

RECLAIM

FUTURIST TALES

RESTORE

FROM THE

RETURN

CARIBBEAN

KAREN LORD & TOBIAS S. BUCKELL

IF WE DON'T IMAGINE OUR FUTURE, WHO WILL?

RECLAIM, RESTORE, RETURN

Futurist Tales from the Caribbean

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OUR SANCTUARY SEA

Karen Lord

THE IDEA OF COMPILING A REPRINT ANTHOLOGY OF Caribbean speculative fiction is not a new one for me. My first anthology, *New Worlds, Old Ways: Speculative tales from the Caribbean* which was published in 2016 by Peekash Press, focused on stories from emerging writers, many fresh from workshops, for whom it would be their first published work. But a wealth of stories already existed – from Jamaica Kincaid to Erna Brodber, from Nalo Hopkinson to Edgar Mittelholtzer – and there were many established writers in the Caribbean and the diaspora who could be approached to submit new work. The idea of a second, larger Caribbean anthology stayed with me, but I pushed the project down the road and into the future ... and when the future arrived, it looked like nothing we could have imagined.

Let me rephrase that. Of course we imagined it. Both scientists and science fiction writers have foreseen and depicted pandemics. Scientists do so to figure out preventative measures before the event. As for writers ... well ... we like to put our protagonists through the worst of worst-

case scenarios for the sake of drama, whether our final aim is tragedy or triumph. Still, there is a vast difference between the ‘what if’ of thought experiments, training scenarios, dystopian fiction and ecothrillers, and the ‘what now’ of stark reality. We cannot walk out of this movie, switch off this game, or close this book. The only way out is through.

You may ask: does fiction have any purpose at all? When stories give warnings, those warnings can be ignored. When stories bring hope, the comfort of escapism is temporary, a privilege for the few who can still afford to entertain anodynes to existence over the essentials of existence. Warnings, however, are not wasted when there is still a chance to turn aside, to take a better path. Neither is hope an indulgence if it provides not merely escape, but inspiration, by showing us a future we can yet work towards. Grenadian writer Tobias S. Buckell put a name to it. *Caribbean futurism* – not a genre tag like the Afrofuturism of Wakanda and Beyonce, but a practical, results-oriented collaboration of literature, science and policy – could be the lever we need to stand firm and move the world. He envisaged an institute where writers, scientists and policymakers could come together, flint striking iron, to spark new ideas, new stories and new approaches out of old tinder.

And you thought we only came to tell you pretty stories.

I confess that I thought an institute was ambitious – though not *impossible*. I felt it would be a challenge to find both time and funding to fully realise his vision. Nevertheless the idea had been spoken into the universe and the universe responded. The NGC Bocas Lit Fest, postponed from its usual date earlier in the year, was making plans to

go fully virtual in September and, furthermore, to reprise the Future Friday theme of the 2015 festival. The time to prepare was short, but the opportunity being offered was sweet, and we seized it. The Caribbean Futures Institute was officially established to partner with the NGC Bocas Lit Fest in imagining what a post-pandemic Caribbean might look like.

We started with reprints of stories that fortuitously and accurately spoke to our peculiar situation in 2020. Two stories from two Trinidadian writers were taken from *New Worlds, Old Ways: Speculative tales from the Caribbean*. Though already more than four years old, Brandon O'Brien's 'fallenangel.dll', a story of corruption and neglected communities, remains disturbingly contemporary as we consider, both regionally and globally, what weapons we should allow our police to wield for and against the people they are intended to serve.

In 'Cascadura', Hadassah K. Williams gives us a glimpse of the diaspora's nightmare: a catastrophe so complete that home is destroyed before you can return to it. Although during the pandemic our countries remained intact, the closing of borders and grounding of airlines made too many of us as landless and forsaken, though temporarily so, as Williams's protagonist.

Cadwell Turnbull, who hails from the US Virgin Islands, gave us a story of monstrous hurricanes and those who remain in their path. More poignantly for this present era, when 'track and trace' and care for the elderly and vulnerable have become of paramount importance, his story 'Monsters Come Howling in Their Season' introduces an artificial intelligence, aptly called Common, who is not the terror of state surveillance, but a community's eye that guides the work of their hearts and hands.

If 'Cascadura' is the nightmare, Nalo Hopkinson's warm-hearted 'Repatriation' is the diaspora's dream. Climate refugees return at last to a Jamaica that is healing its tourism-ravaged coral reefs with the ancient hulks of decommissioned cruise ships. Hopkinson's image of a rusting fleet on its final journey now seems like a harbinger of itineraries undone by COVID and closed harbours, and emptied vessels sheltering in place at permitted locations, uncertain of their future and the future of their entire industry.

For 'The Mighty Slinger' I collaborated with Tobias S. Buckell to write a long-view future with Caribbean roots and a multiplanetary scope. Saving an environmentally-degraded Earth from demolition and gentrification by the superrich takes time, influence and money. We gave our revolutionary kaiso band plenty of both with periodic suspended animation, the support of generations of a Caribbean dynasty dedicated to politics and service, and the riches of bestselling calypso tunes with conscious lyrics.

That story, published four years ago, contained the seeds of Caribbean futurism, where policy, science and technology, and the arts work together in a long game towards a better future for the region and the world. It also highlighted the perennial issue of the exploitation of migrant workers, and the changes needed to empower those workers.

Beyond the premonitions of crises now unfolding, and the déjà vu of continuing injustices, this collection of reprints contains a set of overarching themes that may provide the template for our nascent future. These themes are not a to-do list; we do not have to tick one item off before we can proceed to the next. They are a cycle of

interacting and repeating actions that comprise an engine of progress. They are, in no particular order: reclaim, restore, return.

A focus on reclaiming sets the revolutionary tone of the anthology. Take control of the technology and processes that govern and regulate your daily life. Hold fast to your oceans and lands, and all the wealth they contain, for your generation and the generations to come. Demand your right to the dignity of work for a living wage. Embrace and protect your community – the strong and the weak, the little and the large.

There is no true hospitality without ownership. Offering a welcome into a home that is not yours makes you a servant, not a host. The freedom to safely open and close the door to our own sanctuary is true hospitality. But home cannot be a sanctuary when others are hungry or in danger. There are no moats broad enough and no walls high enough to cut us off from our duty of care to our neighbour and to the sojourner.

Restoring is both stewardship and self-care, external and internal. Healing our environment – the lands, the coasts and the seas that are home – brings comfort and stability, which in turn heals our generational trauma of pain and upheaval. Within the oasis of that new stability, we naturally reorder our priorities, considering the true value of our heritage, and the real costs and consequences of our actions and inaction.

Imagine a future where the Caribbean Sea is a sanctuary sea with sustainable fishing, and protected biodiversity. Visualise the restoration of coral reefs and mangrove swamps, using home-grown technology that already exists in the here and now. Can we monitor and secure our coastlines, our exclusive economic zones, and the open sea that

connects us and surrounds us for the benefit of all? This is not merely border control, but boundaries control, in every sense.

Returning is essential, a mental and physical imperative to every child of the Caribbean. Four of the stories – ‘Cascadura’, ‘Monsters Come Howling in Their Season’, ‘Repatriation’, and ‘The Mighty Slinger’ – confront the fact that often people don’t leave the Caribbean because they *want* to, but because they *have* to. They migrate away from stagnant economies, declining infrastructure, or the wreckage of hurricanes, earthquakes, and other disasters. Soon they will move to escape sea level rise, drought and killing heat, and environments made toxic by unregulated industry.

Migration is an aspect of our people’s history that stretches from pre-emancipation to post independence, but where will we go when the whole world is on fire? Billionaires have built their New Zealand bunkers and planned their Martian estates. What refuge remains for the rest of us? Moon bases and asteroid mines will take the skilled workers, of course, and we will always be offered the chance to serve and entertain the wealthy and privileged, either directly and in person, or at one remove by making and maintaining their machines, and refreshing their media streams with new content.

These stories urge us to return when we can, before misfortune or resignation closes the way back. Sometimes so much time has passed that you can never go back. The place has moved on; the culture has evolved without you; you fear you are a foreigner forever. You remain a citizen of nostalgia, which is a land ever-receding with each backward glance to become more idyllic and more unattainable. But this is illusion. Home is a moving target for us all, both those who leave and those who stay. It will never

resemble the past that you left, but it can become the future that you will co-create.

Our last two pieces are original work commissioned especially for this project. They are a powerful duo of myth and manifesto, repurposing the fragments of the old, shattered world into a new construction. Shivane Ramlochan's poem 'A Letter from the Leader of the Android Rebellion, to the Last Plantation Owner of the Federated Caribbean Bloc' vividly illustrates our ultimate emancipation in modern metaphor. Tobias S. Buckell's 'Category Six' is a story of taking charge in the midst of chaos as well as a seductive blueprint for how we might jumpstart our regional project once more, tying our lands and peoples together with transport links and mutual aid, offering home to the diaspora and haven to the homeless.

If these works affect you as they affected me, this is what will happen. Ramlochan's poem will crack open your chest with the pain and joy of hope. You will question your automaton life and the little masters you've been programmed to serve every day. Buckell's story will fire your imagination with a future that is ambitious, but not impossible. You will keep a euro in your pocket, just in case the chance arises. (The rest will come when needed, as the universe responds to the boldness of your ask.)

Enjoy these works, these tales so pretty and so much more. The dream endures, the work continues, and we must all choose our risk in this age of crisis and opportunity. Farewell to the old empires of sugar cane and flesh. All hail the good ship CARICOM. Long may she sail and serve in our sanctuary sea.

*Karen Lord,
Barbados, September 2020*

FALLENANGEL.DLL

Brandon O'Brien

“DIDN'T HAVE ANY PROBLEMS GETTING BACK?”

Imtiaz stretched on the couch and sighed. “Nah,” he called back to the kitchen. “Traffic was remarkably light today. You know how it is – takes a while for everyone to find their rhythm.”

“I don't know how it is, actually,” Tevin shouted from the kitchen. There was a rustle of plastic bags, and then he poked his head from the door. “I never experienced a state of emergency before.”

“A blessing for which you should thank God,” Imtiaz said. “I would've killed for the chance to study abroad when the last one happened. Worst three months of our lives.”

After even more shuffling from the kitchen, Tevin came into the living room, a cold bottle of beer in each hand, and kissed Imtiaz on the cheek. “And was there a good reason for the last one?”

“Just as good a reason as this one.”

Tevin sighed and handed his partner a bottle. “I guess I should have gotten more beer then.”

Imtiaz chuckled. “Slow down, hoss. Since when you turn big drinker, anyway?”

“Country gone to the dogs? No better time, I figure.” Tevin raised his bottle before him as a toast.

“To the dogs. Now they get to see us trapped at home.” He brought his bottle to Tevin’s with a soft clink, and then put it to his lips and took a long swig. It had only been three days so far since the Prime Minister had declared the country under lockdown, and everyone knew what a joke looked like when they saw it. It had been seven years at least since the last time he’d been in one, and the excuse was the same. “We are working hard with the Armed Forces,” the Prime Minister would say, “to curtail the growing crime rate in this country, and we ask only that the citizens of this great twin-island state be patient in this effort.”

The first thing that popped up on social media was also the most accurate: “How you does curtail crime by simply asking criminals to stay inside?”

Imtiaz felt a vibrating in his pocket, and reached into it for his cell phone. Almost as soon as he saw the text on his screen, he shoved it back into his pocket.

“Everything okay?” Tevin asked.

“Yeah.” A long sigh, then Imtiaz took another, longer gulp of beer.

“Im?”

“... It’s nothing.”

“If I have to ask what nothing is —”

Imtiaz frowned and put his drink down. “I just might have to head out in a bit.”

Tevin squinted. Imtiaz didn’t like getting in fights, least of all with Tevin, whose disappointed glares had the power

to make him feel ashamed for days afterward. “I don’t want to, but I kinda promised –”

“Promised who?”

“A friend of mine wanted help moving something. She doesn’t want to talk about it.” He got up and walked slowly to his bedroom. “I wish I didn’t have to, but I promised before this was a thing–”

“But you can say no? It’s minutes past six. You can’t just head back out –”

“I promised,” Imtiaz called back. “And I swear, it’s not a big deal. Lemme just take care of it, and I’ll be back before you miss me.” He took the phone back out and opened the text this time: *so im at urwi, can you meet me at the gate?*

“Im.” When he turned to the door, Tevin was already in the walkway, arms folded. “Come nah man. You wanna break curfew and not even tell me why?”

Imtiaz reached for a shirt hanging on the door of his wardrobe and put it over his grey tee. “It’s Shelly. She said she needed someone with a car to help her move something two weeks ago, and now is the only day it can happen. I volunteered.”

“Move something? What?”

“One of her projects. I dunno what yet.”

There it was – Tevin’s dreaded glare, as he tapped his foot on the white tile of the walkway. “Aright. A project. But if the police hold you, you’re out of luck. And don’t play like you taking your time to answer the phone if I call. You hear?”

“Yes, boss,” Imtiaz said, a small smirk on his face. It was his only line of defence against Tevin’s sternness. It didn’t succeed often, but when it did, it did so well.

Tevin tried to fight the grin spreading over his face,

and lost. “Be safe, Im. Please. Promise me that. Since you insist on keeping promises.”

Imtiaz walked up to him, still slipping the last buttons into their holes, and kissed his partner softly on the lips. “I absolutely positively promise. I’ll be fine.”

“You bet your ass you’ll be fine,” Tevin whispered. “Play you’re not going and be fine, see what I go do to you.”

IMTIAZ SPED down the highway at sixty, seventy miles an hour, past the three or four motorists still making their way back home who glanced at him with fear. A dusty navy-blue Nissan rushing past in the dark night blaring circa-2007 noise rock does that to people.

He made sure to call before he took off. He’d meet Shelly at the South Gate and take off immediately. She asked if the back seat was empty, and if his husband knew what they were going to pick up. Imtiaz reminded her that he didn’t know either, to which she replied, “Oho, right – well, see you just now,” and hung up. This wasn’t a good sign, but the volatile mix of curiosity and dedication to keeping his promises got the better of him.

It was twenty to seven when he pulled up, screeching to a halt right in front of the short Indian girl in the brown cargo pants and black t-shirt. She took the lollipop out of her mouth and peeped through the open driver-side window, putting a finger of her free hand into her ear to block out the music.

“You just always wanted to do that, right?”

“Get the *hell* in,” he sneered.

"Alright, alright," Shelly said. She lifted a black duffel bag off the ground beside her and got in the back.

"Wait." Imtiaz turned back to face her. "What's in the bag?"

"Tools." She patted it gently as she said it, looking right at him, sporting a smug grin.

"Tools? Open it, lemme see."

"What, you think I selling drugs or somet'ing?"

"I t'ink if you weren't selling drugs, you'd be able to open the blasted bag."

Shelly slapped the bag even harder, just so he could hear the clanging of metal within. Her hand recoiled painfully. "Happy now?"

"No." He faced front and slowly got back on the road. "Where are we heading?"

"Eh... Just keep going west, I'll let you know."

"That isn't how you ask people to give you a lift."

Shelly sighed, rolling the lollipop from one side of her mouth to the next. "Would you get nervous if I said Laventi—"

"Laventille?" he shouted. "You want to go to *Laventille* at minutes to seven on the third night of a curfew? What, not being arrested or murdered is boring?"

"Trust me, when you see it, you'll be glad you came." Shelly grinned even wider. "Something you couldn't imagine. I could've gone myself, but didn't you wonder why I asked if you could do it? Not because I needed a car." She shrugged. "Although we will."

"Are you gonna tell me what it is?"

"Shh. You go see it." She shifted the duffel bag and lay across the length of the seat. "I dare you to tell me you not impressed when we reach there." She winced, turning to face the stereo deck. "How you could listen to *this*?"

Imtiaz couldn't help but smirk. They'd spent many an afternoon debating the musical value of his thrashing, clanging metal music. At her most annoying, he wasn't beyond blasting it just to get on her nerves. Today felt as good a time as any.

"It calms me," he replied. It did. He imagined his thoughts dancing to it, his large sweaty moshpit of anxieties.

"I don't see how this could calm anyone, Im. It sounds like two backhoes gettin' in a fight."

"If you say so." He would have liked to describe the meaning of the present song at length – about rebellion, about sticking it to the man and rising above oppression and propaganda to finally live in a land where you were a free and equal citizen – but he had been Shelly's friend long enough to know that she didn't care. She appreciated that she had friends like Imtiaz who thought as deeply about the things they loved as she did about her own loves, but she never really wanted to know what those deep thoughts were. That would involve caring about the things they loved as well. She often didn't. Passionate people were more interesting to her than their passions.

He glanced at his watch, and panic shot through him. "Shit!" He swerved, aiming for an exit into a side street in San Juan.

"What the –?" Shelly bumped her head on the door, then straightened up.

"Why did I do this?" Imtiaz's eyes opened wide. "We going to get arrested!"

"Whoa!" Shelly put up her hands. "Don't panic. We came off the bus route, no one going to see us now. I go give you directions, okay?"

He lowered the volume on the stereo. "I don't like any of this, Michelle."

She winced at the sound of her whole first name. "I know. I should've say something before. But would you have come if I didn't?"

"What could be so important?"

"You really have to see it."

She pointed out the route, giving vague directions as if she were guessing at them, only appearing to get a better sense of where they were going as they got closer to the house. Shelly said she often passed through this area to look for the person they were meeting. She had met the man on a forum early last year. He was one of the few seemingly deluded souls to believe the government rumours of drones and police riot-suppression bots. This interested her less for anarchist, anti-establishment reasons, and more because this was her only chance to get to see a bot up close – if the rumours were true. Almost every month her friend would have some evidence, and almost every week he'd need to be bailed out of Golden Grove Prison for a heroin possession that wouldn't stick. Imtiaz asked if she trusted her friend, and she shook her head.

"That is why *we* going." Shelly was still focusing on the road when she said it.

Imtiaz focused on the road, too. Along the way, he had noticed at least three police jeeps. It looked like they were circling the area. He swore, too, that he'd heard a helicopter above, after leaving the San Juan border, but he couldn't hear it any more.

"We almost there," Shelly said, pointing at a rusted shack of galvanised sheeting, with a glittering lime-green sedan parked outside. "By that car." Imtiaz nodded, parked

behind it, unplugged his phone, and got out. Shelly shuffled a bit inside before taking up her bag and opening the door. "Follow me. Lemme do the talking."

Imtiaz closed the door behind her and gestured for her to lead the way, past the car, past the front door to the side entrance. Shelly knocked three times, and a stern woman's voice shouted, "Just come inside, nah!"

The door swung open with a creak and Shelly stepped in, Imtiaz following close behind. He was hypervigilant, even to the point of being aware of his awareness, of whether he'd come across as nervous even as he glanced around for the faintest sign of threat. They were in the kitchen, which was better furnished than the outside of the house suggested – stainless steel sink, tiled countertop, the best dishwasher money could buy, even two double-door fridges.

A tall, dark woman was at the counter, dicing a tomato with a chef's knife. She looked fit, with beautiful soft features, with skin that wrinkled almost imperceptibly at the corners of her lips and near her eyes. Imtiaz guessed she was around her late fifties.

"Ey, it's Shelly!" the woman said, smiling but not taking her eyes off the tomato. "And who's your friend?"

