

**Note:** This is a draft of my new chapter in the ongoing story, The City. I'd really like to get your feedback on it, as well as on the previous chapters, as I continue to write.

Also, this story is inappropriate for young readers. If you're a young reader then you likely won't heed this warning, but at least do me a favor and feel bad about reading past this point. (Quite plausibly it isn't appropriate for any readers and you should all feel bad. But, hey, what did you expect given where you found it?)

### Chapter 3: Cycles

When Julia staggered back into the communal quarters, her breasts still dribbling isolated drops of opaque white on the clean cucumber floor, the tenders to either side of her were practically carrying her. They deposited her in the showers against a wall, and hit a button as they departed to bring down a torrent of warm water on the twitching exhausted woman.

The water trickling over her bare flesh was welcome. Long hours' worth of sweat and other grime clung to her body. But also at an inchoate psychological level Julia felt horribly dirty and in need of being cleansed. Warm rivulets comforted her abused flesh, matting her hair down and dripping off the ends of her still half-erect nipples. Around her scores of other women were also showering. Most, unlike her, had shed their remaining clothing at the door. Julia took no notice of them for a long while. She simply stood under the comforting flow barely moving her eyes closed.

Julia only made her way out of the showers, by now almost deserted, because the water flowing over her shut off of its own accord. Dripping, she wandered out into the assembly room. The housing pod was laid out in a clover-leaf arrangement: the assembly room was a central hub, behind it was the showers while the bunk room and the mess hall lay to either side.

The bunk room was dim and quiet, and to judge by the noise most of the women were in the opposite chamber. Julia turned in that direction. Within she was met with a bustle of activity. Rows of tables and benches akin to those in a school cafeteria were occupied by over a hundred women taking a meal. Voices came from all quarters. Julia felt somewhat bewildered and paused on the threshold taking in the scene. Her soaked underwear clung to her more-or-less transparently. (The fact that this barely solicited a second glance says much about the place.)

She was plucked from her stupor by Jacky, who walked up beside her and put a hand on her shoulder. "There you are. I looked for you. Come sit down."

Julia gratefully followed leaving a trail of wet footprints on the wooden floor. Jacky made her way to an end table where Torch and several women Julia didn't know already sat, Jacky gestured for her to sit and she slid in beside Torch who was eating hungrily.

"Ugh," Torch grunted, looking up, "you didn't dry off."

Julia shook her head dejectedly. "No," she agreed.

"There are blowers to the left of the door." Torch said. "Feels good too." She scooted a few inches further from her sopping bench mate.

Jacky pushed a few pieces of the stuff Torch was eating towards Julia. "You might want to eat something, honey." The substance offered looked like bars of grey-brown modeling clay.

"What is it?"

"We don't know," Jacky admitted. "It comes out of the dispenser kiosks over there just like this. I've heard *them* call it 'fill'."

Julia exhibited exactly no desire to put a stick of fill into her mouth.

"It's sort of like really dense tofu. It's not gross or anything. Anyhow, it's all we have to eat."

Julia still let the solid-looking sticks remain on the table in front of her.

"How was your first day?"

"It was horrible," Julia whimpered.

Jacky frowned sympathetically.

"What did they have you doing?" Torch inquired.

Julia didn't speak for a minute. Then her words all tumbled out at once, "They put me up on a wall and milked me like a cow," she wailed. "They'd just walk up and grope me! And then they'd sit there and drink the milk like it was normal!"

"Yea," Jacky said softly. "The first day is rough. But you made it through."

In a disorganized stream the chronicle of the day's seemingly unending ordeal poured out before her audience. After she'd realized what was going on, she'd had nothing to do but watch in dread as each new customer entered and selected some poor woman's rack to manhandle knowing that her own turn must soon come. Before long it had. A balding man in a drab tie selected her and, placing his flagon down beneath her dangling breasts, proceeded to milk first right then left. At his first unceremonious yank she'd let out a small shriek. The feeling of her tender flesh being thus grabbed and of milk spurting out of her were both deeply jarring. She intuited, perhaps from the silent endurance of most of the other woman, that she must keep quiet, so she tried to stifle the involuntary urge to cry out. But a string of whimpers and mewls had escaped her nonetheless as the man's grip tugged the liquid out of her.

