

SYMBIOSIS

In her dream, Maria really was Akirikari.

She was the god that tricked the stars into confessing their secret names, the fisher that stopped the great wave from crushing the sacred city of Yat, the swordsman who made the rainbows above the tidal shelf by accident with a thousand swipes of his glaive-guisarme in the battle with Efenathu.

Maria was Akirikari, the red-bannered hunter who brought up the bream from the deep, who could spear an asteroid at a hundred lightyears, whose wild dances carved the valleys, whose black bile excavated the karst caves where the Borna people lived, and had lived, for three thousand years.

In her dream, Maria was Akirikari. But when she woke, she was only dressed like him, in stiff ribbons of mid-priced cloth, in a well-meant, but unconvincing imitation of his red banners and gold bangles.

Also, her makeup had smudged on the pillow, removing the startling black eyeshadow and radial lines that made her eyes seem huge and intense, and leaving her face feeling naked and eyebrow-less.

And – it was far too early to be awake. There was a blue, cold, crepuscular quality to the walls and surfaces of things that proclaimed it.

She groped for her spear, but it had been confiscated by the Transit Authority before she got on the shuttle, and her hand found somebody's face on the dark bunk below, warm and soft, and she quickly retracted into herself like a sea urchin.

The sleeper stirred, and turned over. Maria held her hands tight to her side and didn't breathe.

The ceiling was too close. She stared at it, and then pushed on it, half-heartedly, like the lid of a coffin. It pushed her back, a weightless imitation of gravity acting on her, and she was pressed into the bunk.

If she really were Akirikari, she could have jumped to the Starry Pellicle from Borna. Comet by comet, and oh how gracefully, but, more realistically, she would have gotten out of bed already. Akirikari feared no social faux pas. Especially not – what – making noise in the morning? Disturbing strangers who she should have been friends with by now?

But, she was not Akirikari, and the prospect of trying to pack her over-tight bag in microgravity in a room full of sleeping strangers too early in the morning made her hesitate, so she waited under the covers. There were still a few more hours until they were scheduled to dock anyway.

At that moment, there was a subtle clunk from the fore of the shuttle, and Maria heard a whistle over the intercom. All at once, the room was full of people jostling together in zero-g, swinging their bags over their shoulders and floating out the door.

Maria's heart flew into her throat, and she scrambled out of bed, bruising her spine on the ceiling as she propelled herself down the rungs. A few of her things were missing from her piles by the wall: her tape recorder, her fishing wire, and her beat-up old mystery novel (except for the cover and title page, (the first installment of *Who was Ringing the Tungsten Bell?* by B.S. Sack) which had fallen off and been taped back together so many times she had lost count). It seemed like a few of her socks no longer had their mates, but she didn't count them, cramming

everything into her bag and shooting herself at a reckless speed down the now-empty hall.

"Sorry! I'm coming," she called to the captain as she hurtled weightlessly toward the airlock.

The captain said something in Chatachuai which Maria didn't fully process until they had grabbed her legs and she found herself floating off the side of a metal railing about eight hundred stories above the ground.

And also below the ground.

And to the right and left of the ground, since the Pellicle was a hollow, spinning cylinder.

Her head itched in embarrassment.

The Starry Pellicle was immense. So immense that the other end of it was completely lost in a light blue haze, the surfaces fading into sky as they approached it. The ground above (and below) (and to the right and left of her) was roughly equally distant in every direction, so she could have fallen any number of ways, quite a long ways, although the bottom was slightly closer, since the tiny transport vessel didn't have the priority to land in the exact center, where it wouldn't have had to take the time to align itself to the Pellicle's spin.

But she was struck most by the things that ran counter to her expectations: the soft colors and shapes, the wildlife: the gummy, star-shaped creatures bumping on the windows, the fish, the random swells of wind and color, a crystalline, candy quality to the materials the ship, and the mess of color and architectural styles jumbled on the ground. She had expected straight lines, glass and metal, forethought and regulation.

The captain hauled her back onto the platform, and she apologized with all the words she knew.

"It's fine, kid. You're not the first person to be excited about leaving a transport shuttle," said the captain, taking a hold of the airlock. They gestured to the stairs leading down the side of the huge vinyl record of a wall. "Take it slow."

"Thank you," said Maria.

"Have a safe journey." And the captain disappeared.

The ground had weight again, just a little, enough to push back against the soles of her boots. She felt wrinkly and boneless. Like she had spent too long in a pool.

As it became more intense, at the middle, then towards the bottom, the noise of the market increased, and she could pick out individual shapes: a toy store, a tower of apartments stacked like books, a public park, a dense forest, a glowing rectangular hole, a candy shop, a shelf of tidepools.

"I like your costume," said an alien who was dangling a fishing pole off the side of the Pellicle through a sort of luminescent barrier.

"Oh! Thanks," Maria said.

The alien's bare, light blue, aquatically-inclined legs dangled down through the glowing, gummy barrier out into the neon-edged laser tag arena of outer space, fish jumbling around outside, dumbly.

The gummy, jumbling fish-eyes focused on her, all, backwards glances and open mouths. They looked like candy, like non-animals, no movement from the gills, just the nervous sliding of irises and gummy undulation.

Maria faltered and caught herself like she was standing in a canoe.

"Are you part of the play?" the alien asked.

"The play? Is that customary here?" Her eyes unfocused for a second, and the barrier light jittered insanely, like a hyper-active fan.

"You look just like, um. What's his name – Coriander's Spoon in that Hymn on the Gable."

"What?" said Maria. "Oh, lord, it can't be that bad, can it? You can't even recognize me? Or did I miss the festival day? What's today? Why aren't you dressed?"

"It's the 19th."

"But no one is dressed–"

"Dressed?"

"For Akirikari's reincarnation! When his hundred million enemies peel themselves from the sides of the caves, swim up from the depths, and come out from behind the stars to hunt him in his ethereal infant form, to smother him and drink his blood–"

The alien shook their head slowly.

"You really don't know either, do you?" she said. "I'm sorry. I just thought everyone would be celebrating when I got here. They're celebrating back on Borna right now. Everyone is in costume and making as much noise as possible, up the karst towers and over the plateau, lighting the fireworks, dancing and singing. At least, they should be, if my math is right."