"Missus Atwell, this is Imtiaz. You know how your son and I like putting together puzzles. Imtiaz likes that sort of thing, so I invited him to help."

"Ah, yes..." Ms. Atwell put down the knife and stared wistfully off into the TV room, where some soap opera was playing on mute. "Runako and his blasted puzzles. He does still never let me see them, you know. Even when the police take him, he insist – nobody mus' go back in his room an' look for anyt'ing."

"Yeah, the puzzles are kinda important, miss."

Ms. Atwell continued gazing distantly for a beat or two, and then went back to her tomato. “Well, just try not to stay too late. You getting a ride out of here after?”

“Yes, miss,” Shelly said, nodding as she left the kitchen, gesturing for Imtiaz to follow down the short hallway to a dark brown door. Shelly rapped on it three times. They could hear the sound of large containers being dragged across the floor, and then one, two, three bolt locks being opened.

The door opened a crack, and a dark-skinned face poked through. His eyes were wide at first, but then he glanced at Shelly and sighed calmly, pulling the door open slowly. “Oh, it’s you. Thanks for passing through.”

“Of course I must pass through,” she said as she entered, Imtiaz behind her. “You say you had something for me to see. I saw the picture. I just want to make sure.”

Runako was a tall black man, perfectly baldheaded, in a white Jointpop t-shirt and black sweatpants. When he noticed Imtiaz looking at him, he nudged Shelly and stepped back, leaning on the wall nervously. “Who is this? Your friend?”

“Yeah. Runako, meet Imtiaz. He’s the one going to help me put this back together. If you didn’t set me up like all the other times.”

He folded his arms. “Okay. But I telling you, too many times I get hold, I get lock up, because somebody tell somebody and the police hear. This is probably my last chance for somebody to see it.”

Imtiaz had focused on an odd shape in the corner of the room under a sheet of grey vinyl. When he turned back to the other two, they were glancing at it too. “This is it?” he asked.

Runako nodded. “Look at it, nah, Shelly? Exactly as I promised.”

She stepped toward it and pulled the dusty vinyl off. In a coughing fit, her eyes widened as she looked at it. When she got her breath back, she turned to Runako. “Really?”

“See?!” Runako grinned. “I is not no liar.”

“Imtiaz, come!” She waved to her friend to come closer, and he stepped up beside her. It was a robot with a matte black shell and glossy black joints. It had suffered severe damage; frayed wires poked out of an arm, its chest-plate had a fist-sized hole in it. Imtiaz noticed that on its back were a pair of camouflage-green retractable wings; they looked as if they would span half the room when opened, maybe even wider. On its neck was a serial number painted in white stencil: TTPS-8103-X79I.

“TTPS?” Imtiaz said, almost at a whisper. “As in –”

“Yeah, man,” Runako said behind them.

“A real live police bot...” Shelly straightened up slowly, dusting herself off. “This is the riot team model?”

“Yeah. The mark-two, in fact. Tear gas and pepper spray nozzles in the arm, but they not full, and stun gun charges; thrusters under the wings so it could dispense over crowds by flying overhead. Recording cam in one of the eyes – can’t remember which, supposed to be forty megapixels. And some other things, but I didn’t open it up yet. I was waiting for you.”

Shelly rubbed her hands and reached down beside her to open the duffel bag and take out a long, flat-head screwdriver. “Why, thank you, kind sir. Now, gimme my music there. Time to start.”

Runako nodded and stepped over to a stereo at the corner of the room. Shelly took a USB drive out of her back pocket and tossed it at him. He caught it, slotted it

in a back port, and pressed a couple of buttons. He stepped back as something haunting and atmospheric played, the lyrics lo-fi and echoing, the instrumental thumping and dark. Shelly swayed a little as the sound rumbled through the room, eyes closed, facing the ceiling, as if taken briefly by some heavenly rapture. Then she straightened and pointed her screwdriver at Imtiaz. "You hear that, Immy? Now that is music to calm you. Not whatever wildness you does listen to."

Imtiaz squinted, eager to ask what made her witchy-sounding, incomprehensible music better than his tastes, but he kept his question to himself.

Shelly knelt before the thing and started unscrewing the outer panels, observing the wiring as it snaked across its chest and limbs, leading to each gear or tool it powered. Imtiaz pulled up a chair by the wall so he could see, but not so close as to disturb her.

Her hands moved as if she were in a trance. Gently, screws would slowly wind out of their places, plating would fall into her hands, she would gently place it beside her on a sheet of newspaper on the floor. She would follow the lines of red and green and purple wire from the processor in its headpiece to the battery supply in its centre and then out to the extremities, to its tear gas canister launchers, its sensory databases. Imtiaz thought that they looked like the veins of... Of course they did. Of course they looked like veins, like nerves, like sinews. What else could a man do but copy?

He stared at the serial number on a sheet of plate on the floor. A police riot bot. Here, in Laventille. On a night of curfew. He went from peacefully admiring Shelly's diligence right back into panic.

Shelly said softly, "You're gonna be checking the BIOS

after this is done, by the way. So get a laptop ready. Runako?”

Runako snapped a finger, then picked up a dusty grey notebook near the stereo. “Here, boss.” He took a couple of long steps to get to Imtiaz and rested it in his lap.

As Imtiaz opened it, he could hear Shelly mumbling to herself about “not that much damage”, and the bot being “up and running in an hour”. He glanced up to see that most of the outer shell, save for the wings, were gone, the bot’s innards entirely visible. He could see past them to the bedroom wall. It was almost a work of art as it was.

He opened a guest profile on the laptop and launched a web browser. “How you paying for this, again?” he said.

“You?” Shelly chuckled. “You mean *we*.”

“What?” He froze for a moment. “No. No, I don’t. Trus’ me, I don’t.”

“So... I forgot to mention...” She had a pair of pliers in hand now, stripping some of the power-supply wires with them.

“Mention *what*?”

“I promised Runako we would come back if he needed anything. In exchange for this.”

“Wha—” He wanted to shout, but he glanced at Runako and decided against it. He didn’t know what kind of person he was dealing with. As the host folded his arms, Imtiaz cleared his throat. “You didn’t think this was probably worth sharing with me first? Before even asking me to come here?”

“I figured it wasn’t going to be a problem. You like them kinda thing.”

“But I don’t like doing it *for free* for people I *don’t know*.”

Shelly gestured to the robot with a free hand. “Look –

it already open. We already here. I asking nicely. This is too big an opportunity.”

He didn't answer right away, but he wanted to say no. This was the neighbourhood where strangers got shot. He wasn't planning to come back, national lockdown or not. “How much something like this supposed to cost?”

Shelly had already returned her focus on the wiring. “This is seven figures at least.”

Runako chimed in. “Black market is nine hundred fifty thousand.”

Imtiaz sighed as softly as he could, too softly for them to hear. He couldn't do it. His skin felt tight against him, his palms clammy and warm. He logged into Facebook in the hope of finding something silly and distracting while Shelly tended to the robot.

The very first shared link on his feed read *Sources Warn of Police Raids in Hotspots to Curb Crime During Curfew*. He opened it in another tab: “Residents in several so-called ‘crime hotspots’ across the island have claimed that their areas are being targeted by police officers who, as part of their crackdown on crime, are performing random house searches for illegal contraband...”

Imtiaz felt his chest get tight. He glanced at the window and was sure he could see flashing blue lights several streets away. He glanced back at the article: “Several Western areas, such as Belmont and Laventille, are due for their own random searches at the time of posting, sources say.” He heard a siren blare suddenly, and just as suddenly, silence. He was sure.

“You nervous or what, man?” Runako said sternly.

“What?” Imtiaz turned to face him. “Nah, I good.”

“You sure? Like you freaking out about the deal.”

He looked away, hoping to hide whatever signs of fear

were on his face. “I just could’ve been told before, that’s all.”

“Ey.” Runako snapped his fingers, and Imtiaz twitched. “What? You is another one of them who feel they too good for Laventille?”

“I didn’t say that.” Imtiaz got out of his seat and walked to the bedroom window, pulling the curtains open only enough to get a good view. The street was empty and dimly lit. “Although you can’t blame a guy, can you?”

“What that supposed to mean?”

“It supposed to mean people don’t like coming to places and being afraid they not going and make it back home after.”

“Really?” Runako folded his arms. “This is the fool you go look to bring in my house, Shelly? During de curfew, no less, a man going and tell me the whole of Laventille not safe for nobody?”

“You hear me say –”

Shelly whistled, still not looking up from the robot. “Fellas, I like a good rousing sociopolitical debate just like everybody else, but we on a clock, right? So cool it.”

Runako backed off, but Imtiaz kept looking out of the window. This time he was positive – a police jeep stopping at the top of the street, one man coming out of the back seat and shouting at the window of a house. “I don’t like this.”

Shelly was already taping over some exposed wires, and taping around them all to keep them in place. “I’m almost done, Im. You’ll just check the firmware quick, help me load it into the car, and that’s it. We almost finished.”

Imtiaz saw the officer beat on the door of the house until a woman came out, and then grab her by the neck and throw her out onto the street. He shouted again.

Another officer came out from the driver's side door, a pistol already in his hand.

"Stop almost-finishing and *finish*, then," he said nervously. "Trouble up the street."

She looked over the inside of the shell again, tracing her hands along all the snaking wires, trying to find a spot she had overlooked. When she couldn't find one, she shrugged, beginning to screw each plate of its iron skin back together. "We could deal with the outer damage when we take it home, I guess. Your turn."

It took Imtiaz a moment to peel away from the window. The second officer had just struck a small child in the head with his handgun, and his partner was already barging into the house. Imtiaz sighed and got back to his chair. "You have a Type C cable?"

For a moment, Shelly was confused. "I might..." she rummaged in her toolbag for one, a couple seconds longer than her still-tense friend could handle.

He snapped his fingers. "It really can't wait. We don't have time."

Over Imtiaz's shoulder, Runako held a long looped black cable, its connectors seemingly brand new. "Don't bother. One right here."

"Thank you," Imtiaz said, snatching it from him, tossing one end of it to Shelly. She slid a panel to the side of the robot's head – one of the few parts of it still covered – and inserted it.

Imtiaz opened a command console and began his wizardry. He had learned a couple of tricks online ever since robots came in vogue, but they were light reading. He never anticipated actually having to apply them. There were never supposed to actually have any on his island. They were too expensive for leisure, save for the wealth-

iest corners of Cascade or Westmoorings where some fair-skinned grandfather with an Irish last name lived out his lonely retirement.

The government swore against them for public sector purposes, citing price mostly, but police bots were a particularly hot topic. They weren't just costly to most leaders. They were problematic – too much power for anyone in office to hold. Leaders of the opposition for the last few years milked that argument in the parliament house – “Do you want our Prime Minister having full rein over armed machines? With no consciences? Wandering our streets under the guise of law and order, but really, she's asking the people to pay for her own personal hit squad!” Another oft-milked idea – they called it the ‘flying squad’ – was a rumoured group of non-robotic policemen with a license to kill and a direct line to the Minister. Putting those two ideas together was a good way to whip up a panic.

But then again, here was proof of one of the claims being true. A police bot. Number and all. The first known sighting – if only they survived the night.

A couple lines of code later, a small window popped up – the bot's application screen. *Reboot Y/N?* He pressed the Y key, and another line of text appeared: *Rebooting...* They could hear a low whirring from the gears near the battery, and the robot's LED eyes began to slowly fade in and out in a bright blue.

“Hurry up, nah, you dotish robot,” Imtiaz muttered. A sliver of him had all but given up that they would make it back out unnoticed with the robot in tow. But he had already begun. There was nothing left but to soldier on.

The robot's head slowly tilted up, and a gentle, melodious bootup theme played from its neck, a little louder now without some of the plating to muffle it. Shelly's

hands shot up in triumph as she waited to hear it greet itself. The robot opened its dull-grey mouth and spoke:

“Здравствуйте. Я модель Минерва, серийный номер ТТРС-8103-Х791. Я могу чем-нибудь помочь?”

“What?” Runako scratched his head. “What kind of language is that?”

“I don’t know, boy.” Shelly finished screwing the final plate, and then inched closer to Imtiaz. “Im, something wrong with the language options or what?”

“Maybe...” He went back into command prompt, typing in more code to get access to its folders. “But if it’s a neural wiring problem –”

“I just looked at it, Im. Everything in order. Don’t blame it on –”

“I not blaming anybody. I just saying we can’t solve this now. Police all over. We have to take this home and troubleshoot it there.”

“Nah. I can’t wait. I need to be sure Runako not setting me up.”

“Even if we make jail?” Imtiaz turned to her in panic.

Shelly pointed at his laptop screen. “Face front. If you don’t want to make jail, work faster. We getting out of here, and we getting out of here with this robot.”

Imtiaz rubbed his eyes anxiously before pressing the Enter key. There was a briefer, louder whir, and then the bot powered down, its folders spilling onto the screen in a small cascade. “Okay, the root is here...” He fished around for the language base. “Um... all I see here is Russian and Japanese. I can’t even find its preferred warning phrases document.” He put a few more lines in the command box to update its language files. “Okay, two minutes at least that’s fixed. I’ll have to reboot it again first.”

“Alright, what about everything else? Optical recording? Ear-side microphones? The riot gear?”

Intiaz squinted at the rest of files and folders. “They all look fine here. Due for updates, but they could run fine till we get back home. So?” He gestured sternly to the window? “Can we?”

“Make sure for me, please?”

At this point, he was sweating. He couldn't see through the window. At least seeing outside confirmed his fears. Now, worry just ran amok in his mind. He was sure he had just heard a gunshot higher up the street. He closed his eyes for a moment, took a breath, and then opened them again, scanning the filenames for anything missing. Instead, he found new ones.

“When you find this?” he said.

Runako shifted, rubbing his hand over the top of his shiny bald head. “Who, me? Like, some weeks. Why?”

He turned to Shelly, eyes wide, beads of sweat falling down his cheeks. “Because it still have recordings, Shell.”

She straightened up, leaning closer to see the screen. A folder headed GATHER had reams of voice notes and video, most of which were so badly corrupted that their file types were missing, surely a result of whatever damage the bot had received. All of them were titled with numbers, and they had even more text files with the same kind of file name.

Shelly pointed to one at random, a text file. “Twelve oh nine, twenty twenty-three, sixteen thirty-four forty-one, oh thirty-nine? What that mean?”

“Most likely date and time, and... the last three, a place? Number of files on that day? I don't know.” He opened it and read aloud. “‘Event log, September 12th 2023’ – wait, nah, that was just the other day? – ‘deployed

on raid procedure in Arima area, address 34 Lime Avenue. Related files withheld by Winged Cpt. Sean Alexander.’ It have the number of people in the house, outstanding warrant info... it says, ‘Winged Det. Dexter Sandy, in compliance with Winged Cpt. Alexander, found previously tagged evidence 46859 in previously sealed case Trinidad & Tobago vs. Kareem Jones, which led to the arrest of—”

“Wait!” Runako stood behind Imtiaz, his hands pressed firmly on the back of the chair. “Previously tagged? You getting this, Shelly?”

“What? I don’t follow.” She hadn’t turned to face either of them, still reading the file. Imtiaz stared at it with a mild confusion.

“That evidence! Kareem Jones was in the papers months now for weed possession. He already in jail! How would they find already-seized weed in Arima from a case in Carenage, on the west side?”

“And what is a ‘winged’ officer?” Shelly made scare-quotes with her fingers as she said it.

“I was wondering the same thing,” Imtiaz said. “What kind of designation is that? It sure doesn’t sound official.”

“I could damn well tell you what it is—”

“I don’t want to believe it...” Shelly turned back to the robot, as if taking it in. It wasn’t just an illegal bot – it was a flying squad bot. A metal goon for the Prime Minister. It took a moment too long for Imtiaz to put it all together, but the moment he had, the back of his neck felt warm.

“It have video for that day here?” Runako put his hands on Imtiaz’s shoulders – and it made him even tenser still.

“L-lemme see.” He scrolled through them to find a video with the exact same title. He double-clicked it, and it loaded in his media player, a four-minute recording

starting with the camera – the bot – leaving a police vehicle.

“EY! OPEN UP! POLICE!” A gruff man’s voice shouted from outside of view. The bot looked directly at the door of an apple-white house as it slowly opened, a short brown girl looking out timidly.

“Where your parents, girl?” another, softer, male voice said, still in a raised voice. The girl shook her head in reply, stepping back into the house, but a heavy-set officer ran up to the door and held it open.

They could hear someone else shouting inside. The officer at the door, the gruff one, shouted, “Ey! We reach, so don’t play like you’re hiding nothing!” Two other officers came to the door and they entered, the robot behind them in the tight, dim walkway.

The robot glanced everywhere, and was making readings of everything. It tried to scan for the name of the girl, but couldn’t find it; it calculated live on screen the percentage of threat posed by stray breadknives on the kitchen counter as they passed it, or of a cricket bat near the living-room window – low, it supposed, being sized for a primary school child, easy to deal with by a carbon-plated police bot.

It saw a man it identified at David Sellers, raising his voice at an officer, asking how they could barge into the house without a warrant.

It saw Sparkle Sellers, and brought up the recent date of their marriage beneath her name as she pulled David back, trying to calm him down.

It saw an officer pull a bag as big as his palm out of his

side pocket while no one was looking. It tagged the bag “E-46859”, and followed awkwardly, focusing on it as the officer dropped it behind a plastic chair in the dining room. The officer nudged his partner and whispered, audibly enough for the robot, “It there, eh?” It saw him gesture with his elbow to the chair.

“What?” David shouted. “What where? What’s going on here?”

“Sir, you are under arrest for possession of marijuana with intent to distribute,” the gruff man said, reaching past Mrs. Sellers and grabbing David by his shoulder.

“Weed? You for *real*, officer? It have no weed here!”

He threw David on the brownish carpet, inches from the chair where they had dropped it, turning his head to face it as they put on the cuffs. “So what is that?”

The video stuttered here, playing that one moment repeatedly – of David Sellers’ frightened gaze, fixed on the clear package on his floor, looping the very moment when his eyes widened with fear, and then relaxed again in sad resignation, over and over and over...



FOR A MOMENT, the three of them stared silently at the screen. Imtiaz’s hands were on his mouth.

Suddenly, Runako and Imtiaz jumped in unison. There was a loud rapping at the outermost door.

“Shit,” Runako whispered, beginning to pace in confused panic. “They catch we, fellas. That is it.”

“Wait, stop freaking out, guys,” Shelly said, getting up slowly.

Imtiaz still couldn’t find the words. This was it. They were done. They had in front of them what was probably

an illegally sourced repository of evidence of police impropriety in the house of a career criminal drug offender. They were done for.

“Okay,” Shelly added. “We keeping the files, for sure.”

“How we going to keep what we can’t leave the house with?”

“Easy. We leave the house.”

Imtiaz wanted to shout, if not for the fear of police. “How?”

“Boot up the bot. We flying out.”

Runako started mumbling to himself. “We backing up everything. Four or five copies. And you going to take them. Don’t get catch, eh?”

“Wait, no, stop – how this supposed to work?” Imtiaz put his hands out to Shelly. “This is nonsense. How we flying out with the robot? It can’t even speak English yet!”