After what seemed eons he'd finished and strolled away sipping his drink. But her outbursts had drawn looks and pointing from all quarters of the room. A small line formed in place of her single tormentor. For perhaps an hour subsequent there wasn't a single break in her ordeal as one pair of hands followed the other in assaulting her swollen glands until she hung exhausted from vain struggling and inexorable stimulation.

The balding man's attentions had, for its short duration, seemed like the depth of misery. But she soon discovered that his conduct was far from the worse for her. Some hands pinched and tugged at her by now very erect nipples. Others grasped her bosom without technique, clumsily kneading great handfuls of her undefended flesh and extracting only a few dribbles of milk. At times both of her breasts were clasped by a different set of eager digits.

She was humiliated beyond all description. Many of the men scarcely glanced at her face as if she were simply part of the bar equipment. But those whose gaze took all of her in would often make eye contact as they placidly filled their glasses and that was even worse. Further deepening the burning humiliation of this ordeal, there was an element of pleasure intimately mingled with the discomfort, alarm, and frustration. A hum of arousal which she did her best not to countenance soon crept into the background of her experience and never really went away. She kicked her concealed legs impotently in frustration. Even when nobody was mauling her, her nipples stood erect and proud, dribbling their contents onto the shelf below.

Every other woman shared essentially the same tribulation, and witnessing their degradation seemed to reflect her own back to her. Though even in the midst of things she's several times been stabbed by a pang of sympathy for one of the others. The redhead who had served the day's first customers had at one point become the focus of a pack of teenagers who'd entered together. While the staff was otherwise occupied, they formed a semi-circle and pushed one of their number forward. He was red faced and hesitant at first, but bolstered by his fellows he reached up and drew one tender pink nipples into his mouth. The woman's face was a picture of misery as this eighteen-year-old warmed to

his activity and showed off for his audience, his adolescent maw suckling first one bosom and then the other. She bucked furiously, but this only served to send some of her fiery curls into her eyes where she was powerless to remove them. Her tormentor tossed and blew. As her ordeal continued her face deepened in hue and she began audibly whimpering, but it was still some time before an aproned staff member barked at the kids. As the teenagers scattered guffawing the barman came over and wiped down the ends of the mistreated breasts.

And that there was pitiful Maryanne. When someone had finally set hands to her swollen torso the milk had gushed out in a geyserous discharge which sprayed all over the shelf and struck the man milking her. She'd let out a long shivering moan of comingled relief and misery. The man seemed amused by the spectacle and began pumping at the bursting mounds with gusto. From that point on, even when no pressure was being applied to her, milk simply flowed from Maryanne's conical chest. The bar tenders returned at intervals to clean up the mess. Given what Julia was feeling, she had no desire to imagine what the girl next to her was going through. At times Maryanne sounded genuinely grateful when a pair of hands clasped her leaking bust.

"And my...my swelled *even bigger* now," Julia concluded miserably. "They're producing milk! They turned me into a dairy cow!" She buried her head in her arms.

• • •

Lieutenant Kirs<sup>1</sup> scanned passing members of the crowd with an expert eye. If asked, he'd have had difficulty explaining what exactly he was looking for. When one has become good at spotting something very subtle it is often nearly impossible to explain what alerts one to its presence. One simply sees it. That was true here. It was something about the cast of a man's eyes, thought Kirs, something in the way they moved and focused. But that was surely just part of it. It was hard to put one's finger on.

There were those who didn't even bother trying to spot good candidates and just administered the test to as many as possible, pulling men off the street at random, stopping whatever passerby was interested with the offer of tokens. But the success rates were abysmally low. Out of the thousands of men who swarmed through the open sectors of the City each cycle only a tiny minority had any prospect of passing the test, much less the subsequent screening. And one could see at a glance that many were too absorbed in the enticements all around them to even heed the little oddity they'd be handed. Why waste so much time watching people vainly fiddle with the thing? Better to administer the test only where there was some hope of success.

