

BRING YOUR OWN SPOON

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Hanu sat before his stove, warming himself. It was cold outside, and the wind scoured away the cloud of nanites, the airborne biotech that kept people safe. He had seen more than one friend catch their death in the wind, caught in a pocket of air without protection, their lungs seared by some virus, or skin sloughed off by radiation. A thin mesh of pack sheet formed a tent around him, herding together the invisible, vital cogs. Shelter was necessary on a windy night, even for those with meagre resources.

He was cooking rice on the stove in a battered pot with a mismatched lid, something made of ancient cast iron. Ironically, in certain retro fashion houses, this genuine pre-Dissolution-Era relic would have fetched a fortune, but Hanu had no access to those places, and wouldn't have cared either way. A pot to cook your rice in was priceless, as valuable to a roamer as a tent or a solar stove.

He measured a quarter cup of fine-grained rice into boiling water, added a bit of salt, a half stick of cinnamon and some cardamom. The rice would be half cooked before he added onions and chillies, perhaps a touch of saffron. In a way, Hanu ate like a king, though his portions were meagre. He had access to an abandoned herb garden on the roof of a derelict tower, plants growing in some weird symbiotic truce with the nanites warring in the sky, nature defying popular scientific opinion. The rice he'd got from an abandoned government grain silo, sacks of the stuff just lying there, because people feared contamination. Almost everyone in the city ate from food synthesizers, which converted algae and other supplements into roast chicken at the drop of a hat.

He let the rice cook until there were burnt bits sticking to the bottom of the pot, which were pretty tasty. The smell filled the tent like a spice bazaar, and he ate from the bowl using his wooden spoon. No one disturbed him, for which he was thankful. It was difficult to find a square inch empty in Dhaka, but it was a windy night, the pollutant levels were on orange alert, and most people were indoors.

Moreover, he was on the fringes of the riverside area of Narayanganj, where the alert level was perpetually red due to unspeakable life forms breeding in the water, a sort of adjacent sub-city swallowed by Dhaka a hundred years ago, a pustule that was avoided by even the moderately desperate homeless, only one step away from being cluster-bombed into oblivion by the satellites above. Thus, he was able to finish his meal in peace and was contemplating brewing some tea when a gust of wind knocked the tent askew, and a lumpy black dog nosed his way in.

Hanu sighed and gave the dog a bit of rice. It ate directly from his hand, thumping his tail in appreciation. He got out of the tent to prevent the creature from breaking it. Where the dog roamed, his master would not be far behind.

'You're corrupting my hound,' a voice said. In the shadows, a form slowly materialized, a human-like thing extending a field of disturbance around him. It was the djinn Imbidor, an ancient creature recently woken from centuries of sleep, diving again into the cut and thrust of mortal life, puzzled somewhat by the rapacious change in humanity.

'He's a mongrel, Imbi,' Hanu said. 'Even more bastardized than you.'

Imbidor frowned. 'Are you sure? The one who sold it to me, that man by the sweet shop with the bird cages, he said that it was a pure bred Mirpur mastiff.'

'Mirpur mastiff?' Hanu laughed. 'Cheeky bastard! The pure breed Mirpur mastiff is a euphemism for the most mangled bloodline possible. Your hound is descended from the original street dogs that roamed Dhaka before they started injecting turtle genes into them.'

'Oh,' he scowled. 'Humans are always ripping me off.'

'You want some rice?'

'With cardamom and saffron?'

'Of course.'

The djinn took the pot and ate the last of the rice. He had his own spoon, a silver filigreed thing which no doubt came from some kingly horde. 'Thanks, Hanu. You're a good cook, I always say.'

'Not much demand for cooks these days,' Hanu said shortly. His father had been a cook once, long ago, before the current banking cartel had pushed the Cardless out of the better neighbourhoods into subsidized boroughs, which were little better than feral slums. There had been a time when there was apparently a 'middle class' sandwiched between the dichotomy of rich and poor.