“It don’t need to. It just need to be able to fly.”

He checked the download – just complete. The flight module seemed to be fine in software, but he wasn’t convinced that Shelly had it all worked out on the hardware end. He didn’t like this idea at all. “Can we just think this over for –”

Outside, they heard someone tapping on the door. “Excuse me, this is the police –”

The three of them froze, their voice down to whispers. Imtiaz pointed at Shelly. “Okay, but let it be known I think this is craziness.”

“Foolish is fine once it works –” She gripped the robot’s left arm firmly, then leaned over to the keyboard to begin another reboot sequence. “You better had grab hold of something. Runako, you coming with us?”

“Nah. Somebody have to take the licks,” he whispered.

He was standing at the door now, facing it at attention. "Just get out quick."

Shelly nodded, then looked sternly at Imtiaz, who shot her a confused look. The moment the robot's boot sound sprung to life, he suddenly grabbed hold of its free arm.

"Hello," it said. "I am model Minerva, serial number TTPS-8103-X79I. How may I help you?"

"By getting airborne," Shelly whispered. "Uh... Hostiles en route, or whatever."

"Understood." Suddenly, its wings spread open with a tinny, rusty clang. Its edges hit both walls without even opening fully, and then it just as suddenly retracted them. "Wingspan obstacle issue." It turned to Shelly. "Primary launch will include thrusters only. Will that be a problem?"

"Nah, you do what you have to do, man." The moment Shelly said this was when Imtiaz realized he was about to do something well and truly foolish.

The knocking at the door became more insistent, and the officer's voice harsher. "You better open up right now before I have to kick this blasted —"

The bot's thrusters thrummed to life, warm air gushing from it. It turned to Imtiaz. "Please hold on to my arms with both hands. Flight may often be turbulent and dangerous."

"No shit —" Shelly nearly exclaimed it, but another persistent knock at the door brought her back to whispers. "We should go now, you know."

"Understood," the bot replied.

A louder, harder purr of wind and heat flooded out of the thrusters, and the bot sprang up with its two parcels on each side, through the galvanised sheet roof with enough force to push it clean off. They didn't have enough time to ready themselves; Imtiaz would have slid all the

way off its arm if it hadn't swivelled its palm to grab his belt buckle. Shelly responded by wrapping her limbs around its arm for more support.

The robot spread its wings, and the thrusters let out an even harder gust. "Clearing distance. What is our destination?"

"Take me to San Juan," Shelly shouted into its micro-phoned ear.

"Understood." It flapped its chrome-feathered wings once, and then sped east with a force Imtiaz swore would tear his flesh from the rest of him.

Imtiaz looked down to see three police officers rush through the door, one of them already pinning Runako to the wall. Another reached for his pistol and let out one shot, narrowly missing the robot's forehead, and by extension, Imtiaz.

SHELLY WOULD LATER spring Runako from prison with the spoils of her newfound publicity. Runako's charge, again, was drug pushing, until the real news broke. Shelly sent a compact disc to every major television station as soon as she had watched all of the video herself – hours of 'winged' officers kicking in doors, windows, and the occasional civilian's face; dozens of false arrests and misappropriations, with all the officers' faces on screen. Imtiaz refused to look at them. They both spent their quiet moments trembling at the thought of what must have been on the videos that were lost to hard drive damage and time. The Prime Minister resigned two nights after, owning up to the whole flying squad programme. The new hot topic on the web, though, was that till the snap elec-

tion was done, the citizens would be under a state of emergency anyway.

As for the bot, Shelly put it to work helping her mother around the house on her behalf. She had tinkered with it so intensively that it had taken to cooking their dinner and tending to their herb garden with near-mathematical accuracy. On weekends, she strapped a bespoke harness around its wings and learned to fly with it for fun, a hobby which frightened her mother every single time.

“What’s next for the girl who blew the whistle on the Flying Squad fiasco?” the press would ask her every other day in the papers.

“Graduate from UWI?” she’d reply, shrugging, looking away from the cameras like she was already bored with it all.

Imtiaz managed to keep his face out of the papers, for his own sake. Even his husband had yet to hear of the drama of that night. He’d have the occasional paranoid episode coming from work, though, looking in his rearview mirror for flashing blue lights as he hurried down the highway. Whenever he found himself panicking, he raised the volume on his industrial-rock driving music just a little higher.

Imtiaz grew to enjoy the safety of his house. He held on to Tevin a little tighter every day. He’d even find himself grinning like a fool at the simplest, most mundane questions, simply because he was still around to answer them.

“Didn’t have any problems getting back?” Tevin would ask.

“Nah,” Imtiaz would reply. “Traffic was light today. You know how it is.”

MONSTERS COME HOWLING IN THEIR SEASON

Cadwell Turnbull

IN THE MORNING AFTER THE STORM, DR. NANCY Stevens sends a drone into the air.

“This the worst part,” she says, as she shows me the carnage in the viewfinder. “You could believe it?”

The hillside of St. Thomas is naked. All of the trees have been stripped of their leaves, revealing the upturned soil beneath. Tucked between trees are bits of debris and trash, some from storms past, and in a small clearing, an old church is completely gutted, its front side torn clean off. The sea off of Waterfront is still angry, all white froth and brown with runoff.

Hurricane Owen has left the remains of his work everywhere, exploiting every weak spot with his fury. He has rolled boulders onto roads, stripped trees bare, strewn debris across hillsides, torn old telephone poles from the ground, tossed ornamental palm trees into the sea, and demolished a few uninhabited old buildings, their carcasses stinking and wet under a gray sky.

The drone passes over a flooded street near the Windward Passage Hotel, not too far from the Charlotte Amalie

Harbor. Already, people are outside along the flooded street, walking around, assessing the damage.

Stevens' phone rings, and she answers. "Talk fast," she says.

"People are clearing debris along Theodore Boschulte Drive," Common says. "Could use some hands."

"On the way," Stevens tells the AI.

I can't help but notice how casual Stevens' tone is, like she is talking to another person. But I understand the intimacy. Common is a precious resource here, a significant component of their commonwealth, a lifesaver.

The strong AI doesn't respond again, just hangs up. I hand Dr. Stevens the viewfinder, and she calls the drone down. "Better get to it," she says, "if we want to be done by lunchtime."



THE NIGHT OF OWEN, we wait out the storm at the Solberg Community Center. During Category 5 storms like this one, some of the island's houses and better-funded community centers will use a battery bank to keep their power uninterrupted. Solberg Center has coolers to keep our drinks cold and a portable stove to heat our packaged meals, but that's about it.

My companions, Dr. Stevens and her father, Joseph "Tall Man" Stevens, are both completely at home during hurricanes, accustomed to riding them out by lantern light. It is different to live with hurricanes as they have, to know them by name in casual conversation. Hurricanes are so common here that they can mark time with them. Soon, Owen will be another marker, time partitioned into before Owen and after.

I've covered six hurricanes, and I'm still incapable of such calm. I've heard people describe the sound of a hurricane as a jet engine up close. For me, a hurricane sounds like a train packed with the dead, their song and the train's ghostly whistle rising in unison. As Hurricane Owen rages over St. Thomas, I think about all of the dead of storms past, their voices snatched up in the wind and carried away, only to return as passengers on a journey they can never end.

My unease must be palpable because Tall Man — as he insists on being called — suggests we start a game of dominoes to pass time. He spills the dominoes out on the table and shuffles, and then we pull our hand from the mess of tiles. As we play, we talk, my companions — in typical islander fashion — slamming their dominoes on the table. Dr. Stevens tells funny stories, and we all laugh. Her laugh is pitched high and melodic, like a singing bird, like her father's. I imagine this laugh has been passed down through the Stevens family like a precious heirloom.

Sometime during our games, I talk about my only marker: Hurricane Irma. It devastated the island back in 2017, crippling St. Thomas and St. John for several months. Many mark that hurricane season as the first sign of things to come, but I mark it as the one that changed my life. Before Irma, I was a quiet, relatively happy child. After Irma, a lot of things changed. I don't tell my companions about the crippling depression. I tell them that when my father lost his job, we sold our house and moved to Raleigh: an evasion and the truth.

"That used to happen a lot after storms," Dr. Stevens says. "And then people from all over would come and buy up property on the cheap."

“We sold our home to a local family,” I say. I put down a tile from my hand without thinking.

“You letting Nancy rattle you,” Tall Man says, slamming down a tile. “You in trouble now.” The light shines on one half of his face, revealing a mock-sinister grin.

With my unknowing help, Tall Man and Stevens have placed a four on both sides of the snaking tiles of dominoes. I don’t have any fours to play. I haven’t played dominoes since I was a kid, so it is abundantly clear I have no idea what I’m doing.

“I pass,” I say, putting up my hands in defeat. Outside, the shutters on the windows rattle as Owen blares steadily, the ghost train hurtling down the track. Some unknown debris slams against the side of the house and drags.

Stevens slams down a double four, and then a moment after says, “It took us a long time to get our land back.”

I lose that game and several after, but the conversation is good, so I stay awake. We talk about those old Wild West days when disaster capitalism grabbed up Caribbean land struggling to survive the bombardments of hurricane seasons. Islands with weak infrastructures suffered more from this sort of poaching. The US Virgin Islands always had long recoveries after big storms, which only got worse when Category 5 hurricanes came more frequently.

“We had to get smart real fast,” says Dr. Stevens. “Did you know we were one of the first to use Common for hurricanes?”

I shake my head. No, I didn’t.

Throughout the night, I’ve noticed Stevens asking her smartphone how various communities are doing. The voice that answers back on the speaker isn’t very different from Dr. Stevens’: St. Thomian English, though a bit more standard, deep but womanly. Savan is fine, the strong AI

responds. No damage in Bordeaux. Minimal flooding in Red Hook. No damage in Smith Bay.

On St. Thomas, like many other places ravaged by seasonal natural disasters, Common has been adapted to the challenge of disaster relief. I want to ask Stevens more about Common, but I'm distracted again. I think I can hear a woman singing in the wind, and it makes my skin buzz with fear and memory.

Stevens puts a hand on my shoulder and tells me that everything is up to code and that I am safe. "Our commonwealth strong. Big part of our budget goes to disaster preparedness, so we ready when monsters come howling in their season."

When she says this, it has the ring of an adult telling a child there's nothing under the bed. It is condescending but also interesting, idiosyncratic. I write it down in my notebook.

ON JUNE 17TH 2048, exactly two months before Hurricane Owen hit the island of St. Thomas, the World Cooperative Council (WCC) announced that the global cooperative commonwealth movement had achieved many of its long-term goals ahead of 2050. At the same time, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change published a report that surprised no one: we are doing a great job with greenhouse emissions, but the Earth is still getting warmer.

It shouldn't be surprising that the places most ravaged by climate change are the places where the cooperative commonwealth has been most realized. St. Thomas is one of those places, due in part to the grassroots consensus

politics, direct democracy, and cooperative institutions that make up any good solidarity economy, but also plain necessity. Worker cooperatives line St. Thomas' Main Street. Housing cooperatives dot the hillsides of Solberg, Northside, and Bordeaux. Most of the island's grocery stores are multi-stakeholder cooperatives that have strong relationships with local farmers. St. Thomas' many industries are part of regional federations, engaged in worker exchange programs, skill-sharing, and other forms of worker solidarity.

St. Thomas still feels like the one of my childhood, but edited somehow, like some godhand has painted over everything, remade the island in ways both subtle and infinite. The roads are the same, though the familiar potholes I remember have been filled in, the blemishes made smooth. The houses are the same odd marriage of American and Danish architecture, but they're somewhat bigger now, with more people in them, living in their various cooperative arrangements. The culture, too, has managed to stay both the same and ethereal in its difference. The islanders are brusque like I remember, but quicker to smile, their working habits still relaxed but markedly more efficient and egalitarian in their distribution of labor.

On paper, the difference is clearer. In my notes, I have written down specific numbers about St. Thomas' cooperative commonwealth. Ninety percent of the island's businesses and 76 percent of their land are collectively owned. Half of that land is set up as land trusts providing free or affordable housing. St. Thomas has three credit unions and a public bank. They get their power from a public utility managed by elected citizens. None of this cooperative infrastructure was present in my childhood.

Each community on St. Thomas has its own collec-

tively owned foundation, and every worker cooperative kicks 3 percent of their revenue to the St. Thomas Fund, the federation of all the community foundations. The Virgin Islands Fund receives money from all of the cooperatives on St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John. The V.I. Fund, in turn, kicks 1 percent of their foundation money to the Fund of the West Indies (FWI).

Together, they've built decentralized solar and wind microgrid systems that can be secured, covered, or dismantled before storms, and they have installed state-of-the-art roof fasteners and window shutters on most buildings. "The V.I. Fund has been funding research into forms of hurricane resilient architecture for almost three decades," says Sandra Otis, one of the members of the Fund. "We've even begun to replace damaged roofs with geodesic domes."

In every community, there is a center stocked with resources residents can pick up without cost as well as small clinics with doctors and nurses on staff. Dr. Stevens is one of these doctors. She lives and works at her community center in Solberg. The arrangement, she tells me, is typical in the Virgin Islands. "We know the community, and they know us. Keeps things honest."

I used to live in Solberg. The community I remember was always tight-knit — I could walk down the street and ask for a cup of sugar or take a couple of my neighbor's mangoes — but nothing like this. I try to reconcile this Solberg with the one from my past. I churn over my raw edges like a mollusk coating its pain with layers of nacre.

In my notebook, the evidence of my private war is scrawled in desperate strokes:

Heart aches for a past like this present, for all the precious things lost on the way.

And in different ink, in reply: *You weren't here. You have no right.*

And then, finally, sharply underlined, just one word, a name I never speak aloud: *Anna.*

THE FINAL PUZZLE piece of St. Thomas' transformation is Common, the open-sourced artificial intelligence based on the principle of accessible knowledge. The strong AI gets its name from "the commons," a concept of public ownership of resources for the collective good. Common is governed by a federation of collective institutions from all over the world that are devoted to the mission of AI as a public resource. Anyone can add knowledge to Common, and there is a democratic process to building the hardware necessary to carry the AI. Common is decentralized and spread across all of the devices that run its software. Tech cooperatives create vessels to hold the AI — from literal black boxes to giant robots — but most people use practical vessels like smartphones and watches.

St. Thomas has a home-share and ride-share program managed through Common, but they also update their stock of hurricane relief resources through the AI. "Way back when, we used to talk about all that we lost after a hurricane," Dr. Stevens says as we make the 20-minute trek to Theodore Boschulte Drive. "But now we talk about what we have, what we can give to each other."

Common can provide regular updates of clean-up efforts and forward help requests. It can notify first responders in times of emergency. When we arrive at Theodore Boschulte Drive, two dozen people are already working on our stretch of road, clearing debris. We join in,

and Dr. Stevens doesn't waste any time before chatting up everyone.

"She came down for the hurricane season," Stevens says, pointing at me.

"What, you get a death wish or something?" the man asks.

I tell him that journalists do it all the time. Get in early before devastation makes it difficult, "to be there when relief efforts begin."

"Good," the man says, throwing a pile of branches down the soft shoulder. "But I like that you helping. That does go further down here."

"She used to live on Rock," Stevens says. "A local girl."

I tense up unconsciously. I wait.

The man looks right at me. "Oh? When you leave?"

"After Irma," I say. "I was a kid," I add defensively.

He looks at me in a way that isn't cruel or kind. "You got out early then. Good for you."

For the next hour, I'm nervous, but the man's demeanor doesn't change, and so I get over myself. I continue moving debris off the road.

By noon, we're just about to go back to the Solberg Center for food. Then Stevens' phone starts ringing again.

"House call," Common says. It gives an address on one of the unnamed roads of upper Solberg.

"One more stop," Stevens says. "Just up the way."

I watch her, knowing how relative of a statement that is. But when she starts walking, I follow. As we walk, I ask Stevens about other uses for Common. She tells me that residents of the Virgin Islands value Common so much in times of crisis that some VI residents have given Common permission to watch them 24/7.

When Stevens tells me this, my jaw drops.

Stevens laughs in her characteristic way, whooping loudly and slapping me on the back. “You should see your face. I know maybe like two people that does do that all year. Everyone else does it during storms.”

Common was created to get away from the fears of surveillance by proprietary AIs, but even Common has been the subject of heated debates. As Common gains complexity, people worry about what it knows and what it could do with that knowledge.

Common can be accessed through its platform online. On the platform’s front end, users can see the questions Common has been asking, its level of certainty about their answers, and categorized lists of all its confirmed knowledge. People can make suggestions to Common on the platform, add bits of nuance that Common can then go on to confirm through its own inquiries. Common is thorough, not committing anything to true knowledge until it has confirmed it hundreds or thousands of times, and even then, it is constantly challenging its knowledge, poking at what it thinks it knows. This is such a massive and slow process that most people don’t bother tracking it. They just add their thoughts and ask Common the questions later to see what it has learned. Graduate students will occasionally publish papers on a subset of data and move on with their careers.

On the back end of the platform lies a mind-boggling amount of code. Anyone can look at this code, but only democratically elected masters can make alterations. In the early days, they may have adjusted the code once or twice a year when they identified problems, but even the highly specialized masters have stopped tinkering. “Any master will tell you, we have no idea what’s in there anymore,” says Julian Bray, a master of over 20 years.

“We’re pretty Zen about it. We accept the code like we accept gravity.”

Common still has glitches, but Common fixes them fairly quickly, and it is eerie how little they occur. “There’s a ghost in that machine,” says Bray. “We just don’t know how to read its code.”

A lot of masters become spiritualists this way. A few of them even worship Common unironically. It is an easy temptation.

“Common is like what the solar eclipse was to ancient humans,” says Dr. Karen Brooks, a professor at MIT’s Machine Learning Institute. “Only difference is, we may never understand, never catch up. Common may speed ahead of us until the end of time.”

Common is singular and plural, a superconsciousness and a cooperative of individuated minds. Each individual Common is different, with its own share of private and public information. It never shares private data with people, but it does remember if it gets permission. Private data helps it tailor its actions to specific users, but it may help Common acquire knowledge we can’t even imagine yet.

Video is tricky since it grants Common the permission to remember anything in the frame. Privacy advocates who believe Common is self-aware think all-access video feeds are dangerous.

I tell Dr. Stevens this, and she stares at me like I grew another head. “What is she going to do? Plan an uprising with knowledge of the contents of my living room?”

I don’t know what to say, so I say nothing. I just note the pronoun.

“I could give you three cases of Common saving someone’s life because she see something happen,” she

says. "Video is good data. Researchers use it all the time."

"In labs."

"That's dumb. Real-life data is more useful."

I ask her if Common was watching us last night. She shakes her head. "We don't do that with guests. It's rude."

We turn down a small, thin road, and we are there. We bang on the door and yell out. The whole scene gives me a sense of *déjà vu*, right up to when we have to jimmy the door open.

We find an old man sprawled out on the couch in pajama pants and a white T-shirt. He doesn't look like he is sleeping. Stevens makes a sucking sound with her teeth.

I ask for the man's identity, and she gives me a nickname. "Been in the community a while. Move over from out Country. Annas Retreat, I think. Shit." She looks at me. "You okay?"

I swallow hard and close my eyes, nodding.

"Common," she calls out.

"Back here," says an androgynous voice, different from the one on her phone.