"It's a big ship," said the alien. "Everyone's celebrating a different holiday. If you asked me, I probably wouldn't be able to name any of your holidays, and you probably wouldn't be able to name any of mine."

"I don't like that," said Maria. "We should know those kinds of things about each other."

The alien laughed, but then realized Maria was fully genuine. "Hundreds of millions of people live here. I think that would be asking a lot of everyone, don't you?"

"No," said Maria.

"And we're strangers," the alien said.

"We shouldn't be," said Maria.

They laughed. "But then what's your intent? You're going your separate way. Unless you want to sit here and fish with me."

"I need to get to the university before 6:20."

"Then we'll remain strangers."

"I don't like that," said Maria.

The alien shrugged.

"Well," said the alien, "best wishes to you, I guess."

"Thanks," said Maria.

"What does Peter know," Maria whispered to herself in Borna as she turned away, "of course there are fish in space."

In the city, there were thousands and thousands of people. And absolutely none of them were dressed as Akirikari.

It didn't make any sense.

This was the Starry Pellicle, the thin sugar crust in the shape of the six-pointed star on Akirikari's glaive-guisarme. Even a quarter of the population could have confounded tens of thousands of revenge-minded demons. But no one seemed to know the tradition, or, perhaps, to care.

What people did seem to care about was trying to sell her things, and offer services to her that she had never considered needing before.

When the fourth person to grab her elbow and offer to carry her bag touched her, she yanked her arm away and came very close to saying one of her two Chatachuai insults, but settled for “don’t touch me!” and stormed away.

“Excuse me—” came a different voice.

She ignored it, and pressed forward.

“Excuse me, miss—” it persisted.

“Leave me alone,” she said, turning.

The stranger was holding her Star I.D. It must have fallen out of her pocket a few minutes ago.

She was suddenly face to face with them, uncomfortably close, as the crowd hemmed them in.

They had dark brown skin, wide, scrutinizing eyes, and almost luminescently white, coily hair with dozens of pastel-colored bits and bobs, stars, flowers, and regular polyhedra, which were the only color on their otherwise all black ensemble. Round black glasses, a thick black long-sleeved shirt, long black pants, and long black boots.

“You dropped this,” they said.

“Oh,” said Maria. “Thank you.”

“Any time.” The stranger picked one of the candy-colored things out of their hair and stepped back into the crowd.

Damn it, she thought. That was really nice. I should have thanked them more enthusiastically.

“There’s water, water in the wound,” said the Transit Authority officer right behind her.

Maria became briefly airborne.

“Water in the wound. The sword of truth, sui juris, see it, it moves this way and that. Its voice is your voice. Hollow and resonating in the chamber, a door in the mountain. Give it a shout. Scream it in the ground. Scream, scream it in the ground.”

“Sorry?” A sense of desperate, creeping isolation fought its way inside Maria’s lungs.

She stepped back.

“Transparent, intangible,” continued the TA officer.

There was a thin membranous film separating her from everyone else. There was no one here who looked like her. But more than that – It was impossible for someone to really know her. Really, actually know her. Even her friends and family. Did they know who she was? Did she know them? Everyone knew a different side of her – was there a real side? A full image? And now, here in this strange place: She was the only one of her kind.

She was the only one of her kind.

She began to weep.

“Leave her alone, Modus Tollens.”

A long, black-sleeved arm was gesturing in her direction.

“Anise Wall-Breaker Boat-Rocker! A wavered word would have you jettisoned in a jelly.”

“She clearly doesn’t know the handbook codes by heart, so if you have something legitimate to say to her, you should talk plainly.”

"Scoundrel way-lighter. Swing the sword this way and that. Violet in moonglow sweat. Flick flack. Flicking the dark. Flick flack. Flacking the dark."

"Public ordinance 23, I get the idea, Tollens. How about you leave the lady alone and we'll leave you to your poetry recital?"

The official went blue and grumbled another verse from the Transit Authority Handbook.

"Sorry about him," the stranger said to Maria as they stepped away, "you know how it is with government officials."

"I – I guess," she said, wiping away the tears. She stumbled after the stranger, re-adjusting the weight of her carry-on bag.

"Here," they said. "I can help you carry it."

"Oh," she said, and, unable to think of anything else to do to fulfill her turn in the dialogue, passed it over.

"Where are you headed?"

"The University," Maria said, with a sinus-clearing sniff. She pointed nebulously to the south, where the ship stretched on, out of sight into a neon-edged cadenza gloom. Other things were visible on the ship now, large things, viscous, luminous, and moving.

"Which one?" asked the stranger.

"There's more than one?" Maria asked, clipping the straps on her backpack to shift the weight off her shoulders.

"Kibelo is the biggest, then there are Post Polita and Ap-Mat."

"It must be Kibelo," she said. "Is that where Professor Heylin teaches?"

"I don't know, sorry. I'm Anise, by the way," said the stranger.

"I'm Maria." She smiled. There was a faint breeze, and fish bumped against the floor from outside. "Are you from here?"

"No, the Borna system," Anise answered, "but I've lived here my whole life."

"Wait, really? I was raised on Borna-3!" she exclaimed. "But you're not celebrating today either, are you? Where were you born?"

"A very small ship in resonant orbit," said Anise, leading Maria down a set of stairs. "You might have heard of it, but it was decommissioned when I was very young. It was called: Like a Spring it Depresses Itself in its Muteness in Order to be Able to Bounce Back with the Suggestion of Ineffable Things."

"What a strange name," Maria said.

"Yes," said Anise.

They followed the canyon of steps down several twists and switchbacks until it came to a wide canal, then below the ground into a subway, where they waited under a glowing sign that read ROSATE SPOONBILL REBOUND – 5.

"Huh," Maria said, rubbing her eye. Her hand came away with the rest of her eyeshadow. "So, what do you do here?"

"I'm a gender kiosk analyst," Anise said, like it was a collection of words that made sense together.

"Oh?" said Maria.

"Although I often find myself on the banks of an old river with a rare soft west wind beside me." They looked at her, expectantly, as if gauging her reaction or waiting for a particular response.

She held their gaze for a moment, trying to answer without words, but her eyes slipped away, and she was only able to ask another question. "Is that... what you had planned to do?"