The test itself was an ingenious piece of design on the part of the Shaperate, a spherical puzzle to which some would intuit a solution rapidly while others would experience an impenetrable enigma. These latter would manipulate its rings for a few moments and then toss the thing away as no path forward presented itself. Insight into the puzzle's obscure architecture directly correlated with a specific sort of alertness and conceptual power. In essence the puzzle could be used as a litmus test for the aptitude which might fit a dreamer for a position in the City.

Kirs and a handful of others were responsible for providing most of the men to entered the ranks of the city's various divisions. The need was constant, but generally small. Once induced into citizenship, men tended to remain long-term. And finding new citizens was far less pressing than slaking the constant thirst for female "visitors." That was the reason the latter was an edifice unto itself while the former was the purview of a few officers amongst the tenders.

---

<sup>1</sup> Pronounced "kIərz" and most definitely not, as was the irritating tendency of some who had only seen it written, like a nickname for a Kirsten.

Of course, it took virtually no effort at all to bring in the throngs of men who coursed through the City's open sectors each cycle. But most of the urge-producing masses had a consciousness of the world around them that, while entirely sufficient for their enjoyment of what the city had to offer, lacked the lucidity required by tender and archon alike. It wasn't that those who failed the test were stupid—it was simply that their consciousness wasn't where it needed to be.

Today Kirs had chosen open sector Rho-3. Rho was one of the sectors laid out for foot traffic in mimicry of an urban area, and he'd chosen a place in it where the throng tended to be thinner and less knockabout. He had selected a corner in the section nicknamed "bar end" a block of amusements that were all variations on the common bar theme. There was *Monument Valley*, a fairly conventional, though much heightened, breastaurant setting; *The Black Box*, an S/M experience; *Oktoberfests*, which catered to fantasies of frauleins bearing steins; *Swang*, a combination of class ambition with libido ala classic Playboy; *Lipstixxx*, a "lesbian bar" scenario; and *The Generous Cow*, where drinks were wrung from udders. Kirs watched the patrons come and go from the embellished facades and wondered, as he had before, if certain amusements were more likely than others to draw the particular sort of man he looked for.<sup>2</sup>

"Excuse me, sir. Would you like a few coins?" He stopped a bright-eyed young man in a Manchester United jersey who looked as if he hadn't shaved for a few days.

The man stepped away from the cluster he was walking with, "What's that?" He queried with a slight Irish accent.

"Two coins to try solving this puzzle, and ten more if you do it." Kirs offered. It seemed a little odd to entice with trivial sums rather than leading with, "Take this test and you could become one of the men that run this place." But a key tenant of the open sectors' management was that, to the greatest extent possible, operational infrastructure would be obscured. For the visitors the delights of the city just unfolded in a way that made perfect sense to dream logic. It was best that they should focus on the cake and not be distracted by its chef or his ingredients.

"Sure. I'd take twelve bob." He winked and held his hand out for the puzzle, then beckoned with the other for this two coins.

Pocketing the coins he stared at the sphere intently for a minute, spun a ring tentatively, then stared again before spinning another. After a long minute he grinned. "Ah, that's cute! The center spins on its own when you look thus." An instant later the top of the puzzle sprung open with a "sprong!"

"Indeed it does," replied Kirs, smiling in turn. "What's your name? I might know of some more opportunities for a gifted fellow like you."

"I'm Collin." The young man responded, "And you're not tryin' to welch on my fackin' coins, are you, mate?" He held out his palm.

• • •

Jacky did her best to comfort the new girl, though it was hard to know exactly what to say to her. She'd gotten through her first day without being driven to anything that earned demerits. That alone was a fortunate sign: it seemed like new women were especially likely to do something stupid in their first few days. Probably that was by design. They'd add to the impact of landing in the City the immediate punitive reassignment or two. Avoiding that was good.

---

<sup>2</sup> In the euphemisms of the City a recruited female is a "guest" while a visiting male is a "patron" or a "visitor".