He shook his head. His father had told him a lot of fairy stories. And then he had fucked off. 'Plus, it's illegal to use real plants, like I do. They'd probably arrest me for endangering the cardamom or something.'

'Well, for the Fringe, then,' Imbidor said. 'We should have a restaurant. Something like the old days, a place for people to gather. Plenty of the Fringe would like it – perhaps even some of the citizens.'

The citizens were the general populace without capital wealth, no stocks or shares or bonds, whose main contribution to society was the biotech their bodies spewed, which added to the mass of benevolent nanites fighting the good fight in the sky, scrubbing the air, killing disease, controlling the microclimate, forming the bubble which protected Dhaka from the big, bad world outside. The Fringe was a subset of the citizenry, filled with the homeless, the drifters, the thrill seekers, the darker edge of the maladjusted. And djinn. More and more often, djinn emerged from slumber these days and found a world near-wrecked by hubris, the lonely places they favoured despoiled and unliveable. Many went back to sleep right away. It was rumoured that djinn did not age while they slept, that they could afford to while away centuries waiting for a better time. Of course, there was no guarantee such a time would come.

'I would cook, and you would serve,' Hanu joked. 'We could call it "Bring Your Own Spoon".'

'And the Hound would be the lookout,' Imbi said, enthused.

'We already have everything. The tent, the stove, the pot.'

'The mosques give away free bowls,' Imbidor said. 'Their food is some horrible grey sludge, but the bowls are good. I've collected a stack of them since I woke up. And we'd provide *real* food. No discrimination against the Cardless either. Pay however you can.'

'You know, why not, Imbi?' Hanu said, suddenly struck by a thought. 'Why can't we do it?'

'That's what I've been saying!' Imbidor shouted. 'Come on, Hanu! I'm so bored.' Boredom was the reason the djinn went to sleep so often in the first place.

'Okay, I'm in! We must find a good place to set up the kitchen. And food suppliers, well... I know a few. Benches? Clean water? We'll need a place without the cameras if possible...' The possibilities seemed endless. Problems jostled in his mind, shifting in priority as solutions clicked into place. It felt good to think again.

'Come on, let's go,' Imbidor said. 'I know the perfect place.'

He extended his distortion field around Hanu like a ragged cloak, keeping out the bad stuff in the air. Hanu stumbled from the slight vertigo it caused, felt that familiar tinge of nausea brought on by proximity to the field. But, in truth, Imbi's power was tatty, weakened from some ancient conflict, his

touch feather-light compared to the great djinn. Once, Hanu had seen a Marid with a field so powerful that it was opaque, reflecting the sun, a solid fist that rammed through the crowd relentlessly. He'd seen a man caught in its centre pulped to death by unimaginable pressures.

Djinn did not officially exist, although the Fringe knew perfectly well they were there, often out in plain sight, going about their business. There were rumours that great djinn lords ruled human corporations, wielding terrible power from the shadows. Imbidor was not that kind of djinn. He had no *dignitas*, the peculiar currency the djinn traded in, he commanded no respect, had no followers, no wealth in either world. There were the indigent even among the mighty djinn.

They worked their way deeper into Narayanganj, Hanu suppressing his atavistic fear of the bad air. The street was still lined with shanties, extruded sheets lashed together with adhesive bands, cheap stuff which could be printed out of the many black-market operations found in greater Dhaka. Here, farther away from the centre, the people seemed unhealthier somehow, and their progress was tracked warily, with more than one weapon being raised, although the djinn was recognized and allowed to pass. People moved here out of desperation, for even though the main boroughs of the Cardless were crowded, at least the air was good, basic supplies were provided, and there was work. Here, by the river, the town was semi-abandoned, and as they got closer to the water, the citizens became more furtive, many with deformities, the scarring of errant nanites. Big pharma liked to experiment with their new designs in high-density population areas, beta testing algorithms on live users – all for good nanites, of course, never anything weaponized, because that would be immoral. There were always side effects, though.

'Here we are,' Imbi said, stopping.

