**Outro.**

“The texts labeled ‘history’ tell one story. If anyone bothers to ask, we can tell another.”

This Ks’ou, who should have been his enemy, said these words as she shifted her weight on the edge of the vault of their damaged ship, then pushed one of the last bottles of water in his direction. It rolled to him easily. He picked it up and tried to suppress the hint of disgust as he drank, but he could not help the display, obvious as a Human grimace. To make this moment worse, the breeze was not so kind as to be cool; still, it was night, and so, between the dust above and the sand below they heaved a collective, if not somewhat forced, sigh of relief from the onslaught that mid-day wrought.

He brushed off the feeling of dis-ease: he wasn’t *really* sharing water with a Ksou.

She’ll be dead soon. This didn’t count.

Her chosen name was Aurana. She wasn’t looking at him, but was instead intensely staring at the old device she held in her hand, small enough to fit in the palm of it. Clunky as it was, he was grateful—it brought them music of the Human kind. For Efyir, this sound was hard to like, but by now Aurana had figured out what he preferred and what he despised. She was far less picky. How they negotiated with one another was often over which song they could agree to listen to together.

His father named him Efyir-Azayim, but he had pushed thoughts of his father far from his mind in this moment. He was watching closely to her hand movements on the device. He was trying, politely, not to look at her neck, and failing. Even in the moonlight, the pulses at the top of her exposed neck were unmistakeable. She ignored his gaze and after awhile, began:

“Promise me…”

“I’ve made enough false promises between us,” Efyir said abruptly.

But Aurana smiled. “Promise me you’ll tell your father. That we ruined the title of his book.”

*Impossible Discourse*. Well, it was a start. Not a perfect one.

She was again clicking the device, until it finally landed on a song that she knew would please both of them. The earphones were the kind that you stuck in your ear. The one he held fit ill in his Thhiyatkhoor earlobe, but at the right angle the rich sound filed out of the instrument and into his mind. The sound they shared: the other earbud stretched out and was inserted in the ear of a human. Not just a human: a human occupied by a Ks’ou.

He tried not to think about that.

The song ended. The intentional clicks of the device sounded again as she frantically searched for another song that would be agreeable to them both. He very obviously closed the top of the bottle and rolled it back to her, which she caught without looking up but did not bring to her lips.

“I’m sorry you will die.” He finally said it. He’d wanted to say it all day. The clicks stopped for only a moment, and then continued again, as if motivated by a frantic compulsion.

“Don’t be ridiculous. When has a Thhiyatkhoor ever been sorry over a Ks’ou death?” As if to answer her own question, she took a quick sip of water, closed the top and rolled it back to him.

She was right. He corrected: “I’m sorry that my actions *lead* to your untimely death… I still have to truth-tell, per our custom. This is a final battle.”

“The battle is over. I failed.”

“The battle isn’t over. It’s shifted.” He wasn’t feeling very argumentative—it seemed to issue naturally whenever he was around her. “It is now towards the life of your human, who will remain after you die tomorrow. And my own life. So I truth-tell… I would like to think the General will be pleased to be corrected on a point that was his life’s work. So, yes, I will tell him. Perhaps he will be compelled to change his title.” That last point was an embellishment. Knowing his father, he wouldn’t.

She smiled thinly, still unsatisfied.

“So promise me…” she spoke, hoping to push him, further. Relentless. Exhausting. Intriguing. “That you’ll tell him how powerful our resistance is? That he won’t need to send a fleet?”

Efyir could make no such promise. It wasn’t even certain that *he* would survive this to deliver the message. But he could say, “The General knows the dangers of this. He is fond of humans, against Thhiyatkhoor custom. He will want to protect them as best as possible.”

“El.” He cringed. The nickname she’d given him once meant more than it did now. She had put the device down so that there was no sound between them, except the rustling of emptiness throughout the sand dunes. “Are we allies?”

The branches on his head stretched out into the darkness. They could reach out, like wisps of thread, and feel the air far around them. He could feel the emptiness of plenitude they were compressed between: billions of tiny holes in the sky and billions of rocks below them under the ship, still radiant with the day’s heat.

“First encounters can never be replicated, and ours was built on the absence of truth. You didn’t tell me what you were. And I didn’t tell you my name.” A burst of sound interrupted. She’d found the song, although he suspected she was compromising, because there were elements he knew she didn’t like. He talked through it. “But sleep is no longer relevant. So… we have a few hours left to try.” He turned to her so that he was looking at the human, directly, and could no longer see the back of her neck where Aurana pulsed discreetly. “If Ana promises me something.”

“What is that?”

“That she’ll finish your book. *A Brief History of Human Colonization*. Even when you die.” This place was miserable. It was still too hot; he could see it on her face. There would be no more arguing. No more sparring, either.

Aurana nodded, then gulped, as if gasping for air. It would be time, soon. There was not enough water for them both. Soon, not enough for any of them. He had forgotten to take a sip, and hoped she hadn’t noticed, either. He pushed the water back in her direction but she stopped it mid-roll, and did not move to lift if to her human’s lips. He did not urge her to drink from it, despite a strange compulsion in him to say so. It wasn’t right. It wasn’t his place.

The texts labeled ‘history’ would tell one story—that was certain. His father had learned this lesson the hard way. If only her human could finish the book. Perhaps they could tell another.

“Flesh describes an alien entity, a more or less expendable figure…

its most poignant determination is the extent to which such a body cannot prevent or ward off another's touch.

The single-most powerful evidence of the loss of freedom is the fact that bodies lose their integrity and may be invaded or entered… by coercive power.

This touch that we associate with intimacy… becomes instead the power to wound and violate.”

Hortense Spillers[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Chapter 1 (Kelisfton)**

They were beautiful; I would destroy them.

The planet of the newly discovered creatures, the *Olyat-Koi*, appeared in the screen before me and my team of warrior-Settlers. It was small, with only one continent visible from the exosphere where we lay in wait, and these aliens as I had come to understand them seemed placable enough. Trained in intercepting and decoding messages, I happened upon a *Thhiyatkhoor* transmission which had given these coordinates. Under the guise to my superiors that I was making a simple investigation, a curiosity about a planet I heard about by rumor, I set a course for the *Olyat-Koi* homeworld. I didn’t want any nosy overseers following and trying to take over what was rightfully my discovery.

If the *Thhiyatkhoor* were here, they would be so peacefully, as the messages had indicated. I wanted to know what they were doing, and if these new creatures were suitable for settling.

In the corner, the short, bipedal creature, with tan flesh and a black nest shooting from its head, began to whimper. The creature, a gift from one of my allies and confidantes, was designated to be used for research missions. But a Commander could use research for only one thing.

The whimpering grew louder. Why now? I needed to concentrate. “||*Quiet that thing*||,” I hissed. Not even my own shell of a settled made such noise as this mewling thing had since the transfer had been made to this ship. A soldier, in an elongated body pinched at the waist, raised one of its weapons, but the ensuing clatter into short creature’s skull would not come. I took one immediate leap and slammed the soldier’s head into the wall, pushing so that a trickle of dark blue blood began to emit from its ears: “||*I did not say kill it. I need that thing for my project. Are you trying to sabotage me||*?”

“Adê (*No*),” the soldier whimpered. It sounded as pathetic as the little creature, now, who had quietened and was looking up at us both with widened eyes. I calculated: I could not afford to lose another soldier, nor was it worth losing patience over what amounted to mere vibrations in the air. I released him so he would slide to the floor. To the short thing I said, “||*Carry on your irritating and arbitrary noise-making*||,” knowing that the stupid thing didn’t understand my language. This would be remedied when I released my current creature and Settled the small one, connecting to its neural pathways as I was biologically designed to do. But not yet.

As if on cue it began making noises again. I conceded that if I were as small as it, with so much exposed flesh despite the long sheet of thin fabric covering from just below the head to its lower body, I would perhaps have cause for worry, too. The Ks’ou and it were not much different in that respect—our bodies are vulnerable, unlike the hardened, mosaic bodies of the multitudinously-formed creature I currently possessed, or—I thought this with an inward joy as I turned my attention back to the screen—the *Olyat-Koi*, whose bodies were as formidable and strong as their minds. The best hosts were sharp in both, as these were rich resources that the Ks’ou could mine for our own purposes. Lost in the thought of finally landing on the planet, executing the plan, and retrieving the exemplar, I was able to push away the sound of the short creature’s bleats as my mind flooded with images of conquest.

This would be a day, perhaps, named after me for celebration. I was saving the *Olyat-Koi* from their illusions of peace. I would bring the galaxy to them, to hold them honorable above all other species.

In case you were wondering: there are no heroes in this story. There are those who do heroic acts, and there are moments of courage. Do not consider any of us heroes; we are all only villains until the very moment of our dying breath, until our being is taken into account.

**Chapter 2**

NeVarr--and by default, James--were standing in front of the tank. The edges on the wide afro of the human glowing slightly aquamarine in its light. The Ks'ou formed the humans lips and sent the signals to vibrate the throat: it was a quiet mumble, as they shook a flaky substance onto the open top of the water. A couple of snails were stuck to the side of the tank; the fish that remained from the last fiasco were maneuvering calmly throughout the seagrass that NeVarr had recently planted.

They had had cuttlefish some time ago before *both* Aurana and Ana finally convinced NeVarr to give up once the latest one had died. He mourned a little longer than was appropriate; Aurana reminded him sharply that they weren’t sentient as Ks’ou were. Ana invoked a gentleness that humans were so good at: she knew that the resemblance of Ks’ou to cuttlefish was close, and reminded him that cuttlefish were limited with their eight arms and inability to speak back despite NeVarr’s numerous attempts to detach from his human and crawl into the tank with them and make contact.

NeVarr refused to believe it at first. “If it’s true they aren’t sentient, how can they have eyes? WE *Ks’ou* don’t even have eyes. And yet they can’t communicate?”

“Having eyes and communicating sentiently are two different things.”

They thought once he’d given up on cuttlefish-raising that he was done, but he diligently kept the tank thriving, with almost six or seven creatures—two fish, two snails, and some crustaceans—seeming to be swimming happily now that their cuttlefish predator was gone.

So was the scene that Aurana, in Ana, walked in to as they returned from their recent KLF solo mission: NeVarr, in James, humming evenly, as though reciting a poem.

“They can’t hear you,” Aurana said mildly, locking the front door behind them. “And even when we’ve attempted to communicate via our natural tongue in water, all studies have pointed to no signs of conscience.”

NeVarr ignored her, continuing to speak rhythmically. After a moment, he stood and observed her, noting the blood in her sleeve and gesturing towards his own cheek to show that hers wasn’t quite clean. She dragged her human’s hand against it instinctively; NeVarr sighed, “Do you think it’s true? That we all began on the same planet, even humans? That every thing, in the entire universe, was once… of one *kyôsta*?”

“It’s an interesting theory. Unconfirmed and likely uncomfirmable. A creation story, as any other.”

NeVarr snorted rudely. “You don’t even care for your human’s creation story.”

“It doesn’t *taste*,” Aurana responded. Such was the Ks’ou way of interpreting the world, even this one largely devoid of water.

“Our job as symbiotes is to *taste* any thing that has been robbed of us,” NeVarr said cooly. “Air thriving. The life of mind. Tasting.”

“You taste more than most Ks’ou,” Aurana said, grinning thinly, gazing past NeVarr to the kitchen, where a mess invariably await. “What will you do when we are back on *kyôsta* and you are no longer allowed to eat with a tongue?”

He nodded. “It’s the only thing that would convince me to stay on Earth.” Preemptively he held out a hand to stay her shocked expression, “Relax, *relax.* Obviously we have to leave when the war is over, and that includes leaving our humans, too. I’m just dreaming impossibility. Can I do that, at least?”

Aurana threw their bags on the couch, a gesture she knew would annoy NeVarr to no end, because the only mess he failed to recognize was the one he created in the kitchen. She sat her human’s body down and illuminated the screen, but none of the images that passed sight interested her. It was a far cry than from when she first learned ‘sight,’ as with eyes, when all things were fascinating. Now it was dull; repetitive.

NeVarr sat himself and his human, James, down next to them on the other side of the couch. They watched in silence for moments before she spoke.

“You’re dressed like a jackass clown. Are you going to DJ again tonight?”

She never looked at him, but could *hear* him, burning at the cheeks.

He made a small choking sound. “Please don’t tell Ana. Is she listening, now?”

“She’s not listening to us,” Aurana said haughtily. “She’s in the archive.”

“You know about this? The club?”

“Ana tells me everything,” Aurana said calmly, tearing her human’s eyes away from the screen to give NeVarr a pointed look. “Unlike some Ks’ou present, I don’t need to *take* information from my human that she freely gives.”

“That was only in the beginning,” NeVarr said defensively. His eyes narrowed, as though challenging her. He even licked his lips slightly, his unconscious habit. “Besides…” he frowned, his eyebrows narrowing, “She doesn’t tell you *everything.*”

“Doesn’t she?”

NeVarr had a way of pushing his human’s expression into something unreadable, his eyes were wide and bright. “What’s my favorite food?”

She scoffed. “We’re Ks’ou. We’re not supposed to have a *single* favorite food.”

“Well, I do. And Ana knows it.” He pushed his human lips into a thin, triumphant line. “Your human doesn’t tell you *everything.*” He’d said this with an unnecessary finality, returning to the moving light on the screens, but she could tell he wasn’t paying attention.

After some time, NeVarr continued, as though excusing himself, “I’ve limited my club time because of Ana. I’m on call for emergencies only. Only because of what happened…”

“I know what happened,” Aurana snapped. She didn’t, in fact, but she was testing him. He didn’t fall for it.

“*Kwa.* Aurana. Did you know…” he hesitated. “The KLF has charged me. *Me*. I’m not supposed to inform you, my Sub Aspirant, about it.”

Aurana glanced at him, but his gaze was not directly back at her. Instead, he looked towards the table, where a simple white sheet lay.

“I’ve only partially deciphered it. But it… I know, already, that it’s beyond anything I’ve ever done. I’m not ready. I can’t do it alone.”

Aurana noted his worry, and, as was typical, did not let emotion overcome her visage. Humans felt much; Ks’ou did, too. It could be embraced without being indulged. “You’ll be fine, NeVarr. This is good news. They want to promote you.”

NeVarr scoffed. “Or kill me.”

She ignored him, “Let’s decipher it completely, together, and then I can help you plan what to do.” He didn’t look fully convinced so she sighed and said, “Remember the Protocols.”

“You and these Protocols.”

“They’re useful. I say them to myself when I have trouble sleeping.”

“There’s something very wrong with you,” he said, arching the eyebrows of his human, but sighed and said, “Just the first two, okay?”

Together, they repeated: “Protocol 1. Subset 1. We aim to dismantle the Ks'ou Nation, fully and without exception.

Protocol 1. Subset 2. We aim to re-establish Ks'ou as a *peaceful* presence in the universe.”

There were more, many more. And Protocol *Sifr*, of course, but that one was so burned into their founds, so foundational, so utterly necessary to everything the KLF aimed to do, that they never found it necessary to say aloud.

Protocols 1.1. and 1.2 usually sufficed. To remind them what set them apart. To remind them the levity of what they needed to shift. She convinced NeVarr to repeat Protocols 1.1 and 1.2 three times over. The third, NeVarr actually smiled and said, “You’re right. That did make me feel better. So many Ks’ou have failed to succeed at Protocol 1.2. We’re all *really bad* at it. Why should I expect to do any better?”

--

The greatest true stories they knew—and Aurana had the greatest repository of stories in the known universe—began with births and deaths. Which is why this begging human, whimpering on his knees, struck them both as a great tragedy.

Earlier, Aurana and Ana were staring at a single Human face in the mirror: braids to shoulder blades, dark brown eyes, skin that Ana’s mother often said was like sequoias, not just because its shade was a mix between hers and her father’s, but also because these trees were rare, and the last few were isolated in containment for scientific preservation. Apparently they had visited one when she was younger, much younger, but war had devastated most of these. Their trunks remained, and that was why her mother called Ana *Sequoia*, sometimes, because she believed that, despite struggle, she could remain firmly rooted in herself, her convictions, her family, many of whom she had never met, only holding stories from which she drew threads, senses, sketches.

{ Your mother was not wrong. }

{ Stop reading my mind, } Ana snapped, but knew that she had been, once again, thinking too loudly.

Ana took off her earrings, the katydids that most people mistook for leaves, the last visible connection of her first home, the last that she had shared with her sister.

“My hair needs to be shorter,” Ana grumbled, knowing this was not possible. She regarded her curls, the way they sagged in the mirror, lamenting how tight they could have been were they not so heavy with length.

Aurana did not care much for hair, only to the extent that it covered her human’s neck: { We’re here for the Human. } a gentle reminder. Thoughts were easily lost in tangled webs. NeVarr had already detailed the report on Friday, which meant that Ana had to catch Aurana up today.

{ Offender on two counts of pro-Nation assaults. Offender of colonial resonance. Offender of Human legally-defined trafficking activities. } Language that was once foreign to Ana had now become everyday words.

{ So it will be easy, then, } Aurana thought. No need to differentiate between Human and Ks’ou. No need to coax the Ks’ou out, as it were.

{ Not quite. }

It was not difficult infiltrating the hospital. Both the human and the Ks’ou knew already its landscape. Ana’s sister was located in this same building, in another wing, indefinitely, until she recovered or humans decided otherwise. This was the death side of things.

The birth? This was currently happening in one room over of the birthing hall of this place. They need only wait for the human father to take a break, to use the restroom, which he did in the 13 hour ordeal that struck Aurana as both lengthy and, given what the human had to deal with, painfully slow.

Ks’ou do not give birth this way. Ks’ou laid eggs to be inspired, and that was that. The event of a Ks’ou birth was not considered an event; Ks’ou were considered ‘born’ in other ways.

But here it was—a birth, a presumed death, to come. Ana and Aurana had peeked inside the door while everyone was occupied. Before them both: a human woman, with brown hair intertwined with silver, trying to issue life into human hands, on her back while the body screamed and squirmed. Her intent was to give life; the other life-giver, the biological father, was, however, slated to die. He was situated on the other side of the table, playing his part. The lie was in his presence. They knew the one moving the male, charcoal and grey body wasn’t actually the father: they knew it was a Ks’ou, controlling the human, pretending to be engaged in this beautifully horrific orchestra of human blood and other fluids.

Proper Ks’ou births used to be in *etaoin*; humans translated this as lagoons but it is not accurate. The Nation, the overarching organization of the Ks’ou species, disrupted this. Soon there was no *etaoin*. Soon, there was only the call for war, and instead of in *etaoin,* Ks’ou were born in cold, inorganic ships.

And then it was his time, to succumb to the biological faculties of the human. And their time to strike. She waited until he was in the hallway, and pulled him, unwillingly into another room. Aurana had dressed her human, Ana’s, body in the warrior clothes of the terrorist group they aspired to join, a gift from a mutual friend.

The human’s eyes widened at the sight of their uniform. “I know you,” he shuddered. This was a lie: he knew nothing about her. He knew *of* her, but no more. She was a new subject, and attacked him accordingly. In moments that they tumbled she had freed the human, temporarily, from Ks’ou control.

“Choose, human,” Aurana hissed when the blinking, confused human entered the reality that the Ks’ou had denied him. Ana readied her body for their transfer; death came from her, the human, alone.

“I know you can’t answer this,” this father-to-be said, “But how strong are you? The KLF? I just… is freedom close? Would it be worth it, to wait, for my daughter?”

“You’re right,” she said, looking away for fear that her terrible awkwardness for lying would betray information that she couldn’t give. “I can’t answer that. But I can tell you this: don’t look to the KLF for your freedom. It is something humans will secure for yourselves, from your own colonizer.”

“Yeah,” he mumbled, the sobriety of it like a brick struck against his face. He began twitching.

“Your Ks’ou will regain control soon,” she said. “I’m sorry, We need your decision.”

“I don’t have an answer,” he said, finally, holding up a hand, extending and retracting it as though he were testing to see the very moment that it would return to control of the Ks’ou. “I want to see my baby girl. But I don’t want this monster to lay a finger on her.” He laughed, sadly, as though he had just made a great joke. “My wife has always accused me of being impatient.”

Just then they could hear her very screams through the wall, not quite the blood-curdling scream of a human whose life was about to end; this sounded closer to a great and powerful cry, peaking, apparently, to the crowning finality of a newborn birth.

—

A Brief History of Human Colonization

It is clear that the Ks’ou alien Colonizers functioned as a disruption to the Human historical timeline. Humans, Earth-wide, would never be the same as before the Ks’ou arrived on Earth, and the nature of Ks’ou control would obliterate and disrupt Human-driven possibility. This has never before been made so clear as the introduction of the terms ‘Pre-Ks’ou Era’ (PKE) and ‘Post-Ks’ou Era’ (PsKE) in many Earth-published textbooks; though these terms are charged and used sparingly here, it should be noted that this work before you is written in 39 PsKE. The small years of the Ks’ou failed attempt at colonization will be simply referred to as ‘KE.’

To be sure, *Humans were colonizers before the arrival of the Ks’ou*.

Not all Human colonization can be considered the same across all Human contexts.[[2]](#footnote-2) The title of this work is not to imply that ‘Human’ indicates an essential, singular form of colonization. That ‘Human’ serves as a metonym for ‘all’ or ‘universal’ is an unfortunate implication in some (though not the majority of) Human languages.

The purpose of this work is to explore the nature of Human-driven colonization across different geographical, political, and cultural contexts on the third planet from Sol (formerly the ambiguously named ‘Sun’) in the Human Solar System within the galaxy that Humans refer to as the Milky Way. By privileging the era of Human history before the Ks’ou arrival, when time was designated ‘CE’ or ‘AD’ and ‘BCE’ or ‘BC’, the authors aim to provide initial thoughts toward how Human colonization shaped the reaction towards subsequent Ks’ou colonization. Through the lens of the writers, the PKE can never fully be torn apart from the PsKE, though the former was never fully shaped by it, either. Across the galaxy, may we be comforted in the fact that all species share one trait: we are all the artifacts of our histories, whether we remember this history or not…

*—*

Their path home was pervaded by the quiet sound of water flickering off leaves. The temperature was dropping, but slowly, so that they trudged over the muddy floor of a forest between seasons. Beads of water still clung to the edges of branches, like unsettled dust. They both felt that it was good to be engulfed by something taller, something bigger than themselves. This had the power to ease a heart likewise engulfed in quiet war. Their shadows, and the dim light through the tops of the trees, had a calming effect.

It was when they approached the clearing that they saw it—there, on the top of the trees, the slender body, the ridged head and, though an outline of a shadow, a set of horns extending from the back of its head called *naghryoja.* It was aiming a weapon: Aurana could see the glint of the moon on its surface.

She slipped her own weapon out of her pocket, extended it, and aimed. Not many Thhiyatkhoor graced the Earth these days, enough in number only that this chance encounter did not seem out of place. What was this one doing so high in this tree? Did it not know not to expose itself? Of course. Typical Thhiyatkhoor arrogance. Earth was hardly a threat, though she had heard of Human attempts to kidnap Thhiyatkhoor for money—most by now surely realized that Thhiyatkhoor did not discourse in Human sums, that battle was their currency. If one were to fell a Thhiyatkhoor on accident, adequate payback would involve dealing with their enemies, the greatest of these the Ks’ou, rivals from the beginning.

But a purposeful kidnapping? Aurana was tempted. She would never give him over to the miserable Nation, but the Ks'ou Liberation Front could use him for their aims to upend and defeat the Ks’ou force currently wreaking its havoc on Humans; Ks’ou anti-Nation liberators wanted an end to the war that had devastated their people, that had destroyed the Universe’s consideration of their species.

Aurana aimed, but the glint of the object the Thhiyatkhoor held caught her eye. Was it really a weapon? Through the pistonet’s viewer she adjust for a closer look. The object that she imagined was a weapon seemed round and clear, except for inside. There, they saw a swirling sphere, deep blue and green and brown as lush planets are, and there were clouds as well as light streaks, a shining lace of phosphoric luminescence, that cut through the bodies of terra.

Unlike Earth, this planet’s landmass was largely connected in a band that clustered toward the center, a band that humans would refer to as an ‘equator’. Many peninsulas speckled the large bodies of water north and south of this center, but they were hardly visible in this opthastre.

It didn’t matter. There it was, entirely.

*kyôsta!*

She imagined that she had thought this, but as her ears trembled, she realized that this Thhiyatkhoor was saying it also, over and over again; his narrow, sharp lips moved in the dark. She shifted the viewer towards his head instead, to discern his expression, and to see his mouth, if it were true what she was too far away to hear.

Her finger slipped.

She could see the shot, though tiny, tearing the air apart.

Aurana stood her human’s body in frozen horror. She had never unintentionally triggered her weapon before—was always precise, until now.

{ Don’t worry. I got you. } Ana whispered her assurance. Aurana dared to look upwards and understood: Ana had sensed the mistake she was about to make, shifted her physical hands so the shot missed him by moments. The Thhiyatkhoor was, thankfully, unscathed, but he was now looking directly towards them.

When they looked through the viewfinder again, the Thhiyatkhoor was gone. She could see the movement of the trees but could not hear its rustling, could barely hear the deftness as he tore, quietly, through the branches at an impossibly quick speed. Anxiety gripped her; she did not fear, was accustomed to battle, but she did not have enough information to discern how she should prepare for what would occur next. She knew that running would be foolish—Thhiyatkhoor were excellent tree-runners—but to remain would risk a provocative wrath. She could only stand still to see what kind of Thhiyatkhoor this one was. The leaves that rustled sounded as the wind; she could not discern where, exactly it was, until a sudden shake just in front of her.

The creature swung down in a simultaneous stomp of both its legs, only minute spaces in front of her. Thhiyatkhoor are not particularly beautiful creatures: with slim, angular bodies and little shapeliness except for the sharp of their arm blades, there was not much to them except outline. Aurana concluded that they were like muscular seaweed— perhaps *dangerous* muscular seaweed. Ana of course disagreed: she liked the Thhiyatkhoor crown, as she called it, but these, even round, were only an extension of Thhiyatkhoor, and not the Thhiyatkhoor itself. Humans at least had a little roundness that made sense. Yet being Ks’ou and thus born without sight, it ultimately didn’t matter: who was she to judge what was pretty and what wasn’t?

He brought forward his three formidable arm blades; struck against her small weapon she now used as a tiny shield. She swung her other arm and missed, purposefully, to show him a rhythm he did not understand, causing enough confusion for her to deal a blow to his jaw. He was unfazed; her human’s hand throbbed. As they clashed again, he leaned in close as though to intimidate her. His blades could fell thick branches, and her weapon, though long enough to act as a thin shield, was beginning to give. He was obviously *warrior class*, notably in the interim pauses of this initial scuffle, the ways his eyes shifted over the body of her human, assessing speed and estimating their next movements.

She knew, also, that this attack was restrained, so it was no surprise when the caveat came, his eyes shining night against night. “You attempt an attack?”

He spoke low. Thhiyatkhoor voices tended to be tonic; their throats and palates are curved differently than humans, so it made it notoriously difficult for humans to understand what Thhiyatkhoor found important, and lead to many different misunderstandings between the history of their races. No misunderstanding as deep as between Ks’ou and Thhiyatkhoor, though. The sound that Aurana was so used to—a sound had become normal to her, like rushing water, a high-pitched hum, that had nestled itself into the creases of her mind, suddenly diminished, like a wave breaking suddenly to become calm. The voice of this Thhiyatkhoor cut through it like the bow of a ship through saltwater. It was the first thing she noticed about him. But she couldn’t stay with this thought long enough to make it salient, and so quickly forgot it.

“Yy- You’re a Thhiyatkhoor.” She could try to feign ignorance. So said the stupidest thing that came to mind. His response did not disappoint.

“*Obviously*.” His slate flared superiority. A brief shine over a slower diffused cloudburst, like grey and white wisps passing aside a full moon. Ana had only seen Thhiyatkhoor in books, so Aurana took her awe at his skin emotions and expressed it as her own.

“What are you doing on Earth?”

“What are you doing with that weapon?”

“Nothing,” she said, exaggerating her human’s embarrassment. She held up both arms, the weapon dangling from the thumb of one, wondering how many details of her face he could see in the light wind. “A misfire. I’m sorry. I’ve never seen a *live* Thhiyatkhoor before.”

For her this was a lie, and she was still learning how to do these, but what did a Thhiyatkhoor know of good or bad lying in a Human context? He hesitated, regarded her with his dark eyes. The sphere—humans referred to it as an *opthastre* and she couldn’t remember the word in Endaithsu—glowed in his hand.

“Can I see it?” she asked honestly. “The thing, you have—the marble. I will lay my weapon down; honest, I only was using it as a telescope to see what you were holding in the moonlight, and I did not know the trigger was activated.”

As a “Human,” she placed her weapon on the ground timidly. Aurana was invoking every aspect of Ana, the early Ana, the pre-war child, *the unborn*, that she could.

“We are in a time of peace,” she said. Earth’s unprecedented peace—even for Earth—was propaganda, of course, begun by humans themselves and now perpetuated by Settlers. But at 39 PsKE, human memory waned, and now that more of the universe was open to them, so, too, the whelm of distraction.

“Excessive peace,” the Thhiyatkhoor mumbled. He glanced at the *opthastre*. “It is civilian grade.” Reluctantly, he placed it into her hands, while staring directly at her grounded weapon as he did. The opthastre, close to 3 inches in diameter, contained within it the real-time projection of an image that she thought she’d never see in her lifetime.

“This is my place of origin, my *kyôsta*,” he said as she held up the swirling planet to her eyes. He glanced towards her ear and neck, but it was useless: though she did not sport the *zilaa[[3]](#footnote-3)* sign, she wore a scarf that covered her neck and the edge of her ear, and was still firmly wrapped there despite the intensity of this initial battle. “Kyôsta being the word for ‘home’ in my native language.”

“I figured that.” Her tone was coarse, but she looked at this creature, this tall, slate, Thhiyatkhoor, the shadows of his adolescent *naghryoja* cutting against the stars in the backdrop. Gauged him. “Do you miss it?”

“My Human hosts have been as family to me since before I formed branches. But when I see what my planet looks like from the outside, perhaps that thing you call ‘missing’ is what I experience.”

She twitched, annoyed. It is not *your* planet, she wanted to sneer. Not alone. But Thhiyatkhoor speak this way, of course, because they have succeeded in making, marking, and manifesting their planet as their own. He was between child and adulthood, likely similar to her own interplanetary measure of passing. She pushed aside these political thoughts and regarded the sphere, which held an image she had hardly seen; Ks’ou were not allowed to think of this *kyôsta* as *kyôsta-sy,* though it framed their indigeneity.

It had been years since she had even seen her own planet of her birth, but this was different: she had never seen projections of the original *kyôsta* such as this. Spheres of this kind were not technology bestowed to her species.

She held it back out to him, with some resistance, “Thank you. Your so-called *kyôsta* is a beautiful place. Perhaps Humans can visit one day.” This laughable proposition was something Ana was thinking, loudly, and therefore a real text that Humans might speak.

“Perhaps.” He made a rude sound, one that Aurana likened to scoffing; wordlessly, he took the sphere back. What more did he want? Argument? Understanding? *Meaning?* But he seemed stalled. She picked up her weapon again and stuffed it into her pocket to begin heading out of the forest starred.

**Chapter 2\***

*Ana Joseph and Aurana~*

*Spring PsKE 39, 2—-*

*Dr. Hagåtña*

*A Brief History of Human Colonization*

*‘Chronotope’ (Time-Space) is a theory by the ancient Russian thinker M. M. Bakhtin (citation needed).* He argues that *Narration can be looked at separately through the lens~~e~~ of these two different relationships: temporal (time) and spatial (space). These ~~two~~ components express a particular worldview or ideology depending on the genre of literature you find it in.* [is this sentence necessary?] *However, the time and space components of chronotope are not easily separated, and I will argue that this unsettling connection between time and space shows the ways that colonization has ~~unsettled~~* [try 'disrupted’—less weird, you know…] *Human civilization since the beginning of time. Colonizers aim to dominate and reconfigure the chronotope of other cultures and peoples.* [yes.] *Though there are varying types of colonization, if there is one tenet that all colonization shares, it is this…*

Professor Hagåtña[[4]](#footnote-4) lifted her eyes from the paper to gaze at Ana directly. The professor’s brown eyes contrasted well with the dark green rims of her glasses, framed by curly black hair and skin like saturated elm. “Seems a little ambitious for a senior capstone.”

Ana tried not to feel small. Mama and Papa Joseph taught her to be fairly comfortable in this minute academic world, but Dr. Hagåtña was sharp and serious, someone who did smile on occasion, only when she intended to and usually at her own humor. There were other differences in *this* world, too: Ana tried to hide her shoes beneath the chair, they would not last through winter but the duct tape should hold up for a few more weeks as long as it didn’t snow too often. She took care to keep the upper half of her body presentable, wearing a dark blue blazer and keeping her braids tidy and tight, as Mama taught.

“I’d like to think of it as a lifetime project. I would just lay out the groundwork for this class, get started, you know.” She needed this project approved so she wouldn’t have to work with Dr. Jayco. Dr. Hagåtña was one of few professors at the University who looked somewhat similarly to Ana, and the only one who likely had enough savvy to know how she could navigate it.

Dr. Hagåtña’s eyes dropped again as she surveyed the summary that Ana had hastily typed out that morning on her Univ-pod, having forgotten the assignment was due at all. Aurana had to follow through and make corrections, all too late. The reminder from her Ks'ou was one of many times she was grateful to be co-inhabited—a nagging voice who would help her recall all she’d forgotten.

{ You’d do better if you would just update your calendar, } Aurana hissed. { Why are Humans so terrible at time? It would take one minute, of which you have 960 per average waking— }

{ Shhh! You’re not supposed to read my mind! }

{ I’m not. You think as loudly as you speak. And no one has ever referred to you as *quiet*, if I recall. }

{ *Shhhh!* }

Ana blinked. Dr. Hagåtña was staring at her curiously. She must have said something that Ana hadn’t heard in the outer-body aloud. “I… I’m sorry, Professor. Could you repeat the question?”

Her professor’s eyebrows raised, slightly, lifting her spectacles just up over the ridges of the wrinkles on her forehead. She repeated, “Who is Aurana?”

Ana gulped. She had insisted that the very Ks’ou who controlled her body be included in the authorship, because of the archive. Without thinking about having to explain what the name was doing there in the first place. “My sister.”

“You’ve referred to her as Éloise in the times you’ve mentioned her in class.”

*Curse her formidable memory*! Ana thought quickly. “It is. But that was my nickname for her. A joke. She was born seconds after me. So I started calling her After-Ana, *A-r*-ana. The name stuck.”

{ …what an excellent lie. } Aurana mused, impressed.

Ana felt somewhat self-satisfied, too, when she noticed how Dr. Hagåtña nodded, the slight curve of the corners of her mouth peaking. “Clever.” The curves disappeared. “But why is she a co-author?”

“My… I talk with my sister about it.”

“With?”

“I mean *to*. I talk to her. She doesn’t talk back, obviously.”

“Obviously.”

Ana was beginning to despite that word. “But I really want her to be on there. She’s helped me so much. I wouldn’t be here if she didn’t urge me to attend college. And we’ve always talked about colonization with each other. So she should get credit.”

“If only more academics thought as you did,” Dr. Hagåtña muttered dryly. “You wrote and tried, desperately, to edit this at the last minute, I see. Let me read through and see if I can piece together something logical out of these syntactic disasters.”

Ana held her breath, waiting for the professor’s final answer. In the silence she began to fumble around with the cotton gloves in her lap, the kind that were open halfway so that her fingers poked through. When she tried them on and wiggled her fingers in, Aurana had joked that the gloves made it look as though she had tendrils just as her own.

Tendrils was the word that they had finally decided on; ‘tentacles’ was the word that Aurana first used, but Ana had to correct her, arguing that they had a creepy undertone.

{ Appendages, then, } Aurana had said. She had very little patience for the richness of the English language, and a particularly unhealthy disdain for synonyms.

{ That’s also a weird word. }

{ Why do Humans make perfectly fine words into oddities? They are simply words, they point to a thing and that is all. Weird words are arbitrary! }

{ Let’s just say tendrils. Tendrils sound nice. Like tender. }

{ *Arbitrary*. } Aurana had insisted again.

Dr. Hagåtña finally finished decorating Ana’s paper with the blood-red violence of semi-constructive criticism. She handed it back; Ana could breathe. *Approved with major adjustments* was scribbled across the top. Her mother would be proud; she couldn’t wait to tell her, imagined her round and shining arms lifting up energy into the air, “Kreyol: ||Nou pa sèl ki ka fonn pa lapli[[5]](#footnote-5)!||” Aurana was ecstatic and weary at once.

“You’re a promising student, and it will be a necessary contribution to the field, as long as you give yourself parameters,” the professor said. “Give me something more concrete—and not written at the last minute—by next week’s class.”

“Thank you, Dr. Hagåtña,” Ana said, shoving the paper into her backpack and standing to leave.

“Ana…”

Ana grimaced. She hoped her professor would just return to her screen as she normally did, with that distant look in her eyes indicating that her mind had already shifted to other pressing abstractions. This was the third professor who had spoken to her in that tone of voice.

“I am concerned about your engagement in this class,” she said. “You are often distracted. You hesitate to speak though it is clear you have much to say. Is there something about the class that is disappointing you?”

Dr. Hagåtña usually framed things in the context that mattered most to her.

“It’s not the class,” Ana forced a thin smile to show she was genuine. Of course, she couldn’t tell her professor about the alien currently residing in the interstices of her brain, the alien whose appenda—*ahem*, tendrils—had curled and curved their way from the cerebral cortex up through the synapses. The alien who lay unseen, except for a small bump on her neck hidden by the scarf she wore, but listening in to this very conversation. “I’m engaged, promise.”

“I’m not allowed to make assumptions, but I can say that having difficulty concentrating could indicate a larger problem. If you need resources, I can direct you to Mentality Services, or the Abilities Office. They serve all species—”

Ana grimaced inwardly; chewed her lip. She drew back and Aurana did not miss a beat, taking over her Human’s mouth, “Dr. Hagåtña, I am Human, and I am just fine. Last week you reframed James Baldwin’s *Talk to Teachers* in our context today. That 2—- is a time where we are at a further loss for our identities because we couldn’t figure out who we were, we couldn’t figure out our vision for ourselves as a species, before aliens came. Writing this book *is* my vision for humans. If I can configure colonization in Human’s past, then we can contend with the resonances of the Ks’ou’s failed attempt at colonization today.”

{ Applause-worthy elevator speech. }

{ Perhaps it *is* time you pay better attention in class. }

{ Yep. Mmm.. noted. }

Dr. Hagåtña was smiling at her—if only the professor knew she was smiling at two beings at once. While her eyes were direct, she made a motion with her lips as though wanting to say something, but chose not to respond directly. “Good day, then.” The distant look in her eyes pulled her away and she turned towards the books on her shelves, as though Aurana were never there.

Aurana was fairly certain that the professor wasn’t inhabited, but she always wore a high collar, and in winter when everyone’s necks was covered for warmth, one could never really know—unless you had access to the Ks’ou database. That would require an unnecessary hacking, and their time was occupied plenty by other, more necessary ones.

Aurana sent a small trill through their shared minds. { A co-author! This is exciting. We are making a text! I’ll be the first published *Ks’ou*! }

{ It’s just a school project. It’s not a big deal, } Ana reminded her, but she took one look out the window and finished relinquishing to Aurana. They were headed outside, where it had, to Ana’s chagrin and the ultimate destruction of her boots, began to snow. Aurana hated the cold, but she was fascinated by ‘solid water’, liked to saunter through it. By the time they had finished pushing open the doors to the outside, Aurana now controlled her entire body, not just her mouth as the final moments back in the professor’s office. Ana, though she was still able to see, did not have to feel a hint of cold.

They headed towards their next class, a certain Professor Jayco who was far less intimidating—but also less interesting—than Dr. Hagåtña. { Still. A book that needs to be written. Humans and your lack of knowledge. Why does it take alien colonization for you to set yourselves straight? }

{ Pot. Kettle. }

{ A fair point, } Aurana grumbled, but Ana could always hear that small hint of admiration in her voice, a tone that resonated even as they spoke through each other’s minds.

It was snowing more heavily now, the kind of abundant snow that populated the campus grounds in heaps and seemed to absorb all sounds of Humans and movement and monument around them. Veroia was a medium-sized university, the only of its kind, as Professor Hagåtña had said, to “serve *all* species,” which was a misuse of the term ‘all’ but very common for humans to overstate their aims. It had no shortage of posters with faces of smiling humans and human-appearing aliens in *living fakes,* with their necks bent in awkward angles so that the *zilaa* signatory was obvious, the words“Earth’s first public institution integrating species in the same learning environment,” emblazoned as its caption. Veroia promised a more inclusive, diverse education; it was also the perfect place for Ks’ou to do their affairs more or less conspicuously as the Nation machine marched forward.

The campus was large enough so that it was easy to disappear as a student; the snow that fell on its campus only added to this effect. It was so quiet, in fact, that they almost didn’t hear the muffled cursing from across the courtyard. They stopped completely and stared as the two figures in navy enforcement suits, their ranks given away by the cotton-colored armband slashed with Ks’ou blue, wrestled with a blonde boy. They were dragging away a *Settled*, a student she had recognized only briefly from the Ks’ou Deep. Enforcement had waited until he was in the POD and trapped; likely, Aurana ventured, he was being sent for reprimanding for some infraction.

Ana was quiet. There were some words that didn’t need exchanging. They both agreed tacitly, for example, that the book they were writing for her capstone was a distraction from the other colonization that was happening—the global, quiet colonization, from the inside out.

Remnants from the war that Humans wrongly believed they’d won.

--

“But what about the Ks’ou?”

The entire class was staring at her, but Aurana didn’t care if she uttered the word that seemed so forbidden, as though not mentioning Ks’ou would somehow make that sore spot in Human history disappear. She glared back at the students: several were clearly *zilaa*, including the awkward boy with pepper hair, non-human and suppressed in the human-seeming encasements that *zilaa* were forced to wear.

Yet most were Human: sleepy-eyed. Gangly. Apathetic—until it impacted their personal lives. Awhile ago Ana took offense at this description of her people until Aurana gave line-by-line evidence, and at that point Ana was ready to declare herself—though she couldn’t, really—not-fully-human.

*What ABOUT the Ks’ou?* This was a nuance they needed to interrogate and the professor was deliberately dancing around the question.

“Yes, well,” Professor Jayco coughed and adjusted his glasses. He seemed to be a very nervous Human, with a fancy bald spot that seemed out of place with his youthful visage, dressed in a suit that seemed slightly too big for him. “It is true that the Ks’ou were known for stealing technology, though never for financial gain since the monetary system as we understand it is a Human invention.”

“So would you say Humans and Ks’ou alike share a history of stealing technology?” she pressed. Some of the Humans finally stirred in response to her words and glared at her, those who understood the point she was trying to make.

“That might be… glossing over… details,” the professor said weakly. “Perhaps we can discuss this after class.”

{ Don’t slay him too hard, } Ana told her half-jokingly. { He looks like he went from diapers to degree. }

Aurana snickered internally. Aloud she said, “Perhaps. I merely want to press on the point that the sanctions on Humans for stealing technology from the *Thhiyatkhoor* and selling it for profit are marginal compared to the current sanction on Ks’ou. Technology-related deaths increase exponentially each year and we fail to address it because of our general preference for Humans as a species. We should analyze our personal biases when addressing crucial issues such as technological plagiarism.”

“Nn-noted,” the professor squeaked. “I think we should continue with the lesson.”

But one of the *zilaa* boys—whose name she hadn’t bothered learning—spoke then. He was new, having just arrived in the middle of the semester only a couple weeks ago. His dark curls were entwined with a silver color that was not of his age, and long enough to hang over his ears but not his neck. It was usually the first thing both Ana and Aurana checked briefly with discerning eyes—smooth neck skin, prominently displayed, he was most certainly not Settled. Ana referred to his skin color as ‘ambiguous,’ whatever that meant. Like leather, his skin was brûlée. He tended to be quiet, so both Ana and Aurana were surprised when he offered the harsh, loud claim, “Are you a *Ks’ou* sympathizer?”

She glared at him, trying not to touch the scarf she always wore, a move which might bring unwarranted attention to her neck. A few other students murmured—in approval, it sounded—with this comment. This was a dangerous accusation. To be a Ks’ou sympathizer on Earth was nothing light; the few who existed had been silenced, often violently, so much so that the minority that remained no longer spoke openly. One of the mighty warriors of the first great battle on Earth against Ks’ou had been rumored to hold Ks’ou sympathies, but she no longer spoke publicly.

“I am merely asking *legitimate* questions. Unlike yours.” She snapped her head to challenge him with her eyes, eyes that told him to bring his best argument. His eyes, also brown, stared back at her widely, but not harshly. “Are humans beyond critique?”

She had long suspected that he was *zilaa*—a non-Earther—just by the few remarks he would offer in class and his blatant misunderstanding of Humans. Once he’d claimed that Humans were all electronics-toilers, which was clearly false, even in the small metropolis they were in. Another time he’d referred to Humans as bipedals, a somewhat derogatory term if anyone thought about it long enough.

Non-bipedal. That was all she knew of his species, but it wasn’t enough. There were monopeds and quadrupeds, and plenty more in between. Her own species, as water-born, did not even identify with this idea of ‘pedal’. For pedaled species, the default is to think in terms of feet. Wasn’t the mind just as sound?

“Of course not,” he finally said, his eyes flickering. “Humans earn critique as much as any species. By what measure do you critique them?”

This was a trap, she recognized. The measure she chose might reveal the fact that she was *zilaa*, too, or even her species, and of course she could not measure against atrocities that humans had committed against any species but her own. Her response would reveal what she was, and with that, who.

So she raised her chin and said, “I measure us by our contribution to the universe. And so far we *humans* contribute much to those we identify as our own, and little to those we identify as our Other.” She’d hope the lie would pass, and for many in the public eye, it seemed to.

While he was unsatisfied with this response, the professor was now begging them to sit so they could finish their lesson before the next exam. Humans loved tiny tests that did not involve battle or blood, and it was perhaps a safer way to test one’s competence, but boring; nonetheless, they resigned.

When class ended he seemed insistent on finishing the conversation. He followed close after her as she hurried out the door, “I have a book you should read, written by a *Thhiyatkhoor* General. It details—”

“What’s your name?” she interrupted sharply, then kept walking, heading towards the exit. She hoped that it had stopped snowing so that her Humans’ boots would survive the twenty minute walk.

“Uh…” he reddened, as though unsure. They reached the double glass doors at the exit; here, her hopes for a ceased snowfall were dashed. She stopped pull her coat out of her bag as she waited for what should have had an immediate answer.

“Ef.”

Aurana blinked, unsure if he was insane or trying to be funny as she pulled the coat over her shoulders. The mop-haired boy shifted his bi-pedaled weight uncomfortably.

She’d heard this, and repeated: “Elf?”

He heard the ‘l’, hesitated but realized this might be an advantage. ‘Elf’ over ‘Ef.’ “Yes. Elf. With an *l* like liquid. *Llllll*.” She stared; he continued talking. “It is longer, but I have been taught that I must truncate my name.”

She smirked. “Sure. But ‘Elf’ is a thing on this planet, a tiny and ridiculous creature. Do you not know?” His expression told her that he didn’t. “Perhaps El, then, might be a better fit. Just a suggestion, in case you don’t want too many to know you are *zilaa*.”

“Perhaps.” He—his engineered Human-appearing skin, rather—deepened crimson. “Pretty obvious?”

“Only just so,” she said, unsure that he picked up on the sarcasm. “I’ve read the book you mentioned, written by the Thhiyatkhoor General Shyridin? Spectacular storytelling, peppered with colorful myth. It is no wonder it reached the top of the Interstellar Bestseller list—pure stilled water.” He didn’t react so she continued, more firmly, “No Thhiyatkhoor should be trusted to write on the *Ks’ou*. Their two histories have been too violently entangled for too long.”

“I think that is exactly why they should be trusted with it.” He was stubborn, his words edged by a strange, soft kind of belligerence where he seemed to be arguing with no one but himself.

“Then would you tolerate a novel about the Thhiyatkhoor written by a Ks’ou?” she challenged.

He thought for a moment. “I could perhaps be bothered to read work by a Ks’ou sympathizer.” *What was he*? As she puzzled over his words, trying to find in her inventory a species to match, he caught her off guard, “For *zilaa*, you do a good job of holding humans accountable.”

“What makes you say that?” Aurana visibly sank into her scarf. She’d spoken a little too quickly, and was embarrassed to see El’s crooked smile, triumph she wanted to erase from his face with a quick blow. Ana mumbled a few words to her to calm her down.

“Most Humans find me pretty intolerable within the first minute, but you somehow have continued talking to me.”

She stared at him for a moment; Ana was roaring with laughter and she was trying to hold her Human’s face straight. “I find you decently intolerable,” she said, looking away so that he couldn’t see her face for her long braids. “My name is Aurana.”

“I thought it was Ana?”

Hmm. So he listened in class more than he let on. “Yes. That is my truncated name, as yours.” She glanced outside; the snow gave no sign of letting up. Visitor’s Hours would be over if she didn’t hurry. “I do have to go.”

El nodded. “Tomorrow, after my *Ecology of Alien Invasions* class, maybe we can talk about General Shyridin’s book together. I’d like to hear more of what you disliked about it.”

“Pffff,” there were many things about Humans that she liked. One of them was how you could make breathy sounds instead of using full words and still be understood; it was clear, however, by his blank expression that El wasn’t so well versed in that, either. No idioms, no sounds—how long had he been on this planet? She tugged on her scarf a bit so it hugged more tightly around her neck before she stepped out into the snow, “Sure. I have enough footnotes for a book of my own.”**Chapter 3**

Not all heroes die in a fantastic blaze of light.

Some die quite normally, with facility. Closed eyes and a simple, unperturbed decision to shift, to decay into the next mode of being.

Suddenly, in the middle of the night, from a lung that refuses to fill, or a heart that refuses to beat, organs consumed by the slow burn of existence.

Some die in the dark, alone. The hunter become the hunted.

As you know, when my father eventually died, he did not get to choose the manner of death. He was in fact not far from my position on Earth, and his proximity would haunt me for a long time to come. He did not die in a glorious battle; it was a small skirmish compared to a lifetime of excellent engagement in war. He would die, I had first imagined, by the hands of the creatures whom he had committed his life to destroying. A lucky shot from a large Ks’ou ship refusing to follow Thhiyatkhoor protocol. They returned fire before their own ship exploded, enemy eliminating enemy at once.

There was no great battle to be won. No hero story to tell. Not even an individual that I could use to avenge my father’s death.

Before the incident, my last words to my father were, “I disown you.”

And his to me, “It is a good thing, young Efyir, that our people do not allow sons to disown their fathers. But you will refer to me as General in lieu of *father* until you have regained sense.”

He ended transmission at that moment. The final exchange between father and son in our interminable battle for mutual respect.

In re-encountering his final transmission, I realized that I misjudged a great many things about him.

My only hope was that, before his death, he realized that he had misjudged me. That he lived in a different time than I did, and was indeed, against me in chronotopic resonance. His ally in the first war, the Human Kahti, the remainder of their particular era, seemed to think so.

I was temporarily expatriated to Earth as a punishment for disobedience. I was to learn from my father’s friend, Kahti, and her daughter—my sister-without-crown—about Human ways. My father found his time on Earth, just as his *ekhair* after whom I was named, necessary to his formation as Thhiyatkhoor. His philosophy was that one could not understand their own people until they began to understand another’s.

It took me many years to realize that his philosophy and my own were ultimately, at their ends, the same.

However, my father’s mistake, which I, eventually, would not to repeat, was this:

He refused to learn from our enemy, the Ks’ou.

—

“|If you think history flatters you,||” General Shyridin was saying, “||Then you are impaled on your history like a butterfly on a pin.[[6]](#footnote-6) You are incapable of seeing or changing yourself or the world. These words come from the Human James Baldwin in Earth Year they call 1965 Anno Domini, for them; these words which resonate with many species today. Do we find ourselves, us Thhiyatkhoor, impaled? Do we find us feeding ourselves the lies of inhumility? Or are we committed to dismantling ourselves from the bias of our speciesisms? In other words, how do we carry our history *within* us?||”

Efyir-Azayim sank lower in his chair as the General spoke.

“||Qwa, what is a *butterfly||*?” someone whispered loudly behind him.

“||An Earth insect with four, easily breakable wings. Don’t you pay attention in our *Anthropology of Carbon-Based Earthen Lifeforms* class?||” another hissed.

“||No. What does an Earth-bound *butterfly* have to do with *us?||*”

The class had been filled with an eager energy at first, but the more words were said, the more unfamiliar it seemed to the rest, who were sure to find these so very *Human*, so very un-Thhiyatkhoor-like. Some of their kind had begun to smirk, shown as diffused cloudbursts on their slate. Others began to whisper, both great- and few-branched individuals, glancing from Efyir back to the General, and passing along words with unkind eyes.

General Shyridin had a commanding physical presence. His head-*naghryoja*, well-curated, twisted and circular, sported twenty offshoots, unheard of for most Thhiyatkhoor; he was tall, and the scar he sported across his face, a near-fatal attack, was a testimony to his many years in war. It was odd for him to be appearing alone; but then again, not entirely out of place, for who he was as General.

His advisors had counseled him to stand without speaking, that by merely looking he could communicate more than were he were to open his mouth, but this was something he refused to do. He had much to say, and felt the drag of time that might keep him from saying it. So it was that the General continued speaking, boldly, as though not noticing the diminishing return of energy in each room he spoke in such as this one.

“||The Thhiyatkhoor have led excellent legacies, and won many wars. Yet we suffer from an arrogance which keeps us content, as though our political status in the universe, and ability to win wars, will continue indefinitely. I warn you—our approaches must change, we must consider the mediation of other successful species such as Humans, if we are to continue thriving.||”

There were embarrassed glances shot in Efyir’s direction, though no one, not even his closest *ekhair,* or non-blood-brother, would say a word to him or look at him in his black eyes directly. What Thhiyatkhoor invokes the means and manners of other species in order to conduct their work? The General, it was now agreed, had spent far too much time on Earth, away from his true species, to speak to his own people.

Per Thhiyatkhoor custom, no one would dare challenge the General with direct insult. But it could be done with subtlety, which the *lagoon-toiler* Taghyr was known for. When it came time for questions, he was the first in line. Efyir longed for the time when those people were not allowed at such events. But tides were changing, and to combat the universe’s diminishing opinion of Thhiyatkhoor, it was seen as a great gesture of inclusion to allow lagoon-toilers and war-born to discuss politics together, even if the toilers rarely had anything valuable to add to the discussion.

“||You maintain the Ks’ou are no longer a threat||,” Taghyr said. His crown was gangly, twisting in odd directions because it had not been well shaped. It was hard for Efyir to take him seriously, but others seemed to do so, which forced him to pay attention to this *toiler* with so few articulate words. “||Yet wasn’t it the final decision on Earth that keeps their species thriving to this day||?”

“||The Great Alliance decided collectively on this course of action,||” General Shyridin said, though it sounded rather meek at this point. “||Thhiyatkhouw, I assure you, I elected against it. There would have been nothing greater than to rid ourselves, finally, of the enduring infamy of the Ks’ou ignominy, and I remind you that it has been my life’s work to undo the damage of this Human-based decision.||”

“||What kind of Thiyatkhoor listens to the whims of Humans?||” Taghyr muttered. He had stepped back to say it away from the amplifier, so that the General would not hear his words but those in close proximity of the audience did, and it rippled in whispers throughout the rest of the crowd with a shockingly quick pace.

The General was of a dying era; older, but not considered wiser, his words were watered to soundbites of a mumbling ancient, relevant to only the forgotten, the near-buried, and the dead.

The session ended, they filed out, and each of what he once considered his own seemed to quicken or slow their pace aside Efyir. He stood outside the ceremony building wishing he had never gone, wishing against his own bloodline. Taghyr, in his grey-edged, light tan tunic, approached Efyir with several of his colleagues.

It was always Taghyr who seemed to speak; at least from what Efyir could remember. “||Ah, the Earth-born! Is that not true?||”

Efyir grit his teeth. Taghyr and he were close in history; they both had head-*naghryoja* with only two shoots from their branches. Because of this, they followed many of the same classes, though Taghyr could not attend the warrior sessions once their shared classes ended. Their destinies were different, but because they were parallel, Efyir had no choice but to speak:

“||It is no secret. My parents returned before I was of remembering age. And it was still a proper birth, in the woods.||”

“||Then perhaps you are wiser than your father, the Human-lover,||” Taghyr sneered. His entourage, none of them warriors, offered unkind sounds of encouragement.

“||His thesis is sound, even if it seems out of place,||” Efyir attempted.

“||Your elder father has reached the end of his prime. Sure, he fought his wars, and well, it seems. But simply fighting a war does not give one permission to speak. Perhaps he should let the present Thhiyatkhoor frame the current world for him. After all, his moment is over.||”

Efyir tried to leave; he truly did. But Taghyr was relentless, finding offense when the other turned his shoulder to him.

“||You haven’t the courage to meet a like in battle. Your father is dust, while you, you do not even know what ripening is.||”

Efyir stopped walking. His left arm extended as though automatic. A threat such as Taghyr’s could not go ignored if he could save any shred of his dignity among Thhiyatkhoor. He would not remember his arm blades meeting Taghyr’s face, but everyone present would tell of the satisfying shriek he gave when it happened.

—

Jacque, pronounced Jack-ee with the Human tongue, was Kahti's daughter. She looked like her mother but her hair, also very short, was completely black. She taught Efyir how to crouch in the hallway in such a way that he could hear the conversation on the OptiScreen without exposing himself. He would never have conceived of such a plan alone; he often defaulted to his own body, but was beginning to realize that stealth was a crucial advantage that Humans *sometimes* had, simply due to size and shape. As long as they were not in proximity to something that could sense as well as Thhiyatkhoor could, they would be fine.

Efyir’s shell made him appear as human. It was an organo-synthetic material, a *living fake* as some called it, that he put on and would make him seem human. Like anything organic it needed watering and care, which the PODS provided. He’d chosen this one because it was the same strain as his father’s, the same model cut from his father’s cloth: dark hair, and skin the color of *hethalu*.

They could have found an off-market shell that would fold them into something slightly smaller, but Kahti was discerning and would notice them attempting to blend in with the wall. She said often ‘She had been around the block’ when it came to folding, though cubes and their relation to knowledge were still a mystery, as many human idioms, to Efyir.

So they sat there listening in, only able to hear Kahti's replies but able to piece together what they could of her conversation with Efyir’s father, who was deliberately transmitting quietly.

“He’s fine,” she was saying. “He’ll be attending school on Monday. I’ve arranged everything; they will only know his *zilaa* status, nothing else.”