From Jacky's point of view Julia's ordeal simply didn't seem so dire. There was a time when it would have seemed so, but that time was beginning to feel far off. Jacky had been in the City a long while. She had been there for more cycles than anybody else in her housing pod. And in that time her perspective had developed. How could it not? Yes, being serially fondled in light bondage was still unpleasant, but it was far from the worst fate one could find oneself enduring.

Still she offered Julia a sympathetic ear and tried to raise her spirits. She felt some obligation to try and take care of the new ones, to ease their transition a bit. The other girls Julia had seen at the table, Torch aside, were also fairly recent arrivals, though they'd been imprisoned for some cycles already. Regardless of whether you had the worst of it, this place was no vacation, Jacky reminded herself. And there was no way to really make them see things her way. "Just remind yourself that it's a dream, and you'll wake up eventually," she was just now saying for the benefit of her protégés.

"A dream?" queried Julia, apparently puzzled.

"This." Jacky gestured around the room, "this whole thing, is a dream." Had the young woman been so muddled she'd missed that?

Julia shook her head. "But... what does that mean? This is my dream?"

"Not yours, I don't think. But somebody's dream that you're having. Point is, it isn't really real."

"But how is that possible?"

"I don't know. But it is a dream. They told you in your orientation. And think about it, you must have kind of known: you're upset right now. But if you'd really been enslaved, surgically altered, and then molested by a bunch of guys wouldn't you be *more* upset?"

Julia was very quiet for a while. "So none of this is real? It feels real."

"Well dreams do feel real when you're in 'em." Torch offered irritably.

"So...so I'll wake up sometime soon and then all of this will go away?" Julia's face brightened at this prospect for the first time.

"No, honey, I wish." Jacky replied ruefully. "You've already woken up once and you're still here."

"What do you mean? I don't remember waking up?" Just as the grotesqueness of the last few days had begun to form itself into something she could wrap her mind around it collapsed back into a confused heap.

"You know when you were out cold after being changed, processed?"

Julia nodded.

"You were probably awake in there. You had a normal day, fed your cat, went back to bed, and then woke up here."

"But...but I don't remember any of that."

"No, and you won't. They do some trick on your memory so that what you remember of being here and memories of being awake are kept separate." Every once in a while a stray memory did seem to get through though without rhyme or reason. Some cycles prior Jacky had suddenly had a vivid mental image of herself eating a Romaine salad. Nothing else. Just a flash of shoveling leaves into her mouth with a salad fork. No context, no memory of when it had happened. "If it happens after you came here then you won't remember it."

"I mean think: thousands of women end up here, don't you think some of them would post about it on the internet or something? Maybe try to find the people that did this to them?"

When they'd first brought Jacky in she'd had a somewhat different introduction to the city from most other women, likely because of how she'd been snared. They brought her into a posh looking conference room and matter-of-factly explaining to her in careful detail about her long outstanding

debt, and exactly how the collateral was finally being collected. As they'd done it, they'd stripped her bare and then forced her to do a jumping jacks.

Trembling with rage she'd promised that the instant she woke up she'd find every last one of them, and their friends, and light them on fire. She knew where the paper trail started. And she would tell everyone. They'd simply laughed. "No, you won't," one said, "you'll never be motivated to investigate." Then they'd explained the "memory lock" that rendered her shouted threats impotent. "We could," one concluded as a final dagger twist, "each write our names and contact information on your naked body right now and still never hear anything further about it." He made a writing motion with his finger pointing at her belly.

"It's like there are two of you living two lives." A new voice offered quietly. It was Angelique, a skinny, ivory-skinned woman who had been a graduate student of some kind. "One of you is living your free life up in the real world, and one of you is locked down here. And the two can't really talk to each other."

"So it's not real, but it seems real and there's no way out." Julia hazarded.

"Exactly," said Torch. "It sucks ass."

"You will get out eventually, when your visit is over," Jacky corrected wistfully.