It was a shell of a building six storeys tall, built in the old style with concrete and steel, the bricks, wires, windows, doors and anything electrical looted long ago. It was near the riverbank, close enough that Hanu could feel the cool air stirring, and his instinctive fear of the water made him cringe.

'Smugglers,' Imbi said, knocking on the door of a makeshift room.

A man with an electric sword emerged and watched them without speaking. Hanu glanced at him disinterestedly. The Fringe was full of smugglers with swords.

'We want the empty room,' Imbi said.

'For the night? Or do you intend to live here?'

'More than a night,' Hanu said. 'We want to try something out.'

The swordsman shrugged. 'The djinn crashes here sometimes. I'm okay with that. I give him electricity, and he sweeps for bad bugs with the distortion thing of his.'

'It's a pretty good spot,' Imbi said, embarrassed by his poverty. People who lived on the riverside were the scum of the earth. 'I can clean the air, at least enough for us few.'

'You don't get sick here? No black lung? None of the skin stuff?' Hanu stared at the smuggler, trying to spot these ailments.

The smuggler turned his sword off. 'Not so far.'

'How?'

'There's a lot more people living here than you think,' the man said. 'The djinn cleans the air, and we have a nanite replicator. It's old but it helps. What business did you say you were in?'

'Hanu Khillick,' Hanu said. 'Restaurateur.'

The smuggler burst out laughing. 'Karka. Riverboat smuggler and pirate.'

'Imbidor of Gangaridai,' said Imbi. 'Djinn. Professional giraffe racer. Of course, there are no giraffes left.'

'Come inside,' Karka said. 'Let's get you set up. I'm not going to charge you rent as long as the djinn helps out. Once in a while, surveillance drones show up. You have to take care of those quickly, or corporate security will send someone down to investigate.'

Inside was a sparsely furnished space, well swept, covered with the black market gewgaws of the smuggler's trade, a few solid pieces, a power generator, an ancient nanite replicator and a squat printer with its guts out. Karka clearly had a proper set-up – no wonder he survived here. Hanu wondered what he smuggled.

Karka motioned them to sit on the futons covering the floor.

'I will be most happy to help,' Imbi said.

'If you guys need anything else, you're gonna have to pay. Air scrubbing for three ain't cheap. You got any money?'

Hanu shook his head.

'I am the descendent of an ancient empire known as the First City. I have lived hundreds of years, I have looked into the void of the abyss, I have seen the dark universe of the djinn, I hold over 300 patents currently pending litigation in the celestial courts...' Imbi said.

'So, no cash, I guess?'

'Er, no.'

'Any sat minutes?'

Hanu shook his head. Sat minutes were hired time from satellites, a secure pin which activated the chip in your head for a designated time, showing you the vastly expanded VR universe that rich people inhabited. It was funny that everyone got chipped for consumer tracking and census purposes, but very few of the Cardless ever actually got to walk the VR world. Bandwidth was jealously guarded. Sat minutes were the way, a brief glimpse into paradise, a ten-minute birthday treat for a child, a wedding gift, a de facto currency, hoarded but never consumed, a drug for the VR junkies, news, communication, vital information, everything rolled into one.

'Do I look like I have sat minutes? I'm a cook. I'll cook you food.'

'I got an old VAT unit,' Karka said, looking at him dubiously. 'Makes food out of the little seaweed packets.'

'Chinese or Indian?'

'Post-crash Malay.'

'Everything tastes of coconut, right?'

'Haha! Yeah, I don't even know what coconut is. Some kind of nut?'

'There were big trees once, and these were the fruit – kind of like big balls full of liquid.'

'Yeah, well, that's fucken food for me, coconut-flavoured seaweed.'

'I'll make you rice right now that will make you cry.'

'No, thanks.' Karka looked queasy. 'I already ate. Look, man, don't worry. I'll help. Imbi sorted me out a couple of times with his djinn jitsu.'