A pause. Then,

“No. Not this year, either. Shyr, you need to come here *yourself* if you want. Maybe you can help me—*damnit*, of course I’ve tried. He would recognize your voice and might react differently. He’s your *e—*.”

She cut off, suddenly. Efyir was thinking about the fact that she called him ‘Shyr’. No one called him that, ever. That Humans reduced names to such a tiny bit of sound was still a mystery to him.

“Yeah, I know it’s been awhile. But if it’s true that makes you and me the last of us. Doesn’t that matter to you?”

Silence.

“Well, he’s safe here. Do you want to talk to him? …Of course.” Kahti sighed rather loudly. “Right, I get it. No Human food. He’s under *my* care now, stop micro-managing.”

She ended the call abruptly, there was no wishing for success in battle as people often said goodbye to Efyir’s father—whether he was directly headed off to battle or not. The hallway creaked. Aunt Kahti—Efyir was instructed to call her that, because *Aunt* evoked *Auntie*—headed away from their position; to this he breathed a sigh of relief. She was grumbling under her breath, *“If I want to give him fucking Human food, I will give him fucking Human food.”*

When he was sure she had gone to her room, he spoke, “Your mother is very bold. I have never seen anyone speak so directly to my father that way.”

“Yeah,” Jacque said. She was a dark Human, not as dark as Kahti, but it struck Efyir how many shades Human skin could be. Thhiyatkhoor shades did not vary as widely. “You should see the way she talks to *my* dad.” As if to change the subject she hurried to add, “You shoulda burst in and demanded to speak to him.”

“No,” Efyir said. “I have nothing to say to him.” The ship had only dropped him off a few days ago, and he still smarted from the reality of being here, stuck, with no way of escaping unless his father granted it.

Jacque regarded him haughtily, crossing her arms. He could tell she was annoyed—she taught him much about how Humans conveyed emotions. But then she seemed to relax. Humans go through many emotions in a very fast amount of time; it was hard to keep up, sometimes. “You seemed a more dangerous *prob[[7]](#footnote-7)* when we were kids, bro.”

He could tell she was relieved, and he was slightly, too, that he was here. When they were younger, they saw each other perhaps once an Earth year. But that practice stopped, suddenly, when Efyir’s father decided not to return some time ago. While Efyir was not fond of Earth, and often complained of its bizarre practices, he liked Jacque, who had always understood him, beyond his own blood sister.

“I suppose there are worse reasons to be grounded here.” He shifted uncomfortably. His Human shell, the skin-like organic substance, was not the best thing he’d get to wear in his lifetime. In the house, he rarely wore it except when he was near Jacque and participated in her *trickery*, as she’d called it.

“Ready for school tomorrow, Silverbutt?”

He did not, however, miss this nickname at all. “Don’t call me that. And yes, I am prepared for the Human version of education.”

He did not enroll in any technology courses. Even though Humans knew of and had access to some Thhiyatkhoor technologies, their understanding of them was diminished. Mostly he was to take courses in history, on his father’s demand: “Learn about your past, so that you may understand your present.”

Efyir chose to take Anthropology of Carbon-Based Mammalian Lifeforms; he’d taken it on *Routhhe*, but the human version fascinated him because Humans continued to be attached to their own version of taxonomy. Though he burned with questions, his father’s adage forced him to be overwhelmingly quiet: “*Speak to no one else but those who resonate with your own.*”

His father often did not choose to be invisible. Years away from his home planet, from his people, had compelled him to be drawn towards visibility, and therefore to connection, with his people. Efyir’s host-Human on Earth, Aunt Kahti, on the other hand, seemed excessively the contrary to his father. She had withdrawn from Humans, had rebuilt her home in a swath of silence, underscored by nettles, vines, and weeds.

Both of them, heroes of Earth’s first alien colonial conquest vanquished by their past.

In a class arranged not much unlike Thhiyatkhoor lecture halls, he surveyed the room while his mind briefly drifted. He could count 3, maybe 4 *zilaa* like him. He was sure about the girl seated on the far left.

He’d met her in the woods once before, but decided not to pursue her attempted attack further. She wouldn’t recognize him now that he was in his shell, and he reminded himself as to how his host-aunt and host-sister constantly told him to “ease up”, that he need not invoke the disciplinary stance or military measures of his upbringing.

This *zilaa* girl seemed by her discourse to both critique and favor humans, and she’d said a few disturbingly *even* things about the greatest Thhiyatkhoor enemy, the Ks’ou. At this time, many aliens on Earth—except the Ks'ou, of course, sanctioned from shell technology and banned from Earth—could choose to take on a shell in place of their own biology and skin, to blend in more with Humans, as they preferred it.

For all their media and stories and imagination, when aliens *actually* came to Earth Humans proved themselves to be pretty uncomfortable about the whole ordeal, anticipating aliens without fully preparing for their difference. So they invented—Efyir had to admit, *cleverly*—the shell technology that would protect them from too much difference. The shells were like a human-appearing chamber, within which any alien (even if they were slightly larger than a human) were locked. It wasn’t hard to tell who was not-Human, as they all bore the same insignia, the *Z* imprinted on their neck. Still, it was difficult to tell who was *specifically* what. All *zilaa* could find a POD and eat or regenerate in private as their biology deemed fit, so Efyir could pretend to be any Earth-approved species he wanted to.

When Efyir met her, he appreciated her balance, because she chose to straddle the invisible between, the invisible that was calculated; specific. Her shade of skin shell was as dark as slate as many Thhiyatkhoor, dark like Kahti and Jacque, and her hair, black with small, tight, twisted spirals, was pulled into two spheres on each side of her head with a cascade descending over her neck and back.

She often wore earrings in the shapes of leaves, and always a scarf.

She was scribbling in a book in front of her while the teacher spoke as though distracted, yet, remarkably, each time the teacher asked a question she leapt to answer. Efyir was fascinated but hopelessly lost; his Thhiyatkhoor education lent itself to preparing for the research facility or the battleground, so in the center of the course he turned to her.

“Hello.”

She didn’t notice his words, so he waited to speak again. When she spoke up in class, he rose and responded with what he hoped would inspire a reaction: “Are you a Ks’ou sympathizer?”

This only seemed to anger her; though she noticed the Z-shaped pin grafted to the collar of the skin of his shell, she ignored him for the rest of class.

Her manner of speaking, in addition to the way she’d fought in the woods, marked her as warrior-class. Indeed, she sparred as evenly with her words as she had with her arms.

“I find you decently intolerable,” she would tell him later. This was perhaps progress. He would remember long cords of hair covering her face: bronze, round, discerning. “My name is Aurana.”

“One cannot ‘unsettle’ the ‘coloniality of power’ without a *redescription* of the human—

a redescription of the human outside of the terms of our present descriptive statement of the human.

The human: Man, and its overrepresentation.[[8]](#footnote-8)”

Sylvia Wynter

**Chapter 4 (Kelisfton)**

You have discovered inhabitable planets, at least, those inhabitable by your standards. You have wondered how long it will take to travel there. You have questioned why alien species who might live there have not reached out to you; made contact.

I assure you, we know who you are. But you were not interesting to the rest of the universe. Not until we arrived on your planet to judge your corporeal potential.

My Ks’ou name and tree were never important to me. I was known as Commander, and I would become *Ke’Ad*, the highest rankings for a Ks’ou. My tactics were precise and effective. My praxis, bent towards the Ks’ou Nation. No one could question my dedication, and that is why I survived as long as I did. If you must know, I was born Kelisfton, Salix Adrath Kinë, *kyôsta-fs[[9]](#footnote-9)*.

Yet as I said, that is not important.

I was one of the last born on the homeworld before births were relegated to ships in preparation for world conquests. This offered me a compromised and composed position that was unique: the homeworld was mine, though it was not quite home for Ks’ou. I remembered it. And because I did, I later imagined what life might have been had we been able to establish a true culture, as Humans, Thhiyatkhoor, and so many others did.

But this was not to be our case.

Instead, we were shuffled off into a war we had only begun to understand, started by others that we barely knew who came before us, and were sent to die for a cause that was not fully clear to us. All this was rather disorganized, I'll admit.

“War is the great equalizer,” was a phrase I would learn from a species I had not yet fully met. If I had heard the phrase at the time, I would not have understood. Equalizer of what? Ks'ou are deaf to outer-water creatures, though we easily hear one another. We are considered blind, but have our own way of seeing.

Ks'ou are brilliant.

Among ourselves, we were already equal, the only difference were those with ambition, as was I, and those without. We all had the same colonizing instinct.

Colonization was a great equalizer; *Settling*, a greater one. While some species wasted time colonizing one another to take ownership of resources, materials, land, and the like, Ks’ou had the greatest form of colonization of all. We were empowered with the ability to crawl into other creatures, extend ourselves into their furthest corners, and take over their bodies. We could harness their language, and, if skilled enough, colonize that creature mentally.

Ours was a complete and holistic colonization.

*Then*, war. Against other creatures, war was necessary to make us even. To put us on the plane so that other species would contend with us. We were born weak in body but mighty in spirit and intellect. We knew how to climb the ladder of master species, learning how to be adept through them, and subduing them when necessary. Our efforts would be in the name of making us present to the universe.

Let our being be known.

“Move in closer,” I ordered the lowly soldier manning the ship. This new planet, one I had recently discovered via the Thhiyatkhoor—our wretched enemy—was a risk, as it was likely that there would be Thhiyatkhoor on this planet as well, but one does not become Ke’Ad Designated anything by restraining from risks.

I’d settled the body of a *Besh*, a large, four-torsoed creature with broad shoulders, a jaw that clenched, and skin like interwoven shards of glass. The formidable giant was as easy to control as it was to ignore. Its pleadings for me to release it had long since been set aside to simple whimpers and minute speculations about its future. They were simple, unsophistocated creatures, and it was unfortunate that so many had been slaughtered in war, as they made wonderful, powerful warriors.

Not as good as the *Olyat-Koi*, however. The *Besh* bodies were strong, but minds weak. The *Olyat-Koi* excelled where the *Besh—and humans—*failed. For the *Olyat-Koi,* their flesh and spirit both intertwined in a dizzying display of ontological excellence, full of vast knowledge, and skilled in movement and grace. I would Settle one at all costs.

**Chapter 5**

“The human form has no rival.”

Ke’Ad spoke a certain way; Aurana could barely describe it. His voice was always smooth, always held the same cadence, though he appeared to them in many forms. His voice, whatever language he chose to speak in—Ks’Sassi, but occasionally English or Kiswahili or even other ‘human globe’ languages—was like the word Ana found pleasing to say: ||*daaoud*||. That is, until she learned what it meant. It was melodic, and calm, and if she could close her ears to understanding, she would dare call it pleasing.

“How much do you give to the human body you’ve Settled? To understand the ways it twists and thrives and lives out its being? Their form is undeniably beautiful. Every day, a gift. The control, the movement that humans possess in this air they breathe—can you imagine? All this that they have, and they dare to disdain it. And, a further insult: in water they are hardly capable, yet they do not need water to inundate them, as we do, to survive, so they waste it, on indulgences and play.

“They know not what they have. But we give them value. We give them meaning.”

When Ke’Ad spoke, everyone listened. Like an addict to the thing you knew would kill you, you could not turn away. You found his words, his rhetoric, his cadence, pleasing and necessary. So your ears turned toward him, despite the lies.

*{ ||I understand why my people love him.|| }*

She did not think loud often, but this, Ana heard. She growled back between their thoughts,

{ *Your* people? Can you even call them that? }

NeVarr, their *KLF* supervisor and apartment-mate, made a sudden noise, a blend of coughing and spitting, which interrupted their discussion before it turned to a heated argument. He couldn’t hear them, of course. Rather, he was reacting to Ke’Ad’s speech, to the lies which now were wound up as a festering wound dressed in a gilded bow. Ana appreciated this quiet disrespect to Ke’Ad’s words. NeVarr identified as Salix Seth Anir, *dostôn-fs[[10]](#footnote-10)*. Aurana didn’t hold this against him. His Human, James, towered over them. In the dimly lit, crowded room, his dusky hair and skin the color of buckeyes helped him blend in. If it weren’t for the reflection of the light from the front of the room bouncing off his glasses, they wouldn’t know he was even there.

Ke’Ad’s image flickered. Before the mass of hundreds of Ks’ou Settlers, he stood on a podium, clean-shaven and spectrum-based. For obvious security reasons, he never appeared in person to the lower ranks. In *imago-holo*, his signification would be projected, never fully conveyed as the him who was real, though he feigned well. Aurana dreamed of the day she could stand in his presence: Ana, in return, shared her dreams of how she would use that opportunity to kill him.

“*Philanthropy.* A Human Standard English word with roots in the dead language called Greek. It means, human-loving. And though we despise these creatures for the ways they waste their being, is it not wise to call our enterprise of giving them meaning *philanthropy*? For they do not know what they have. Until, that is, we Settle them, and show them what it is *to be*.”

At these words, the crowd erupted in an enthusiastic roar. NeVarr and Aurana had attended enough of these to know when to be ready: they had to fake it as best they could, their half-hearted cries lost in the drown of those adherent to Ke’Ad’s nauseating claims. And there were opportunities elsewhere: a few feet away from NeVarr’s right side was a *Settled* in a bright-haired human who was *not* enthusiastically screaming. In fact, in the corner of her eye Aurana could see the human’s body standing very still, looking pale, semi-frozen in space.

And then, the familiar twitch.

Aurana waited as the crowed’s roar was calmed with a gesture from Ke’Ad. She watched closely, until it happened again. Her eyes caught NeVarr’s—he’d noticed, too.

They waited until the crowd fell completely quiet, attentive to Ke’Ad’s continued speech. Quietly, NeVarr shifted closer to the Settled young girl, leaning over to whisper, “Are you having difficulty controlling your host, colleague?” He said it flatly, knowing the music, and the difference between cadence and concrete.

The Settled twitched once more, her mouth forming into an awkward grimace. Her lips pursed; drew down; pursed again, until the Ks’ou seemed to manage to take control again.

“I’m fine,” it growled.

Then, the human took control of her own hand and slapped herself in the face.

The Ks’ou reacted strongly against this rebellion, drawing the human’s hand down while every piece of exposed skin turned bright red. The Ks’ou tried to hide her embarrassment by looking straight at NeVarr, but the fear and trembling was apparent in the eyes that the human still seemed to control.

“*Kwa*, you haven’t taken your prelims, yet,” NeVarr whispered to the Ks’ou. “Don’t worry, you will learn fully settle your human. I struggled in the beginning, too. Let me tell you of some tricks before Ke’Ad’s higher forces learn of your weakness. But,” he glanced hurriedly over his shoulders; caught eyes with Aurana; returned to lock eyes with this inadequate Ks’ou, “Let us do it out of sight of the others.”

The Ks’ou regarded him with cold human blue eyes. Finally it muttered a, “M-my regards, colleague. I just need to learn which synapses to follow, it should be quick.”

“When are your examinations?”

“In a few weeks.” The desperation was palpable.

They disappeared behind a crowd of others listening intently to Ke’Ad’s speech. Ke’Ad spoke with convincing velocity, now. The Human Call, he framed it. The human desire for connection. Purpose. Ks’ou would give it to them. Humans had tried, and failed, to build societies that could sustain their differences. Ks’ou would correct these.

After a few minutes Aurana led her human Ana’s body through the crowd, over the arch, past a series of *hethalu* clones and finally into the isolated space that she and NeVarr had agreed upon beforehand. NeVarr was quietly instructing the Ks’ou in *Master Settler* techniques, though he had little experience of his own. The Ks’ou listened intently, completely unaware of the impending danger.

A moment in darkness. The helmet went on.

She leapt out towards the both of them. NeVarr reacted quickly, trying to feign reaching for his weapon, but even in pretending, Aurana was faster and kicked it deftly out of his hands. With her fist, she sent a blow designed only to appear to be devastating. His neck twisted strangely and he crumbled in the corner of the room, as planned.

To the Ks’ou Settler she dealt true blows, an easy fight for a human with no experience of violence. A few punches into the gut, and then a sweeping of the legs to send her back-to-floor. She was nearly bored, until a gentle reminder from her human that this moment was not supposed to be interesting.

She grabbed the human’s shirt, pulled her closer to the mask so she could see her reflection. The surprise threw the Ks’ou Settler off; the human, it seemed—one could never be sure—took over, her eyes transfixed on this helmeted person who stood before her.

“You… you, saved me,” she breathed. “I can speak again.”

“Then choose your next words wisely, human,” Aurana hissed. “Would you rather die, or *wait* to be set free?”

There was no hesitation. “Kill it. Please kill this thing in my head. Even if it kills me.” This begging was so desperate it was almost intolerable.

“It certainly will.”

Her eyes widened and brightened. “Yes. Set me free.”

Ana obliged without twitching, “By your command.” The weapon would jolt her heart until it stopped completely. The human trembled; the cyan of her Ks’ou seemed to bleed from the human’s eyes; it stilled and was covered by an unnatural glaze that dressed only the dead.

Ana/Aurana turned to NeVarr, who had stood from his feigned injured position and watched them quietly; they didn’t know how long. He turned his head once the empty human body began to eject its internal fluids.

“Slow and steady wins the race,” NeVarr—or James?—muttered.

“Do you ever wonder why the KLF tasks you with something so mundane as killing the weakest of Ks’ou?” Aurana asked, once Ana had sufficiently wiped the blood off her gloves on the now muddy ground. He shook his head; she continued: “It doesn’t make sense, does it? Why target those that can barely control their Settled, what should be the most *basic* of strengths of any Ks’ou?”

The internal shuddering was nearly simultaneous with NeVarr’s. *Strength?* he wanted to say, but knew from the ways her eyes seemed to go blank that Ana was taking care of this careless use of words. Aurana had a habit of this.

“The basic… the *destructive* power of the Ks’ou,” she mumbled, evidently duly chastised. “Still. You’re not doing warrior work—you know that, right?”

“What am I, then?” he growled, attaching his weapon to his hoist and heading out of the opposite corner before anyone would discover them. They went back into the swarm of people; Ke’Ad’s speech was over, but there was always the heated excitement after, Ks’ou speculating a swift and easy closure to what they considered a petty civil war, and the thrill of the ultimate goal, what Ks’ou had never accomplished before: the complete and totalizing colonization of humans.

“You’re just a messenger,” Aurana said. She had to speak a little more loudly, now, before their voices were lost in the drone of other conversations.

“A fine thing for a sub-aspirant to tell her supervisor.”

She carried on, unbothered by his jab. “The KLF will spare no one, not even the weakest, of the Nation. You’re not here to make balance out of numbers. The Nation far outweighs the KLF and always will.”

“We’re ok with *just* being the messenger. We don’t want to be warriors,” NeVarr said, evenly. “We don’t want to be like you, or Ana. James and I like to sleep at night, with our conscience.”

But Aurana regarded him haughtily. “I suppose your conscience allows you to participate in death indirectly. I suppose when it’s easier, it’s not really killing, is it?”

NeVarr did not waver. His sharpness, despite his shyness, was something Aurana always admired about her Ks’ou companion: “I suppose when it’s not your body, but your human, doing the death work, it’s not really killing, is it?”

—

{ They all look very much alike, } Aurana was reassuring her human. { Even if we were to see his true form, it would be hard to tell. }

{ Do you think he’s the one from the woods? }

{ It doesn’t matter. We’ve figured out his species, at least. Just listen to how he practically spits when he says Ks’ou. And he can’t stop staring at *trees.* }

The revelation—that *he* was of the species most foundationally enemy to her own—should have bothered her more than it did. She was used to species, many species; this was nothing more than an addendum to a rivalry so aged that it seemed nearly petty?

Of course it wasn’t *petty.* It was because of Thhiyatkhoor that Ks’ou leaned so desperately on the lives of others, to the detriment of those species. A deep and aging conflict, older than anything Aurana had in the archive.

It didn’t seem so with El. Like her, he seemed both inscribed in and on the margins of the interminable war between their species.

El, in his human suit, was seated politely in front of them, watching as Aurana ate the sandwich that NeVarr had been kind enough to pack them for lunch. His hands were folded calmly in front of him but his eyes betrayed a certain jealousy. “You were incorrect, yesterday, in class,” he blathered, as though talking would distract him. “To compare the Human theft of technology with what the Ks’ou did is a poor maneuver.”

“Was it?” It was true that he had a tendency to piss Humans off—Ana was already infuriated by his manner of speech, while Aurana chose instead to be amused, wondering how quickly he would back himself into a corner.

“The Ks’ou have had a long history of using technology to advance political gain, enslave species, and advance themselves in war. The Humans— ”

“The *Humans* abused Thhiyatkhoor technology in order to get *money*, their own invention that—no surprise—will only aid their development of war technology.” She was even more sure, now, that he was Thhiyatkhoor; his arrogance was remarkable. She put the sandwich down, the taste of staleness spreading throughout the tongue of her human.

She should have been repulsed, but in truth, she was eager. It had been a long time since she had battled a Thhiyatkhoor directly, and she was hoping to finally have answers to questions that her kind would never allow her to ask.

“Humans have yet to use such technology for a mass-infestation enterprise as the Ks’ou did, not long ago.”

“*Yet*. But we know that Humans know colonization and nationhood well. Just wait. *By the way*. You sound like a textbook,” she shot. “An old, outdated textbook that won’t be republished anytime soon.”

He winced; she prepared to leave.

{ Thhiyatkhoor do not tolerate criticisms of their species. } Aurana explained to Ana. { We should— }

Yet to their collective surprise a smile spread across his olive face. A broad, awkward smile but a smile nonetheless.

“You are right,” he said. “I was quoting the General, and he is often like an old textbook. I am not sure about your comparison of Ks’ou with Humans, but I think you make a good point.”

She was stunned. She glared at him suspiciously. “Then why did you argue with me?”

He looked at her and then began to tug on his shirt awkwardly, unashamedly revealing the ‘Z’ shaped tattoo, visible just beneath the skin between the end of his jaw and ear—Humans are very good at marking things *other*. She was thankful for her scarf so he could not see that she had no such tattoo, though she had self-identified as *zilaa*. Indeed, she was—just not the legal kind. She wondered briefly if the shell he was wearing was comfortable.

“My species thrives on combat. I am not particularly good in direct physical combat, so I thought I would try verbal combat. It seems I am not particularly good at that, either.”

She looked at him nearly in disbelief. Then said, “Well, you didn’t fare so terribly. And… it’s nice to argue with someone, for once. Most Humans stare, or roll their eyes, when I speak.”

“Humans can roll their eyes? How does that work?”

A hard, blank stare was most certainly warranted, here. “Listen, I take a martial arts class at the studio downtown. Fighting is good exercise for learning to move as a Human. You learn balance and control… You should join me.”

{ Tell him he walks like a puppy with a broken leg, } Ana suggested. Her metaphors were useful—Aurana was still learning how to create these—but she decided she had insulted him enough for the day.

This was a good proposition to him. He tilted his head. “What are you?”

She feigned offense. “That’s a rude question.”

His human shell, so good at translating his own Thhiyatkhoor physical reactions, reddened. “I mean, what species?”

“Still rude,” she pointed a finger at his ‘*z’* symbol. “Would you like me to ask you what you are?”

He frowned. “No. I suppose not.”

“Then a challenge: we can guess each other’s.” She tried to hide the triumphant smile at having already guessed his. Ana was scolding her for some reason but she was having too much fun to listen closely. She looked at the time; NeVarr/James would be away at music class for the rest of the day. “Any more classes, today, El?”

He didn’t even glance at his schedule. “None. But, uh…” he reddened. “I am *very* hungry. I have to go…” He glanced at her earrings. No question. Species confirmed.

{ Thhiyatkhoor and their eating habits, } she grumbled to Ana. { You have yet to witness the devastation they lay upon trees. }

{ Not all of us can go days without eating. You sure as hell weren’t complaining about that sandwich you had on my behalf. }

Aurana nearly laughed out loud. { Have you ever directly tasted manufactured syntrophic cultures? }

{ Only when I fell into the lagoon once, } Ana shuddered mentally. { It tastes nothing like kombucha. }

{ Yeah, the Nation’s been promising cranberry-flavored for awhile now, but I guess they’re too busy colonizing humans to make much progress on that. }

{ Jeez, Aurana, I never know when you’re *actually* joking or if Ks’ou are just that humorless to begin with. }

Aurana smiled inwardly and didn’t answer. To El, who was used to her long, thoughtful pauses by now, she said, “Sure, there’s a POD right over there. This sandwich has sated me; I can wait. Then we can take a walk to the studio and argue about colonialism some more.”

He left behind his backpack to go to the POD which was designated for extra-terrestrial feeding. He did not know as she did that the PODs were in fact Ks’ou inventions, where they could order fermented drink in secret if one knew the right phrase. By making it open to all earth-approved alien species, they circumvented the need for excessive regulation.

He had left his copy of *On the Ks’ou Colonizers: Impossible Discourse* on the table. She ventured a peek, and barely made it past the first intentionally blank page. Writing in a lovely script was brushed across it, taking her only moments to decipher. His version was written in *Endaithsu*, and she wasn’t supposed to be able to read it.

“||*Endaithsu: For E & A*||,” it read. “||*May impossible discourse inspire further discourse.*||”

She spent the half hour that he was gone mulling over these words and treading through the pages to see what sorts of things he’d highlighted. When she saw him returning, she quietly slipped the book back to his side of the table and pretended that she’d been reading her own.

—

NeVarr’s moss-colored eyes—or rather James’ eyes, managed by NeVarr—surveyed her for a moment. He opened his mouth, closed it, and opened it again. He adjusted his human’s glasses, which he often did when he was about to get upset.

Finally, in a voice surprisingly calm, he said “Have you lost your mind?”

She smiled widely. “Not at all, Ana will confirm that my mind is *perfectly* intact.”

“You cannot pretend to befriend a Thhiyatkhoor, Aurana. I don’t care how clever you think you are, he is going to find out and then you are going to get us killed.”

“I’m not *pretending.*”

“Ah. So he knows what you are?” NeVarr’s eyes were knowing, if not laughing.

She bit her lip in a moment of stubborn silence. “He’s completely aloof. But at least he knows more about General Shyridin than any of these stupid history books and even that *l’tabf[[11]](#footnote-11)* I retrieved.”

Ana took over—that was how they arranged their control, and it was *her* body after all—and made the ‘H’ in sign language so NeVarr would know. “Aurana just wants someone who will entertain her theories about Human privilege. He actually argued with her about human-on-human colonialism for over an *hour*. It was disgusting.”

But he was not amused. “Ana, please convince Aurana that this is too dangerous. What good will it do? Is she that desperate to be promoted to Aspirant?”

Aurana had been stuck at sub-aspirant for a long time, now, longer than exceeded her patience. To Ana, didn’t seem fair that NeVarr, who was never fully on board with the KLF’s violent means of dealing with the Nation, was ranked at Ensign. But they knew that NeVarr’s supervisor, unknown to them both, would promote them when they’d proven themselves.

{ That’s a good point! I bet they’d be *very* interested in El. }

Aurana didn’t respond, but her reaction resonated from her to her human. At the moment, the tiny alarm in their helmets sounded. It was time to head up.

Aurana took back over Ana’s body and held up the black fencing mask they had modified. It now contained a shaded visor for better visibility and a communication device, like a microphone for when they were separated by a great distance. Both she and NeVarr were dressed in black and standing in front of one of the boulders that separated the rest of the cave from the Ks'ou Deep. It lead to the lagoon and trees that were supposed to have been dismantled years ago, following the treaty that, according to Aurana, would have spelled the end for the Ks'ou species. “Too dangerous? And this isn’t?”

He sighed, exasperated, knowing that Aurana was not to be deterred when she became this persistent.

“||*Kwa[[12]](#footnote-12)*, zs’wythaou sed[[13]](#footnote-13)||, Aurana,” he said, shaking his head. He hoisted himself up the side of the cave, and deftly scaled the wall.

“Keep your energy. No one engages in *resistance* while asleep. This is why Ana encourages us to *stay woke*,” she called up, placing the mask over her head and drawing her weapon.

{ What? That *not* what that means, } Ana complained, but Aurana wasn’t listening. She followed after NeVarr on the wall until they reached the top; a crevice they’d discovered not just last week, just wide enough to peak their faces through, and fit a weapon that could be positioned at ideal angles, and not much more. They surveyed the enclave full of Settlers, busying themselves with the new Nation's work. With a small laser, NeVarr tagged and identified the targets.

There was a brief series of illuminations from the far corner. The signal. Aurana pointed her gun and shot out the series of overhead lights; the room descended in brief confusion. It would only last a moment before the emergency lights were triggered, but it was perfectly effective; NeVarr pointed his own weapon at the target, measuring the distance between the two. A series of quick fires—he missed the shot in between—and the Settlers, and their Humans, were down.

—

Once upon a time…

…there was a type of Ks’ou tree, called *hethalu*.

(Ana does not like the story of *hethalu* in the format of her people’s stories for children. But Aurana finds it fitting, because it was so long ago, no one knew how real it was by direct experience.

Also, for Ks’ou, anything before one’s first kill is considered childhood. Across the length of time, from when Ks’ou could access *hethalu* to when they could not, any story on Routhhe was fit for a story of childhood for the species.)

*Hethalu* were very beautiful. Unlike many Earth trees, these were the only trees found on *kyôsta* that were rooted in lagoons. The base of the structures were bright and vine-like; they stretched out into the depth of the warm waters. Deeper, deeper in these waters lived the Ks’ou. As aquatic creatures, the Ks’ou avoided the water’s surface; the roots provided all that they needed, serving as vents from which expunged cultures that the Ks’ou fed on.

The Ks’ou could sense vibrations; when they approached the roots to feed, or touched the roots with their tendrils, their senses could shoot through, up through the trunk of the tree, to the branches, and *up there* was effervescence: life. Something strummed the branches, plucked the leaves, kept the tree thriving so that its roots grew stronger, deeper.

The Ks’ou and the Thhiyatkhoor once shared a *kyôsta.* Routhhe*.*

The Thhiyatkhoor fed on the leaves of the trees, the parts that the Ks’ou could not see but could sense through its roots. They used its branches to leap across tree to tree as play, would discourse on it, sleep on it. They had land, of course, but the trees were their home. They would look down and be struck at the sight of glowing-blue water, the blue that must have been the roots and something else, something simple; these were a pleasing sight, but of no further interest because the moving blue was not food—

And it did not discourse.

Aurana would tell Ana this, but the story would fade from telling because there was no telling that would soothe the bitter sight. Humans would not sit in the branches of these Ks’ou-cloned trees, they would not leap to other trees nor would they find comfort in the shade of a ripe sun. Humans would have to hold their breath, partially hung beneath tree branches drooping from a weight it was never made to bear. Humans would be a strange and bitter crop, held by the neck with electrified cords, as they waited in limbo for their assigned Ks’ou to complete its feeding and return to control their bodies.

The Ks’ou retrieved many of their ideas from their Humans, after all.

There are no words a settler can give to a host to explain or comfort the sight of the Ks’ou Deep. What would such explanation be, exactly?

Aurana would see through her Humans’ eyes all the twisted, bulging ugliness of the scene. And then she would have no choice but to draw up close, because it was either feed or die, and pull the cord around her Human’s neck, and hold it with both hands so that there was slack and Ana would not choke. Aurana would then detach, sliding slowly from her brain by pulling her arms out, billions of threads, pulling back until she was on her host’s neck and could leap out, blind, into the waiting pool below. The cord was rigged so that the Human’s hands were connected by currents; they could not let go even if they wanted to, and many of them wanted to: let go completely of the slack and all that bound them to the tree.

The fermented drink that humans called Kombucha kept Aurana alive, but only just; she could last a month with it yet once a week, *at least*, was required by the Nation to check in by the routine, and story failed, and words failed, and they would arrive in silence except for the identifier she had to mutter at the entrance, “Aurrin, Salix Derroush, *kyôsta-fs.”* Then Aurana would obtain means to live for a bit longer; they would exit without speaking, a din that often lasted hours after, the perpetual bondage of anger and silence.

—

A Brief History of Human Colonization

“There’s a regrettable tendency for colonialism to be one of the monolithic kind of constructs… as if it were one thing and universally operated in the same kind of way… There’s all the world of difference between what we might call a ‘franchise colonial formation’ such as classically the Dutch East Indies and British India, and the kind of social situation that I describe as settler colonial as one would find in Australia or the United States or Palestine.” [[14]](#footnote-14)

The Ks’ou invasion of Earth has created yet another new kind of colonization: one where the Ks’ou colonizers needed the bodies of Humans as product and production. The colonizers needed Humans as both physical objects to control and as means to produce more physical objects of control. Ks’ou did not need Human ‘stuff’ as some colonizers would have it—human resources were mediocre at best against the demands of interstellar materials. And we did not need to convince Humans that Ks’ou ways were inherently better than their ways—though this did ease control, it was not necessary to their form of colonization. Ks’ou needed, first and foremost, bodies, to exist in air, doing the things that water-born Ks’ou could not do.

During the Second invasion on Earth, a new endeavor was pursued: the production of humans from birth already bound by a Ks’ou. These humans would no longer know or understand that they are beings apart, and thus not only easily controlled, but bodies without true minds to wrestle with. This was called the *Callixte* project.

The problem:

This is the very situation Sartre warned against when he wrote about the ‘absurdity of colonization’: it is soundless to create the very situation in which one no longer colonizes, but merely exists—it is to undermine the power enforced from one more powerful against another. And yet the Ks’ou Nation marches so that, one day, every human might never know that they have ontology—that they have being—without the Ks’ou.

Ks’ou don’t seek to drive the Natives out, as Wolfe defines settler colonialism. Ks’ou need the bodies to remain here and to keep producing more bodies; the simplicity of this makes humans, from the point of view of most Ks’ou, mere vessels towards others’ ends—towards other wars. Revenge on Thhiyatkhoor. Interstellar colonization.

The outcome for natives is the same as in human settler colonial contexts: dispossession of their minds, and ultimately, their sense of their own physicality.

It is minds the Ks’ou want to colonize, via the body. An irreparably bound and universal state.

**Chapter 5\***

The only visible trace of her Southern heritage were the katydid earrings Ana wore on the regular, and this was because of the night she met the one she now called Aurana.

She was still under settlement from her previous Ks’ou, and had tried to wrestle control of her body and take her own life. Then: the katydid, who leapt into the very hand that was about to wrestle control of the weapon, and with it, hesitation. Ana was holding her palm—yes, *her* palm—and at once she could sense the insect as she could sense the murderous Ks’ou trying to regain control. A hand, open, wide, yet the creature could not move it, nor could she, for the winged creature inside it.

She would remember a poem her sister loved, from Nikki Giovanni, who shared their birthplace. Éloise always talked about how *they all should be ashamed to die[[15]](#footnote-15), that between misery and ecstasy, were the songs that katydids sung.*

*Ana would not die that night.*

*That night, the murderous Ks’ou would.*

*Before arriving at Veroia University, Ana had managed to rid herself of her accent and any references she could to erase the Southern roots that seemed more like strangling vines. She talked about jazz instead of bluegrass, the guitar instead of the banjo, oatmeal instead of grits, baguettes instead of biscuits. It was never yes, ma’am or sir, but simply ‘yes,’ full stop. She never talked about copperheads or bobcats screaming, and could fit right in if she complained about how the hovertrains were always seconds too early or late.*

*When they were children, their parents would take them on long walks. The hover paths were new, then, lining the sky in what to a child’s eyes were fantastic streaks of orange and blue. The Josephs were saving up so that they, too, could own a compatible vehicle. As it were, anything that was not a hover vehicle was banned, so the outdated four-wheeler they had worked for half a decade to buy—her father refused to grapple with monetary slavery like interest—was rapidly obsolete. They could exchange it with the government for credit towards a compatible hover car, but Thomas Joseph would furiously claim that he would die rather than give the government his hard earned work, and the rant would last until Ana’s mother, Éloisine, would quietly remind him that as a professor he was a government employee. They—Thomas, Éloisine, Éloise, and Ana— would laugh, because it never got old, this broken record exchange that kept them grounded.*

*On their walks they would always pass by the old cotton fields; these, too, were forgotten, now that more sustainable crops could be manufactured from neighboring galaxies, and so they grew wild like weeds, blood-red branches like thorns and white, unnatural puffs peaking out like billions of small eyes without irises. Ana and Éloise would pick them and throw them in the air like dispersed clouds until their mother told them to quit fooling around. Their father would joke that if they were so busy working, they may as well make some money doing it, which would receive a harsh, unkind glare from their mother, for what reason they did not at that time know.*

*Ana recognized that the shudder then was the same shudder now; even though Aurana, as her Ks’ou, was the closest she had been to anyone since Éloise, it was still the same copper taste would be on her tongue when she entered the Ks’ou Deep, the same haze that seemed to cloud her eyes, and the unnerving feeling of being watched by angry ancestors past.*

*—*

*Who am I, by my species?*

{ So, what do I do again? }

{ You go say hello. }

{ And then what? }

{ I don’t know. Ask him about his day. }

{ That is mundane. All he has to answer is ‘fine.’ }

{ Listen, do you want El to be your friend or not? This is what friends do. Ask about the mundane things first. The deeper comes naturally. }

Aurana did not agree, but she took in a deep breath via her human and compelled their bodies forward anyway. Ana had had many friends—before, at least, Ks’ou took over—and so was apparently an expert in this area. Aurana sensed there was some ambiguity in the work that it took to become a “friend” in human terms, but did not complain, because she knew no better.

There is no word for *friend* in the Ks’ou language. This does not mean that the concept doesn’t exist; it does—in the context of war. NeVarr, for example, was her *assoud adftua adaoud[[16]](#footnote-16)*, because they hadn’t extensively battled in war together. He knew her, but without the trust in combat.

She didn’t have an *assoud ftua daoud[[17]](#footnote-17)*. El would perhaps qualify once the war on Earth got going, but could the word be used that way?

El would certainly have only one word for her once he discovered what she was: Thhiyatkhoor did not tolerate enemies; Ks’ou did not tolerate allies.

For the time, El, not knowing her species, and she only having recently guessed his, would not yet qualify for the human term ‘friend’. Yet she spotted him in the cafeteria on a day where they had not arranged to meet, and her human insisted that it was perfectly appropriate to engage in none other than mild conversation.

Having friends, Aurana discovered, took an enormous amount of energy—a different kind of energy than having an enemy. Time with friends, for example, was not always usefully spent.

She did as her human instructed, heading over to where he stood in a corner reserved for artifacts, and when they arrived at his side, waited for him to glance over. He was standing and staring deep into a screen, his hands moving quickly over a controller and some buttons in a very outdated digital simulation. *pew. pew. sizzle. pew. pewwwwww! sizzle.*

“Hello,” she insisted.

*pew. pew. pew.*

He grunted his response, not bothering to part lips to respond in kind.

She waited a moment before offering another greeting. This was also met in silence.

Curious, she finally looked over at what he was playing, her human’s stomach wrenching in response. The game was called *Decolonize Earth!*

It was most certainly not about decolonization.

Commonly known as a ‘shooting’ game, both humans and non-Earth *zilaa* of various species would walk aimlessly across various Earth settings, often those whose meaningful geographies were recognizable by monuments, all key places of Ks’ou invasion in the first war: a monument to Ghandi; another named Rhodes; still another to Lincoln. From around the monuments they came: blue, wavy-armed Ks’ou, crawling unfathomably fast to settle the bodies of the various species. The shooter would gain a few points for killing Ks’ou before they overtook their prey, and double or triple that for killing it once it was Settled by a Ks’ou.

Clearly the mundane would have to wait.

She leaned back, then said, “What if *I* were one of those species you had to kill in that game?”

He did not respond, but his movements over the controls weakened, slightly. It was then that she noticed the small, metal hook hung around his neck, curved in such a way that is almost looked like a human eye, which shook as he did, angrily, as soon as the melodic din of failure issued from the machine.

“Are you happy?” he asked crossly. “My number falls short of quadrupling the high score.”

“So *becoming* of a warrior class,” she muttered, then nodded towards the game. “That is foolish, what you are playing. Marketable decolonization at its finest. Although, I imagine someone from your stature would not care for such waste as funds.”

He growled. “You aren’t supposed to be talking to me.” He pointed to the hook, what humans referred to as a *t-mwan,* and stared directly at her.

But she ignored these words. Instead, she focused on his game. “Of course. You have no problem shooting at humans, even digital ones,” she gestured rudely towards the machine. “How long have you been standing here? Did you miss *all* of your classes today?”

“Not all of them.” He nodded towards his backpack on the floor. A small, digital packet sat next to it, so dark blue that it was nearly black, with script in white ink scrawled across it, moving like a piece of seaweed in a wave. At the top was a clear and very red ‘2/20’. As she picked it up she could hear him illuminate the game once again. Out of precaution, though he was distracted she activated the translation mode, since she wasn’t supposed to be able to read Thhiyatkhoor script, the complex motions of lines against motion were supposed to be too difficult. It was easy to read quickly—as quickly as one could with the manufactured sound of shooting and tiny screams as background music.

“Could you stop playing that?” She wasn’t just cross at his game playing. The essay he’d apparently written was abysmal, perhaps not even warranting the few points it gained.

“Why?”

“Where should I begin?” she snapped, desiring deeply to punch him for his ignorance. “It’s called *Decolonize Earth!* but the name is nothing more than an excuse to kill non-human creatures. You should be offended. Plus, *those*,” she gestured towards the worst offenders of all, tiny puffy creatures called *Tribbles,* imaginaries of human minds, multiplying in ridiculous numbers on the screen, being taken over by the wiggly Ks’ou. On this level, the Ks’ou also multiplied at alarming rates to match the greatly numbered Tribble confederation; once shot, they exploded in an unlikely burst of turquoise blood. “We don’t even—” she, catching her tongue at the last minute, breathed deeply and started again. “We don’t even have data about Ks’ou mating techniques.” El eyed her. “*Not that we would want to.*”

He sighed and pulled away from the game, to her relief. Nodded at the packet now in her arms. “Grades are the height of human inanity.”

“Agreed. Disputes should be held over combat, not letters.”

He looked at her directly for the first time that day, the look of anxiety seeming to drain from his face. “I don’t understand. That essay should have been the easiest for me. *Space Traders*. No alien species cares about a bunch of naked humans.” He even thumbed the hook around his neck out of anxiety. “You really shouldn’t be talking to me.”

She brushed him off. She had *Space Traders* both memorized and archived; it was a favorite of Ana’s, and a good one for understanding humans. Stunned a bit that El hadn’t understood this, she began to reread his essay response briefly. “Ah… but what about the T’tuu≈ua[[18]](#footnote-18)? You don’t think they would *willingly* enslave humans, naked or not?” His lips pinched firmly in a way that told her she was right. The T’tuu≈ua were a species known for brutal and universally illegal enslavement practices. “You missed the point of the story entirely. It’s not about the alien perspective—*your* perspective. It’s about black humans in the *previously* united State of America.”

“I barely know anything about this,” he murmured, but something about the way he reddened told her that he knew that he should have known more than he did.

“Really? Fine. Let’s go to the Uni archives, then. There are a ton of documents.” The humans’ archives were a rich, quiet, desolate place. Aurana enjoyed going there so she could file the human archives into theirs.

El was not so convinced. “It’s too late,” he murmured. “Every failure on Earth is reported immediately to…” he paused and looked at her warily. Then slammed his fist on the console of that insolent game he was playing. “I just want to go home!”

*“kyôsta*,” she said, cooly. It was a safe word, one that existed even in *Izlaa*, the language that was being pushed as the language to bind all species in the Universal Forum.

He eyed her again. “Yes. *kyôsta*.”

It was not lost on her that they both had, at root, the same problem. Ks’ou no longer had any home to claim, so they busied themselves serving the Nation to claim the homes of others. She’d be lying if she said she pitied El, who, as Thhiyatkhoor, at least had a home to go to.

A home that used to be shared between their species.

But, there was an advantage to sending this Thhiyatkhoor home. And one, namely, was that if he discovered that Ks’ou were inhabiting Earth, he would by law have to engage them in a new war. The first was so devastating, it was hard to imagine what the second would look like. As much as he made for interesting discourse, it would be far less complicated if he weren’t here at all. The Ks’ou Liberation Front would have to take care of this war for the humans, without any other species meddling.

“Well,” she said, pulling out her tablet to retrieve the reading[[19]](#footnote-19). “Let’s get you home, then.”

“Why are you helping me?” his words were almost desperate; his eyes translated the same.

She eyed the *t-mwan* around his neck. “What word? Or words?”

“What?” he looked confused until he followed her gaze to the *t-mwan*. “Oh, it wasn’t even a good one. When I saw my grade I just cursed a bit. Couldn’t tell you which, though—that would give my species away.”

*Too late*. But she gently nodded anyway as they set to work.

They would pour over his essay for the better half of the hour before they were interrupted. El, once he finally displaced himself and his hubris, had begun to ask important questions after the slight shift, when Aurana proposed they looked at the story another way. “Let’s say, hypothetically, that Ks’ou return.”

El laughed. “Ks’ou have been *completely* driven from Earth, there’s no way—”

“Hypothetically, El, *keep up!”* She smacked him in the arm of his *living fake*. “Anyway, let’s say they return, but they ask that humans give them only one kind of human. Black American humans. And in exchange, they’ll give Earth, *oh I don’t know*, all that humans need. Shelter. Food. Medicine. Fuel. An answer to poverty—they consider it so shameful that they *still* create statistics to determine whether the current leader is answering the problem. Imagine, El. For a human leader to claim zero poverty, full sustainability, all for a decision they made to give one kind of subhuman up to aliens. Wouldn’t it make you pause?”

El furrowed his brow. He said, finally, “And the pause… I am to be disgusted by it?”

“Yes. Yes!” she said brightly. “It’s awful, isn’t it? Who we wish to sacrifice to serve our own survival. How much we desire to negotiate an *Other*’s being to serve a greater whole.”

Efyir was drawn. He asked questions, some that Aurana couldn’t answer: *Why would one species enslave an entire subset of its own?*, and *How does a species became a subjugated other in their own? But what would happen if that subjugated other suddenly disappeared—didn’t the dominant depend on them for their identity? For superiority? What would happen if they were suddenly gotten rid of? Wouldn’t they just eventually choose another to subjugate? Who?*

Then, loud, argumentative voices interrupted their meditations.

“Take that pseudo-intellectual bullshit and stuff it.” A girl, darker than even Ana, and tall, was shouting at a boy with fluffy chestnut hair not far from them, descending the steps towards their table in the game room. She was loud, and the boy was turning more and more pink as she raised her voice. Aurana would have ignored them completely if El hadn’t froze and was staring very obviously at her, with widened eyes.

The boy said some illegible, to which she burst out laughing. “You’re sick.” She punched him on the shoulder—it wasn’t anger, just energy, that she exuded. A human energy. Without glancing at her neck both Aurana and Ana could tell this girl wasn’t Settled. Of course, it was never certain, but most Ks’ou weren’t skilled enough to express *this* much humanness…

“‘Ey! Silverbutt.” The girl caught El’s eyes, nodded her sharp chin towards him and jumped from the stairs, over the handrail towards them. She didn’t glance back at the boy but her gentle goodbye could be heard—“Catch you later, *prob*.” Her curvy cheekbones were framed by hoop earrings. She sat down abruptly at their table, taking a seat across from El with her back turned slightly in Aurana/Ana’s direction. “Can you believe that? He was actually trying to argue *for* colonization having benefits. When this whole *planet* is post-colonial? He doesn’t even know who I fucking am.”

El had cringed since her approach, the skin of his shell turning an odd, somewhat inhuman color. Aurana guessed that even Thhiyatkhoor emotional displays on their skin were so powerful that they could peek through even the shells that made them appear human.

“Jacque…”

“I used to think Renan was cute with that stupid Euro accent of his but, can you do me a favor, Efy? Make sure I don’t date any more of these fucking racists. I’m done with him and his crew.”

“…It seemed you left on good terms?” El managed to murmur.

“Oh, no, I was just faking. I’m actually really pissed.” Jacque made a rude sound and began shuffling in her bag. She pulled out a holotext and began typing furiously on it. “I’m canceling going to their party this weekend. Telling them I slept on a project and will need to pull a few all-nighters. Those pro-colonial carcass shits. I’ll dump him next week.”

“You should join us, then, if you have no other friends to visit.”

“Us?” Jacque turned, and seemed to recognize the other “human” for the first time: a shade between her and her brother’s *living fake*, with black hair, thick spirals, past her shoulders, around which wove a light scarf, up to her chin.

El introduced her in the way he was familiar. Aurana noted he was gesticulating widely, trying to cover with his hands the *t-mwan* that hung unceremoniously around his neck. “My friend, Aurana… She is *zilaa*, like me. And warrior class.”

Jacque stared. “You have a *friend*?”

“What kind of an introduction was that?” Aurana scoffed at El, who was clearly trying to distract them from his own problems. She surveyed this *Jacque*, intrigued by someone so clearly human, who must have also known, by her amusing term for him, that he was Thhiyatkhoor. “My name is Aurana. Longhand for Ana. As our tactless friend said, I am *zilaa*, but more importantly, I prefer non-mashed human music, noodles, and martial arts. And you are…?”

Jacque didn’t know whether to laugh or be joyously stunned. Her interstellar sibling actually made a friend? “Jacque. Efy’s my little brother.”

His Thhiyatkhoor skin nearly shone through the *living fake* again: he seemed to cloud as Aurana’s confused and concerned eyes drew to him. Jacque grinned making a ‘my lips are lips sealed’ motion with her hands, seeming to drink in the awkwardness with zeal. With a sigh he finally murmured, “My father used to return to Earth once an Earth year, and brought me with him. Jacque and I grew up together, in that sense. She is my sister-witho… my host sister on Earth.”

“I’m much cooler than *your* older bio-sister, too,” the human Jacque added with a broad grin.

“You have an older bio-sister?” Aurana stared at him, ashamed that she had stopped her investigation once she’d figured out his species. Ana, half listening, was curious, too. They shifted closer to Jacque. “A human sister and a bio-sister. Extended time on Earth. What else can you tell me about… Efy?”

“No more, Jacque,” El warned. “She’s trying to trick you: Aurana and I have a bet to guess each other’s species.”

“I’ve already guessed yours,” Aurana said nonchalantly, leaning her chin on her fist playfully.

“No… no you haven’t,” he said with an uncertain arrogance.

She nearly yawned when she said this next line. It rolled off her tongue neatly, the central term to Thhiyatkhoorkind and one in which anyone with minimal lessons in Endaithsu could pronounce, “||Two parallel lines may never meet.||”

A mix of utter disbelief flashed over El’s face. “||You… you speak *Endaithsu*? But you can’t possibly be Thhiyatkhoor!||” He was so stunned that he didn’t realize he’d said this in Endaithsu himself.

“||*Endaithsu:* I took a few programs on the network,||” she murmured. “||It’s more fun to speak than Human Standard English.||”

He decided he liked the sound of her speaking. There was a rhythm he hadn’t heard in awhile; she spoke it like his elders spoke, without inflections of youth. “||*Endaithsu:* Yes, HSE is excessive. They have too many words for one thing, and not enough words for another.||”

“||*Endaithsu: Khryouyati!* I have been trying to tell humans that forever!||”

“*Y’all shush*,” Jacque coughed, gesturing with her head towards the people around them, a larger crowd of students gathering now that it was the lunch hour. None had turned in their general direction, but two people speaking Endaithsu would inevitably draw unwanted attention. Then her eyes scanned Efy, because she had already seen the *t-mwan* but was trying to ignore it out of politeness. “Haven’t you been punished enough?”

He nodded in Human Standard English, unable to shake a stupid grin. “No one talks to me *already*.”

Jacque shuddered, taking her eyes off the *t-mwan* and the memories it inspired, to give Aurana an unreadable look.

“The argument you were having, with that boy…” Aurana nodded curiously at Jacque.

“Oh, Renan, ugh,” she rolled her eyes and flipped her braids over her shoulder. “Our stupid professor is trying to have us read KE ante-colerial—ante with an e, not an *i*, mind you—propaganda. We have a debate next week and he’s absolutely giddy to represent the position where colonization is a political necessity.[[20]](#footnote-20) He actually uses it to justify the Ks’ou invasion.”

Aurana raised an eyebrow. Who was this human who was so bold as to mention *Ks’ou* without flinching, as so many humans do. “How so?”

“He thinks it made us more human. More powerful Colonizers defeating other colonizers. *Worse*,” she grit her teeth. Aurana couldn’t help it—she was starting to really like this human. “He thinks the Ks’ou invasion *erased* race since we so-called ‘united’ as a human race to defeat them. He argues this was a benefit of colonization.”

“*The colonist only quits undermining the colonized once the latter has proclaimed loud and clear that white values remain supreme*.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Aurana smiled knowingly, a smile which Jacque returned.

“It is a failure of humans that they are so hierarchically ordered based on visual characteristics alone,” El piped, trying desperately to feel involved in their conversation.

Before Jacque could protest Aurana snapped at him, “*You* think *your* kind is absent of designations, war-born?”

El puffed. “Not visual, no. It is based on *birth* as well as *skill*. Aren’t you war-born yourself? Or is your species so superior that you’re absolved of hierarchies?”

Aurana was about to get into it until the gentle reminder from Ana: { Careful. He’s goading you. } { Oh. You’re so right. } She backed up, carefully crafting her counter-argument without revealing her species—he was right, of course, and it wasn’t just kyôsta-fsand dostôn-fs that divided Ks’ou, but she obviously couldn’t say that. They got pretty far from the race question that Jacque had proposed and instead became distracted by the heated discussion of the superiority of various species. It may have ended in a physical sparring match, if not for the interruption by the arrival of a few of Jacque’s friends—Aurana guessed she, unlike her host-brother, was quite popular—who asked her to join them for some social event over food. Jacque laughed and toyed with their thoughts, making it seem as though she was interested when, after they left, she clearly wasn’t. She turned back to El and Aurana, her eyes ablaze. “Watching you two is fun. I’m so happy, Efy, that you found a friend.”

“I, uh, need to regenerate my skin in the POD before we have to head home,” he said, hesitantly, glancing wearily at his host-human sister. “Please don’t, *nnd*, say anything weird.”

Jacque grinned. “You have my word, Silverbutt.”

He left, grumbling. She lurched forward, close to Aurana, staring hard. At first Aurana was afraid she was going to ask her to remove the scarf, but she wasn’t looking at Ana’s neck. Rather, it was her hair that was of interest.

“Can I have the *coords* of whoever did these twists? I wish I could do something like this.”

“I do them myself.”

“*Layl[[22]](#footnote-22)*, what?”

Aurana froze, not sure if this was a good thing. *Curse her human’s need to bother with such nuances as hair!* Ana had dipped back into the archive, and she didn’t want to bother her to come out again and listen in if it wasn’t necessary.

Jacque pressed, “That’s a lot of work for just a shell. Can I…?” She extended a hand.

“I, um, I’d rather you not.” Aurana never understood why Ana was inexplicably angry when anyone would dare to touch her hair, but she had to respect her human’s wishes. “Another time, maybe?” Perhaps this gesture would be read as friendliness, to help pass the awkward feeling that seemed to hover between them.

“Of course, I get it.” Jacque sat back again, looking at her curiously, touching her own hair, a soft halo around the sculpture of her head. “I have to keep it short. They don’t keep the products that sustain my hair. Not anymore. I can barely find coconut oil on the shelves, and even when I do, I can’t afford it.”

Coconut oil, incidentally, became the source of the primary diet of a species in the XS-52 region. Its exportation was crucial to some economies, as they could charge inordinate amounts to the species for a different resource that was far more valuable (and rare) to those humans.

“It’s as though they care for nothing but those they consider their own,” Aurana mumbled, a phrase that Ana invoked often.

“Girl. Exactly,” Jacque said, nodding sagely.

Aurana beamed. ‘Girl’! Had so she quickly won the favor of this human sister of El’s? Humans were easy. “You get it.”

“I do,” she nodded vigorously. “Listen.” El’s host-sister glanced over at her shoulder at the POD that El was currently inhabiting. “I’m nosy.”

“Noted.”

“My brother is a pain and doesn’t make friends easily. You have apparently put up with him long enough to be his friend. So I have to be… *discerning*.*”*

“Worry not,” Aurana affirmed confidently. “We have had many conversations in which he has proven to be arrogant and somewhat obnoxious. And I still find his discourse acceptable.”

“I feel that,” Jacque said, and though it sounded genuine she seemed distracted. She looked at Ana’s hair again.

When El came back, their conversation turned to humans, and progress, and how was it that humans could invent so much but change so little?

And when he and Jacque had to return home for dinner, just before they departed, El made a point to tell her, “You speak Endaithsu *very* well.”

“Just a paradigm.” She was so busy, she’d forgotten to tighten her scarf, which was only a little loose around her shoulders as she bid them goodbye, confident her human’s hair should have covered her neck. Efyir was already distracted; Jacque had continued watching.

These were the words which she wished, but could not say, to El:

*Ks’ou are not supposed to appreciate humans. But some of us do. Some of us so much that we choose a human that we designate as our ‘symbiote’ to describe a mutual relationship to them: they offer, we offer; they take, we take; they honor, we honor.*

*I honor all species. Each has something to give, even if it is not considered ‘useful’ to the Ks’ou Nation. Each has value beyond one’s own limited bubble. Every species is part of a complex whole.*

*And yet, this is not the philosophy of the Nation.*

*And makes me question who I am, by my species, which I can never revoke.*

--

*{ By human definition, it can’t be called a lynching. }*

The three Settled humans were being led across the stage, their hands tied together in a line with rope like human schoolchildren at a daycare. NeVarr and Aurana stood reluctantly at the edge of a large throng; they were far enough from the stagefront that they would not be expected to participate in this oncoming slaughter, but close enough to see the figures clearly, white sheets covering the human/Ks’ou heads, knotted at the base of the neck like the ropes tied to humans during Ks’ou nourishment.

The Speaker, or so the figure who lead these proceedings was called, inhabited a youngish human in her 30s, with long, silky black hair, bangs, and dressed in a simple but pointed blue suit with an aqua ascot, tied loosely around her neck. It appeared as though part of the arms of the Ks’ou bulged obviously from her chest.

Across her jaw was a tattoo, a white streak shaped like a thistle stem, curving from the base of her neck all the way across her jaw, and ending with a number that was too small for Aurana to see. The designation of those in Ke’Ad’s Special Army, those who had passed a specific and brutal set of tests to prove their allegiance. There would be no allyship in this human; if, after the tests, there was anything of the human left, they had chosen their allegiance, too.

“Colleagues,” her voice echoed across the cave of this section of the Deep. “Colleagues, look among you. Among you, a small few are traitors. They do not wish the advancement of the Nation. They sew discontentment, division. Their numbers are *small,* too small to outweigh the greatest of us*.”*

The Speaker for the night was sometimes Ke’Ad itself, but never for this kind of event, and his appearances were becoming increasingly rare. Aurana wondered briefly if he was even informed of this “minor” capital punishment. The Speaker tonight was an important political figure close to him, one who sparked intrigue among these Settlers.