• • •

Though it was almost impossible not to refer to them as 'days' there were no true days in the City. One of the few furnishings the women in a housing pod were permitted were clocks built into the walls of each room. These clocks had a single hand and were not divided into twelve hours. Instead, they looked more like a pie chart, mostly red with a black wedge at the top. This face represented a cycle. When the hand came out of the black section, Julia and the other women woke to begin their day. When the needle was crossing back into the black she must be in her bunk at night. The time in between was subdivided into a long portion for work and a small one in which the women were locked inside their pod. This was the pattern of every cycle: wake, labor, return, have a shower and a meal followed by occupying themselves for a while before re-entering the bunk.<sup>3</sup>

Have you noticed how you can have a rather elaborate dream in a few minutes of dozing? Or how time seems to slow to a crawl when something is going horribly wrong? Subjective time is not as closely tethered to objective time as we sometimes suppose, and the builders of the city made systematic use of this fact. Subjectively, the part of a cycle the women were conscious for lasted about 9 hours. Objectively these 540 minutes of activity had been compressed into far fewer actual minutes.

As Julia sat with her new companions the present cycle was drawing to a close. Presently someone would point out that they should get into their bunks. Julia would find this a good deal more awkward than the night before due to being fully alert this time. True, lying prone with her udders dangling beneath her caused less discomfort than lying either on top of them or below them, but it also made her feel like an obscene piñata. Yet this aversion would make no difference. At a certain point everybody in the bunk room would pass from consciousness to unconsciousness as rapidly as they had done the opposite at the cycle's start.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> The clocks a shaper would have looked at was rather more elaborate, as was the daily routine. But the women in the pod lacked occasion to observe this.

<sup>4</sup> Women who weren't in bed by the proper time could only keep their eyes open for a short while. If they were unable or disinclined to sprint to a bunk then they would collapse where they stood and possibly wake to fresh demerits.

• • •

So the wheel began to turn for Julia. She'd be trundled off to the *Generous Cow* each morning, where she'd endure a day of indignity. Each night she'd be locked back in the confines of her pod, a world only four rooms large.

Her shock at all this began to fade, but her intense loathing did not. Her hours on the wall felt endless, even more so because once the initial shock had receded a certain tedium became a defining feature of her experience. This only served to make the involuntary stimulation of her bosom more salient, but also left her grasping at anything else that could hold her attention. Her mount severely restricted what she could see, but in due course she had minutely studied everyone and everything in that field of vision. She knew the major knots in the woodgrain of nearby tables. She began to notice patterns in the sea of male faces: some of the other ladies had regular fondlers, bar regulars who seemed to prefer a particular pair of tits to any others. It did not take long to acquire some of her own. It was a compliment she would have done much not to receive. She learned each face, each pair of nipples, and how the expression on that face would change when those nipples were squeezed. Her fellow "cows" were quite varied in appearance and shape, notwithstanding that all bore monstrous breasts.

Maryanne calmed somewhat as their disastrous first encounter—for which Julia whispered profuse apology—receded into the past. She would answer questions and exchange what brief syllables they could. One morning a dark beauty with the pixy cut and enormous areolae was blindfolded along with her morning shot so that every pair of hands that assaulted her that day came as a surprise in the dark. Asked about this Maryanne explained that Quinton, the thin man who administered the injections, discomfited the immobilized women at whim. "He's a mean little fuck-head," she'd whispered, "and if you look at him wrong he'll find a way to make your day more miserable. He might even put you in the mirrored box." An approaching bartender had kept Julia from finding out what the mirrored box was. The next day the unfortunate object of Quinton's whim had a real cowbell dangling from her neck. Her every involuntary twitch and quiver produced jangling.

At the end of the day Julia would be escorted wearily back to her pod, hair matted with sweat, nipples tingling from over-stimulation. She'd shower, eat sparingly of the tasteless matter provided, and pass some time before bed. It might seem unlikely, but it took her three cycles to realize that there were no bathrooms in the pod. Jacky explained that nobody seemed to need them.

She felt fortunate that Jacky had taken her under her wing. The older woman seemed to know the ropes, such as they were, and to take more interest in her than most. Having even just one or two friendly faces to seek out at the end of the day made all the difference. In a place like this one made fast friends.