"Never in my wildest imaginations," said Anise. "But things rarely work out how you expect." They nodded toward a yellow X on the ground, and Maria stepped forward onto it.

There was a rush of air and the light values and colors of the tiles in the room changed slightly.

Anise appeared behind her. And pointed to another mark on the ground, a green M. They walked to it, and the room changed color again. "What do you hope to study at Kibelo?" they asked.

"Temple-builders," Maria said, and beamed. The glowing sign now read: DEFIANCE - 178, KIKIMAS - 3, and Anise signaled that they should wait.

"I've always been fascinated by them," Maria continued, when it was clear that Anise was inviting continuation. "Ever since I was a little kid and the library ship would land on the rock pile at the edge of the shoal. There's so much about them we don't know! Their symbology, behavior, morphology, their social structure. Like: Why do they emulate human structures? Why some but not others? Is it a choice? Is it art? Or are they compelled? Are they individually or emergently conscious? Why are they found only on some planets, but not others with identical climates? How deep and large are their tunnels? What's inside? How do they power the temples? Why don't they have any natural defenses? Why do they look like that? Which is to say: Why do subterranean creatures have such a bright red pigmentation? Things like that," she said, like someone who was in the middle of a long and difficult journey and had suddenly remembered why she had set out on it in the first place.

Anise gave her a secret smile. "I hope you get in. You sound like you've got the drive." The sign clicked down to KIKIMAS - 2, and they gestured towards the next shape.

In the next room, the sign read: KIBELO - 2.

"Oh! There it is," Maria said, taking a step forward.

Anise said something, but Maria didn't catch it.

There was a dark wind rush, and the lights went out. She stumbled forward, nauseated. She tried to step back, and felt the room change again, but the regular lights failed to return. The sign now read: DISTAL - 8,349,870. A second sign read: DAY-DREAM - 957,843,001.

"Anise?" she called out.

There was a singular light, very far above her, which cast Maria like an actor or an opera singer, her red ribbons giving the light a red tint, like a mist.

Well, shoot, she thought. Last week (a few months ago, standard time, because of the large-fraction-of-light-speed transport trip) she had sent a message to Dr. Heylin via the university's communication portal telling him that she would make it to his office hours today; that deadline was rapidly approaching. He would probably understand about the whole thing, but this latest mis-step was entirely her fault.

And then of course, to make matters worse: There was a scuttling.

A scuttling in the dark at the end of the terminal. A noise on the wet blue and white tiles. An intermittent frantic noise, like a lizard in a metal sink.

She looked up at the light, and it left a bright spot on her eyes when she looked away.

"Hello?" she called out to the skittering. She took a few steps into the dark. Her eyes adjusted.

Around the corner, there was a little amphibian hand sticking out of a grate in the wall.

It was slick, and black, like a stone that's translucent when you hold it to the sun. *Like nuummite*, she thought.

The skittering resumed, the hand and its twin flicking in and out of view as whatever they belonged to pushed itself spongily against the dingy grate.

"Hello?" Maria said.

The skittering stopped.

"Do you need help?" she asked, still half behind the corner.

There was a long pause.

"Graat-at," said the owner of the hands.

"Is that a yes?" Maria asked.

"Graaaat-at," it reiterated.

She came around the corner.

It was possibly-amphibian, that was sure. It had six legs, six fingers on each of its hands, and an open, neutral face, like a newt. It was about as long as Maria's legs, which, in 29 years hadn't ever gotten that far above the ground, and it was very wide and close to the ground, with the overall impression of an equipment failure at the gummy bear factory.

It skittered against the grate again.

Instinctually, immediately, Maria reached out and touched it, laying her whole palm on its wet forehead.

A word sloughed off her soul. (Independence.) And she became about the size of her legs, and slipped into skin that was black and translucent, like nuummite or a licorice gummy bear.

She had a memory of networks, runnels, and soil tubes. She was lost in the metal now. She had been stolen and dropped in a plastic crate. She missed the loam, the moist earth. She missed her brood, and she was afraid of predators. It was tempting, in this moment, confronting a stranger, to wish that she had a hard, scaled surface, or that she could secrete a harmful toxin, but there were better alternatives, ones that wouldn't turn her body against itself or make her forget the feeling of water filtering through the earth.

The human on the other side of the grate stared at her, limply, kindly, almost crying, said "graaat-aat," and yanked the grate off its mooring.

Maria skittered out. Less Lepeleph threw the grate to the side, and bits of concrete broke off on the tunnel's metal floor.

The creature ran out of sight, and Maria was left only with a feeling of independence welling up again, seeping back into the dirt that it had been pumped out from, and, on her hands, the gritty feeling of having held too tightly to two old metal bars.

Suddenly she was above ground, staring at a brick wall.

Her brain said to squint, but her eyes had already adjusted to the light.

"Maria?" said Anise.

"Huh?"

"You spaced out for a second," they said, handing back her carry-on bag. "We're here."

"You found me-?" she interjected.

"What?"

"In the tunnels," Maria continued.

"You were just a little off the beaten path."

"I'm sorry."

"You already apologized. It's not your fault."

"Then, thank you? I lost time, somewhere. That's never happened before."

"Happens to the best of us." Anise gave her a piece of paper with a string of numbers written on it. "Here's my phone number," they said.

"Thanks," said Maria.

Both of them were quiet for several moments.

"It was so strange. I wish I could describe it."

"Your lost time?"

"Lost is the wrong word. I was someone else."

Anise said nothing, but looked at her curiously.

"I just wish..." Maria lifted her gaze to Anise's.

Anise waited a few seconds, smiling, as if they knew what she was trying to say. "Wish what?" they asked.

"I don't know," Maria eventually replied. By which she had obviously meant: I want to show you the karst towers and the prayer flags fluttering in the wind over the Stepping Stones above my house in the side of the mountain; I want to argue about why *The Tungsten Bellringer* is better than the prequel; I want you to show me your apartment; I want us to make fruit tea and play a board game; I want us to come back and play the same board game at the same time every week for several years and meet new people and invite them too; I want to stay up and talk until well past midnight and not want to fall asleep because I'm alive with thoughts and ideas. "Anything. I don't know," she decided on. "I wish I wasn't so easily distracted."