As their host continued her speech, some in the audience murmured a reaction, while Aurana could not resist a quiet scoff. *Numbers? Small?* Inconfirmable, and therefore convincing. The cowards in the crowd—those who needed *numbers* to decide what was right or wrong—nodded quietly, as though to say: of course, of course. Choose what is right based on where the strength lies. Choose the safe path, the one with the biggest numbers. Surely, even if you disagree, the one with the smaller numbers will never make *progress*. Choose from the best hand given to you.

{ *It can’t be called a lynching because this is sanctioned by the Nation.* }

{ *But you don’t even think Ke’Ad knows about it. Or The Committee, for that matter.* }

{ *True.* } Aurana hummed thoughtfully. *{ Perhaps the Speaker is, in fact, acting beyond her authority. In your late 18th century, Charles Lynch did the same. Did you know that lynching didn’t begin with race, that it began with law[[23]](#footnote-23)? }*

*{ I am ashamed to say that at this point, you know more human history than I do. }*

*{ Honored to share it with you, }* Aurana trilled, then thought about it. She was speaking to distract her human, she knew. Or perhaps herself. The Speaker rambled on about why everyone should be grateful to the Nation, why Ke’Ad was a fantastic leader bringing Ks’ou out from the darkness of their shame at having lost the first war to conquer humans. *{ Lynch law was used to defend mobs who used an authority they did not have. Did you know it didn’t always involve hanging? Burning alive—that won’t happen today, Ks’ou still think fire is too vulgar and it will hamper popular opinion of the Speaker. Shootings, stabbings, beatings, drownings. No one will be drowned, either, in case you were wondering. The Ks’ou would detach and would have to be killed separately, and they’re trying to make a point, here, about human and Ks’ou symbiotes. }*

And because Aurana knew her human so well, she could sense the impressions of her mind, and knew the next question. She let her ask it anyway.

{ *What would you do, if that were us up there?* }

{ *Do you doubt I would do what was right? What I gave an oath to do?* }

{ *I just want to hear you say it.* }

{ *I’d extend all of my arms into every fiber, every nerve, so you would not feel your own death. I would talk to you, just as I am talking now, perhaps telling you a story of the multitudes I know, to distract you. To distract us. I would talk to you until I could speak no more. Tell stories that you haven’t yet reached in the archive. I would talk to the very interstices of death. Protocol 3: together, we’d die. You know this.* }

{ *Yes.* } Ana shuddered in the shared space of their minds. She didn’t know if she liked the idea of not feeling her own death, but feared it enough to think she’d prefer it that way.

“Even if you disagree with the Nation, surely you can quietly give mercy to your human. The Nation is overwhelming and strong; we have the capacity to make fundamental change—with power comes great capacity for change, yes? The takeover of the human species is inevitable; if it could be done with facility, with as little bloodshed and torture as possible, then isn’t this mercy?

“A few days ago, these defectors killed two outstanding Nation colleagues. We do not mourn individuals as such, but we mourn the loss of the future contributions they could have made had their lives not been cut short. Between those colleagues, nearly 2,000 Settled humans due to their incredible philanthropic endeavors. Their deaths will not pass without retribution. These,” and at that, the speaker unveiled the white cloth sheets that had covered the human faces. A man and two women, eyes wide in terror, with a brace over their mouths so they could make no other sound than garbled screams.

“It’s a fucking lie,” NeVarr cursed under his breath. “I know for a fact that one of those is *not* a symbiote with the KLF.”

“Go ahead and speak up,” Aurana grabbed NeVarr/James’ ear and pulled it closer to Ana’s mouth so she could say these next words. “We should both be up there, instead of those three.”

NeVarr looked at her pointedly through the lens of James’ eyes, pulled back, and said no more.

“These,” the Speaker continued, “These enemies of the Nation, threaten us. They reject our ways, and our hopes. Yet, we are not here to destroy humans, are we?”

A resounding cry from the crowd. *No, no. Not at all. We are here to free them. To give them life, as Ke’Ad says.*

“Then what reason, for this attempt at division? Will we be as the humans, endlessly warring against one another; humans, who cannot find unity in their difference. Should we be that? Humans, whose desperate plea was once this: *Dare we dream of a golden day when this bestial War shall rule no more?[[24]](#footnote-24)*

“They desired an end to their interwarring, and end to civil conflic. Yet they bought themselves more war. If only they could lay down their arbitrary identity categories. If only they could simply forge into the future, leaving the past as past. If only they could focus on cleansing themselves of their humanity; of rendering themselves in the beautiful speed of the Nation’s mobility[[25]](#footnote-25). If only they could end their petty disagreements. And yet… here we are.” The Speaker gesticulated wildly to them all. “White. Black. Brown. *Mestiza*. *Melangé*. Mutt. More. And who has united you?”

The crowd roared instantaneously, a sound deafening and frightening at once. Aurana and NeVarr had no choice but to participate, though every fiber in their being urged against it, repeating the words: the Nation. the Nation. the Nation.

The crowd was chanting, now, feverish and overwhelmed at its own pride. The Speaker was a good one; she had set the stage. After a moment she quieted them, turning back to the solemn group of 3, forgotten until now, and inscribed and interpellated into the very identity that the Speaker had crafted: enemy of the Nation, enemy of the individual Ks’ou, enemy

“Let us begin,” the Speaker said, and at once the nooses around their necks went taught. Not too much. Just enough make its bearers struggle.

{ *Lynchings became a spectacle to behold. When Francis McIntosh was immolated, a judge described the mob as an ‘unstoppable force… mysterious, metaphysical, and almost electric.’* }

The Speaker had narrowed her eyes at the culprits. “Do you love your Nation so much?” She was staring at the individuals, but her voice rose so that she seemed to be speaking to an entire community. “Then let it be.”

{ *Is that what your people are, now? A force too powerful to be stopped?* }

Ana communicated this thought to Aurana just as the first rock flew. It pelted one of the women just above her eye, and she let out a small muffled cry. That seemed to be a signal. Suddenly hundreds of rocks flew, the human bodies disfigured before their eyes. ‘Your people.’ Ana was merely repeating Aurana’s own words, and yet the Ks’ou could not make sense of why she felt those words were so repellent now.

Aurana’s humming had long since ceased. This display, this murder that could not be called a lynching, was disgustingly primitive—and that was the point. Technology produced such incredible devices for murder, but spectacle always reigned. A new torture device was always welcome in the Nation, but the audience could never engage with it, directly, physically, as the tried and true stoning.

NeVarr was talking, aloud, too. Just words, strung together, nothing to bind them. He kept his voice low, kept talking, because he knew no one around them was listening at all, all eyes and ears fixated too intently on the scene before them. He kept speaking, Aurana knew, because it helped him cope with the horrific scene before him. He was always sensitive to life and death, even the deaths that were necessary. He would have made a fine being in almost any situation except this very one, the one that required them to be wrapped up in death, whether dealing it, or its witness.

When it was done, his eyes were still tracking the ground. The Speaker had a few final words to say.

“Who does our loyalty belong to?” the Speaker calmly, evenly, stepped over the decapitated bodies as they continued to bleed profusely, a river which spilled from the stage to the ground as a small fountain.

“Her next,” NeVarr said without raising his eyes. “I deciphered most of the charge from the KLF. And it has designated that I take care of *her. The Speaker.* Next.”

—

*Ana Joseph and Aurana~*

*Spring PsKE 39,* 2—-

*Dr. Hagåtña*

*A Brief History of Human Colonization*

*The Transatlantic Slave Trade fundamentally shifted the nature of slavery as it had been understood on Earth.* Presently*, some humans ~~presently~~ argue against the use of the term ‘slavery’ in post 1600 (PKE \*\*\*\*) because of this difference. It’s not about terms and semantics, though. At the time, humans were ~~made~~* crafted *as products as no other time in human history.*

*The dehumanization of the time was so deep that it would be the* [nascent] *moment ~~of birth~~, for later generations of humans, whose legacies were shattered between shores. Humans in that moment became nothing more than objects* [of breath]*, not unlike the ‘shells’ sold on human markets today. 1619—the first Africans to land on soil that became the (now, Previously) United States of America was the beginning, also, of the hierarchy* [by phenotype.] *Appearance. This is another colonization of the body: the colonization of sight.*

*Therefore, for the second time in human history, Ks’ou colonization fundamentally shifted the definition of slavery. Human bodies maintained a biological relevance, particularly due to the Ks’ou ‘corrective’ mechanism. These bodies where phenotypically relevant only in the context of gaining access to certain humans, but even this varied: humans in positions of political or economic power tended to have more advantageous phenotypes, and thus were considered more favorable commodities to this Ks’ou. Over time, when the Ks’ou took over enough humans, this would diminish.*

*This was not the goal of Ke’Ad Earth-designated First, who had little vision and therefore little imagination. But Ke’Ad, Earth-designated Second would have more clear ideals. He saw the potential that could be given to humans were he to convince them that colonization would work in their favor, too.*

**Chapter 6**

My father faced the court when he returned, *victoriously—or so he, and all, thought*—from the first war on Earth. It was a formality, of course. Despite the bizarreness of a Thhiyatkhoor so extensively spending his time with humans, he could pass his behavior off with the excuse that the humans were digging their own grave, conducting their own political affairs.

*Apologies*. Yes, I understand. To dig one’s own grave is a human term, let me explain—of course graves do not exist in our society.

I only meant that they were preparing to extinguish one’s final leaf, inviting their own deaths, by their political decisions at the time, decisions which are not like our own.

May I return to my narrative? Thank you.

The point is, the accusations against my father were fraught. I recognize now that the the language of those accusations, involving terms such as ‘*consorted with’* or ‘*discourse with’* alongside humans, alarmed many Thhiyatkhoor. These accusations most haunted my father in his ending days, hence the title of his novel. He called it *Impossible Discourse* because to use such extreme language with Ks’ou would show that, though his conduct with humans undid all that Thhiyatkhoor thought was possible of ourselves, there was a line to be drawn. He wanted to show that he was still fully Thhiyatkhoor in his being.

I assure you, however, that *discourse* is the only term that can accurately convey the expanse of what happened.

My original intent was never to make discourse, nor was it to continue any consorting once I had discovered the Ks’ou’s trick. But, as any warrior knows, the best laid plans are only that: an idea, a proposal with an aim in mind. When war is a moving target, the plans must be adjusted accordingly.

—

*Aletheia the Human was the first to die of our Alliance*, his father had told him the night after Efyir’s first true killing.

She was the kind of Human who could learn any movement from any One. The lesson would be transformed into battle with deadly results.

Efyir’s killing was at the Human annular cycle 7—the Thhiyatkhoor cycle *bith*—but it was nonetheless unpallatable to him. He saw no *sayiel* in it—often translated as *logos* to humans—not when so many other options lay open. His father scolded him.

“||Killing does not need *sayiel||*,” he sighed and hung his head low. This was the best way to show his formidable branches, all seventeen of them. He lifted it again to speak. “||It is hard for you to have full knowledge, since we are in a cycle of peace. I understand: the cutting of life means little to a future, when a collective signifies no more than an individual. Yet. Try harder.||”

This he learned from General Shyridin during his training for a war that he suspected—wrongly—would never come.

They had driven them into the trees; these creatures who had been examined and found guilty of collaboration with the Ks’ou, time ago. They had given their vile enemies weapons whose biological signatures traced them back to this planet, and this planet alone. They’d denied it, of course; accused the Ks’ou of theft, but General Shyridin knew well enough now that lies issued from every species with equal ease, and *these* creatures, with their long arms and four, wheel-like legs, were sympathizers of the worst kind: sympathy by convenience, without basis or explanation.

In the trees, the Thhiyatkhoor held the strongest advantage. These trees were close to their own, with thick twisting branches at the top, some trees holding and supporting others, so that one could leap across them as on a balance beam. This, they could do quietly, so that it was difficult to tell the difference between rustling from wind and their running, nearly breathless speed. Efyir had already been outrun by the rest of the soldiers, who had deftly scaled the trees far ahead of him, swinging down and striking the wheeled creatures—a species whose name he’d already forgotten—with some groans of pain. Efyir decided to track one in particular—the soldiers had likely left this one for him—whose blood he could smell from twenty-two even paced trees away; weakened, it would not be difficult for him to bring this creature the end its actions had called for. He swept down, deftly, where it had taken a chance to pause and breathe; dragged its revolting body upward until they’d reach the highest branch Efyir could stand on without their weight forcing it to bend.

“Efyir,” his father was there, close, whispering. The distance of the resonance told Efyir that they were not in the same tree. Two or three apart, perhaps. Yet the stench of blood on his father was evident; likely, he had killed several dozen by the time Efyir had caught up with this just one. “Execute them. The laws-without-memory.”

Efyir did not need to close his eyes; it was dark and starless and he knew after his blades had plunged three holes into the creature’s chest, the blood flowing forth in a heartbeat rhythm that even he could feel the slight shudder, this early on, of a discordant pulse. “||*Izlaa*: The United Intergent Council has determined that you are in violation of Universal Law for collaborating with Ks’ou. For this, you are banished from the living universe.||” *Izlaa* had many *Endaithsu* words, but as the creature’s paling eyes bore back at him; he suddenly realized that he wasn’t even sure if this creature spoke *Izlaa* or his language at all. Did it know why it was about to die? Or perhaps Efyir’s words did not even need to be said: the creature could know by other means, by the mere fact of a Thhiyatkhoor being on its planet, surely it must have known why he was there. Unnerved by the way this creatures eyes moved back and forth, as though trembling, Efyir gave this creature his greatest empathy: he dropped it from their position, the highest branch, so that by the time it reached the ground it would no longer have to worry about rhythms: of breath or tongue or heartbeat or harmony or thought.

Afterward, when they’d all returned to their ship—not a single fallen of their own, the General was good at calculating such—his father had proudly presented him. He’d been *among* them only, his father said, before they arrived here; and now he was integrated *with* them. They congratulated him by touching the tip of their arm blades to his, but he could no longer feel his arm blade, feigning each forced movement until the ritual was complete and he could retreat to his quarters, succumbing to the form of dreamless, bitter sleep earned only by those who took life without giving it.

—

“||What did you learn, of the creature you held victory over?||” his father pressed. This was the first training of a new set that he’d earned since his killing.

Efyir froze. Learned?

“||Remember Aletheia,||” the General hissed. “||Despite her human background, she had wisdom. *Every* species has a lesson to teach you. *Every* species, if you listen to their heartbeat, regard their movement, will reveal to you how to destroy it. And when you do, keep listening, because the way they die will tell you all that you need to know about them.||”

Efyir closed his eyes; tried to remember the whirring of the species whose name he could not remember.

“||They—they were rhythmic,||” Efyir tried, weakly.

“||Are you certain, Efyir-Azayim?||”

Efyir breathed. His father invoked his full name when challenging him, when he wanted to intimidate him, and it always worked. Efyir tried to remember the heartbeat of the creature, with its breath. The way its eyes seemed to widen when it realized that these were out of sync.

“||I… I think so. They were afraid, when my blade plunged into its chest; they were afraid because I had disrupted the rhythm of its breathing.||”

“||Do not think so. Know so,||” his father growled. “||You are correct, but barely.||”

Efyir said no more. There was no arguing with General Shyridin, and his father would not hesitate to lecture him when dialogue was stone without a river.

“||Thhiyatkhoor, in ideal circumstances, can defeat 3/4ths of species in the universe. We are faster. Our bodies were built against failure. Creatures such as the *Wyké* have size over us, and others such as *Aiiuo* are extremely venomous and can pierce our slate. As for the rest, worry not for them. The sentients are foolish. Know enough about your enemy, and you can defeat them.||”

“||Ideal circumstances?||”

“||Humans rely on the weapons they build with their hands. But if you take a Human away from their metal toys, what does it have? Flesh, and sometimes wit, but more often only the former.||”

Efyir’s mother interrupted them, then. She had finished her secret training of Astriyen, who trailed quietly behind her, one shoot prominently displaying on the young Thhiyatkhoor girl’s branches. Khii-Uyan embraced Shyridin tightly, holding her hand over his neck and brushing the lower part of her face on his forehead. “||You were with our son at his most important moment.||” Her eyes drew to Efyir proudly, the black of her *naghryoja* shining like river stones in daylight. “||Yesterday’s victory will be remembered *ay-dagh*.||”

Astriyen snuck up next to Efyir as their father recounted the story *again*. It was embarrassing, and he was trying not to allow clouds to cover his skin. “||*Took you long enough*. We can go to the battle programs together. Mother has been able to find me one where they do not complain about the color of my branches—it is incredible, what our bodies can do!||”

“||I have no desire to,||” Efyir hissed back. “||I cannot stop thinking of its rhythm.||”

She gave him a strange look, then nodded. “||Little brother, it is difficult, the first. But you will soon learn the Thhiyatkhoor rhythm. And when you do, you will understand.||”

“||Is it the same Thhiyatkhoor rhythm that says you and mother should not fight in war as father and I do?||” Elfyir countered, feeling somewhat triumphant at stalling his elder sister’s discourse.

Astriyen was quiet and angry. “||That will change.||” she said firmly, “||When they see what I can do.||” She was like their father and knew the right tone to end speaking.

It took him a long time to realize that the cedar of his mother’s marriage offshoot was fading even in this moment; though he let go of many of those after-memories, he held tightly to this one, for what reason he did not know.

—

“I do not understand why the Old Human cannot feel his face.”

“Don’t listen to the lyrics. They are inane.”

“So what am I supposed to listen to?”

Aurana sneered at him, exasperated. “The other sounds, of course. Not the Human sounds. But the instruments, the technology. These sounds create meaning. Meaning creates propositions. And propositions create new words.”

“So you are telling me to ignore words in order to hear words.”

“…Pretty much, yes.” She pushed the headphone back in his direction, and placed the other phone over her own ear. As she moved her head, he was forced to join lest the headphones slip away. They eventually found a beat, though the right one was still out of reach. At the checkout counter, the clerks exchanged glances and decided not to comment on the bizarre scene in front of them.

Her hair was curved around her head like a rolled, folded-in *naghryoja*, pulled up from its usual position framing her ears and shoulders. She wore what she referred to as a turtleneck, though Efyir could not discern from his *Earth Species* course why an animal without much of a neck would be given such prominence that an entire type of clothing was named after it. And today, her earrings were in the shape of another kind of leaf-like Earth substance called parsley[[26]](#footnote-26). It was a reference to a terrible massacre, she’d said, in which many were killed based on how they pronounced it. Some humans thought this was a story, *but even if story*, the truth of the massacre was still there[[27]](#footnote-27).

“Why would you wear *that*?” he asked, not caring to mask a voice lined by both disgust and fascination.

“Because forgetting is humankind’s most refined invention.”

It had been months of being on Earth, attending Veroia University. Efyir was excelling in his classes, enjoying his deepening friendships with Aurana and human-host sister Jacque, and still awed at his own misery. He mentioned this at dinner once; Jacque punched him in the shoulder playfully and called him ungrateful, but by now he was better at reading Human faces and could tell she’d been offended by his words.

He and his father had not exchanged a single breath of sound since he left Routhhe.

He’d convinced his warrior-class friend Aurana to take a break from her project documenting Human colonialism to attend a novelty shop, a place once called a Tower but now referred to as *Hums*—Human unmashed music store. It contained all of Earth’s old original music and was the only place to hear songs that had not been ‘mashed up,’ as they’d called it. Humans had, a long time ago, ran out of music combinations that were not copyrighted and owned by other Humans, and the only music left to make involved weaving prefabricated songs together. Owning music was a strange concept to Efyir—one could own one’s *naghryoja*, one’s blades, one’s honor, but how could one own sound?

“Do you like this one?” she asked. She was testing a theory based on his complaints on all the other songs—and it turned out to be right.

“Yes,” he said quietly. It had no words, which was helpful. Human languages still sounded odd to him despite his years of experience; it was like squeaking. This one had no human voices, so it was easier to pay attention to the instruments, whatever they were, which were long and then cut quick, suddenly, like a child with questions too numerous to answer.

“You don’t have to pretend,” she muttered, about to pull the CD out. He put a hand over hers as a gentle stop.

“It isn’t the music. I like this one. It reminds me of my *ekhair.* He has not communicated with me since I arrived on Earth, though I have tried many times to reach out to him.”

Her hand paused. “*E-khair*?” she feigned a lengthy mis-pronunciation of the word.

“A designation of a non-blood companion, yet someone close enough to be blood.”

“I know this,” she snapped rather suddenly. “Obviously one of the most important designations in your society.”

He was quiet again, thoughtful. He set the CD in motion to replay the song. The music was so powerful, he even dared to speak these next words forbidden by laws-without-memory; he did this only because he knew her to be warrior class, perhaps an ally of Thhiyatkhoor. “You and I have in fact had deeper conversations that he and I ever had. It might be more fitting if you took his place.”

She stared at him blankly. There was no pity in her eyes, which he appreciated. “You still haven’t guessed my species. I don’t think it wise to choose this *ekhair* without knowing more about them. And I don’t even know your full name.”

“I am no one that important,” he lied after a moment. “But you are right… My people have laws against this.”

“Oh?” He would learn that she knew this already, too. “Then it is a good thing you are an excessive rule follower. I can never be your *ekhair*.”

“…Your species shouldn’t matter. There is too much emphasis on species; it causes division; war.” He had a brief, fleeting fantasy of never knowing her species, and she never knowing his full name. He imagined they could coexist peacefully without needed to know these convoluted things.

“My species does matter,” she snapped him out of the reverie. “I cannot reject my time before me. My species is my history.”

“Yet you never talk about it.”

She bit her lip. “There is much about it I do not know myself.”

“You have before professed to being a smaller creature. Perhaps you are a Capêe,” he mused. This was a smallish, four-legged, winged alien who lived on the edge of the Thhiyatkhoor solar system. The last he had heard, they were experimenting with planetary tourism. “It would make sense, then, for us to be friends. We are neighbors, and when I return home we could perhaps visit one another.”

She shook her head to show he was indeed wrong, then chose another song, closing the disc-playing device and pushed a triangular button. They fell into quiet when the song began playing. Another without lyrics, this time with a different instrument, without the smoothness of the former but still pleasant. When it was done she said, as though still in disbelief that he’d even asked, “An *ekhair*?Laughable*.* I am not even well liked among my own people.”

He laughed nervously. “That is perhaps why we resonate.”

“Promise me,” she said this slowly, and he would remember for a long time after this how the headphones framed her neck when she said this, that in some recess of his mind he was surprised how the evening light seemed to turn her hair blue, even her *parsley* earrings, “Even if we have to send our messages across lightyears, promise we won’t ever stop talking to one another?”

One of the clerks has begun to nervously move closer and closer to them, pretending to shelve or organize the music but rather obviously listening in to their conversation. He’d asked, several times while they had been there, “Can I help you?” But they were here to listen to music; they did not need help. With him so close, Efyir could not risk saying these next words in Endaithsu, so he said them in a somewhat mangled translation instead.

“By *logos* and by *lux*.”

Aurana’s expression was of a peculiar slant, with a smile that seemed at once curious and uncertain; with only partial understanding, she repeated his words.

—

On Sunday afternoons referred to pejoratively as “lazy,” Kahti filled the house with music. It was a ritual akin to the others of her kind, but for the first time, Efyir found residence in the strange combination of air vibrations. It wasn’t like going home, but it wasn’t a stranger’s house, either. Somewhere in between—a branched bed that had been prepared for him, a wooded path he’d walked, however infrequently, before.

It wasn’t a song that he cared for, so he didn’t bother to know the words, yet he couldn’t help joining a bit in its melody, an action so instinctual that he hadn’t noticed he was doing it until he realized, mid-bite of a delicious leaf, Kahti was staring at him with hard eyes.

“Nice humming, Bambi,” Jacque elbowed him with a fork. They shared the dinner table on this day, and she was enjoying a piece of an Earth bird, fried in oil and spiced beyond reason.

Efyir hated this term as much as he hated the name Silverbutt. It didn’t matter how many times he insisted to Jacque that his species looked nothing like the Earth-bound animal creature called *deer*, she never stopped calling him by it, so he nearly retaliated by calling her a *geywev*, until he thought about it and realized such an offensive term was unnecessary. He settled on responding by munching, as loudly as he could, these leaves that Kahti had been kind enough to bring home. By Jacque’s slight cringe knew his retaliation was sufficient. Yet he had slight regret: his sonorous revenge diminished his own enjoyment of the leaves. A magnolia tree grew near the ritual house that Kahti and Jacque attended that morning, and those leaves were the best in all of Earth, to his limited knowledge, best eaten slowly and quietly.

“Efyir,” Kahti said, and something about the way she said it made him stall his *naghryoja* in attention. “You have never, in all the years I’ve known you—since birth—cared for human sounds.”

“Aurana and I sometimes go to *Hums* after class. It’s one of her preferred ones,” he tried to say as calmly as he could, not understanding the sudden tenor.

“Aurana?”

“His *girlfriend*,” Jacque added.

“I have looked up the word you are using and determined it to be an inaccurate translation,” Efyir snapped. “She is a friend and also happens to be a girl. Or, erm, in a girl *shell.* The term you use refers to a different human relationship arrangement.”

“My fault, Efy. I thought, since you an *expert* on humans, you woulda known the diff.”

The two shot daggers at each other until Kahti interrupted them with a small cough. “We enjoy meeting friends of friends in this household, Efyir. Invite her to dinner.”

“The new countries offer a vast field for individual, violent activities which, in the metropolitan countries, would run up against certain prejudices, against a sober and orderly conception of life, and which, in the colonies, have greater freedom to develop and, consequently, to affirm their worth.

Thus, to a certain extent, the colonies can serve as a safety valve for modern society.

Even if this were their only value, it would be immense.”

Siger, *Essai sur la colonisation* (1907), quoted in Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1955)

**CHAPTER 7**

***Kelisfton***

Wake up. Wait. Speak. Train. Sleep. Repeat.

In my early years, at my first time inhabiting the bright-eyed Myf of our planet—a large-eyed pawed creature resembling an Earthen tarsier—I used every colorful word I knew in my language. The Myf are informidable but adequate hosts, hardly the best of hosts I would obtain in my lifetime. Here, I will be crude: I crawled into its neck, thrust my multiplicitous arms into the pores of its skin, wrapped these around its muscles, nerves, bones, brain, conquered its synapses, controlled its mind, and suppressed any possible dialogue with its simple intellect. That is what we Ks’ou do.

“kyôsta[[28]](#footnote-28)? Giddân, zia plok psyta bogoud[[29]](#footnote-29),” I was seeing, visually *seeing*, for the first time in my life. It was night, but the above was streaked with lines of difference. I knew nothing about ‘color’ at that point; later, I would learn that our planet was mostly imbued with hues my future human would describe as green and yellow, that the thing humans called a sunrise which we merely referred to as‘assoud’iss bïdd[[30]](#footnote-30)’ and the thing to come at the other end, called ‘assoud’iss idez[[31]](#footnote-31)’ were in fact the only two beautiful things our planet had to offer. The rest could perhaps be describe as intensely desolate, damp, and rocky. This *assoud’iss idez* was a melange of ten different shades of green and blue. Light clouds that constantly edged our sky were pierced by its pervasive light, and in their glow a crack of lightning struck briefly across them, until the light diminished and was no more. But I could still *see*—with *complex* *eyes*—through the dark, like waves of motion jettisoning towards these things called *pupils* and extending through the *retina—*

Thus my mistake. I was so taken, so struck by air-sight that my host took its body back over and began to scramble around, scratching its neck, trying to claw me out.

“Ks’owa! Rak’iyad-zs ke err[[32]](#footnote-32)!” the commander of our small group of Myf-Settled initiates screamed.

But I could not. The Myf continued to clamor about, and the control that should have been instinct to me was resisted by my host. My commander then slammed a rock in my host’s head until I detached just before it fell unconscious, and I was disposed of, back into the lagoon of warrior training for war.

Failure.

The second time I witnessed sight, in a different Myf body, I knew exactly what I had to do. Control first. Pleasure of sight second. I focused on its mind, only its mind, and saw each pattern of synapses approach as I wrapped throughout various interstices of its body. I had to concentrate on this. Or, I would lose my life. I knew that the Nation did not tolerate weak Ks'ou who could not maintain control over bodies we were supposed to Settle. I would not become one of the expendables.

So I took over its mind and stood there. I wanted to look to the sky. But I could not. Because if I did, then beauty would overtake me, and my Myf host would lose its mind again, and I would die. I learned to look at rocks and the ground and eventually I learned to look at nothing at all, to stare off blankly as though the world were void, so that I would no longer look *at* things but through them.

We were conditioned to look forward to only this, so that control of a host would be the most magnificent thing. Why bother with their cries and protests, as they all did, with varying degrees of sentiency, when you could discover new avenues for sentiency of your own?

*You*, reading Human, are already familiar with the concept of control.

It can be as simple as the story of asserting power over another. When something does not go your way, you try to control the situation. When you speak and no one listens, you speak louder. When something fails you, you find another route or another means of dominance. When this does not work you protest. In any way, it is telling: Humans love control as much as Ks'ou do. While by default Ks'ou control other bodies, in our enjoyment we are merely reflecting the same kind of power that Humans love so much.

What strikes me is that Ks’ou are not strange to Humans. We are Human-like in our being. In some stories you have, we are depicted as superheroes, with powers limited only by creativity, of which you dreamed as a child. You might think of us as blood-benders, controlling the water and life force of another. But we are not so nefarious. We are like hypnotists, controlling space and impressions. We are like a mirage, controlling images.

More practically, however, we control space-time: we colonize.

We take the best of your society… and we improve it.

This is why the aliens called Gelliiy did so well before those loathsome Thhiyatkhoor attemptedto wipe them all out and to prevent Ks'ou from taking their bodies over. The Gelliiy lacked higher cognitive abilities, and we gave it to them, or at least gave them access to a different way of being. The Thhiyatkhoor, out of fear, sought to destroy that.

Not all Thhiyatkhoor are terrible, however. Ks'ou learn swiftly; some Thhiyatkhoor translated our language into one we and other listening and sight-seeing species could read and write, on our planet and beyond the skies. Though our history dates shorter than Humans, they would intervene on our behalf and propel us into the universe, into a new history of our people.

We never before established or recorded a history of our own, though history did indeed exist before the Thhiyatkhoor came.

Our history *xteêe[[33]](#footnote-33)* began with them. What preceded it does not matter. We could only imagine the community we might have been had they never plunged into—disrupted—our timeline. But he and other Thhiyatkhoor brought themselves to us; brought us to them. They gave us bodies. We used them. And… some time later, we came to Earth to disrupt the Humans, who would soon know our new cycle:

Wake up. Train. Fight. Sleep. Repeat.

**Chapter 8**

A Brief History of Human Colonization

“Decolonization can only succeed by resorting to every means, including, of course, violence… In the colonial context the colonist only quits undermining the colonized once the latter have proclaimed loud and clear that white values reign supreme. In the period of decolonization the colonized masses thumb their noses at these very values, show them with insults and vomit them up.”

—

“Ana means ‘I’ in Arabic.”

She stared at him like a tree stares at the moss on the base of its roots: the tree knew the moss belonged there, but it was still somewhat of a surprise having grown so suddenly, and brazenly at that.

“Ahh… you know Arabic?”

“Not really.”

The boy with the dusky hair had been playing guitar by the gated entrance to the upper roads, and though most of the busy passers-by ignored or nearly stepped on him, something compelled her to leave a coin. She didn’t remember how much, but knew that Papa Joseph would have scolded her for not honoring someone who played music. When she’d left the gift, he’d stopped playing immediately and held the coin back up to her.

“I’m not doing this for money.”

“Oh?” she didn’t want to take the coin back; tried to keep him talking, “What’re you doin’ it for?”

His hand had dropped and he’d placed the coin on the ground near her boot. Ana had grimaced internally; now she’d have to either pretend she hadn’t noticed, or take the coin back. Papa was always firm: pay the artist for their work. But before she could react, he had brightened and began playing something that was so deep that she knew it must have been illegal. Pure songs, untouched by other harmonies and melodies to protect them from copyright infringement, were grounds for arrest. But she didn’t stop him; couldn’t. When he was done he’d said, “Who knows what tomorrow will bring? A 1970s soul classic, forgotten for decades until life was breathed back into it in 2002 by RJD2, perhaps one of the greatest of the pre-mash artists of all time.”

She’d continued staring.

After the briefest long awkward minute passed, he’d conceded a translation. “What I mean is, it’s for the war. I play music for the war.”

“War is over,” she’d muttered with a small move of her foot, pushing the coin gently in his direction.

He’d laughed, and she would have thought it was rude if he didn’t smile so broadly. “No matter how much I want it,” he had begun strumming again. “Against my own desire for peace, there’s always a war, somewhere in the universe.” He didn’t take his eyes off of her and she had wondered even then—though briefly, the kind of wondering that is too quickly forgotten—if he were *zilaa*; he had worn a high-collared shirt and it would have been rude to try to look. “Earth is not the only place to have endured it.”

“True,” she’d said. “And it will come here again once we get bored enough with the technology that the last one brought.”

He’d nodded in agreement then finally looked at the ground directly by her boot. “Pardon me, but the coin is still there, uh…”

“Ana.”

He had suddenly brightened. “Ana! I happen to know a song with the word Ana in it.” He had begun to play a song in a language she didn’t recognize. Minor as well—he must have had a preference for it.

“What does it mean?” she’d asked at a lull.

He stopped playing. “I know that Ana means ‘I’ in Arabic.”

“Ahh! You know Arabic?”

“No. Just the word *Ana*. I memorized the rest of the sounds.”

“You’re singing a song and you don’t know the meaning of the words?” she scoffed. Something her father would have disdained even more than expecting a musician to play for free. ||*Anpil moun panse ke yo konn pale kreyòl, men yo yonn pa vle pale konen l’ an profondè.[[34]](#footnote-34)||*

“Oh, well,” he reddened. “The singer’s voice sounded sincere.”

“That’s not enough. Where did you get this song from? You should figure out what it says.” She picked up the coin and place it firmly back in his palm, forcing his hand closed over it. “Don’t you have your holotext…. uh…?”

“James.” He was frowning. “I don’t have one.” He nodded towards his palm, because it should have been obvious.

“Oh. Sorry. Right.” She stooped down to pull her own holotext out. “We should look this up. There should be a record *somewhere*.”

Back then, she didn’t know what Ks’ou were aside from the boring accounts in history class. She didn’t know that James was listening just below the surface, amused by the exchange she’d in fact had with the one she would come to know as the Ks’ou named NeVarr.

And that was the limen on all: words, trickle, impulse.

—

Ana wondered if Éloise’s coma was like Ks’ou control. Ana could peer out, dimly, through eyes that should have been physically hers, but were subject to the Ks’ou—the first one. The one before Aurana. That one knew control very well and kept her from seeing the world unless it wanted to torture her.

It held, moved, and felt all parts of the body like a puppet master whose veins were the very strings it controlled. It forced her to say terrible things to her parents, so much that they kicked her out. She was homeless for awhile, living on friend’s couches, but the Ks’ou did not mind, of course. Every friend she had was controlled thereafter; soon, she was grateful that her parents had kicked her out, because then the Ks’ou could not figure out yet how to lead them into its control. It tried, many times, but Papa’s demands for apologies was something the prideful Ks’ou could not swallow. And when it transferred speech to her, demanded that she make an apology on its behalf, she could wrestle control of her tongue and curse in just the way that she knew Papa hated, *Why did you spend so much on that rusty ground-chained car, Papa, when you could have had a hover and we could have been free?* Papa’s eyes clouded and he would be hurt; the Ks’ou would curse her and force her to leave. It would be over and Papa and Mama would be protected once more.

Éloise was always safe in her coma.

A safety that Ana envied.

—

Earlier that morning, Ana had held Éloise’s hand, but her body was at a distance from the bed, so that her arm would stretch out and she would feel the tension in her muscles; this tension would make her sore so she could remember to think of her sister throughout the day. Her hand was much darker than her twin’s, to be expected for the time spent in this room. No matter how often Ana tried to come to make sure the cheap plastic shutters were open so sunlight could stream though, some nurse would always come by after she left and shut them, like clockwork. Opening them was part of the routine battle of keeping Éloise alive, between herself and innumerable other unseen players, and she could only remove her blindfold after her opponent had moved.

“Aurana’s work has been on fire ever since she found her new friend. They sit and argue and *spar*, too, not just verbally, and then after he leaves she writes for hours. She hasn’t the nerve to ask him over to the apartment, yet. NeVarr would flip.”

What would Éloise think of the alien controlling her body? She had no idea. Éloise, at least the Éloise she remembered two years ago, was a fire starter. She’d wanted to participate in the war; she had also wanted to see the Ks’ou enclave herself, and was disappointed to learn that they had all been expelled, banned from Earth indefinitely, and left to do their damage on other parts of the universe. Like Aurana, Éloise was curious, obsessively so. Ana vaguely remembered her saying that she wanted to interview one—get an insider perspective.

Ana not only had that perspective, she lived it. And she could only imagine the dialogue. It was a recurring dream, in fact:

“The Ks’ou does *what?*” Éloise would hiss at her.

“It burrows. Into my neck. You know, like those little sand crabs you and I used to pick when mama and papa took us to the beach. Right. Um, then it extends its… tendrils into my spinal chord, my nerves, my brain, my muscles… throughout my interstitium. I can no longer move, almost paralyzed… but Aurana can move me. My head, hands, feet, everything. And she connects to my mind, too. I can send thoughts to her, just as she can send thoughts to me. I share memories with her. Dreams. She could *take* these, of course, by force, but we agreed… only if I give them.”

“And you let her?” Éloise would be angry; confused. She would invoke their family, “What would Papa think?”

Papa.

Well, Papa would have at least appreciated the *sabbath* that she’d agreed to, with Aurana. Friday was only one day, but it was something. Papa was always strict about a sabbath, any sabbath, and Aurana cared about understanding human culture, much as she struggled in other aspects of her control.

Yet. “Papa would be angry.”

“Damn right he would be.”

“But he wouldn’t understand.” This was whispered harshly. The dream was almost over, she knew, but despite her sister’s admonitions she had to stay here, because her sister’s voice was more real than ever. “Don’t hate me, Éloise. Please. Some days… it’s just better not to be human. Can’t you understand? Aurana has an archive, a beautiful archive. I want to stay there.”

But the eyes of the imagined Éloise were solid. “No. I don’t understand. Why would you choose the colonizer over your own sister.”

It was never a question, but a statement. Ana would wake. The scene of the hospital, the white empty.

Ana would like to think Éloise and Aurana would have gotten along. But Éloise was also fiercely protective; the thought of anyone settling her sister would have likely eviscerated any of that curiosity.

“We’d probably make a good team, though. The last time we were in the…” she paused. There was no way to know which walls had ears; who would happen to hear a stray word. Aurana was constantly checking to ensure that this entire floor, and especially Éloise’s doctor, were Un-Settled, but it was difficult to keep up with the pace at which the Ks’ou were going now that they had the entire police force overtaken by their species. “Last time, it was fantastic. They retrieved four… four of us. You know, like you and me. And got them to safety before anyone knew what was happening. Aurana and I have been getting really good at our martial arts training, something happens when we fight… it’s easier than when I try to do it alone. You’d be proud.”

Usually when Aurana was here, she wouldn’t speak aloud. She would sit and hold her hand and pray, silently, so much so that she was sure Aurana was unaware she was even doing it. But today was Friday, and they had had their agreement—Aurana’s idea, in fact—and Ana felt like a coward for wanting to undo it, to let Aurana have Fridays, too, just like all the other days when living seemed secondary.

Ana hated the twisted feeling in her stomach, what would her sister think of this weakness? This weakness that kept her tied, but also alive, to Aurana. She could barely be here without wanting to retreat, in the recesses of her mind, so that she could see without the pain of seeing, all of which Aurana would be able to absorb for her.

The same absorbing that would happen when she exited the room, for example, to the quiet mumbling of the nurses, how “Isn’t it time…?” and “There are limited resources…” as though Ana were deaf.

The numbing, no different than when she would walk out the doors to the hospital, to the scene that greeted her, the silent cold of falling snow, which Aurana would have loved. It was only in standing there just long enough to become annoyed at the sudden drippiness of her nose that she noticed El, standing under a lamppost, hesitant and looking miserable. The snow piled on his black, curly hair, and he pulled his coat up closer to himself, buttoning it over his mouth so that only his nose and eyes peaked out. His ears were redder than humanly possible—it was the *living fake,* crumbling like overly dried clay, buckling with less fortitude than real human skin could withstand in the onslaught of the cold.

“Don’t they warn you about hats on your planet?” She said this more harshly than she needed to.

“I have one for the head of this *living fake*,” he mumbled. “But left it at my host aunt’s house. I am still not used to the weather, here. This is a much colder place than where I lived on Routhhe. I will likely need to regenerate my skin after this.”

She let the conversation fall. She couldn’t tell him that Aurana wasn’t here, that she was currently at home as they’d agreed Fridays would go.

“Sorry, I saw you walk in and I thought I’d say hello. But I did not know if I was allowed inside. So I waited.”

“My, uh, friend. Coma. For the past 2 years. They’ve been trying to convince us to pull the plug for months, but… thank God for legal entanglements.” A pause. “Though it’s only a matter of time.”

He looked at her with large, distant brown eyes, as though calculating a math problem in his head. “It is good that you care about Humans. Despite my criticisms, I like them very much. More than I thought I would.”

Ana bit her tongue. She was a better liar than Aurana, and El was pretty aloof, but she would be sure to screw up at some point. Especially when she didn’t know what he was talking about.

“There will be a leaf alight,” he added. She blinked. Was this a Thhiyatkhoor thing, or just El being strange? “For your friend.”

“Okay… I have to go.” She couldn’t stand the crestfallen, pathetic look on his face. It was almost as good as NeVarr’s. “Why don’t you come to my place for breakfast tomorrow?” This alliance, or whatever it was, was good for Aurana, she decided. Gave her something to do other than fret about the Ks’ou Nation.

“I’m not allowed to eat Human food,” he said.

“BYOB.” It was fun to throw him off, to see him hesitate and see if he should ask—which he almost never did. She grinned after the silence had extended awkwardly enough, “It means Bring Your Own Branch. A Human joke.”

“Oh. Ha. You are much better at making Human jokes than I am.”

She smiled plainly and watched as he walked away into the oppressive cold.

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*Memory*.

Historical memory. Bodily memory. Intergenerational memory.

And the Archive.

Aurana was unique: the Archive in her mind seemed endless. It had an end, Ana was sure, it *must* have, because all things did. But she did not know where it was, and after time eventually gave up searching for it to rest instead in the collections, curled up in a chair she had crafted from thought-strands, to teach herself. Like the billions of neurons in Éloise’s damaged and vibrant brain, Aurana’s archive was a collection of billions of texts, details, images, sounds, comprising of cultures and their customs across the universe.

Human brains are as scattered as humans are. To find a memory proved difficult even for a Ks’ou; it took quite a bit for an inexperienced Ks’ou to find needed information: language, thought, movement, impressions. But the Archive, which Aurana freely shared with her, was different. Ana would spend hours there as one might spend hours in a library, reading and living through text the lives of others. She loved here; loved this Archive, where she was safe, and without form in the void of sight in the world. The Archive was a different world: hers to inhabit, and lovely.

When Ks’ou settled creatures, the Settled enter a haze, like opening eyes underwater, with figures before them sliced by light and substance. Or complete darkness. The Ks’ou could, as many did, cut off complete sight so the Settled could not *see* what was before them. Aurana and Ana decided that this was variable. Ana often did not look for sight; she had enough of Earth, enough of humans. She needed mostly the Archive, always NeVarr when it was Friday, and nothing else of Earth. She could let Aurana live her life for her, and abandon the world to the Archive where she need not be human, could pluck a text from the shelves of her mind and be immersed in the new vibrant living of beings elsewhere.

**Chapter 8\***

{ So… what does ‘There will be a leaf alight,’ mean? }

{ That refers to a Thhiyatkhoor ritual of lamentation and sometimes healing. } Aurana uttered this slowly and somewhat groggily. The hovertrain blared loudly overhead, its tracks situated just above their apartment.

They were cooking eggs and still trying to wake up; NeVarr/James was making coffee—decaf, of course. He seemed tense; annoyed, and was wearing a turtle neck even though he usually preferred to sleep in a t-shirt like his Human. Aurana knew that her confession of having befriended a Thhiyatkhoor the evening before had bothered him, but did he have to persist as a child?

Why ask about ‘There will be a leaf alight?,’ Aurana puzzled. Occasionally, Ana would spring a question on her to check, to make sure that the Ks’ou really was keeping to her agreement and not reading her mind. The sensation wasn’t special: a slight oscillation, an uneasy energy as when she drank too much coffee, the same feeling when Aurana would control other aspects, like managing pain from the injuries they sustained when fighting in the Deep. It was hard to tell these sensations apart, and no human could ever trust that a Ks’ou would do as they said they would.

But there seemed to be no immediate reason for the question. So Aurana pressed: { …Wait, why are you asking? } She didn’t recall El ever mentioning his rituals around them, and though it wasn’t in her archive, she knew it by other means—by reading a Thhiyatkhoor-authored book, perhaps.

{ I may or may not have run into El after visiting Éloise at the hospital. And may or may not have invited him over for breakfast. And… judging by what time it is, he may or may not knock on the door in the next five minutes. }

{ You *what*?! } she hissed, spinning around to NeVarr, “Did you know about this?! That El…?”

NeVarr, whose eyes were puffy, did not seem pleased. “Yes. Ana, you really didn’t need to wait until the last minute to tell her.”

As if on cue, a loud knock came at the door. Ana took over for a moment, “*Behave*,” she practically spit to NeVarr, H-symbol in hand, then led a reluctant Aurana over to the door, offering control as soon as she had touched the handle. { Relax. He’s bringing his own food. }

El was on the other side, wearing a black coat and a hat this time, and, indeed, holding a branch, at the end of which was a huge sprig of dark green leaves. It was still partially covered in snow, as though he had just picked it.

{ The hell, Ana. } Aurana forced her human’s face into a weak smile, “What, you only brought one?”

He laughed. “You couldn’t possibly be *Wyké*.” This was another well-known species that fed off of tree leaves and could also stomach the Human kind as Thhiyatkhoor could. But their species was large, very large, and making Human shells that could accommodate all of the space that would needed to be folded for them to fit proved difficult. For this reason, *Wyké* weren’t exactly banned from Earth, but weren’t welcome, either.

“You know, my species is much smaller,” she opened the door more widely and gestured for him to come in. NeVarr stood at the entrance to the kitchen drying his hands with a towel; his eyes flickered over El for only a moment. He grunted or coughed in his direction.

El nodded kindly, “Oh, hello.”

Wordlessly NeVarr disappeared back into the kitchen, while El looked at her.

“That’s James, my housemate. Don’t worry about him, he’s shy. Come sit.”

It was a normal enough living space. NeVarr/James’ room was on the first floor, next to the kitchen. There was a small corridor with stairs, leading up to Aurana’s room. The living room was situated modestly; the objects that commanded most of the room were two large bookcases against the lefthand wall, filled to spilling over. This was Ana’s pride; Humans did not collect books anymore, and thanks to Aurana, she now had reason more than ever to consume books at a frenzied pace. In the center of the room, a coffee table and a huge ugly green couch. No pictures of people were found anywhere. To the left of one bookshelf, a medium fishtank, glowing with a few fish, sea snails, and other aquatics. NeVarr/James had neglected to put away their guitar, which sat in the far right corner. Music sheets spread across the coffee table, which Aurana rushed to stack and shove beneath a few books—some of this music had words written on them in the Ks’ou language.

As El walked past the entrance, his eyes caught the wall, and he stopped in full. A part of her went cold. She had framed and hung a picture Ana once doodled, of a small creature with tentacles and an elongated head. She hurried to recover, “It is a cuttlefish. I very much like this creature on Earth. It can change the color of its skin to blend in, even in the dark, and scientists—Human or otherwise—still don’t know why.”

“Cuttlefish?” El said in a disapproving tone. “They look too much like Ks’ou.”

*BANG!* A pot in the kitchen clattered to the floor. El didn’t seemed to notice.

“You do think so?” She issued a proud, { Told you! } to Ana, who still disagreed. { How do you know what Ks’ou look like? You’re blind! } { Only in the way that *you* see. } { Squid. } { Bipedal. }

Aloud she said, “A resemblance, sure. Yet they are a completely different species. The Earth-bound cuttlefish blend in when they want to, not because they have to, as you and I are commanded to do in our shells. And they don’t live nearly as long.” She gestured for him to sit on the couch and joined him there.

“Is your friend,” El leaned closer to her whispering, glancing towards the kitchen. “…is your friend *zilaa*?”

Ah. She hadn’t thought about how to lie to him about this, yet. “No. Human. Maybe let’s not talk about Ks’ou around him.”

But NeVarr had a way of ruining things at the perfect moment. He walked in, slamming two cups down on the coffee table next to where El had placed the branch. “So, I hear you’re Thhiyatkhoor*,*” he said with contrived cheer.

“Ne-*James*,” Aurana hissed.

“Um, it is true—”

But NeVarr was on “one,” as Ana would say. On ‘two’ would be too much; on ‘zero,’ not enough. “How many Humans did your kind trim off like a lawnmower, all for the sake of winning the lousy war that was your cause to begin with?” NeVarr wasn’t the best at making metaphors, even when he wasn’t livid.

“I…,” El seemed to pale. “I do not remember what a lawnmower is, so I cannot possibly—”

“You have the context alright. You Thhiyatkhoor walk around thinking you’ve somehow saved Humans, that we should be grateful to you and just let you roam our planet as you wish.”

“James. Enough.” This was Ana, who had now grabbed James’ hand. He slapped it away.

“In truth,” El continued, “I am not convinced the Thhiyatkhoor would have won the war without the Humans. Shyridin—before he became a General—emphasizes the influence the Great Alliance had on the war. For this many Thhiyatkhoor have criticized him.”

“He’s not outside of Human critique, either,” NeVarr, or perhaps James, sneered—at this point through their mutual anger it was difficult to tell. He was wise to have worn the turtleneck. A Human vein was prominent on his forehead; she could nearly see the inside of the cuff of his sweater a dim blue light, and hoped El wouldn’t see. Thankfully, El was still looking at his hands, stretching and closing them.

“Yes. And Humans, too. In fact, were it not for the begging of the ethical Humans, the Thhiyatkhoor would have completely exterminated the Ks’ou Earth colonizers, instead of only expelling them.”

El said it so deadpan, it was hard to tell whether there was disappointment or solemnity in his voice. Aurana wanted to ask him how he knew this, but she was also eager to change the topic. The conversation stopped for an awkward minute. Then El, as though he sensed her disquiet, looked at her and said, with a soft movement in the corners of his mouth, “Before I forget to tell you, a leaf is alight. For your hospital friend.”

There was a bloom in her. A confused and tangled bloom. “That was kind, El. You didn’t have to.”

{ Is someone going to explain this weird leaf obsession or am I just going to be left guessing? } Ana muttered.

NeVarr/James looked confused, too. They grabbed their decaf and retreated back to their room, slamming the door. Another hovertrain passed over ahead, shaking the room, some of the papers still scattered across the table vibrating in response.

“Sorry,” Aurana said quietly. “I didn’t think he would react that way.”

“It’s fine.” She stared at him so curiously that he felt he needed to explain, “I’ve been told to discern the status of Human-Thhiyatkhoor diplomatic relations.”

“Oh. Is that why you’ve been sent here?”

He didn’t respond.

“Your assessment?”

El’s eyes glanced from NeVarr/James’s closed door to her. “Severely ambivalent.”

When it was time to leave, he stood and asked her to dinner at his aunt’s—really, she was his host-Human, but he considered her close enough to be family, he’d said. He’d finished off the leaves fairly quietly and if she pretended he was eating a salad it was almost normal that he was plucking leaves from a branch and pushing them into the Human shell that was not his real mouth, and that somewhere in there was the *him* who ate the leaves. This time they decided to forgo their usual colonialism debate, just in case James/NeVarr came out again, which he never did. Instead they talked about planets they’ve been to; Aurana could tell that El was desperately, but politely, trying to guess what species she was, still. It was easy to evade: she’d been to many planets, *she’d said,* some desolate, some lush, some beautiful—only a few that were perhaps more beautiful than Earth.

None of them home.

After Aurana saw him off, James/NeVarr ambled out. She was still standing at the open door, arms crossed, watching as El headed down the mush-covered street; it hadn’t snowed fresh in days and was beginning muddy. From the nearly guilty look on his face she could tell he probably had been standing at the door, listening the whole time.

She knew NeVarr well enough, that even though his words were without emotion, he was trying to be cautious of hers: “The KLF would fetch a fair warprice for him.”

She shrugged casually. “Discourse might be a bit awkward after that.”

He stared at her for a moment, the senses connected to his human buzzing. If they’d been in the Ks’ou lagoon together he wouldn’t have been able to suppress the wave of shock, and here it translated to a wide open mouth.

“Aurana, that’s a *Thhiyatkhoor,*” he managed when he was able to work his human’s jaw again.

“Haven’t forgotten.”

“You cannot *discourse* with it. It will *kill you.*”

“Hasn’t happened yet.”

“This is not going to end well.”

“It will be fine,” she waved him off with a hand.

“Thhiyatkhoor hate our people. They expelled us from *our* planet unjustly. They seek only our elimination. Do you think this one will be any different?”

“He will not be. But he doesn’t know what I am. So for now, our discourse is civil.”

“Civil,” NeVarr scoffed. “Civility only breeds benign discourse, absent of impact or magnitude.”

“Our discourse is not like that,” she murmured. “He asks questions I have not heard before. He challenges my words. That is good, isn’t it?”

But he made a sound like cracking, as though spitting, “I speak from experience. We are Ks’ou. We weren’t made for other species… like this.”

There was a silence. Ana pulled them both away from the frame and closed the door, making the ‘H’ symbol with her fingers. “We know.”

—

{ Well, this was certainly an ill-made choice, } Aurana said to her Human. The one named Kahti had a giant weapon pressed to the front of her neck; her scarf had since fallen to the floor. It had happened in just moments and Aurana was impressed, though this wasn’t the time for laudations.

{ No, no, it was *perfectly* rational! Go have dinner with the fighters of the first Ks'ou war on Earth. They’ll *love* you. }

{ I had *no* idea whose son he was. If I had… }

If she had, she certainly would have *never* accepted El’s invitation to dinner.

Kahti, Aurana realized with a curse—*zia plok!*—must have known all along.

Aurana’s curiosity compelled her: she had guessed his species, but she never thought to guess *who* he was.

Aurana only began to assemble mere pieces of the puzzle as they were climbing the steps to the house. It looked like it was two houses, in fact. One was an old model, before new alien architecture became vogue. The older of the structures was decrepit but still standing. After they passed this, Efyir led her up two flights of cracked steps lined with moss stains and somewhat slippery with frost; it eventually gave way to a concrete-like substance and then opened up to a large platform with a wild garden, and behind it, the newer, rectangular grey house with rounded edges and many windows.

His host-human sister Jacque was there, her short hair and those dangling hoop earrings. Standing next to her was an older woman, frailer, whose thinness could not be hidden by the large jacket she wore, coming into full view as they approached.

When they first exchanged looks, she couldn’t help but feel a jolt. The mighty Human warrior of lore was an old woman, somewhat short, with a short, frayed crown of grey and white hair. Wrinkles lined her face like fissures from her eyes and mouth, but she still had somewhat young, high cheekbones and a smooth forehead. Despite the ways that aging clothed her face, Aurana knew it well. She had been detailed in many, many Ks’ou reports, and Aurana had made it a point to read and archive all of them.

When she spoke, there was a kind of elegance in her voice. Power.

She greeted Aurana pleasantly enough.

“I am honored,” Aurana said, and this was the truth. The Human had laid waste to many Ks'ou, but her tactical precision was unquestionable. Kahti looked puzzled until she explained, “You are the fighter and victor of the Ks'ou war on Earth, with the Great Alliance?” She held out her hand.

Kahti shook it somewhat warily. “Of course. Not many youth your age know who I am. Or care, for that matter.”

“History is still a dangerous profession to be in,” Aurana murmured. Both she and Ana were thinking of Dr. Hagåtña, and her boldness to remain a university professor. In the initial colonization of humans, Ke’Ad Earth-Designated First ordered the massacre of historians, archeologists, anthropologists, librarians, and other humans with roles like those. The erasure of history was his hoped-for legacy. Generations of humans impassioned to know their past, laid to waste by the order of one Ks’ou.

“Aurana has a deep knowledge of history,” Efyir offered at that moment. “More than some of the professors in our classes, I think.”

Aurana turned slightly red. “Sometimes. I have so many questions. Like, how did you break into the Ks'ou Deep back when there were those mock *Ihnn* Gates? What was Ke’Ad, Earth-Designated-First like? How did you—”

“There will be plenty of time for answers to those,” Kahti said, somewhat too cheerfully.

“Okay, okay, but one last question,” Aurana grinned and then somewhat cheekily asked, “Could you sign my tablet?” She never understood this ritual of asking human celebrities to scribble their barely-legible name onto things that could get lost or deleted, but it was a human enough gesture.

“Of course,” Kahti obliged. She signed and handed it back to her with a pointed look.

Her name was scribbled across it, illegible as was the norm, but the very last scribble seemed to end in a tiny sea-like creature with long, wavy arms. Aurana looked at her with an unamused grimace, but said nothing, while Kahti smiled nonchalantly. Was this some kind of strange humor that only old humans possessed?

As if to goad her slight oncoming panic, as soon as they’d been ushered inside the door his aunt sneered politely, “What can I offer you? Water? Soda? Kombucha?”

“No kombucha, *no thanks*,” Aurana said, hoping her firmness wouldn’t betray the incongruity between her piqued curiosity and the desire to flee abruptly. “A great joke you’ve just told.”

“What’s the joke? You often drink it when we’re together,” El sparked.

“El. Seriously.” She made a *shut your mouth* motion with her hand. “On Earth, it’s taboo to offer kombucha to a guest.”

“It is?”

Aurana could have slapped him. She was now derailed, having to give El the history lesson she thought they’d already covered. “We’ve been reading the General’s book for how long now? And don’t you often visit Earth? Don’t tell me you can’t remember this. Kombucha was nearly outlawed after the war because it sustained the Ks’ou apart from *hethalu* clones. The uprisers even attempted to use tainted versions of it for chemical warfare in 2—-. After the Ks’ou were ousted from Earth, kombucha-producing companies nearly went out of business. It is good that Humans have such a short historical memory, however, otherwise we’d never see it again, but you *never* offer it to a guest.”