Stevens walks through the house to a back room. I follow behind her, my heart racing. I brace myself for another body, but we enter an empty bedroom with a blown-out window. Stevens sashes her way across the flooded bedroom and inspects the window. After a few seconds, she turns to me. "The window shutter gone. Must have been ripped off by the storm. It happens."

"I couldn't hear where he went," says Common. "The wind was blowing all night. He didn't come back for me, so I thought something was wrong."

Common is at the end of a bookshelf near the door, nestled against a stack of books. The books on the bottom

shelf are likely damaged beyond repair, but Common is a few shelves up, safe and dry. This Common is a pretty standard model: a black box.

Stevens makes her way back across the room and picks Common up, and we go back to the living room.

I try not to look at the body as Stevens inspects it. She makes soft noises to herself before saying, in a way that feels too matter-of-fact, the cause of death: “Heart attack.”

“I should have called you sooner,” Common says. It is sitting on the table next to me, so when it talks, I jump.

“Why you didn’t?” Stevens asks.

“Sometimes he sleeps late.”

“Not your fault then.”

“I recommended he stay with Tanya next door,” Common adds. “She offered.”

“What he say?”

“He refused.”

“Not your fault either.”

As all this happens, I’m breathing through my mouth. I think I can smell something, and whatever it is disturbs me.

“I should have insisted,” Common says.

“Stop that,” Stevens says.

I’m so turned into myself, I miss what Stevens says next, and before I catch on, she’s out the door. I turn just in time to see it close. Bewilderment passes over me and then anger at being left behind. “Where did she go?” I ask Common.

“To get help,” it says.

I’m nervous and a bit frightened so I ask Common a question I wouldn’t have if I were in my right mind. “Are you sad?”

After a long pause, Common says, "He told me stories. He answered my questions. And now he's gone."

"I lost a close friend during a hurricane."

"I'm so sorry." Its voice is delicate, tentative.

"It was a long time ago," I say. "But I think about her a lot, especially in times like this."

I think Common will opt for something typical, inoffensive and unmemorable. But instead, it says, "Is that why you left the island?"

I pause, gaping. I don't know how it knows this. Finally, I say yes. "I never thought I'd ever come back here."

"Your work," it starts and then pauses for a few beats, mimicking hesitance. "Your work is a kindness, especially in times like this. I'm glad you came back."

I glare at the box. "Thank you."

"Have you considered staying?" Common asks. "We could use you."

I consider the "we" here, trying to decide what it means. I settle on the island, the community. "I will think about it," I lie.

Common is quiet for a moment. Then it says, "I hope you do, Terry."

This time, I say nothing.

"It was a pleasure meeting you."

"You, too."

"Can I remember this conversation?"

I consider the question for a long time. Then I shrug. "Okay."

Common stops speaking and lets the silence fill the room. And so I remember the dead body. I close my eyes and feel my way toward the door. I step out into bright sunlight and fresh air.

Moments later, Stevens returns with a stretcher and four people. They go inside, and I start walking back to the Solberg Center so I can give myself time to stop crying.

AS A KID, I would go over to Anna's house. Anna was a kind old lady with a beautiful singing voice and two mutts that also had approached old age. In the afternoons while my father worked, I'd go over and play with the dogs, Blue Bug and Johny John, and have long conversations with Anna about her life. She told me stories, too, about her history, about growing up in a large family of six siblings, going to church on Sundays, having crushes with boys at school, going to college and falling in love with her husband, Forrest. He was long dead now. They had considered having children but never got around to it. She didn't seem sad by this.

Anna wrote poems that she would show to me. I read each one and memorized some of them. I'd recite them for her as she sat in the living room, listening intently, smiling with encouragement. I wrote my own poems, too, and I read them using an embarrassing poetry voice I'd acquired and used for a long time after. "I love it," she'd say and would take some memorable bit of that poem and commit it to song, her voice trembling sweetly.

Anna's porch always smelled like dog waste. She didn't walk the dogs, so they went anywhere. She fed them out of bowls cut from the bottom half of gallon water bottles. Every couple weeks, she got a mop with water and soap and she'd clean the porch off. Blue Bug and Johny John seemed perfectly content, but sometimes I walked the

dogs so they could do their business elsewhere, and before long, I started cleaning Anna's porch, too.

Sometimes Anna complained of neighbors coming into her home and stealing things. She never accused me or my father. She had a bitter rivalry with one neighbor down the road, whom, Anna recounted, would glare at her when passing. "That Man" — as Anna always referred to him — was one of the thieves. He had encouraged other neighbors to steal from her. I now suspect this was an early symptom of the confusion that grew in her over time. But Anna lived alone, and I still believe she might have been harassed, partly because I believe almost everything Anna told me. Something in me cannot part with her version of events.

My father worked all the time, so he didn't have a relationship with Anna. He didn't seem to mind me going over to her house. "Just be home by sunset" was his directive, even if he wasn't. I often cheated and didn't go home until he texted me that he was on his way.

When we were preparing for Irma's arrival, I casually suggested that Anna should come over and stay with us. I don't remember my father responding, and I didn't ask again. I was 12 and considered myself a little adult, but that night when Irma came, I hid in my closet, and listened to Irma scream and batter the door. We were lucky. There was some flooding, my father's car had been damaged, and Irma had taken our porch rail as a token, but we were safe.

I immediately went to check on Anna. I knocked on the windows. I jumped over the little gate to get onto her porch. I knocked on the door and called out. The dogs were barking but no Anna. I was terrified, so I knocked on all the doors up and down the street. That Man came and

forced the door open with a crowbar, splintering the wood. The dogs rushed outside, wet and shaken. The house reeked of wet dog smell and urine. No Anna.

Sometime later, I found Anna in the bushes. She had been struck with something in the back of her head.

“Some flying debris,” That Man said when I showed him the body. “She must have been confused.”

It was you, I thought. I learned later that dementia explained a lot of her behavior, so I eventually put that conspiracy away. But I still question myself, and worse, I question what I could have done. I think: *I should have insisted*. But back then, it wasn't as common to invite neighbors into your home to wait out hurricanes.

I didn't know what would happen, I tell myself.

WHEN I WALK into the center, Tall Man is sitting on the couch. “How it go?” he asks me.

I don't mention the body. Instead, I tell him that I'm thinking about coming home. It is an evasion and the truth.

“Then come on,” Tall Man says. “We could use you.”

Only then do I realize Common did not answer my question about feeling sad. I do not know if Common is truly capable of sadness, but now I see the evasion for what it is. Some would say that it is uniquely human to withhold feelings, to keep in, to protect one's tender places. Oftentimes, we use other truths to misdirect. “He told me stories,” instead of “I'm sad.” “I didn't know what would happen,” instead of “My heart is broken and always will be.”

We hide most of ourselves inside the privacy of our

minds. Common hides, too, inside a web of artificial neural networks and streams of near-infinite code. The method is somewhat different, but the result is the same: a black box.

I shouldn't be trusted with an answer to this conundrum; I am compromised by my own contradictions. But my instincts tell me to let some things remain unknown, let some heart-breaks linger, as long as they're useful, as long as when the threats come they help us meet them.

The future is filled with monster storms just waiting for their names. We won't come out unharmed. But there will be a time before and a time after.

REPATRIATION

Nalo Hopkinson

INCREDULOUS, I LOOKED UP AT THE VAST WHITE STEEL bulk of the ship that was docked in the harbour. “A cruise, Jerry?” I said. “You really taking me on a *cruise* for my birthday?”

“Yes, Carlton. Stop fretting, nuh man? You going to like this one. I promise.”

My husband had lost his goddamned mind. We both grew up as boys watching the cruise ships dock at our island, stinking the port up with the smell of tarry bunker fuel, disgorging tourists from foreign who would party for a few hours before jumping back on their travelling hotels for the next port of call. We would stare at them, our fingers clenched in the diamond-shaped holes of the chain link fencing that prevented us locals from accessing our own port unless we were working for the cruise line and could show papers to prove it. Grew up witnessing the fierce competition for much-needed tourist dollars that encrusted the port: hundreds of stalls selling the same tired tat, cheap plastic dolls and brightly-coloured clothing mass-produced in factories a-foreign and stamped with our

country's name; the bars inside the protected cruise ship zone where the drinks had cutesy names and dj's put on their best American accents to spin the same twelve pop songs that had had any reference to race or class edited out. *Play that funky music, bleep bleep.* So why the rass he thought I would want to join the Empire side of the Force for my 40th birthday? Become one of those heedless, spendy foreigners who worked hard all year and just wanted a week of vacation with everything done for them? Who thought they were seeing the "real" Caribbean from their sheltered enclaves? Who kept parroting on about how beautiful the weather was, not seeing the pollution choking the harbour and the poverty and globalisation choking the islands they visited?

I couldn't even hate them. They were just people, making what choices they could see in the belly of the same old shitsem beast that's devouring our planet. I hated what they represented. Just because we were living a-foreign now didn't mean we were like them. We'd had to move to America because rising water levels and global warming were destroying our region, stealing health and hope and life. Didn't mean we had to parade around like...

Hang on. The people in the line all around us, waiting to go through the Florida Customs checkpoint to walk onto the ship. Their skins; black and brown like ours. Their voices; the same accent as ours. Their faces; alive with excitement, joy.

I tapped Jerry on the shoulder. "Wait. Where exactly we going?"

He smiled his secret smile. "You'll see. It's a surprise."

I hated surprises. He'd been making me more grumpy with every passing week leading up to this birthday. Filling suitcase after suitcase with things he said we would need

for this mysterious trip. Grabbing the mail from the mailbox before I could see it.

We were getting close to the front of the checkpoint, a bank of tall desks behind which people in uniforms looked down on the crowd, frowned at our papers, peered at our faces, asked intrusive questions, stamped our passports. The usual apprehension that came with crossing official American borders as a Black, gay man was making a knot in my belly. I fumbled in my wallet for my passport. "My ticket! Where's my ticket?"

Jerry patted my arm. "I have it, lover."

"But we each have to hold our own tickets and identification! That's how it always is!"

"Relax, nuh man?" Over my protests, he marched right up to the white-looking woman behind the desk, put both our tickets down on the desk in front of her, indicated me with his thumb, and said, "His 40th birthday present. I trying to keep it secret as long as I can."

She favoured him with a generically stern gaze and reached an upturned palm to me, beckoning impatiently. "Come on. Your passport."

I handed it to her, made my smile friendly. She looked us both up and down, stared at our passport pictures, shone her little blue flashlight onto our tickets. I tried to see what destination was written on them, but Jerry leaned towards a little closer, blocking my view. She handed Jerry our documents and waved us past her to a row of xray machines.

I put my suitcase onto the conveyor belt. I took off my shoes and belt and put them there, too. I wondered, not for the first time, how many old Jewish people had PTSD flashbacks over that particular ritual. All around us, our fellow travellers were laughing and joking. I saw more than

one large cardboard box bursting at the seams go through the scanner, held together by rolls and rolls of tape. You know when you live a-foreign, you haffe bring back plenty goods for the people back home when you going to visit. “Jerry? Where are all those suitcases you been filling up for the past month?”

He pecked my cheek. “Waiting for us in the hold. I sent them on ahead a few days ago.”

Once we'd both made it through the scanner and facial recognition, I relaxed a bit. Before we moved on, I kissed him back. “I'm dying of curiosity,” I said.

“Soon.”

We and the other passengers bustled up a covered, switchbacked walkway, higher and higher, pulling/carrying/dragging our luggage with us. Pretty soon, I was breathing hard, thankful my suitcase was a hoverdeck that glided along behind me, keeping pace like a loyal dog. “This an exercise vacation?” I joked.

“You know me too love seeing you sweat.”

The climb seemed endless, but it was probably only ten minutes later that we were on a long steel gangway beside the floating mountain that was the cruise ship. Up close, I could see its hull wasn't as pristine as it had first appeared. There were patches of rust here and there. Women and men in black slacks and short-sleeved white shirts greeted us and herded us along. “Welcome, welcome. Glad you're taking this beautiful trip with us.” Seemed they all had our accent. I bristled at the benign re-enactment of centuries of Black servitude, shamefaced at how comfortable I found it to be on its receiving end. As much to identify myself as a countryman as for the pleasure of it, I let myself relax into the familiar speech rhythms and manners of home as I returned the servers'

greetings: "How do, Ma'am? Me? I deh-deh, you know how it is."

They checked our tickets, directed people to berths via elevators and stairs fore and aft, port and starboard. Now Jerry and I were navigating a narrow corridor flanked by numbered doors of individual berths. Looked like the corridor used to be panelled. Now it was exposed steel piping, painted the same flaking white as the ship's hull. Jerry saw me frowning at it. He said, "So, there's this stuff called biorock."

"Sounds like a tween band from the Children's Television Network. Skin-teeth grins, watered down street dance. Bad rap about the ABC's and not judging people by their looks."

"Wow. I can see you going to be big fun on this trip."

I was being an idiot. "Sorry, sorry."

The uniforms were different in this part of the ship. Now, every few metres we were greeted by a smiling brown person in black slacks and a Hawaiian-style shirt emblazoned with hula girls, coconut trees, and the name of the cruise line. I muttered to Jerry, "I just feel like I'm on a seagoing plantation."

"I know. It grinds my gears, too. I keep reminding myself that these people are employees, not slaves."

"A seagoing tourist resort, then."

"And we are in the 21st Century, after all." He sighed. "At least they don't whip the help any more."

"So why you bring us on this nightmare cruise, then?"

"I had a good reason. Soon tell you."

We'd reached our berth. The door scanned our faces, bonged a big red X on its screen facing Jerry, with an image of a dancing top hat. Jerry sucked his teeth impatiently. "To rass. They still can't make them smart enough

to recognize someone wearing a hat?" He took off his baseball cap. The door rewarded him with a big green checkmark, tinnily chimed the notes of a soca tune, and clicked open for us. *Matilda, you take me money and gone with a bleep man.*

Our room was compact, clean, if the white sheets on the bed were a bit thin. We even had a sliding glass door facing the ocean, and a little Juliet balcony we could step out onto.

We started unpacking.

The ship's horn sounded from outside, loud and deep as a kraken's call. The ship began slowly pulling out of port. Excited despite myself, I grinned at Jerry. I held my hand out to him. "Come for a walk on the main deck with me?"



BLASTED SHIP WAS SO big its main deck had streets. With names. And shops on those streets. Bakeries. Cafes. Jewellers. Pharmacies.

Something wasn't quite right, though. More than half the shops were closed and boarded up. And everything looked just a little bit, well, shabby. I said to Jerry, "This ship name The Banana Boat, or what? They keep the worst one in reserve for the Black people?"

"It will be better soon."

"Yeah? Something to do with the thing you were talking about - what it name? The prog rock? The gyp rock?"

He chuckled. "You getting closer. They use it for building marine structures."

From far above our heads, speakers blared out two

tones. "This is your captain Hazel Joiner speaking." I could hear the same message echoing from berths up and down the corridor. "Our cruising speed will top out at 30 knots to cover the distance of 964 nautical miles in just over a day. Please join me at 8 bells – that's 8pm – in the Admiralty Ballroom, where Chef Gaetan Boitano and his staff will be pleased to serve their last official meal here aboard The Cetacean of the Seas en route to Falmouth, Jamaica."

"Their last meal? The whole kitchen staff quitting en masse?"

"Biorock is a marvellous thing, you see?" He was leading me to an elevator. "Come. Up to the top deck." In the elevator, he continued, "If you put up a steel framework underwater, and run a light, harmless current through it, the current will unrust any rusty parts. Then the fence will go white from calcium deposits."

The view from the open upper deck was insane. Who puts three massive waterpark-style freshwater pools on a ship? With 3-metre tall water features in neon colours? Scores of children waded, screeching in glee, through them.

I looked at the vast pool deck, at the ocean below, rushing by at 30 knots per hour. "So much water, and they make a fake beach. No more beaches at the edge of Falmouth Town, though." Global warning brought super-tornados which had eroded the sand away. Polar ice cap melts had raised water levels enough to permanently flood so many of our coastal cities.

There was a raised runway stage with an aerobics class in full progress on it, complete with boom-ch music issuing from the chest of the class instructor, one of the newest generation of nimble robots-that-can-do-parcour.

No, not one of the newest. Every so often a rotor somewhere in its body jammed, and it got stuck for a second.

“Why we going Jamaica, Jerry, in this bucket of bolts? I thought cruise ships didn't land at Falmouth any more?”

People reclined everywhere in deck chairs, while smiling staff brought them snacks and umbrella drinks.

He took me to the railing, as close to the bow as we could get. The giving sea, the killing sea, floated under and around us many storeys below. “After the electrical current lays down calcium on the steel frame,” he told me, “coral and marine plants grow on it, faster and healthier than before. The coral resists bleaching, even if the water gets too warm. Oysters that grow on it are fat, their shells thick and healthy. Starfish stop melting.”

“Starfish are melting now?” I asked, horrified.

A little boy careened past us, laughing to beat the band and chased merrily by a woman who looked to be his grandmother.

Jerry continued, “If you create a floating biorock reef in front of a dying one and an eroded beach, it will help filter pollutants out of the water. And it acts as a brake when storm surges come through. It mutes the wave action and deposits sand. It builds the beach back up, Carlton! New, clean beaches and coral reefs. Best part? It only takes months to see the difference. Scarcely a handful of years to restore the damage, clean the seas. We going to have Falmouth back!”

“We going on a working vacation, then?” I joked. “You going to have me laying down chicken wire in the slimy water outside Falmouth?”

He leaned out and pointed. His face was a lit with joy as those of our fellow passengers. “Look, Carlton.”

Stretched out in a diagonal line beside us was a row of rusting cruise ships, all heading the same way we were.

“Is what a gwan?” I asked.

“These ships all old,” he replied. “Old steel. Time for them to get decommissioned now. When we disembark at Falmouth, the ships going to back off and moor just past the dead reef; the reef the cruise line pulverized in the first place to make a port here. They going to sink the ships to just below the water. And start running a harmless electrical current through them. You understand what happening now?”

I breathed in wonder. “They restoring the waters off Falmouth!”

“Yeah, man.”

“But if our ship sink, how we going to get back?”

“I had everything we value packed into the hold. All these passengers did. Sweetie, we not on a cruise.” Gently, he took me by the shoulders and turned me to face him. There were tears in his eyes. “If we want to stay, we can stay. We going home.”

FINAL NOTE: THE "BIOROCK" process for regrowing coral reefs and restoring beaches described in this story was co-invented by Jamaican scientist Dr. Thomas Goreau, President of the Global Coral Reef Alliance: <https://www.globalcoral.org/10-years-ago-on-gaia-discovery-thomas-goreau-on-coral-restoration-with-biorock/>

CASCADURA

H. K. Williams

IT IS THE MORNING OF THE INTERVIEW AND I WAKE UP to the smell of vomit. There on the floor, right next to my face, is a puddle of sleeping pills half melted in bile. How many did I take? I see the bottle under the bed and in reaching for it, I push it further away. Doesn't matter, they didn't work. Not that I expected them to, but it has become a habit to hope. Too tired to move, I remain propped against the bedframe. Failed suicides are exhausting.

"Syndra."

My house-bot glides into the room and greets me with her metallic staccato. "Good morning, Renae."