Hanu scrouged in his bag of provisions and brought out something he had been saving, a rare find. It was a raw mango from a tree near the red zone which had miraculously survived all these years, and which had now suddenly given fruit. No one touched the mangoes, of course, fearing some hideous mutation – even the street kids stayed away. They had all heard stories of trees bursting open to release deadly nanite spores of the terrible Two Head Disease, which caused a bulbous head-like protuberance to come out of your ass; or of the Factory Germ, which slowly hardened your body into metal. Hanu's father had taught him to forage, however, as the very poorest must do, and this foraging had developed in him an instinct about what could be safely eaten.

He sliced the mango with his knife, letting the slivers fall inside his pot, careful not to lose the precious juice. Then he brought out a small lemon, nursed carefully from his secret herb garden, cut it and squeezed half of it onto the fruit. Salt, pepper, turmeric, mustard seed paste and chili flakes followed, a little bit each because the flavours were intensely different from VAT food,

almost alien. He mixed it all together by hand till the slices glistened with spice. Karka and Imbi had gathered around, their mouths open, inhaling the smell of raw mango and the sharp tang of mustard, drawn by an ancient evolutionary pull.

'What the hell is this?' Karka lowered his head involuntarily, breathing in the smells.

Hanu ate a piece to show them it was safe. 'It's good.'

Imbi, who had largely bypassed the Dissolution Era, had no such qualms and quickly forked a third of the mango onto his palm.

'It is good,' Karka said, unable to resist a slice. He looked entranced. 'It's damn good. You *are* a cook.'

'You in?'

'You seriously want to open a restaurant?'

'You've got a perfect view of the river.'

'You realize they call this the river of the dead, don't you?'



The next morning, they got started, Karka joining them for a breakfast of rice from the last of Hanu's horde. Afterwards, he handed over a key to the spare room and a handful of electronics, a solar battery, some basic furniture. He dragged out the air scrubber and placed it equidistant between their doors. 'I eat for free. Plus, Imbi does his shit. We share the air. If it runs out, we split the costs.'

'Deal.'

They dispersed, Hanu going on an herb run, Imbi dispatched to spread the word and also discover some sources of raw material. It was, after all, useless to have a restaurant without any food. Hanu knew this was the biggest hurdle. He expected this dream to end soon, for where on earth would Imbi find so much real food?

Nonetheless, he set up his station on time, arranging his supplies of herbs and spices, warming up water from the ancient ion filter, even setting up a bench for customers. If Imbi came back, they would open for lunch. By 11 a.m., hopeful-looking people invited by Imbi were ambling around, steering clear of the glaring Karka, trying to be nonchalant. Hanu studied his prospective customers and had to conclude that, collectively, they hadn't a penny to their name. He might as well have started a VAT kitchen, feeding the homeless like the mosques.

'This lot couldn't buy crabs from a brothel,' Karka said, hand on sword hilt. 'If Imbi's not back by noon, they're going to start looting.'

'The road is my home,' Hanu said. 'I am not afraid.' *People always assume that poor people are dangerous. They wouldn't be here if they were.*

Imbi staggered in at half-past noon carrying a large burlap sack. There were a good dozen customers still loitering despite Karka's best efforts. The three of them gathered inside the room, where the djinn threw open his sack with obvious pride.

'What the hell is this?' Karka recoiled with disgust.

'It's a fish,' Imbi said. 'From the river.'

It was, indeed, an enormous fish, scales glistening, gills still flapping for air. Hanu remembered his father bringing home one once. Karka had never seen one and was clearly repulsed by the idea of eating something from the river.

'Look, there's a dozen people outside, and we have to feed them something,' Hanu said. 'I know how to cook this, I remember.'

'What's wrong?' Imbi asked Karka. 'We used to fish from the river all the time...'

'That was 200 years ago, Imbi,' Karka said. 'We don't touch that shit any more...'

Hanu ignored them. He had a fish to scale, and he'd only ever seen it being done as a child. It took rather longer than an hour to get it right, the pieces prepped, somewhat mangled, but soon, the smell and sizzle of grilled fish permeated from the pre-fab, and his customers sat down and waited in an almost hypnotized state, so docile and silent that even Karka had no complaints.