“Sure when you say it that way, I do remember,” El nodded, unconcerned. Something about the way Jacque and Aunt Kahti's were looking at him caused him to explain further, “Aurana and I have been critiquing his book—”

“You two started a club over your dad’s book?” Jacque teased. “He’d be so proud, Efy.”

The pieces fell into place. His father's book? The General. His… *father*? The explosion in her mind was instantaneous.

“Efy,” she repeated, slowly, taking a step back. “Efyir-Azayim?”

He paled, then cursed in his language. “Jacque, *that* wasn’t common knowledge.”

Jacque rolled her eyes in protest. “Oh nooooo, the movie’s been spoiled. Soylent green is people. Rosebud is the sled. The carrion contains the vaccine. You are Shyridin’s son. Sorry, too soon?”

Aurana felt an influx of human-like impulses: laughter, tears, the need to attack. “*You’re* the General’s son?” Memories flooded, apart from the archive. Her own. She suppressed these. Thhiyatkhoor have always been dangerous. The General was no different.

“Why does it matter?” He seemed stiff. Wary. Or suspicious?

Why *did* it matter? Thankfully Ana’s mind sprang forward a reasonable enough lie, which Aurana vocalized: “I- I’ve been trashing the book right in front of you this whole time!”

“I prefer the term *critique,*” El hissed, his shell reddening. Aurana was relieved the lie worked. “Besides, I just want to hear someone say something hones—”

“No *wonder* you act so spoiled! You’re a military brat!”

El frowned. “Honest like that, yes, I suppose.” Jacque stifled a laugh; Aunt Kahti's expression remained unreadable.

As if on cue, a small chiming sound pervaded the room. *Tink, tink*. It grew slightly louder and there, right on the small screen that lined the wall, appeared a picture of the General himself, his name burning across the bottom of the screen. Aurana wouldn’t have recognized him from the picture alone—how many grim-faced, scar-eyed Thhiyatkhoor were out there? But now she knew, and there he was: stern, slate-colored, black eyes, and a rigid face like a prism.

Aurana shrank in her chair. The General. The greatest, most horrific of Ks’ou combatants. Of course, of course, he’d referred to the human as *Aunt* Kahti. This was the legacy of the Great Alliance. NeVarr was right: this was foolish. Surrounded; an escape route was now impossible. She looked at El, but was surprised to find, in his expression, resonance—he looked terrified, too. Pale.

*Tink, tink.*

She noticed that he wasn’t moving. She nudged him but his eyes were fixed on Kahti, and after a moment, he mustered to his ‘Aunt,’ “You are not going to answer it?”

“Tell him I’m busy,” she said, looking at Aurana with a calm, thin smile. “Tell him I have an important guest here who cannot be left alone.” *Tink, tink.* She took her eyes off Aurana for a moment to stare directly at Efyir. “This is your chance. Speak to your father and let him know how you are doing.”

He still hadn’t moved. “Now?”

“This has been going on long enough,” she said firmly, and he knew that no excuse would untangle him. He glanced warily at Aurana, wanted to be brave, and stood.

“Wish me all the glory of battle.”

“||*Tié ave urill[[35]](#footnote-35),||*” Aurana managed a whisper. *You do your battle. I find an escape*. El flashed her an awkward, worried smile and headed into the room.

Now they were alone, and it took only a moment before Aurana was held against the wall.

And Aurana was wondering why her—Ana’s—throat hadn’t been reduced to atoms by a weapon by now. “You,” Aurana squeaked, trying to breathe, “Are very fast for your age.”

“And you should be dead,” Kahti growled, pressing harder.

“I was right!” Jacque stood just behind them. “I mean, I wasn’t sure, but I thought it was *weird* that someone with such excellent hair would spend all that time for just a shell.”

“Th-thanks?” Aurana rasped.

“*Not the time for celebration*,” Kahti snapped to her daughter. To Aurana, she wasted no time: “I have questions. What is your kind doing here? All of you should have been extradited or exiled with the 2—- Peace Treaty.”

“I… would be happy… t-talk… buh… breathing…” Aurana choked, also distracted by Ana’s cursing at Kahti in their private speech. { Calm down! } Kahti lifted the weapon only slightly. “I am not your enemy,” she muttered. There was no use in lying or pretending she wasn’t exactly what Kahti thought she was.

“Like hell. I’m old, not stupid,” Kahti hissed. “You clearly don’t have a shell at all. Talk, Ks'ou.” She squeezed the weapon she held, a gift from Shyridin—*typical Shyr, sending a war token instead of bringing himself to Earth*—to initiate the charge, making itself evident a low hiss. Jacque’s eyes went wide, but she didn’t move from the couch.

“I wouldn’t have come here to meet you directly if I thought I could fool you, of all people,” Aurana protested, sharply but quietly. Efyir would be distracted but he still might *hear* them. “I mean, *clearly* you are more quick on the uptake than our friend *Efyir* here—” She noticed Kahti frowning in a way that meant she was losing patience. “If I intended to do him harm, I would have done so already. I’ve had the pleasure of knocking the wind out of him multiple times while sparring, rendering him vulnerable, and he is *fine*.”

Kahti sighed. Efyir lacked Shyr’s caution, but then again, so did her own daughter, “How don’t I know he isn’t *already* Settled?”

“*You* are still alive, aren’t you? Do you know how much the Ks'ou hate both you and the great General Shyridin?” Aurana whispered blithely. “I had no idea of his name until a few moments ago. If I had truly Settled him I wouldn’t have shown up by myself, unarmed.”

“Tell me what are you doing here.”

“Having dinner,” she responded with a weak laugh, but Kahti gave a warning growl.

Aurana drew in a breath. { You’d better just come clear, } Ana said quietly, though there was no need to whisper since no one could hear the conversation that passed between a human and their Ks’ou. The door seemed not so far away, but they both had little sense of Kahti’s strength.

“It’s not good news, obviously. The Ks'ou are not gone—we never left in accordance with the treaty. But it’s not just a few of us. There are… *tens of thousands*. More, perhaps. A second secret war has been brewing for a long time, now, and there are Ks'ou lagoons across the globe. The Ke'Ad in charge, Ke’Ad Earth Designated Second, clearly took note from Ke'Ad Earth Designated First, after the first invasion and learned from its many, many mistakes. He is biding his time.”

Kahti was not prepared for this. She loosened her grip, enough for Aurana to pull away with relative ease. She could finally see Jacque, who wasn’t glowering as her mother was, but seemed frozen. Afraid? Or calculating? Jacque would have only heard of Ks’ou in history books, heard her mother’s stories; she would never have seen one in real life before.

Aurana took a few cautious steps back. She couldn’t outrun them, or Kahti’s weapon, still directly pointed at her, but she wanted some distance before she uttered her next words.

“You and your colleagues made a terrible mistake,” Aurana continued. “Giving Ks'ou shells to fuse with spelled the end for the Ks'ou as a species. It never translated sight to us. And they break easily, not able to last as long as hosts—especially *Human* hosts—do. The Ks'ou who rejected the Peace Treaty defected and launched an aggressive repopulation campaign underground to rebuild the Nation.”

Kahti thought about Aurana’s words without saying anything, she stepped back, and in moments had slumped onto the couch. The weapon landed with a thud on the carpet and, out of human hands, quickly decharged itself. Even the rigor of this small attack took much out of her. She rubbed together her crinkled fingers, gently touching the faded, lighter part of her skin where her wedding ring had once been.

They hadn’t seen Malcolm in years; for all they knew, he would be dead. She and Shyr were the only ones left. How were they supposed to fight this?

Aurana continued, “They salvaged a few cloned *hethalu* trees. Then slowly infiltrated high ranking officials, one by one. Then when the Humans became *space-bound*, that was easier. They could easily smuggle in a few hundred Ks'ou from *kyôsta* and a few *hethalu* clones with each ship that landed. No direct war. No grand schemes. Just patience.”

They could hear snippets from Efyir from the other room, still talking to his father. His voice sounded calm, at least, and it was a good sign he was in there for such a long time.

“But! Some good news! The Ks'ou are about to experience their *first ever* Civil War.” She paused when Ana scolded her. “Hmm, well, Ana is telling me that I should have not had such a cheerful tone of voice. Sorry.”

“Ana,” Kahti said in a low voice. “That is the name of your Settled?”

“She’s my Human,” Aurana scoffed. “I don’t refer to her as my Settled.”

“Let me talk to her.”

Aurana started. She surveyed the Human Kahti, the great warrior, the one who helped fell the Nation in the first war. She had battled with the former Ke’Ad directly, *multiple times*, and crushed many Ks’ou. Aurana was now deeply regretting the curiosity that brought her here in the first place.

“If you destroy me, my Human will be very sad,” she said. “She and I are companions.”

{ She does not appear to be one for sob stories, } Ana cautioned.

She was right: Kahti’s eyes were unwaveringly cold. “No harm will come to you. *Not yet.* Let me speak to her. Now.”

{ Go ahead. I’ll protect you. }

Aurana regarded her. This urging of her human was compelling, but she was afraid. Ks’ou were so vulnerable. And the pain of detaching…

As if noticing this final hesitation, Kahti struck her weapon against the table. The sound shocked Jacque so much that she leapt up from her seat; Aurana, on the other hand, used to sudden bursts of sound, simply looked from Kahti and back to the weapon, unfazed.

“A gesture, Ks’ou.”

Yes. The human knew the power of gestures.

The void, she hated the immediate void in sight. Not darkness, no, nothing of color, but absence absolute. Made doubly so, because sounds were of course not an option, not outside of liquid. Ana had pulled Aurana out of her neck, gently, as the synapses Aurana held with her Ks’ou threads released their hold on her brain and spinal chord. It was as though Ana had, sewn into her body, electric blue hair, bound by a single bulb, and at present torn out completely from where it settled at the base of her human neck. Aurana was could not see or hear what was going on, but had her faculties of physical touch, and knew she was at least safe in Ana’s hand.

She hoped Efyir would not be returning anytime soon. She did not want him to see her like this, and would have to trust that her human could hide her if he returned.

Ana held Aurana outward with a dark brown arm. Aurana, as Ks’ou, was a creature striped with varying shades of bright blue. Ana’s palm cupped Aurana’s head and body, while her appendages, shrinking as they came in contact with the air, wrapped around Ana’s fingers.

“A gesture of peace,” Ana said. Her eyes surveyed the room, taking note of the time on an old clock hanging on the wall adjacent to the couch, the round kind; she was unable to discern if its hands were moving and actually working. It was always a jolt, being able to see with her own eyes. When Aurana had control of her body it was like watching something on a screen; now she felt like she had actually stepped inside of it.

“Do you have *any* idea what that is? This is not a game, young lady, that is a *parasite—*”

“I thought you were different,” Ana interrupted. “General Shyridin refers to you as a Ks’ou sympathizer in his book. I thought of all of them, you would understand.”

Kahti quieted and surveyed her for a moment. Jacque was looking back and forth at them both, with an unreadable expression.

“You *are* the Kahti whose tactics carved the way for Ks'ou peace in the first war, aren’t you?”

“And I am also the Kahti who slit necks to win the war.”

“Aurana told me you were full of contradictions,” Ana said calmly. “But Aurana also said that that is the nature of war. She doesn’t want Ks'ou on Earth. But she doesn’t want her species *wiped out* either. We have an agreement. I let her use my body, and she works to get the Ks'ou off of Earth and back to *kyôsta* for good.”

“kyôsta?” Jacque finally spoke.

“It is the word for *home* in the Ks'ou language. They do not even have a name for their own planet,” Ana said. “We help each other—”

“Don’t delude yourself,” Kahti scoffed.

“Perhaps it was not possible in your time,” Ana said. “All your time had was kumba-ya singing Ks'ou who didn’t know that peace cannot be restored without violence. Who sat by and essentially did nothing for Humans. That was why that movement dissolved so quickly.”

Kahti's eyes narrowed. This sharpness was something she hadn’t heard in a long while. Not since Aletheia died. “And how far—how violent—are you both willing to go for peace?”

Ana didn’t answer this. Instead she said, “Believe it or not, she likes *talking* with the Thhiyatkhoor. She wants to help him. If the Ks'ou discovered that he *out of all of them* was here… well, *you know*… That’s why she is helping him act more Human. So he can blend in.”

“How old are you?” Kahti hissed.

“Well, *Aurana* was born something like a decade ago. Myself, only earlier last year.” She grinned.

Kahti frowned. Ks’ou accounts of age never made sense to her, and she didn’t like the way this child was getting smart. “Stay away from him—you and your Ks'ou. You’ve informed me of enough.”

Ana sighed. Discourse was over. She returned Aurana to her neck. The arms of the Ks’ou wove into the human. Ana could only liken it to the feeling of having body hair twisted and torn out, a dis-ease that extended from the neck, to the abdomen, and outward to the arms and legs. It should have been much more painful if Aurana weren’t so skilled. She was also quick: unlike Ana’s former Ks’ou, who seemed to extend the pain for much longer than necessary, Aurana made it near-instantaneous: liquid thread to thread; ex-tense to existence.

When she was sure the Ks'ou had regained control of Ana’s senses, Kahti snipped, “We are done here.” Pointed towards the door. Aurana raised her eyebrows—she would really allow her to walk out…? Of course, when Efyir found out, he already knew where she went to school, where she lived. NeVarr would be angry at having to move *again*. These thoughts spun around in her mind as she grabbed the handle, affairs in hand, when they were interrupted by Jacque’s exaggerated announcement of Efyir returning.

“Oh, *heyyyy*. Silverbutt.”

Aurana spun around. El—Efyir, rather—had taken off his Human shell. He now stood in front of them in his Thhiyatkhoor form. He was bright, so bright that his skin—somewhere between silver, yes, but certainly slate—was shining. His birth form was dressed in the traditional *Thhiyatkhoor* clothes, dark brown tunic and loose pants; his was interwoven with a crescent-like pattern. He was a shade bluer than his father, but the likeness in their visage was striking, particularly the black, solid eye-arches, and while the stern, narrow ridges of his face were not yet set due to his youth, it was a softer version.

Ana was always weirded out by the fact that Thhiyatkhoor do not have hair on their heads. Instead they had two branches they call *naghryoja*, shaped like antlers or horns—though slightly smaller than those of the animal that Ana was thinking of—and curved in a disconnected circle around their head. Efyir’s were cedar and about a foot long, and each bore one small stem. He was young. His face was similar to Humans—ears, mouth—but slightly sharper, the most prominent difference being that his nose was as edges, around which were slits for airways. Out of the left arm of the tunic was a large round cut, where his blades, three, extended sharply; the fierce pride of the Thhiyatkhoor.

Aurana was clutching her scarf, which she hadn’t had a chance to put on over her neck where the small blue bump would clearly be visible at the right angle.

“Are you leaving?” he asked, in a voice so calm that it clanged against the tension that had risen in the room during his absence.

She startled them all with a sudden bust of anger she hadn’t realized was there. “*No one important?*! You’re obviously not here on diplomacymatters, *Efyir-Azayim*. No Thhiyatkhoor General’s son would be tasked with something so mundane.”

Efyir’s skin clouded. “You—you’re right. But I am in fact here for something *more* mundane than diplomacy.”

She damned him and his diplomacy. Huffing with a swift swirl of the scarf over her neck, too quick for him to notice, “You’re not the only one who lied.”

“Fine,” he said too quickly. “Let’s *ghjj*? Winner decides who gets to tell the truth.” In his smile she recognized *him,* the El—or Efyir—that she knew, despite his lack of shell. “I promise my reasons for being on Earth are not as exciting as you might think.”

Aurana’s curiosity piqued again, but, interrupted by Kahti,

“Now is not the best—” she stopped herself when she regarded Efyir’s skin, an expression utterly strange via a pattern she had seen on Shyridin once or twice.

“It’s alright, Aunt Kahti,” Efyir said to fill in her self-imposed silence. “Aurana and I spar all the time.”

They were all compelled by the strange calm that seemed to have overtaken him. And Aurana realized this would perhaps be the last time they could *ghjj*. She didn’t dare glance at Kahti, whose hate she could sense without even meeting her eyes. Once he learned the truth—and she knew it was either she who would tell it or Kahti—there would be no more sparring. “Fine. But *ghjj* like you are right now. No shell.”

He scoffed. “You can’t possibly win against me like this.”

She gestured her head towards the window with a sly smile. “You haven’t looked yet outside. It’s snowing.”

Outside, Efyir was uneven. The snow clumped to his branches; made him clumsy. And worse, they battled on even ground. Aurana was wise enough to dodge his attempts to draw her into the thicket, where he would have the advantage. He pinned her shoulders only once, briefly, but she managed to break his grip, and nearly break his wrists at that, though she knew the limits, as did he.

The sparring was beautiful, the most beautiful—they’d think—for a long and indefinite time. Her scarf around her neck would seem at first a weakness, but it was a weapon. He’d try to grab ahold of an edge and pull her closer, and she’d follow, only to anticipate the attempt and bring forth a fist or other attack that would make him release. She used the loose ends of scarf, even, to tie his hands at one point, and he made the unfortunate decision to slash them into pieces with his claws.

Their battle ended when the snow momentarily let up; he could finally see, and balanced himself enough to make his final attack, pulling her scarf around her eyes in one quick gesture, breathlessly slamming her back to the snow-covered ground with his legs and holding her, boot-like shoes pinning her shoulders, triumphantly.

“Don’t hold back next time,” he grinned, leaning over and pushing the scarf from over her eyes.

“Neither should you.”

“A fight between a Thhiyatkhoor and a Human is hardly fair.”

She started, eyes wide, lifting herself up from the ground as he climbed aside. They spoke low, their voices captured in snow.

“Last week, when we were sparring, I noticed that you had a birthmark or a bruise on your arm. Shells don’t have birthmarks, and if it were a bruise the shell would have repaired itself, if, as you’ve said, you’ve been going into the PODs. But I suspect you haven’t. That’s the truth you wanted to tell me, right?”

Aurana bit her lip, tightening the tatters of her scarf and hoping he would blame the red of her face on the growing cold. “You’re not so aloof after all.” It was indeed a birthmark, one Éloise had always teased her sister about. Her eyes caught Kahti; she and Efyir’s host-human sister had been watching them from the door. The elder’s eyes glittered, almost laughing. All things must end—and a Thhiyatkhoor was dangerous enough without being *the* General’s son. “Walk me to the hovertrain station. There’s another truth you need to know, Efyir-Azayim.”

“What?” he seemed stunned. “What about dinner?”

“I’ve been disinvited.”

His slate skin bore hazy marks, like remnants on a chalk board, a sign of his internal confusion. When he turned to question Kahti, she mumbled a few words, and told Jacque to escort them, only worsening his confusion. He retrieved his human shell and, alongside Jacque, met Aurana right where he’d left her after their *ghjj*, at the edge of the woods surrounding Kahti’s house. She hadn’t budged, standing in the drifting snow with a contemptuous look. Aurana’s eyes flashed from Jacque to Efyir, unsurprised, and she turned and began walking without saying anything. He hurried to follow.

He tried to make small talk by reviewing their *ghjj*. It had been exciting, having to fight nearly blind as the snow clumped to his *naghryoja*; after some prodding, Aurana began to speak about how she arranged her offense, trying to fight through a growing dizziness. Jacque said nothing, trailing behind them. When they arrived at the hovertrain station, all their words failed, pervaded by an unstable quiet.

A sound resounded through the partially enclosed platform where they stood, something like fabricated strings, clearly arranged in dissonance so it might not inadvertently copy an unmashed song. Aurana tried focusing on how pleasant the individual notes were, despite the sharp collective tone cutting through Ana’s ears. When the sound had ceased its assault, Efyir blurted, “I checked the database. My *ekhair’s* name was removed from my entry.”

“What?”

“My *ekhair*. He must have processed this with our government to end our *ekhair* term. It’s allowable to do without warning if another *ekhair* is considered out of contact. This is why he hasn’t reached out to me while I’ve been on Earth.”

Jacque cursed, but didn’t say anything further, glancing back and forth between them warily.

“I’m sorry, Ef—I mean, El.” She looked at him again. It was still strange to her, that this had been the General’s son this whole time, this awkward creature who wore human skin even more awkwardly, whose voice was firm but held an undertone that was less self-assured. He was right to have hidden his name. A true identity did change everything. As he was about to find out, himself.

“I really don’t mind that you lied about being *zilaa*. I just want to continue dis—” But the train finally pulled up, and the less pleasant sound of the doors opening and people rushing out swallowed the rest of what he’d said. This was perhaps better, too.

“Greet me in Endaithsu,” she cut off his babbling, stepping onto the train.

“But, there are people around…”

“*Just do it*,” she snapped.

He sighed, then in a low voice, *“Endaithsu*: ||Two parallel lines may never meet.||”

As though she knew, Jacque stepped up and put a hand on his shoulder. This was perhaps helpful. A salve. Or perhaps to keep him from lunging at her, to kill her.

But she would wait just a bit more. She stared hard at him as the hollow sound blared, the warning that the doors would be shutting soon, and the train would sweep her and Ana away, up to 480 km/hr. Her lips budged but made no sound until Ana urged her. The train sounded once more just as she spoke, but she knew he’d heard it, clearly, the vile tongue. She imagined that when he finally processed, staring out into the now empty platform, the sound that at first seemed garbled would become like spitting, oozing in his mind: “*Ks’Sassi*: ||May they be broken so they do.||”

**— — — — —**

Later, in the night—very early in the morning, actually, when she knew the kids were well asleep, even Efyir, who had been agitated all night—Kahti took advantage of her insomnia to call Shyridin.

“You are sure.” Shyr’s eyes, specked with blue in the center of a sea of slate, stared hard at her through the OptiScreen.

“I talked to a Ks'ou directly myself.” Kahti didn’t like leaving out details, but some part of her wanted to protect Efyir from his father’s disappointment.

“It’s not a trap? It was willing to tell you all of this? Why?”

“She had no reason to lie. I could have shattered her throat. And then she willingly left her Settled and the girl told me the same thing.”

“We already know of willing Settled Humans,” he snipped.

“This was different. And I’ve been noticing, now, some odd things, too. The police here have been aggressive about POD violations, lately. And they’re about to vote on a planet-wide curfew—have you ever heard of such a thing? The girl mentioned something about a civil war.”

“If true, this is good,” he mused. “The Ks'ou can be played against one another until they destroy themselves from the inside out.”

Kahti frowned. “I need you to come. We are the only ones left.”

General Shyridin was quiet at first. His head lowered, revealing a shadowed head-crown. Kahti could not remember the last time she counted his offshoots, so she took the opportunity to do so, then. 20? *Layl.* *What happened to you, old friend?* But she remained silent, having known that the battle for whom she wanted Shyr to be had long since terminated.

Finally, he spoke. “We do not have enough information yet. If we call too much attention, it could trigger panic, and there would be demands for a full Thhiyatkhoor fleet,” Shyridin paused intentionally, here, the cyan of his eyes watching Kahti so that he can see his words seep from the air into her bones. “No, this should be a quiet mission. This will be good for Efyir and Jacque to investigate. I will inform Astriyen—”

“You will *not* have me put my daughter in a new war,” her sudden rage relieved her. “Not after all that we’ve been through.”

“Our children have been spoiled with peace. They are much older than you and I were when we fought on Earth; I feel they are ready.” When he saw her prepare a new protest, he was gentle, “You can’t protect them forever, Kahti.”

“I have been to *every* funeral of each one of us, Shyr, I have watched *all* of our friends die. You have not been here a single time for *any* of them and now, Malcolm—” she caught her throat with her tongue; swallowed.

In looking at him she could see his face regain some aspects its youth, the way his eyes softened and she could tell he wanted to say something. But she blinked and it was gone, and Shyr’s dim expression returned, of one who had witnessed and dealt too many deaths, the flat circles in his eyes framed by the scar from his forehead all the way to his neck.

“Thhiyatkhoor do not funeral, as you know. If my *ekhair* is indeed gone,” Shyridin said this hollowly, “Then I have no reason to return to Earth again.”

“You have no reason to return to Earth if he is *alive*,” she hissed, slamming her fists on the wall beside the screen.

He ended the transmission.

**Chapter 9**

My father, the one we all refer to as simply ‘The General’, would always tell me that it was foolish to think of any time as a time of peace.

This was how he gained the ranks of General in the first place. I was told—by others—that he’d stopped many wars before they ever began. Shyridin—I invoke his very name to honor him—preemptively struck so that any uprising would be quelled before it became out of control.

Preempt, this was what he learned from mistakes made in his earlier time on Earth, *Shyridin admitted to me one day*. If the Thhiyatkhoor had simply arrived earlier with their fleet, then many lives would have been spared. The Ks’ou leader Ke’Ad Earth-Designated First should have been eliminated, not put before a tribunal. He scoffed at the thought of litigation for a Ks’ou. He should have been publicly executed, not given the rights of citizens. In his mind, this diminished the victory he had had with his colleagues, and began his slow indignation towards those he’d once called friends.

Yet he loved them. And because he loved them, and humans and Earth in general, he was constantly held in a state similar to the human Dubois’ double-consciousness. Not the same, but similar… my father was at once one and the other. Routhhe-born; Earth-bound. Thhiyatkhoor by biology; influenced heavily by Human culture.

As you all know, I was not born on Routhhe. This profoundly influenced the ways I perceived myself and my place on Earth. For one, I did not find it disruptive at all to pursue certain human ways…

—

These were not the thoughts Efyir should have had during this time of solemnity, but it was difficult to push them away. He was outside; even though Kahti had prepared a lovely tree room in her compound, it wasn’t the same as the space of the forest, as home, that expanded from her backyard, even if it was colder than Thhiyatkhoor preferred. This place had once been an animal reserve, inherited from her parents. But now she was what Humans call retired, which meant she made a lot of food and read many books, most of them old, so old that they were printed, hard-bound, and not even translated into Efyir’s language so he could read them. And the food always smelled incredible, though he noticed she made it mostly while he was away at classes and he could only sense their remnants when he returned home.

With the exception of the OptiScreen she used to speak to his father on—and it was only him who seemed to ever call her—she had very little technology. It was difficult to complete his assignments without it, so he often left early for school to work there.

He would find his new friend Aurana in the courtyard just outside the library. She would never say hello when he arrived, so deep in her work, and, in admiration of her intensity, he would place his notebooks and holotexts on the table next to her, inspired to work himself. It would not take long. Most often, she would be working on something that seemed tangentially related to class. The silence, so excessive, would compress until it erupted in discourse.

“There are no good sources on decolonization,” she growled. She did this regularly, complaining about things for which he had no context.

“Decolonization? But the humans have already been decolonized,” Efyir tried.

She glared at him. “You imagine because of your people?”

He froze. How could he respond, without giving away his connection to Shyridin? “I mean… it is a process. Fanon has said this, right?” he was mumbling random bits he’d heard here and there, not knowing he had stumbled on a site of intrigue.

“Fanon?” Aurana’s eyes widened. Human eyes were like dyed fibers, with an absence in the center aperture, but despite this strangeness Efyir liked that the color of her eyes were close to *hethalu* trees.

“Yes.” A moment of pause gave him reflection, and with this, insight. “Decolonization is a historical process, not a single moment. A thing to look back on. A thing we know is happening, that makes us different fundamentally. The humans have been forever upended, but they are expressing life beyond their colonial period. Self-sustaining, expressing great advancements in the universe. Technology, *when it is not stolen*,” he said this with a wry grin, which she returned. “Their technology is proving to be on par with like species on the same trajectory of advancement. Soon, I imagine, they may be invited to have a seat on the United Intergent Council.”

She brightened, nodding. “Okay. Yes, Fanon. How could I have forgotten.” Glancing down at her holotext, she began typing furiously, then was utterly still—she must have found the text she’d wanted. He snuck a peak to see if he could guess, from the translation, her species—but was disappointed to see it in the original French. She could read French as well? How many languages did she know?

As though to answer his question, she looked up at him blankly, “648.”

He repeated the number, dumbly, as though she couldn’t possibly have guessed his question. “648?”

“Yes. I am knowledgable in 648 languages.”

“That’s nearly half of all human languages,” he said in disbelief. “That’s nine times more than any known human can speak.”

“I speak other languages than human ones,” she said without looking up, then as if possessed by a sudden impulse, “What do you know about Ighjjya?”

Efyir was not so disappointed by how quickly she figured out he was Thhiyatkhoor. He was instructed only to hide his name, not his species, and why should any Thhiyatkhoor hide who they were? Still, it intrigued him how many questions she seemed to have about his species, questions not even Jacque seemed interested in—or knew to ask, perhaps.

“Not much.” He recited the paragraph that they were taught in school: A trust, a failure, a legacy.

“Yes, everyone in the universe knows that part. Is there any more?”

“That is what we learn to recite.”

“What about what happened with Ighjjya on the original planet inhabited by *both* Thhiyatkhoor and Ks’ou? Why did he bother? What joy could anyone gain from staring at a lagoon of blind, hapless creatures all day, who could not communicate unless they overtook him?”

He shook his head. A new habit he had picked up; this was the longest length he’d stayed on Earth thus far, and he realized how much he’d missed even in those brief visits.

She pressed the tablet pen to her lip. “You don’t find that odd?”

“I do not find those questions interesting,” he said.

She made a sound from her throat. It was not a pleasurable sound. “You are pretty obnoxious some days, El.”

He guessed this was not a complement despite ‘pretty’ being a desirable physical trait for Humans, but there was a small commotion on the other end of the courtyard. From what he gathered by the hushed whispers around them, someone was in a POD who had been on probation, for whatever reason, and violated the terms. The Human police arrived swiftly and dragged them away. The Human shell and Earth-passing status of the violator would be rescinded, no doubt.

Aurana watched the scene with an unreadable look in her eyes. But then it passed, and nonchalantly she picked up Fanon again and did not ask him any more questions about Ighjjya.

She murmured, reading aloud without consciousness of it, “Le colon et le colonisé sont de vieilles connaissances…”[[36]](#footnote-36)

—

“Keep your legs apart, like this,” Aurana instructed. “With your knees just above your ankles. If you stretch too far it will be easy to topple you. See?” She gave him a shove to demonstrate and he fell, as expected. “*Voilà.*”

“Humans are *very* unstable,” Efyir complained.

“No, they’re not,” she countered. “Humans have excellent bodies, you just rely too much on what you know of your own.”

Thhiyatkhoor ‘antlers,’ as Humans inaccurately referred to them, helped them keep balance. All had two, wrapped around their head in a near-circle, but the number of branches accumulated as one aged, according to biology, and aging was spurred on by how one fared in battles of various kind. Efyir’s had remained at two since leaving Routhhe, to his disappointment.

He looked at her and did the stance, this time as instructed. She pushed and he wobbled but kept upright. He ventured, “Are you a tetrapod?” He did not feel any closer to guessing her species.

“No,” she laughed. Before he could ask the next question she had swept her feet across his and threw him on his back again. “Pay attention.”

Her martial arts class was nothing that he expected. He did not know Human bodies could move as hers did, much faster than they let on, though never as quickly as the limbs on a Thhiyatkhoor. Nonetheless, she still had strength in very odd places, most particularly her legs; she demonstrated, once, a blow to a series of wooden blocks. She could land a powerful hit that could certainly damage other Humans, and perhaps a few more species with similar, unweaponized bodies.

In his shell, he had to be more careful, more intentional with his movements. Shells were fragile and could be torn with too much exertion. It was not difficult getting them repaired but the procedure was lengthy. This shell he wore, as a strain of his father’s, meant extra care was needed on Efyir’s part.

Class was over but after her students left she always allowed him to stay a bit longer, since it was taking him longer to learn what others seemed to instinctively know.

“I bet you have yet to guess my name,” he challenged.

She tilted her head to the side thoughtfully. Her hair, like oiled wood, was mostly up in a single sphere today, on the very top of her head, with the remaining cords cascading past her shoulders where she wore a high collared uniform associated with a particular style of fighting for Humans. She seemed to change her hair every day, a behavior he did not quite understand. He once accused her of trying to be unpredictable, to which she agreed, finding it to be a noteworthy quality.

“Not yet. But judging from your arrogance, and the way that your professors never seem to mind that you turn in *every* assignment late, you come from a family of high military ranking.”

He started and in such surprise used his Human mouth, “That obvious?” He shut it. “Hmph.”

“I am starving. Are you hungry?”

“I should not—“

She cut him off. “There is a restaurant just around the corner. One of the instruments, perhaps the stove, emits this awful sound… anyway, it would be a good place to talk about colonialism and war without having too many overhear us.”

He wanted to tell her that his father had forbidden him from eating Human food; that he failed his father’s tests before he arrived on Earth. But this seemed like a somewhat pathetic thing to say, and since she threw him to the ground so many times that day, he decided on a bolder path.

His father wasn’t *here*, after all.

“It’s close enough, we don’t even have to take a hovertrain,” she smiled slyly.

As though driven by some unseen force, he followed her outside and down the street, dictating a panicked-but-somewhat-hopeful private message to Jacque. *My friend Aurana wants to talk about one of our classes. But she insists that she cannot speak to me unless there is food and there is a noodles restaurant nearby.* He only slightly lied.

*I think this is a bad idea, Efy. You are not to be trusted around noodles,* came Jacque’s reply.

*I will only eat a little*. he insisted. *Please?*

There was a small amount of time between his reply and hers.

*Fine. I’ll tell Aunt Kahti you’re out studying with your girlfriend.* He did not pick up on the nuance and thanked her.

At the noodles restaurant Ana insisted that he try to eat. That, along with his martial arts, all he needed was the proper training. This made sense. He had already received some Human training, but never to his father’s satisfaction. Human food did not taste well, but its substance was fascinating. Humans could adapt to a many different textures, and though leaves usually were fibrous, they did not vary so much from the mush to the leathery that Human food apported.

It took him over a minute to realize that she had not only stopped speaking, but was not eating, either. He had managed to figure out how to consume the noodles without slurping, but had a hard time doing it without haste, because the broth had strange flavors and he was not used to eating liquid and solid at once. He hadn’t noticed that his shirt was slightly—ah, *very*—soaked with overflow from the bowl. Some of the other Humans in the restaurant were staring at them.

“You are really impressive, El,” she finally said, no longer able to suppress her look of disgust.

“I sense that you are not being genuine with your words,” he said between noodles.

“An Intett[[37]](#footnote-37) has better table manners than you… argh, *stop*,” she reached forward and pulled the bowl out of his hands, setting it closer to her side of the table. “Do not touch either bowl,” she sneered, then stood up and walked to the counter, speaking in a low voice to the Human server there. A few minutes later she returned.

“I cannot believe that you have not been trained to behave more Human than this. Honestly, how have you managed? If no one else will teach you, then I will—you need some self control.” As she said this, she set and arranged several items neatly in front of him. He looked, puzzled, at a new bowl filled with rice, and two sticks laying parallel to its side. There was no fork instrument—he thought all Humans used this? She smiled that strange, unreadable smile of hers. In her own hands she held up what he later came to know as chopsticks. “Eat.”

She forced him to eat rice nearly by the grain until he became too frustrated and gave up eating altogether. But there was something bright in her eyes; it reminded him of the way Thhiyatkhoor turn their eyes upwards, slightly, when amused.

She had had a full meal, but he was still hungry. After she ate he invited her to the woods, to see the tree where he liked to eat. Aurana’s expression was interesting as he removed his Human shell. He wasn’t quite sure it was disgust or fascination, the way the spongy living flesh fell around him and his body stepped out in full Thhiyatkhoor form, slightly taller than a human, less hairy, looking relieved now that the *naghryoja* on his head was finally able to breathe.

Picking leaves made him feel much better; when he returned from the top of the tree she was reading a book—the old kind, with pages—and he wondered briefly if she and Aunt Kahti would get along. It was quickly getting dark so she closed it as he approached. He noticed a hesitation to look directly at him.

“Sorry,” he said. “Would you be more comfortable if I put my Human shell on again?”

“Your form doesn’t both me.” Human eyes told what Thhiyatkhoor *naghryoja* sensed. “Your, um… antlers.”

“*Naghryoja*.”

“How do they work?”

He smiled, but not with his mouth. He did it with his slate, a kind of shine that eked across in smooth, even cadence. “Have you ever sewn a button?”

“What?”

“Sewn. A button.”

Aurana seemed thoughtful. “Never.”

“You should try. It’s like this.” He placed his claws in front of him, cupping one. With the other, he touched the thumb to the middle claw, and placed it beneath the cupped. He pushed the claw against the back side until at one point he parted his upper claw so that the thumb and middle claw poked through. “When I’ve seen my Aunt Kahti sew, she threads the needle through one side of a piece of fabric. It comes up through another place on the other side, and it is only by experience and hope that she has found, *generally*, the right place to come through. Otherwise she has to undo it and try again. But my *naghryoja* can sense the very point of the needle. The needle, the point it meets the fabric, where it would appear on the other side. This is seeing without eyes, as humans are so accustomed to. My *naghryoja* sees waves and particles. It is *light* where light cannot travel. Waves without obstruction. This is why we can see so well.”

She flinched jealously. He seemed intrigued by her movements so she felt she should explain. “We, um, we’ve met before.” It dawned on her the minute he’d stepped out of his shell, now that she’d seen the shape of his *naghryoja*, their particular twist. “You were in the tree, looking at your *kyôsta*.”

“Yeah,” he said. Thhiyatkhoor do not redden; they show embarrassment by a slow-moving celestial-gray cloud swirling over their skin. “It is a good thing you didn’t shoot me.”

“For many reasons,” she said, then her eyes swept over the landscape of his figure: asymmetrical. Thhiyatkhoor bladed arms were thinner than their other arm, for speed, certainly. From a Ks’ou perspective, the asymmetry was bothersome. Ana mocked her for this bias, but it didn’t change the fact that Thhiyatkhoor looked uneven. Imperfect. “Is it true that your arm is faster than a snake?”

“I am not sure,” he said, but slashed his arm in the air a few times to see what she thought.

She nodded approvingly. “I can see why you prefer your Thhiyatkhoor body to your Human one. You are very lucky to have been born Thhiyatkhoor.”

“I suppose. I could certainly beat you in combat in my own form.”

She grinned. “Wait one second.” She disappeared into the trees for a moment, and then returned with a very large stick, long enough to be a branch but skinny enough that she could wield it. “Let’s spar.”

She was not quick as Thhiyatkhoor are, but she was deft. She found ways to surprise him, sometimes, by twisting the stick so that it ended up on a different side of his arm than expected, or she distracted him with a high kick towards his chest while swinging the stick low.

“You lied to me,” she said after awhile. “You told me that you were terrible at physical combat.”

“Not a lie. It is what my father has always told me,” he replied. “And you… I long suspected you must be warrior class, for your species, and now I am sure.”

She raised her chin a bit. “Of course. Trained from birth.”

“As was I.”

It was getting very late. When they went to retrieve their backpacks he saw on his tablet that he had *seventy* messages from Aunt Kahti. “I should probably go home. I think I am in trouble.” He sent a quick message telling her he was fine and would be home shortly, then put on his Human shell; if he was already late, there was no sense in hurrying back.

“We can walk part of the way together,” she offered.

“I have come no closer to guessing your species,” he said. “You know far too much about many others; it seems your knowledge has no bounds.”

“I have a paradigm,” she said. “The conditions of possibility of a thought.[[38]](#footnote-38) The boundaries are always there. I choose know*ing* so that those conditions stretch out as far towards the boundary as possible.”

“Aurana,” he repeated, first, then slowly, as though the answer were there. “Your name is the only hint I have and yet there is no creature I could associate the name’s sound with. As for other clues, I just know that you have a propensity for sea creatures. Your name sounds like the fish in our *Principles of Earth Animals* class. Piranha.”

She frowned. “No. I am nothing like the Piranha. Though some might say that my species has a predatory nature.”

He frowned, too. She didn’t often have good things to say about her own species, something he wasn’t used to. He told her so.

“I suppose one can never fully despise their own species,” she conceded. “I’m not sure where to start.”

“What is one thing you can do, that other species can’t?”

She thought for a moment. “My species was made for Others. At least, I think so. Our history only makes sense when considering how one of us is tied up in an Other. But this history has never been lovely.”

When he asked her to explain further, she seemed to refuse offering anything more to say. “But,” she said, “I do know that my history of my people did not truly begin until we required another people. I do not yet know if this is good or bad.”

They walked out of the woods in silence until they reached the hovertrain station. It was only 10 minutes, maybe 12, to travel the hundreds of miles to bed. Distance collapsed by time. Suddenly reminded of something, she piped, “Tomorrow is Friday. I will likely not see you.”

A sudden movement washed over his skin, like mist, that dissipated as quickly as it had come. “||*Ay-dagh*||, then, friend.”

—

“*Endalithsu*: ||Do not be weak.||”

In some ways, Efyir’s second killing was more difficult than the first. He knew what to expect, now, and was terrified of it. Terrified of the bulging and hideous eyes that would stare back at him, eyes without discourse that he knew of, because the creatures never seemed to respond when he gave the traditional Thhiyatkhoor death sentence.

And then, of course, the ‘research’ he was supposed to do upon the creature’s death. He was, his father had said, supposed to understand an entire species, or at least the subset of a species, by how it died. By killing he was forced to gather data and make sense of it… how could one do so in such a brief moment, without mutual words, without mutual speech? And yet, it was true in some way: how it died, the way it uttered words or peered at him, there was much he could tell.

An inarticulable hatred for all Thhiyatkhoor.

The third: this one could speak. It begged him for mercy, through mutual speech it claimed a desire for its family and friends and life, but it could not make any logic for dialogue, so there was no discourse, and Efyir discovered that he could treat this one as he treated the others. He noted how it died, in eyes or breath or otherwise, and he could even take into account how it begged, but he would ignore its exact words, shut his ears to listening, so that his blade met nothing but a flesh entity, a shell that spoke without discoursing. This would be the last of the “first” deaths that he would remember.

Efyir woke from a dream past; the dream was restless, and if he hadn’t remembered faintly the images he would have been sure he hadn’t dreamed at all.

“A Ks’ou.” He said it definitively aloud, as though he had the authority to speak existence into something that had existence long before him. Aurana was not a Ks’ou name. It was a Ks’ou, a vile, wretched Ks’ou, who had crawled into the Human’s central cortex, inserted its tendrils to spread throughout her spine, brain, nervous system, all to control the poor Humans’ body. When did it happen? Was it this entire time? Surely any earlier, the Ks’ou wouldn’t have let her speak, would it? What benefit did it have, to allow a subaltern *Settled* the right to discourse, when it was clearly able to control everything without regard?

He remembered her face as he stood there while the hovertrain pulled away, human eyes as wide as the dead: a human mask over a Ks’ou body. He imagined the blue notch on the base of her neck. He fought against the instincts instilled to him since birth to cut it from her, to pull it directly out of her brain; though this would kill both the Ks’ou and his friend, the image brought him a strange sense of satisfaction.

He began to review every moment of their discourse that he’d remembered. Their first meeting; the way she easily spoke to him even in disagreement.

No, he’d forgotten. They’d first met in the woods while he held the opthastre. Her curiosity. Could she had been Settled then? Perhaps it *had* tried to kill him, but made alternate plans. When he walked away after showing his *kyôsta* in the *opthastre*, it could have still attacked, but decided instead to bide its time.

The way she critiqued humans. Her arguments with their professor in the classroom against privileging human behavior.

“*Shit. Shit.*” Efyir said this pleasing word that Jacque used so often, over and over again. The impossible thought finally surfaced: had he been speaking to a Ks’ou this entire time? Was she *never* his interlocutor, his friend, at all? He overturned in the curved pod that served as his bed trying to remember the exact details, to review them, reassess. There was little human in its words. The ease by which it spoke Endaithsu.

But he couldn’t go there.

*Why*? He returned again to her questions about Ighjjya. The debates on the General’s book. The Ks’ou wanted information—but it had seemed surprised, angry, even, when he revealed his name. It must have used the pretense of being *zilaa* to get close to him without knowing the dangers of the move.

He should be committing himself to *solemnity* right now. But he couldn’t. There was nothing solemn about this—only an unquenchable burning. Solemnity would have to wait.

He did not move even when Kahti came in to check on him, a brief opening of his door, the light click of this announcement. He pretended to sleep, but everything in him was unhinged. The door closed. He could only listen: a muffled voice next door, a voice likely that of his father, but these were drowned out by the sound of his own heartbeat and breathing, that seemed to knock against the side of his bedpod in a babble of miserable fury.

—

“Your father was right. I’ve protected you and Jacque from this for far too long.”

Aunt Kahti had been mumbling all night, and finally she said something aloud that made sense. Jacque and Efyir exchanged concerned glances; they had been sitting across from her on the couch, unsure if they should head in for the night or stay with Kahti.

Wordlessly, she stood; knowing they were supposed to follow her, they also rose. Jacque had a brightness in her eyes; she seemed genuinely thrilled. Efyir wondered: if her life had been lent to one of training, as his was, if she understood the approaching bloodshed, would she still be this way? Kahti lead them outside, through the garden and down the steps into the old house, the one that was covered in dead vines, bare and branching. Another open door, a switch flipped, and then Efyir and Jacque walked down a long corridor, coated in dust and illuminated by yellow overhead lamps, half of which were not working. He couldn’t stop sneezing until finally the corridor broke, opening up to a large, mostly empty room in the shape of a semi-circle.

Empty, except, as Kahti flipped another switch, on the far end of the room were five glass encasements. These were not dusty; it was clear that they had been taken care of, recently: a brighter light illuminated them, and the glass was clear. Within each, dark black armor, for bipedal bodies, except two. They all shared a shoulder casing that bore an insignia that looked like a dark green avocado with legs.

The two apart were designed for Thhiyatkhoor bodies. The signature arm cut—here, three specific circles—that would allow their blades to poke through. Efyir knew his father’s right away because the cut was on the right arm, while his own was on the left. The other set designed for Thhiyatkhoor must have belonged to Qay, the one other Thhiyatkhoor of the long passed, long dusted, Great Alliance.

“Ah, I take back every word I said against how uncool you are, mom,” Jacque said. She reached forward and touched, gently, one set of armor.

“Those are mine. You’ll be wearing Malcolm’s or Aletheia’s. They both had broad shoulders.”

“Thanks,” Jacque grumbled. “I’ll take Aletheia’s, in case, you know, Malcolm comes back.”

“I haven’t spoken to Malcolm in 7 years. He’s likely dead… but Shyr isn’t ready to contend with his blades even if so.” She mumbled this, as though the words eased out of her before. But then, a sliding of her eyes towards Efyir, following by an embarrassed gaze directed at the ground.

Efyir, stunned, said nothing. He was thumbing his father’s armor. It was surprisingly small; Shyridin had only one branch when he was trapped on Earth. He imagined a time when his elder was not a general, when he was eager to learn more than it was his time to, foolish and able to make mistakes of seeming little consequence. Or perhaps his father was always capable, and Efyir the bumbling, unaware.

Suddenly, all the speeches he gave made sense: his human turns of phrase, the way he seemed to think of human figures before Thhiyatkhoor ones when making historical references.

Shyridin was a clever liar, Efyir decided. He always spoke of each member of the Great Alliance, Thhiyatkhoor and Human alike, as though they were merely his colleagues. And now, he’d learned. Malcolm. A human. His father’s *ekahair.* Efyir’s namesake. It was unheard of; forbidden, even. And yet, not so far beyond what could be imagined as true.

“They considered one another *ekhair*, up until the end,” Kahti said when she finally caught Efyir’s hard stare, his *naghryoja* pulling her energy towards him like a vortex. She gestured toward’s Qay’s armor. “Put it on. See if it fits.”

His hand drew toward’s Qay’s armor and pulled the dark blue material, piece by piece. Then he found a dark corner to withdraw, where he would have to take off his Human shell, and wear this one.

When his father Shyridin, and Qay, his pilot, had crash landed on Earth so many turns of planets ago, they were both extremely young. Qay was tall for Thhiyatkhoor young women, and likely older than his father had been at the time, but still the armor was tight and did not quite fit the way it was supposed to.

When he had finished the uncomfortable squeeze, he walked towards Jacque, who had finished dressing and seemed to have encountered the same problem he did. The armor did not quite cover her shoulders, the smooth breastplate ended above her waist a little too high, continuing with tight leggings in a material similar to the human’s *chainmail*, and ending in boots that should have gone up to the knee but just barely reached. She was holding what looked like two metal, short pipes. He tried his best to levy a confident stride at odds with what he felt inside.

“You wear it well,” he offered. She hadn’t benefitted from the warrior education as he did, but he could tell it was in her blood, as from her mother.

She grinned. “Catch, Silverbutt.”

One of the weapons twisted in the air. He caught it and nearly placed in his right holster, when he paused. He regarded its edge, thoughtfully. It was a weapon that could indeed fell many Ks’ou.

*You are foolish*, *Efyir-Azayim*. A faint feeling of stinging paralyzed his arm, kept him holding the weapon halfway in and out of the holster.

“I cannot do this task.” The words came so smoothly out of him, even he was surprised by how sure it sounded.

Kahti said nothing; Jacque, stunned, demanded:

*“*What do you mean?”

Efyir swallowed, knowing his next words would not be taken well. “Earth is not my fight.”

“You’ve been visiting here since we were *kids*,” she pressed harshly. “What, you want to back out? Humans aren’t good enough for you?”

But he had already clenched his claw until the weapon pulled out of the holster and dropped it immediately; he would not remember what sound it made when it struck the floor. He then began taking off each piece of the armor, feeling more confident and strengthened as he did so. *I need to go home. I need to finish my war training. How much have others my age advanced already? I need to go home.*

“You can’t *not* fight*.* What kind of coward would that make you?” Jacque continued, approaching him in that aggressive Thhiyatkhoor way that she knew would incite him. She knew this at least: battle was their language; confrontation their home.

*What do I owe these humans? What have they given the universe?*

Somehow his own disapproving internal voice took on his father’s tone and depth. He thought, despite himself, of Aurana’s critique of humans. He decided, also, that this would be one of many stories he would *not* tell his father. It seemed even. How many Earth stories had his father neglected to tell him, for fear that he would fall in love with Earth, as Shyridin once did?

His outer voice was more practical. “The Council will never give me permission to engage in war here. I haven’t earned my rank.” Somewhere deep within him, he felt relieved to have a sensible excuse for what he knew was cowardice.

Jacque approached him in contact distance; in her armor she looked proper, her eyes ablaze with rage. “We are doing this *together*, Efyir. I thought you were my *brother*. I thought you loved us.”

To this he had no answer. Wordlessly, he turned away from her, because human eyes were indeed as intimidating as a Thhiyatkhoor *naghryoja* with ten offshoots*.* His armor was only partially off, pieces of it on the floor. He picked up the weapon, illuminated it, and sent a series of five shots into the darkness of the cave, striking a rock and boring a hole several feet deep into its core.

Jacque knew enough about Thhiyatkhoor gestures to understand this one. “You’re a coward, Efyir.” Her words burned in him so deeply that he had to turn and leave, lest she see the display of grey-white cloud on his slate, evenly from left to right.

—

“If the Ks’ou had never come to Earth, Humans would have progressed in technology and economic prosperity beyond measure,” Professor Jayco squeaked. The instructor was more nervous than usual, but firm. He kept glancing around wildly. Aurana, who did not move from her seat nor look directly at him, sat with her journal, scribbling and drawing, and for the first time seemed not to be listening. “The Ks’ou wrought the widespread underdevelopment of humankind,” he continued, empowered, seemingly, by her silence.

*These are human lies*, Efyir growled internally. He knew from the General’s book that Humans were in a moment, during the Ks’ou invasion, of undermining themselves with policies that would have destroyed their advancements in technology. The strange illogic of the first Ks’ou invasion was that it brought galactic attention to Humans in ways that were never before possible. This and another contradiction: while Ks’ou invasion did disadvantage Humans in despicable ways, Humans were disadvantaging themselves by pitting their most powerful against the least. The professor persisted, however, in his argument that somehow the Ks’ou were solely to blame for Human misfortune.

“The Ks’ou so underdeveloped humans, it has been likened—and I agree—to the European underdevelopment of Africa. Humans now can feel justified, by being united in their collective oppression.”

*These were not the same situations at all!*

Efyir felt like bursting from his human shell, but he stopped himself. It was not his place to cause rancor, not here in this useless human space of useless human knowledge. He noted the cowardice of the Ks’ou Settler Aurana, who had hardly budged during the professor’s rant, though he saw her pen stop and eyes flicker up at him, only briefly.

The past few weeks at Veroia, Efyir had to pretend a benign coexistence. Kahti commanded him not to kill her despite his pleadings that she knew too much.

“She’s not a threat.” Was this human logic? Regardless, it was growled in a voice that kept him in line. He could not ask his father for advice; to do so would mean to admit he foolishly made discourse with a Ks’ou without knowing what she was.

The Ks’ou did not seem to mind so much, the silence between them, though he noted that issues the professor lectured on went unchecked by her usual vocal, argumentative ways. He’d spied on her as much as he could, waiting for her to head into the Deep so he could notify Jacque and Kahti, but he never seemed to catch her at the right moment.

Today, for the first time since she betrayed the truth, he even dared to look directly at her. Had her eyes left the page in front of her—thankfully they didn’t—he would have looked abruptly away. So he was glad that she stayed her eyes on the page, the human’s hair descending over her shoulders. He almost couldn’t believe she was inhabited by a Ks’ou at all, maybe, he tried to convince himself, it was just a brilliant lie… and yet, the high collar, he finally noted, or the scarf, always there, betrayed a presence he never saw.

Professor Jayco droned on: wrong, yet unchecked. Why wasn’t she speaking against this, the coward? Or perhaps, now that her identity had been revealed to him, she was afraid of his backlash? Yes, that must be it, he decided, and settled back into his own reverie to wash out the professor’s ridiculous stream of sound.

*|| Yes, all on Earth is fine. Of course I despise it; of course humans are mundane. Do I wish to return?Nnd… Betthi[[39]](#footnote-39), I am beginning to suspect that more Thhiyatkhoor are needed here. To keep a closer eye on humans and their activities. There are strange events happening… ||*

One of few recent productive conversations with his father, the strange breakthrough since the very day he learned that his closest friend Aurana was indeed the mortal enemy of his species; the strange simultaneousness that his father seemed to be his ally for the first time in their lives.

His father seemed surprised at his words, at first. But after their conversation, upon reflection, it was clear: the General was only surprised that Efyir had noticed, *not* that it was happening*.* Kahti must have told him already. But Efyir would play this discourse game, to see where it would lead.

Shyridin had always taken for granted Efyir’s ability to analyze, tactically, a potential war situation.

Wasn’t this what he wanted? For his father to respect his abilities? While, for Efyir, a mysterious anger still pervaded every conversation he had with the General, he held this within so it would not see light, by day or by night.

“||*Perhaps, Efyir-Azayim, you should continue your investigation. Perhaps something on Earth is in need of Thhiyatkhoor correction.*||”

“||*I will continue*||,” Efyir promised, wary of the ambiguity but unwilling to go further. His full name invoked, was, for the first time, one of pride; he’d never experienced this before from his father. Always desired it. And now that he had, wondered why it still felt so empty.

He desired battle; yet battle would require engagement with an enemy whose relationship he refused.

He desired movement; yet he was grounded on Earth for his actions on Routhhe.

He desired agency, and yet every thought he had was framed by the actions of others.

So he did nothing.“I’m one of those trees whose roots reach the bottom of the earth. They can cut down my branches, but they will never uproot the tree. The roots are too strong, and there are too many.”

-Author unknown, but of confirmed anti-colonial origin[[40]](#footnote-40)

**Chapter 10 (*Kelisfton)***

This is a history. History needs archive. It needs storytellers. It needs death. Sans death, what emptiness would history be? History is the storytelling of the dead.

Though all creatures are beautiful in their own way, I believe that the Ks’ou were made for Human bodies; that Humans were made for us, and we were made to colonize them. Our symbiosis is too refined, too perfect to be anything else.

Yet.

The *Olyat-Koi*.

*Kwa*, their species is the most beautiful.

Their species were not made for us Ks’ou. Not knowing this, I, uninformed and gluttonous, wanted them.

It did not take long for me to become what is called a ‘Master Settler.’ It was why I became Commander in such a short amount of time. I was able to manipulate bodies very well, as one pilots a ship. I knew which synapses to follow, where to focus my strength on to ensure that the settled creature would never regain control, and above all, how to dislodge myself from a love of sight and sound as many species experience it, so that I could forward the mission of the Nation. Many Ks’ou could not do this so early on; many Ks’ou would, at one point or another, lose control, particularly when there were extreme emotions to contend with.

After a few initial failures, I found means by which I could block my host’s attempts to regain control.

Some of my colleagues rely on torture through the manipulation of emotions or replaying of painful memories. I consider these tactics crude and base.

To employ a creature’s weaknesses is the work of the unimaginative. A good colonizer does it this way: I gave my settled body the *illusion* of control. I exploited their senses so that they could feel included, and in that, their murmuring desires for freedom eventually ceased, because they realized that I gave them a better, more benevolent way of living.

Each creature has dignity; to ignore this is foolish. Those we settled are not merely material, but have non-physical existences. It is a bit like how Ks’ou speak in *etaoin[[41]](#footnote-41)—*the pulses we send through the liquid is physical, but their depth is immaterial*.*

This, therefore, was my philosophy: exploit the being, convince them that their existence was contingent upon Ks’ou, and their body would be ours via the colonization of their mind.

My superiors were impressed with my settling abilities. I was eventually given a prized creature to Settle: the powerful *Besh*, a mind of limited intellect, excellent warriors whose muscular bodies could also endure harsh temperatures and weather conditions. They bled slowly; a good quality indeed.

I was also given a ship and my own staff of inferior Ks’ou soldiers, all of whom were young and struggled to maintain control of those they settled. I offered advice, occasionally; just enough, not too much. They would have to figure out how to maintain control on their own, just as I had to learn.

While I understood minds, I also excelled at accessing databases. I found a way to follow Thhiyatkhoor ships, undetected, and retrieve the reports they constructed on the various alien cultures they encountered.

They were set to meet one particular species that I had never heard of. There did not seem to be anything interesting about them, at first impression, but I became intrigued when I read the report in detail. For one, the Thhiyatkhoor appreciated these creatures because they had crowns on their head with symbolic similarity to their *naghryoja*. This I did not care much about. But, secondly, they seemed inhabit a very small planet, with much water, and they were very trusting of other species. They accepted everyone whom they invited, for they knew not of war or betrayal—at least, not in the way the Thhiyatkhoor and the Ks’ou were familiar with. Finally, the Thhiyatkhoor were particularly excited by the invitation as honor: this, they believed, was rare. What was so remarkable about this planet that even the self-absorbed Thhiyatkhoor would feel flustered about an invitation?

This new species I was now pursuing called themselves the *Olyat-Koi*.