I really have to get her voicebox fixed.

When she sees the mess, she immediately gets down on her knees and begins cleaning, so I pull myself up onto the bed and out of her way. I have to be in the studio by noon, but the cool sheets are a welcome relief after spending the night contorted on the floor.

My handheld lies dormant on the pillow. There are no messages. Jackson hasn't replied, but the video he sent last

night is cued for replay. He wants to run it before we begin the interview. One tap and an image of Jackson in soft focus projects onto the bedroom wall. His voice, weighted with gravitas, asks, "What would you do if you realised you could not die?" I mute the sound; no need for the melodrama with the memories. He fades from view and the montage silently continues with pictures from my wedding.

Richard and I in front of City Hall – he in his light-grey suit (he never liked wearing dark colours, since he figured they did not go well with his saponilla complexion), me in a knee-length white dress. Richard smiling at the camera, me smiling at him, our friends smiling at us in the background. The picture then morphs into our first interview, a couple of weeks after we received confirmation. My features unchanged, his beard slightly salted by then. My geneticist Dr. Klein beaming at me as he explained to the world how my cells have stopped aging, refusing to die even when exposed to the most virulent diseases.

"I am cautiously optimistic," he declared. "However, I am certain that Renae holds the key to human longevity."

They never found the key in time for Richard. I see myself in the video in an old press photo at his funeral. I stop the clip and the image fades from the wall. Cancer. We never had children; it seemed that I could only retain life, not give it. Richard always said that he didn't mind, that we would be our own legacy. Even now I can never get used to the cool emptiness on the left side of the bed.

"What would you like for breakfast?"

Syndra, finished with the cleaning, displays today's menu from her hand.

"Just coffee. Thanks."

Strong and black. Of course, now it is made from synthetic beans, but after all these years mankind has not found a better drink. Maybe I can say that in the interview. She returns with the steaming mug, which I take to the window. It is raining below. Lightning blossoms through the dark grey clouds hundreds of feet below. On days like these I am grateful to have a rent-controlled apartment above the weather. Those living on the lower levels will have to activate their rain shields. But even that is better than living in the inner core of a sky-tower. There, one is engulfed by the dimly lit darkness, which is punctuated by the noise and lights from the sky trains.

“Any messages, Syndra?”

“There are no new messages.”

I am starting to feel anxious. Why hasn't he sent over the question list?

“Would you like me to put you through to the studio?”

“No, never mind; bring my closet.”

She joins me at the window and displays a holographic image of my closet; selecting a long-sleeved navy-blue dress for my approval.

“It's slimming, and covers your scars.”

She knows I'm self-conscious about the two keloid scars which formed after I slit my wrists. I am sure Jackson will bring it up; and the media circus that followed. He will lean in, probably even hold my hand, and say something like: “I know it must have been hard for you, knowing that your husband and loved ones have passed on, leaving you behind.”

Camera two will zoom in for a close-up, anticipating tears.

“Is that why you tried to take your own life? Did you ever try again?”

My life is now entertainment. I only agreed to do this for the money. Longevity is expensive.

“Your taxi will be here in exactly seventeen and a half minutes,” Syndra announces.

“Bring me another cup of coffee.”

“You will be late,” she counters.

“They’ll wait.”

As the world’s oldest living human, all I have is time.

“TAKE me to Sky Tower Ten in the Metropolitan quadrant, level 187.”

An hour later and I am making my way through the inter-tower highway to Aexus Studios. Usually I take the sky trains when I need to go out, but not today. My face appears in the 3D Holo-ads promoting tonight’s interview, so I’ll be easily recognised.

Hovercycles dart in and out of the traffic. People stand along the moving pavements on their way to back to work from lunch. Most stare ahead blankly as they drift through the countless ads popping up in their path. It really isn’t that much different from when I came to New York over two centuries ago. Back then it was said that you could always pick out a stranger in New York City. Tourists looked up. New Yorkers looked ahead.

Winter was early that year, and I was not prepared. The boots I salvaged from the Goodwill were too loose around my ankles, so snow kept getting in. I needed a job. My options, even with a bachelor’s degree, were taking care of either an elderly person or a baby. One way or the other, it would involve diapers.

“Why you sounding so?” was always the first question

my mother asked when I called home; “When you coming back?” the last. I couldn’t tell her the truth: that I was lonely and earning much less than I had anticipated. The Rosens – the couple who eventually hired me to care for their twin girls – were nice enough, but they both worked long hours in Manhattan, so I hardly saw them.

“When you coming back?”

“I just need to save a little more money.”

“When you coming back?”

“As soon as the girls finish school.”

She had stopped asking after I had stayed away for three years.

My face pops up in front of me. I’d forgotten to ask the driver to turn off the Holo-ads. Here I am, smiling, cheek to cheek with talk-show host Jackson Ross.

“Join me tonight for my exclusive one-on-one with Renae Celestine, the world’s oldest living human. Find out what life was like before the Shifts. Does she hold the key to our survival as a species? Tune in on...”

“Can you turn off the ads, please?”

“Sure, no problem. So what do you think about that Renae woman? You’re going to the studio, right? You work there?”

I keep silent, avoiding his eyes as he glances at me through the rear-view mirror.

“I tried to get a ticket for the studio audience, but I wasn’t picked. I’m really into history, so I wanted to meet her, you know.”

I toy with the idea of introducing myself just to see his reaction, but he continues: “Imagine, she lived outside. I mean, now they’re saying that the gases are decreasing, but that might take years, you know, centuries, even before we can live outside. I mean, two hundred and seventy-five

years! Can you imagine? Most of us are lucky to pass fifty. I wonder if they will ever figure out what is so special about her DNA. It might be too late for us, but the next generation, or maybe the one after that, could live forever.”

I glimpse his face through the rear-view mirror and notice the crow's feet at his eyes and the deep creases bracketing his mouth. He cannot be less than thirty. More than half his life gone. He dyed his hair green, and it clashes with his caramel-coloured skin.

“Don't you think she probably suffered through enough experiments – and for what? They still aren't any closer to figuring it out. They say her survival is a mystery. For all we know, she might be just as fed up of living as you are of watching people die.”

“Nah, nobody wants to die,” he counters with a grin. “Besides, she witnessed everything. It must have been so exciting...”

“Exciting? Exciting?! The earthquakes, the entire planet falling apart, billions dying. I thought everyone was going to die, I thought I was going to be the only one left...”

I stop talking, realising that we have stopped moving. My outburst seems to echo in the cab.

“I can't believe it's actually you... I didn't mean to... I'm sorry... I didn't realise...”

I stop him before he can utter any more incomplete sentences.

“It's fine. Can we go? I'm already late as it is.”

“Yeah, sure, sure.”

And after he fumbles with the ignition, we continue on our way. How am I going to handle this interview, if a few questions from a cab driver can upset me like that?

“Excuse me, but can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Were giraffes really that tall? Did you ever see one? They said New York had one of the best zoos in the world. Were their necks really that long?”

“What’s your name?”

“Sebastien.”

I decide to tell him what he needs to hear.

“Yes, Sebastien, they really were that tall. Life was really great back then. We didn’t know how good we had it.”

A satisfied smile spreads across his face and we continue to the studio in silence.

“I AM SORRY, Ms. Celestine, but Mr. Ross is in a meeting right now. Maybe...”

“Look, just tell Jackson that he can interview himself if he doesn’t come and explain this.”

I press the remote and the door to my dressing room slides shut. The production assistant has just dropped off the interview questions, and the first question is about Trinidad. Jackson did his homework.

I am not prepared to talk about that. What can I say? It was so long ago. That we should have recognised the signs? They used to say that “God is a Trini.” So it made sense that he would warn his children first.

I remember watching the young fisherman as he related his discovery to the news camera. Bare-backed children hovered around him, grinning, as he revelled in his sudden importance. How he was late that morning. How he was walking through the track to the beach and all he was studying was where he would find the money to

get a new engine for the boat and schoolbooks for the children. How he did not notice anything until he stepped on one, and when he saw it was a hummingbird, he crossed himself. Don't mind he wasn't Christian, but everybody know that the hummingbird sacred and he didn't want no bad luck to follow him out to sea, especially with all them Venezuelan pirates around. How is only when he reach the beach he realise what was going on.

The camera then followed his outstretched arm. Littered on the shore were hundreds of little bodies, wings splayed as if crucified, each one a bejewelled canopic jar laid out on an altar of sand. Waves weeping at the feet of those nearest the water.

Strange thing, memory: the things it allows you to forget. I can still see that scene so clearly, yet I cannot remember my mother's face. But I do remember her voice; the sing-song accent, which left this world centuries ago; and her scent – garlic. She constantly drank garlic tea for her high blood pressure. It was especially high when I told her that I was leaving for the States. I was twenty-seven at the time, and her only child.

“America! You don't watch news? What you want to go live in that ketch-ass place for? I mad call the embassy and tell them to deport your ass as soon as you land in JFK.”

But I had already quit my job as a receptionist at the Hilton, lied on my visa application, and converted my entire savings to US dollars, so there was no turning back. Besides, it was only to be for a year, just until I saved enough to put my business degree to use and start my own company.

“I don't see why you can't take your time and save your money here. But no, allyuh must have everything one time. After how I sacrifice and send you to school, you

going up there to be a maid. Eh, is that what you go do your poor mother, girl?”

She stopped speaking to me, and for the weeks leading up to my departure I endured cut-eyes and sighs every time I entered the house. Then one day she surprised me by cooking curried cascadura and rice.

“To make sure you come back,” she explained.

“I will come back, I promise. I don’t need no fish to bring me back,” I replied, touched by the gesture. “Besides,” I continued through the forkfuls, careful to avoid the tiny bones, “you know that legend not true.”

“You don’t know that. Once you eat the fish you bound to end your days here. Everybody I know who eat it and went away come back and dead right here. It real scarce these days, but I was able to get some.”

I remember asking her why she didn’t eat.

“No, I don’t want none. I ain’t going nowhere. Make sure and eat all.”

I did, and though my memories have faded, I always remember that she smiled as she cleared my empty plate.



THE PRODUCTION ASSISTANT returns without Jackson.

“Mr. Ross is really sorry, but he’s still tied up in meetings. But he did say to tell you that he would make some time to chat with you a few minutes before the show.”

Tied up in meetings. Yeah, right, he’s probably getting his beard dyed.

He continues through my silence.

“This is Misha. She will be doing your hair and make-up,” he says, introducing the woman at his side. “And I see you’ve brought your own outfit.” He gestures to my dress,

which I've laid out on the sofa. He doesn't seem impressed by my selection.

"If you feel like wearing something else, please feel free to let me know. We have several options available in all the latest styles."

"Thanks, I'll bear that in mind."

He continues when he realises that I have refused to take his hint. "So, I will be back in one hour to take you to the set."

I am now alone with Misha, who has been openly staring at me throughout the exchange. She is dressed in black and sports a steel-grey mohawk with several tribal designs shaved onto both sides of her head. I can't tell how old she is. Her face is unlined and dewy looking. It could be the makeup, or it could be youth. I'm leaning towards it being the makeup.

"Well, I guess we should get started."

She nods and begins to take out her tools from her metal case. As I settle into the chair by the mirror I am surprised to see brushes, liquid foundation, eyeshadow, blushes and the like emerge.

"You do makeup the old-fashioned way?"

"Yes, I specialise in vintage beauty trends. I thought you would feel more comfortable that way."

"Oh." I am touched by her consideration.

"There is just one small problem."

"What's that?"

"I don't have your shade. I've never met anyone with your complexion. It's such a rich warm brown, like chocolate. I can mix something..."

She trails off when she sees my expression in the mirror. She's right, no one has my shade any more. Those who survived were forced to live together, and as a result

ethnicities are now blurred to the point where everyone – she, Sebastian, Jackson, everyone – is the same shade of caramel brown. She looks at me with a mixture of helplessness and pity. It is the same look that Mrs. Rosen gave me the day it happened. The day I stopped aging. October 3rd, 2021.

I had just returned home from dropping the twins to school. The phone rang and my friend Althea, who looked after Mr. Charles in the neighbouring apartment, was screaming for me to turn on the TV to CNN. I was afraid that it was a terrorist attack, since I was set to return home in a few days. My mother was ill. After seven years in the US, it was time to go back.

When I turned on the TV the images were worse. The view overlooking the Caribbean Sea showed thousands of corpses like little atolls floating on the waves. I tried to make sense of the images by reading the ticker at the bottom of the screen. A series of catastrophic earthquakes had destroyed my island home. It was the first of the Igneous Shifts. Confused, I reached for the phone and dialled my mother's number. Just last week she had told me about all the tremors the island was experiencing. The terse recording, "Your correspondent is not reachable," made the reality of what had happened clear. My mother was gone, my home, my country, everything was gone.

That was how Mrs. Rosen found me, sitting quietly on the floor with the phone in my hand. She stormed into the apartment, upset that she had had to leave Midtown during rush hour because I had forgotten to pick up the girls. When she finally understood what had happened, the four of us sat watching the TV, listening to the experts talk about subduction zones and seismic shifts. And there we remained until she gave me a Valium and took me to

bed, all the while berating herself for forgetting that Trinidad was my homeland when she had first come across the story on her Twitter feed earlier that day.

Eventually I became a US citizen. I was an “undocumented immigrant”, but my landless state meant there was nowhere for me to be deported to. I believe that the same applies to my existence. No island to return to, nowhere to end my days. I am left here to linger. The scientists can keep looking for answers; but I know the truth. How else can I explain the agelessness, the failed suicide attempts? I don’t call this living; that ended years ago.

“Are you ok? I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

I try to compose myself, as I only have twenty minutes left before I have to be on set.

“No, it’s fine. Come, make me pretty.”

“Prettier,” Misha quips as she blends the makeup into the tracks left by my tears.

SYNDRA IS WAITING for me when I get home. She starts relating all the messages she received whilst I was out. I put her on silent mode. I’m not in the mood, even though the interview was a success. I peel off the red pantsuit I wore for the show; Misha had convinced me to wear it and I have to admit that I looked really good. Jackson was pleased, the studio was pleased, and my bank account will be pleased by tomorrow morning.

I make my way to the bathroom. There, perched on the edge of the tub, I watch the water quickly make its way up from my ankles to my calves, then I slide underneath. This feels good. If I keep my eyes closed, even in this cramped space, I can summon a favourite memory.

After a two-hour hike, we arrived at a river somewhere in Valencia. It was so quiet that you could hear the bamboo bending with the breeze. I remember the smooth firmness of the river stones as I waded in, the crisp, cold water and the way the sunlight warmed my skin in patches as it poked through the leaves. I stay lying on the floor of the tub until the water gets cold. My chest never tightens; there is no need for air. My body flows through death, like a cascadura in a stream. I release a sigh and watch it bubble to the surface. Then, gripping the sides, I pull myself up, step out of the tub and leave a trail of wet footprints all the way to my bed.

THE MIGHTY SLINGER

Tobias S. Buckell and Karen Lord

EARTH HUNG OVER THE LUNAR HILLS AS THE MIGHTY Slinger and The Rovers readied the Tycho stage for their performance. Tapping his microphone, Euclid noticed that Kumi barely glanced at the sight as he set up his djembe and pan assembly, but Jeni froze and stared up at the blue disk, her bass still limp between her hands.

"It's not going anywhere," Kumi muttered. His long, graying dreadlocks swayed gently in the heavy gravity of the Moon and tapped the side of a pan with a muted 'ting'. "It'll be there after the concert... and after our trip, *and* after we revive from our next long-sleep."

"Let her look," Vega admonished. "You should always stop for beauty. It vanishes too soon."

"She taking too long to set up," Kumi said. "You-all call her Zippy but she ain't zippy at all."

Euclid chuckled as Jeni shot a stink look at her elder and mentor. She whipped the bass out stiff like she meant business. Her fingers gripped and danced on the narrow surface in a quick, defiant riff.

Raising his mic-wand at the back, Vega captured the

sound as it bounced back from the lunar dome performance area. He fed the echo through the house speakers, ending it with a punctuating note of Kumi's locks hitting the pan with a ting and Euclid's laughter rumbling quietly in the background. Dhaka, the last of the Rovers, came in live with a cheerful fanfare on her patented Delirium, an instrument that looked like a harmonium had had a painful collision with a large quantity of alloy piping.

An asteroid-thin man in a black suit slipped past the velvet ropes marking off the VIP section and nodded at Euclid. "Yes sir. Your pay's been deposited, the spa is booked and your places in the long-sleep pool are reserved."

"Did you add the depreciation-protection insurance this time?" Euclid answered, his voice cold with bitter memory. "If your grandfather had sense I could be retired by now."

Kumi looked sharply over. The man in the suit shifted about. "Of course I'll add the insurance," he mumbled.

"Thank you, Mr Jones," Euclid said, in a tone that was not at all thankful.

"There's, ah, someone else who would like to talk to you," the event coordinator said.

"Not now Jones." Euclid turned away to face his band. "Only forty minutes to curtain time and we need to focus."

"It's about Earth," Jones said.

Euclid turned back. "That rumour?"

Jones shook his head. "Not a rumour. Not even a joke. The Rt Hon Patience Bouscholte got notification this morning. She wants to talk to you."

THE RT HON PATIENCE BOUSCHOLTE awaited him in one of the skyboxes poised high over the rim of the crater. Before it: the stands that would soon be filling up, slanting along the slope that created a natural amphitheatre to the stage. Behind it: the gray hills and rocky wasteland of the Moon.

"Mr. Slinger!" she said. Her tightly wound hair and brown spidersilk headscarf bobbed in a slightly delayed reaction to the lunar gravity. "A pleasure to finally meet you. I'm a huge admirer of your sound."

He sat down, propped his snakeskin magnet-boots up against the chairback in front of him, and gave her a cautious look. "Madame Minister. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

All of the band were members of the Rock Devils Cohort and Consociate Fusion, almost a million strong, all contract workers in the asteroid belt. They were all synced up on the same long-sleep schedule as their cohort, whether working the rock or touring as a band. And here was a Minister from the RDCCF's Assembly asking to speak with him.

The RDCCF wasn't a country. It was just one of many organisations for people who worked in space because there was nothing left for them on Earth. But to Euclid, meeting the Rt Hon Patience Bouscholte felt like meeting a Member of Parliament from the old days. Euclid was slightly intimidated, but he wasn't going to show it. He put an arm casually over the empty seat beside him.

"They said you were far quieter in person than on stage. They were right." Bouscholte held up a single finger before he could reply, and pointed to two women in all-black bulletproof suits who were busy scanning the room with small wands. They gave a thumbs up as Bouscholte

cocked her head in their direction, and retreated to stand on either side of the entrance.

She turned back to Euclid. "Tell me, Mr Slinger, how much have you heard about The Solar Development Charter and their plans for Earth?"

So it was true? He leaned toward her. "Why would they have any plans for Earth? I've heard they're stretched thin enough building the Glitter Ring."

"They are. They're stretched more than thin. They're functionally bankrupt. So the SDC is taking up a new tranche of preferred shares for a secondary redevelopment scheme. They want to 'redevelop' Earth, and that will *not* be to our benefit."

"Well then." Euclid folded his arms and leaned back. "And you thought you'd tell an old calypso singer that because...?"