Anise thought about this. "Me too," they eventually said. "Well--"

"Well," echoed Maria.

"Call me if you get into a tough spot. Or if you want to get coffee. I would stay, but I've got a ton of data to collect before the sun moves out."

Maria inclined her head in a nod, and returned the secret smile Anise had given her earlier.

Find out what a phone is, she noted.

Maria approached the divot in the brick wall beneath the "Kibelo" sign.

Behind the desk, not indiscreetly reading a light novel, was a dull-feathered avian, about four feet tall, with a heavily ridged face and beak and an innumerable number of earrings and other piercings, despite her lack of external ear structures.

"How can I help you?" said the receptionist, brushing away a floating gummy bumpy orb thing with her grey wing. The orb bumped into one of the other, identical floating gummy bumpy orb things.

"I'd like to apply for an auditor's pass to visit Professor Heylin," she said. Flawless opening. Practicing that sentence dozens of times in the mirror had paid off.

"Okay," said the receptionist. She looked at the screen for a few moments, before adding, "Name?"

"Maria," said Maria.

"Last name?"

"Maria from Stepping Stones."

"Alright," said the receptionist, typing it.

"I'm from the fishing village of Petri. I came here with a letter of reference from Argri Clerk. For Professor Heylin. Is he still teaching here?" Another flawless set of sentences. Maria: 2. Chatachuai: NaN.

"I'm not sure, but I can look him up for you," said the receptionist, stating a fact rather than offering a service. "Who is Argri Clerk?"

"Argri, the librarian – from the Keyhole Library."

"Okay," she said. "Can I see the letter?" This second statement was phrased as a question, despite not being one.

"I'd rather you didn't, it's just for the Professor."

The receptionist glanced at Maria like she was a piece of hard cheese with a green spot developing in one of the cavities.

"If it's necessary," said Maria.

She started to unravel the red cloth around her arm, untwining it up to her shoulder and swinging it up behind her neck and around for the receptionist to read.

The receptionist began to study the glyphs, then called to one of the floating gums, which scanned the ideograms and fed them back in a non-metrical, un-poetic Chatachuai.

"We'll submit this, then," the receptionist said. And "that's fine," when she scanned Maria's Star I.D. "And I'll need a secondary form of I.D. as well," she finished.

"Of course," said Maria, and unravelled the rest of red cloth (revealing the painstakingly hand-written text of the 78 stanza poem that was Akirikari's true name) the rest of the way, down to her belly button, exposing the tattoo on her back.

If the receptionist was surprised, she didn't acknowledge it. She tried to parse the labyrinth of colored dots and lines of Maria's lineage, then called for the gum, who very confidently produced a few lines of complete nonsense and then ran away before anyone could give it a performance review.

"Can you explain this?" she asked.

"It's a map," said Maria. "It tells the story of my ancestry."

"Right, well, I'm afraid I can't accept it as a form of identification."

"But—" Maria protested. A sudden surge of runnels and soil tubes fought for the rights to Maria's head. "It's an ancestry. It's the complete story of the world up until the moment I was born. It's much more complete than a Star I.D. could—" she struggled to complete the sentence, finding that instead of having the right words to convince the receptionist, she was now the receptionist.

"It's not a recognized form of I.D., I'm sorry," she said, as the receptionist. "And the translator can't make heads or tails of it, so I can't submit a petition for it to be added to the database. I'm not going to be able to authorize you for an auditor's pass."

The strangely-dressed, older-than-the-average-student human woman looked more confused than anything, her mouth getting kind of clenched up and wide, arms covering her front like she was cold.

"But I was going to meet with Professor Heylin today," the human said.

"I'm sure you'll be able to find him tomorrow," she replied.

There was a long silence.

"What's your name?" the human woman asked her suddenly.

"Renn," she answered. She smiled sympathetically at the prospective student. "If I were you," she said, "I would take it up with the Registrar's office in the morning. It's an ancillary office just around the corner. It'll be empty now, but you can come back later, when it's open."

"Oh, thank you," said the human. That did the trick. She started wrapping herself back up, covering the tattoo. She put on her backpack, thanked Renn for her time, and walked away.

Renn watched her go with the sides of her eyes in a way that would have looked judgmental outwardly, but was not, and resumed her book, which she was able to read for almost thirty minutes before being interrupted again.

Maria came back to herself, literally, in a blind alleyway, calves and heels aching. She wondered how the receptionist was feeling right now, having experienced the other half of the phenomenological exchange. She also wondered what she was doing staring at a brick wall in a narrow alleyway.

She was breathing hard. She could only assume that Renn hadn't done anything that she wouldn't have done herself, since their entire experience had been exchanged one-to-one.

What a useless exchange!

If either of them had carried some inkling of themselves into the other's experience, they might have gotten somewhere! But instead, they both just continued as they always would have, as complete strangers, because, she supposed, if you had been born as someone else, you would be that person exclusively your whole life and no one else. But what's that got to do with it? she thought. And where was her tote bag? And why was she out of breath?

"You there!" said a rasping voice.

Maria yelled, and made a running leap up a pile of crates over the fence.

She landed heavily and staggered sideways and clipped the wall with her backpack.

"You cannot run from me, scoundrel Akirikari!" rasped the evil voice from the other side of the fence.

There was a swish of fabric and a "thunk!" as a black knife appeared in the fence. The wood around it hissed and smoked as it disintegrated.

"Fool that you are!"

The blade was yanked from the wood, and Maria caught a glimpse of her pursuer as it leaped over the fence in a billow of shadowy silk, a whipping scarf and a long scythe.

"My blade thirsts for your blood!" shouted the shadow person.

It slashed towards Maria with the small knife and she jerked backwards.

"What the hell!" she yelled, picking up a stray 2 by 4.

"You have wronged the house of Hilter-Skellsis!" the shadow person said with another two frenetic swipes of the knife. "You flaunt your treachery even now, but you cannot deceive me as you did my house! Your blood will be mine!"

"Bro stop," Maria said, blocking one of the attacks with the plank and swiping at the shadow's head. Surprisingly, the blow connected, and the thing staggered back, disoriented.

"Who are you!" Maria demanded.

The shadow seemed even more staggered by the question than by the blow to the head.

"You remember me not?"