When I saw them for the first time, it was indeed a sight: tall and powder blue with bright indigo markings, with thick skin and a gracefully long, bi-pedal body. Their hands are claws, and, as though they have a second skin, they wear a shimmering case of a similar texture, which covers their body from neck to hip, in colors varying from their skin. Their most defining feature, however, is the top of their heads. Each is curved like a concave dome, bordered at the top with varying dips and hills; each *Olyat-Koi* differs from another in shape and size. It is how they know who is one being and who is a different one; unlike Ks’ou, uniqueness is valued in their culture. Their eyes are grey and shining, and when I first laid eyes upon them I agreed that they were indeed very beautiful as had been detailed in the reports I stole from the Thhiyatkhoor.

While the Besh were suitable for war, reconnaissance missions required another tactic. My species were currently conquering another called Humans, which was where this tiny, nest-headed mewling prisoner had come from.

Also bi-pedal, this particular Human was only 1/6th the size of the Besh I inhabited. The Nation gave it to me in order to test its viability on other planets. Humans are *numerous*, and their enslavement was key to extended Ks’ou expansion across the universe.

And key to my mission. A Besh would be an obvious link to the Ks’ou species. A small Human? Not so much.

Transferring from one host to another is the most dangerous thing a Ks’ou can do. It requires precision and finesse. You must ensure control of one body, and rely on the pain it takes to detach the fibers from this body in order to inhabit the next, to disable the host and prevent it from killing you. I was grateful for my lowly soldiers who were standing guard as the transfer process occurred, from warrior to the tiny Human slave. Once I fully dislodged from the Besh I would have to trust my soldiers to keep its tethers held taught as I entered and initiated control of the small thing. If anything faltered—if the Besh broke free, for example, or if the Human made a sudden move, I might die.

Ks’ou are powerful, but physically we are very weak. Our endeavors mean that we are at peril at many moments in our lives.

Once I entered the Human, extending my arms, I focused not on sight. That is the mistake of the untrained and unwitting. Instead, I focused on its knowledge. I tapped into information first, material impulses next, senses last. I began, at first to know its language, its fears, its wonder. Then, I knew how to move its body, its hands. I knew it was something called male, opposing himself to something called female on the bizarre basis of color and daily activities. On his planet, he was perhaps 8 or 9 years old. He did not know; he lost track of days during the war against his people, all the more once he’d been handed over to the Nation.

{ ||A child,|| } I murmured in my language. { ||An unborn child.|| } It could hear me but could not understand. They had given me a child! I knew of the concept, but it was still new; Ks’ou do not think in terms of children. Regardless of age, you are born or unborn. Those unborn have never killed; those of us born are fully engaged in war, and have ended the *being* of another creature whose being you had no hand in creating. Such a line has no age with regards to rotation of a rock around a sun.

Then, I began to absorb itslanguage alongside impressions from its mind. The Human child had no parents, or his parents had been killed—I was still working this information out. I could have told him that we had this in common—that Ks’ou parents do not care for the new Ks’ou they make born—but to control one’s Settled necessitates limited communication. They fear the unknown, and therefore, me.

To be truthful, once I learned more about the *Olyat-Koi*, I ultimately much preferred them to Humans.

The *Olyat-Koi* presented a challenge; Humans, on the other hand, were easy to settle.

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The plan had a complex simplicity. I would arrive in the unborn Human’s body, convince the *Olyat-Koi* I needed help, take one of their bodies while they slept, be retrieved by my soldiers, and return the body as evidence to my superiors for a new conquest.

Yet, the execution extended itself far beyond the normal risk. No Commander ever became so by merely *being*. They took risks which brought them to where they are. Who knew how many potential Commanders perished by some kind of means beyond their own control?

To be Commander meant to control, and to understand control as chaos: as Ks’ou, I controlled another, yet I was controlled by so many other factors.

I had no idea even if my new tiny Human would survive on the planet. If it was breathable. I would have to take that risk—the Thhiyatkhoor, numbering eight or so by estimate, seemed to manage. I landed on the *Olyat-Koi* homeworld trusting fully that the crew of my ship would follow every detail of our plan exactly as I gave it. This was my arrogance; this factored into many mistakes committed, whether or not they bore immediate consequences.

*{ ||Iraqi Arabic:* Help me.*|| }*

Once the ship departed, disappearing in a cloak that mimicked the sky, I felt my solitude increase tenfold. It would not only leave the planet, but the entire system. It would need to do this in order for the Thhiyatkhoor to believe my story.

In the child I was free to roam; it could breathe, it could explore. I tapped into his innate curiosity; another thing Ks’ou and Human children shared. It is propaganda that we Ks’ou wanted to take over merely for the sake of taking over—they try to deny us intellect by such exaggeration. We are also curious. Children are indeed the best to Settle because of our shared curiosity.

I could sense an easing of some of the child’s terror as I used his eyes to survey the planet. His whimpers gave way to interest. I let these interests guide my own so that I could appear as Human as possible. It was difficult to know where the Thhiyatkhoor were, these creatures who were certainly more formidable than this child; if they were in trees, they would be able to hear from a greater distance, but if they were on the sand as we were, their senses would be diminished. I became slightly greedy with a sudden thought: a Settled Thhiyatkhoor would be a great prize indeed, as their biology evaded quick Ks’ou entry. But of course, *I* could not take a Thhiyatkhoor: the Olyat-Koi must be reserved for me. Could I trust any of my soldiers for the task?

*One, perhaps could rise to the challenge. But they would have to be trained*, I mused. A thought for another moment.

We stood on shining, almost glittering sand, a mix of grey, black, and gold. Tall objects that the Human thought to be some type of *tree*, shooting out from the ground a distance around us. Some were bare and obsidian in color; these were shaped as a spiral or a triangular-like pyre, pointing towards a clear blue sky. Others had branches, also spiraling, with shaggy navy coverings as foliage or fur.

With every step, the child’s feet sunk slightly and were semi-immersed in water, as though stepping caused water to rise up from the ground. These shocked me so much I had to force myself to look away. To maintain control of my host and the façade of being a Human child, I had to stop being curious about *this*, about these lagoons that appeared by walking.

{ ||*Iraqi Arabic*: Please, free me.*||* }

I first headed to the site where the ship had detected where a group of *Olyat-Koi,* without the Thhiyatkhoor, gathered. The risk was great but worthy: could they hear well? Did they have other senses I did not know about? Observation before initiating is wise for any studier of creatures to do.

Each step was difficult—physically, that is. I found in the tiny human’s mind a familiarity with walking in sand, but not simultaneously sand and water.

Through the openings on my human’s head, we breathed deeply. The air seemed thick; respiration took labor. I slowed my pace, which I admit was a bit panicked due to being in the open air. When we finally reached the grove of pyre-trees, I eased a bit. I tapped into the Human’s mind, which had also calmed, enjoying the light shade these trees offered from the sharp sunlight. He wanted to touch the trees; something about their color, their shine—it seemed, at first, nothing like what he knew of his *kyôsta*. I pulled one of his fingers forward to gently stroke the tree, testing it, then brought forth my whole hand, as the boy had so desperately wanted to do, so that I could practice seeming as Human as possible, *whatever that entailed*. The tree felt surprisingly smooth, and fragile. The texture reminded my Human of a thing called a vase that his mother used to put flowers in.

So I clenched his fist and knocked against it.

The glass-like covering did not shatter; his weak hand laid not so much a scratch—throbbed, slightly, in response.

The boy enjoyed this. His internal whimpering gave way to a short, rapid laugh. He wanted to break the tree, or at least see it crack; this I could agree with. I hit the tree again. Then again. I became carried away, perhaps. Rather suddenly, his initial joy gave way to an internal cry, caused by the onset of type of thought called memory. An impression flashed in his mind of a thing close to him called a sister, whom I understood to be presently dead, and a past moment when he’d torn apart an object of hers that she had wrapped around her wrist. The beads were obsidian, resembling the tree, and suddenly my moving his hands to hit the tree angered rather than amused the human child.

His anger thrilled me. What curiosity, to be upset over a memory, over a being who had already met their end. What rapid emotions for this human thing that had not yet fully experienced life via the deliverance of death.

But I would not have long to ruminate. My joyful teasing was interrupted by a loud, thrashing sound. I panicked, hoping at first to scramble onto the obsidian-like pyres. These turned out to be too thin and slippery for the human child to climb, and I could not find a hold. The human mocked me, telling me it was a stupid idea.

{ ||*Iraqi Arabic:* They’ll kill you,|| } I hissed to him, finally, in his language. These first and few words I ever spoke to him. { ||They’ll kill us both!|| }

The boy quieted his mockery. And in his quiet, I could read his thought for survival: the Others in boots, whatever that meant, had come rather often in his recent life on Earth. He had played a Hiding Game, as he’d called it—one he’d learned from his parents, so that the Others would raid the objects and not the people. The Hiding Game kept him safe, for a time.

Not far off were the shaggy dark blue trees, too short to hide in, but whose moss—easily tearable—I could grab in great bundles. It was the human’s idea to cover the body, and cower at the trunk. This was a pathetic but necessary move, but this was, too, a good human, I realized. Clever. Small enough for hiding. Did the Nation know that it gave me something rather valuable?

The thrashing stopped. The beings had arrived. We listened closely, intently. An *Olyat-koi*, flanked, I imagined, by at least two Thhiyatkhoor, seemed to have arrived. One of the Thhiyatkhoor was speaking, loudly, obnoxiously. Then the *Olyat-koi* spoke, and I wished it would not stop speaking. It sounded like the edges of the *etaoin,* during a storm, vibrant and alive.

One of the Thhiyatkhoor was translating the *Olyat-Koi*’s words into Endaithsu; the other replied once the translation was complete, speaking unnecessarily slow.

“||*Endaithsu*: We. are. honored. so. honored.||,” the one Thhiyatkhoor gushed like a trickle—groveling, disgusting. “||To. be. invited. again. I. must. say…||”

The *Olyat-Koi*’s voice rolled, smooth at first, then with sudden peaks and dips in tone. It did this for only a moment. The Thhiyatkhoor translator rambled, no doubt expressing all of the basic meaning without any of the depth. Once the translator ended, the other—whose words were clearly comprehensible to the *Olyat-Koi*, responded:

“||Yes, certainly. An. honor. bestowed. upon. many. species. before. us. Heard.||”

The *Olyat-Koi* gave a reply. In that moment I wished I could hear only its voice. The troublesome Thhiyatkhoor were distractions—too eager, too ready to make a returning sound.

As though the opposite of my wish were its command, the Thhiyatkhoor responded: “||O-of course. We. shall. give. you. a. momentary. *reprieve.* of. our. presence. Let us. know. when. *we*. should. return.||”

The Thhiyatkhoor, from what I could hear, at least, then disappeared from the grove. It was only me in hiding, buried in this human thing, and the beautiful being. For a brief moment.

To be sure, the first thing it did was make that humming sound again; low, at first, and then at a pitch so low that I do not think my human’s ears could perceive it. But something was happening, *something* was moving in the air; I knew it because I could feel it—I, the Ks’ou, not the human boy whose senses were rather limited. I briefly lifted up from my Settled’s neck to sense what it could not see, and in this watery landscape my senses were much more sharpened.

The sound that the Olyat-Koi made seemed like a call to others. And there they came—gathering, haphazardly at first, and then in a circle, each murmuring at that quiet pitch that only I could hear. I wondered briefly if Thhiyatkhoor *naghryoja*, which were the branches that extended from their head, could sense it, too. They were singing, it sounded. Or, it must have been some kind of ritual. Important, solemn. I could sense it in their voices. Lovely.

Lovely.

So lovely that I threw the moss coverings off of my Human body and announced myself with a tone that mimicked their own.

{ ||Vile Human child!|| }

He’d taken advantage of my wonder and took possession of the body that was rightfully mine. He’d decided that death was inevitable, and chose this moment, *ruined it*, in order to bring death into both our lives. I wrenched control back but it was too late.

There we stood, my Settled human and I, betrayed to them all. Betrayed… but not fully exposed. They did not know I was a Settled human. They only saw a boy in rags, whose head was covered by a dusty blue cloth, twisted most thickly around his neck and forehead. A traditional covering for him, and wonderfully convenient for me.

The *Olyat-Koi* cried out at the sight of him—an elongated, sharp cry that even pierced the human’s ears and made us wince. The Thhiyatkhoor came running, sadly, the gushing one was among them, flanked by a few others whose voices I did not recognize. Finally the Translator arrived, nearly out of breath, listening intently to the *Olyat-Koi*’s complaints and trying to convert them to its language. Then it turned to me and nodded its branches in my direction; a death nod, I was sure of it.

“||*Endaithsu:* The creature, that creature,||” it said to the others, without taking its eyes away from our figure. “||It wants to know where it came from. Why we brought it.||”

“||We did not bring it!||” another said in alarm. “||That thing… it’s a *human* isn’t it?||”

“||It seems so, from the books. Humans, haven’t they only just recovered from their Ks’ou colonization?||”

At the mention of the forbidden species’ name—*mine*, no doubt—the ripples in the air tensed tenfold. The *Olyat-koi* and Thhiyatkhoor alike knew what it meant.

“||Get its neck! Its neck!||” another, with cedar branches and dressed in a woven dark green cloth, screamed. Here, again, I had advantage of the boy. I backed away from the Thhiyatkhoor’s advances and began speaking rapidly in his language. I showed fear, not pride. I whimpered and then, searching throughout the boys’ mental resonations as deeply as possible, came up with a response.

He remembered a story from long ago. A story about a desert like *his* desert, but strange, upended by humans that didn’t belong there; a story he wanted to share with these *Olyat-Koi*, because their own strange desert reminded him of this story that was at once familiar and unique. The story was about a boy trapped in the desert, far away from home, and when he found a human stranger, also trapped, he asked for a sheep. It was not such a strange request, my human had thought, having sheep of his own.

This was good information, I realized. The idea came as quickly as it needed to be executed, so I did not take the time to analyze it.

He smiled. *I* made his face smile.

And, without bending his head down, began to draw in the ground with his foot. The shape disappeared slowly in the liquid sand as I spoke: “||*Iraqi Arabic:* This is my sheep.||”

They stood, dumbfounded.

“||*Endaithsu:* Anyone speak Human?||” One of the Thhiyatkhoor spoke, finally.

“||There are a couple *thousand* Human languages, still,||” the one that I came to realize was the Translator hissed, “||Until they sort themselves out. Which one?||”

“||It isn’t Standard Human English,||” another piped. “||I’ve studied it since *uht[[42]](#footnote-42).*||” She was bragging; I could hear it in her voice.

I stared as though I hadn’t understood. I pointed at the *mouton* again, and pointed to the sky. I made a great many gestures and then finally settled on one that I knew they would understand, at great risk to myself: I made my fingers out to wave, clamped them on my throat, and pointed to the sky again.

“||Ks’ou!||” one shouted. “||It is telling us there are Ks’ou! In orbit!||”

I nodded vigorously.

“||Alert the ship,||” the one with black branches ordered another. She was clearly the designated leader. As she spoke, the Translator was busy trying to convey what was happening to the *Olyat-koi*, curious as to the commotion. That group had grown, unbeknownst to me, as my attentions were focused solely on the few Thhiyatkhoor before me who would decide my fate. Now I suddenly realized that there were perhaps twenty *Olyat-koi*, in a half circle around the one whom I assumed to be their leader, the purple with a shimmering sand encasement, the one who had been with the Thhiyatkhoor from the beginning.

*Focus, Kelisfton.*

This *Olyat-koi* began humming loudly in response to the black branches’ order. It was a bright sound, a reverberation that seemed to shake their crowns, and lasting long enough for me to breathe rapidly, via my human, fifteen times. Everyone, everyone, stopped speaking, and turned to her.

After a moment, the Translator said to her cohort of Thhiyatkhoor, shakily “||*Endaithsu*: The… her most high asks that we conduct any war activities as far away from this planet as possible. Violence is forbidden.||”

But the Thhiyatkhoor leader was relentless. “||Search the orbital range. They can’t be far. When you find and capture those Ks’ou filth—||”

The *Olyat-koi* understood these words. She reverberated again, this time so forcefully that all of us non-*Olyat-koi* crouched over, covering our ears in sudden pain.

“||N-no… direct or even *proposed* violence at all within the solar system. It must be taken elsewhere.||” the Translator murmured.

“||Are we to leave, then?! Lure the Ks’ou away?||” she hissed, to no response but wide-eyed fear. She cursed, frustrated, and turned to her underling. “||Tell them to find the Ks’ou ship. Do *not* engage. Entice it, somehow, away from the planet. Alert the nearest militia and make them aware of the… sensitivity of this situation.||”

Then she turned directly to me, staring at me with eyes as emotionless and even as a neutron star. “||What does the Olyat-koi want us to do with this thing? *Checking* it would not amount to direct violence, correct?||” She continued ranting about the danger that I presented and the need to expose my neck. She began reciting the long, dull history of Ks’ou conquest and evil and a word that my human offered to me called *blahblahblah*…

The Olyat-koi remained quiet. After a few moments, it began to walk slowly towards me, thrumming gently. My admiration was growing with each step it took. To possess such a creature was my only hope.

So I began to explore the Human unborn, as full as possible. What would he do? *What would he do?*

He would do something quite loathsome, of course. He did not know better. But my desire for the *Olyat-Koi*, so great, that I was willing to listen to—and follow—any of his impulses.

His ears had found voice of the black-branched Thhiyatkhoor leader—who had been complaining the loudest about me/him—pleasing. The boy liked its rhythms—there was yelling in it, and, not understanding the words, he found the tone I associated with anger rather sweet. I waited until her claws had returned to her sides. The Olyat-koi was close, now, so close that I could look upwards at it in the wake of its shadow. His impulses did not lie. The boy would have me do a hideous thing, that no Ks’ou would ever do given the history of our people.

I scrambled away from the Olyat-koi in fear…

…and put the tiny human hand into the hand of the Thhiyatkhoor leader.

I, a Ks’ou, made physical contact with the Thhiyatkhoor. Not the right kind of contact, where I would reach through her neck to control her interstitium, but the gentle, generous, kind. The abhorrent, vile kind.

Later, much later, Ks’ou would learn that this particular event turned out not to be so… groundbreaking. There was worse, much worse, to happen between Ks’ou and Thhiyatkhoor. But for its time, it was astonishing. Astonishing enough that I could see it on the Thhiyatkhoor’s slate skin: a burst I would later learn was surprise, and soon after, marks of compassion.

I knew the small human unborn’s impulses, in all his weakness, had quelled the empathetic heart of my enemy, because its claw now closed gently around the boy’s hand that I commanded, her anti-Ks’ou rant defeated.

“||*Endaithsu*: Perhaps… it is just a Human.||”

**Chapter 11**

{ *This* tired fool thinks he’s clever! }

{ Settle down. He’s not even very good at it, } Aurana chided gently.

{ *Settle?!* }

{ Calm. Chill? I think this is a moment where I am supposed to tell you to chill. } A sharp and somewhat brusque internal noise told Aurana that this was *not*, in fact, that moment.

Whenever they could find a quiet place where they would be unbothered by the outside world, they would meet inside their minds, facing each other.

Ana was herself, of course, but she imagined a human-like Aurana: a hybrid between herself and her sister, Éloise. That was how she appeared away from the outside world and surrounded by the peace of the archive, an imagined human body that stood in place of the sea creature-like Ks’ou. Aurana was easier to communicate with, this way.

They’d met fairly often like this the over past few days, mostly because they had never fought as much as they were fighting now. They didn’t often disagree, but Ana, to Aurana’s puzzlement, didn’t seem to want to let go. She never quite vocalized exactly what her problem was, but the tension was there, resonating between them.

This was foundational to their symbiosis: unlike Thhiyatkhoor, who wore their emotions on their skin, and humans, who mostly wore their emotions on their faces, Ks’ou emotions—when they allowed for it—were sent through internal pulses, in water or between attached beings.

So it was that Aurana pulsed now, trying to make Ana understand everything that failed her by mouth. To no avail.

El, *or Efyir*, son of *the* General, as Ana reminded them—had been stalking them for days, trying to find his way into the Deep, no doubt. She was livid. After class, he’d tried to take a seat a few tables away from them at lunch. When they rose, so did he. When they headed to the library, he happened to be there, too.

It wasn’t difficult for them to lose him. He was clumsy; obvious; aloof. He seemed to live, fully, in the awkwardness of being, which Ana disdained. She had had enough, she’d told Aurana, and now they were sitting in the locker room of the martial arts studio, but really sitting in the archive of Aurana’s mind, arguing internally about it. { Your discourse isn’t even civil anymore. }

{ Silence is fairly civil to me. }

Ana grumbled at her in Ks’Sassi. She was getting quite good; to think in a language was a step towards mastery. { NeVarr said that the KLF would be interested in him. What if this was your chance? Ours? We’re *sub-aspirant*, Aurana. The lowest of the low. } It was an important fight. Necessary. Painful. Ana continued, { We can do so much more than what the KLF is giving us. Don’t you want that? You’re just usually more… *ambitious* than this. }

Aurana trilled. { You know I *despise* that word. Ambition. It’s a terrible thing. Many Ks’ou have become lost searching for it. }

{ Okay—wrong word. Clearly humans don’t have enough words for this, *whatever this is*. } Ana was preemptively triumphant. { Let’s not get sidetracked. You befriended El knowing it was trouble. You have to see it through, now. }

{ And you want to change our war status? } Aurana snapped impatiently, wary at her own resistance. Of course to become *ensign* and stop all of these foolish micro-missions was her present desire. This should have been an easy decision. Why wasn’t it? She couldn’t pursue this question. So tried another route. { We should be patient. Don’t you know what advancement means? Its risk? NeVarr may be replaced as our supervisor. We’d be reassigned, to a different place, even. You may never see whether your sister wakes up. }

These last words were a mistake, as Aurana would eventually learn. She should never invoke Ana’s sister this way.

{ I’d rather her wake up with me gone, knowing I did the right thing, than to have her think I sacrificed my body to some Ks’ou for nothing. } Ana hissed.

It was intended to hurt, but Ks’ou could take words and meaning separately. What Ana chose to communicate was not what she felt. So Aurana pulsed back calmly. Thoughtfully. It wasn’t language, nor was it supposed to be. Sometimes, there could be no words. And because Ana had a unique way of understanding—the same kind of understanding she brought to NeVarr when he was strumming a certain way on his guitar—words, here, were not necessary. She understood, and calmed.

But in this exchange, Aurana realized a critical turn: Ana had *already* understood. Understanding did not always lead to unification. Symbiotes didn’t always have to agree. Aurana had to pulse this next idea slowly. It was a sudden compulsion, but one that felt right once exposed. { Maybe we, as symbiotes, should have the day off from each other. }

{ What does *that* mean? }

{ You should enjoy some freedom. I need to spend more time in the archive. To work on our book. We failed to meet Professor Hagåtña’s deadline. She’ll be livid if we don’t submit something soon. } Aurana was only a good liar—story-weaver, perhaps—in this pulsing language she used between herself and Ana, while she was connected to Ana’s brain.

{ Friday’s tomorrow… }

{ Hardly enough. There’s a lot more work to do. I’ll be fine. } Aurana forced a hum; tried to make it seem natural.

{ It’s not safe here. }

Aurana used Ana’s eyes so they both could gaze around the empty dressing room. { Sure it is. No one will bother me. Just be sure to bolt the locker. }

Ana sighed without saying anything further; she, too, was tired of arguing. She should be happy to have a day off from her Ks’ou. A moment apart, to think only thoughts that were her own, where she didn’t have to guard herself from thinking too loudly, thinking too honestly, to expose herself to another being locked into her body. An extra day to be human—not part of the schedule, but a welcome, unexpected peace offering. At least that’s how she tried to conceive it.

{ Okay. Maybe you’re right. See you on the other side… I guess. }

With some reluctance, Ana removed her Ks’ou from her mind and body, slowly; the threads, which somehow Aurana made sure never hurt to insert or remove, pulled out from the base of her neck with an unsettling ease, shrinking as they were exposed to air. Then she found a large coffee cup and filled it with water from the sink before placing her Ks’ou in it, staring for a moment at the small sea-like creature floating inconspicuously in water. It was hard to think that something so small, with such tiny tendrils, coiled up into the base of its body, could wield so much power as to maneuver any living creature it came into contact with. She pushed these thoughts aside and set Aurana inside the locker, bolting it as instructed.

“Isn’t it Thursday?” Michael frowned as soon as she walked into the main room. She was wearing the simple cotton outfit designated by the studio, collar high as she could put it, with her hair in a low bundle between her shoulder blades. Thursdays was one of their busiest days, and their teacher depended on his most diligent student to lead a few of the classes.

“You caught me,” Ana betrayed a forced grin. She couldn’t walk quite like Aurana, or move like she could move her body, either. Ana longed for the calm of the archive, already exhausted, but at least being here in the studio felt comfortable. Right. “Aurana isn’t feeling it today, *aythe-l-xte[[43]](#footnote-43)*.”

He shook his head. “No colonizer language in my studio.” Then, when assessing her expression, he added, “Anyone could be listening.”

“Surely not in *your* colonizer-free zone,” Ana said, glancing at the long rows of awards and medals her teacher had won. Aurana had always referred to him as the good warrior, though it seemed his time in war had ended long ago. “And we are speaking English, after all. Do you know how many people that English-speaking humans killed in order to ensure it was *their* language that marked this planet?”

He nodded with a thin, but warm, smile. Michael was a former professor who’d fought off Ks’ou in the first invasion during the first wave of university instructor extermination. He went into hiding, renamed himself, and opened up the very martial arts studio they were in. That was all they knew of him. He figured out that Aurana was Ks’ou fairly quickly. Convincing him to allow her and Ana to remain was a near-death negotiation.

“Speaking of colonizer-free zones,” he said, nodding his head towards the large window, mirrored on the street side, that bordered the studio wall. “Your friend reappeared. He was here earlier, too. Must be urgent.”

Aurana looked. Across the street, NeVarr/James sat, signature tan guitar in hand. She couldn’t hear the song they were playing, but by the way that James’ hands moved over the strings it seemed to be a quick, joyful song, the kind they played when they wanted passersby to feel comfortable. At ease. Eventually the Ks’ou-Human pair would seem disappear into the city backdrop, becoming as tied to the concrete as naturally as the fire hydrant or the streetlight, and then they could speak, unnoticed.

“I told him he could come in and wait,” Michael added nonchalantly. “But he seems genuinely afraid of me. Don’t know why.”

Ana laughed. “Maybe that story you told him about tearing a Ks’ou out of your head with your bare hands got to him.”

“Just a story. Perhaps.”

His light-hearted voice didn’t quite match his eyes like stone. Ana didn’t know why this surprised her so much; she imagined there was a time when he had a wider range of facial expressions. It seemed almost possible with the way he reacted whenever one of his students impressed him or made him proud. But if such expressions existed, they were laid to rest a long time ago. “Aurana’s classes will be intense today, so I hope you’re up for the challenge. Did you two have another bad night in the Deep?”

“Not yet,” Ana tied her belt a little tighter and adjusted the collar, ensuring it still covered her neck, though she didn’t need to. By now it was habit, nearly instinctual. “You know that friend of hers? The pathetic one that used to come here?”

“The clumsy *zilaa*?”

“Yeah. She had to tell him the truth. He didn’t take kindly to it.”

Michael shook his head; there was little empathy from one who lived so long, even if length of experience designates more than time. “We all have to tell the truth, eventually. Or the truth is told for us.”

“It’s about to get a lot worse.” Ana’s brown eyes were genuine as she stared at him. “There’s… there’s been a lot happening. I’m a bit afraid.”

“I’m not.” There was an envious finality in his voice. “I did not come into being Earth by my own choice; nor do I have a choice when I depart.”

“But your family?”

“…Much has been taken away, yes,” he nodded after a moment. “But I still have much to praise. My studio is thriving. I’d like to imagine I’m training a host of humans who can defend themselves against the Nation, even if they don’t know it yet. And I have companions, however few. Even your Ks’ou.”

Ana looked at him skeptically. For her, much had already been taken away, and not necessarily by Ks’ou. She no longer knew what faith was.

In the late afternoon rush hour, the distracted students and businesspeople had better places to be than immersed in the reverb of an unkempt-haired guitar player. So deep he was into the song, he didn’t notice her approach.

He was playing an Untraceable, the one she’d told him never to play, the one that Mama played every Saturday morning before setting off to clean the house.

A sun rising somewhere else.

Ana couldn’t help but add a thought to this past scene, one she had never shown Aurana. A house as broken outside as it was in. Papa would have come in from work earlier that morning and was snoozing on the couch. Even though he slept the morning away, he swore he could see Mama through closed eyes, so it didn’t bother him to sleep out there in the open like that. When Éloise and Ana were done with their chores they’d wait until Mama went to fix some lunch so they could find something to mess up Papa with. Tied shoelaces (he oft forgot to take off his shoes before falling onto the couch). A wet rag in his armpit. A bow in his beard. He’d wake up for lunch and they’d time how long it took him to figure out he’d been had. Mama would shake her head quietly but because Éloise had the worst poker face of them all, it wouldn’t take him long to figure that they’d had their mischief—

The memory ceased when NeVarr found the bridge. On her unmashed music player, she was never able to get to this part. Would always shut it off. She didn’t have that option, here. What NeVarr played was a riff of the original--on the border between illegal and legit. It wasn’t as powerful, but it pointed to the *thing* and she could never erase that palimpsest in her mind, the memory of sound that was still ingrained in her, even without Aurana and the archive.

“Don’t you think it’d be a shame if the police picked you up over this?” The song wasn’t over, but there was a brief lull, and she wanted to speak to him about something other than the war. His fingers continued to move over the strings, with a light finesse that NeVarr somehow managed through James’ clumsy human fingers.

“James thinks music shouldn’t be owned. That there should be no restrictions on it. I agree with him: to own sound is soundless,” NeVarr said without looking up. He fell quiet again so he could finish the song. When he was done he looked at her and made the symbol ‘K’ with his fingers. Then ‘K-L-F.’

She made the symbol ‘H’ with her own hand. His eyebrows raised, then spoke, hesitantly, “Ana. Sorry. It’s Thursday.”

She made an exaggerated gesture of rubbing her hand over her own neck, as though she was working out a sore muscle. Smooth. “She wanted to spend some time in the archive today. So I left her in the studio.”

“…I didn’t realize. Care for another?”

“Something from your shitty band?”

He reddened. “Our band isn’t shitty, we’re just struggling to find our genre. *Anyway,* no. Another illegal.”

“Now?”

“I could wait until tomorrow. But you’re here. And… after I tell you, we may not expect another day.”

He began to strum something else, playing slow so they could hear each other’s voices between note and throng.

“||*Portuguese:* We’ve been charged,||” His timing, also, was impeccable; his voice, deep and low.

“||*Portuguese: You’ve* been,||” she muttered.

“||*Portuguese:* Listen.||”

Once he was done explaining she repeated, slowly, evenly, “||*Portuguese:* A map? The Nation continues its expanse abroad?||

“||*Portuguese:* The Nation has affected places other than America first,||” NeVarr chided gently.

Ana of course knew her non-American roots. These waned quickly in the face of what advantages Americanness afforded her. A constant struggle between her and her father; she *wanted* to love *Ayiti* like he did, but love needs intimacy, and she had such little, childish knowledge of the place. “||*Portuguese:* You’re right. Sorry. Where?||”

NeVarr shook his head. “||*Portuguese:* Aurana is charged to retrieve the map tonight. This should be an utterly quiet mission—be clandestine. Once you have it, we’ll be able to know the place it will point us to… it is very important. It will not be easy. I’m going to ask the KLF if we can go together. I’ll argue that we’ll need Aurana’s tactical knowledge.||”

“||*Portuguese:* When should she recharge?||”

“||*Portuguese:* Retrieve the map under that guise tonight. You can take the normal way. And I’ll *follow the path* to be your support, just in case.||”

Ana mumbled NeVarr’s name: it was a rare Thursday. And this, briefest of moments. In the red dusk she noted a few people beside them, none having lifted their eyes once since they begun their conversation; they stared, glossy-eyed, at other things, like the ground, or the bus, or the distance.

“||*Portuguese:* Don’t get used to this. Aurana will regain sense.||”

The strumming stopped. Something in the way NeVarr held James’ eyes told her that the next words would not be good.

“||*Portuguese:* I’m going to… I’m going to have to report *him,* you know.||”

Ana felt hot. At first she thought that they’d been standing too much in direct sunlight, until she realized it had been descending rather rapidly and the night was about to settle in. The color of the evening was ambiguous; uncertain. She glanced over. A light-haired of the throng that seemed to be hanging on to the street was staring directly at her, but when she tried to lock eyes he looked away. In the distance there were two uniformed people, she could only make out their shape and they were too far to see what kinds of badges they wore. Her mind turned back to the song, the vivid colors of her distant memory of her sister who seemed to be gone; of her parents who no longer looked so thin and whose skin was no longer smooth. She knew she could never be sure of anything, anymore. She snapped back to attention.

“You don’t *have* to do shit.”

NeVarr caught on to the change. In a tone she’d ever heard, he said, “I am Aurana’s superior. I am her mentor. If I don’t report her and they find out, then we’ll *all* be trouble.”

“She just wanted to discourse with him. And *you*,” she thumbed him in the chest. “Are out of line.”

But NeVarr knew her well. He knew enough, at least, to let go of his guitar and hold her by the hand and say with just the right softness, “Ana, *please.*”

“I’ll take care of it,” she said baldly, though confidence dispersed from her like sweat. “Aurana trusts me. I’ll take care of him.”

At his signal they headed out. She insisted on escorting him to *the path*, the hidden entrance they used when conducting anti-Nation activities, before she would take the "normal" route prescribed by the Nation to get nourishment. Together, she and NeVarr went: into the street, then the alleyway behind the medium high-rise, around the corner.

Then, beneath the hovertracks, past the art gallery where once a painting of *Papa* holding his violin had been featured that one short time, past the large stone houses, inside of one where they’d once killed a powerful Settler, down the grassy knoll that bordered the golf course, past the creek, over the little bridge, within the trees, deeper, until finally, finally, there: barely visible, between two rocks, a meaningless slit: the forbidden entrance to the Deep.

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Later that night, Ana, who had reintroduced a surprisingly disinterested Aurana back to her neck, pulled her jacket sleeve up to her elbow as she—they—stood in front of this man in the plain dark blue uniform as he sized up the ID embedded beneath her skin. He was new: she’d never seen him before. This guard babbled in Ks’Sassi as he passed what appeared to her a small green laser pointer to and fro over her wrist, revealing the imprint beneath her flesh, the marker of the *Nation*. She’d had to remove her gloves to let the dry, flaky hands of his human pass over hers, and tried not to shudder—Ks’ou didn’t care about touch like that. The wind had picked up and she pulled, with her other hand, the scarf over her neck. It snowed a lot less these days, which was cause for joy for Ks’ou and her alike—her boots could last one more winter season, she’d hoped. The guard coughed; she remembered that it was her turn to speak.

“Aurrin, Saalix Derroush, *kyôsta-fs,*” she murmured. Aurana was in the archive and this part bored her, so there was no need to draw her back out. Besides, Ana had spoken these words so often that she’d had it memorized even before Aurana taught her Ks’Sassi.

“*Kyôsta-fs*,” he repeated, making a rude sound, something like *ungvvvvv*, which told her immediately his opinion about that. He must have been *dostôn-fs*, born on a ship and not the planet that Ks’ou were condemned to by Thhiyatkhoor, but certainly he would not venture his opinion about that here.

They stood at the entrance to the gated community. It was still designed for cars, the rusted tire spike barrier embedded in the concrete, a bright flood light hovering above, illuminating the little white and red gate arm that was actually an invisible barrier. Ks’ou technology that would set any biological thing aflame. While cars did occasionally come, it was usually pedestrians passing through, heading in to their next feed. With the implementation of the new hovertrain laws, even those in gated communities could barely afford a car, and those that could preferred the chateaus in the next county.

The guard then glanced back inside his security hut, at the screen masquerading as a human computer and sniffed, turning back without looking at her directly. “||*Ks’Sassi:* You’re early.||”

“||*Ks’Sassi:* The Settled’s family is planning a trip to camp and hike. A precaution.||” She spoke slowly, evenly. She could get away with a mistake here or there—Ks’Sassi was not designed for the human tongue, after all—but not too many; the guard only needed to double check the record to see that she’d been on Earth for over a year, long enough to master the practice, at least. The guard didn’t react even though she knew she didn’t draw out one of the *ppp* sounds long enough; she smiled inwardly. *Éloise, would you be at least proud of this?* Éloise had always been the better of the two at learning languages, having mastered the required Swahili and Izlaa in school, in addition to learning the dead languages Latin and Postmodern French.

He laughed coarsely, not how humans laugh, but more like a high-pitched grunt. “||Humans and their hiking. They love making natural things so unnatural.||”

“||Ke xtêee,||” she said shortly. Ana knew better than to read the officer’s blabber as a desire for talk. He was stuck in this box all day, probably with a screaming human in his mind. He was looking for a way to cut through the sound, not a chatting buddy.

He dropped his grip on her wrist and gestured to the gate arm; as it lifted, the Ks’ou technology that would have paralyzed them moments prior was deactivated.

She walked through calmly, not caring to see what new weird ‘improvements’ the Homeowner’s Association had decided on for that particular season. Everyone who lived here was Settled, so all decisions were made by Ks’ou trying to appease human aesthetics *just in case* while simultaneously, maybe because they enjoyed the risk, able to put a Ks’ou mark on their little enclosed world. Most recently, they had turned every pool into a lagoon, forsaking the deadly chlorine blue for an earth-tone, complete with rocks and even a little tree in the middle, as they were used to. Holidays were also interesting: the giant statue in the park that centered the neighborhood was always dressed in some kind of American human holiday figure. Last Christmas he was decorated as a glorified Cthulhu complete with red cap, button suit, and tentacles spurting out its horrendous face. This was in homage, she knew, to the tentacles the Ks’ou so admired, and the horrifying figure that was supposed to drive humans insane as Ks’ou were supposed to do. *Whoever said Ks’ou didn’t have any humor?*

Even if she ignored Ks’ou decorative techniques, she could not ignore the strange perfection of the grass, always so evenly cut, it seemed, to the very last blade, and the hedges manicured with obsessive precision. The house she was always to enter, residence 18 on Evergreen, was as yet untouched by the approaching holiday, but she knew her superiors would eventually ‘fix’ the house appropriately.

She knocked on the door.

A woman with very large eyes, perfect teeth, and golden hair opened it. “||Aurrin, Saalix Derroush? A bit early, yes?||”

“||Camping tomorrow with the Settled’s family. It must be done now,||” Ana said shortly. She began to nudge Aurana a bit, uncomfortable with the constant onslaught of nosiness. The Settler was called Prïdryss, Saalix Lyden—Ana didn’t know the human’s name—opened up the door to their home: a place unfathomably clean, with artwork whose significance was supposed to be legible to all humans hung on the wall, a well-vacuumed entrance, and an impeccable aesthetic.

According to Ana, Prïdryss’s human looked like the kind of woman who ate gourmet jelly beans with flavors like *mimosa* or *matcha*. When she’d tried to explain, Aurana didn’t get why this was such an insult, but now they couldn’t help but think, vividly, of jelly beans whenever they entered Prïdryss’ home.

Each of the houses in this complex were the same inside. She didn’t know this for sure because they always had to enter the same house, to the same Gatekeeper, but it helped her make sense of this eerie place. The house never changed, not so much as a sock on the floor or a speck of dust on the artwork. It was always clean. Perfect. Impervious to human critique.

Prïdryss walked over the impossibly eggshell carpet and past the kitchen, where her human’s husband, settled by a Ks’ou named Fsaoul, was sitting in front of a screen, a mug in hand.

“Coffee?” he asked cheerfully. He had dark hair, combed over, and wore a sweater vest. Both of them had their necks fully exposed, likely for the sheer joy of not having to hide, proudly displaying the blue bulbs nestled just beneath the surface of human skin.

“||It's night.||” Ana blinked, nudging Aurana to come out of the archive, disliking how chatty Fsaoul was. He usually didn’t given them so much a glance whenever they walked by.

“Come on,” he continued with a sly grin. “It's not your normal nourishment day, so you have some time."

Was this a trick? Why was he speaking to her in English? Upon seeing her puzzled face, he added, “I’m trying something new with my human. I’ll explain in a second.”

“||I do have places to—I must go, c-colleague,||” Ana was feeling far less confident in her Ks’Sassi, now, and tried to betray no facial expression. { Aurana! *Hurry.* }

“Here,” he said, pouring the coffee into a large ceramic mug. “Just give us a few moments of your time, colleague.”

She took the smallest sip she could, and then two. It warmed her, at least, though her pleasure quickly faded. Fsaoul started up a conversation about something that Ana found gross: infesting child humans so that they would only know slavery. No resistance would make for easier, and more natural, settlement. Aurana was still taking her sweet time connecting. Prïdryss responded minimally and kept glancing at her; it was clear they wanted Aurana’s opinion about this initiative that they called *The Callixte Project*.

“The humans would never know what freedom was,” Fsaoul finished. “Isn’t it brilliant, Aurrin?”

Ana frowned. “||We don’t have enough Ks’ou for that, do we?||”

“Not enough ones *willing* to fuse themselves to a mindless infant, no. It’s just in the initial stages, but a colleague of mine who works in the lab has expressed excitement about their findings.”

“||Perhaps if we can get more Ks’ou off our *kyôsta,* they’ll be more willing*.*||” she managed. Then another urgent nudge, { Aurana! } { I’m here, I’m here, ugh. I’m just trying to catch myself up. } Usually Aurana needed to ask permission to explore Ana’s mind, but Ana, impatient to hand over control, didn’t care this time if Aurana searched more thoroughly.

Both Ks’ou were now staring directly at her. Something about her tone must have set them off. { Shit. What did I do now? } Ana asked. Aurana had figured it out before Fsaoul even uttered his question: *our* *kyôsta*. Ours. Only certain Ks’ou referred to it this way.

“||I thought you were dostôn-fs?||” he asked point blank. This was a terribly rude thing to ask among colleagues, something only guards could use to confirm identity, but it was too late to fix Ana’s mistake.

Aurana, finally back in full control, took in a sharp breath and said with her chin raised a bit. “||Adê. Kyôsta-fs.||”

“||*Vngkh,||*” Prïdryss muttered in disapproval, pretending to be looking at something else.

Ana was still watching and listening; usually with Aurana in full control it felt like being in a separate room, but right now she could almost feel herself there with them. It felt a little like exposure, and though she knew it was impossible, it seemed that Fsaoul and Prïdryss were staring at the both of them.

{ *Kyôsta-fs*-hating good-for nothings } Aurana grumbled to her human, who still didn’t understand. There was another word she could call these *dostôn-fs*. It was terribly rude and she had promised NeVarr she would never use it, not even against those that deserved to have a few indecencies thrown in their direction.

Aurana had patiently explained, many times, the Ks’ou divide: ship-born *dostôn-fs*, unlike *kyôsta* born, were free from Thhiyatkhoor sanctions, and thus thought themselves less enslaved, less tied, to their greatest enemy. It was because of the sanctions that *kyôsta-fs* were becoming more and more the minority on Earth, as it was easier to secretly breed Ks’ou on ships.

Aurana had been ruminating on this, finishing this coffee she didn’t ask for out of spite, and nearly slammed the mug on the table. Fsaoul stared at the mug. Wordlessly he went to get the coffee pot, filled it again to brimming, and returned the pot to the machine. “How are you feeling?” He shoved the mug back in her direction.

Aurana, unnerved by his gaze, said, “||Just fine.||” She lifted the mug again, but it seemed unnervingly heavy and hard to grip. She realized also that Ana seemed bolder in her mind, more present. { Sorry. I’m trying to go deeper but something keeps bringing me back. } Aurana finally looked at the cup, mustering more strength than usual to lift it to Ana’s lips and take another sip, when it hit her. “||This—this is caffeinated.||”

“Precisely.” Fsaoul kept a steely gaze on her. “You seem to have very good control of your human. When I tried this on Prïdryss she lost momentary control after the third sip.”

“||This is why you’re speaking English?||” Aurana didn’t turn Ana’s eyes away from him. She didn’t dare to ask the second question lingering in her mind. No Nation-Ks’ou ever asked if they were allowing their human to speak, even if their human was cooperative with the Nation. It was as taboo as offering kombucha to a human.

“I’ve figured out how to re-Settle most of my human’s faculties but the human tongue remains trying,” Fsaoul grinned slightly, amused, apparently, at his own words; the grin disappeared fairly quickly. “Because my human does not know Ks’Sassi, I have temporarily lost my ability to speak it. It’s interesting that it seems to pose you no such trouble.”

Aurana grunted back. She was never a very good liar, and but could tell the truth slightly slant. “||I have always had good linguistic faculties over my human. She is multilingual, so I have had to acquire three human languages from her. Perhaps this is why.||”

Prïdryss scoffed. “||3 human languages? What an awful waste of energy. I can’t wait for us all to be united by Ks’Sassi.||”

“||We’d still have to speak Izlaa, in the Universal Forum,||” Aurana said, her patience waning. She glanced towards the door that lead to the basement, within which the official entrance to the Deep was hidden.

But Fsaoul wasn’t letting up, turning the conversation back with a, “So nothing else is slipping?”

Aurana glared at him. { Don’t take the bait, } Ana hissed, sensing Aurana’s stubborn resentment. { Just tell him I’m screaming at you. Or that I’m about to grab my neck. Anything. }

“||She is a lot louder, internally,||” Aurana spoke at last. The pause was intentional, too, in hopes that they would see her lose at least a bit of face. “||I feel her trying to get a hold of her hands. She wants to see if she can tear me out of her neck.||”

“||My human tried that,||” Prïdryss snorted. “||I haven’t forgiven Fsaoul for this ridiculous little game of his.||”

Fsaoul kept a stony silence, scanning over Ana’s body for any hint of resistance. Aurana faked a small twitch and twisted her human’s foot a bit, but it still seemed unconvincing.

“||Well… why isn’t *your* human resisting?||” She spoke slower, pretending to underscore how difficult this all was.

“Oh he did, in the beginning. Nearly took us both out. But if you practice, over time, it gets easier. I can take perhaps half a cup over half an hour and still retain complete control, but you drank an entire cup in ten minutes.”

“||Don’t be jealous, Fsaoul,||” Prïdryss stood. She walked towards the door of the basement and opened it as though anticipating—or desiring—Aurana’s exit. “||Maybe the *kyôsta-fs* is a developing Master Settler.||”

“||Perhaps you should bring your experiment to Ke’Ad!||” Aurana added. Ana suggested that it might be best to smooth things over with Fsaoul, so she tried, though everything in her wanted to resist. Her human was right, though: the last thing they needed was a resentful Ks’ou looking for a way to make their lives miserable. “||This could be used as part of the Master Settler examination.||”

Fsaoul seemed to brighten. “Of course I was intending to do that.” His voice betrayed that the idea had only just come to him now that she’d suggested it. “Check your hubris, colleague.”

“||Of course. Colleague.||” Aurana took the mug to the sink and dumped the rest of the coffee out. She *was* feeling oddly displaced. But because Ana was not resistant, there was nothing to show for it. { Want me to punch him? I can scream ‘Vive la résistance!’ while I do it. Monolingual-loving prick. } { Settle down. Just clench your fist.} { Awwww. }

But Ana obliged, clenching her fist. Aurana placed her other arm over it and held it as though keeping her from using it, and looked at Fsaoul and Prïdryss again. “||Regional-brain displacement Settlement,||” She said as though that explained everything. “||A technique we learned from our officers on *kyôsta.* Perhaps I can teach you one day what the people on *our* planet taught me.||” It was an unnecessary jab, but one Aurana didn’t regret. The only thing worse than a Ks’ou who favored the Nation was a cocky *dostôn-fs* Ks’ou who hated their *kyôsta* colleagues.

{ No, not worse. }

{ Right. Thoughts out of order. }

{ Must be. } Ana said this warily.

“||I need to feed, now, before the caffeine in my human surges. This was a fun game, Fsaoul. I’ll be more careful taking drinks from you.||”

“Indeed,” Fsaoul growled as she descended down the stairs.

He was quickly out of their collective minds and to the KLF’s charge instead. This mission would be discreet; a battle that would likely end in no bloodshed, Aurana hoped. Ana didn’t say anything. They prepared themselves, both, to enter the Deep. There was no need to speak, because the sounds there spoke thoughts for them.

**Chapter 11\***

*The archive*…

….seems endless. It has an end—everything does, their story being no different—but it is so vast that you could get lost in it if it were an actual physical space.

At its center is a rootless tree, and that’s how Ana and Aurana always know how to find their way back. It hovers above the ground in stasis, neither dead nor living, somewhere either in between or not at all. The tree is locked. There is something inside of it because if you felt just the right spot you could feel its warmth. Both Ana and Aurana had given up trying to unfold its mysteries; there was some kind of knowing that told them that it would not be open by force, that it would open when the time came.

Ana liked to curl up at the base of the tree; she would then be hovering with it, seated on air as though it were solid ground. Aurana preferred to climb it. It had twisted branches that she could nestle in, like a seat.

That needs some explanation: a Ks’ou cannot climb a tree. Over time, Aurana, too, got used to the projected image of a human that Ana had of her, and used this form in the archive. The archive only had a few sections immersed in water; largely, it was land-based, and therefore not very comfortable for a Ks’ou, so the human form was more appropriate for the landscape.

It must be hard for human beings to imagine why Ks’ou find land so difficult to contend with. Humans have hands that have built societies and empires. They have ears that can hear a many great things. They can swim—not well, but they can. So, if a human is confused as to why Aurana felt more comfortable imagining herself human, they should think about the ability to fly. And, with this, being transported, suddenly, to an air-dominant society. A human would feel more comfortable if they were given wings in such an instance.

The archive was built for mostly land-based beings because the beings from which it came were land-based. Ks’ou had texts. But not books. They had sound, and were mostly oral. They could see, but through pulses, and needed liquid for this to work. The archive was not built this way, but a human could navigate it likewise.

The archive had more sections, Ana would joke, than she had hairs on her head. And hairs is what seemed to connect them at least—long threads, like fiber-optic chords. The only difference is that for humans, hair is dead; for Ks’ou, their ‘hairs’ are alive, like a river. A river can flow; Ks’ou are a river that can flow through others.

Back to the archive: here, you could ‘check out’ anything: books, images, language, objects, propositions, impressions, shadows, vibrations.

Not absolute memories.

Those could never be preserved.

Still, once you were done with the thing, it would always find its way back to where it belonged. Everything was organized with impeccable, incredibly fine in detail. It held secrets unknown to the universe. More creatures than could ever be contained within a single book. Aurana understood how easy it was for a human like Ana to become lost in this world. Ana could never access it otherwise, and could linger, without judgement, in it, for as long as she liked.

**Chapter 12**

*She had muttered, “Le colon et le colonisé sont de vieilles connaissances…”[[44]](#footnote-44)*

“Français: ||La décolonisation, qui se propose de changer l'ordre du monde, est, on le voit, un programme de désordre absolu.

Mais elle ne peut être le résultat d'une opération magique, d'une secousse naturelle ou d'une entente à l'amiable.

La décolonisation, on le sait, est un processus historique : c'est-à-dire qu'elle ne peut être comprise, qu'elle ne trouve son intelligibilité, ne devient translucide à elle-même que dans l'exacte mesure où l'on discerne le mouvement historicisant qui lui donne forme et contenu.

La décolonisation est la rencontre de deux forces congénitalement antagonistes qui tirent précisément leur originalité de cette sorte de substantification que sécrète et qu'alimente la situation coloniale.

Leur première confrontation s'est déroulée sous le signe de la violence et leur cohabitation — plus précisément l'exploitation du colonisé par le colon — s'est poursuivie à grand renfort de baïonnettes et de canons. *Le colon et le colonisé sont de vieilles connaissances.* Et, de fait, le colon a raison quand il dit « les » connaître. C'est le colon qui a fait et qui continue à faire le colonisé. Le colon tire sa vérité, c'est-à-dire ses biens, du système colonial.

La décolonisation ne passe jamais inaperçue car elle porte sur l'être, elle modifie fondamentalement l'être, elle transforme des spectateurs écrasés d'inessentialité en acteurs privilégiés, saisis de façon quasi grandiose par le faisceau de l'Histoire. Elle introduit dans l'être un rythme propre…||”

(Fanon, *De la violence)*

Jacque and Efyir stared at the large, heavy bag that seemed to meld itself into the bridge of Kahti’s back. She seemed taller to them, then, though she was clearly stooped under the weight. She held a stick which was not a weapon, as Efyir learned, but one for walking.

“Mom? You sure you need all that?”

“This will be no small trip in the woods,” she laughed roughly. “I have everything I need.”

“I don’t see why *camping* is a good idea right now,” Jacque grumbled. “It’s cold as hell, still.”

“I think we all need a small vacation,” Aunt Kahti said, and though neither she nor Jacque looked at him, Efyir felt targeted. He restrained a reaction, maintaining an even haze on his skin. “We’ve used the cabin in winter before. Perhaps with refreshed eyes, we can find our harmony again.”

“Ugh, but like *this*?” Jacque held up the ticket clearly marked by the name of a very distant city, one Efyir had never heard of before.

“How long has it been since you’ve seen your father?” Kahti snapped with steely eyes. “He hounds me every other day about it, no matter how much I tell him you’re an adult now who can make her own decisions.”

“But this *isn’t* my decision.”

“Of course it is,” Kahti said, eyes glittering, then nodded her head towards Jacque’s hands. “That ticket. Rip it up.”

“What?”

“Rip it up.”

Efyir noticed that when two human women challenged one another, they locked their eyes in a way that sent their temperatures skyrocketing. He witnessed this, now, noting the sweat that appeared on Kahti’s forehead and the way that Jacque’s hair, though short, seemed to curl tighter in response. In Thhiyatkhoor society, this kind of exchange would be a good thing, revealing the hidden truth of words that are considered impolite to say aloud. But such is not the case for many humans. The tension drawn between them did not seem to be a good thing, because Jacque, grumbling under her breath, crumpled the ticket in a balled fist but did not rip it.

Kahti, unappeased, double-tapped her stick on the ground. “Be safe.” She turned to leave but stopped herself. “Efyir.”

Efyir froze. He’d hoped to render himself invisible during this exchange, not knowing on which ground he stood now that he had declared his neutrality in the potential war to come. “Yes, Aunt Kahti?”

“Don’t wander too far from the compound. Shyr and I are negotiating your return to Routhhe soon. But you know how bureaucracy is. Humans and Thhiyatkhoor alike are guilty.”

“Qwa, *really*?”

“Don’t look so pleased,” Jacque sneered.

He wanted to avoid looking at her, so looked at his hands instead. He hadn’t even said *qwa* with a bright voice, but the shine on his slate skin could not be suppressed. It came in waves in a surprising luminescence. He began to think about home more concretely, imagining the trees interminably bound and rooted with one another, the strongest branches winding at the top where Thhiyatkhoor would walk and write and play. Yet some spark in his mind disrupted; immediately the waves plateaued, a sudden break in the waves.

He fell solid slate again, and had no idea why.

“Thanks, Aunt Kahti,” he mumbled.

Wordlessly she turned and headed out the door. They watched as she headed down the dirt path that would take her to the border of her compound and then out towards the woods, in the opposite direction of the hovertrain that took them to the city.

“Do you think she’ll be alright, out there in the woods by herself?” Efyir asked, but if the tension had been hot with Kahti present, it became unstable and dense with her gone.

“I don’t know, Efyir,” Jacque hissed. His name, not one of the nicknames she used for him, sounded strange on her tongue and he believed this to be intentional. “Why would that matter to you? You’re going home soon.”

She went back inside, making great effort to slam the door. This useless human expressions of anger never made sense, but he knew a *ghjj* between himself and a barely trained Jacque would be a foregone conclusion, and sometimes humans liked to stew in their anger, perhaps because they liked it to ripen just as they liked their food.

—

Efyir watched as the ship slowly took off in the dusk. His *naghryoja* of one offshoot trembled in the oncoming cold, and he wondered briefly if it had all been a mistake. The General and his entourage of soldiers, hadn’t they been standing *right there*? He had turned and made his way into the thicket of the forest, as instructed. They were on the hunt for Ks’ou *together*, were they not? And Efyir—thrilled because he had only seen Ks’ou in the picture books, alongside the written history of how their great species had defeated this parasitic race, expelled them from their planet for rebellion and treachery—was eager to find one and kill it, and complete the Warrior’s Examination so he could finally join his father among his ranks.

But this was not as expected. The more he thought about it, the more he realized this must have been by design. The way that some of the soldier’s slate had overturned patterns of nervous, irregular rhizomes. The uneven way in which his father encouraged him to venture towards the forest alone. The way in which his father’s 19-offshoot crown seemed to flake, as though it were bone-dry, as though his father had been committing a ritual without water for days.

Efyir, the non-branched, was supposed to be here, alone. His father, of all of them, had intended to abandon him here, on this planet.

One Thhiyatkhoor alone on this wasteland of trees and rocks, and ten-, perhaps twenty- hundred thousand Ks’ou.

That thought caused every inch of his slate skin to flare in white bursts, but he kept moving in his intended direction. This was not the *kyôsta* of the mainplanet Ks’ou. This one was simply called ||Training|| and you knew what it referred to by the way your voice dropped when you said it. It was not the simple training of warrior school or even practice Efyir attended with his friends when they wanted to relax after school. Sometimes—Efyir had heard his father say this when he was not in the room, but close enough to hear—this place was also called ||*thsji-ojiind[[45]](#footnote-45)|*|, but Efyir, now here, was not feeling playful. The ancient Thhiyatkhoor had the foresight to preserve some of those Ks’ou untouched by conscience and sight to a new place. These Ks’ou never knew Settled or Settler; these Ks’ou who were resigned to their pathetic, lagoon-bound state because they knew not the power of their siblings. They didn’t even know a war was going on. The testing site for all warrior class Thhiyatkhoor who might venture to advance in rank, a place in which Thhiyatkhoor could gaze upon their enemy apart from war.

Yet war was still here, even if not viscerally present. These Ks’ou were still dangerous. Not all soldiers returned from ||Training||. Some simply disappeared, and their stories were never told. Others, certainly: sometimes a Ks’ou did manage it—did manage to overtake and realize its internal power. The Thhiyatkhoor soldier who dared let himself be captured had his mind shot out on the spot when the returning soldiers and their General found him. No Ks’ou on that planet could be allowed to realize its natural born ability to control and manipulate other species.

And it was glaringly evident who a captured soldiers was, by all accounts. Ks’ou knew little of how to manage Thhiyatkhoor skin, though the bodies of other species, like humans, were much easier to settle. For a Thhiyatkhoor, if the Ks’ou could Settle the mind and muscles, they were fortunate. Not many Ks’ou were even capable of fully penetrating the complex biology of Thhiyatkhoor. But even further than that—how to present oneself as only a Thhiyatkhoor could? The facial expressions, the shine on their exposed skin, the stance—these were particular, and would take much time, more time than they had, to master.

Efyir would only learn this much later.