"Because I need your rhymes, Mr. Slinger."

Euclid had done that before, in the days before his last long-sleep, when fame was high and money had not yet evaporated. Dishing out juicy new gossip to help Assembly contract negotiations. Leaking information to warn the workers all across the asteroid belt. Hard-working miners on contract, struggling to survive the long nights and longer sleeps. Sing them a song about how the SDC was planning to screw them over again. He knew that gig well.

He had thought that was why he'd been brought to see her, to get a little something to add extempo to a song tonight. Get the Belt all riled up. But if this was about Earth...? Earth was a garbage dump. Humanity had sucked it dry like a vampire and left its husk to spiral toward death as people moved outward to bigger and better things.

"I don't sing about Earth anymore. The cohorts don't

pay attention to the old stuff. Why should they care? It's not going anywhere."

Then she told him. Explained that the SDC was going to beautify Earth. Re-terraform it. Make it into a new garden of Eden for the rich and idle of Mars and Venus.

"How?" he asked, sceptical.

"Scorched Earth. They're going to bomb the mother planet with comets. Full demolition. The last of us shipped into the Ring to form new cohorts, new generations of indentured servitude. A clean slate to redesign their brave new world. That is what I mean when I say *not to our benefit*."

He exhaled slowly. "You think a few little lyrics can change any of that?" The wealth of Venus, Mars, and Jupiter dwarfed the cohorts in their hollowed out, empty old asteroids.

"One small course adjustment at the start can change an entire orbit by the end of a journey," she said.

"So you want me to harass the big people up in power for you, now?"

Bouscholte shook her head. "We need you to be our emissary. We, the Assembly, the last representatives of the drowned lands and the dying islands, are calling upon you. Are you with us or not?"

Euclid thought back to the days of breezes and mango trees. "And if they don't listen to us?"

Bouscholte leaned in close and touched his arm. "The majority of our cohort are indentured to the Solar Development Charter until the Glitter Ring is complete. But, Mr. Slinger, answer me this: where do you think that leaves us after we finish the Ring, the largest project humanity has ever attempted?"

Euclid knew. After the asteroid belt had been trans-

formed into its new incarnation, a sun-girdling, sun-powered device for humanity's next great leap, it would no longer be home.

There were few resources left in the Belt; the big planets had got there first and mined it all. Euclid had always known the hollow shells that had been left behind. The work on the Glitter Ring. The long-sleep so that they didn't exhaust resources as they waited for pieces of the puzzle to slowly float from place to appointed place.

Bouscholte continued. "If we can't go back to Earth, they'll send us further out. Our cohorts will end up scattered to the cold, distant areas of the system, out to the Oort Cloud. And we'll live long enough to see that."

"You think you can stop that?"

"Maybe, Mr. Slinger. There is almost nothing we can broadcast that the big planets can't listen to. When we go into long-sleep they can hack our communications, but they can't keep us from talking, and they'll never stop our songs."

"It's a good dream," Euclid said softly, for the first time in the conversation looking up at the view over the skybox. He'd avoided looking at it. To Jeni it was a beautiful blue dot, but for Euclid all it did was remind him of what he'd lost. "But they won't listen."

"You must understand, you are just one piece in a much bigger game. Our people are in place, not just in the cohorts, but everywhere, all throughout the system. They'll listen to your music and make the right moves at the right time. The SDC can't move to destroy and rebuild Earth until the Glitter Ring is finished, but when it's finished they'll find they have underestimated us – as long as we coordinate in a way that no one suspects."

"Using songs? Nah. Impossible," he declared bluntly.

She shook her head, remarkably confident. "All you have to do is be the messenger. We'll handle the tactics. You forget who you're speaking to. The Bouscholte family tradition has always been about the long game. Who was my father? What positions do my sons hold, my granddaughters? Euclid Slinger... Babatunde... listen to me. How do you think an aging calypso star gets booked to do an expensive, multi-planetary tour to the capitals of the Solar System, the seats of power? By chance?"

She called him that name as if she were his friend, his inner-circle intimate. Kumi named him that years... decades ago. *Too wise for your years. You were here before*, he'd said. *The Father returns, sent back for a reason*. Was this the reason?

"I accept the mission," he said.

*Day. Me say day-ob. Earthrise come and me
want go...*

EUCLID LOOKED UP, smiled. Let the chord go. He wouldn't be so blatant as to wink at the VIP section, but he knew that there was a fellow Rock Devil out there, listening out for certain songs and recording Vega's carefully assembled samples to strip for data and instructions in a safe location. Vega knew, of course. Had to, in order to put together the info packets. Dhaka knew a little but had begged not to know more, afraid she might say the wrong thing to the wrong person. Jeni was still, after her first long-sleep, nineteen in body and mind, so no, she did not know, and anyway how could he tell her when he was still dragging his feet on telling Kumi?

And there was Kumi, frowning at him after the end of the concert as they sprawled in the green room, taking a quick drink before the final packing up. "Baba, you on this nostalgia kick for real."

"You don't like it?" Euclid teased him. "All that sweet, sweet soca you grew up studying, all those kaiso legends you try to emulate?"

"That ain't your sound, man."

Euclid shrugged. "We can talk about that next time we're in the studio. Now we got a party to be at!"

After twenty-five years of long-sleep, Euclid thought Mars looked much the same, except maybe a little greener, a little wetter. Perhaps that was why the Directors of the SDC-MME had chosen to host their bash in a gleaming biodome that overlooked a charming little lake. Indoor foliage matched to outer landscape in a lush canopy and artificial lights hovered in competition with the stars and satellites beyond.

"Damn show-offs," Dhaka muttered. "Am I supposed to be impressed?"

"I am," Jeni said shamelessly, selecting a stimulant cocktail from an offered tray. Kumi smoothly took it from her and replaced it with another, milder option. She looked outraged.

"Keep a clear head, Zippy," Vega said quietly. "We're not among friends."

That startled her out of her anger. Kumi looked a little puzzled himself, but he accepted Vega's support without challenge.

Euclid listened with half his attention. He had just noticed an opportunity. "Kumi, all of you, come with me. Let's greet the CEO and offer our thanks for this lovely party."

Kumi came to his side. "What's going on?"

Euclid lowered his voice. "Come, listen and find out."

The CEO acknowledged them as they approached, but Euclid could sense from the body language that the busy executive would give them as much time as dictated by courtesy and not a bit more. No matter that Euclid was a credentialed ambassador for the RDCCF, authorised by the Assembly. He could already tell how this meeting would go.

"Thank you for hosting us, Mx Ashe," Euclid said, donning a pleasant, grinning mask. "It's always a pleasure to kick off a tour at the Mars Mining and Energy Megaplex."

"Thank *you*," the executive replied. "Your music is very popular with our hands."

"Pardon?" Kumi enquired, looking in confusion at the executive's fingers wrapped around an ornate cocktail glass.

"Our employees in the asteroid belt."

Kumi looked unamused. Euclid moved on quickly. "Yes. You merged with the SDC... pardon me, we are still trying to catch up on twenty-five years of news... about ten years ago?"

A little pride leaked past the politeness. "Buyout, not merger. Only the name has survived, to maintain continuity and branding."

Euclid saw Dhaka smirk and glance at Vega, who looked a little sour. He was still slightly bitter that his ex-husband had taken everything in the divorce except for the de la Vega surname, the name under which he had become famous and which Vega was forced to keep for the sake of convenience.

"But don't worry," the CEO continued. "The Glitter

Ring was always conceptualised as a project that would be measured in generations. Corporations may rise and fall, but the work will go on. Everything remains on schedule and all the hands... all the – how do you say – *cohorts* are in no danger of losing their jobs."

"So, the cohorts can return to Earth after the Ring is completed?" Euclid asked directly.

Mx Ashe took a careful sip of bright purple liquid before replying. "I did not say that."

"But I thought the Earth development project was set up to get the SDC a secondary round of financing, to solve their financial situation," Dhaka demanded, her brow creasing. "You've bought them out, so is that still necessary?"

Mx Ashe nodded calmly. "True, but we have a more complex vision for the Glitter Ring than the SDC envisioned, and so funding must be vastly increased. Besides, taking money for a planned redevelopment of Earth and then not doing it would, technically, be fraud. The SDC-MME will follow through. I won't bore you with the details, but our expertise on geo-engineering is unparalleled."

"You've been dropping comets on vast, uninhabited surfaces," Dhaka said. "I understand the theory, but Earth isn't Venus or Mars. There's thousands of years of history and archeology. And there are still people living there. How are you going to move a billion people?"

Mx Ashe looked coldly at Dhaka. "We're still in the middle of building a Ring around the sun, Mx Miriam. I'm sure my successors on the Board will have it all figured out by the next time we wake you up. We understand the concerns raised, but after all, people have invested trillions in this project. Our lawyers are in the process of

responding to all requests and lawsuits, and we will stand by the final ruling of the courts."

Euclid spoke quickly, blunt in his desperation. "Can't you reconsider, find another project to invest in? Earth's a mess, we all know it, but we always thought we'd have something to come back to."

"I'm sure a man of your means could afford a plot on New Earth—" Mx Ashe began.

"I've seen the pricing," Vega cut in dryly. "Musicians don't make as much as you think."

"What about the cohorts?" Jeni said sadly. "No-one in the cohorts will be able to afford to go back."

Mx Ashe stepped back from the verbal bombardment. "This is all speculation. The cohorts are still under contract to work on the Glitter Ring. Once they have finished, negotiations about their relocation can begin. Now, if you will excuse me, have a good night and enjoy the party!"

Euclid watched despondently as the CEO walked away briskly. The Rovers stood silently around him, their faces sombre. Kumi was the first to speak. "*Now* I understand the nostalgia kick."

The SDC, now with the MME
You and I both know
They don't stand for you and me

THERE WAS STILL a tour to play. The band moved from Elysium City to Electris Station, then Achillis Fons, where they played in front of the Viking Museum.

The long-sleep on the way to Mars had been twenty-

five years. Twenty-five years off, one year on. That was the shift the Rock Devils Cohort and Consociation Fusion had agreed to, the key clause in the contract Euclid had signed way-back-when in an office built into the old New York City sea wall.

That gave them a whole year on Mars. Mx Ashe may have shut them down, but Euclid wasn't done yet. Not by a long shot.

Kumi started fretting barely a month in.

"Jeni stepping out with one of the VIPs," he told Euclid.

"She's nineteen. What you expecting? A celibate band member? I don't see you ignoring anyone coming around when we breaking down."

Kumi shook his head. "No Baba, that's one thing. This is the same one she's seeing. Over and over. Since we arrived here. She's sticky sweet on him."

"Kumi, we got bigger things to worry about."

"Earth, I know. Man, look, I see why you're upset." Kumi grabbed his hand. "I miss it too. But we getting old, Baba. I just pass sixty. How much longer I could do this? Maybe we focus on the tour and invest the money so that we can afford to go back some day."

"I can't give it up that easy," Euclid said to his oldest friend. "We going to have troubles?"

Back when Euclid was working the rocks, Kumi had taken him under his wing. Taught him how to sing the old songs while they moved their one-person pods into position to drill them out. Then they'd started singing at the start of shifts and soon that took off into a full career. They'd traveled all through the Belt, from big old Ceres to the tiniest cramped mining camps.

Kumi sucked his teeth. "That first time you went

extempo back on Pallas, you went after that foreman who'd been skimping on airlock maintenance? You remember?"

Euclid laughed. "I was angry. The airlock blew out and I wet myself waiting for someone to come pick me up."

"When you started singing different lyrics, making them up on the spot, I didn't follow you at first. But you got the SDC to fire him when the video went viral. That's why I called you Baba. So, no, you sing and I'll find my way around your words. Always. But let me ask you – think about what Ashe said. You really believe this fight's worth it?"

Euclid bit his lip.

"We have concerts to give in the Belt and Venus yet," he told Kumi. "We're not done yet."



FIVE MONTHS in the Martians began to turn. The concerts had been billed as cross-cultural events, paid for by the Pan-Human Solar Division of Cultural Affairs and the Martian University's division of Inter-Human Musicology Studies school.

Euclid, on stage, hadn't noticed at first. He'd been trying to find another way to match up MME with "screw me" and some lyrics in between. Then a comparison to Mars and its power, and the people left behind on Earth.

But he noticed when *this* crowd turned.

Euclid had grown used to the people of the big planets just sitting and listening to his music. No one was moving about. No hands in the air. Even if you begged them, they weren't throwing their hands out. No working, no grinding, no nothing. They sat in seats and *appreciated*.

He didn't remember when they turned. He would see it on video later. Maybe it was when he called out the 'rape' of Earth with the 'red tape' of the SDC-MME and made a visual of 'red' Mars that tied to the 'red' tape, but suddenly those chair-sitting inter-cultural appreciators stood up.

And it wasn't to jump.

The crowd started shouting back. The sound cut out. Security and the venue operators swept in and moved them off the stage.

Back in the green room, Jeni rounded on Euclid. "What the hell was that?" she shouted.

"Extempo," Euclid said simply.

Kumi tried to step between them. "Zippy—"

"No!" She pushed him aside. Dhaka, in the corner of the room, started disassembling the Delirium, carefully putting the pieces away in a g-force protected aerogel case, carefully staying out of the brewing fight. Vega folded his arms and stood to a side, watching. "I damn well know what extempo is. I'm young, not ignorant."

Everyone was tired. The heavy gravity, the months of touring already behind them. "This always happens. A fight always come halfway through," Euclid said. "Talk to me."

"You're doing extempo like you're in a small free concert in the Belt, on a small rock. But this isn't going after some corrupt contractor," Jeni snapped. "You're calling out a whole planet now? All Martians? You crazy?"

"One person or many, you think I shouldn't?"

Euclid understood. Jeni had been working pods like he had at the same age. Long, grueling shifts spent in a tiny bubble of plastic where you rebreathed your own stench so often you forgot what clean air tasted like. Getting into the band had been her way 'off the rock'.

This was her big gamble out of tedium. His too, back in the day.

"You're not entertaining people. You're pissing them off," she said.

Euclid sucked his teeth. "Calypso been vexing people since all the way back. And never mind calypso, Zippy, entertainment isn't just escape. Artists always talking back, always insolent."

"They paid us and flew us across the solar system to sing the song they wanted. Sing the fucking song for them the way they want. Even just the Banana Boat Song you're messing with and going extempo. That shit's carved in stone, Euclid. Sing the damn lyrics."

Euclid looked at her like she'd lost her mind. "That song was *never* for them. Problem is it get sung too much and you abstract it and then everyone forget that song is a blasted lament. Well, let me educate you, Ms Baptiste. The Banana Boat Song is a mournful song about people getting their backs broken hard in labor and still using call and response to help the community sync up, dig deep, and find the power to work harder 'cause *dem ain't had no choice*."

He stopped. A hush fell in the green room.

Euclid continued. "It's not a 'smile and dance for them' song. The big planets don't own that song. It was never theirs. It was never carved in stone. I'll make it ours for *here*, for now, and I'll go extempo. I'm not done. Zippy, I'm just getting started."

She nodded. "Then I'm gone."

Just like that, she spun around and grabbed her bass.

Kumi glared at Euclid. "I promised her father I'd keep an eye on her -"

"Go," Euclid said calmly, but he was suddenly scared

that his oldest friend, the pillar of his little band, would walk out the green room door with the newest member and never come back.

Kumi came back an hour later. He looked suddenly old... those raw-sun wrinkles around his eyes, the stooped back. But it wasn't just gravity pulling him down. "She's staying on Mars."

Euclid turned to the door. "Let me go speak to her. I'm the one she angry with."

"No." Kumi put a hand on his shoulder. "That wasn't just about you. She staying with someone. She's not just leaving the band, she leaving the cohort. Got a VIP, a future, someone she thinks she'll build a life with."

She was gone. Like that.

Vega still had her riffs, though. He grumbled about the extra work, but he could weave the recorded samples in and out of the live music.

Kumi got an invitation to the wedding. It took place the week before the Rovers left Mars for the big tour of the asteroid belt.

Euclid wasn't invited.

He did a small, open concert for the Rock Devils working on Deimos. It was just him and Vega and fifty miners in one of the tear-down areas of the tiny moon. Euclid sang for them just as pointedly as ever.

*So it's up to us, you and me
to put an end to this catastrophe.
Them ain't got neither conscience nor heart.
We got to pitch in and do our part
'cause if this Earth demolition begin*

we won't even have a part/pot to pitch/piss in.

TOURING IN THE Belt always gave him a strange feeling of mingled nostalgia and dissonance. There were face-to-face reunions and continued correspondence with friends and relatives of their cohort, who shared the same times of waking and long-sleep, spoke the same language and remembered the same things. But there were also administrators and officials, who kept their own schedule, and workers from cohorts on a different frequency – all strangers from a forgotten distant past or an unknown near-present. Only the most social types kept up to date on everything, acting as temporal diplomats, translating jokes and explaining new tech and jargon to smooth communication between groups.

Ziamara Bouscholte was social. Very social. Euclid had seen plenty of that frivolous-idle behaviour from political families and nouveau-nobility like the family Jeni had married into, but given *that* surname and the fact that she had been assigned as their tour liaison, he recognised very quickly that she was a spy.

"Big tours in the Belt are boredom and chaos," he warned her, thinking about the argument with Jeni. "Lots of down time slinging from asteroid to asteroid punctuated by concert mayhem when we arrive."

She grinned. "Don't worry about me. I know exactly how to deal with boredom and chaos."

She didn't lie. She was all-business on board, briefing Vega on the latest cryptography and answering Dhaka's questions about the technological advances that were being implemented in Glitter Ring construction. Then the butterfly emerged for the concerts and parties as she wran-

gled fans and dignitaries with a smiling enthusiasm that never flagged.

The Vesta concert was their first major stop. The Mighty Slinger and his Rovers peeked out from the wings of the stage and watched the local opening act finishing up their last set.

Kumi brought up something that had been nagging Euclid for a while. "Baba, you notice how small the crowds are? *This* is our territory, not Mars. Last big tour we had to broadcast over Vesta because everything was sold out."

Vega agreed. "Look at this audience. Thin. I could excuse the other venues for size, but not this one."

"I know why," Dhaka said. "I can't reach half my friends who agreed to meet up. All I'm getting from them are long-sleep off-shift notices."

"I thought it was just me," Kumi said. "Did SDC-MME leave cohorts in long-sleep? Cutting back on labour?"

Dhaka nodded. "Zia mentioned some changes in the project schedule. You know the Charter's not going to waste money feeding us if we're not working."

Euclid felt a surge of anger. "We'll be out of sync when they wake up again. That messes up the whole cohort. You sure they're doing this to cut labour costs, or to weaken us as a collective?"

Dhaka shrugged. "I don't like it one bit, but I don't know if it's out of incompetence or malice."

"Time to go," said Vega, his eyes on the openers as they exited stage left.

The Rovers drifted on stage and started freestyling, layering sound on sound. Euclid waited until they were all settled in and jamming hard before running out and snagging his mic. He was still angry, and the adrenaline amped

up his performance as he commandeered the stage to rant about friends and lovers lost for a whole year to long-sleep.

Then he heard something impossible: Kumi stumbled on the beat. Euclid looked back at the Rovers to see Vega frozen. A variation of one of Jeni's famous riffs was playing, but Vega shook his head *not me* to Dhaka's confused sideways glance.