When he was ready, he brought it out, 15 pieces of grilled fish with crispy skin, flavoured with ginger, garlic and chili, accompanied by little balls of rice. He had used up everything he had. The crowd took their portions solemnly, signifying the importance of the moment, ate with their hands along the makeshift bench with all the dignity of a state banquet. There was no hesitation. no question of what they were ingesting. It simply smelled too good. Karka ate the last piece, his resistance melted away.

'God, this is a good way to die,' he said.

It started up the conversation, rounds of introductions, stumbling praise for the food, old recollections of when they had last seen food like this, of the myriad turns of their lives, which had left them careless and desperate on the streets. Imbi sat amongst them, extending his field for them, and they marvelled at the distortion, wondered aloud that such a powerful creature should be wandering the road with them. And then, by some unspoken consensus, it was

time to leave, and they began to make their offerings. A knife, much handled, the last thing a man would give up; an old card for sat minutes, so old, so carefully preserved, to receive a call that never came; a silver locket with the picture taken out, a book of short stories, an ancient watch.

The last lady stood up, her hands empty. 'I have nothing,' she said. 'But there is a place with birds - chickens. If I bring them, will you cook?'

'Yes, of course,' said Hanu. He looked at the small pile of treasure, and tears leaked from his eyes.

'Hanu and Imbi,' the djinn said, sweeping his hand back towards the establishment. 'We are open for business.'

And open they were, for six months and more, feeding crowds, sometimes with feasts, sometimes with nothing but onions and rice. Their customers scavenged, bringing food from unknown places. There were unspoken rules. Everything was eaten. No one was turned away. At first, Imbi kept his field up like a tent, kept the bad air at bay, visibly exhausting himself, burning surveillance drones out of the sky. When their accrued wealth piled up, Karka could afford to charge up his replicator, spewing out the good nanites, and people stayed by the river out of good faith, adding their bodies to the critical mass required to power these things, the human fuel which made their community work.

The river, though, collected a tax. Some people sickened from its bounty, one died from intestinal rot. But the people who roamed here sickened and died anyway. There was no noticeable drop in custom. Imbi wandered far and wide, bartering, gossiping, marketing, and returned with useful things - water filters, glasses, proper cutlery and utensils for Hanu's Kitchen. It would have been safer to move around, but they couldn't. People relied on them, the gangs left them alone. It was a safe spot, blessed by the river gods.

'Look what we've done!' Imbi said, proud. 'I told you it would work.'

'It can't last,' Hanu said.

Hanu was right. One day, men from the high city swaggered down, uniformed, in their rented armoured car, flashing their mercenary badges. Private security. They didn't like activity in the orange zones, and the river was a boundary, a red zone which these company men avoided at all costs.

'DISPERSE! DISPERSE! RED ALERT! HAZARD! HAZARD!' the armoured car was going mad with panic, its blaring voice rising in pitch as it twisted its way through debris. Karka came out with his sword behind his back, Hanu with his cleaver and a decapitated fish head. The score or so people dozing in the sun after lunch sat up blearily. The car louvered open and two men came

out of it in full combat gear, faces hidden inside command helmets, a swarm of sparrow-sized drones buzzing in the air above them. These models were six seasons old, a tried and tested method of crowd control. The new ones were apparently mosquito-sized and just as lethal.

'Gathering in a red zone,' the company man said. 'What for?'

'Easy, we're just squatting,' Hanu said. 'Cardless, see?'

'What is this place?' the security guard walked around, touching the benches, the bowls, the cardboard box of scavenged cutlery.

'Shelter for the poor,' Hanu said, trying to cut him off from the kitchen. 'Look, we're just feeding them. Hungry, homeless people, for god's sake.'

The company man touched him with a gloved hand, the powered suit amplifying force, and Hanu went stumbling back, a deep bruise forming instantly on his chest.

'Food? This is no VAT kitchen. You have set up a microclimate here. We saw it from above,' the man said, staring into the interior of the kitchen, his face unreadable. 'Why is there a microclimate in a red zone?'