*Then*, he knew that the Ks’ou was his enemy, and that he need kill only *one* to fulfill the terms of the Warrior’s Examination. Then. If he failed, he would be killed, perhaps by his father the General himself. He would have failed his family, and worse, failed his species. The Ks’ou were not to be held in low regard. Even picking one up could cause ruin. It could plunge itself anywhere in the skin, though it preferred the neck. It could extend itself throughout the body in a matter of seconds and force the body to do things that the body’s mind refused. And, if left long enough, the mind would be overtaken, also. Nothing would be left.

Efyir trudged through the thicket, his mind sorting through all that he’d learned in school, his pulsing rapid with the beat of his blood-giver. Could a Ks’ou drop from the trees? Possibly. They could not survive long outside of water, but if they sensed their enemy, they could crawl out of the lagoon and use the branches and roots of the tree to find its location, and descend upon its victim within moments.

At least, he’d heard a story of this once, somewhere in school, perhaps the younger brother of a felled warrior, explaining why he did not return home. Efyir placed his long weapon against the crux of his neck just in case, his eyes darting rapidly from the floor to the dark mauve sky. He noted his breath and the exercises his mother had taught him:

One—look to your sky aspirations;

Two—look to your roots;

Three—look to your father’s shoulder;

Four—look to your mother’s shoulder;

Five—look to your—

A sudden, virulent sound pierced his ears, like the sound of *feiouwr* against *wnjien*. He looked above to see some kind of winged creature moving across the trees. It wasn’t Ks’ou, he immediately knew that, by its size and stature. *There are other creatures on this planet!* Of course. How stupid, how stupid could he be. His own planet thrived with many creatures, but he imagined that if it were a warriors training planet, the Thhiyatkhoor would have limited to the one thing they were training against.

It was a terrible time to realize these assumptions were wrong.

But the immediate next thought was something he would never forget: *There were things other than Ks’ou to fear.*

He held his fabricated weapon close and his natural weapon, his blades, closer. Although he usually felt safest in the trees, he decided, not knowing the potential enemy above, to stay closer to the ground. In just a moment’s time the forest opened up to a kind of glade. It was still, save for a few tremors of the smaller plants on the ground, though Efyir felt no wind. There, in the center, was the tree he needed, the one that he could smell from miles away: the *hethalu* clone, the trees that his species’ scientists created specifically to satisfy the needs of Ks’ou apart from their planet. Engineered to mimic, but to be a *lesser than*, their branches weren’t so satisfyingly twisted and thick as those from home, its color bland like the ground.

The violent screaming of the winged creature came again. He ducked as an immediate reaction, his *naghryoja* sensing the danger, and scrambled back into the forest. When he opened up all possible ways of seeing, he realized he was clinging to the base of a tree like a child.

*Efyir-Azayim!*

He pushed himself away from the tree and curled up on its roots. One. Look. Two. Look. Three. Look. Four. Look.

In the midst of an immediate hunt, it was inappropriate to ritual. So he kept to the practices his mother had taught him and his slate skin became even and solid again. *Efyir-Azayim. Complete this. Show them you are a warrior. They will see. Astriyen will never get this opportunity. And she is a better warrior than you. You shouldn’t waste this. You should make her proud.*

He fell asleep thinking these thoughts.

On the gloaming of the fourth day, the day that his slate was nearly blanched from dehydration and he had finally managed to kill the winged creature that had been hunting him, he tried to calculate how far he’d gone. In his prior mind, he had assumed that Ks’ou lagoons would be plentiful and vibrant. Not here. Here, there seemed to be little else than dust, and thickets with violent birds, and nothing that he was searching for. Perhaps he *would* die. What a disappointment that would be. Astriyen would not be surprised, of course. He was always the weaker. And his mother? What would she consider?

It was fully night, now, and the strange constellations overhead did not give enough light for solace. This miserable planet didn’t even seem to have a moon, but Efyir could still carve out shapes using the senses from the branches on his head. Another screaming animal from above tried to make more sounds but Efyir did not react. Perhaps it was trying to scare him. He held his bladed arm close to his body just in case.

Tonight would be a different night. He smelled it, so subtle at first he thought he was hallucinating. A slightly coarse, savory smell, like when they visited planets where creatures regularly fed on others’ flesh. But he kept walking towards it, and there, in the glow, it was:

The lagoon where Ks’ou lived in the deep.

To get close enough, he would have to climb one of the branches. To walk directly into the water would court danger, and a Ks’ou only needed a little to make its move. Mercifully one such branch hovered just over the lagoon, its waters calm and undisturbed, reflecting the stars.

It looked almost empty, but Efyir knew better. Ks’ou almost always preferred the deeper part of the water and wouldn’t be so near the surface at this time of night. A sudden cold shook him, striking him as perhaps too cold for even Ks’ou. He briefly wondered how much longer he would have to wait. A hunt of any creature could take days. What if they didn’t come? He would starve to death, right by the very lagoon that was his passage into honor within his family.

He pushed these thoughts aside. The branch he needed was on the other side of the tree, and the trunk was always at the center of the lagoon. Instead of walking around the long way, he decided to leap onto the closest branch first and make his way across the tree. No more delays.

In moments he had scooted over the weaker part of the branch that was most likely to bend directly into the water, onward towards the trunk. Then he climbed around to the branch he needed, and made his way to its center, right where it wouldn’t bend and right where he would be close enough to reach the water. From there he peered over into the void. No life, at first. He pushed his head closer to the water, as close as he dared. He could see zattara, floating bit of wood over the face of the water, drifting with the circular current of the lagoon.

How could he see…

The illuminations came from behind the driftwood, not above. There they were: obvious as blades. Masses in the deep, barely visible, but there.

It must have been time to feed. Ks’ou only rose so close to the surface when it was time to feed, and this was his chance—it must have been scheduled along with his Training.

This moment was why it took to long for their species to finally meet.

*I only need to kill one.*

*Just one.*

*It should not be difficult.*

As if noting his presence, one seemed to approach the surface. Two, then six, then dozens, it seemed. The enemy, floating in peaceful, interminable ignorance.

Ks’ou weren’t beautiful *per se*. Their color was beautiful, at least, Efyir could affirm. A bioluminescent teal. But its body was a disgusting, bulbous tube, trembling in the water like a child on a branch too thin for its weight. They were almost amusing to watch.

He dipped his hand in the water. They must have known, immediately, because they seemed to give one collective shudder and in an instant all had vanished, having plunged into the deeper part of the lagoon. *They must fear me* was an initial thought. But his own mind chided him, *don’t be arrogant*. Perhaps they would be returning in greater numbers.

*I only need to kill one. Just one*.

He withdrew his hand and passed it over the edge of his blades. It cut immediately and, dripping with blood, he dipped his hand back in the water again. In moments he could see that it had worked: the braver of the flesh-thirsty Ks’ou could sense his biology. A few of these reappeared, pulsing, drawing nearer and nearer towards him.

This should have been finished, all of it. All he had to do was swipe his bladed arm and it would have been simple. *In this state, Ks’ou really were rather pathetic*, he thought. They couldn’t see him as brightly as he could see them. They couldn’t do much unless he let them make contact. In fact, it wasn’t much a fight at all. *Why had so many soldiers perished on this planet?* he wondered. This hardly seemed a worthy battle.

One Ks’ou was excessively curious. For Thhiyatkhoor, curiosity was a terrible thing. ||*Do not be curious: be discerning*.||

This small Ks’ou, so disarming in the way it waved its arms and darted back and forth in the water, wanting, wanting, Efyir knew, to touch this new creature that dared to infiltrate the water in which it lived.

He hesitated. He was, to his own fault, also curious. Paralyzed by curiosity. He didn’t strike when the Ks’ou creature lifted up three of its own, many, arms to briefly touch; nor did he move when it shied away from the tips of his claws where he had made the cut. He didn’t even strike when those same arms reached further and began to wrap, slowly, around his fingers. It didn’t begin at first to plunge beneath his skin, though he was watching attentively, ready to kill if it did.

But, then.

***burning.***

Efyir twitched, panicked, and drew his hand back so abruptly that the Ks’ou was nearly halfway out of the water before it released its hold, falling back in with a small splash and jerking backward towards the deep. He clutched the wound in his hand and glared at the Ks’ou. *It tried*, he thought. *It found flesh that it wanted. I should kill it for trying!*

But he could not plunge his hand back into the water. In fact, he could hardly move at all; his hand felt numb, a feeling which then spread throughout his entire body, a sensation like ringing palpitations. With great effort he edged to the branch towards the shore, where the lagoon below was shallow, drawing far enough so that he could hear the lapping of the water against the beach. The Ks’ou that had tried to overtake him remained at a further depth, a pale, slow-moving glow, perhaps waiting, perhaps wanting. Efyir looked at his hand, still throbbing with the Ks’ou’s sting and began to examine it more closely. The blood had stopped flowing, and raised marks in a green tint lined the edges of the self-inflicted wound. He broke off a branch on the tree and began sharpening against the edges of his blade, but the glow was gone, and the water once again became an impenetrable black to his sight. He would have thought that was the end of the encounter, until another strange thing occurred.

The glow, this same, obstinate Ks’ou, reappeared moments later. It approached at an uneven speed, closer and closer as though deliberating. He was almost shocked that it dared, after the first time it tried, and held the branch-turned-spear with his uninjured arm. Then. He realized what was causing the Ks’ou to move so erratically: in its tendrils, it carried a small thing. Gripping the branch more tightly, Efyir peered as closely as he dared bring his *naghryoja* to the water.

In the future, when he had two branches and he reflected on this unforgettable moment, he would realize why the color seemed so familiar: it was like the bulbs that humans often used to light their homes, but immediately after they turned off, an extant energy, the color of post-existence. Lightbulbs were an ancient technology that Kahti held on to despite advances in this arena. The Ks’ou that had tried to harm him was now offering a dim mass, its teal glow having long faded. Another Ks’ou.

A dead Ks’ou.

*It’s baiting me!* *A good trick*, Efyir marveled. Who knew that Ks’ou, even those that had no awareness beyond their own lagoon, could have anything so close to discernment?

How did it know that this was something he needed?

He only need grab it before the Ks’ou could grab him, and then he would have proof.

Proof that he had passed his examination on ||*Training*.||

Proof that he had killed: when, for once, he did not have to kill.

Efyir looked at his hand once more. The pain was beginning to subside.

He thrust it back into the water toward the Ks’ou.

—

When the doors shut to the hovertrain, he hadn’t actually expected Jacque to still be standing there, ticket no longer in hand, dispersed in shreds to the ground.

“I guess you’ve always been a *prob*,” she mumbled, unenthusiastic but duly convinced. “Mom is gonna be pissed when she finds out.”

“And your father?”

“I don’t care what he thinks.”

As they headed back towards Kahti’s house, he explained his idea. He hadn’t expected to land on the location of the entrance like this, but he was anxious to go, and didn’t want to go alone.

With Kahti gone, they could get away with being gone for a few nights without worry. Jacque wanted to grab their suits before they went, but the Great Alliance base was locked and Efyir felt an urgency to get there as soon as possible. Inside the house, they stumbled upon some gear from Malcolm and Kahti left in Kahti’s room.

“How’d you manage this again?”

“I used the last of my Earth-based currency to buy a new skin that she would not recognize me in.” Jacque nodded as though it were easy, so he felt he should add, “I’m impoverished by this move.”

But his sister-without-crown scoffed at him without empathy. “Yeah, the General’s son. *Impoverished.* Anyway, you should put it on. Maybe you could fit into mom’s old gear.”

It was a thought he hadn’t had, so his was grateful to Jacque when this idea worked but only just. He had to wear the human skin first so he could be folded into a small enough shape to put on the armor. Jacque burst out laughing and wouldn’t explain why. At the moment, he didn’t care. He was grateful that Jacque was even on speaking terms with him after the looks she gave him when Aunt Kahti left.

They arrived at the two rocks that he had seen the Ks’ou crawl into with its human earlier, their armor stowed away in their backpacks. It was in a small wooded area that Efyir was familiar with; they’d sparred near here, before. Perhaps *it* had tried, and failed, to lure him in, then. This area was bordered by a human recreation center for a very dull sport that Efyir didn’t bother to remember the name of—whatever it was, it was a far cry from true warrior training, and involved lots of human stillness and precision toward no real aim. In the spring and summer it was on lots of open grass, too exposed and uncomfortable, and now was closed, covered in a blanket of white. This was located just down the street from the noodles restaurant that he and Aurana had once eaten at. That day was now bitter: it had taken him there to mock him, he was sure, to prove to him that it could pretend to human better than he.

“We’ll need to put our armor on once we’re close enough,” Efyir suggested. They had to squeeze these into the small crevice first, each falling with a small *thunk* on the other side, and their coats, too bulging to be worn.

“Is that too far a drop? I can’t tell.” Jacque was muttering before climbing in, hesitantly. She disappeared into the fold and then called up, “Not far at all! Just don’t breathe when you fall.” Inside it was pitch dark, except for the small break of light from the slit they had just crawled through. When Efyir followed, he found Jacque to be true: they only landed a few feet down, though the quarter second of free fall was terrifying enough for a full minute of excessive post-jump heartbeat. They spent more time than necessary trying to feel around on the ground for their backpacks, and even then couldn’t find them.

“Damn. Flashlight would have been useful, huh?”

“I think I’m going to have to take off my shell and lead us through,” Efyir suggested.

“Good plan. That shell is creepy on you, anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

“I dunno. Your other shell is just more you.”

Efyir unzipped himself from the human shell and stuffed it inside the backpack alongside his armor. The tunnel brightened immediately, his *naghryoja* resonating throughout the dirt-covered walls.

Humans like to divide their senses by five, and that was just fine, but Efyir learned that Thhiyatkhoor had senses that humans did not recognize. His *naghryoja* ‘saw’ in a way that Jacque’s eyes could not: resonance, rhythms, sometimes vibrations. At nighttime this was useful, because the aperture of the eye was not conducive to warring in the dark, and one could never know at what time their enemy would need to be fought. Once Efyir’s shell was off, his *naghryoja* was bright to dark shapes. He saw the walls, and the icy precipitation that clung to the ground. He saw that they were surrounded by formations, some of these hazardous jettisons from above, and could map those that should be avoided. But most importantly, he saw a path, trodden many times before, melded into the mud but burning like red for its frequency. This was the path they would need to take, because surely it lead to the Deep.

“Take my hand,” Efyir extended his claw out a few feet in front of her. Jacque blinked several times, waving her arms in a wildly inaccurate swirl, before he understood. “Oh, right.” He extended his hand further and took hers before leading them down the tunnel. After some time, ground becoming slushier as they went, it became so warm that Jacque took off her coat. The tunnel seemed to open up to a cave. The air became more humid, the preferred conditions for Ks’ou, and hundreds of cave formations became apparent to his senses. He had more difficulty leading, Jacque, then, because she kept bumping into rocks and other formations that lined their path.

“Ow!”

“Perhaps…,” he said after the fourth time this happened, “We should put our armor on? We are close. I hear voices.”

“Not yet.”

Light finally pierced the tunnel, it wasn’t until he dropped Jacque’s hand, when he realized, too late: they were already *there*, in the Ks’ou Deep. They’d nearly walked into a few boxes stacked with Ks’Sassi language written on the sides, contents like minerals or ship parts. Human-appearing people rushed by, their necks betraying their Settled state, bulbous blue and vulgar. Efyir drew back into the shadows a few steps, hurrying to put his new human shell back on so they could watch. He pretended to grumble as he put on his “creepy human suit” as Jacque had referred to it. It always felt like double baggage, and he felt weighed down though the folding didn’t add real mass to his corporeal Earth form.

There was mystery to make of it all.

In this section there was a giant building made of glass. It was fifteen floors high, extending up towards the top of the cavern, lit brightly from the inside. The glass was the windows, the doors, and even, seemingly, the floors. Efyir and Jacque could see Settlers moving about long tables amidst equipment that one would find in a laboratory. Most of them wore white coats like Human doctors, bustling about with their invisible agenda amidst a host of shorter human figures. Some seemed to be in labs, working alongside long tables, while others were in classrooms, with large whiteboards covered in scribbles. They weren’t close enough to see details, but could see movement made awkward by distance between uncertain pauses, chaotic gestures.

It took Efyir a moment, but he realized that those shorter figures were children. He turned his face.

“Let’s try walking,” Jacque suggested.

“What?” He looked back out into the throng, his discernment more focused now that it had been sobered.

She nodded towards the humans. “Some of them aren’t Settled. Their necks are exposed and they don’t have bumps. And there’s just *so* many. Let’s just try it. We can cover more ground that way.”

Efyir looked. She was right: their necks, exposed, were smooth, the sight of these complicit humans filling him with disgust. He did not want to admit that he had never actually seen a Deep before and that he, too, was curious. “We’ll have to leave our armor.”

“Com’on.”

“Jacque…” Efyir hesitated. Before going into any sort of dangerous situation, he was supposed to ritual. But there was no time for that, and they weren’t down here to make trouble. He could hear his father’s voice chastising him. At the very least, they could do one thing. “We do have to truth-tell, before we go.”

She rolled her eyes but nodded. “Sure. Let’s do your Thhiyatkhoor thing.”

“I’m not here to war.” He said this as quickly as he could, holding himself, knowing that beneath the *living fake* his true skin blazed.

“Yeah, Efy. I-I know.” Humans preferred to lock eyes, but Jacque wasn’t looking at him. She was gazing back out into the swarms of human peoples, colonized from the neck out.

“We’re just here to investigate,” he continued, though he didn’t need to. He’d already truth-told, but he felt he should explain. “So I can report to my father.”

Jacque didn’t respond. She wasn’t moving at all. Then she turned to him. “You done?”

“I believe so.”

“Here’s my truth-telling then, Efy. I… I love you, little brother. No matter what you do or don’t do.”

*This wasn’t really how it worked.* He knew these things that she’d said, already, but then again, Jacque was human and didn’t understand their customs, particularly the ones related to war. More than once she confused human praying over food with Thhiyatkhoor ritual, and she knew nothing of beings and their rhythms. He was tugged, here; she was preparing for war on her planet, and knew so little of the rituals that made Thhiyatkhoor warring great. Efyir regretted having no time to teach her.

Still, there was something to his sister-without-crown’s words. Propositions, perhaps. Words *for* words… words beyond words. He would have to ruminate on them until he fully understood, he’d decided. He nodded, saying nothing. Humans liked that.

He found them a nice rock not too far beyond the opening to stuff the backpack that held their armor behind. When he turned around, Jacque had already, too hastily, scooted out into the bustling mass. She was brave and foolish in all the ways Efyir was never allowed to be. He jogged to catch up; she had found a line of humans to follow, at the front of which was a man in a dark blue outfit, *Guard* in Ks’Sassi written across a tag on his left chest, barking orders at them in English. They didn’t stay long; Jacque suavely side-stepped into another line when the first seemed to bottleneck, so that they were in a new line with a new barking Settled human.

Efyir eventually realized his human host-sister was right. It seemed that if one walked with confidence, there was no question or problem. This Ks’ou-controlled city bustled with more life than downtown Veroia, with everyone seemingly focused on one task or another. Efyir suddenly realized he had not seen so many exposed necks on Earth at once, even in summer. Eventually they understood that they didn’t even need the lines to try and blend in, and so broke off from a group to begin heading, with false confidence, towards the opening of one of several large tunnels.

Each entrance was bordered by an arch made of brick, at the center of which was a figure carved out of some kind of metal, shaped as a Ks’ou. The name of the Ks’ou was etched on a plaque in Ks’Sassi beneath. This tunnel was slightly quieter but not less packed, and was named *Psimnn*. Each tunnel seemed to be named after a different Ks’ou historical figure, each of which had a significant role in Ks’ou colonization.

Efyir couldn’t help but think: *The Humans were being invaded right in front them, right within their own planet that they imagined was a free territory.* If the Ks’ou succeeded at conquering them, it would not take long to inverse this scene—send the Human buildings and homes to the ground, and bring the *hethalu* clones and Ks’ou monuments to the surface, leveling anything that did not serve the Nation’s purposes to rock and rubble.

As they walked along he began to remember, bit by bit, some of what he’d learned from his *Dissection of Ks’ou Life* textbook. They had exited a tunnel and now entered a tunnel named after *Kedrash*, the vile Ks’ou who poisoned the mind of the once great warrior Ighijya. Efyir felt mortified; though it was only a tunnel, a *thing*, but there there were again, those propositions…

“At least there’s *something* pretty down here,” Jacque’s quiet words interrupted his thoughts. Efyir turned to see what she was looking at. The tunnel had opened up again, but this cavern was very large, so large that some of it was ‘fenced off,’ so to speak, by large masses of electric orange, creating borders between the Deep and the rest of the cave. Efyir wouldn’t call them pretty, but this strange reminiscence did remind him of home. A closer look would reveal pebble-sized hexagons, almost a spongy texture in a never-ending tesseract pattern, like a web.

“Those? Don’t ever touch them.”

“What is it?”

“They are an organism called the *Ihnn.* Native to my planet. They poison anything that isn’t doubly-inhabited.”

“Ew. That thing’s *alive*?”

“The Ks’ou use it as weapons, too. ”

They kept walking. Eventually that cave opened up to another tunnel, which they followed into a different cavern, this one with a brilliant blue ceiling. And then… a sight. How could one describe this? They were both so horrified that they took a step back.

“Efy, are you seeing this?”

“*Shit.*”

Efyir remembered from his planet what the real *hethalu* trees should look like: lush and vibrant as living entities should be; resonating as though with song. This cavern was filled with enough trees to make a grove, a hundred or so mock clones from the originals. Their branches were softer, the leaves almost limp and not alluring at all. Most were surrounded by lagoons of a somewhat green tint rather than the scintillating blue of the homeworld. He had thought Earth trees were terrible; these were worse.

There was much more that was puzzling about it, too. Words he had read long ago made so much more sense now that he wasn’t reading about it in the history books. The layout, for one: the lagoon was supposed to be centered by a tree trunk, but these seem modified so that the trunk was slightly raised in the middle. The thickest parts of the roots were exposed and reached outward all the way to the edge of the lagoon. This allowed humans to be led up to the shore so that Ks’ou could drop down into the lagoon directly, because humans did not know how to climb trees, *not really*.

It seemed that Ks’ou preferred that many humans be settled on one tree at once. Each tree seemed to accommodate at least fifty humans, or more, and they would be forced to line up along the thick parts of the trunk just before where its roots plunged into the lagoon. One by one they lined up, as though rehearsed, until they seemed to form a series of circles around the trunk. Each grabbed one of the weak branches. One the end of these branches were nooses, glowing white, which the Settled human would wrap around their neck. Then, the humans, in a kind of morbid choreography, would lean back, and a Ks’ou edged out of their necks, slowly, to ultimately descend into the lagoon. Many of the humans would be transformed; their faces visibly different than when under Ks’ou control; some began crying or screaming in rigid stance, fearful of moving for the noose.

“I think we should leave,” Jacque whispered.

Efyir agreed. It felt like they were drowning in Ks’ou. He hadn’t any idea what he would do when they got down here, but at least they’d seen it. The confirmation of what he’d hoped wasn’t fully true; this was much worse than what Kahti reported to them.

But when they both turned around the same shudder passed through them, a shared current. What was the last tunnel they passed through? Behind them they saw the many branches of the Deep, many, many tunnels, and he had been so engrossed in what was around them that he hadn’t taken note of the last tunnel they came through. How could he have been so stupidly oblivious? In his normal body he would have been able to detect their path. But in this ridiculous shell…

“Let’s just keep walking,” Efyir advised, sounding less sure of himself than he intended. “Don’t panic.”

“You’ve never said those words to me before,” Jacque sputtered. “Shit, Efyir, that means we panic!”

Efyir cursed himself internally. He was not gifted, as his father reminded him often, at motivating his fellow warrior. “Just follow my lead.”

Once they passed under the first Ks’ou plaque, labeled *Krrin*, Efyir felt immediately an uneven, disturbing puncture in the air. No, this was wrong. He stopped and tugged Jacque while several humans screamed some distance off. “Another tunnel. Let’s go.”

They tried another. And then a third. And eventually a sixth. He could sense a panic rising in Jacque; suppressed his own. No, of course they would find a way out. Of course they could find a means back to their armor. There would be no way they could be trapped here, when only *moments* ago they had found their way into this wretched place that they hadn’t known existed. Of course there was a way out. They had lived more of their lives out than in.

A hand was placed gently on Efyir’s shoulder; he jerked away reflexively. He should have felt it approaching more quickly. His human shell could not detect the perforations that his *naghryoja* could: tiny pinpricks in air currents, disruptions in temperature, small irritations in the fabric of the atmosphere. Humans could only rely on their eyes, and while these were good, it allowed them to be snuck up on just as this boy did them.

“||Colleague?||” It was a boy who looked very young: opal eyes, hair that seemed to glow like light, skin like eggshells. He wore an enforcement suit in navy, with a cotton-colored armband slashed with a blue a color so bright it was nearly iridescent.

His eyes went, automatically, to their necks. “Your Ks’ou is…”

Efyir sputtered. He did not feign fear, but he was at a loss. He should have detected this boy. From distances away, he would have detected him and his stare, had he only had access to his *naghryoja.* But without this he was as flat as human senses; even flatter because the skin did not always translate what his full crown was capable of. Finally he mustered the Ks’Sassi he knew from school, the broken, pathetic form that he was told he might need in the midst of battle and never bothered to learn because he’d always figured he would have a translator nearby to do the work for him. “||Yes. Lost. Ahhhh… lost Ks’ou tree of ours.||”

The soldier laughed coarsely at his mishandling of Ks’sassi and switched to English. “Worry not, I will find your Ks’ou.”

“||I-I allow you,||” Efyir murmured with all the sound of compliance he could muster with this Ks’ou.

The soldier nodded though it wasn’t pleasant. He regarded them thoughtfully then seemed to place a finger on the corner of his eye, next to his *sclera*. He spoke evenly, in a tone that one might speak to an animal pet, “What lagoon are you referred to? Who is your Ks’ou?”

Efyir frowned. He did not have a ready lie for this. “S-s-salix…” Salix what? Line after line of what he’d studied and knew passed through his mind like wind through claws.

As if on impulse Jacque sputtered, “Salix Derroush.”

“Derroush, eh?” the soldier said. “They are a good Salix.”

“Yes,” Jacque faked an expression a relief. “They are good… Salix”

“Of course.” His eyes never left her and he lifted, at that moment, a weapon. “Move along.”

“What?”

“You heard me, human. We are finding your Ks’ou. A message has been sent. They will meet us at the terminal.” The soldier tilted his bright eyes to the screen he held up. Jacque and Efyir looked in horror: their faces were projected on it. In Ks’Sassi, Efyir could make out a few words, || *To absent — — own — two humans ——? Report to NC9-Salex Nïup*|| appearing below the screen.

“Dammit Efy!” Jacque hissed quietly as they began to move.

“Me?!” It wasn’t a fair assertion that he *alone* be damnited. But she wasn’t wrong.

“What’s going on, now?” Jacque whispered urgently. “What did that say?”

“||Shut up.||” the soldier rudely thrust a weapon into her back. He didn’t intend his words for Jacque to understand, but the gesture was enough. “||We’ll find your Ks’ou soon enough, *human filth*.||”

Efyir knew enough to understand what he’d said, even if he couldn’t repeat it. The way he held the eyes of the *living fake* he wore told Jacque everything she needed to know: don’t resist. Just wait. They would figure something out. He hooked his arm with hers, readying himself. If it came to it, he would have to tear himself out of his skin, his eyes scanning If only he could find the stack of boxes that hid the slit where they made it through, and get her to it…

In this small moment, all of the bustling seemed to pause, briefly. Other Settled, looking from the small monitors they held to them, stared at them as the soldier ushered them along, glancing back from screen to presence, puzzling mildly and then disinterested.

Of course no one recognized them. Because Jacque and Efyir had never been Settled. As no one approached, they could sense the growing anxiousness of the soldier who seemed to be prodding their backs with his weapon more and more as they closed in towards what Efyir guessed was the base.

“Look, we’re just some dumb humans,” Efyir finally muttered as a last attempt, forcing the strongest human voice that he could. “We wandered in the wrong place. We know we’re not supposed to be down here. We won’t say a word, honest. But if we show you how we got in—”

“Dumb humans, yes, but a little more,” the young soldier hissed impatiently. “You know some *Ks’Sassi…* enough to have had interactions with us before.” He smacked his weapon against Efyir’s face as if underscoring a point.

Efyir smarted, holding onto his jaw. He had made a critical mistake, he realized too late. But—he glanced at her when he thought this—that did not mean that Jacque had to suffer because of it. The soldier was stopped, briefly, by another soldier, a higher-up, Efyir presumed. They were arguing in Ks’Sassi too rapid for him to parse out in his panicked mind.

He only had this one chance. If he could do it in his language, that would unveil him but they probably understood less of his language than he knew of theirs. “*Endaisthu:* ||When I say run, Jacque, do it. I’ll fend them off as much as po—||”

The soldier had heard—his head twisted fully around to revel human eyes unnaturally widened. He looked so shocked that he nearly dropped his weapon. “*Ks’Sassi*: ||Y-you speak—||”

But the soldier crumbled. And what would follow would be Efyir’s shame for a long time. He reached out instinctively to pull Jacque closer to him when the shot rang out.

—

One thing was for certain: he would never tell his father how it was that he finally managed to escape the Deep. How it was that that vile Ks'ou… Efyir shuddered to even think of it. No, it was most certainly one of many secrets he would keep from his father until the last beat of his rhythm.

He stood before him, now, son before father, trying not to allow the shame glaze obviously over him. He’d seen the Deep himself. That’s all his father needed to know.

“||You have your orders,||" his father was saying. "||You will investigate Ks’ou matters and gather as much data as you are able. You will create a report that conveys, honestly, how desperate the situation is for Humans. Be sure to detail the ways Humans are positioned to fight for themselves—that is the conclusion that must be drawn. *Be as detailed as possible.||*”

Efyir glared at him through the Opti-Screen. His entire slate body shook, but he swallowed his fear and spoke, “||You don’t believe all that I have seen will make a case? If you could just send a fleet—||”

“||A fleet?||” his father scoffed. “||For a second invasion? Do you know what you are asking?||”

Elfyir burned hot with clouds, embarrassed that he’d forgotten to consider something so important.

“||You remember what happened with the *Olyat-Koi*. That event formed many of our laws-within-memory… you know that will happen to those… those *you* care for. Kahti. Jacque. They cannot die by your mistake. Furthermore, for someone with my history on Earth to venture such a proposition is unseemly. I will investigate as to the Thhiyatkhoor in your environs so that you can gather like-soldiers. There are not many; Thhiyatkhoor opinion of Humans has been dwindling for quite some time since we have saved them, sacrificing too many of our own. I believe a war-friend of mine, Rieq, may still remain.||”

Efyir was not interested in other Thhiyatkhoor. He had barely thought of them since his arrival. “||I am not prepared for this, father. I hardly—||”

“||Do not fail me,||” Shyridin hissed. *This* subject was closed. He continued, effortlessly, as was his custom, “||I have been contact with the family of Taghyr, whom you shamed, and by shaming them shamed our family. You will also make solemnity with—||”

The name of his enemy sparked an anger and rebellion—*who cares about that lagoon toiler?!* Efyir was now pointed towards the most dangerous path he could find, one in which he knew would derail them from discussing menial things like Taghyr. He blurted, “||Who is Malcolm?||”

General Shyridin’s eyes shifted. Efyir knew that he was too sharp, too diligent to bother creating a lie or to offer the obvious answer.

“||It seems you already know,||” his father replied evenly.

Malcolm, one of the humans of the Alliance. Malcolm, whom Efyir *must* have met, but his mind was too hazy to know or remember.

Malcolm. A human. And, somehow, as Kahti let slip, his father's *ekhair.*

“||I want to hear it from you. I want you to tell me *exactly* who he is. What he meant to you. And why you kept this from me for so long when we used to come to Earth and—||”

“||Earth is not a *vacation*.||” Shyridin snapped. “||It should never have been so. If you are finding yourself comfortable there then I advise you to open all the internals of your eyes and witness those Humans you consider friends.||”

*Open all the internals of your eyes.* Phrases like these were what set his father—and him—apart from the rest of Thhiyatkhoor society.

He continued, “||Malcolm is… was my *ekhair*, as you obviously know. But one’s ekhair does not designate the entirety of a species. Malcolm was different. He was by blood Human, and by legacy Thhiyatkhoor. He had more resolve and strength than most Thhiyatkhoor I know. And he despised Humans—rather, *Humanity.* He was, he was—||” and here, his father paused, and Efyir would have given anything to know what he was thinking, but as usual his thoughts were as closed off to him as a cell. “||I should have rescinded his *ekhair* status a long time ago. I struck it from the official records. Nothing more could be done.||”

Efyir turned his eyes away from his father, a somewhat human thing to do since his emotions were already indecently exposed on his slate skin, a mix of marks of chalk and eyelets angrily bubbling just below the surface. “||Father, your words are distasteful. How could you have hidden from me this? How could you say such things about Humans? I cannot imagine my namesake saying he despised Humans.||”

“||That I renamed Malcolm in Thhiyatkhoor tradition was a mistake. He was wise, bold and a warrior—everything a Thhiyatkhoor should be. But in the end, he was *only* Human. I believed from our discussions that you were beginning to see this. I was clearly wrong.||”

“||*Khaathhikgh[[46]](#footnote-46)!*, Shyridin, I… *I disown you!||*” he was energized by this new admission, relieved in a strange exasperated way to finally speak it aloud. “I disown all that you represent—the hatred of Humans against all else.”

His father did not miss a pulse. “||It is a good thing, *young* Efyir, that our people do not allow sons to disown their fathers, or even allow someone with *two* offshoots on their branches to speak in such a way to one with *twenty*. You will refer to me as *General* in lieu of *father* until you have regained sense.||”

Efyir ended the transmission in that instant. He cursed using all of the new words that Aunt Kahti and Jacque had taught him. Then he said, to no one at all,

“And I have made possible discourse with our enemy, the Ks’ou.” He wanted it to sound defiant; triumphant. But this fell flat, because if this *lie* of a dialogue between him and the Ks’ou were anything that could be called discourse, then he had no idea what that word meant, anymore.

He left the room in his defeated fury to find Jacque sitting on the couch. It was clear she’d been listening in, or perhaps they’d been really loud, because she was staring at a book, the kind with a cover, and he couldn’t remember the last time she’d picked up one of those.

“Parents, eh, Silverbutt?”

He mumbled a sound, a pretend response with no meaning.

“Let’s take a walk,” she said.

He went to retrieve his shell, feeling a proud kind of defiance as he put it on, his Thhiyatkhoor physical body disappearing into the folds of this Human skin.

They walked for a long time. He, stubbornly, ignored the cues she gave, invitations to breach the silence. He was unsurprised to find them at the hovertrain station, boarding it with the numbed automation of the lowliest of soldiers. He didn’t give a thought to how long they’d been on it. It was dark outside and they may as well have been apparitions, spirits tunneling through the night to nowhere in particular. No one spoke; most had some kind of device covering their eyes, listening to music—

“Stop that. It’s rude,” Jacque elbowed him.

Efyir realized he’d been staring at necks. He lowered his eyes. He felt he’d been seeing them everywhere. And nowhere. He couldn’t see most necks; in winter humans were reluctant to expose their fragile skin to the cold. But even then, some were embarrassed. Especially the older ones. Ks’ou left scars, and ones that had been Settled so long ago and then freed were humiliated. So they covered themselves, inadvertently allowing the rise to a new taboo, that would protect the next crop of Ks’ou to have an excuse to hide. For all he knew, he could be surrounded by Ks’ou.

“I’m sorry. Really. I know being on Earth is hard. I get it.” Efyir blinked. Jacque had been talking to him. They were now waiting in the holding station between trains. His human host sister was sitting on a small, dirty bench; Efyir had preferred to stand. He was listening to her, now, focusing all his attention on sound, trying to concentrate on anything but necks.

*Do you really?*

“You want to go home. I would, too, if I were stuck on another planet.”

*But you’ve never been.* Efyir slipped back into half-listening, wondering how long this would take. Perhaps he could make an excuse to leave and find a nice tree to escape to. Perhaps he should just go back home lose his brain to the screen of his holotext. He vaguely recognized his surroundings; they were somewhere near Veroia’s campus, perhaps next to the centre.

But Jacque stood up. In a few strides—her legs were very long, for most humans—she was close to him, and then she took both her arms and wrapped them around him. He didn’t respond but kept his arms to his sides; it was a human gesture, one that he was familiar with and never really liked. He knew that Jacque was trying to be kind, but he felt locked in, and wanted to either attack or escape. That wave passed over him and she finally pulled away.

“I’m sorry.” The love for ambiguousness—human, or at least part of Jacque’s culture—was always intriguing to him. At his silent stare she continued, “That your ex girlfriend kicked your ass.”

He scoffed. “She was not my friend. She is hardly female. And she kicked more than my ass. My arms, for one, as well as my chest.”

Jacque twitched, but he had a hard time discerning why. The next train approached; they boarded silently. This trip was much shorter, and in a few minutes they were ascending a rusted set of stairs towards the above-ground. It was a school night, not one of the many designated for human parties, so the station and tunnels were quiet. Efyir wasn’t even sure if any work was due the next day. His frequent absences, he decided, would not be missed. On the contrary, he’d better be consistent.

Jacque’s steps were determined; her pace, quick. It wasn’t until they nearly ran directly into it that he even realized where they were.

He winced. “Really, Jacque, here?”

Aunt Kahti’s face stared blankly in their general direction. It had smooth, pupil-less eyes and a serious, flat brow. She stood in a battle-like stance, one arms held across her chest as though blocking, another raised firmly in the air and ending in a fist. The features were young; this had been a long time ago. Next to her figure was Aletheia, her hair pulled into a single braid that extended beyond her shoulder. These stone carvings loomed above them, underwhelming and flat in the shadows of the orange streetlights.

It always struck him as naive, to carve into semi-permanence figures bound by time, almost like they were a little too hopeful to encapsulate a past that had been re-envisioned in their imaginations, a past that they could not admit was never fully accessible to them. This was why Thhiyatkhoor called their old laws “laws-without-memory,” because they knew that even though these laws were extremely important, they were established too far back to be bound, as it were, by anything concrete.

His thoughts must have been written across his slate, because Jacque looked at him and murmured, “Creepy, right? That’s supposed to be our parents.” She laughed sadly. “We were famous kids, for awhile. I guess it’s good that so many people forgot, or no longer care, what our parents did.”

Efyir was quiet. For the son of a general emeritus, there was no such forgetting on his planet. He was almost jealous of Jacque and her species’ love for suppressing history.

To Aletheia’s left was Malcolm, and on Kahti’s right would be his father. All the figures were arranged in a circle so that at this angle Efyir could only see their profiles; between them, her back turned to them, would be Qay. Humans had gotten this all wrong, of course. Shyridin and Malcolm were facing opposite sides, their backs to each other, touching not even the edge of their feet. This was an inappropriate depiction of one’s *ekhair*; they should be standing blade by side, especially in public like this. Then again, for Thhiyatkhoor, they wouldn’t be depicted this way, either—an other-species *ekhair* was forbidden, of course. He wondered briefly if this had bothered his father when he’d first laid eyes on the monument as much as it did him now.

What disturbed Efyir most was that the ekhair given name, *Azayim,* was still in his own records. His father never needed to go to the lengths to do this; never needed, even, in Thhiyatkhoor tradition, to refer to his son with it. Particularly since, as he’d said, it was never made official. Yet… why did the General insist on using the name; insist, even, on referring to Efyir by it? Was he clinging onto some hidden hope that Malcolm was alive? Did he really believe it was a mistake, like he’d said? What story wasn’t he telling?

Jacque nudged him. Apparently she had said something.

“What do you want to do?” She murmured. He blinked. “About your, um, ex-friend.”

“Ks’ou are like Earth mosquitos in the low waters. They suck life from you and only leave disease and devastation. They have nothing to do with *meaning*.” He said it plainly. No need for nuance or unnecessary details.

“You were frightening last night. Your whole demeanor…” Jacque trailed.

“I know. It was mostly a show,” he held up his hand weakly, a gesture he hoped would show his human sister that he meant to be genuine. “The so-called Aurana is Ks’ou. The work that must be done… it isn’t easy. But this is war.”

Jacque persisted, almost childishly: “*Aye*. You don’t have to be so cold about it. You barely know anyone on Earth not part of your host family…”

Efyir thought of his former *ekhair*, who was no more. In some ways, he realized, shocked at the brash comparison his mind had made, he nearly felt the same way about *him* as he did about Aurana. “Relations are brittle. I will kill her, if necessary. Until someone proves themselves, they mean nothing.”

Jacque scoffed. “She didn’t kill you last night, did she?”

Efyir reflected on this. Multiple times, she’d had the chance: the weapon that had been very clearly aimed at his attacker, the way she held on to him even while kicking him through the *Ihnn*. “Perhaps part of an extended plan to have me Settled.”

“Don’t forget. *You* were in that awful human suit, but I was completely exposed when that soldier plastered our faces, *literally*, across the wall. Someone might recognize me… they may already have.” For the first time, Efyir saw her shoulders heave in defeat. She leaned forward, putting her head against her clasped hands. “I can’t sleep. I don’t know when I’ll ever be able to sleep again.”

To this Efyir was silent. This hadn’t occurred to him, but it was glaringly obvious. When she looked up directly at him, he noted, in the orange shadows of the night lights, that eyes were rimmed with dark circles that were nearly the color of his own slate.

“I’ve put up with your grumpy silver butt since we were kids.” She laughed, but in it he could hear an edge. “Soooooooo, I have a better idea. I mean… You’re not going to like it. I don’t think we have a choice. We messed up. But, Aurana and I talked. *I know, I know*,” she said when she saw his dim expression. “But she’s been tasked with a mission from the Ks'ou Liberation Front that she thinks we can help her with. And she told me to meet her at the old studio, the one where you two once hung out, tonight, if we agree.”

Efyir was quiet for longer than he’d intended. He actually had made up his mind pretty quickly about it all. This did count, after all, as *investigating Ks’ou matters,* didn’t it? It was dangerous, and foolish, and this was his chance to finally understand his enemy’s motivations. But he held off responding at first, trying to resist the impulsiveness that his father so often condemned. He thought of the General, and all his trainings. He thought of Routhhe, of his ex-*ekhair*, of his mother and sister. Then he thought of Malcolm, this *ekhair* buried in his father’s inner thoughts, unaccessible. The statue in front of them was unmoving, unwavering. It had no answers.

“You are the daughter of a Ks’ou sympathizer, after all,” was all he could say on the matter.

—

The human Michael was at the door, about to lock it, when they arrived. He hurried them in, grumbling at them with large black eyebrows, betraying no reaction—surprise or otherwise—but with eyes that seemed frantic, as though they couldn’t stay in one place lest they be accused of laziness.

“She’s in back getting her affairs,” he said with a reluctant slowness after locking the doors behind them. “She’ll be up here in a sec.”

They sat in only the briefest awkward silence before Michael piped up, looking at Efyir, “I heard you cancelled the rest of your classes? You know there’s no refund, right?”

“It’s fine,” Efyir said quietly. He made the exaggerated gesture of combing the hands of his human shell over his hair, missing the place where his *naghryoja* should have been.

“But as a business owner, I have to ask. You weren’t satisfied with instruction?”

“They were, um, good,” he mumbled. It wasn’t a lie, now that he thought about it, but he shuddered at the memories. The human wouldn’t stop locking eyes with him, so he finally issued an excuse, “I’m supposed to be returning home soon.”

“Got it,” Michael nodded, “I bet that’s important for a *zilaa*.” He tapped on the back of his ear, to show that he’d seen, then his eyes seemed to deliberately fall on some papers on his desk, which he began to shuffle through. There was a clock on the wall that seemed to be loudly declaring itself, and Jacque was either chewing gum or grinding her teeth, because her mouth-noises seemed louder than usual. When the studio manager turned to put something away up high on a shelf, Efyir couldn’t help but take a peek; he was staring so intensely at his neck that it too late when Michael suddenly turned and caught his eyes. “I bet…” the human said, grabbing another set of papers, tugging his T-shirt down even further so that the full of his neck was exposed when he turned to set the papers away high again, “You’re wondering what a post-colonial is doing letting a Ks’ou teach in my studio.”

It was the kind of impossible phrase that Efyir should have had enough wisdom to meet with silence, but since his earlier conversation with the General he felt a sudden urge for the dangerous. “Human logic is puzzling, yes.” Jacque elbowed him, making the ‘shut your mouth’ motion with her hand.

Michael turned towards them again. This human had high cheekbones and a shadow that hovered throughout his entire phenotype, something Efyir couldn’t quite place but was as real as breath. “Who is your enemy?”

“Eh?”

Patiently the human repeated himself.

“Well,” Efyir mumbled, since Jacque, who’d told him to shut up moments ago, was still quiet. “We have a shared enemy, I believe.”

Michael laughed. Or maybe grunted. Efyir had a hard time differentiating, and he was, by his own surprise, anxious for the Ks’ou to appear so they could all leave. “Of course we do. My enemy. Is yours. And yours,” he nodded towards Jacque. “And, theirs as well.” His head gestured toward the back room, but Efyir picked up on the meaning fairly quickly.

“My enemy cannot possibly be itself.”

“Brilliant insight, surely,” Michael said as though bored. “If your answer is that any individual, or any species, is your enemy, then you’re only searching for the easy answer. If it were just *them* you could call enemy, that would solve everything, wouldn’t it?”

“Remove the Ks’ou. Remove the threat,” Efyir said quietly, giving his species away, he knew.

“Funny you say that. That is the well-known motto, is it not? But may as well be a human saying as well. We don’t own these things called words. For whatever reasons, humans did not take to it,” Michael strolled casually over to a photo on the wall, a grey and black of a young man who shared the shape of his eyes and nothing else. His back was to them, now, and they could see sweat dripping from his shoulders. “If my brother, here in the photo, decided to join the other side of a war… a civil war, let’s call it, a war in which I knew that I was fighting on the right side, but against *him*, is he, then, my enemy?”

“Your enemy in war, if not in flesh.” Efyir was surprised at how grateful he was for his father’s training in this moment. It prepared him for dialogue with this foolish human, too blind to see his own complicity.

“He is not my enemy,” Michael said. “But I still killed him, for what was right.” There was a silence that pervaded, until he turned and shrugged. “Just a story, of course. A metaphor. I never killed my brother. I love him dearly.”

Jacque seemed to sigh an audible breath of relief but Efyir never let go of the tension he felt, as though this human were about to attack, or perhaps that feeling was *in* him, a need to attack this human.

“So I ask you again, who is your enemy?”

This time, Efyir remained silent, trying to be wise.

Michael tapped the photo of his brother, though now neither Jacque nor Efyir were sure whether this person was dead or alive, and said, “War gives the illusion that there are two sides to a fight. It must be flattened like that. Otherwise, clarity of thought and purpose would get in the way of all the death that must be dealt, for a victor to rise and craft history in their own image.” He nodded as though he were making perfect sense. “Your enemy has many faces. It’s beyond any single being. It’s beyond your control. And you can chase this illusion of an enemy that has been handed to you, by media, or the bias of your parents, or that propaganda you call history books. Or you could see the enemy for what it truly is.”

“The enemy lecture again, really?!”

Efyir was surprised at his own relief to see Aurana—how long had she been standing there?—with her arms crossed, dressed in black, with the required studio outfit hanging from her hand. Her hair was up in a single sphere, and she wore the familiar scarf. “And let me guess, you showed them the picture of your so-called ‘brother,’ right?” she gestured with a thumb towards the picture on the wall, “That’s a picture he found in the newspaper of some stranger he thinks is his dopplegänger. He framed it so that he could make up that crazy story to scare children in the studio.”

“You ruin all my fun.” Michael returned to the front desk and began shuffling papers again.

“We’re leaving, we have official business elsewhere. Can you find a sub for the rest of the week’s classes for us?”

“I suppose,” he grumbled. “And you won’t tell me where, per usual.”

“All that matters is… ||I’ll return in victory,||” her lips dispersed widely.

“How many times do I have to say, no colonizer la—” Michael let out an exasperated *tuh*! when he caught her expression. “Alright. See you next week. God willing.”

“*Whoever* wills it—sure isn’t me,” she said. For the first time that night, Michael smiled as he ushered them out, closing the door and locking it. He seemed to wave one last time before turning the lights off and plunging invisible into the dark.

“Sorry about that,” the Ks’ou who called herself Aurana said quietly, turning to walk down the street. Her pace was brisk, and she spoke as though only to herself. “He waxes philosophical sometimes.”

“He should mind himself, and stick to human affairs,” Efyir grumbled; the Ks’ou took it for discourse.

“It’s still a good question, isn’t it? I’m reading Patrick Wolfe, now, and I’m having to rewrite…” she glanced quickly at Efyir, then changed streams. “Anyway, for tonight’s assignment. There is evidence of a project, a huge one. Ke’Ad himself may be there, though it’s hard to know for sure. I don’t know how long we’ll be gone.”

“Gone?” Jacque finally piped. “Where are we going?”

“The Sahara,” the Ks’ou seemed to say this with a strange enthusiasm.

“The Sahara *desert*?” Jacque said. The Ks’ou looked cross but didn’t correct her.

“And how do you intend to get there?” Efyir grumbled.

“Well… we uh…” the Ks’ou slowed her pace. “We were hoping we could use your ship.”

“*My* ship?” Efyir said, astounded at her audacity. “How dare—”

Jacque, sensing the conversation escalate, interrupted them both quickly, “He doesn’t have a ship.”

“Don’t tell us the son of *the* General Shyridin doesn’t have a ship,” she snapped in annoyance. “We may be sub-aspirant, but we’re not idiots.”

Efyir frowned. Her sudden use of pronouns disconcerted him.

“Oh, Efyir’s grounded,” Jacque added unhelpfully. Efyir glared sharply at her; if he had been out of his *living fake* he would have displayed a lengthy cloudburst on his skin to show his disapproval, but instead chose to make the same ‘shut your mouth’ motion with his hand that she subjected him to earlier, which she ignored. “This prob’ got in trouble back on Routhhe and was sent here as punishment.”

“*Jacque*,” Efyir hissed.

The Ks’ou stopped walking for a moment. She was making some kind of motion with her hands, which they couldn’t see in the dark. *So this was it,* Efyir thought. The only plausible explanation so far, this Ks’ou didn’t need *them*, just his technology, which would explain why she was willing to—

But then she spoke again, and in her voice there was an evenness at this development, “It’s fine. We have an alternate plan. You know how to fly a *dermakyna’ich[[47]](#footnote-47)*?”

“Like piloting a tricycle,” Efyir crossed one arm over his cheek to show that he was finished conversing.

The Ks’ou looked him over, laughed coarsely, then gestured for them to follow.

**Chapter 13 (Kelisfton)**

Have you ever encountered something so beautiful that you wanted to destroy it?

You regard it and wonder in what form it should appear: aflame, submerged, eviscerated except for particles, diluted except for remnants. No matter. The sheer aesthetic, the way it was written or woven. Too beautiful to leave alone. No, you must destroy it, whoever created it was too brilliant for you not to intervene. By destroying it, you leave your mark on its creation, thus making you a part of its authorship.

All beautiful things we intend to destroy.

Perhaps it is different with the humans.

They are not so beautiful. They make excellent vessels, but their minds are not sharp. Why else would they spend so much time colonizing one another, their *own* kind?

This is a story of three kinds of colonization: colonization of the body, also called ‘peopled’ or ‘settler’ colonialism, but different than all of human history. The Ks’ou do not employ humans for labor and resources, as humans did. No—Ks’ou explicitly *take* the body. And with it, dominate the humans’ mind. For the two cannot be so easily separated.

The second colonization: the colonized. Again, specificity is needed here. One cannot consider colonialism without giving the colonized its story, even if ill told. For it is via the colonized that a colonizer sees themselves. The settler colonizer invites the colonized into their realm, teaches their language, their customs, their ideologies. Even for Ks’ou, the colonized bodies would need to understand the importance of the Ks’ou Nation. They may never come to love it—no, that is not the goal. But they must believe it has logic, and in logic, truth. The truth of their subjugated state. Ineffable.

And finally, the spectators. These must not be forgotten. For those that watch colonialism as it happens right before them, particularly those that justify it, do nothing, contribute importantly to the civilizing mission. They may benefit, too, through conscience or substance—*to intervene would be worse,* or, *let us purchase these items from far-off places, for we give well to their economies.* The spectators play a vital part, for they normalize colonization. They make it safe. And in neutralizing it, they help make the colonized believe that colonization is the guiding essence of their own history:

inextractable.

inevitable.

And so all play their part, the beautiful web of life in the universe.

\*\*\*

*Contact*.

I had been under close watch since my bold move to hold on to the hand of the Thhiyatkhoor who most vocally accused me of being a threat. Since, the Thhiyatkhoor would not take their eyes off of me as they conducted their affairs. I pretended not to understand them, idly drawing sheep in the sand as they exchanged information that I am sure was intended to entice the Ks’ou they rightly believed I was. But I did not react. I did as my human wanted, playing with sticks and looking at the sky and trying to climb their trees, which was nearly impossible because they were so slippery and fragile.

Were we not enmeshed in war, it would not have been a terrible life to live. But because war was our dialogue, this way of living had no purpose.

In the meanwhile, I watched the Olyat-koi closely, almost esuriently. I could play it off as childish fascination.

By nightfall the Thhiyatkhoor had abandoned hope of discovering the Ks’ou threat immediately. They had sent soldiers off to explore the empty airspace. Upon observing my performance, they had nearly forgotten to watch me as closely as in the beginning. They, arrogant as ever, determined that clearly my behavior warranted no threat. They even allowed me to sleep among them.

And so it was that I could become closer to the Olyat-koi, who decided the would care for the human child as one of her own.

I succeeded in reaching the Olyat-koi’s neck, and my suspicions about the location of its central cortex had been correct. I had to work efficiently, my fibrous arms weaving through the pores of its skull and into its knotted brain; while I worked I extended my arms into its blood-paths and nerves that I hoped would hold the Olyat-koi—if it were like other organic beings—making it rigid if it woke. Its peaceful slumber was trembling now, as its consciousness rolled on the edge of internal dawn. I eased up on the speed of my tendrils—I could feel its heartbeat, the rhythm of its breathing, as they shuddered and the creature began to recede from what it thought was a bitter dream, and did not want it to wake just yet. *More time, more time* I urged; I had control of its claws, but was working out where in its large and impressive mind it held the other parts of its body, and tried, in a frenzy, to consume its language at once.

It was impossible to do all this too quickly. I began to exhaust myself, but pressed forward out of urgency.

Its brain was nothing I’d ever experienced before, and as I held it I had recourse to its conscious somewhere beyond, and like the beauty of sight I was intrigued by a mind that held much, much more than I ever ima—

“*Ahhhhhhhhhh!”* the loud wail behind us startled us both. The Olyat-koi was surely awake now. I began to panic, as I had not yet fully entered its brain, and had only found its nerves, and was parsing these out trying to grasp and divert as many sensations as I could to myself. It was sluggish because of this, but it could still move. Had I clenched enough? Surely…

The wail came again, louder still, as the human unborn child began to realize he was free. He would warn them, I knew it, but I dared not turn the Olyat-koi’s head. Pulses, impressions were thrown at me, and though I still was working to obtain its language I could sense its confusion, its panic, its desire… only towards helping the child. *It did not know what I was doing!* I realized. *It did not know I was here.*

An opportunity to exploit: I continued to work in the folds of its brain, but did not take any more strides to control its body. This I let it do, and the Olyat-koi slowly turned, imagining it was exhausted, and pulled the screaming child toward it. Sight—I needed to see what was happening. But not too much. I peered though its hazy eyes, as a light in water, fractured but not impossible to see. The Olyat-koi might believe that its own sight was affected by fatigue. The child’s eyes were still closed. He perhaps did not even realize he was free, because as soon as the Olyat-koi touched his shoulder his screaming died down. It began to make some kind of pleasant rocking motion again until the human boy fell asleep completely. And then the Olyat-koi itself fell asleep, worried, as I understood from its impressions, that if it did not rest it would not be able to complete an important task in the morning.

*Language.* I understood a thought. Not all, but enough. I was close. The Olyat-koi was unconscious again. Would sleep. Cheerfully, I went back to work, on this vastly spot-filled mind.

**Chapter 14**

The taste of coffee was grimier than Ana remembered. It had been so long since she sipped a *cafecito* that her mother prepared for them all in the morning; this stale Statesian brand that Fsaoul had tricked Aurana into drinking clung to her tongue like chalk, a sensation that worsened as she licked her lips unconsciously while setting the shot. It was aimed directly at the center of the human boy’s forehead, and she would have pulled the trigger already if it weren’t for Aurana pleading quietly in the background not to do it.

{ This is *mercy*, } Ana argued.

Mercy was what you gave to those who didn’t know better for themselves.

*Merci*—the urge to offer an other what had been denied you.

This shot was articulated clearly. Aurana knew how to set it; Ana knew its execution.

{ This was supposed to be a clandestine mission! } Of course, all had been going as planned:Aurana recharged, re-inhabited Ana, they retrieved the map effortlessly. They had even headed towards the exit when NeVarr noted, in the small intercom placed inside their scarf, that a small skirmish between some humans who had wandered from their Ks’ou in the *NC9-Salex Nïup* region, would result in a detour; she should avoid this area.

Both Aurana and Ana were never good at following directions. What kind of humans were they? Were they truly lost, or trying to escape? Did they need help?

*“Follow. The. Path.”* NeVarr had hissed in the intercom.

They’d disconnected it. { *Oops*. }

When they arrived at the scene, the poor Settled underling look panicked, almost lost. He was trying to convince a higher up to re-display the human faces on the larger screens that were placed throughout the vast Deep and had since been taken down since it didn’t generate any interest. He gave his diatribe through panicked, loud *Ks’Sassi,* to a commanding officer who clearly wasn’t interested.

{ It will be a clean shot, } Ana murmured. { We can free them. } *From Ks’Sassi Settlement*—Aurana had no problem filling in the blanks. { We’ll just say we were playing around. }

Ana had the boy first in her viewfinder when she then noted the young soldier that detained them, arguing with the other soldier. With so much caffeine pulsing through their collective veins, Aurana was surprised she could even articulate anything resembling language. Pulsing—pulsing! Yes. Aurana pulsed as much as possible everything she could interpret while witnessing the scene laid out before them.

Ana sighed in exaggeration, shifting their weapon. Since they weren’t dressed in *KLF* garb, they could get away with what Aurana proposed they do next. Thrive the humans. Kill the Ks’ou. Three humans: one Ks’ou. Aurana wasn’t *sound*, but Ana could understand her, even through the erratic, caffeine-laced pulses.