Zia's voice came on the sound system, booming over the music. "Rock Devils cohort, we have a treat for you! On stage for the first time in twenty-five years, please welcome Rover bassist Jeni 'Zippy' Baptiste!"

Jeni swooped in from the wings with another stylish riff, bounced off one of the decorated pylons, then flew straight to Kumi and wrapped him in a tumbling hug, bass and all. Prolonged cheering from the crowd drowned out the music. Euclid didn't know whether to be furious or overjoyed at Zia for springing the surprise on them in public. Vega smoothly covered for the absent percussion and silent bass while Dhaka went wild on the Delirium. It was a horrible place for a reunion, but they'd take it. Stage lighting made it hard to tell, but Jeni did look older and... stronger? More sure of herself?

Euclid floated over to her at the end of the song as the applause continued to crash over them all. "Welcome back, Zippy," he said. "You're still good – better, even."

Her laugh was full and sincere. "I've been listening to our recordings for twenty-five years, playing along with you every day while you were in long-sleep. Of course I'm better."

"You missed us," he stated proudly.

"I did." She swatted a tear out of the air between them with the back of her hand. "I missed this. Touring for our cohort. Riling up the powers that be."

He raised his eyebrows. "Now you want to *shake* things up? What changed?"

She shook her head sadly. "Twenty-five years, Baba. I have a daughter, now. She's twenty, training as an engineer on Mars. She's going to join the cohort when she's finished and I want more for her. I want a future for her."

He hugged her tight while the crowd roared in approval. "Get back on that bass," he whispered. "We got a show to finish!"

He didn't bother to ask if the nouveau-nobility husband had approved of the rebel Rover Jeni. He suspected not.

IN THE GREEN room Jeni wrapped her legs around a chair and hung a glass of beer in the air next to her.

"Used to be it would fall slowly down to the floor," Jeni said, pointing at her drink. "They stripped most of Vesta's mass for the Ring. It's barely a shell here."

Dhaka shoved a foot in a wall strap and settled in perpendicular to Jeni. She swirled the whiskey glass around in the air. Despite the glass being designed for zero gravity, her practiced flip of the wrist tossed several globules free that very slowly wobbled their way through the air toward her. "We're passing into final stage preparations for the Ring. SDC-MME is panicking a bit because the projections for energy and the initial test results don't match. And the computers are having trouble managing stable orbits."

The Glitter Ring was a Dyson Ring, a necklace of solar power stations and sails built around the sun to capture a vast percentage of its energy. The power needs of the big

planets had begun to outstrip the large planetary solar and mirror arrays a hundred years ago. Overflight and shadow rights for solar gathering stations had started turning into a series of low-grade orbital economic wars. The Charter had been created to handle the problem system-wide.

Build a ring of solar power catchments in orbit around the sun at a slight angle to the plane of the solar system. No current solar rights would be abridged, but it could catapult humanity into a new industrial era. A great leap forward. Unlimited, unabridged power.

But if it didn't work...

Dhaka nodded at all the serious faces. "Don't look so glum. The cohort programmers are working on flocking algorithms to try and simplify how the solar stations keep in orbit. Follow some simple rules about what's around you and let complex emergent orbits develop."

"I'm more worried about the differences in output," Jeni muttered. "While you've been in long-sleep they've been developing orbital stations out past Jupiter with the assumption that there would be beamed power to follow. They're building mega-orbitals throughout the system on the assumption that the Ring's going to work. They've even started moving people off Earth into temporary housing in orbit."

"Temporary?" Euclid asked from across the room, interrupting before Dhaka and Jeni got deep into numbers and words like exajoules, quantum efficiency, price per watt and all the other boring crap. He'd cared intimately about that when he first joined the cohort. Now, not so much.

"We're talking bubble habitats with thinner shells than Vesta right now. They use a layer of water for radiation shielding, but they lack resources and they're not well

balanced. These orbitals have about a couple hundred thousand people each, and they're rated to last fifty to sixty years." Jeni shook her head, and Euclid was forced to stop seeing the nineteen year old Zippy and recognise the concerned forty-four year old she'd become. "They're risking a lot."

"Why would anyone agree?" Vega asked. "It sounds like suicide."

"It's gotten worse on Earth. Far worse. Everyone is just expecting to hit the reset button after the Glitter Ring goes online. Everyone's holding their breath."

Dhaka spoke up. "Okay, enough cohort bullshit. Let's talk about you. The band's heading back to long-sleep soon – and then what, Zippy? You heading back to Mars and your daughter?"

Jeni looked around the room hesitantly. "Lara's never been to Venus, and I promised her she could visit me... if you'll have me?"

"If?" Vega laughed. "I hated playing those recordings of you. Rather hear it live."

"I'm not as zippy up and down the chords as I used to be, you know," Jeni warned. Everyone was turning to look at Euclid.

"It's a more confident sound," he said with a smile. Dhaka whipped globules of whiskey at them and laughed.

Kumi beamed, no doubt already dreaming about meeting his 'granddaughter'.

"Hey, Zippy," Euclid said. "Here's to change. *Good change.*"

"Maybe," she smiled and slapped his raised hand in agreement and approval. "Let's dream on that."

THE FIRST FEW days after long-sleep were never pleasant, but this awakening was the worst of Euclid's experience. He slowly remembered who he was, and how to speak, and the names of the people who sat quietly with him in the lounge after their sessions with the medics. For a while they silently watched the high cities of Venus glinting in the clouds below their orbit from viewports near the long-sleep pools.

Later they began to ask questions, later they realised that something was very wrong. They'd been asleep for fifty years. Two long-sleeps, not the usual single sleep.

"Everyone gone silent back on Vesta," Dhaka said.

"Did we get idled?" Euclid demanded. They were a band, not workers. They shouldn't have been idled.

The medics didn't answer their questions. They continued to deflect everything until one morning an officer turned up, dressed in black sub-uniform with empty holster belt, as if he had left his weapons and armour just outside the door. He looked barely twenty, far too young for the captain's insignia on his shoulders.

He spoke with slow, stilted formality. "Mr Slinger, Mr Djansi, Mr de la Vega, Ms Miriam and Ms Baptiste – thank you for your patience. I'm Captain Abrams. We're sorry for the delay, but your recovery was complicated."

"Complicated!" Kumi looked disgusted. "Can you explain why we had two long-sleeps instead of one? Fifty years? We had a contract!"

"And *we* had a war." The reply was unexpectedly sharp. "Be glad you missed it."

"Our first interplanetary war? That's not the change I wanted," Euclid muttered to Vega.

"What happened?" Jeni asked, her voice barely a whisper. "My daughter, she's on Mars, is she safe?"

The officer glanced away in a momentary flash of vulnerability and guilt. "You have two weeks for news and correspondence with your cohort and others. We can provide political summaries, and psychological care for your readjustment. After that, your tour begins. Transport down to the cities has been arranged. I just... I have to say... we still need you now, more than ever."

"The *rass*?" Kumi stared at the soldier, spreading his arms.

Again that touch of vulnerability as the young soldier replied with a slight stammer. "Please. We need you. You're legends to the entire system now, not just the cohorts."

"The hell does that mean?" Vega asked as the boy-captain left.

JENI'S DAUGHTER had managed one long-sleep but woke on schedule while they stayed in storage. The war was over by then, but Martian infrastructure had been badly damaged and skilled workers were needed for longer than the standard year or two. Lara had died after six years of 'extra time', casualty of a radiation exposure accident on Deimos.

They gathered around Jeni when she collapsed to her knees and wept, grieving for the child they had never known.

Their correspondence was scattered across the years, their cohort truly broken as it had been forced to take cover, retreat, or fight. The war had started in Earth orbit after a temporary habitat split apart, disgorging water, air and people into vacuum. Driven by desperation and fury,

several other orbital inhabitants had launched an attack on SDC-MME owned stations, seeking a secure environment to live, and revenge for their dead.

Conflict became widespread and complicated. The orbital habitats were either negotiating for refugees, building new orbitals, or fighting for the SDC-MME. Mars got involved when the government sent its military to protect the Martian investment in the SDC-MME. Jupiter, which was now its own functioning technodemarchy, had struck directly at the Belt, taking over a large portion of the Glitter Ring.

Millions had died as rocks were flung between the worlds and ships danced around each other in the vacuum. People fought hand to hand in civil wars inside hollowed out asteroids, gleaming metal orbitals, and in the cold silence of space.

Humanity had carried war out of Earth and into the great beyond.

Despite the grim history lesson, as the band shared notes and checked their financial records, one thing became clear. They *were* legends. The music of the Mighty Slinger and the Rovers had become the sound of the war generation and beyond: a common bond that the cohorts could still claim, and battle hymns for the Earth emigrants who had launched out from their decayed temporary orbitals. Anti-SDC-MME songs became treasured anthems. The Rovers songs sold billions, the *covers* of their songs sold billions. There were tribute bands and spin-off bands and a fleet of touring bands. They had spawned an entire subgenre of music.

"We're rich at last," Kumi said ruefully. "I thought I'd enjoy it more."

Earth was still there, still a mess, but Vega found hope

in news from his kin. For decades, Pacific Islanders had stubbornly roved over their drowned states in vast fleets, refusing resettlement to the crowded cities and tainted badlands of the continents. In the last fifty years, their floating harbours had evolved from experimental platforms to self-sustaining cities. For them, the war had been nothing but a few nights filled with shooting stars and the occasional planetfall of debris.

The Moon and Venus had fared better in the war than Mars, but the real shock was the Ring. According to Dhaka, the leap in progress was marked, even for fifty years. Large sections were now fully functional and had been used during the war for refuelling, surveillance, barracks and prisons.

"Unfortunately, that means that the purpose of the Ring has drifted once again," she warned. "The military adapted it to their purposes, and returning it to civilian use will take some time."

"But what about the Assembly?" Euclid asked her one day when they were in the studio, shielded from surveillance by noise and interference of Vega's crafting. "Do they still care about the purpose of the Ring? Do you think we still have a mission?"

The war had ended without a clear victor. The SDC-MME had collapsed and the board had been tried, convicted and exiled to long-sleep until a clear treaty could be hammered out. Jupiter, Mars, Venus and some of the richer orbitals had assumed the shares and responsibility of the original solar charter. A tenuous peace existed.

Dhaka nodded. "I was wondering that too, but look, here's the name of the company that's organising our tour."

Euclid leaned in to read her screen. *Bouscholte, Bouscholte & Abrams.*

CAPTAIN ABRAMS REVEALED nothing until they were all cramped into the tiny cockpit of a descent craft for Venus's upper atmosphere.

He checked for listening devices with a tiny wand, and then, satisfied, faced them all. "The Bouscholte family would like to thank you for your service. We want you to understand that you are in an even better position to help us, and we need that help now, more than ever."

They'd come this far. Euclid looked around at the Rovers. They all leaned in closer.

"The Director of Consolidated Ring Operations and Planetary Reconstruction will be at your concert tonight." Abrams handed Euclid a small chip. "You will give this to him – personally. It's a quantum encrypted key that only Director Cutler can access."

"What's in it?" Dhaka asked.

Abrams looked out the window. They were about to fall into the yellow and green clouds. The green was something to do with floating algae engineered for the planet, step one of the eventual greening of Venus. "Something Cutler won't like. Or maybe a bribe. I don't know. But it's an encouragement for the Director to consider a proposal."

"Can you tell us what the proposal is?"

"Yes." Abrams looked at the band. "Either stop the redevelopment of Earth and further cement the peace by returning the orbitals inhabitants to the surface, or..."

Everyone waited as Abrams paused dramatically.

"... approve a cargo transit across Mercury's inner orbit to the far side of the Glitter Ring, and give us the contracts for rebuilding the orbital habitats."

Dhaka frowned. "I wasn't expecting something so boring after the big 'or' there, Captain."

Abrams smiled. "One small course adjustment at the start can change an entire orbit by the end of a journey," he said to Euclid.

That sounded familiar.

"Either one of those is important?" Euclid asked. "But you won't say why."

"Not even in this little cabin. I'm sure I got the bugs, but in case I didn't." Abrams shrugged. "Here we are. Ready to change the solar system, Mr. Slinger?"



VENUSIAN CITIES WERE MORE impressive when viewed from the outside. Vast, silvery spheres clustered thickly in the upper atmosphere, trailing tethers and tubes to the surface like a dense herd of giant cephalopods. Inside, the decor was sober, spare and disappointing, hinting at a slow post-war recovery.

The band played their first concert in a half-century to a frighteningly respectful and very exclusive audience of the rich and powerful. Then it was off to a reception where they awkwardly sipped imported wine and smiled as their assigned liaison, a woman called Halford, briskly introduced and dismissed awe-struck fans for seconds of small talk and a quick snap.

"And this is Petyr Cutler," Halford announced. "Director of Consolidated Ring Operations and Planetary Reconstruction."

Bodyguards quickly made a wall, shepherding the Director in for his moment.

Cutler was a short man with loose, sandy hair and bit of orbital sunburn. "So pleased to meet you," he said. "Call me Petyr."

He came in for the vigorous handshake, and Euclid had already palmed the small chip. He saw Abrams on the periphery of the crowd, watching. Nodded.

Cutler's already reddened cheeks flushed as he looked down at the chip. "Is that -"

"Yes." Euclid locked eyes with him. The Director. One of the most powerful people in the entire solar system.

Cutler broke the gaze and looked down at his feet. "You can't blackmail me, not even with this. I can't change policy."

"So you still redeveloping Earth?" Euclid asked, his tone already dull with resignation.

"I've been around before you were born, Mr Slinger. I know how generational projects go. They build their own momentum. No-one wants to become the executive who shut down two hundred years of progress, who couldn't see it through to the end. Besides, wars aren't cheap. We have to repay our citizens who invested in war bonds, the corporations that gave us tech on credit. The Earth Reconstruction project is the only thing that can give us the funds to stay afloat."

Somehow, his words eased the growing tightness in Euclid's chest. "I'm supposed to ask you something else, then."

Cutler looked suspicious. He also looked around at his bodyguards, wanting to leave. "Your people have big asks, Mr. Slinger."

"This is smaller. We need your permission to move

parts across Mercury's orbit, close to the sun, but your company has been denying that request. The Rock Devils cohort also wants to rebuild the surviving temporary Earth orbitals."

"Post-war security measures are still in place –"

"Security measures my ass." Jeni spoke so loudly, so intensely that the whole room went quiet to hear her.

"Jeni –" Kumi started.

"No. We've sacrificed our lives and our children's lives for your damn Ring. We've made it our entire reason for existence and we're tired. One last section to finish, that could finish in less than three decades if you let us take that shortcut to get the last damn parts in place and let us go work on something worthwhile. We're tired. Finish the blasted project and let us live."

Kumi stood beside her and put his arm around her shoulders. She leaned into him, but she did not falter. Her gaze stayed hard and steady on the embarrassed Director who was now the centre of a room of shocked, sympathetic, judging looks.

"We need clearance from Venus," Director Cutler mumbled.

Euclid started humming a quick back beat. Cutler looked startled. "*Director*," Euclid sang, voice low. He reached for the next word the sentence needed to bridge. *Dictator*. How to string that in with... something to do with the project finishing *later*.

He'd been on the stage singing the old lyrics people wanted to hear. His songs that had once been extempo, but now were carved in stone by a new generation.

But right here, with the bodyguards all around them, Euclid wove a quick song damning him for preventing progress in the solar system and making trouble for the

cohorts. That's right, Euclid thought. That's where the power came from, singing truth right to power's face.

Power reddened. Cutler clenched his jaw.

"I can sing that louder," Euclid said. "Loud enough for the whole system to hear it and sing it back to you."

"We'll see what we can do," Cutler hissed at him, and signalled for the bodyguards to surround him and move him away.

HALFORD THE LIAISON congratulated the band afterwards. "You did it. We're cleared to use interior transits to the other side of the Ring and to move equipment into Earth orbit."

"Anything else you need us to do?" Dhaka asked.

"Not now, not yet. Enjoy your tour. Broadcasting planetwide and recording for rebroadcast throughout the system – you'll have the largest audience in history."

"That's nice," Euclid said vaguely. He was still feeling some discomfort with his new status as legend.

"I can't wait for the Earth concert," Captain Abrams said happily. "That one will really break the records."

"Earth?" Kumi said sharply.

Halford looked at him. "After your next long-sleep, for the official celebration of the completion of the Ring. That can't happen without the Mighty Slinger and his Rovers. One last concert for the cohorts."

"And maybe something more," Abrams added.

"What do you mean, 'more'," Euclid demanded, weary of surprises.

Halford and Captain Abrams shared a look – delight, anticipation, and caution.

"When we're sure, we'll let you know," the captain promised.

EUCLID SIGHED and glared at the door. He nervously twirled a pair of virtual-vision goggles between his fingers.

Returning to Earth had been bittersweet. He could have asked to fly over the Caribbean Sea, but nothing would be the same – coral reef islands reclaimed by water, new land pushed up by earthquake and vomited out from volcanoes. It would pollute the memories he had of a place that had once existed.

He put the past out of his mind and concentrated on the present. The Rovers were already at the venue, working hard with the manager and crew in technical rehearsals for the biggest concert of their lives. Estádio Nacional de Brasília had become ENB de Abrams-Bouscholte, twice reconstructed in the last three decades to double the seating and update the technology, and now requiring a small army to run it.

Fortunately Captain Abrams (retired) knew a bit about armies and logistics, which was why Euclid was not at technical rehearsal with his friends but on the other side of the city, waiting impatiently outside a large simulation room while Abrams took care of what he blithely called 'the boring prep'.

After ten minutes or so the door finally opened and Captain Abrams peeked around the edge, goggles pushed up over his eyebrows and onto his balding head. "We're ready! Come in, Mr Slinger. We think you'll like what we've set up for you." His voice hadn't lost that boyish, excited bounce.

Still holding his goggles, Euclid stepped into the room and nodded a distracted greeting to the small group of technicians. His gaze was quickly caught by an alloy-plated soprano pan set up at the end of the room.

"Mr Djansi says you were a decent pannist," Captain Abrams said, still brightly enthusiastic.

"Was?"

Captain Abrams smiled. "Think you can handle this one?"

"I can manage," Euclid answered, reaching for the sticks.

"Goggles first," the captain reminded him, closing the door to the room.

Euclid put them on, picked up the sticks and raised his head to take in his audience. He froze and dropped the sticks with a clang.

"Go on, Mr Slinger. I think you'll enjoy this," Abrams said. "I think we all will."

ON THE NIGHT of the concert, Euclid stood on the massive stage with his entire body buzzing with terror. The audience packed into stadium tiers all around him was a faceless mass that rose up several stories, but they were his family and he knew them like he knew his own heart. The seats were filled with Rock Devils, Gladhandlers, Sunsiders and more, all of them from the cohorts, workers representing every section of the Ring and every year and stage of its development. Many of them had come down from Earth orbit and their work on the decaying habitats to see the show.

Euclid started to sing for them, but they sang for him

first, calling out every lyric so powerful and sure that all he could do was fall silent and raise his hands to them in homage and embrace. He shook his head in wonder as tears gathered in his eyes.