"I think I would remember a guy like you for a couple reasons," said Maria.

"Scoundrel Akirikari! You felled me at the battle of Rainbow Gate! You laid waste to my house's army in an instant with the Wind from the Bag of Foulstras, but you and I, we fought for three days and three nights before you struck me a killing blow with your glaive-guisarme! But I live yet in un-death at the crepuscular edge of life!"

"Ooooooh!" said Maria. "Oh, you're Hagai, the last sentinel! Hagai the Scythe-Wielder."

"The truth!" the Scythe-Wielder rasped.

"Look – this is all a big misunderstanding," she said. "I'm not Akirikari at all, I'm just a–"

"Lies!" screamed the shadow. "Treachery!"

In a sweeping motion it drew its scythe and swung at Maria, who couldn't clear its radius fast enough and was slashed across her back, deep enough to hear the acid sizzle through her red ribbons, her backpack straps, and her skin.

Her backpack was liberated from her, and she scrambled forward out of the alley.

She ran as far and as fast as she could, colliding with people on the public walkways, scraping against the walls of glass underpasses, tripping forward, counter-clockwise up the side of the cylindrical interior of the Pellicle, until she collapsed on her knees in the grass.

She breathed heavily. She was only aware of a dull pounding present in her entire body, gradually subsiding, replaced by an abrasive stinging where the cloth touched the wound. It felt like there was a red line through her, like her ancestry had been scrutinized and crossed out.

But she had not been pursued by Hagai.

She looked around, as the pounding subsided and her head cleared. She was in a glade, much like the grasslands on the peaks of the karst towers, but no wind rustled in the grass, and everything that ought to have been wild was curated and intentional. There were stone benches, a stream that ran too smoothly, and trees that swayed without wind.

"Pressure on the mooring," came a voice.

"Fire, fire, fire in the light," came a chorus.

It took Maria a moment to realize the ordinance wasn't directed at her. Although she was almost certainly doing at least a few things the Transit Authority would want to have a long chat with her about.

Beyond the topiary hedges she could see a handful of Transit Authority officers, their various colors of heavy robes swaying with the movement of their feet as they took careful steps towards each other, closing a circle, as if ensnaring some feral animal.

"Earth at the edges," the leader said.

"Hollow, hollow, hollow in the night," said the rest.

Maria shuffled towards the topiary on her knees to get a better look.

"You are in violation of the cardinal axiom, Axiom 1," said the woman closest to Maria, who was facing away from her, towards the thing on the ground. "The Observation of the Boundary between the Soul and Other Souls and the Soul and Non-Souls and Other Souls and Each Other. We have found: The boundary is impregnable. The boundary is eternal and self-evident. The boundary requires constant work to maintain. The boundary will blister and burst if it is not constantly maintained. The boundary is already blistered and burst. The damage is irreparable: everything is scattered, unalphabetized, edge-less, integrated, mushed together, and wet. It is impossible to tell peeled grape halves from pineapple cubes. It's all just fruit salad. Wet and multi-various. To build and maintain the boundary is a noble exercise. The boundary does not need to be built or maintained, because it is self-evident. I am a noble person. How do you plead to these accusations?"

"Graaaat-at," said the thing on the ground.

"Your comment has been logged, and will be on file in TASP headquarters for the next thirty days," the Transit Authority officer said, raising her long, curved Transit Authority sword.

"Wait!" exclaimed Maria, jumping between Less Lepeleph and the blade.

"Young woman," said the Transit Authority officer with the Transit Authority sword, "This is no space for deliberation. Is this your pet? Step aside or be sundered."

"No," said Maria. "He's not going to hurt anyone."

"You are responsible for his actions?"

Maria looked at Less Lepeleph, and the six-legged newt looked back up at her, passively, with its small black eyes and gummy face.

"Yes," said Maria.

The Transit Authority officer raised her sword a little higher.

"But so are you," Maria finished. "All of you," she gestured to the nine other TA officers.

"I know it's frightening," she said, "but what do you really have to gain by closing yourself off to other people?"

"There is nothing to gain," said one of them. He pulled back his veil revealing soft grey skin and long, smooth horns. "There is only everything to lose."

Maria picked Less up and held him aloft by his sides, like a cat. He pendulated neutrally.

"There's nothing to lose," she said. "He can show you what it's like." Maria offered Less up to the officer. "On the other side of the boundary."

The Transit Authority officer lifted his hand, gently.

Then, black blood spurted from his chest as a large, barbed sword made its way through his abdomen.

Maria recognized the weapon instantly, even as she was scrambling back in terror.

The Tyrant King Silisarsilisilis, massive frame and meter-long five-pointed moon-crown instantly distinctive even in silhouette, wrenched his barbed sword from the corpse of the Transit Authority officer and kicked the limp body forward like dirty laundry onto the grass.

Two other shadow creatures, much smaller than Silisarsilisilis and with shorter and easier names, began to flank the remaining Transit officers.

"AKIRIKARI!" boomed Silisarsilisilis's impossible baritone. "You may have evaded the BRITTLE-WISP BLADE of the SENTINEL, but you and your paltry troupe of footmen

will be CLEAVED EFFORTLESSLY by my SWORD like a handful of OVER-SATURATED SPAGHETTI against A PAIR OF HOT SALAD TONGS.”

Maria had already leapt over the brick wall at the edge of the park and plummeted a dozen feet into a trench of market shops, where she landed heavily, still protecting Less Lepeleph, and tumbled into someone else, who fell forward on their elbows.

“Maria?” said Anise, face to face with her, holding a parabolic listening device and a set of binoculars.

“Run!” yelled Maria. She pulled Anise to their feet and the two of them careened down the narrow, high-walled market path.

“What’s wrong?” asked Anise.

A boom of shattering cobblestone echoed behind them as the colossal mass of Silisarsilisilis struck the ground.

Anise screamed.

“Akirikari!” bellowed Silisarsilisilis. “Die by my hand!” With this announcement, the tyrant king slung a ball of energy down the crooked cobbles, which collided with shops and pillars and water fountains, vaporizing chunks of rock and melting glass out of windows as it plowed down the street like a bowling ball.

Maria and Anise dove out of the way, and the ball exploded into the candy shop at the end of the street.

