shook her head. Not yet. Her body was already saying everything she wanted to say at this moment.

They were ensconced on a soft curved couch, Anna in Theo’s lap, his hands interlaced across her belly. The room was everything the city outside wasn’t: Warm, gentle, dry, all wooden panels and tastefully concealed lights. Smelled of clean sheets and birch; the wood probably came from some of the recently-harvested hybrid groves. It was difficult to believe a place like this was built inside the shell of Theo’s old hospital.

He’d carried her in here and wrapped her in a blanket as she’d mewled insensate. She’d not known where she was. Hadn’t cared. Just wanted to crawl back to the state of absolute servitude Theo had put her into. Wanted it to never stop. But it had, and the comedown had rolled over her like a slow-moving freight train.

Anna finished sucking her last tongueful of chocolate. What an

indulgence! Theo had to hand-feed it to her at first. She'd tried to bat his hands away, tried to hide her face in her hands, but his arms were stronger and he wouldn't stop until she'd eaten something. She hated being so weak in front of him.

She pulled her legs up and pivoted sideways on Theo's lap so she could see his face but still rest against him.

"So," she began, "I didn't give up anything, my dignity aside. You bastard."

Theo nodded. "I didn't ask you anything classified. You know that I don't want to know those things."

She did. During the worst of it, just after she'd come back into full awareness of herself, she'd burst into frantic tears and pawed at Theo's chest while her tentacles cringed away from his neck, afraid of what they'd find inside his head. He'd ever so gently taken one of them and pressed it firmly under his ear. The rest of her tentacles had swarmed him, then, every filament desperately splayed through his mind. He held himself open, let her go wherever she wished. She flew down every neural link she could find in a wild sprint, dug frantically for the hidden parts of him that—of course—were not actually there. She'd seen what he'd so carefully hidden from her: It had all been theatre.

"At least you're not trying to blow us all up." Anna was surprised at the drip of venom in her words. The trickery, well intended though it was, still stung.

"Wouldn't know how. Never was much good at fighting. Decent with complex fractures though."

"Theo," she frowned, ignoring his banter, "In your memory I saw you relabel the vial but not... What did you inject into me, really?"

"Saline." He had the good grace to look a little guilty. "Absolutely inert."

She pressed a palm to her forehead and groaned. "That syringe... Did I mention you're a bastard? I think I did, before."

"You did."

"It bears repeating, you bastard." She kissed him and pressed herself harder against his chest. "Your punishment is to warm me up for the

span of our natural lives.”

“Am I eligible for parole?”

“Do not push me, husband.”

They lay in comfortable silence for a while.

“Theo?”

“Yes?”

“Ask me those questions again, please.”

“What, the conditioning checklist? It’s just preten—”

“Please? I... I need to be sure.”

“Alright.” He cleared his throat. “Who are you?”

She picked the name that felt right. “I’m Anna. Anna... Becker.” She blushed and glanced shyly at Theo’s face. His eyes were wide with shock. She tilted her nose up imperiously to cover her embarrassment. “I can use your name if I want! It’s my right. Next question.”

“Who am I?”

“You’re Theo Becker, my husband.” His hand found hers and she squeezed it tightly.

“What’s your real occupation?”

“Wife.”

“Of course. To whom are you loyal?”

She winked, feeling more herself with every question. “To my darling Theo.”

“Who else?”

“Nobody.” She meant it. Something in her had burned away, an ancient, dormant locus of control crushed utterly. She missed it not one bit. “I am your woman and you are my man. Nobody can take that away from us, not even my species’ creators.”

“How do you refer to your reproductive opening?”

“That’s my...” Curious. Now that it came to it she felt most comfortable with—“...my cunt.” She glared at Theo’s raised eyebrow. “What? That’s what we’ll be calling it from now on, and I’ll thank you to respect that fact.”

“What about your breathing and consumption opening?”

Anna smiled and shook her head. “What a phrase that is; surely not

medical? It's my mouth. Nothing different there." She leaned across to him, put her lips against his ear. "And my asshole's still my asshole, asshole," she whispered, then nipped his earlobe.

Anna suddenly laughed and kicked her legs like a little squidling. She felt great! Light and fluffy and clean, like her soul had just soaked in a wonderful hot bath.

Theo chuckled, squeezed his arms around her waist, then motioned towards a door labelled 'SHOWER' in old-fashioned lettering. "Shall we?"

The warm shower and her glistening, nude husband sharing it with her were the two things that Anna needed most. She stretched her arms above her, felt her muscles pull taut, and sighed. Theo's brutally thorough use of her cunt had left it a little tender and her skin had bruised a little where he'd stuck the syringe in her, but other than that she seemed to have come through their little date in very good order. She rubbed up a good lather between her hands and playfully soaped her breasts, then glanced saucily up at Theo to make sure he was watching.

He was not. He was looking straight over her head, staring at the tiled wall, for Theo was, at that moment, weathering a violent assault of the most unexplainable despair. He fought the urge to run from the shower—where would he go?—but he didn't want to show himself to Anna like this. It kept coming back stronger each time he tried to push it away.

Anna saw that Theo wouldn't meet her eye. The pressed line of his lips told her that he was upset.

"Theo?"

"Yes?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He sighed. "No, that's not true. I just... I started feeling... not good."

"Why?" Anna dropped her well-lathered breasts and rubbed her soapy fingers into Theo's thick chest hair. She resisted the urge to push her filaments into his head, decided to let him talk.

"I don't know. It just suddenly..." He exhaled hard. "The things I

said, what I did... where did they come from?"

"From you." Anna did have to admit, on reflection, that she'd never have thought him capable of all that. "You worked really hard."

"I drugged you, kidnapped you, strapped you down, terrorised you, violated you!" Theo gritted his teeth. "I just concentrated on doing it well and never thought about what... what might happen. What it meant."

"Yes." Anna smiled. She did so love it when he got focused on something. It was cute.

"I really am a bastard," he said, voice cracking.

"I liked it," Anna said softly, "it was just... a little more than I expected."

"Yes." Guilt carved itself into his face. "I went too far."

She kissed his chest, luxuriated in the smell of his wet skin. "Just far enough. I think I needed that much. Didn't know I needed it, but I did."

Theo let out a sobbing breath as his beautiful violet-skinned wife wrapped her arms around him and stroked a hand over his back.

"I wasn't acting, you know," she continued, quiet voice just audible over the hiss of water, "I really meant every word I said, when I... when I was begging you not to get rid of me. I thought you were going to drug me, get what you said you wanted, that even if I survived I'd never see you again."

A terrible spear of remorse crucified Theo's heart. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be, please. I..." She swallowed. "I can look through every part of your mind but you can't read mine. It's terribly unfair. I never properly understood until that moment that you couldn't see my love for you the way I can taste yours for me. When you had me panicked that it might all have been a clever act, I realised: 'So how does he know *yours* is real, then?'"

"I knew how you felt about the invasion, about everything, but I didn't really understand. I selfishly convinced myself that you'd come around eventually, that because I was on top I'd never have to change anything of myself." She nuzzled into him. "So please, Theo, beloved—

I'm sorry. I love you. I will always love you! I think I loved you before I even knew you existed. I don't know how it's possible but I still think it. I know how things were before, I've seen it in your memories, but that doesn't change how I feel. Please believe me. I can't stop. I pray that there's an afterlife so that I can keep loving you even after we're both gone from the world."

Theo took a shuddering breath, tried to steady his voice. "Anna, there's something I haven't told you yet, something you need to hear out loud."

Anna looked up at him, pretty orange eyes wide and gentle, smile soft and trusting. In a small voice she asked, "What is it?"

"I love you too."