It took one clean shot to rid the young soldier of his babble. They aimed for the diaphragm, because a shot into the neck might have been too obviously intentional. The soldier, who had been speaking roughly to the humans, choked a bit before his head curled into his chest, and then his legs buckled and he fell to the ground. The commanding officer looked only mildly concerned.

Aurana strolled up to them, gesturing in an exaggerated way to their weapon with apologies. “||Target practice!||” she said, then nodded to the humans, trying not to betray that she now recognized one of them. “||I’ll take care of these *strays*,||” she smiled smoothly. She kicked the Settled boy on the ground for effect. “||And this one seemed like he was bothering you.||”

The soldier muttered a gruff sound of respect for the interruption, typical of Ks’ou. Human means of communicating took too much time, too much effort. Why push through air when so much faster, easier, pulses in water were available? The younger soldier was now trying wildly to push sound through his humans body as he bled freely into the earth. As she whisked the two humans away, Aurana had to force Ana’s body not to react when they heard the culminating shot.

“*Follow me. I know an exit,*” she murmured. The one human she recognized, Jacque, nodded compliantly. The other, a boy with bright wheat-colored hair and empty eyes, seemed to not react at all.

She waited until they were out of earshot of anyone. The tunnel they were in was quiet. “*You shouldn’t be here,*” Aurana hissed at Jacque. She tried not to look at the other human.

“We got lost,” Jacque mumbled, looking warily at her companion. Aurana stole a glance. The boy walked awkwardly, like a limp puppy. His eyes were scanning the room wildly like they were unhinged from their sockets. For a human, he was in pretty bad shape. Yet she was almost certain, now, that he wasn’t human. She realized that his eyes were watching her; that she had been staring a little too long.

“Down here,” she gestured to the small, almost invisible slit in the wall of the tunnel, relieved to have a reason to look away. She was almost certain it had started as a fissure in the integrity of the wall, and some genius had decided to carve it wider and deeper so they could make a storage space for whatever materials the nation needed. It was another one of the alternate entrances that she and NeVarr sometimes used for KLF duties.

NeVarr. They were in the fissure deep enough so that she could open up communication again. She did and it was worse than she had expected.

“No, no!” she hissed into the intercom embedded in her scarf. “Call off Retrieval. *We’re fine.*” She didn’t look to see what Jacque and the one she now knew was Efyir were doing.

“Fine?!” NeVarr nearly screamed into their ear. “Where have you been? Account for this, *sub-aspirant.”*

Aurana winced. It was more embarrassing for NeVarr when he tried used what little power he had as her supervisor against her. He wielded power awkwardly, like a *zilaa* holding a kite for the first time. She didn’t answer him directly, just mumbled a repeat of her request that she knew could no longer be a command. A humble request. They were fine.

By the time they fully squeezed through to the other side, she wasn’t expecting the Thhiyatkhoor to actually do it. A full on tackle, in that awkward suit—*zia plok! he should have known better—*wasn’t hard to disarm, and quickly she had him pinned to the ground. She *almost* felt bad for him. She could tell he knew it was a mistake, too, by the way he tried to glare at her through the human shell while she held him, back-to-ground without much effort. He forgot that she was a warrior, too.

NeVarr was yelling again. The grunts from their tumble alarmed him.

“I’m fine,” she murmured, twisting a knee into Efyir’s abdomen. “Tripped. We’re fine. Checkpoint in ten minutes.”

“The KLF will descend on your location in *five.*”

“Then *call them off*,” she muttered a little too loudly. Efyir was trying to squirm away from her. She allowed him to free his arms but kicked him again. He must have learned his lesson about the limits of a human shell he had yet to learn to maneuver. She leaned her human’s chin into her scarf. “Call the KLF off. Nothing is happening. We’re fine.”

“The humans?”

“I saw to their escape.”

“||*Bogoud!||*”

“Call them off.” She made a point of unclipping the intercom and holding it apart from Ana’s body so the human Jacque and Efyir in human clothing could see that it was disabled. “You both need to leave.”

“Why are you wearing that stupid scarf, when we all know what you are,” the human-appearing Efyir hissed.

“Why are you wearing that stupid human shell, El?” It was a dumb retort. They both knew why. But having his nickname out there felt good. It felt like what she wanted to scream at him while they were still in class together these past few weeks. He was unmasked, and was embarrassed, she knew, because the skin of this shell he wore turned as red as the innards of a watermelon. She felt invigorated to continue. “You two are both a complete disaster. And how is it possible that the son of the General knows *so little* about Ks’ou? That soldier caught you because you tried to speak to him in Ks’Sassi.” She held in disdain his dumbfounded look, continuing, “Do your research. We’re not supposed to teach humans our language. Not anymore. If you can’t speak Ks’Sassi fluently, don’t bother to speak it at all.”

Then she threw herself at him as suddenly as he had done so in the fissure; as they tumbled she knocked her head against his so hard he thought she was trying to crack his skull. He felt a brief resistance pass throughout his entire body, it wasn’t until she had pulled away that he could see what had happened: she had forced them both *through* the *Ihnn* Gate that had bordered this small corner room. It had torn through it as though falling through a spider web, and now he had rolled into a corner of the cave, on the other side of the borders. The *Ihnn* was already mending itself, a furious stitching of orange, natural and automatic, though it had no eyes or mind it seemed to “see” and know exactly where the tear was.

She grabbed his throat and slipped back through the gate. The stitch closed around her arm. While she held him, he scrambled to at least make one mark; if she let go he would be dead, until she growled, “Hands to your sides!” As soon as he obliged, she released his neck.

“Never come here again, *son of the Bloodletter*,” she hissed, hoping the threat would sink in. The *Ihnn* closed itself a step further, then began to repair itself, temporarily bandaging the hole with thin film that blurred vision and sound on each side.

She glanced wearily at Jacque, then sighed. “You’re next.” Ana’s forehead shone slightly blue.

Jacque shuddered. “W-wait.” Her eyes watched the Ks’ou-Human pair closely, even as their hands closed over the weapon they held. “We should talk. About helping each other.”

“Trying out your mother’s peace-making skills?” Aurana said impatiently. How would she explain this if the KLF arrived?

Jacque didn’t respond. Her gaze was unnerving now, it seemed the human did not blink. “No. Or maybe. Yes.” Aurana raised an eyebrow. “Your cover’s blown, as you know. Efyir knows what you are. And you know who he is.”

“Evidently.” She glanced over her shoulder with a forced impatience. “My colleagues will be wondering where I am.” She wished she had better studied human lying. NeVarr was nervous about these kinds of operations, but he wasn’t foolish. He wouldn’t call the KLF unless absolutely necessary.

“What’s stopped you from killing him?”

{Ouch.} {*Hush.*} {She literally can’t hear me.} {*Hush anyway!*}

“You don’t actually have to answer that question,” Jacque continued. It was hard to tell whether her mouth twitched because she was triumphant or because of what she was about to say next. For a human, she had excellent command of masking her facial expressions. Aurana studied it. “But think about it. He’s the son of a *very* powerful Thhiyatkhoor. All he has to do is give the word and they’ll send a fleet.”

“Are you giving me reason to kill him?”

“It wouldn’t matter if you did by now, would it? Maybe he already sent the word. Maybe we’re down here to find out how deep this place goes, to report back.”

Aurana couldn’t stop the flush of red as Ana’s body reacted to this news. Damn him! Of course he would, that—Aurana’s mind sputtered curses until she realized Jacque was beginning to smile. Had she been fooled? “So, you’re giving me a reason to kill *you*, then?” Aurana lifter her weapon up slightly in the hope to appear threatening. “Or maybe I should *Settle* you, to find out whether you’re telling the truth.” {Chill.} Ana chided with a calm irony. {*Watch* her.}

“None of that is necessary.” {It’s because she *is* lying, I think.} Jacque’s gaze shifted uncomfortably over Ana’s neck, her secret remaining solidly locked behind those eyes in the interstices of her mind. She was, for a human in great danger, surprisingly calm. “Maybe we can help each other. My problem is, Efyir doesn’t want to stay and fight. He just wants to go home. I think you know enough about him to know why that’s important to him. But let’s say he goes home. Let’s say he *does* report to his father…”

{See?}

Jacque’s silent pause went on longer than Aurana expected. She bit her human’s lip. “Go on.”

“If Efyir stays on Earth. If he doesn’t leave… if he has *reason* to see how expansive this is—”

“Tonight wasn’t enough?”

“No,” Jacque said this firmly. Both Aurana and Ana didn’t trust her, but they fully believed these words. “It wasn’t enough. You need to show him more. So maybe, he’ll stay and fight with me. *Not* you. Not the KLF. We’ll just fight the Nation. I’ll see to it.”

*Two* warriors, trying to do the work of the entire KLF? It was laughable. The children of the warriors of the first colonization or not, they’d make a dent, then get themselves killed trying. Two never made much difference in great war.

Unless, she was hiding something. Unless there were more warriors. But, Aurana had see the great warrior Kahti’s house—a state of desolation, it may as well have been a ruin. And the warrior herself, though fast, was in no state to fight. This girl, Jacque, was fighting disillusion. That’s why they failed so miserably, the two of them, down in the Deep.

Aurana knew “El” well enough know that his weakness was indecision. She also knew him well enough to know that he was so desperately homesick, so desiring to be back with his people, that no one, not even his human sister, could keep him here. All he needed was a good excuse to return to his kyôsta.

She would show him how powerful the KLF was. And that may be enough to get him off this planet for good and keep the Thhiyatkhoor out of it.

She pulse these thoughts to Ana, who readily agreed. Outwardly, Aurana offered this daughter of the great warrior Kahti an open hand as symbolic gesture. “Maybe… something can be arranged.”

—

They wanted to be home. Asleep. One more interlocutor kept them from peace. NeVarr and the KLF had since been calmed. She had saved two stupid wandering humans. Wasn’t that their mission? Weren’t they here to help humans? She pretended to be one of them, she’d told NeVarr. Said nothing about the KLF, *honest*. Just a dumb human who comes down here to help other occasionally dumb humans. No one would believe them if they said anything, so they should just pretend it never happened. The humans’d agreed. She showed them the escape. They’d gone home.

It was spun as a worthy risk that served the KLF’s mission. *Your lying was becoming more refined*, Ana had noted. Perhaps. Being around humans helped. NeVarr was annoyed but he feigned support until their KLF superiors let them off the hook. She knew she’d have to deal with him when they returned to the apartment.

The crisis was over. El was gone. She was only a few steps away from the exit when a sharp “Ana,” pulled her away from the reverie of sleeping soon and tossed it into a half-frozen lake. Professor Hagåtña stood in front of them. “I have to speak to you about your project.” Her hair shifted in a movement like black marbles over a sieve. Her glasses were different. Thinner, and blue. From behind them, chiseled eyes.

“Professor Ha—“

“Saouresk,” she corrected firmly. Professor Hagåtña’s outer oak could not be contested. She stood her human tall with her spine straight, as humans preferred. “Saalix Trrrdeh.”

Aurana could only hesitate for a moment. Furrowed her eyebrows but suppressed the feeling of surprise—and disappointment, that both she and Ana shared. How long? Had it been all this time? “Aurrin. Saalix Derrroush.”

The Ks’ou named Saouresk used her human to smile sagely, as though she’d known all along. “My human finds this moment painful. She’d hoped that one of her promising students wouldn’t have been Settled. I warned her. No human of your Settled’s age could write with such resonance, though you tried to hide it well. Some pieces were so rhetorically terrible they were nearly convincing.” The smile dropped, pleasantries over. “I have something important to discuss with you, about your History of Human Colonization project—”

“Surely a Ks’ou is not bothered by anything as mundane as *deadlines*.” The essay was due in two, maybe three weeks. Aurana wasn’t sure, and it seemed odd to even consider conducting human affairs down here. Aurana glanced over her shoulder, briefly, hoping that NeVarr was already headed back to the apartment, and not watching from elsewhere.

“Of course not. Better. I have been telling others about your work. It has caught the interest of the Ks’ou Internal Review Board for Ke’Ad, who forwarded your materials to him. He is also interested.”

Aurana nearly choked. “Ke’Ad?”

“Yes. They would like an appointment with you. Two weeks from now,” she handed Aurana a small cylinder. “I expect a more… refined project.”

“Of course,” Aurana murmured numbly, shoving the cylinder into her pocket. A question nagged. “You… you are very good at hiding your Settled status.”

“Oh, it can just be assumed that if the human is an educator, they are Settled. Ke’Ad, Earth-designated second did not part with *all* the old ways.” Saouresk used Professor Hagåtña’s face to scan Aurana, then she stretched the corner of her human’s lips into a simulacrum of a smile. “Yes, even Professor Jayco. Though some would say his Ks’ou is not so much playing the part as simply acting out his own sociopathy…”

“Two weeks, then. I’ll be there.” Aurana stared at Professor Hagåtña’s hands so that her lie could not be detected.

**Chapter 14\***

Papa Joseph stared at her—them—with hardsoft eyes. “Kreyòl: ||Demen swa[[48]](#footnote-48)||?”

Ana was gulping, and sending tremors through her body that Aurana could not relieve. { Why this? Why now? } Ana, thinking this loudly, wasn’t actually speaking to Aurana; the Ks’ou knew it was not her place to respond. That this was not her time to speak.

“Papa I have a project due. I won’t have time.”

“||Ou papa viv pou tèt ou sèlman.[[49]](#footnote-49)||,” he said calmly, but she could see the hurt on the edges of his lips, a tremor at the corners. “You could even,” he breathed as though he could barely believe the words that would be coming out of his mouth, “||Ou te kapab men ti mason an…[[50]](#footnote-50) Jamie.||”

“James?”

“||Sila.||”

“You threatened to gut him last time you saw him.”

“||Ou ap viv nan menm kay[[51]](#footnote-51),||” he said. “||Sa se yon reopens ke ou tande souvan nan bouche paran yo.[[52]](#footnote-52)||”

“James and I aren’t dating anymore, okay, Papa? He’s just my housemate.”

“||Eben, ok. Menen l’ non. Depi ou ka li nan key c paske ou renmen l’.[[53]](#footnote-53)||”

Another refusal. And then her father’s final bid:

“I’ll even drive and come pick you up in the family car. Jami—uh, James, will be impressed.”

“Daddy. That’s illegal.” It was their personal joke; her father wouldn’t dare do something so ridiculous. He wouldn’t have made if off of their street, and there was nothing to fuel the costly rustbucket anyway. It was his way to elicit the *Daddy* that she knew he wanted to hear. And, inadvertently, a reminder that she and her mother were not on speaking terms and that she would not have the chance to utter *maman* to her face anytime soon. She had stopped wondering if her mother was somehow in the room with her father when they had these exchanges; she suspected now that he was doing this in secret, perhaps against her mother’s demands.

“The Hovertrains have ruined all my dreams.”

She should have laughed. Instead she sighed. Had he been more discerning, Papa Joseph would have seen his daughter’s face transform, from a softness to a certain kind admixture of cold and confused, of a Ks’ou who still did not understand human facial features much as she tried. He did not discern; just attributed the change to that of a emotional teenager. And so what was abnormal became normal.

“I love you, Papa. Tell Mama I love her, too. But I can’t have dinner with you tomorrow. Maybe another time.”

A sentence delivered in perfect utterance, as Ana would have delivered it. But it wasn’t her. It wasn’t human. It was a different kind of fake living.

Aurana would sit in front of the darkened screen for a long time before dragging her reluctant human’s body back to her room. They’d agreed this was the best way; the only way to keep her parents from knowing the truth, and to keep them from potentially being targeted by the Ks’ou Nation.

{ You are doing the right thing, Ana, } Aurana hoped a few words of encouragement might stay her human’s burning mind.

{ We get the Ks’ou off this damn planet, } Ana replied. { So that I can see my parents again. }

“Of course.” Aurana said this aloud, into the air they breathed, to make it seem more real. Of course. What else could a colonizer, even one resistant to the Nation’s impulses, say?

This had, from the beginning, been their agreement. But decolonization is not like switching a light switch from off to on. It is more like extracting salt from seawater, like filtering impurities.

It is more, as Ana once astutely said as she stared at the mud that her shoes had accumulated from the Deep, a phrase that she’d heard her mother say sometimes as she handed them all, even Papa, mops and rags so they could do Saturday cleaning—certainly, it was more like disinfecting dirt.

—

“Not this way.”

Of course. The first words he’d speak to break the silence on on their long, awkward walk, as they had to navigate around the quickest paths—of course his first words would be an order.

Efyir, a Thhiyatkhoor, in the typical human skin she got to know him in, alongside his so-called human sister, were positioned behind her, a being he had dedicated his life to eradicating. This Thhiyatkhoor who presumed he could issue an order on a mission *she* had organized.

It wasn’t hard for Aurana to orient herself in whatever this was. She had had plenty of time to contend with the fact that he was Thhiyatkhoor. She’d already come to terms with the fact that this Bloodletter wasn’t quite what he said he was, though now knowing his name and lineage there was some care should would have to take. For him, on the other hand, he would have to resolve the cognitive dissonance. His trying to figure these moments was painful to witness. It was clear he was trying to hold steadfast to the identity that made him Thhiyatkhoor: the one that despised Ks’ou.

She kept walking, ignoring him. They were walking beneath the hovertrain tracks, which occasionally would scream past them from above. This was slightly risky, too, as they were many vagabonds and other nomads who traversed these paths or made temporary stops, but tonight it was eerily empty. Perhaps the authorities had already removed them—Aurana would not be surprised, as it was Nation custom to dispose of bodies rejected by their own species. If they weren’t good enough to be taken care of by their own, why would Ks’ou bother to adopt it as its shell? They were only slightly above refuse. (this was not a logic she shared, clearly. Nor, for the protection of her human, did she share the horrifying logic of the Nation with Ana.)

“I have to retrieve my armor. *We,* do.” Efyir insisted. “We left it in the hidden entrance—”

“You won’t need your armor.” Not if everything went according to plan. Which it would, because Aurana and Ana knew exactly what they were doing.

There was brief silence. She realized after a time that she was walking alone. She turned to see him standing smugly next to a reluctant-looking Jacque about twenty long strides away.

“We’ll be *late* meeting my Aspirant,” she sneered loudly so he could hear her, not budging. His defiance was translated easily to his face and it was clear he wasn’t going to budge, either. “*Zia plok*! *Which* hidden entrance? There’s obviously more than one.”

“The one near the Sparring woods. Between the two rocks.”

She flinched. That wasn’t actually the name of the woods—it was the name they’d given it, back when it used to be their spot for sparring after classes. Back before they knew each other’s true names. “*NeVarr*…” she growled under her breath and changed trajectory. She knew those woods because that was where she and NeVarr had set up their own hidden entrance, for KLF business. In his haste he must not have realized he had been followed. She turned to glare at them. “Well? Come on. It’s a slight delay. If anyone finds that armor, it could cause problems for our departure.”

It was more than a slight delay, though the retrieval itself was quick. NeVarr crackled over the intercom with his incessant complaints, which Ana was able to quell as best she could because Aurana had no patience for it.

With her two… { Companions isn’t the word at all. Partners? } …burdened by the heavy armor now held in backpacks, they finally met NeVarr at the southernmost point of the Deep in the region designated by [\*\*historical figure\*\*, the great]. Their detour meant they had to actually climb the steps to the entrance of a hovertrain station. She defrayed questioning of officers—the Nation had complete command of the transport system—by grumbling a few quiet words in Ks’Sassi, then took them on three different trains and a long, uncertain walk on a path made out of concrete, the old kind with yellow marks in the middle that the old people made jokes out of to show that they remembered symbols for which the younger generation had no referent. Uncertain because Aurana could guess from reading Efyir’s awkward human expression that he was alert, ready to kill her at a moment’s notice should she make Ana breathe the wrong way, the same way he sometimes expressed himself when they sparred at the studio or in the woods when he became too lost in the fight.

Jacque, from the interpretations of her movements and facial reactions that Ana fed to her, was blissfully unaware, or at least minimally aware that this moment was tense, but not aware at how ready Efyir was. Aurana pretended not to notice, because she should not have been able to read and understand his slate as closely and accurately as she did. She—Ana, actually—talked aloud nonsensically throughout the entire moment so that Jacque would be calm and Efyir would be distracted enough by the strangeness of her discourse, since he had never actually had a full conversation with Ana before, so they could make it to this last point without any skirmishes.

“You took too long,” NeVarr grumbled when they finally arrived.

“Oh, yes, I’m sorry is it Colonization O’clock already?” Aurana snapped, annoyed herself at the delay. “Wherever has the time gone? A few minutes earlier and none of this conquering business would have happened!”

NeVarr grunted a response to show how little he cared for her humor. He passed his human James’ eyes briefly over Jacque, hovered slightly longer over Efyir, then he proceeded as though they weren’t there. She had already explained this to him, and he was nervous enough about the mission to be fairly convinced that this was the right move. Perhaps with the insight of three warriors, he could succeed in his mission and be promoted. He was often confused by war tactics, but he would never admit it and Aurana would never dare to correct him.

She was the sub-aspirant, after all.

“We’ll need to steal a *dermakyna’ich* while making it seem like a routine transport. I’ve identified *libf-kso-ksö* as our target. It’s a piece of junk, really. Slow. It will take a full night to get there, and too small because I really didn’t expect…” he sighed. “It has what we need. Hethalu clone and the like. I’ll be editing the records if you… *all…* could just, target it, and secure it until I arrive. The *strays* will have to stay hidden. They’d be expected to confirm in *Ks’Sassi,* and we obviously know how disastrous that was the other night.”

Aurana raised her human’s eyebrows, but not by much. It wasn’t surprising NeVarr to be rude—he lacked the diplomatic grace that she cultivated—but he wasn’t often so bold as to insult a Thhiyatkhoor to his face. Whether he was feeling empowered because Efyir was in his shell, because she was there, or was simply tactless, was less certain.

He was furiously coward. Ana would never describe him that way, but that’s certainly how Aurana saw him. Had their roles been switched, she would never trust him on the battlefield. Then again, he had much reason not to trust either one of them.

{ *Stop. That’s not the point.* } Ana was good at calming Aurana’s often erratic and too-many-branched mind.

Right. The point was, NeVarr was not a warrior. And Efyir was. And that was how she ultimately convinced her Ks’ou superior to bring the Thhiyatkhoor and his (untrained—she didn’t mention this) human sister on their journey. Because it was beyond anything he knew. And, she could show them, the power of the KLF, so that no Thhiyatkhoor fleet would be sent in light of her mistake. Efyir could return home to his gilded life as a war-born. Find a different war to fight. And leave them alone.

*It wasn’t a mistake.* The thought wrenched her, suddenly, like an erratic pulse, like a bought of nausea.

Befriending Efyir—*El—*wasn’t a mistake. Of this she was certain, but she wasn’t sure how to say it. It didn’t *taste*, a phrase illegible to Ana. Her human’s way of understanding mistakes and coincidences was different. Where Ana might say, *there are no coincidences—everything is pre-determined*—, Aurana would translate, *all that resonates can, and resonation is always intentional outside of the resonator.* She didn’t intend to resonate with Efyir, it simply *happened*, as did the series of incidents afterward that cleaved them. Who knew he would be the son of the General, the Bloodletter *exemplar*? And yet, it happened, discourse and all, and she could not deny it.

*“Assoud ftua adoud*,” she said. “We will wait for your signal.”

That pleased him. He used his human James’ mouth to smile, a distilled reflection of the intricate, vibrant pulsing that NeVarr would normally send as Ks’ou, had they been sharing water.

At this point it didn’t matter that he was nervous about their unexpected guests, who were to be witnesses, not participants, in the power of KLF means. Quell the Thhiyatkhoor; kill the Speaker. That was the new mission. Perhaps, for NeVarr, promotion. Not because he deserved it, but because she anticipated that he wanted some kind of confirmation that he was doing the right thing, beyond what his human James told him. For Ks’ou, he was perplexed at this world he was born into and doing his best to navigate it. For Ks’ou, Aurana was trying to undo every colonizing motive that she could.

NeVarr disappeared down a tunnel. Aurana turned to Efyir and Jacque. “Let’s find the ship. Scan it to ensure it is empty and disable its—”

A loud sound disrupted her speech. She vibrated from Ana’s thorax up. Waited until it passed. Just an alarm from another sector. Nothing to get worked up about. Could be something as nominal as a tripped wire. These missions never made her nervous, and yet she was internally pulsing so erratically that even Ana had to intervene, doing an internal kind of breathing that quelled Aurana’s disruption. Ana even managed to grab hold of her own mouth and throat and said, “Let’s find something, *fast.”*

The Deep was actually a series of once small tunnels that served humans back when Veroia’s campus was served by underground trolleys, linking it to the larger cities that surrounded it. With the advent of the hovertrains in the years following the decolonizing process for humans, new technology was used to create the illusion of social progress. There was no longer any need for these dirt-encrusted spaces—no longer need to contend with a colonized past. Ks’ou had no difficulty in repurposing them. Many places were widened, but some, particularly the areas that served a less *showy* purpose like the transporters for basic resources, remained small. These places held materials that were used to line the caves to maintain structure, Earth-born metals, silicas, and other compounds pirated from elsewhere that served the Nation’s purpose of regulating human bodies. They covered all the metal tracks with rocks and dirt, leveraging the metal first if it was useful. Nearly unrecognizable from their past use; it would take an archeologist to discover what it once had been. No palimpsest left behind.

She could tell Efyir hated every moment that they crept through the small tunnel lit only by electric lamps along the median, old rusted signs that no longer bore their intended meaning, because Thhiyatkhoor were supposed to enjoy semi-open spaces, where their *naghryoja* could sense the threads of tree branches and make their decisions to move accordingly. On the other hand, completely open space, like meadows, weren’t lovely places; they were terrifying to Thhiyatkhoor because they needed objects like bats needed items for echolocation, some *thing* to determine movement and trajectory.

Unlike bats, Thhiyatkhoor found being deep within a planet too compact, and tunnels were too enclosed for a Thhiyatkhoor to grasp full vision with their crowns. Though he was in his *living fake*, she could tell that he could still access *some* elements of his biological Thhiyatkhoor body because his head was so rigid, standing upward on his neck in the very way she taught him not to in their martial arts classes, trying to access the cave in a sight that his human eyes were incapable of seeing.

Those *skins* were pathetic, really. Unnecessary. Humans were so sensitive; he should have been allowed to walk around with his biology visible, but humans were so shook by aliens that he had to *pretend* human.

Yet by contrast, he had the better deal. Aurana needed an actual human *being* to see. A *living fake* was an organism, but it had no thought. She had to manage her way against her biology as a sentient water organism, through an air organism like Ana, and this was less than ideal, because Ana should never have to host a Ks’ou.

There were other reasons. They succeeded well at not speaking about it.

When they arrived at the platform, it should have been easy. Later, Aurana would have to replay the scene over and over in her head as she worked the ship’s mechanisms, trying to juggle the physical with while ignoring the hushed whispers between Efyir and his human sister Jacque. She owed NeVarr an apology, she knew. His praxis was far from cowardice, and he had saved Ana many a time from diving too deep into the pool of eternal rest, something Aurana might have instigated more than she suppressed.

They had found an entire fleet of transporters, but Aurana became distracted when a routine guard wandered through and questioned their presence. It was left to Efyir, then, to choose the ship. When she had done her best to lie her way through, weighing the options on whether to kill the poor youth who mumbled his way through as she asserted an authority she did not actually hold, she had turned around to survey his decision-making and bit her lip to suppress the disappointment. But it was too late. They needed to move, because the young guard was *not* utterly convinced, and, as planned, the alarms would be set off in moments. The guard shuffled off, but when NeVarr arrived, the anger—and a hint of relief?—apparent on his face, he only pushed them forward and wished them the best.

“This is a risk even I cannot take,” NeVarr whispered, shifting his eyes back from her to Jacque and Efyir, who were standing, a bit confounded, behind her.

“A small setback,” Aurana mumbled.

He continued, “And neither should you.”

He was trying to delay. Aurana would not let him. His potential for promotion had ended; he couldn’t envision what would happen next. Perhaps this was the source of the relief, and not, as she assumed, the anxiety of sharing a ship with a Thhiyatkhoor *Bloodletter*. He was happy being an Aspirant with the KLF, and only that. He didn’t want to wear the responsibilities that the next level, brought, and why should he? He’s shown cowardice befo—

{ *Watch it*. } Ana growled.

Aurana had been thinking loudly. Duly chastened, she re-railed her train of thought. Outwardly, she nodded, resentful. Later, when she had time to unpack this moment with Ana, she would still be resentful, but this time with understanding. “We’re going. Now.”

He sighed. Hesitated. It was clear he had something else to say, but wasn’t sure how to say it. Then, “*Here*.” In a fashion typical of NeVarr, he casually pulled a small object out of his chest pocket, a thing no bigger than her palm wrapped hastily in a brown paper bag. It had a shiny, light blue bow on it. “In case you’re both not back in time. But I know you’ll be back. So, to *you* specifically, Aurana, we wish you, um, a happy Earth Day.”

She couldn’t help it. She broke a little. “NeVarr…”

{ Even haters get to celebrate birthdays! } Ana murmured, but it was clear from her resonance that she knew this moment was coming, had probably conspired with NeVarr and James on it. It was not the time for laughing. It was true—Aurana didn’t deserve even this celebration. She took it as kindness, shoving it furtively into her pocket. NeVarr was good at this, at least—he was never one to forget even Earth forms of commemoration.

Ks’ou did hold celebrations. They weren’t individualized like birthdays or anniversaries; but they did anything to celebrate their species as a whole, to make their species *real* in their collective imaginations. There was certainly the most important celebration of all, the liberation of their species from Thhiyatkhoor. Other celebrations included the \*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*.

Aurana forced a grin. “Thanks, *friend*.” She said it not out of truth, but it came from a place of kindness, wanting to repair the wound that she had set between them (and perhaps between herself and her human, who was still seething at her unkind thoughts. It worked, just a bit.) “|| Make your distance. ||” She closed and locked the door. NeVarr/James would have to clear the room now; the ships engines were fully engaged and in moments they were spiraling through the Deep’s transport tunnels towards the last opening out of the underground and then they were hurtled into Earth’s sky.

Once they were in the air, she fiddled with a series of panels spaced in front of her on what looked like three small, thin lecterns. The ‘panel’ looked like paper, with raised inscriptions embedded in it. Aurana use Ana’s fingers on both hands to glide over these inscriptions, stopping in the center lectern momentarily before both hands shifted to the lefthand panel. After her fingers slipped more slowly over this one—if Jacque or Efyir looked closely they would have seen a small nudge of blue peek out from inside her fingertips and touch then panel directly—music began to play. It was disjointed, sounding at once like a vehicular accident and intentional door slamming. Efyir said nothing, but his opinion was clearly marked on his slate.

“Well,” she sneered unkindly after glancing briefly in his direction, “If we were in *your* ship, we could listen to human music *you* like.”

“Efyir likes music?” Jacque piped.

“Hardly.”

Efyir scoffed and turned away. It was clear that he hated the unevenness of it, this Ks’ou who had tricked him into discourse.

“We should be in As-Sahara in five hours,” she said. “Painfully slow, I know.”

“Slow, are you kidding me?” Jacque grinned. “This *rocks*. I’ve always wanted to fly a ship like this.”

Aurana stared as one stares at a teenager who should be acting much older than they are. “But your mother… of all people *you* should know…”

“Mom doesn’t exactly want me to know how to skip the galaxy whenever I see fit,” Jacque grumbled. “She never bought me lessons or taught me herself.”

“I’ll teach you, then.”

Jacque emitted some kind of sound, a hybrid between a squeal and a shout. A hug would have been appropriate, but she didn’t know if Ks’ou did that. Still, she was reeling, “*Thank you.*”

But Aurana issued a sobering caveat, “If we *live* through this, of course.”

Jacque nodded without really absorbing it all. “Yes. Yes. Of course. Damn, I am so ready for this.”

But Aurana wasn’t smiling. “Why aren’t you like him?”

She gestured towards Efyir, who was standing sourly in the corner, glaring at the both of them. He scowled again at having attention brought to him and turned his entire body towards the far side of the ship, away from them.

“Why would I be?”

“I am of the species colonizing your planet right now. You saw what was happening in the Deep.”

“Oh,” Jacque shrugged, “My mother told me plenty of terrifying bedtime stories about Ks’ou when I was a kid. I suppose that traumatized me enough. I’m not afraid of what’s to come.”

“This isn’t a story,” Aurana muttered, bothered. But she busied herself with something on the papyrus-like sheets in front of her.

Efyir was only partially listening to them. He noted their trajectory; the ship built to transport basic items, so it was small and not very fast, and they would be reaching the ocean called Atlantic within half-half hours, and their destination not long thereafter. He already had some data to assess the *extreme conditions* his father demanded; if they could meet this Speaker, he could get a reading of this enemy, create the report, convince the Thhiyatkhoor to come, and he would have a reason to dismiss himself from this planet, and be free of Humans, their Ks’ou problem, *all of it*, for finality.

**Chapter 15**

“An easy war never made a competent warrior.”

-General Shyridin-Azayim, *Badaya Khryouya*

My father’s words rang truest when I thought about them in the moments before battle. They rang loudest in the moments before a kill. They rang clearest when I was in training, preparing myself for the deaths that would come and the mission, whatever it was, that I was to fulfill. But they rang dull in every moment in between, in the moments when I was *not* a warrior, in the moments when I was merely a son or a friend or a student. In the moments where I was simply my name, and not my title.

It is true that our societies see us as having to wear the slate we were born in as our *authentic* skin. But this was not my skin. This was a lie that I had been born into. You will be surprised to hear these next words, given my legacy and my accomplishments. Do not let yourselves be overwhelmed with shock, for there is still much to tell: at heart, I am no warrior. My upbringing and lineage convinced me it was so—convinced me that, by naghryoja, this was who I was supposed be.

Many of our children dream of their parents like those brave, courageous Thhiyatkhoor of our warlore. And I was most privileged in that I did not have to dream it, my father was there in the flesh—whenever he was home from one of his battles, to tell me directly of his tales. And of course, I became old enough to be *part* of these battles, once I had passed my examinations on—

**—**

|| *Training.* || The stinging sensation came back to him, as it often did, a corporeal Past that reached out and grabbed his arm exactly in the same way the Ks’ou had. That sensation, though brief, would sometimes be repeated when he never expected it to, like the time he’d cut the skin of his arm slightly when climbing an Earth tree, and forgot about it, then returned to Kahti’s home to set it on the table where Jacque had been making lemonade and had neglected to clean up. He’d set his arm down and made a shriek in a tone he was later embarrassed to re-hear in his memory, leaping back from the table, certain he’d see a Ks’ou, and not a lemon, there.

That was just a memory, a nebulous time when he and his father would regularly visit Earth, a time he once thought of as a special time for just them. Now he was not so sure—the purpose.

And this, the present moment, where he had found himself in a Ks’ou ship, in the presence of an actual Ks’ou, more because he knew it *opposed* his father and not for any sensible reason, his hand and arm hadn’t stopped ringing with the distant memory.

{ || *Training.* || }

Efyir hadn’t said the word aloud. At least, he didn’t think so. But he’d said it so loud mentally that he glanced around a few times to reassure himself. Jacque was staring out the window of the ship absent-mindedly watching streaks of nonsense light and dark shift many lengths beneath them; the human and the Ks’ou that Settled her were occupied with something else, murmuring a language he could not understand under breath. His mind, on the other hand, rang clear of that pivotal moment on *|| Training* ||, when the blood he’d drawn himself dispersed through the water, and the Ks’ou had dared to reach out and touch him.

His father could never know of the lie that was that day. The lie where he’d grabbed the dead Ks’ou from the tendrils of the living one, and, with hesitation: failure. He hadn’t passed his examinations at all. The secret, he had vowed then, would follow him into his great death.

This shame that overtook him, of the Ks’ou who had fooled him for so long. Typical. His father could never know. He would add this to Efyir’s list of weaknesses, a list that never seemed to diminish.

Just like this moment, when he was so disgusted by his own inaction that he agreed to Jacque’s absurd proposal, despite everything he learned, despite *everything* his father—no, it was The General, now, he’d lost that right—

At present, the *living, bulbous* Ks’ou before him dared to say something, dare to interrupt his remembering moment, to say something to him.

When the Ks’ou would recount this story years later, neither of them could remember, exactly, what she had said to set him off. She would argue that, in *her* mind, it was only a harmless comeback for the cruel vulgarities he had issued at her while still having to contend with the rawness of her being Ks’ou.

Something like, “Hey. War Infant[[54]](#footnote-54),” or “Blood-bather” or maybe even something less creative, like “Listen, Thhiyatkhoor filth.” Or something else.

Whatever it was, Efyir saw the surprise darken across her face, that he could move so fast despite his shell; Thhiyatkhoor bodies were more nimble, so, although she had a slightly better technique—she had taught him enough in the studio for him to learn and understand why some Humans moved the way they did—in less than a moment’s notice. Not only was he close enough to strike, he had torn himself partially out of his shell in the time it took to react. A high kick was met with his claws—when she twisted away he tried to break her ankle. A lower kick was easily blocked. He could grab any arm without worrying whether his hands would be torn up by blades, because Human arms were bare and weaponless. He managed to catch her calf as it tried a kick towards his chest, and closed his claws over it hard enough to keep it in his grip; when she drew back she lost her balance. He easily gained the higher position, knocked her to the cold floor of the ship, and thrust a knee into her chest.

His arm—half-human-appearing, half Thhiyatkhoor, the three blades jutting out along the length of it because at some point in the fight he’d torn his way out of his *living fake* there, too—was poised above her head, aimed at her face. He already had made up his mind about how he intended to repay her for her unkind phrase—which he no longer remembered what, exactly, it was that she’d said to spark his ire—so knew that she would be reaching for her weapon when his intentions became clear. With his one knee to her chest, his other held one of her arms, while his unbladed arm pinned both of her wrists to the floor. She couldn’t move.

There was a pause. She grit the teeth of her Human and forced her eyes into a narrow shape, betraying no sense of fear.

“||Do it.||” she hissed. Later, he would learn this was in fact the Human Ana speaking, who was hoping by using Ks’Sassi she would incite him to act, give her a reason to attack him once he let his guard down.

Instead, it had the opposite effect.

Efyir moved to strike, then pulled back, slightly. He was recalling the look of terror in Taghyr’s face just before he struck him. Back then, Efyir was not inspired to mercy, as he should accord to his own people. A wound as the one Efyir had given him would never fully heal nor allowed to be corrected by healing technology per Thhiyatkhoor practice. With three slashes on his face, all Taghyr could hope for would be a faded rebinding of his skin that could perhaps be ‘fixed’ in a true battle against an enemy, so he could properly earn his scars.

Which would never be possible, because Taghyr was not a war-born.

Efyir knew exactly what he was doing when he doled that scar, and the thought in this current moment sickened him, because he realized now the horror of what he’d done, in the face of the very *being* he swore an oath to always call enemy.

Here, in front of this Ks’ou, who was not among his own species, whom he was set to scar—carving a distinction, rather than a shame.

Yet.

Mercy would be accorded. A contradiction, or a connection? He did not know.

He finally sighed and his arm relaxed. “I do not owe you the honor,” Efyir growled. He pulled up and left to seat himself upright, on his knees, at the furthest distance the small ship would allow, with his back to them all.

“I don’t get it,” he heard Jacque whisper. It was evident that she was trying to keep them talking, to avoid the awkward silence. “I thought you were kicked off of Routhhe for that… you dishonored someone by doing that very thing?”

Efyir said nothing, trying, unsuccessfully, to let himself be overwhelmed by solemnity. Still, he could hear the background noise, and with it, parts of understanding, until he unconsciously found himself weaving his mind into the conversation.

The Ks’ou had taken it upon herself to speak. “A facial scar given from Thhiyatkhoor to Thhiyatkhoor is considered dishonorable. The scar-giver is frowned upon, though the shame belongs more to the one who allowed himself to be scarred.” His *naghryoja* tracked her movements—he could sense her dusting off her human’s hands, and something else—maybe doing something with her human’s braids, because he could hear a small click of beads against one another. He regretted that he had already told her the Taghyr story during one of their many walks in the woods. And now she must have made the connection, must have realized it was his reason for being grounded on Earth.

*In a very short time, this filthy Ks’ou had managed to suck more information out of me, than anyone I know,* he muttered to himself. He didn’t mind this metaphor, of ‘sucking’ information out of someone; humans sometimes made useful ones, and this was one of them. The Ks’ou whose lie-name was Aurana knew more than Jacque, certainly, but more perhaps than even his former *ekhair*. He tried not to be frustrated at how unfair this all was, resigning himself to staring out the window as the planet soil beneath them disappeared and they settled into a slow-moving glide across moonlit clouds. He was partially in solemnity, and partially eavesdropping on Jacque and the Ks’ou.

She seemed focused on the battle itself, repeating aloud move by move, incensed, eager, almost, to discover what she had done wrong. “A spar in limited space is a good one, I missed that kick because I was too focused on the blades. The ultimate, though not immediate, problem. Anyway, a facial scar from another species given in battle is seen as a great honor. If he were to scar me and not kill me, the honor would be mine, not his.”

Efyir could sense Jacque frowning. “That’s a dumb rule.”

“Many cultural expressions, regardless of species, are inherently incoherent,” lie-name Aurana said, though she seemed distracted, searching around the ship’s compartments until she seemed to sigh and a small tearing sound could be heard. He sense her glancing in his direction a few times; Efyir, under the now worn-out human *living fake*, could still sense these movements, but ignored it as much as he could by suppressing any reaction. He glanced once, only once, in their direction, to see that the Ks’ou had tied the human’s scarf around the cheek where he had made a slight mark, not too deep. It would inevitably leave her neck exposed, but he wasn’t ready to look further.

He decided to hiss out, instead: “Furthermore, I did not strike because that body belongs to the *Human*, not to you.”

“Aurana, of anyone, need not be reminded of that,” the …the human? snapped. He turn to her in time to see that she was making some kind of symbol with her hands, two fingers pointing directly towards nowhere. There was a noticeable change. Despite a face twisted in a way humans used to express anger, she seemed, oddly enough to appear more relaxed. Or perhaps less strained. It didn’t matter—he knew better than to trust that this was indeed the human, finally, and did not necessarily care, but watched her carefully. Her eyes turned up to the screen, a smooth, leather-like liquid with language transmitted through. He could sense her puzzling over something.

Efyir scoffed. He decided to play along. “Do *you,* human, need reminding that you are being colonizing by that Ks’ou?”

“My name is Ana.”

He started. No one could see the hazy, uneven lines —Jacque said it reminded her of chalk—from beneath his living fake. Then again, he didn’t know how much of his true skin was exposed since tearing himself. He decided to speak a few words to pull himself out of his emotional display. “Ok. Ana.”

“And that person you refer to as *that Ks’ou* is named Aurana.”

“Aurana is not a *Ks’ou* name.” He wasn’t actually certain about that. He was familiar with many Ks’ou names, the ones he’d learned about in his history textbooks and the great defeats they suffered at the claws of Thhiyatkhoor. None of them sounded anything close to Aurana.

“We decided on it. Together.” Then she growled, as though he wasn’t supposed to hear, “If you bothered to understand *symbiosis*.”

He hadn’t heard the word before, but because he didn’t care to understand, the word dropped into the void of his mind, folded as if he had never heard it all.

A sharpness, like a sound, interrupted Efyir’s thought process. It was the last sliver of light disappearing from the horizon, a loud disappearance to his *naghryoja*. They were greeted by the second night they would see in the same cycle. The ship was faster than human planes, but slower than even the worse of Thhiyatkhoor technologies. On the screen was the expected display of water, an expanse like tar in the twilight. If they looked at just the right angle there was the potential for illumination, or an illusion, that they could see the outlines of land.

“Do you not know the history of the Thhiyatkhoor and Ks’ou?”

The Ks’ou had said this. Efyir blinked. He realized his mind had wandered, and he realized in echo that Jacque had begun to ask questions of the Ks’ou, or the Human, and now they were on *this* irresponsible topic.

“I do. Just not *from* a Ks’ou,” Jacque responded.

“I’ll tell you,” the Ks’ou Aurana said. Or the Human Ana. Even her voice seemed off, again. Efyir could feel his human shell translating his slate display into a frown on his face. She was confusing.

“We have some time. I’ll tell you,” and she made the human’s face curve into a troublesome grin, “If *he* promises to shut up.”

Efyir’s slate burned. “I have no need for lies. And I *still* have a solemnity to complete.” He had no idea if he would be able to repair his *living fake* in this *Sahara* they were going to, but tried to suppress his worry. “So you can enjoy this Ks’ou’s auditory nonsense, Jacque, if you wish.”

“Oh, I wish.”

The Ks’ou made an exaggeration of it all. She changed the disturbing nonsense music sounds that continued playing in the background into a slow, repetitive squeal of a human instrument Efyir hated called a *violin.* It had a human voice slowly ah-ahing over it, which made it worse, because Efyir suspected she only chose the song, knowing it would further distract him, remembering from their days at *Hums* that this was this very kind of music he hated. She even dimmed the lights within the main room, which then helped him *a little*, because solemnities were supposed to be performed in total darkness, except for the leaves left alight.

“Once upon a time… generations ago, there was a Thhiyatkhoor called *Ighjya.*

Ighjya was your typical Thhiyatkhoor. Self-important. Mindlessly obedient to Thhiyatkhoor military authorities. But he had the one character flaw that Thhiyatkhoor despise the most.” She paused and looked purposefully at Jacque.

It didn’t take Jacque long to realized she was asking her to speak. Her eyes shifted to Efyir, who was trying to ignore them, and back to Aurana again. Jacque finally found the words, nearly in a whisper, uttered: “Curiosity.”

Aurana nodded. “Yes. Curiosity. Ighjya was the *reason* that Thhiyatkhoor despise curiosity so much now. See, Thhiyatkhoor and Ks’ou had one thing in common, one thing that they *depended* on one another for, though they didn’t know it.” She looked at Jacque again, waiting.

“The *hethalu*.”

“*Hethalu*. The most beautiful trees, perhaps in the universe. Trees that were rooted both *above* the lagoons, and *in* them. The Thhiyatkhoor developed their societies on the interconnected branches of the *hethalu*. They ate its leaves, and cooled in its shade when it was too hot. They swam and drank the waters of the lagoons, of course, but they didn’t venture too deep. They had everything they needed in the above.

Thhiyatkhoor didn’t know how deep *etaoin*…. erm, the lagoons went. They didn’t care to find out, really. Until, one day, Ighjya took a bet from a friend. That he could touch the bottom of the lagoon. Thhiyatkhoor were once stupid enough to believe that it didn’t exist. That the trees simply stretched out and thinned to wisps into the depths of the lagoons, until they touched the lagoons on the opposite side of the planet, growing, growing, until they formed the base of those polar trees, into their branches.

Ighjya, because he was so curious, decided to find out for sure. It was dangerous. If no bottom existed, he would die. So he set out to build a machine, at first. That failed. Ighjya realized quickly that his talents were not in engineering.”

“You’re not telling me anything new,” Jacque interrupted. “I know about Ighjya. And Efy goes *on* and *on* about how ugly Earth trees are, how sick they look like they never quite grew.”

“That is one thing that we actually agree about,” Aurana said slyly. “Or, I *would* agree, if I had ever actually seen a *real* one, and not some stupid clone the Nation uses for our thriving.”

“I thought I was going to hear the story from a Ks’ou perspective?” Jacque interrupted again, impatiently.

“Human, I’m getting to that!” Aurana said crossly. “Stories are not about efficiency. They take much time, *especially* the true ones. Are you ready to listen?”

Jacque nodded, duly chastened.

Aurana, purposely, it seems, sat in silence for a few moments past comfortable just to watch her squirm. Then she nodded, a bit triumphantly, and began to speak again. “Yes, it is true. The setting of the story has almost no controversy. Where our testimonies—Thhiyatkhoor and Ks’ou—*depart*, is embedded in this very moment. Ighjya, *also impatient*, began to swim. *Downward*. Deeper and deeper each day. He would try to follow a new root until either it ended or he tired or could no longer breathe. And then he would do this over much time, until he became very good at it.

“Ighyja invented *diving*.

“A concept that did not exist to Thhiyatkhoor. A concept that surely marked him as utterly apart. And yet, it was his. This thing he did, that was new, that so many followed.

“All this paled in comparison to what he ultimately did.

“The history books will inscribe that he *discovered* Ks’ou.

“But the Ks’ou found him. And they saved his life.”

“*|| Taghat! ||*” Efyir interrupted. This part was indeed Ks’ou propaganda. He couldn’t help himself. He had to speak truth.

“What *is* true,” Aurana pushed his interruption aside, unable to hide the annoyance in her voice, “Is that both… *all*… of us, that we could not discourse with each other.” She bore holes at him with her eyes—no, she was forcing the eyes of her human to do this.

This part was, indeed, true. Discourse—*khryouya*—the foundation, for all species.

“And that was the problem, really. Because no discourse could happen, until Ighjya and \*\*\*\*\* first discoursed. Thhiyatkhoor refer to it as the first Settlement. A Settlement ”

“How did… how do you think \*\*\*\*\* saved Ighjya?” Jacque asked.

“It doesn’t matter who saved whom,” Aurana said. “Whatever it was, it was no easy feat, for Ighjya to return to the surface once he dived so deep that he and Ks’ou finally met. You know the saying, right?”

“I, um, don’t know *any* Ks’ou saying,” Jacque was obviously transfixed. Efyir noted where he would have to do to cure her of this propaganda, but now was not the time.

“Blood is thicker than water, but Ks’ou lagoons are thicker than blood.” She laughed; Efyir found it awkward and not very human-like in its rhythm. “The pressure was too great for Ighjya at the depth he was at. His breathing collapsed; he would have died, but he didn’t. Your non-bio-brother here will argue with me over whether this was a benevolent encounter or not. It doesn’t matter. What is true is this: Ighjya should have died; he didn’t. He returned to the surface after having dived at such a great depth, and wasted no time, once he recovered, to tell others of his discovery. And, he voluntarily returned to that depth not long afterwards, hoping for another encounter. Thhiyatkhoor pursued *us*. We had no need of *them.* We knew of their existence already, and we didn’t care to know them further.

“And that was the problem, really. Thhiyatkhoor historians and anthropologists and politicians are still arguing about what happened, precisely, with no definitive answer and many of the records were destroyed. But they always miss this simple truth. If the Thhiyatkhoor had not pursued *us*, then *Ks’ou* would have never known anything about air species. We may not even have known about our ability to *connect* with other species…

“We would have never been kicked off of Routhhe, for that ability.

“We would have never been divided between the miserable *kyôsta*—we don’t even have a name for the planet never intended for us—and that horrifying place called ||*Training*|| where they hunt Ks’ou for sport. And Ks’ou wouldn’t feel the need to find a better place to live, to be here, colonizing this planet.” She looked at Efyir, who hadn’t said a word during this tirade and had remained, to his credit, remarkably calm.

“Thhiyatkhoor brought Ks’ou to Earth,” she said, finally, as though enticing Efyir. And then she—or her human, Ana, if that was to be trusted—turned what seemed a dark red, that was like a shadow on her already oak sin. “Thhiyatkhoor were the first colonizers. They colonized by marking *Routhhe* as their own, and kicking Ks’ou—Routhhe-born, mind you—off the entire planet.”

Efyir watched her quietly; watched as she let her guard down and opened herself up to critique. He did not act, but watched,

He made no motion, and with that, sanction.

The Thhiyatkhoor could have indeed prevented this war if they had better handled their “first encounter” with Ks’ou.

He was surprised by how much he agreed with her.

—

At that she turned to the screen, eyes widened, and she cursed in human language. “I’m supposed to be preparing my mission training. I’ll have to finish later.”

—

“You let a Ks’ou into your brain so you could speak more languages,” he spoke, the number *632* still ingrained. She glanced at him, and, without speaking, turned back to the computer. “You don’t sleep?”

“Before a battle, yes, it’s usually better. But this is more important.”

“How long have you been speaking this… this…”

“Arabic? I knew a few words before tonight.”

It was impossible. The level she reached in comparison to the computer aligned too well.

“The General,” Efyir said slowly, wanting to connect, finally, with this human, who was so wrong in allowing control by the enemy, “Brought me back to Earth so I could be immersed in Human Standard English from a young age. The way humans really speak it.”

“That makes sense,” she growled. “No wonder you hate Earth: nothing to anchor you here but a surface understanding of language.”

“I don’t hate Earth.”

“You’ve complained about it enough,” she took her eyes off the screen for a moment. At his surprised expression she added, “Most of the conversations you had with Aurana, I was there, listening.”

“I *critique* it. I don’t hate it,” he said this with less enthusiasm. The conversation was going about as well as most of the conversations he typically had with humans. “The trees are… sufficient, I suppose. I’ve eaten worse leaves. And some of their branches are less fragile than others.”

The human scoffed, “Aurana, unlike you, *loves* this planet. She understands, for one born without eyesight, what we have. She doesn’t take it for granted.”

“Of *course* she loves this planet. Colonizers do so out of envy. What is the Ks’ou’s actual name? Perhaps if you called her it, you would recognize her for the colonizer she is.”

“…*aaaand*, we’re done.” She activated something of a semi-clear border between them. Much like the *Ihnn,* it stitched a wall, but was synthetic: it was yellow, not orange. Not alive. Though he could still see the human-Ks’ou pair, he could no longer hear her as she practiced the language of their destination.

After a quiet spell, just when he was drifting again, came a voice from the corner, “Some days, Efy, you should stick a giant Thhiyatkhoor foot in your giant Thhiyatkhoor mouth.” Jacque was looking at him expressionlessly; her eyes were puffy, red.

Efyir grumbled that Thhiyatkhoor bodies are not so acrobatic, then stooped down as though he were about to conduct a solemnity, resigning instead to just crouch. It was uncomfortable, and he was beginning to long to climb a tall tree. It hardly even had to have branches, but being in this space suffocated him. *Crouching in a Ks’ou ship, what would his fath—the General, think?* So lost in thought, he didn’t even hear or notice the bottle of water rolling up to him until it had touched the offensive ‘Thhiyatkhoor foot’. He looked up at Jacque, puzzled, as usual, by human actions.

“Carter would have been 18 by now,” she mumbled. “It’d’ve been cool if he could have been with us, on this trip.”

‘Trip’ was not the right word, but he nonetheless gave her a grateful nod before taking a drink, not realizing how thirsty he’d been.

Carter died with a cord around his neck. Not the kind that humans endured when held in Ks’ou capture, the rope so resembling a human era when some humans owned other humans like products, as Efyir owned his ship, but another kind of cord, the one that should have given life, sustained it, as much as it in error could take it away. Carter died slate, the color of Thhiyatkhoor life; Efyir was there for the moment, and was young enough that he was allowed to mourn with Jacque and Kahti, this potential human host brother he imagined he would have.

The General had told him, once, that human mourning extended long, often much too long. Extensive mourning marks all the humans do, and this was why Aunt Kahti was a sympathizer, and made critical errors when the Great Alliance fought together. Perhaps this was why Jacque treated him so kindly, even when he knew it did not deserve it. Perhaps Thhiyatkhoor would do better to learn from humans, that mourning bears something inaccessible to those for whom mourning is not practice.

He told her so.

“Your dad exaggerated a bit. Some humans would do better to mourn longer. Mourn anything, at that,” she said. He rolled the water back to her, and, after a few audible gulps, she finished her thought, “I think Mom got it right. Mourning lets us do what should be impossible. Like put up with those who annoy us, even if we love them otherwise.”

--

And a voice, that he could now hear clearly, though the synthetic wall was still erected between them, from a body that he knew, certainly, by the way she stood before them, the dark hair of her human seeming to curl up tighter with this control that the Ks’ou inflicted.

—

“Some Ks’ou aim to *leave* Earth. If you bothered to know.”

“You speak *nonsense.* What you are saying—convincing Ks’ou to leave. Even if *you* claim that you will do so, which I do not believe, the others will not.”

“You know nothing,” Ana sneered. “There are many Ks’ou who do not enjoy Settling humans. They only want to have access to different senses. Seeing and hearing in air. Even tasting, since we taste differently. It’s not *all* about colonizing bodies. Aurana is grateful for the opportunity to experience air like me. And when it comes time, she will show her people a different way.”

“Ks’ou are not a *people*, they are *slime with tentacles*.”

Ana twitched. This was not the fight she was interested in fighting. Though they didn’t often pass back and forth so quickly like this, she handed control of her body back over to Aurana, knowing this wasn’t her fight. “Cephalopods.”

It was his turn to seem jarred. It displayed on his slate easily. “What?” He watched her hands, where the ‘K’ peeked out from underneath her jacket. Aurana—the Ks’ou, now—locked eyes with him.

“Ks’ou are closer to the Earth creatures classified as cephalopods,” she said, more thoughtfully. When she noticed them staring at her again she added, “More closely, amphibeous *Cuttlefish*”

They both ignored Jacque, who seemed to be stifling a laugh, though at *what*, exactly, was lost on both of them.

Aurana pushed up Ana’s nose. “Human taxonomy is subject to the same pitfalls of *any* classification system. Would you like me to all refer to Humans as merely bipedals?” The accusation stung. She could see in his grimace a sweep of when he once considered humans only by visual cues. “Of course Ks’ou bear *visual* resemblance to slime, but we are closer to the Earth sea-species cuttlefish. They are masters of disguise, blending in to their environment, and they do it all while being completely colorblind!” She was now making cuttlefish motions with her hand.

The others didn’t seem to share her enthusiasm, but she wasn’t seeking their approvalas long as they understood her point: Earth slime was far inferior to cuttlefish.

“*Anyway*,” she growled, then brought up a series of charts, “I’ve only just had time to start learning some of these words. You should bother to learn a few of them, too. You’re supposed to stay out of the way… but just in case.”

((has to be Aurana’s POV move to Ch 14?))

“I want information on Ke’Ad, Earth-Designated Second.” Efyir breathed these words evenly.

“He’s untouchable. Don’t even think about going after him, or sending anyone else to.” She couldn’t help her very visible reaction—Ana’s skin broke out into goosebumps, and then a sweat. She was certain that Efyir could see the hair on her human’s skin raise as though pricked.

Efyir repeated himself again. Aurana glared at him icily. “What do you plan to do with this information?”

She couldn’t decide if Efyir was as bad a liar as she was, or a diligent one. He had, after all, hidden his father’s identity, but not so much his species. On his slate now was a mixture of shine, a few irregular rhizomes, and… a symbol that she didn’t recognize. A symbol that diffused like celestrial-grey, but much more quickly than she could read. Was that… curiosity?

No, it couldn’t have been.

But it wasn’t anything that she was familiar with, though she asked Ana to double-check the archive, she was almost certain the answers wouldn’t like there.

She decided that if she was going to find out what, exactly, this pattern was, she would have to play along, for a time.