“There’s a way back—” Anise whisper-yelled, and led Maria through the little atrium, past a beaded curtain, and down a dimly lit concrete hall.

The tyrant king smashed open the front of the atrium with his fist like a ball-peen hammer on a crab. They heard his footsteps outside, prowling up and down the row. They huddled in the back hallway, hugging the wall under a community events calendar. Stone shattered on the ground outside and the tyrant king bellowed unreasonable proposals for what he would do to Akirikari in exchange for his coming out of hiding. But the lamplight on the calendar was warm, and the footsteps gradually receded as the tyrant king went to search other areas, eventually slipping back into liquid shadow and disappearing.

Maria realized her shoulder had been pressed against Anise’s, and that they had never stopped holding hands; she quickly disengaged, then wished she hadn’t.

Anise peered out the high window.

“What was that thing?” they asked.

Maria shifted Less’s weight in her arms. He had grown softer, like the lamp had melted him.

“That was the Tyrant King Mwenzhi from Akirikari’s First Foray in the Moonlight Temple.”

“Akirikari,” they said, thoughtfully. “I’ve heard that name before.”

“Wait, so you have heard the stories?” Maria asked hopefully.

“No, earlier today, I mean. For the first time.”

“Ah,” Maria said, leaning against the bulletin board.

“I was tracking an incoming shipment from Prarster, and overheard some of the TA talking about Temple-builders. Then they said that name.”

“Temple-builders?” said Maria. “Why would the Transit Authority be talking about Temple-builders?”

“I’m not sure,” said Anise. “I still have to cross reference it with my notes. But I took a recording. It’s very jargon-heavy. Maybe you can make sense of it.”

"You're not just a gender kiosk analyst, are you?" asked Maria.

"I'm a gender kiosk analyst with a lot of free time on my hands," Anise responded. They smiled, and readjusted their glasses, which had slipped all the way down their nose.

They looked at each other, Maria looking slightly up to Anise as the stars and other shapes in their coily hair moved around, like children in a pile of snow. It was warmer here, the two of them framed by the warm orange spotlight on the community bulletin board, a carpet of decades-old concert times and swap meet locations.

"Can I pet your lizard?" asked Anise.

"He causes strange visions."

"I figured." Anise smiled. "May I?"

"Yes," said Maria.

They swapped places.

Anise was petting Less Lepeleph under the chin, like a cat, which seemed like the wrong way to pet an amphibian, which Maria noted, like a video essayist in the back of Anise's mind. But Less seemed not to mind the caress. Anise wondered if he really was an amphibian.

I look so happy, Anise thought, looking at Maria.

God I look tired, Maria thought, looking at Anise. *And I've got to take those starbugs out of my hair.*

Maria reached up to Anise's head and started plucking out the glowing, multicolored bugs.

"No, wait," said Anise. "I think you look good with them."

"Oh," said Maria. "Thank you. They're symbiotic, you know," she gestured at Less. "The host swallows them, provides protection and mobility. They provide certain benefits in return."

Less looked even less solid, now.

"I know," said Anise. "Since the first time I touched him. I mean, since you touched him."

"Are you going to do it?"

"Yes. I think that's what he wants. As long as it's okay with you? It's your body after all. I mean. My body. This is very strange."

"It's different this time," Anise said. "I can hear you in the back of my head."

"For something that spends so much time in the wild trying not to be eaten, it seems like a strange strategy."

"You're eating him, but you're nourishing him. I'm not sure where the boundary of eating and being eaten is anymore."

"There probably isn't one."

"People on ships think too much about airlocks," Maria said, out of pocket.

"You can't completely dismiss the idea," replied Anise. "But it's transgressed all the time. There's no such thing as a perfect seal. The Pellicle itself is a gradient. It's a probability map of atmosphere and activity, not a capsule of 'in' and 'out'. You can dangle your legs off the side and fish for stargums. I've always liked that about it."

"So it's okay with you?" Maria held up the newt-shaped puddle.

Anise nodded. "Yes. Swallow the lizard."

Anise watched as Maria opened her mouth and Less Lepeleph crawled inside like it was dead winter and Maria's stomach was a pile of warm blankets.

"Well that was horrible to witness," said Anise.

"Sorry," said Maria, when she had recovered.

"How do you feel?"

Maria pondered. "Full."

Anise's apartment was a total mess, which it took seeing it through another person's eyes for Anise to realize.

Scattered dossiers, toxicology reports, interview transcripts, and un-redacted Administration documents took up every available raised surface. They were organized, but it wouldn't make an ounce of sense to anyone but them. Even mediocre things like where they put their shoes and how the spices were alphabetized were cast in a new light by the switch. Everything on the Pellicle seemed so crowded now, chaotic and dark. Maria had been born on a planet, not a ship. She had spent her whole life on the open ocean, fishing, playing in the grass, studying. She had nothing but space.

"Here are the spare sheets and towels," Anise said, opening an awkward folding panel in a too-narrow hallway. "The couch isn't the most comfortable thing to sleep on."

"So I've experienced."

"If you'd like, we can—"

"Will your bed fit both of us?"

"It's better than sleeping on the couch."

Maria and Less Lepeleph fell asleep instantly, more transit-lagged from the week-long significant-fraction-of-the-speed-of-light journey than they had realized. Anise took more or less an hour to fall asleep, still spinning with the solution of coffee and stimulants they had been abusing in order to stay awake to monitor the strange, nightly movements and secret dealings of the Transit Authority.

But Maria was soft and huggable, and they eventually drifted off without realizing it.

The only thing stranger than being a different person was dreaming a different person's dreams.

Anise woke first, facing the window. The roving sun had come back too early, and it was scheduled to leave too late.

"So Kibelo was a bust, huh?" they said, pouring the water for coffee.

"They wouldn't take my ancestry."

"Bull. Shit. And they call themselves inclusive and multi-cultural."

The rest of the hot water steamed on the countertop.

"You sure you don't want tea either?" asked Anise.

"I'm not really a tea person," answered Maria and Less Lepeleph.

They sipped the mixture. No stimulants this time, just coffee. Transit Authority agents took Wednesdays off.

"Do you have an eyeliner pencil, a sewing needle, and thread?" Maria asked, seeming to already know the answer.