Obviously the others had their own daily ordeals, and she came to know them just as they knew hers. Torch, it seemed, was a perpetual contestant in a sort of rough fetish athletic competition. Angelique waited tables in an elegant club, her tiny frilled uniform concealing nothing of interest. In waking she'd waited tables on and off for years as a way of paying for her humanities degree, and once commented pensively that she was, in a sense, less meanly treated here than in waking. "So many customers seemed to despise me as a person. Here, I'm naked, but they're much more polite." Of course, when working for tips at *Perkins* she had sat on fewer laps.

Jacky said the least about what occupied her days. She seemed anxious not to dwell on it. By her description she was a "dom" but she added very little about what this entailed. She did mention the

odium of her outfit though, which apparently included a harsh corset and thigh-high boots with preposterous heels.

None in the small circle had been visibly reshaped to the extent Julia had, though they had all been altered. The curves of Jacky's olive-skinned figure had been accentuated strikingly, though not beyond plausibility. Torch found herself more resistant to pain than it had been, her voice changed, and her haunches widened. "And my name," she added, "I wasn't born 'Torch'."

Julia was startled. Everybody, including Torch herself, used the name. Why employ it here if it was something they'd forced on her? "What's your real name?" she asked.

"I don't fucking know." Torch answered. "It's not like they just said, 'your name is Torch now'. I came back from processing and the place in my head my name should be in was filled with 'Torch'."

"You think that's bad?" interjected another woman seeing the perturbed look on Julia's face. "A girl I see sometimes had her name changed to 'Titsy' for misbehaving. She answers to it and everything."

Julia found herself wondering whether Jigglibits had been forced to answer to that name even from herself. The thought was unsettling at a very deep level.

Within the broader population of the pod Julia was very far from being the only one who might complain that her body had been rendered ridiculous. At least her breasts looked like something that grew there—several women's ballooning chests were obviously *supposed* to look fake. But there were stranger things. Elaborate hairdos and complex makeup seemed a permanent feature of some. Julia spoke to one woman who had an actual extra pair of breasts below her first, all 'real' in whatever sense that had here—they all delivered sensations to her brain. Another had eyes approaching the impossible dimensions of an anime character. And, at a distance, Julia had several times seen a woman whose panty seemed barely to contain a full afro sprouting from her lap.

• • •

Each day ended with a portion of time in which, his official duties completed, he was at liberty to enjoy the wonders of the City. Though truth be told, of late, he had done very little enjoying wonders. His eventual prize was ever before his eyes, and in service of it spare time tended to be subsumed by further work. There were methodological alterations to work on, and he refined and re-refined the set up in his recruiting suite. There was also, it had to be admitted, a workaholic tendency to turn to labor as balm for anxiety.

But tonight he felt at loose ends, worn out, and in need of something to lift his spirits. As he loitered in an airy exchange unsure where to go next, Kel's thoughts meandered back over recent events and frustrations. The battleax business woman who had been so condescending came to mind and, along with her, the tag he'd planted. Pulling out his pad he scanned his tags. Sure enough a recent one was labeled only "that bitch." Debra Keane's record came right up.

Apparently she'd been uncooperative right out of the gate—no surprise there—and had already undergone a disciplinary reassignment. He saw her current assignment and grinned. Perfect. Paying her a visit suddenly sounded like exactly the way he'd like to relax. He directed his steps to sector Rho-12.

Kel didn't rush. He followed back routs and took his time. The City was, at least relative to its own internal spatial orientation<sup>5</sup>, vertically stratified. At the top were the grand edifices, the Tower of the First Circle, the Shaperate Academy, the houses of archons and others who had spaces of their own. Beneath that broad thoroughfare and beautifully designed spaces housed the places of work and

---

<sup>5</sup> Of course there was no objective up in the somnole. The builders of the city had simply had to designate one arbitrarily.

residence for many of the lesser citizens. Kel's small apartment, embedded in a block of identical apartments, was on this level, as were foundries, training centers, the analytical cores, and so on. At the bottom limit of this portion, just above the open sectors, lay the Hierogamic Core itself. Bellow the open sectors was the realm of the tenders and, at the very bottom extremity, the many storage pods of the guest population.