'It's not a crime to be here,' Karka said. 'What laws have we broken?'

The company men looked at each other, silent. They were not unduly worried. Laws only applied to those who could afford lawyers. The swarm shifted a bit towards Karka, the machine whine rising an octave. They had already noted his sword, deemed it useless in a fight.

'I don't understand what this is,' The first man said, knocking down the fab sheets walling the front of the kitchen. 'What is this organic matter?'

'Why, it's our food, friend soldier,' Imbi said, beaming. Hanu suppressed a groan. 'Would you like some? Fish-head curry with brown rice. A princely meal! In my day, policemen always ate free! Come, friends, eat a plate, rejoice in the bounty of the river!'

The man took the plate, and his helmet became less opaque, revealing a face inside. He stared at it, fascinated, and Hanu could almost see the neurons in his brain put together the contours of the cooked fish head with the scraps in the kitchen in the shape of an actual fish, which he must have seen a hundred times as a child in pictures. Emotion flitted across his face: curiosity, alarm, wonder. For a second, Hanu dreamt that he would actually take off his helmet and try the food. Then, his face turned to revulsion, and Hanu knew it was all over.

Imbi was standing there, beaming with goodwill, when the plate struck him across the face. Drones punched into him, tearing out chunks of flesh, sending him tumbling back, before his distortion field finally flickered to life,

cocooning him. Karka gave a samurai yell and charged, sword up in high guard. The drones were slow to react, confused by the djinn's quantum field. They finally lunged at Karka but he ignored them, letting them have their pound of flesh, flying through that mist of his own blood and tissue, terminal grace, and his ionized blade somehow hit the command helmet in the neck joint, shorting it out, sending the astonished company man down to his knees.

Abruptly, half of the drones stopped short, hovering uncertainly. The other half, unfortunately, were not so confused. They slammed into Karka with lethal force, shredding the smuggler like paper. The armoured car, programmed to be cowardly, was blaring incoherent alarms, already backing away from the fracas. The second policeman hesitated, then dived into his vehicle, his drones folding neatly into a pocket somewhere.

'YOU HAVE ALL BEEN MARKED FOR TERMINATION! SATELLITE STRIKE IMMINENT! INNOCENT BYSTANDERS ARE REQUESTED TO VACATE! VACATE! VACAAAAATE!'

And they were gone, leaving their fallen behind.

'I don't think I can put Karka back together,' Imbi said, tears in his eyes. He was trying to collect the pieces of their friend.

'Never mind. We must leave. They will destroy this place,' Hanu said. He looked at the dozen or so patrons still left. 'All of us have to leave. They've tagged our chips for death.'

But they knew nowhere was safe. Tagged for death was death in truth. It was just a matter of time till the satellites cleared their backlog.

'Load everything into the boat!' Hanu shouted. 'Everything! We have to go across the river. Into the country.'

They stared at him, unconvinced. 'Look, there's fish in the river. That means there's food outside, you fools! We can still survive! They won't hunt us there.' He turned to Imbi. 'Imbi is a djinn! Djinn! He can clean the air for us, we can gather others, make a microclimate like we did here. They don't know he can do that.'

Imbi stood up straight, spread his arms out wide, dripping Karka's blood, and his distortion field rippled out, encompassing them all. It was stronger than ever before, coloured with rage and sorrow.

'We should leave,' he said. 'We should follow Hanu, who gave us food from nothing. I have slept a long time. I remember when they used to chain you to the earth and force you to work, force your children and their children to the same labour. Now I am awake, I see they have taken your flesh, they

have herded you together like cattle and, living or dying, your bodies are little factories, cleaning the air for them. Your chips are your collars. They kill you without thought. You fear the air, the water, the trees, the very ground you walk on. What more can you lose? Let us go forth into the wilderness, where they dare not follow.'

When they heard the djinn, they grew calm and gathered their meagre things. It was resignation, perhaps, or hope. Hanu freed the boat, pushing off into the river, and the poison water splashed over him, but he did not care. It was cool, and dark, and it washed away the blood.