"You really want to go out again in that Akirikari costume? Do you have a death wish?" Anise laughed.

"There are still a couple hours left before Akirikari is fully grown. I've already distracted two of his enemies – that's two who would have been searching elsewhere if I had still been on Borna. Besides, Akirikari's survival is way more important than mine."

"I don't want you to believe that," said Anise.

Maria shrugged. "He needs me."

"Alright," Anise replied. Acquiescing instead of saying something cheesy like "I need you too." They finished the coffee and stuck to business. "I found a way to get you into the university."

"Wait, really? How?" asked Maria.

"I have someone on the inside. Now, I don't mean I can get you 'admitted' to the university," Anise clarified. "I mean I can get you *inside* the university."

By the time they reached Kibelo's long brick wall, Maria having fixed her costume and makeup, they were back to being themselves. Although this time, Maria noted, it was more like taking off a pair of 3D glasses to discover that the object you were looking at is actually 3-dimensional, and the effect of being entangled with Anise remained, like being unable to unsee a certain interpretation of an optical illusion.

"Should be this one," Anise motioned.

There was a small service door propped open by a brick.

"It's that easy?" asked Maria.

"Like I said, I have someone on the inside."

Maria kicked aside the brick, and the door shut behind them.

They were in a quiet hallway, full of boxes, chairs, extension cables, and dollies.

"I'll meet up with you tonight," Anise said, glancing down the storage hallway, where every other light was turned off or broken. "I have a favor I need to return."

"Good luck," said Maria.

Anise smiled, gave Maria a kiss on the forehead, and walked down the long hallway into the dark, pulling their white hair back into a bun.

Maria and Leph walked until they found the "Conservation" wing of the "Introductory Courses" building. Wide, carpeted hallways brought them past half a dozen lecture halls, until they found the room they were looking for.

"–Then, of course, we have J.P. et al. arguing the opposite – no, these structures should be left alone: it's too real a possibility that their architectures map to an unknown set of warning signs, some danger lurking unseen, on a potentially cosmic scale... For those of you who were in Dr. Pinsker's 101, you might recall her glowing cats exercise–"

There was a ripple of laughter from the lecture hall.

She poked her head in.

"Yes," Professor Heylin grinned and looked at his feet. "J.P. argued it was like that. The information, that is to say the transmission of the connotation of danger, was lost and we were left only with seven strange buildings on seven seemingly random planets. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm imagining the transmission rate for you all was probably less than 100%?" Another ripple of laughter. "So, imagine that not between you and your peers who share a space and a culture, but between us now and an

alien civilization who vanished a hundred thousand years ago, and I think you'll be able to imagine where J.P. is coming from."

It was dark at the back of the room, which was also the top of the room, slanting down, like a semicircular garden terrace, toward the front, where Heylin was writing on a chalkboard.

Maria sat down quietly in an empty chair.

"But then of course," Heylin said, turning around, "the whole debate changed when UNIS said 'screw it'" – another ripple of laughter – "and sent the first volunteer survey team down to the Kwarji system to finally check out the activity on one of the monuments."

"Can you imagine the kind of headspace that survey team must have been in? What an immense honor. What a complete, terrifying unknown. The survey team knew there was a large possibility they wouldn't ever be coming back. Not necessarily that they would die, but that whatever they found there had the potential to contaminate, irradiate, or possess them in a way that meant it wouldn't be safe for them to come back home. Now... can anyone tell me..." here the professor paused and looked around at the half dozen students, "what the survey team found on Kwarji that changed our understanding of temple-builders forever?"

A very quiet murmur made its way through the assemblage, but no hands were raised.

After a few seconds, Maria and Less Lepeleph lifted their arm.

"Yes—" said Heylin, shielding his eyes to see up into the darker end of the room.

"They found people," said Maria. "An artist, a scientist, and a soldier."

"Yes! Thank you—" said Heylin, taking a step back to the chalkboard. "And I'm sorry, I've completely forgotten your name—"

"Maria and Less Lepeleph," said Maria.

"What a lovely name," said Professor Heylin. "And yes, of all the things Kwarji-1 thought they might find, they never expected that they might encounter other people. Kwarji had been barren for centuries. We'll get into the question of 'why a soldier, an artist, and a scientist' later, but for now – can anyone tell me what Kwarji-1 eventually reported about the relationship between the temple and the residents?"

Again, a large space of silence, a stifled cough, a chair creak.

Maria raised their hand.

"Yes—" said Heylin. "Maria."

"They found that the temple needed the volunteers as much as the volunteers needed the temple," they said. "The official report called it a 'symbiotic relationship.'"

"That's exactly the word I was looking for. I see you've already listened to the report."

"Many times," said Maria.

"Then it looks like you're already set for Tuesday's class." There was a general chuckle of amusement, then pens clicking as Heylin read out the details for the other assignments.

"Professor Heylin?" Maria knocked on the side of Dr. Heylin's office door in the "Empiricism" wing of the faculty building.

"Enter!" Dr. Hanisin Heylin's voice rang out. "Ah, Maria!" he said, as she stuck her head in. "Don't remind me your last name, it was – Andless-Lepeleph?"

"I don't have a last name," said Maria and Less Lepeleph.

"That would probably be why I was having trouble finding you on my class roster," he smiled, walking over from the bookshelf to shake her hand. He went to sit at his desk and gestured for Maria to take a seat on the couch against the wall. "I was very impressed by how much you already knew about the Kowarji mission. Is that what you wanted to talk about?"

Maria nodded, and sat on the very edge of the couch, knees pressed together and heels angled apart. "I did want to talk more about temple builders, if that's okay," Maria said.

"Of course," said Dr. Heylin.

"You were actually a co-author on one of the books that first got me interested in the conservation effort. Every month when the Keyhole Library would visit our village I would check out your book and read as much as I could before it left again. I know you're not a member of UNIS, but, I've always wondered – if every natural instance of people cohabitating with monument-builders has involved three people, why would UNIS guidelines recommend a minimum of two and a maximum of four?"

"That's a good question," Heylin said, sinking back in his chair. "And you're right, I can only speculate. Most likely it's the boring answer, which is budget constraints. It costs a lot to train and outfit a volunteer, even though the monument can sustain their physical needs on the ground. Another possibility is that it's hard to find groups of exactly three that are certain to get along with each other. It can be very costly and often dangerous – particularly Ilari – to get people in and out if the group dynamic goes sour. UNIS probably views two as a more stable number than three. In fact, they just replaced a group of three on Ilari with a group of two."