Kel dropped down a transport shaft so that he could amble through the warren of transfer tunnels that underlay the open sectors. The constant traffic of the tenders moving equipment and women from where they were stored to where they were needed was tranquil compared to the crowds on the public streets above. He could also have taken the spacious, straightforward ways reserved for citizens, but tonight, somehow, picking his way through here seemed appealing. He took advantage of the time to anticipate the spicy sweetness of remaking "Ms. Kean's" acquaintance. He popped up to street level just next door to his destination so that he could enter through the front door.

Debra had first been assigned as a dancer, a roll, it seemed, she had staunchly refused to fulfill. Lewd gyration of her body for the enjoyment of others was not in keeping, perhaps, with her standing as an executive. Likely her mouth also had something to do with it. Her standing had not prevented her from being swiftly reassigned into a roll which called for a far less agency on her part. That was how Kel ended up in *Surface* for the first time. It was not at all the sort of place he'd ordinarily have sought. *Surface* had been designed to harvest urge from those harboring a niche fantasy, or, more accurately, several rather niche fantasies—and those fantasies had no intrinsic appeal to Kel.

Strolling in through the glass doors he found himself in a waiting area among a number of middle aged men trying to appear patient. The décor had clear orientalist elements but not overdone and combined with the sleek lines of modernism. A black samurai armor stood on a stand in one corner. Maroon upholstered benches rimmed the room. He strode up to a young host standing behind a sleek counter.

The host nodded in recognition of a fellow citizen. "What can I do for you?" he asked in a muted tone.

"I'd like a table, to myself if that's possible."

"Sure, we can do that." The host answered easily. Kel's heart beat faster. Rank in the city carried privilege in enjoying the delights of the public sectors. High rank could mean great latitude and substantial accommodation. But even at Kel's level small considerations could often be had when it wasn't too disruptive to the flow of operations.

"One more thing, can I get that table with this guest?" He held up his pad.

The other man grinned jovially. "You're in luck. She's not engaged right now. I'll have somebody show you right up. It's been a fairly slow night."

"And these guys?" Kel gestured to the six men waiting to be taken to a table.

"It's part of procedure. Builds anticipation and projects mimetic valuation. You know."

Kel nodded mildly surprised. "You're the host?" The man had not looked mature enough for such a rank.<sup>6</sup>

His interlocutor indicated the affirmative. "I hope you enjoy your meal." He winked.

Kel loitered in the lobby for a few minutes letting his eyes trace the bamboo print pattern adorning the walls. He was feeling almost giddy. Presently, a neatly dressed waiter arrived and led him inside. Each table was housed in a private dining room meant for a group, so it was not feasible for an

---

<sup>6</sup> A host was the top authority in any given scenario of the open sector. It was a position part administrative, part hands on, and part conceptual usually reserved for people who had sufficiently risen through the tender ranks and showed aptitude in specific settings.

ordinary patron to get one all to himself. He followed the waiter along dark, tastefully decorated halls, up a flight of stairs, and finally through a heavy curtain of cool onyx beads screening the room beyond from view .

There, in the middle of thickly carpeted room, was his table. Debra lay supine, her body protruding from the surface of the ovular platform as if she were floating on it. The broad, black pedestal which held the table and imbedded woman a few feet aloft concealed her back side. But above the glassy surface which ringed her on all sides the woman was entirely nude. Her loose hair cascaded out over the glassy surface from her half-imbedded head, her arms lay at her sides immobile implanted. Her breasts stood tall and proud. Kel's stayed at the periphery of the room and communicated his menu selection by pointing. The waiter departed, and Kel was left alone.

The template for *Surface* was the practice of nyotaimori, of course. Thus most of the tables contained slender Japanese girls. But the formula had been broadened a bit to engage other tastes, and thus a few dining rooms housed women of other ethnicities, usually well endowed. Likewise the menu was rather more diverse: after an august sushi section it let its hair down and offered such items as ice cream sundaes and chocolate mousse--even spaghetti dinner by candle light.