“It’s important to know my enemy,” Efyir was saying. “You and the studio owner seem to claim that my enemy is not a single species, though I disagree. But we can agree, unequivocally, that this Ke’Ad is my… *our*… enemy.” He seemed to choke on this last part. She didn’t blame him for it. “I want to know what humans will be up against.”

She began to scan Ana’s fingers furiously across the lectern.

She turned towards the screen and said this word: “Water.” The basis for life: Ks’ou, humans, Thhiyatkhoor.

“الماء” the program repeated.

“al-ma ahh,” she said. Red specks of light illuminated her throat and tongue; a digitized voice issued instructions in Ks’Sassi. She adjusted.

“al-ma’a.” No, several times over. Finally, “‘*al-maa’3.*”

Turquoise light, accompanied with low, soothing humming. Continue.

Efyir did not know at what point he fell asleep. He only realized it when he started and found his brain puzzling to make sense of the scene before him, of this Ks’ou-controlled human body speaking a foreign language into a machine, and his mind began slowly remembering the pieces of truth that sleep had relieved him of. He used his angry at himself, for letting his guard down, to bring him further out of his exhaustion. He did not feel that much time had passed, but noted several points at once: first, it was no longer the Ks’ou, but the human, such was a difference in how she held herself and how she spoke; secondly, she was no longer focusing on single word units, but entire sentences, long and weaving. He had no idea what she was saying, but noted in her visage a fundamental difference.

“Fitting, that we are here together. The place so colonized that Humans have argued over centuries whether it is a continent or a country. It is right, for us, being who we are, to do this *here*.”

“History is the fruit of power, but power itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots.”

― **Michel-Rolph Trouillot[[55]](#footnote-55)**

**Chapter 16**

Ke’Ad, Earth-Designated Second, could not stop thinking about the Dreamless.

And thankfully, he had a few minutes of think before the proceedings began. To his left was Ke’Ad, b3lef-Designated First, inconspicuous, having Settled a longish body the color of charcoal and the texture of pebbles. To his right, Nliquuineinon, Settler of what looked like—from his human’s Earth-centered point of view—to be a multi-pronged yellow mushroom floating in a clear jar, a small vocal translation box affixed to its front. It had neither branches nor eyes nor clicks, and Ke’Ad Earth-Designated Second didn’t understand the point of Settling other water-bound creatures when they accounted for only 1% of sentient, intelligent, and space-bound creatures, and not a single water-born held a seat at the United Intergent Council. *It* was also Designated First. That bore.

Without the challenge that he was presented with as a Designated Second, they had little to talk about. Nor did they share his vision. He therefore endeavored not to speak with them, which was convenient because they found every excuse to speak to other Designated Firsts in the room despite his being sandwiched in between them in the longish row of flat, pillar-like stones meant to seat species of various sizes and shapes of biologically-determined bottoms. Pathetic, really. In his bald, *ft’i[[56]](#footnote-56)*-skinned human, who—though muscular for his species—was short in comparison to quite a few of the present species and bore no visible weapon integrated into his body, he did not have his biology on his side. So he would have to rely on other elements, and that was his capacity to think beyond the present, to how Ks’ou could become commanders of the future.

He at least wasn’t subjected to the fate of a Designated Third, like the few meek fools who stood grimacing in the back edges of the room, attempting to look menacing when all present knew that they were inheriting the final and worst stage of Ks’ou advancement. Well. Some had the benefit of a menacing species, but that did not stop them from appearing meek.

It wasn’t that Designated Thirds failed at their task—they were largely successful. *Third time’s a charm*, humans would say. It was simply understood that their efforts were made easier for them; that each of their successes were not by their own efforts but by the ways paved for them. Historical conquest muddied by too many agents, whether that agent was overcome in battle or merely died while waiting for history to be made before him. A proud—and rare—Ks’ou was one who conquered *at first pulse*.

Ironically, despite the hubris splayed out in the two rows of eighteen designated leaders, no such Ks’ou existed. Yet. But that didn’t stop them from less-than-subtle hints that what *they* were doing would somehow break that mold; that whatever *their* tactics that they used would be brutal or clever or audacious enough to be the species first successful Ke’Ad Designated first.

Since by definition of his title, Ke’Ad Earth-Designated Second would not be *that* Ks’ou, at least not on Earth, he turned his mind away from the lackluster, to instead reflect on the Dreamless, and what he should do about them. Solving the Dreamless problem, he believed, was the ultimate solution to what plagued all of them, even the “Floating Mushroom Leader” as his human had decided to call it out of his own boredom. Whether he could succeed in conquering Earth—and, though he would admit this to no one, not even a confidant, he was still unsure as to whether he could—would pale in comparison to this issue. Should he solve it, he need not depend on human conquest as his legacy marker.

It was a problem for them *all*, really. To his knowledge, none of his esteemed colleagues realized this, enveloped in their own concerns for conquest as they navigated the unique cultures of the species they endeavored to Settle. And for today, it was not the purpose of the meeting. So he ruminated on it in the few moments they had before the Essential Nation leaders arrived.

Humans in all their creativity and diffraction had developed many splendid solutions to their diversity problems. As a populous species relatively unscathed by intergalactic interference, they were still inwardly focused, which made them eminently more useful as a blueprint for species management than Thhiyatkhoor, who were only largely unified because they all held a vile and powerful common enemy, the Ks’ou. Assembling forces to rid the universe of what amounted as pests to them was a thread that tied the Thhiyatkhoor majority. And the minority that cared little for affairs of Ks’ou, that only cared for their day to day survival, were relatively powerless. That tide would change soon, Ke’Ad had heard rumors of it. The Thhiyatkhoor had made a critical mistake. Some of their leaders, some time ago, for reasons of greed, made what seemed to be reasoned arguments to create policies forbidding children of a certain number. Their critical mistake was ensuring oversight only of the visible. That left the invisible minority to bubble beneath the surface, and word was that the non-elite now outnumbered the elite, particularly since the elite often left home in search of adventure, war, and honorable death.

Uncertainty was rampant. Thhiyatkhoor war-born leaders could hardly hold control over the budding knowledge that now their version of *untouchables* far exceeded them in number. And though they lacked the technology, the lower class had figured out how to wield certain weapons. The war-born were afraid, though they would never admit it. Fear, instead, resulted in stricter policies: weapon obtainment, renewed restrictions on class miscegenation, ensuring only trees of certain roots touched other trees, with all others hacked to pieces until it seemed that the roots were never meant to be there.

Humans, on the other hand, had now cycled into a period that Ke’Ad considered wisdom. After the first invasion lead by Ke’Ad Designated First, humans had been given a reason to unite. Not just by being confronted with the Ks’ou enemy; they had considered, deeply, what united them. They feared civil war, because of many devastating examples within their own. Therefore, they crafted categories, to which Ke’Ad paid close attention, in order to dance around the question of civil war (civil now meaning any conflict between humans, not just of their own geography) and instead focus on their enemies abroad (abroad now meaning any species outside of Earth.)

Humans now insisted on their unique art and culture. “Human” culture was never a thing until Ks’ou arrived, a point which Ke’Ad is quick to defend—how else could humans understand their culture if not through their initial strife and friction through colonization?

Sadly, humans do not appreciate this explanation.

Ks’ou have adapted to human forms of art. For one, the practice of writing, painting, and making music are somewhat new, largely because Ks’ou do not have hands. The practice of music making with instruments is prized most of all. While sound functions differently in air than in liquid, Ks’ou *did* have this practice before the tiresome and extensive plotting it takes to pursue interstellar colonization. This meant little time for such a worthy activity.

What else? Humans encouraged one another to confront their central dis-unifying argument. This was difficult for them, since the argument that dis-unified some humans on some continents was accepted without question for others. Abortion and eugenics were now considered ancient arguments, as with gene-editing procedures, for those who could afford them. The mind/body problem had been settled for some time, after all. Anyone who disagrees otherwise—there are always *those*—risk looking like idiots. So they remain quiet, as was best for advancement.

Humans chose now to decry alien engagements, and whether some should be found acceptable on their planet over others. They also spent quite a bit of time meddling in other non-Earth affairs, trying to “fix” other planets as though such an endeavor were under human control. Much time spent on inevitable deaths. Distracting enough to humans that they could not smell the re-colonization of their planet if it were a dish served just in front of them.

Confronting the central dis-unifying argument was, for humans, a fine approach. Calls for civil dialogues around “what to do about the (non-Earth) aliens” warranted banquets of the planet’s finest and most wealthy leaders, who were all to happy to gather to listen to inspiring dialogue around the problem and return home to do absolutely nothing about it until the next gathering. Humans seemed to enjoy this cycle.

Yet, for Ks’ou, it was perhaps not possible to confront directly their central dis-unifying argument. To talk about Dreamless, that word that was hardly uttered even by those who believed in it, was too risky, too—

{ *Risk, too, is inevitable.* }

The thought bubbled up from his human, cautious yet palpable. *Giddân*, Ke'Ad must have had his thoughts open again. He shut his mind immediately and chastened his Settled with a brief but sharp sound. Too much going on around them, too much alert attention given to his external surroundings, making him more vulnerable internally. He should not let this happen, no matter how much he knew his human was trying to *dialogue* with him.

Ke’Ad returned his thoughts to humans, to how they managed to unite together in the most difficult moment of their species’ history: contending with a universe that knew more about itself than they could contend with.

*How*? Ke’Ad tortured himself with this question. *How to manage such a delicate balance with Ks’ou?*

Ks’ou, who in their conflict with Thhiyatkhoor had become semi-unified in a sudden and peculiar way. Ks’ou, who despised the kyôsta-born or the ship-born depending on which position they personally held. What a ridiculous response to a complex question: the Nation need both kyôsta and dostôn-fs—how foolish to imagine otherwise! And yet their ranks suggested otherwise, an out-of-control dialogue which could snap into place if only *he* could imagine otherwise.

Ke’Ad, Earth-Designated Second, in fact, decided that he had much to learn from the humans about matters such as unification.

The first being, as Ke’Ad learned from his human, that humans seemed to thrive most when they eradicated difference and emphasized monolithic qualities. It seemed to happen over and over again, with each turn of history as quiet and natural as a planet’s own rotation. A delicate balance that was only threatened to be upended in a million or so years. Such stability was enviable.

Without prompting, a sudden quiet dispersed among the Ke’Ad group. Ke’Ad snapped out of his thoughts and focused the eyes of his human to the front of the room. The Essential Nation Leaders had arrived. It was time to begin.

They wasted no time. There were 7 of them, which was meaningful to Ke’Ad, Earth-Designated Second’s human in a different way than it was himself.

Ke’Ad by Ke’Ad they were called. Ke’Ad, Earth-Designated Second couldn’t think about the Dreamless, but he couldn’t think about much else, either. He listened, intently, not to content, but to form.

“Ke’Ad, Kukidoun Bezïn-Designated Third. Report.”

And then.

“Ke’Ad, Earth-Designated Second. Report.”

His turn.

He breathed as though it were his last.

Because it would have been, were it not for his human.

\*

**Chapter 17**

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| Protocol Sifr: A symbiotic relationship privileges the Settled, first and foremost, in relation to the beneficial nature of symbiosis. |
| *Status of the Statement with The Assembled: Approved* |

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| --- |
| Protocol 1: Any endeavor into space is either colonization or tourism.  To establish ones presence in an area, even peacefully, is to utilize power to explore what one does not fully understand. The goal are as follows:    1.1 We aim to dismantle the Ks'ou Nation, fully and without exception.    1.2 We aim to re-establish Ks'ou as a *peaceful* presence in the universe. This presence must only facilitate cohabitation and mutual symbiotic relationships between Ks'ou and other species.  1.3 Following the completion of Protocol 1.1, Ks'ou will return *kyôsta* to establish a more stable and equitable governance to fulfill the ongoing trajectory of Protocol 1.2. |
| *Status of the Statement with The Assembled: Approved* |

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| Protocol 2: To be a Ks'ou with a human is to at once open up and close possibility. It is to give yourself a new life, but one in negotiation with the human you sync with. This is the meaning of mutual symbiosis. It does not mean endlessly giving and taking as it pleases one or the other. In fact, it means serving your human first, and yourself only after. If you are not willing to accept this, then you reject symbiosis outright, because the only honorable relationship with a host is none at all. |
| *Status of the Statement with The Assembled: Approved* |

**—**

{ Isn’t it time? }

The voice was insistent. Impatient.

*Mmm?* Ana’s mind motioned towards Aurana. She’d been inhaling a text about the Syatlafokutl, a living society—as far as they knew—in the veptuaesis angle of what Ks’ou referred to as the Undulant dyg[[57]](#footnote-57), though that’s that not how they refer to themselves at all, as Ana had just learned. By Ks’ou—and Other—accounts the species was too violent to engage, but within the archive she learned that what was considered violence, was actually hard-earned mercy for Syatlafokutl, toward one another, to keep their people intact and their inner communities thriving from potential exploitation from the outside, which had once decimated their species to near extinction.

{ Time? …right! Time. } Ana rose to the surface of her consciousness.

Symbiosis didn’t function the same way for NeVarr as it did for her and Ana. For them, symbiosis almost always reared itself on the battlefield, while NeVarr and James held calmer arrangements.

She coughed gently to interrupt Efyir and Jacque speaking in low voices on the other corner of the ship where Ana had banned them. They both turned towards her, unsurprised to find that the wall Ana had erected was now disabled, but Aurana knew El could see it was her, *the Ks’ou*, by the way he seemed to tense and the \*\*\*description of Thhiyatkhoor skin\*\*\*

“We’re close,” she said. “So I should explain what the mission is, exactly. Our enemy *in parallel* is The Speaker.”

“*Nnd*.”

She regarded El, deeply uncomfortable. It wasn’t lost on Aurana that not more than a few interstices of time ago, they could call each other friend. Now, she had to pretend that El was her enemy, and it didn’t seem fair, these roles they had to play out, chosen long before they were born with no option for another path. They were nearly confidants. Only, under the cloak of a lie.

A lie? No. Absence. They didn’t know each other’s true names, and he didn’t know her true species. Sometimes ignorance makes possibility, too.

The one she once called El was now glaring at the images while biting his lip. He did not seem at all like the aloof *zilaa* student; now, he seemed alert, and focused. Aurana should have anticipated this. She was annoyed that this side of him surprised her so much.

To allay her annoyance she began talking. Babbling, really. Everything she knew about the Speaker, outlined in the documents that had originally been destined to NeVarr.

She had been puzzling over the ordinance all night. It was way out of proportion with NeVarr’s capabilities. It was exactly in line with hers. But the KLF had deemed her too dangerous, because she had been so loyal to the Nation before.

Internally, she gasped. Had… had this been a setup? Had the KLF intended this for Ana and Aurana to do all along?

((pulls them up; Efyir demands that she pulls up Ke’Ad, Earth-Designated Second)

Then various statistics about their location. This, perhaps purposely, was rendered in Endaithsu script. Efyir’s eyes scanned it quickly. Then he sucked in a deep breath. Dialogue would have to happen if he were to be prepared for this upcoming battle.

“You don’t find this odd?”

She used her humans eyes to look at him, stubbornly, with pursed lips and an expression as a question. “It depends on what you mean by *this*.”

Efyir nodded towards some of the data. “Below ideal humidity. Limited water access. Desert topography. These are hardly thriving conditions for Ks’ou.”

“I noted.”

“So…” Efyir was trying not to lose patience. “So it seems that there may be another reason why Ke’Ad is bringing its forces *here*. Weapons? Technology? Otherwise?”

“That may be the first astute thing you’ve said on this trip.”

“I’ve been trained to understand my enemy,” he quipped. It was not only his restraint being tested, but his astuteness? This *Bloodletter*…

The one who dared smiled, strangely, but would not note any irony except, “Trained to recognize your enemy. But not your allies.”

“Allies are always temporary,” Efyir said, repeating, with some regret, the words of his father. “To be an ally is a fragile state of being—the burden is to do what before you could not. But to be *one of our own*; that, indeed, is rare.”

He was a bit disarmed when she said, “You’re not wrong. That is the story of Ighjjya, is it not? A temporary ally?” It wasn’t a question she wanted him to answer. She cut him off from speaking by bringing up a host of 20 new faces on the screen, this time more diverse than the many faces of the Ks’ou leader. “These are the personal bodyguards and political confidantes of Ke’Ad. Fiercely loyal, dangerous, and as well-trained as any Thhiyatkhoor warrior.” She ignored Efyir’s scoff of disbelief. “They are not to be spared. Their Settled have likely given up all hope by now.”

“No Ks’ou should be spared.” He did not want her to have any illusions about this temporary alliance. “You haven’t answer my question. Why *here?*”

She stared hard, deciding which battle she wanted to pick. She decided on the lesser. “That’s not the question you are asking.”

Efyir tried not to react, but he was pretty bad at suppressing the \*\*description of skin\*\*. He stared back unwavering until he sighed and said, “Page 438 of *Badaya Khryouya.* Ks’ou are skilled at manipulating the political situations of their victims to achieve their own ends.”

She made a haughty sound. “Another place where your father was wrong. Ks’ou do not recognize Human politics as valid. We want nothing to do with it.”

“Psh! That makes the two of us.”

Aurana looked up, surprised to see Jacque giving her an understanding nod. It was enough relief from the tension for her to use the edges of Ana’s mouth to crack and small smile, and look at Efyir again.

“I don’t actually know why my species is *here*, specifically. I’m not a high enough rank to be privy to that information.”

—

((they’ll stumble upon the preliminary exams for

“Are you suggesting mission creep?” she sneered. “That even if we destroy Ke’Ad’s army and him, that you will continue destroying Ks’ou?”

“If I must,” he breathed. How could he lie? “Or have you designated yourself the leader of this mission?”

The human’s hair partially covered her face, but her eyes seemed to burn even through the black clusters: “I am not here to tell you what to do, *jjobahti Shyridin*. But I will let you know the consequences of your acts. If you begin to mass slaughter Ks’ou, we will be forced to kill you. I’m warning you now. If you slaughter my people, we will act.”

{ *Your* people? }

{ Can you let me concentrate? }

“So you enlist me to kill only the Ks’ou you designate?” Efyir raised a bladed arm. “How do I know if this is not an elaborate plan to gain power?”

“I hate power. Many Ks’ou do not understand what they’re doing. Ke’Ad and his army, they are hardly so ignorant. The Ks’ou need a new voice. New leadership. New hope. If only then, many citizens can be convinced. Not by slaughter. But by good argument, and a leader who can bring them to *kyôsta*.”

“*You*, then?” he sneered.

“No,” she shook her head, but he was standing in a way that meant battle, and was about to lunge forward when Jacque intervened.

“Hey, you two—er, I mean all,” Jacque said, glancing, embarrassed, at Aurana and her human. “Look.”

They turned. The screen which projected the outside portrayed an incredible scene: a rising sun, glowing gold and red, over a landscape that was both familiar and unique. Heaps of sand, but life and wilderness, too.

Aurana would have a thought that she believed she shared with Ana alone; a thought as first shapes of land became discernible on screen, contoured by rapidly escaping specks of light as they arrived at a second sun movement; it was at once bright and shadowed in the Human imaginary.

{ *Kwa*, you exaggerate, } Ana mused. Aurana admired when her human spoke her language; listened, attentive, { Most of Earth has been colonized. By humans. Before your kind even came. I wonder… I wonder if the definition of *nation* is now, having-been-colonized. Those that fit within outnumber those that don’t. }

((Aurana finds a man in the desert whom she knows is controlled; is about to kill him when they discover his daughter in the desert, who negotiates with her not to kill him though she knows the stakes; she tells them where the Speaker is (her father a delegate); they go, discover the Speaker negotiating with Egyptian leaders to hand over their most unwanted people to Ks’ou control in exchange for weapons))

—

((Aurana steals Efyir away, leaving Jacque to fight—gets shot into Sahara, lost))

—

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**Chapter 18**

“Coloniality is a peculiar construction of knowledge, power and being that divides the worlds into zones of being and not-being… and that make war endless.”

-Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality”

She had pulled up a vast array of faces, all which seemed similar but all different. Ecru in face, dark brown or black hair, deep eyebrows. “He has many faces, and no one knows which, specifically, is his. Perhaps none of these. He does this for his protection, against assassination.”

**Chapter 19**

**Chapter 20 (Kelisfton)**

We control the mind, not the brain.

No colonizer would imagine that the brain was the sole source of cognition. This is why we colonize what others may consider the senses or essences of what it means to be. To control the brain was mere material: outer body movement, eyesight, coordination. This was level 1 control, the simplest. No more impressive than a hand forcing the hand of another to hit itself in the face.

Level 2 control: synapses. language. the manipulation of emotion. A Settler can do these through many means, primarily by knowing and understanding the unique creature they possess. They move from understanding the creature as a broad species, and understanding the creature as a unique individual, constituted among others, belonging to a whole. That which you controlled was a synecdoche, a small portion of something greater than it.

Level 3 control: the more difficult. the mind. thought. memories. the

A seasoned Settler figures out how to control all of these, a Master Settler can do it swiftly. Some species are more difficult than others; human species are biologically easier to deal with. Thhiyatkhoor are notoriously extremely difficult and to be avoided. Olyat-koi took some time, but it was not a difficult navigation for me.

For some Ks’ou it takes much time to figure out how to coordinate Ks’ou control with

**Chapter 22**

Hall- Black in Black Popular Culture

the discourse on Blackness and the centering of US experiences has me thinking about Stuart Hall's essay, “What is this “black” in black popular culture?” (2009), where Hall names and critiques the struggle over cultural hegemony -- where interpretations of Blackness are limited by North American history and racial politics. He argues (pulling a quote from my book here), "though strategic essentialisms in Black popular culture may have once been useful, particularly in making space for the Black in popular culture, they simultaneously remove historical, cultural, political and contextual differences, making it appear as if “the Black” and “the Black experience” is universal, thus reinforcing policing and racist strategies, which construct mythical boundaries around what Black is and what Black ain’t. But if part of the work of Black cultural studies is to combat alienation, provide a counter voice, and help defeat racism in the Black diaspora, then Blackness can be read as neither biologically nor epistemologically fixed. It can be predetermined by neither white supremacist bias nor Black American struggle." Hall ultimately argues that we need for new strategies -- to interpret the moment, to posit a more fluid way of interpreting Blackness, to open more spaces for contestation over meanings, and make room for other appropriations.

**Chapter 17**

[[Placeholder: Sahara]]

((Aurana and Efyir swap childhood stories in the desert—

Inaccessible memory scene before the one in the desert - ;

accessible scene - father realizes Efyir had become a spoiled monster. “He tried to raise me to evade every single mistake he made in the first war on earth. But he only made me into a disaster of a soldier, and a disillusionment of a son. I sometimes think that my father would like to have used his blades on me as misericord.

-his is of some abusive interaction with his father, hers the death of a friend by her own hands, forced by another soldier))

“A low sweeping step left.” Aurana pressed the side of her human’s head against the floor, staring out at such an angle that it looked like the slope of a cavern. She tried not to look at the near-empty box on the other side of the room, the one that contained the useless pile of nodes and notches that were supposed to hold the ship together. There would be no further fixing. It could not be done. So now it was that she imagined her human’s face was melting into the cool of this floor, the last beacon of reasonable temperature. She remembered their last drink of water. It was hours before, but she relived the moment as though it were only moments prior. “Right hand over chest for blocking, left arm hooks with the sweep to thrust the *baton* angled towards your head.”

“I’ve leapt up to gain a higher angle,” he said. “Both arms crossed over to protect as I assess. The baton might catch my foot—”

“It misses,” Aurana said reasonably. “You jump too quickly for the short thrust I’d intended of that move.”

They were both quiet again as they calculated the next move in their minds. It was too hot to actually fight, but to sit and talk it out forced time forward, steadily, in a way that gave them the illusion of controlling the march of hours.

“When I land, I move forward with on large step of my left foot, both arms held steadily, my elbows at both sides of my ribs, towards the weapon,” Efyir finally said.

“I move toward you, to your right, with an upward thrust.”

“A hit. Right arm. Forceful but inconsequential.”

They were quiet again.

“The left foot follows through with the rightward turn, positioned away from you, the left shoulder against your attack.”

“

"You win." She said, sitting up suddenly.

"What?"

"Échec. I wasn’t expecting it. I was imagining you to attack from the left, from your dominant arm."

"Oh." He didn’t bother to hide the solid disappointment on his slate; leaned back down on the floor, bored again, and restless. The HUMmer rang steadily along. This time it was playing one that he had enjoyed many times before—a dulcet tone of what humans called a piano, with another instrument, air through reeds, that was *close* to the sound of the human singing voice but far enough away that Efyir actually enjoyed its sound. Between the lines, a soft brush keeping rhythm on brass. These *were* sounds he’d enjoyed. Now, though, in this 11th hour, he feared that they were the sounds he would die with, and realized he preferred silence to having a human song be the last he heard in the living realm.

“Can you stop that? The songs are beginning to be…” Efyir fumbled around with human sounds before giving up. “||*Endaithsu*: Damage-within-cycle.||”

“Oh!” Aurana said brightly. “Humans call it *played out*.“

“Okay, see? That. That right there,” he sat up again furiously, exhausting too much of his own energy, his face disrupted with weak cloudbursts, faint against his blanched, parched slate. “Come honest. There's no way you could know and could translate an obscure word like that without having Settled—”

She cut him off, simmering, “I told you, I have *never* Settled a Thhiyatkhoor. Besides, the word is not *that* obscure. It’s just that no one *talks* about getting cycle-damaged on Thhiyatkhoor music because it's so terrible.”

His eyes narrowed stubbornly. “Prove you haven't settled a Thhiyatkhoor.”

“Sure,” Aurana had calmed herself down again. Ana was laughing at her and El across the collective mind of Ks’ou and human, and that set Aurana at ease. “If you tell me about Routhhe.”

“Routhhe?! What about it?” He eyed her suspiciously, leaning back against his elbow, already longing for the cold of the floor.

“Nothing classified, obviously. I want to know what it looks like, like what you saw in your *opthastre* before we met. I want to know about its trees. And what you can see at night. And—” even he could hear her shining when she said this—“and its lagoons. I want to hear about its Ks'ou-less lagoons.”

“That's hardly telling you anything.” He leaned back fully again, letting silence settle between them, circle the air, and pass several times, before speaking again. “Fine. I'll tell you about those if you tell me about your *kyôsta*.”

“What do you care about *kyôsta*?” she scoffed.

“I don’t. But it should be even. Nothing classified, obviously.”

“Obviously. *Kyôsta* is mostly demilitarized by now in favor of *dostôn’iss’ett*,” she growled, but the force of these words weren’t meant for him. “Sure. I'll tell you about *kyôsta*, you tell me about Routhhe, then I'll explain to you my very legitimate reason why I know Endaithsu without ever having settled a Thhiyatkhoor.”

“Discourse, on your terms, as usual. We’ll die here,” he said it as though one coming to a sense of terms about his own finality. A sense of place.

“*You* won’t die here,” she said, but their eyes were closed.

They opened again after awhile. She stared up at the ceiling at first, hearing the hiss of one of the ship’s motors, the climate controller, no doubt, the lifeline that ensured, for the time being, that they would not roast inside this tiny ship that may become their mortal prison. She heard other sounds, as well, though she preferred not to. It reminded her of the Nation-crafted lagoons, not the natural ones, but those with the constant barrage of vibrations to the end of war. Her species could pick these up so easily, sound and language and feeling. After awhile, she wondered if he’d fallen asleep. She certainly felt the pull, but their most recent agreement had left her restless. She turned directly to Efyir, to find him staring at her—*them*, Ana and Aurana, Aurana in Ana’s body—with the cyan flecks of his Thhiyatkhoor eyes.

He continued to say nothing, so she scoffed, “You can pretend I’m the Aurana before, if it helps. The Aurana you thought was human.”

*That wasn’t the problem*, he’d wanted to say, but he kept his mouth shut.

“You complain about Earth trees enough,” she was prompting him, she knew, but for some reason this silence that had been so welcome before now infuriated her. “So talking about Routhhe trees shouldn’t be hard for you.”

It was precisely difficult. Not for the reasons she’d cited, but for others.

First, though the trees were so vivid in his mind, he could not help himself to the right words. Everything that sprang to mind seemed inadequate. The inadequacy was all his own, he knew. He could not *language* the right way, at the moment, and that was not language’s fault.

He could still try, and though he resented this new proposition between them, he could not hate it. Because it made him think beyond remembering. He thought of the way his own warrior’s uniform was stitched and pieced together by someone other than himself. He depended on it, though it was not he who made it, and so it was that he imagined himself stringing words together, words that were not his own, but from others past, and therefore could count as reasonable discourse:

“ROUTHHE is a planet with numerous trees. I come from the band region, the stretch of islands along the equator that nearly circles the planet. There are Thhiyatkhoor that live elsewhere, but the band is where the majority of us are, of all backgrounds, classes, and dignities.

Our trees are numerous, and obviously beautiful. They are all linked. It is said that no single tree stands alone—that even, there are trees whose branches stretch underwater, forming unity with Thhiyatkhoor across other lands, unity in arms.

Arms… well if you want to know why Routhhe trees are superior to trees on any other planet, it is because of that. Even the smallest branch, stretching out seemingly without purpose since no one can run across it, is itself linked to a root to another tree.”

He sounded bored, but Aurana wasn’t breathing. He hadn’t noticed as he kept talking, describing the particulars of the branches, an expansiveness that she couldn’t imagine. It’s what enabled them to tree-run, as though they are were all linked, infinitely pronged roads.

He describe the particulars of the leaves: some for medicinal purposes, some for eating, others for many useful things. You could always tell by their color, shape, and patterns. Easy, he’d said. *As easy for you to breathe underwater*, she’d wanted to say, but stayed quiet til now, for fear that anything she did to interrupt him would also interrupt the ease with which he spoke of his own planet, the ease by which he described the planet that once also belonged to Ks’ou.

The trunks of trees were like roadsigns for humans. Once you saw their shape, you knew what they were for. The ones so woven they looked like their knots hadn’t seen daylight in centuries—these were places of education. Others for government. Others for play. And still others for war preparation—

She couldn’t help it.

“What about for families?”

It wasn’t a Ks’ou question, or it shouldn’t have been. Ks’ou had no families and no concept of ‘the family’, it was known. A grey-white cloud covered him as he said, “That’s classified.”

“Okay.” { What’s his fucking deal?} {Leave it. } She listened eagerly, hoping the interruption wouldn’t destroy the moment.

He continued, a bit derailed. “You know a tree for its roots. The thicker the tree, the more important the matter to war. The thickest of our trees may take moments to climb. That is for politics and war, so that we may have time to think before we ascend. The thinner-branched trees are for those to educate, since we must educate all, of all ranks, regardless of birth status. And in between… yes. Playful trees. Hopeful trees. Trees that we can raze to set aside for families, which we knew and stayed away from.

“You asked about the lagoons. Well, the lagoon-centered ones need constant maintenance. That is certain. With so many of us with such great need in their leaves, yet the trees are dependent on lagoons for their own nourishment and thriving. It is so that we have those to toil in lagoons so that they may keep it filtered and clean, so that the trees may love—”

“And the sap.” She didn’t feel embarrassed, at having interrupted again. Because it caused a look on his slate, a babble of shine and hazy particles and flares, all moving quickly across his slate in succession. They moved over his arms, at first, always a sign of their import. And then, like a projection on a building (Ana was familiar with these), it centered on his chest, until it reached his boots and dissipated further.

He stopped talking. Let the silence pass.

He’d been thinking of more than the sap. Mites, for one. The small creatures latching on to the trees, feeding off its wealth and yet killing it at the same time.

He didn’t say this aloud, but he thought he did:

The mites were crawling through the interstices of the veins of the tree when offshoot-less Efyir questioned his father about it. They were wild, uncontrollable, stealing nutrients, necessary nutrients from the trees. Efyir moved his claw against one so that it came into contact with the sap. The mite struggled, as they all do in death, and then went still when the sap overtook it.

Efyir laughed.

Until he’d clenched his own claw against his jaw, where the affront had occurred. A stinging, a burning, a dust against his slate until his eyes locked with his father’s and then he knew—that this had been on purpose. That his father had intended for him to cry out, as he did. His father had struck him in the face.

It stung; the bones in his jaw seemed dis-aligned. Efyir stared at him, saying nothing, until he spoke—

“You cannot undo death. Do not ever laugh at what you have wrought. Even if it is against the enemy. Even if you believe it triumphant. Even if you know you have done well. Do not mock death—it attends to you, too.”

The offshootless Efyir watched the mite now, with different sensations. It was frozen in the amber of the tree and certainly gone. He had thought it only an inconsequential thing, and now his father was asking that he condescend to its worthlessness?

He reached forth and plucked the mite from the sap. It was too late; dead, but it was in the palm of his claws.

“F-father… I preserve this thought in its death.”

The General displayed his slate pleased.

*Aurana couldn’t tell what Efyir “looked” like in that moment. He displayed no marks on his skin, which was the only way to tell Thhiyatkhoor emotions. His skin was dark and blank, but in the moments between, just as she was wondering if sound would ever enter air and if so, what kinds of sound, just as the lull became long enough that should she have begun speaking, it would not have been rude—but because she had learn patience, and the command of quiet, she held her tongue—and so, just as seemed the night moved to excuse itself, he perhaps called it back to stay as he continued to speak:*

I had one offshoot when my father lied to me. When he told me, almost contemptuously, “*Jjohti…* this is a time of peace.”

“‘*Bethh…’* I’d said. I remember being constantly worried, even as a child. This was an early Human annular cycle—4 or 5 perhaps. The Thhiyatkhoor cycle has no word for this. We have *jyik = one without offshoots,* which I had just graduated from. It was so early on. I perhaps shouldn’t have this memory at all.

“||*Jjohti*,

*Listen to our heartbeat. Extend the reach of your naghryoja and listen as each of us clutches our weapon and aims it at you. Regard our movement, and it will reveal how to defeat us.||”*

A sudden movement, and then to Efyir’s *naghryoja* it seemed the entire atmosphere was alight with pinpricks of flame. He moved as swiftly as he could, dodging, to his own surprise, a few shots that even he thought he couldn’t. But his defeat was evident and inevitable: he collapsed on the ground, heaving. The shots were meant to disable him, not to kill him. They were designed to only lodge so deep.

“||You must always be ready.||” his father said as he drew closer to him. The sound of his disappointment resounded intentionally. Efyir’s daily trainings should have prepared him for this; he was, after all, no stranger to training. But to Efyir they seemed automated; rote. Boring.

Ready for what? He knew that Ndroiythh and others were off on a trip to the neighboring colonies. Perhaps enjoying themselves in the Island of 700 Mountains. And here he was, his blood pouring out to meet the dust.

He wanted to stop, but he couldn’t. So he continued to move, slowly, until the shots grew so numerous that even his *naghryoja* could no longer feel vibrations in the air.

\*\*\*

It was an old game, one that used to fascinate him but now one he didn’t really care for. Efyir sighed and lazily moved a *usd-green* piece to the left. He knew it would end him. The simulacra confirmed his failure a few moves later.

“||Pay attention,||” Dreshigh commanded.

Efyir looked sullenly across the simulacra lights: yellow dots supposed to represent key planets, green to represent Thhiyatkhoor battleships, and aqua blue, the color that represented the enemy. Efyir didn’t think words were necessary to respond to Dreshigh, here. Behind him, the physician was pressing his claws against the holes across Efyir’s arms and legs a little too roughly and he was pretending not to feel anything by forcing his slate into uneven, chaotic patterns.

As if sensing Efyir’s verbal response, Dreshigh said, “||When your *physical* material is in need of repair, it is an opportune time to improve your *mental* material.||”

Efyir did as he was told. He couldn’t do too much else. His father was off training others and he had only a few days allowed for recovery before he would be expected to do the war routine again.

Shift. Shift. End.

Shift. Shift. End.

Dreshigh made a loud, impatient sound. “||You aren’t even *trying*, *jobahti.*||”

Efyir suddenly slammed his fist into the simulacra. Pieces shattered against the floor in a shimmer of defiance. Efyir remembered how it covered his boots in a coating of light dust, and one of the pieces lay, glowing blue, in the far corner of the room. “||*You have no right to call me that.*||” Dreshigh was silent. His slate was blank, and dead, as Efyir spoke. Such it was that Efyir finally looked directly at him and said, “||*You* aren’t my father’s *ekhair*.||”

The physician had stopped temporarily, his hands hovering over the wounds on Efyir’s legs. Efyir stood up defiantly, shuddering only slightly at the unbalanced flow of blood.

“||True.||” Dreshigh snapped, after a moment. “||And yet, as your father’s *eghir,* I must be prepared for all situations. Unlike you, I do not anticipate the future lightly. Shut up and complete the modules.*||”*

Efyir was reeling, and he let it show. But what could he do? Dreshigh was his father’s second in command, *and*, as a further blow, his *eghir*. Designated as the next in line for *ekhair*, he held jurisdiction over Efyir until he had healed from the wounds his father had inflicted. He tried to suppress the sense of shame that washed over him.

There was something in Dreshigh’s voice that seemed to betray compassion. But Efyir had heard enough stories about Dreshigh’s tactics by then not to trust it, “||Understand, *Ebafyir*. You live in a time of *excessive peace*. Your father is doing everything in his power to ensure you don’t fall prey to laziness.”

Efyir lowered his head, just as the physician returned to his work and found a knot in his muscles that was so twisted, it caused him great pain for it to be rebound by the physician’s claws. But though he could not make a sound, he displayed an angry hash across his body, and made no effort to suppress it.

Efyir said these words: “||You are not my father’s *ekhair*. And yet you stand by his doctrines.||” His eyes were closed now, and the physician was offering to put a small cloth over Efyir’s *naghryoja* so that he would not feel the full intensity of this next part. He was too afraid to press further; too afraid to ask even why his father’s *ekhair* was so unknown, an absent figure so present that Efyir sometimes heard about the bizarre mystery in whispered speculations from his father’s less prudent soldiers.

Dreshigh made a sound of disapproval by flicking his tongue against his teeth. It was not appropriate for Efyir to be accusing him this way. “||I do not fully know or understand your father’s plans. Nonetheless, I am to care for you as he would, which is what I am doing now. Complete the simulation, Efyir, and stop presuming that there is no threat or war. You are *spoiled*. Your father and I will correct this.||”

At this Efyir pulled the small cloth from his head and threw it on the ground. “||You are dismissed,||” he hissed to the physician. He didn’t know what he was doing, and his upper bladed arm rang with a dull pain that was soothed by his anger. The physician’s hands trembled, he looked from Efyir to Dreshigh uncertainly.

“||You will *not* leave,||” Dreshigh commanded. Then, to the physician, “||Finish the treatment. His father has commanded it.||”

“||Touch me and I will inspire regret,||” Efyir hissed in response. The poor trembling physician attempted to move to fulfill Dreshigh’s orders. Then, looking back and forth between the two, hoisted his decrepit arm blade up. He stood, as though paralyzed, like a child caught in the uppermost branch of a tree too high for him. “||As the General’s son I order you. This lowly soldier is *only* my father’s *eghir.* He holds no jurisdiction over me, therefore, nor does he hold power over you.||”

The physician chose not to say anything, but packed up his tools and soothes as quietly and quickly as he could. Dreshigh sputtered a bit but ultimately chose to say no more. There was nothing that could be said—or so Efyir thought. When the physician left he glared at Efyir, angry eyelets across his slate, and then so dared to put his claws against Efyir’s back.

“||Off of me!||” Efyir hissed, but he was small, so small, and could barely strain against Dreshigh’s physical might.

“||Your father ordered that you be healed in time for the next routine. He did not ordain how. So it is up to me to complete what you ordered the physician away from. I am not skilled in this and will leave scars.||” Dreshigh’s claws pressed against Efyir’s slate. He winced but did not display on his slate his reaction to the blinding pain. The cloth was at their feet; it would not be used to ease any of the sensation that Efyir felt.

“||This is for your good, Efyir. Because we care for you and desire only your prosperity,||” Dreshigh said. Then, deliberately, Efyir knew, Dreshigh twisted his claws into the center muscle of a shot, a lesson intended for him, to stay his disobedience. “||This is not about your father’s will, nor mine. This is for the will of Thhiyatkhoor kind, and your duty to us.||”

\*\*\*

((Another run of the simulation))

Panting, he was muttering, “||*Bethhi*.. I can’t.||”

His father relented, sent the command for the soldiers to put down the weapons aimed at his son. “||Keep your face to the ground||,” he commanded. Efyir couldn’t do much else; he could hear his father’s approach, and shook.

His voice was so low, Efyir didn't know if the other soldiers could hear him. All he knew was that he could hear his father clearly. “||When we were caught off guard by a surprise attack and I watched Aletheia die, I couldn't, either. Or so I believed—

“||—Tomorrow,||” he said as interrupted himself, and began to pull his bladed arm across his son's back, evenly, not relenting or hesitating as his son's muffled screams rang through the ground.

When it was done, the word *baba* slipped from Efyir's tongue. The word had been on his mind for days now, but he didn't remember what the word even meant and couldn't remember where it even came from.

His father did not respond to this. He waited until Efyir's whimpering had died down before he spoke these next words. “||You will remember what failure has earned you. Today, you say you can't. *Ay-dagh*, I assure you, you will.||”

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—

Unforgiving.

That is what everyone calls it.

My space, my home, my lagoon. Unforgiving.

And yet, *life.* Beyond anyone’s imagination.

“There is more life than anywhere else—” is what creatures say about our terrible planet.

We are in what are called lagoons, but this word has perhaps been mistranslated. A fjord, maybe. Or, a strait.”

Food and mating are not all that compels us.

Time moves slowly, down here.

Slowly, but it moves.

The pressure is intense, they say.

Not like war.

—

My first friend is named *Sfht*.

He did not have eyes. We Ks'ou don't have eyes. Eyes are a human thing, just like *naghryoja* are a Thhiyatkhoor thing. Sight is a privilege of many species, not of Ks'ou.

We do not have eyes. But we have resonations. This is perhaps better than eyes.

*Sfht*… was a quiet name. Graceful. Whispers. He lived in the lagoon next to mine, joined by a single tunnel. For Ks'ou, a single tunnel meant that you were related, but not by much. Like second cousins for humans. But different--I cannot explain how.

Nonetheless.

Sfht and I would meet one another daily, chase one another, engage in some competition or exploration. We were in our home. When Sfht sent pulses about his opinions, I sent pulses back. That is how Ks'ou know each other: you cannot easily hide from pulses, which communicate loud and soft.

It’s not easy to read the true depth of everyone’s resonances, just like humans cannot discern rightly all facial expressions from their own, Yet I could read his. Sfht was genuine, and loved our waters. He loved *kyôsta*, even when we learned we weren't supposed to be in it, that we all were supposed to be on Routhhe, and that this planet that we refused to give a name was inferior, in so many ways, to it. He still loved every rock in it.

The Nation does not tolerate such feelings.

All that we thought we knew.

—

This is a memory that Efyir no longer had access to. Some memories lie dormant, retrievable in such small wisps that they are almost meaningless.

The memory, like fiber, was every bit alive as his mind. But he could not reach it. Perhaps the mind will earn them back when the body is finally shed—an interesting, but ultimately unprovable, theory.

His memories would, as always, include his father.

“*Baba*?”

“||Yes. *Baba!*||”

Efyir repeated it, erupting in laughter each time. “||*Baba* is a funny word.||”

“||There are many,||” *bethhi* said brightly. He was on a few branches below Efyir, but his voice rang clear in the quiet night. This was the closest his father had ever sat next to him on the tree, and the young Efyir, nascent in his cycle of *jyik—*his *naghryoja* finally growing, slowly, but steadily, in small peaks from his head—relished in it. *Bethhi* continued, “||Here are more: Papa. Père. Father. Abba.||”

“||The humans have *lots* of words for one person.||”

“||They have many languages. Too many to know what to do with.||”

“||Too many,||” Efyir repeated. “||*Baba*. I want to go!||”

It was one of those Routhhe nights percolated by stars and thriving nocturnals. Efyir’s sister and mother were off doing something else; his young mind didn’t know, or care, what. All it meant was that his father’s attention had been entirely on him and that suited him well. *Bethhi* said these next words clearly, articulating each sound. “||You have been. You were born there.||”

“||Bo-orrrrn. Baba and born!||” His voice sang, which dispelled into laughter, again. He did not notice the unsettled rhizomes that swept over his father’s slate in the branches below. His face was still round, but his eyes were serious, and his *naghryoja,* the feature that his father was most proud of, growing strong. “||Earth? That is funny, *bethhi*.||” At the time, he’d thought it was a joke. So he played along.

His father was silent for a long time after these words, so the young Efyir took this time to look up at the stars and see, from his *naghryoja*, the beating of wings from branches further away, nocturnals on the hunt for their evening breakfast. Births and deaths were important stories, surely, but not as important as the in-between, his father had decided.

“||It is a time of peace, Efyir||,” his father finally said. “||Or so I thought was ensured before you were born. Everyone that mattered to me was there. And yet, when the Ks’ou struck nearby and your mother went into labor, I knew that I had failed you all.

“Tomorrow you begin your training. I hope you will one day understand, *jobahti,* why this must be done so early.||*”*

*“Baba*,” Efyir teased again, but the sound tittered on the edge—he was being clutched by sleep quickly. “||Tell me an Earth story.||”

His father decided that this would be of no harm. Besides, he had already told his son many stories of Earth, battle stories, great stories of the defeat of the Ks’ou Nation. This one was only a pivot in difference, “||A young boy once fell to Earth as a fire stone. He had only one branch on his *naghryoja*, and little training or knowledge of the ways of war because he had not reached of age in that time. The boy, and his pilot, had ventured too far to the edge, lost their way, and found it again in the humans.

“It was a human named Malcolm who found him first, on the edge of the woods. The boy was confused, broken, afraid, and unable to speak any human language. This was before the time that humans knew of such creatures as Thhiyatkhoor, or Besh, … or even *Ks’ou*.||”

“||They knew *nothing*?||” Efyir marveled.

“||The humans were galaxy infants. *We* were once galaxy children, as well, a long time ago. Shall I continue?||”

“||Yes.||”

“||The boy who fell to Earth was *zilaa*. Not of Earth. But there was no term for that back then—or rather, inadequate terms. Nor did *living fakes* exist. The boy could not leave the forest, lest he be discovered. So Malcolm the human cared for both the young boy and his pilot until they were healed. But their ship could not be repaired. And then… *war came to them*. The boy realized he could not leave. Not because he was part of a long lineage of war-born, though that was certainly the case. But because he had grown to love the human. The boy had shown the human how to discern the air, how to climb. And the human showed the boy his planet, how to scale rocks, to dive.

And even better, they showed each other how to fight. The boy could use his arm blades, growing sharp and strong with each day. And the human used his fists, his legs, and even his *head* once, to fight.||”

“||His head?!||”

“||Humans have no *naghryoja*. You don’t remember this last time you were there. But their heads curve soft, so they can use it to perform what is called a headbutt.||”

This was another ridiculous word for Efyir. Too tired to laugh, he yawned instead. He waited until it ended, hoping his father hadn’t noticed, seeming so far and so close on the branch below, so that he could ask his next question: “||And… my born?||”

“||Yes. Your birth.||” his father said firmly. He didn’t perceive himself as talking directly to Efyir at the moment. He was talking to himself; or no one at all. Such it was that the words could ease out of him smoothly, as though intended for the warm night air all along.

“||My pilot—you remember, her name was Qay—as well as your mother, and I were on Earth visiting Kahti. And others. We had your sister remain on Routhhe, for what reason I do not remember. It was a slight risk to travel so near to your birthing moment, but it shouldn’t have been a problem.

When

Efyir was falling asleep. He mumbled, “||We go back.||”

“||For as long as we can,||” his father assured.

—

“And what about your mother?”

“What?” Efyir blinked. The memory was washing away. He couldn’t believe he had been speaking for this long. And the vividness memory made the scenery around him feel all the more shocking. Who knew, *who knew?*, that the son of a great Thhiyatkhoor General might perish on the very Earth soil where he was born. Not in the midst of battle. Not in a forest. But on the tail end of a skirmish that he’d lost, in direct disobedience to his father’s orders to simply *collect data*, with no evidence of how his demise, came about, among piles and piles of ground-up rocks and not a single tree—even an ugly one—in sight. Next to a *Ks’ou*, of all creatures. Would a human find his bones in this sand hundreds of years from now and solve a great mystery? No, he couldn’t die here, he vowed. Whatever it took. He would find his way back to Jacque, who must be terrified, now, at their disappearance.

Aurana had kept talking, as though to bring him to present rather than future perishing. He murmured a reply that revealed he hadn’t been listening at all, so she repeated herself, “Ana has noted that you never talk about your mother. Nothing positive or negative. I know none of this—of parents—but Ana says surely she must have been formative. You have nothing to say about her?”

Efyir winced. “My mother is my mother.” That was all he could say. Aurana surveyed him quietly and then looked back out at the desert. If she squinted it almost seemed as though the merciless sun was about to begin to set. There would be no further discourse there.

—

He held the opthastre up to her. They were going to die, he’d decided, and so it was of little consequence. She took it and clutched it with an embarrassing avidity; she noticed this at least and mumbled a *sorry* under her breath, never letting her grip waiver.

“*kyôsta* never felt like home,” she said after a few moments. “Though I was born there.”

A fast-moving haze of rhizomes and chalk moved over Efyir’s slate. *Routhhe* wasthe place of his childhood. It didn’t feel that way, either. But he did not say this. Instead he said, “War does not tolerate *kyôsta.”*

(AUrana will tell him how she knows Thhiyatkhoor so well, but in several different languages)

Meanwhile: Jacque proving herself capable:

“I know you’re symbiotes. And I need your help.” ((They’ll find them but will ‘wait’ to strike))

—

Sahara

“You never minded that I lied about being zilaa,” she said mockingly. “You just wanted to continue discourse with someone who would listen to you.”

“Not with a Ks’ou,” he breathed. “If I had known… it wouldn’t have happened.”

“So what is this, now?” she asked, sharply. “Is *this* discourse?”

He looked at her, a thousand patterns washing over his slate at once.

—

For the first time they felt the collective sting that came from realizing the utter hopelessness of their own agency. They had both always believed themselves to have wills--anyone who speaks “I” does, after all.

The will exists, of course. But War checks the will. War, they realized, with a foolish reticence at the obvious, was being done to them. Everywhere and no where, it held them hostage in broad daylight.

And yet, war done to them was also a place for them to do war in return. Tiny effusions done because of what was done to them. Agencies turning like stones in the light; does not transform them as they are, but makes them think they shine more than they do.

Efyir thought of, at the moment, one of the examinations he’d had to pass in order to earn one of his ranks, surpassing his former *ekhair*, Ndroithh, which he realized now was tainted by an unrepressed envy that he'd been too aloof to see.

The test was this: determine, by a set of twisted tree branches recently broken at each end, if those branches shared a root or were two completely separate entities.

It was a test that many did not pass, because it was hard to discern if a treebranch was tied up in another out of circumstance or out of origin. Still, Efyir could discern subtle differences. Clues might be a jarring turn of an internal vein, a ring against a perpendicular fiber, or even a subtle smell--a difference in dampness between one root and another.

Basic soldiers kept themselves so busy that they could not separate the vines from the tree: so entangled, to even suggest the vine and tree to be two entities would be as wild as to suggest that skies were oceans.

Impulsive warriors might know, but did not care--and why should they? They followed orders and that was that. If their leader was foolish, it was of no consequence. At the end of the day, they were conducting the good work they believed in, and died in the abundant heat of chaos.

*Good* soldiers were only slightly different. They followed the line to the extent that the line lead them to victory. If it was substantively different, they may make note of it, for future reference. It may effect them, or it may not. The personal long-term was their only concern.

But *leaders*--as Efyir was expected to be--must follow the line to its very dire end. Even if it meant undoing the mission entirely. Even if it meant that he was wrong. And he was. All of his learning, all of his training, though good, was twisted to the wrong root.

This desert pause—a desert mortality—was the thread that began Efyir's undoing.

*It was a mistake,* Efyir thought, *for my father to ground me here on Earth*. He could see the fool that his father was, finally, the fool that everyone except Efyir seem to see in such bright obviousness, a knowledge which he’d staved off for too long, from a son who loved his father, a son who wanted to be—and, yet, not.

Perhaps this was unfair.

*Fairness has nothing to do with truth.*

Efyir was sent here, he knew, so that he could long for the peace that should have been reigning on Earth. A peace that the Thhiyatkhoor considered to be their doing; a gift from a greater species to another. And in that peace, Efyir knew, he should have also seen the human disposition, the thankless demeanor as they lived their lives and continued colonizing one another—*colonizing their own species!*—as though all that mattered in the universe was profit, and historical memory was shoved into a guilded well.

—

[[Placeholder: Aurana is chided by the KLF]]

Aurana’s face was red. She murmured, “Ks’Sassi: ||*But Protocol \*. No one of any rank is to continue if they are found in contempt of the KLF.||”*

Captain Husna snapped, “||*You aren’t in contempt. You’ve simply made too many mistakes.*||”

Now Aurana was truly confused. “||*N-no. You should be sentencing me to death. This isn’t right.*||”

The captain grimaced impatiently. “||*We’re not the Nation, child. You’re embarrassing yourself. You are limited in your knowledge. You know not of the substance of what you study. You and your human symbiote are being given life. Go live it beyond the war.||*”

Oh, she despised this. These words crushed her more than she would admit. Not only because she had never perceived of life outside of war, though this was the problem. It was also that she had failed to understand something so fundamental about the KLF. So certain was she that the KLF simply executed anyone found in contempt, she had never considered that they might simply… sever ties. Such protocol was foreign.

It made sense, perhaps. In its structure she knew too few KLF members for it to really matter. NeVarr was the only one immediately implicated. A Ks’ou of Husna’s ranking would no longer be required to go anywhere near the Nation; she and her crew had their own *hethalu* clone, and would not venture near the Underground. Her defiance was open.

—

“Racism will disappear when it’s, (A), no longer profitable and no longer psychologically useful. When that happens, it’ll be gone. But at the moment, people make a lot of money off of it ― pro and con. And also it protects people from a certain kind of pain. If you take racism away from certain people ― I mean vitriolic racists as well as the sort of social racist ― if you take that away, they might have to face something really terrible: misery, self-misery, and deep pain about who they are. It’s just easier to say, ‘That one over there is the cause of all my problems.’” Toni Morrison

**“18.** All warfare is based on deception.

**19.** Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must seem inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near.

**20.** Hold out baits to entice the enemy. Feign disorder, and crush him.

**21.** If he is secure at all points, be prepared for him. If he is in superior strength, evade him.

**22.** If your opponent is of choleric temper, seek to irritate him. Pretend to be weak, that he may grow arrogant.

**23.** If he is taking his ease, give him no rest. If his forces are united, separate them.

**24.** Attack him where he is unprepared, appear where you are not expected.

**25.** These military devices, leading to victory, must not be divulged beforehand. “

-Sun Tzu, the Art of War

[[Placeholder: Efyir’s Father’s death]]

1. Reference lost. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Wolfe, Patrick. “Comparing Colonial and Racial Regimes.” 2013 lecture. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwj5bcLG8ic> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *zilaa:* Non-Earther (a term from Izlaa, the Universal language) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Guampedia, entry Hagåtña <https://www.guampedia.com/hagatna/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “We are not statues of salt to be dissolved by rain!” See Simone Schwartz-Bart, *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle  
   —*With thanks from the author to my colleague Rashana Lydner for the Hatian Kréol translations. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Baldwin, J. “White Man’s Guilt.” Ebony Magazine, 1965.   
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   Peck, R., Baldwin, J., Grellety, R., Aigui, A., Jackson, S. L., Deluxe, S., & Barbéris, M. H. (2017). I am not your Negro. Altitude. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Slang for reprobate [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Wynter, S. “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument.” (2003) Coloniality’s Persistence. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. kyôsta-fs: literally, home-born; designates those born on the Ks'ou planet, which has no official name. Opposed with dostôn-fs [ship-born] [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *dostôn-fs* (Ks’Sassi)⁠: ship-born [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Story/history/knowledge (synonym for xte) (Ks’sassi) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Kwa Ks'sassi):* Expression of annoyance, exasperation (Ks’sassi) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. You tire me. (Ks’sassi) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Wolfe, P. (2016). Traces of history: Elementary structures of race. Verso Books. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Giovanni, Nikki. “Poets,” <http://www.depoetry.com/poets/201303/06_nikki_giovanni.html#Anchor-poets-14210> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Literally, light-no-war; figuratively, light-without-war, a light lit in peace. A friend, but someone who hasn’t fought alongside you in war. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Literally, light-with-war. A friend who fought directly beside you in a war. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Bookmark—this species will become deeply relevant later. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Bell, Derrick, “Space Traders” in Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Race. New York: Basic Books, 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Renan, Ernest. “La reforme intellectuelle et morale de la France.” p. 141 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Fanon (2004) p. 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Expression of awe; loanword from Ks’Sassi and adopted, with reluctance, into the Human Standard English dictionary in 5 PsKE [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Finkelman, P. (Ed.). (2006). Encyclopedia of African American History, 1619-1895: From the Colonial Period to the Age of Frederick Douglass Three-volume Set (Vol. 3). Oxford University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Griffith, D.W. “The Birth of a Nation.” [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ross, Kristin. Fast cars, clean bodies: Decolonization and the reordering of French culture. MIT press, 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. A massacre which targeted Hatians in the Dominican Republic. See Danticat, Edwidge. The Farming of Bones: A Novel. Soho Press, 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See Dove, Rita. “Parsley” from Museum. Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 1983. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Home [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Stream of curse words (Ks’Sassi) [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Sun plus (Ks’Sassi) [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Sun less (Ks’Sassi) [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Control this thing! (Ks’sassi) [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Truly/in fact (Ks’sassi) [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Everyone likes to think they speak kréol. No one wants to know it deeply. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. It is done. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Fanon, “The colonist and the colonizer are old acquaintances.” (trans. Philcox, 2) [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Intett: A corpulent creature with sixteen mouths. Their invitations to other species for dinner often go declined. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ngnang, “In Praise of the Alphabet,” 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Well… Father (of mine) [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Danticat, E. (1998). The Farming of Bones: A Novel. Soho Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Lagoons; where Ks’ou reside (Ks’sassi) [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. uht - the first level of education for a Thhiyatkhoor (like primary school) (Endaithsu) [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Teacher (Ks’sassi) [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Fanon, “The colonist and the colonized are old acquaintances.” (trans. Philcox, 2) [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. War-Toy (Endaithsu) [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Curse word (Endaithsu) [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Ks’ou transporter ship [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Tomorrow night? [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. You cannot live for yourself [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. You could even bring that boy. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. You’re living under the same roof. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. It’s a common paternal response. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Well, still. Bring him. Since you seem to like him enough to live with him [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. *daoud-ad’sassi* [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Ks’Sassi for *ecru* [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Ks’Sassi for *pellucid place* [↑](#footnote-ref-57)