"Really? Huh. I must have missed that while I was traveling."

"Ah, so you've just arrived?"

Maria nodded.

"Time really does slip by when you're traveling at a significant fraction of the speed of light. Can I get you anything? Tea, water?"

"Sure," she said. "Tea is great."

Professor Heylin went into a small adjoining room with mosaic-tiled walls, and Maria heard the sound of water filling a pot.

She looked out the window at the large bronze dome of the assembly hall, the highest point on the campus. All the dull red roofs connected to it, cascading down from the dome in rivulets.

"So, what happened on Ilari?" Maria asked.

"Well, most of the details are classified," Heylin responded from the other room. "but what we know is that two volunteers, the soldier and the scientist, were pulled, and that the artist, Driving Dusk, was declared dead. But I think UNIS is, at best, over-simplifying. According to her coworkers, she didn't die – she transformed herself into a land feature. She sacrificed herself to protect the monument."

"How does someone become a land feature?"

"A ritual of color and art," said Heylin, coming back into the room with four small boxes of tea. "Or sustained, intensive prayer. But I'm sure there are other ways. Any preference? Fruit, herbal?"

Maria shook her head.

"As dangerous as the Churn is, it might be the saving grace of Ilari. Even though it spells the death of its tourism revenue," he chuckled. "But the churn allows for

ranged engagement with the Mass. And the new soldier is an incredibly accomplished marksman, so I don't expect the Ilari mon to be at the top of UNIS's priority for quite a while."

"Right," said Maria. "They'd be putting more resources into Kalit and Daus, and the Derelict."

Heylin smiled, then returned to the other room to decant the hot water into mugs, saying, "It seems like you've already mastered most of what we'll be covering in 101. If you want, it would be a fairly simple matter for me to talk to the Registrar and have you moved up to 201."

For just a second, Maria was wordless, trying to think of how to explain who they were and how they got there. She weighed the phrase, "Well, I'm actually not a student yet," but set it aside.

Then, she felt a cold hand clasp over her mouth.

"Maria?" said Heylin.

She tried to scream.

Another arm reached out from the wall and covered her mouth from the other side. She struggled to pry off the arms and yell out to Heylin, but more were already springing from the wall, grabbing her wrists, and covering her eyes and nose. In the dark, she felt another set of hands shoot out from under the couch and snatch her ankles. More arms wrapped around her torso and pulled her back down as she tried to stand.

The couch began to lose its solidity, then the wall, and she was pulled through it, and out the other end, and was falling.

All dark, she felt like she was tumbling down an elevator shaft, kicking her legs helplessly.

She landed on her back, cracking what sounded like ceramic shingles, and her body tensed up from the pain. But Less Lepeleph flooded her blood with adrenaline and the pain vanished. She ripped the hands away from her face and caught the edges of the broken shingles before she could roll off the edge.

"Grant me your blood!" whispered the hundred desperate voices of the many-armed Chorus of Yarzek.

Smaller creatures sprouted up from the shadowed cracks between the tiles – tiny soldiers, walking sticks, carnival freaks, regular polyhedra, twisting and groping.

"Now's not a good time!" Maria yelled, trying to kick them off.

"Oh I must disagree!" said Anaria-Noria, the Queen of the Moon Ballet, kicking her through the window into the hallway.

Maria scrambled to her feet in the broken glass and turned to face her.

"Akirikari, you've outdone yourself! The whole galaxy is standing on your doorstep! You've finally decided to show your face, you scoundrel!"

Maria's palms were cut deeply in many places, but no blood was coming out. Less wouldn't let it.

Anaria-Noria vanished from sight as Maria wheeled around, and suddenly they were on the roof, surrounded by a crowd of shadows, covering every available inch of the red roof. Anoria slammed her into the ridge of the roof with a clattering crack, and another belligerent stabbed Maria in the stomach with a flag pole.

"Hurg," said Maria.

The flagpole was yanked out, and bits of Less Lepeleph held onto it like gum, sticking to Maria's blood and springing back into her.

Maria shoved herself to the left and tumbled down the side of the roof.

"Not so fast, you scoundrel dog!" sang the Queen of the Moon Ballet.

Maria was impaled in mid-air by a long spear, snatched, and teleported to a different part of the roof, where she was thrown against a golden bell and slashed across the face and chest.

In the cacophony, many other shadow-husked fragments of gods stabbed, slashed, bit, clawed, and beat her, hundreds of thousands, parading along the roof, each delivering an otherwise fatal blow that Less Lepeleph diligently patched and sealed even as the next shadow-fragment tore open another.

The whole process took about an hour and a half.

"You want something from me that I can't give you," Maria and Less Lepeleph said when the last one had uncreatively stabbed her seven times in the heart. "But you don't need it. What you need is to be part of something bigger than yourself."

"You misunderstand us, scoundrel fish-catcher," said Hagai the Scythe Wielder. "We wish to kill you and we wish to be alone in our own domains with our death, where we will sulk forever in the grottos of un-death."

"For people who want to be left alone, there's an awful lot of you hanging out together in the same place."

"Don't think your quick tongue and fat little pliable licorice body can save you next year," said the Queen of the Moon Ballet, wiping away black sweat.

"We'll stamp you out if it's the last thing we do," said the Tyrant King Silisarsilisilis. "Every last one of you."

Maria was puzzled by Silisarsilisilis's last statement, but its implications slipped off her brain as the shadows melted back into the cracks in the roof and fell into line between thin trees and Doric columns as the band of kaleidoscopic sun made its way back up the long corridor of the Pellicle.

Her head sunk to the roof, and she breathed out.

She and Less lay completely still for a very long time, staring at the spinning ground dozens of miles above them. They day-dreamed about what it would be like to be a gender kiosk analyst, a professor, a conservation volunteer, a receptionist, a transport shuttle captain, or a trickster god – a fisher, archer, an invincible, unparalleled, uninhibited, immortal celestial warrior, who seemed to need her as much as she needed him.

Then they got up and climbed down from the roof.