Lurked in the doorway for a long moments. He could hear her Debra breathing and see her bare chest rising and falling. He had a pleasing awareness of the asymmetry of their positions for he could survey her full length, but was shielded from her view by the immobility of her head.

Finally, he sidled into her field of vision. "Good evening, Ms. Keane," he tried to sound as composed as possible.

"You!" she hissed in surprise, her eyes narrowing to hostile slits.

He sat down at her flank. "Our last meeting felt a bit strained. I thought perhaps we could smooth things out over dinner. Or under it." He could not forego a smirk at this. "That is, of course, if you don't need me to get my manager."

The older woman said nothing, but her face betrayed a world of hostility.

"You didn't have these during our last meeting," he gentry prodded a grapefruit sized breast with his index finger. "It suits you."

"Don't touch me!" she growled.

Kel laughed. "Oh Ms. Keane, don't be so standoffish. This is our chance to get to know each other better. I've ordered whipped cream and cherries to share. I'm sure," he continued, moving his finger lightly down her torso, "that we'll come to an understanding."

The look on the seething woman's face as his fingers nestled into her neat, dark bush would keep him contended in his work for cycles to come.

• • •

Deep in the storage pods rumors swirled and incubated. The groups of isolated women with little to do but talk was an ideal environment. But, beyond that, it was policy that not many women kept in the same pod would ever be assigned to the same scenario. Thus it seemed each woman had seen something, heard something, had something whispered in her ear, that no one else was in a position to know.

And, at least to the few who paid any head to such matters, it was impressive how rapidly a rumor might spread between pods. Like a furtive game of telephone, hushed bits of discourse carried stories across the gap between the intentionally isolated groups swiftly and often. This back channel

susurrus distorted as it transmitted, and a single bit extrapolated from an experience would soon exist in nine versions in nine different mouths.

Escape was an almost obsessive topic of interest. Despite the space they occupied existing in a dream, many were still convinced that a physical rout somewhere lead outside of this realm and their confinement in it. Naturally many located this passage to freedom where they had first entered the City. But accounts of where the atrium lay or, for that matter, of local geography at the most basic level agreed in virtually nothing. Nonetheless, somebody always knew someone who knew—*really knew*—where the gap in the wall lay.

Other stories were unspecific sources of hope. Five women made a break and only three were ever dragged back for punishment. A masculine looking woman had passed herself off as a tender for several days and been able to move through the city at will. And then there was the tale which had quickly taken on the dimensions of myth about the group of escaped women hiding in the tunnels and fighting a stealthy war against their captors. The specifics varied, but the pattern was the same: they were like ghosts, moving through deep forgotten passages where the men couldn't find them. But here and there somebody had caught a glimpse or overheard a guard lamenting one of their exploits in hushed tones.

The mirror to this were the darker rumors, tails of terrible reassignments and fates, of surreal punishments, and realities even more dismal. A tale circulated of women existing with no heads. Another held that, contrary to the prevailing wisdom that it was impossible, some women had undergone mysterious dream pregnancies. It was even whispered darkly that when the end of a woman's stay arrived she wasn't really freed, but rather shuffled off to some new misery never to be seen again.

A well-worn story to be heard nearly everywhere told of a locked up woman, or perhaps more than one, with breasts were the size of pianos (this particular description of size was remarkably invariant between tellings). She, or they, were confined in a room barely larger than their swollen bodies, the doors of which they could not even fit through. One who neared the florid glow coming from the open door of that room would be haunted by the plaintive cries coming from within. It had come to function as a kind of ghost story, and perhaps also an indirect way of reiterating that it could always be worse.

Then their brief reprieve would end. The conversations would cease. They'd lie on their cots. The cycle would begin again.

**Stay tuned for Chapter 4: Deviations. Also, thanks to those who have given feedback and encouragement. I'd like to communicate more, and have started a thread on the forum (r/overflowingbra) if anybody is interested in doing so. Please stop by.**