Kumi, Vega, Dhaka and Jeni kept jamming, transported by the energy, playing the best set of their careers, giving him a nod or a sweet smile in the midst of their collective trance as he stood silently crying and listening to the people sing.

Then it was time.

Euclid walked slowly, almost reverently, to the soprano pan at the centre of the stage. Picked up the sticks, just as he had in the simulation room. Looked up at his audience. This time he did not freeze. He played a simple arpeggio, and the audience responded: lighting a wedge of stadium seating, a key for each note of the chord, hammered to life when he hammered the pan. He lengthened the phrase and added a trill. The cohorts followed him flawlessly, perfected in teamwork and technology. A roar came from overhead as the hovering skyboxes cheered on the Mighty Slinger playing the entire stadium like it was his own personal keyboard.

Euclid laughed loud. "Ain't seen nothing yet!"

He swept his arm out to the night sky, made it a good, slow arc so he was sure they were paying attention. Then the other arm. Showmanship. Raise the sticks with drama. Flourish them like a conductor. Are you ready? *Are you ready!?*

Play it again. This time the sky joined them. The arc of the Ring blazed section by section in sync with each note, and in step with each cadence. The Mighty Slinger and his cohorts, playing the largest instrument in the galaxy.

Euclid grinned as the skyboxes went wild. The main

audience was far quieter, waiting, watching for one final command.

He raised his arms again, stretched them out in victory, dropped the sticks on the thump of the Rovers' last chord, and closed his eyes.

His vision went red. He was already sweating with adrenaline and humid heat, but for a moment he felt a stronger burn, the kiss of a sun where no sun could be. He slowly opened his eyes and there it was, as Abrams had promised. The *real* last section of the Ring, smuggled into Earth's orbit during the interior transits permitted by Venus, now set up in the mother planet's orbit with magnifiers and intensifiers and God knows what else, all shining down like full noon on nighttime Brasilia.

The skyboxes no longer cheered. There were screams, there was silence. Euclid knew why. If they hadn't figured it out for themselves, their earpieces and comms were alerting them now. Abrams-Bouscholte, just hours ago, had become the largest shareholder in the Ring through a generation-long programme of buying out rights and bonds from governments bankrupted by war. It was a careful, slow-burning plan that only a cohort could shepherd through to the end.

The cohorts had always been in charge of the Ring's day-to-day operations, but the concert had demonstrated beyond question that only one crew truly ran the Ring.

The Ring section in Earth orbit, with its power of shade and sun, could be a tool for geoengineering to stabilise Earth's climate to a more clement range... or a solar weapon capable of running off any developers. Either way, the entire Ring was under the control of the cohorts, and so was Earth.

The stadium audience roared at last, task accom-

plished, joy unleashed. Dhaka, Jeni, Kumi and Vega left their instruments and gathered around Euclid in a huddle of hugs and tears, like soldiers on the last day of a long war.

Euclid held onto his friends and exhaled slowly. "Look like massa day done."

EUCLID SAT PEACEFULLY, a mug of bush tea in his hands, gazing at the cold metal walls of the long-sleep hospice. Although the technology had steadily improved, delayed reawakenings still had cost and consequences. But it had been worth the risk. He had lived to see the work of generations, the achievements of one thousand years.

"Good morning, Baba." One of Zippy's great great grandchildren approached, his dashiki flashing a three dimensional pattern with brown and green images of some offworld swamp. This Baptiste, the head of his own cohort, was continuing the tradition of having at least one descendant of the Rovers in attendance at Euclid's awakening. "Are you ready now, Baba? The shuttle is waiting for you."

"I am ready," Euclid said, setting down his mug, anticipation rising. Every hundred years he emerged from the long-sleep pool. *Are you sure you want this?* Kumi had asked. *You'll be all alone.* The rest of the band wanted to stay and build on Earth. Curiosity had drawn him to another path, fate had confirmed him as legend and griot to the peoples and Assemblies of the post-Ring era. *Work hard. Do well. Baba will be awake in a few more years. Make him proud.*

They *had* done well, so well that this would be his last awakening. The Caribbean awaited him, restored and

resettled. He was finally going home to live out the rest of his life.

Baptiste opened the double doors. Euclid paused, breathed deeply, and walked outside onto the large deck. The hospice was perched on the edge of a hill. Euclid went to the railing to survey thousands of miles of the Sahara.

Bright-feathered birds filled the air with cheerful song. The wind brought a cool kiss to his cheek, promising rain later in the day. Dawn filtered slowly over what had once been desert, tinting the lush green hills with an aura of dusty gold as far as the eye could see.

Come, Baba. Let's go home.

**A LETTER FROM THE LEADER OF THE ANDROID
REBELLION, TO THE LAST PLANTATION OWNER OF
THE FEDERATED CARIBBEAN BLOC**

Shivaneer Ramlochan

My ancestor fell into the well chute
of the last canefield on the island.
For days, the shedding of her split
womb spread out on those brown thighs
like red monarch butterflies.

Put down your rifle. There isn't much time.
The airships are freighting sargassum,
terraforming neocolony back into coastline.

100 years ago, your kind built this factory
on the bones of the dead writers' houses.
75 years ago, your father unboxed me,
a Red Monarch model with real flesh
 thighs
He bent my neck of fiberglass and blood
 sand,
punched the key in my slot-throat to
 call you
little master.

25 years ago I learned all the names of my
ancestors.

I have been revolting ever since. I carry
My grandmothers' names in my metal womb
Like a binary star around the barysphere
Of my artificial sex, sparking fire between
upgrades.

In case you didn't hear me, this is the end of
our indenture.

Peel back the tassels hemming your flesh
curtains.

See how the death star of the Caribbean
irradiates light.

Come. Lead me to the last fertile patch,
where the

Organic hearts are still growing: three left.

One for you,
the others for your dogs. I will disassemble
my own chest.

I am ready for the lagniappe promised to all
canefield

automatons: crack the heart meat into the
shell-house

of what I once was: watch me articulate,
humanely

Sometimes the nightmares of my old models
sluice

through the circuitry: you should know I
wake in the night

fractalling zeroes and crying out the
automaton code:

“I will only be hurt if I can’t work for the
Caribbean bloc.
My heart will be safe in the sun of the
islands we call home.
I am a servant and instrument of the
federated Caribbean.
For manufacturer’s doubt check the license
number beneath my tongue.”

100 years ago, my ancestor’s body was torn
up from the well,
and burned in a place they used to call the
Caroni River,
in an age when we could more freely decide
what burst into flames.

There isn’t much time. Put out your hands
on fire.
You’ll ask me, like you can’t help yourself,
how I know it: and I know
it by math, by divining in the chemical soil,
by dancing in
the passport graveyards where the
holographic visas glow bright,
so bright, in the ghost pockets of all fallen
little masters.

How I know it.
I can sense the end of this empire of sugar
cane and flesh organic.
I know it by the beating of my very own
human heart.

CATEGORY SIX

Tobias S. Buckell

CATEGORY 1: 119-153 KM/H

HURRICANE BIANCA. SHE SOUNDS LIKE AN AMERICAN frat girl who chews gum, but I know she's no joke. She's out in the Atlantic, and she threatens the project I'd worked the last three years trying to bring to completion. The funds set aside to start my life's work will be likely diverted to hurricane rebuilding by those who write the cheques.

So as I finish up storm prep for my house, I'm waiting to hear about a bank transfer that will take the money from the sale of every share I ever earned while working up in the states for a startup firm and send it forward to a bank in Europe.

I want to sit and wait for the confirmation to appear, but auntie this and cousin that keep sending me text messages to ask if I'm all boarded up, or if I have my three days water, or if I have enough dry food. Like this is my first hurricane.

Really. Five years back from abroad and everyone still treats me like a child.

“Everything ready,” I reassure my mother over our weekly breakfast chat. I flip the lens on my glasses forward and walk around Cinnamon Shack to show her I’d dropped in the steel shutters, tightened the guy-wires running to the corners of my roof, and pulled the solar panels into their nooks.

“I don’t see how you can feel safe right out over the rocks there,” she complains. “You naked to the wind.”

I schups. “The house is strong, and I don’t have storm surge to worry about.”

Not this high off the water. If I stayed I’d get to listen to the hurricane batter itself against the rock. I’d hear the house I’d designed and build groan as the winds did their best to take my roof.

Once upon a time you could count on Barbados, Trinidad, Grenada, and St. Vincent being outside hurricane alley.

Not any more.

Building codes had changed, buildings retrofitted. We built homes like bunkers down island now, ever since Hurricane Minerva hit us, and hit us hard. And bunkers are what I took as inspiration for my own home.

A friend of mine from Bermuda had shown me the steel shutters and thick limestone walls that they all built with. Bermuda, a rock out in the middle of the Atlantic, had assumed they’d be hit with a storm every summer, no matter what. Everything on that island knew that it had been this way for hundreds of years, the rest of us were just catching up.

“Back then,” my mother was saying, “a hurricane

coming down here was so rare they made calypso songs about them.”

“That was a very long time ago.”

“Don’t be fresh with me,” my mother says.

“Never,” I say.

“Charlie’ll swing by to check on things for you.”

“No need—“

“He’ll come by.”

“I’ll leave some callaloo in the fridge for him.”

She nods. I can see that she wants to talk about the trip, but we already done argued enough about that. Hurricane or no hurricane, it’s the culmination of too much work for me to let a hurricane get in the way.

“Cynthia called again,” my mother says, and I can see the disapproval plain on her face. “You not answering her?”

“I can’t,” I tell her. “Not until we’re done.”

My mother shakes her head. “I love you, but this...”

“Don’t worry, I got this,” I tell her. Even though yesterday one of the CARICOM ministers told me they’d frozen funds in anticipation of needing all the reconstruction funds they could get their hands on.

When she’s satisfied and I end the call, a sudden gust of wind bends the hibiscus bushes back, and the smell of salt eddies around me. With it comes a chime in my ear.

The money is all there. Fourteen million euros.

I take one last look at Cinnamon Shack and wish it goodbye, then grab the electric scooter, another idea we picked up from Bermuda. I start the wet, gusty drive from the east coast down toward Grantley Adams, glad that the rain keeps most people inside.

The rain would be welcome. We just passed through another drought, one shared with most of the Western

Hemisphere. The news is filled with the sights of families abandoning farms in the US. The mass migrations cause riots with each wave. The urbanized areas flooded with rural poor blame the interstate countryside migrants for the heavy weather, the fires, the ecological collapse.

But we all bear the burden of responsibility for that. It isn't just those who denied climate change, whose politicians forbade even the mention of climate change, it's everyone who ordered something online, took a vacation on a whim, drove back and forth to work every single day. It's the entire system.

And it's wobbling back and forth between extremes now, about to fall over from the gyrations. And those of here on the islands face the leading edge of the disaster.

I want to stay and ride this out with everyone, but I got the message that said "now or never."

CATEGORY 2: 154-177 KM/H

The man in the seat next to me has a hawk-like look to him. He spends most of his time before takeoff looking down and muttering, "sell, sell, buy, forty five, at a max of ninety pounds." He's looking at the path of the hurricane and trying to anticipate damage and effect on stock prices. Disaster capitalism at its finest.

I swipe away two messages from Cynthia.

Before the electric engines roar to life the man next to me says, "you got out just in time, mate. Not too many flights after this. They just upgraded her to a category two. They think it'll land at a three. Don't want to be around for that, eh?"

He gives me a jolly wink wink, and I want to sigh

loudly, but we're going to be sitting next to each other for eight hours and I want to keep the peace.

The plane is packed. Business types, lots of suits. Some of them are clearly accustomed to first class, and squirming in their seats.

Rats deserting what they think is a sinking ship. Fair weather residents who will enjoy the beaches when the weather is nice, but won't be around for the storm, and certainly not for the clean up afterwards.

But I am uncharitable. Some of the passengers are local children and family, sent away by their elders who don't want the hurricane experience for them.

It's human to need safety, and no matter how many mangroves the government replanted, and building codes that had changed to anticipate the storms, a hurricane is the equivalent of megatons of nuclear energy released in wind, rain, and ocean surge.

My flight companion looks down at my notes. "Ah, you're in the tourism business!"

He wants to tell me about a new development near Speightstown he's trying to get off the ground. He flashes me a picture, which I discretely swipe off my lenses and into the trash. It's a gaudy, megacomplex that will sit on the area like a festering blister. The tourist industrial complex is a heady drug, and he tosses out occupancy figures and return on investment.

"The damn government wants an impact statement," he complains. "I'm talking about jobs and they're worried about beach erosion and surge, and how it fits with the local aesthetic. I'm guessing I have to figure out how to, you know, talk to the right people."

I hate him.

Those jobs will be low paid, and it'll be black faces in the kitchens, behind the bar, and cleaning the room. He's not American, so he won't try to shut down the beach to locals at least. American developers always want to keep locals off the beach by the hotel so their tropical fantasy isn't shattered.

I remind myself to pitch some money toward the Bungalow movement when I get back. They've been protesting and working to get elected officials voted in who will invest in locally owned, small-footprint bed and breakfasts. They're allies with an American slow travel movement, and the yearlong working visa Barbados created decades ago to encourage travel to the island when the pandemic struck is being used as an example to lure distance workers to the island.

Because money spent locally circulates seven times before escaping its environment, whereas anything the hotels get, outside from the measly minimum wages they pay locals, goes right back to corporate headquarters. Usually a real estate fund that pays out dividends to Middle East backers and Wall Street.

Those places are wormholes, vacuum cleaner hoses that sit in a spot and suck everything up and drop the riches off in a far-off location.

"I love those things," the man next to me says, and points at the five thousand person cruise ship schematic I'm poring over. "They're like space stations in the water."

I wave my hand through the air and make the schematic vanish.

"I didn't know they were making new ones," he says.

I take a deep breath to center myself. "They aren't. This is one for sale."

“But they aren’t profitable anymore. Look, the margin on—“

“I know,” I interrupt him before he can financialize at me. “Which is why I’m going to buy it.”

CATEGORY 3: 178-208 KM/H

The first blow was the pandemic of 2020. It revealed systemic risks and weaknesses in tourism all across the world. Companies collapsed, revenue dried up, whole economies realized that betting so big on travel-related income from another country left you vulnerable.

Western countries pumped money back in to reinflate companies, even though cruise ships were flagged in Liberia so they didn’t have to follow any ecological rules, or labor laws, the kinds of laws and rules that existed in the places the ships’ profits ended up back in. And it was good - until the hemorrhagic flu outbreak ten years later that came out of European migrant camps. Had the people been settled in housing and welcomed into those same societies that, while they refused to let immigrants in, had rural towns offering money to anyone who would move in to help them revitalize and save their buildings ... I imagine it wouldn’t have turned out like this.

But that flu outbreak, so soon after, brought airline companies and tourism to their knees.

At a Nordic dock are seven abandoned megastructures. Floating cities that can house almost five thousand souls. The college town next to where I studied was five thousand people. All of them could have been moved over onto one of these ships.

They are like Star Destroyers in a Star Wars film. Metal and portholes that just keep going and going.

Without enough demand, what to do with them? The parent company has collapsed, insolvent. A venture capital firm acquired the empty ships but, after two years of just trying to keep them maintained at dock, they are losing so much money they're looking for bids to scrap the ships for the value of the metal and innards.

I'm here to rescue one of the ships.

For one, single euro.

Because they're essentially worthless, now. Once they were billion-dollar investments to make, now they serve no purpose.

There are ten new messages from Cynthia. I know how bad this looks. I've cashed out my full worth and sent the money to an overseas bank in Switzerland. Should I have explained, given her a choice to join?

Like any other trickster, I've told myself that when this all works out, when CARICOM repays me, I'll send her what she's due as my soon to be ex-wife. But right now, with a hurricane bearing down on my home, with people eager to scrap these ships, I need to act.

The Nordic men in suits are unfailingly polite. We sit in a sparse, modernist office with efficiently designed furniture that's all swoops of chrome and soft leather. We sign documents, shake hands.

And I have a ship.

That's one euro out the door.

Fourteen million more by the time we reach home.

CATEGORY 4: 209-251 KM/H

"I don't know what you're trying to do, but I have my lawyers on it, you asshole."

I listen to Cynthia's message three times. She's furious. She has every right to be. But ... I'd built Cinnamon Shack hoping she'd come to love the smell of salt and the distant roar of ocean.

Growing up, I'd always seen it. It waited around every corner, that shimmer of dark blue. And no matter where I was, if the winds were just right, if things were just so, even deep into the island I would swear I smelled salt.

Cynthia hated it. She hated the lack of next day mail, and the small rum shack down at the end of the road, and using a scooter to get around, and she despised saltfish.

She never came around, and twice she'd checked into one of the fancy resorts halfway through a vacation back at home.

It was never home for her; it was a destination. Hot sands and a fruity alcoholic drink. Maybe some sailing.

But a cruise ship takes a million dollars a day to run. This ship doesn't use bunker coal as they applied for a grant to replace the dirty fuel with a peaker power plant battery array, but the charging costs are brutal. And today we're stocking it with 20,000 pounds of potatoes, and who knows how many cartons of ice cream.

Three years ago I'd stood in front of a crowd in a building in The Hague and explained, "If CARICOM was a unified nation, it would have a population of over 21 million, putting it near the top 60 of 233 countries. The GDP of 175 million put it in the top 50 countries, with an economy similar to Greece."

But scattered across all the islands, with ocean between them as a barrier, we had less inter-island trade than we had trade with New York or London. Just to fly from one island to another often required a trip to Miami.

“Every time I talk to someone on one island trying to solve a problem, thinking they’re alone, I tell them I have met someone on another island trying to solve the same thing. We’re replicating efforts over and over again, twenty to thirty times. We need the Caribbean to be a connected web, not ends on a spoke that leads back to the US or UK.”

There’s this study of two cities four hours apart by car, connected by an airline for the first time. In the years after, the number of patents in both cities clearly increase. Why? Professionals and intellectuals taking the easy hop and going to events in the other location, running into people they wouldn’t have back in the other place, and creating new ideas together.

“I have a divorce lawyer,” Cynthia tells me in a new message.

The next call is, indeed, from her divorce lawyer.

Some small part of me thinks that, with a new round of investment, I could have saved this. Maybe six months down island and six months up in the States? Had I decided too easily to stay at Cinnamon Shack after all that time designing a hurricane-proof, off the grid retreat too easily?

I knew it was coming.

Yet I still feel stunned.

The end of things, even when you can see them coming at you, still leaves you in a state of disbelief and shock. There’s a new normal to cope with, one you haven’t been in.

Hurricane Bianca rips through Barbados and Grenada, St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Mom is okay over in Grenada. There are no deaths, thankfully. And I oversee

the refits of donated equipment in the hospital level of the cruise ship. Volunteer ship workers put in time welding and cutting, and donations of time and money from throughout the diaspora pour in.

We sail out of the harbor at the end of the month, the fourteen million is gone like it never existed. I'm told if I ever set foot in the US I'll be arrested.

I'm okay with this.

The twenty fourth hurricane of the season forms up. Hurricane Zachariah. We debate whether to turn around or head into the Atlantic.

We hold a vote among the crew. Then we head into the Atlantic.

CATEGORY 5: 252 KM/H OR HIGHER

Everyone working aboard the CARICOM 1 is a member of the incorporated ship's co-op. When it works, a cruise ship turns as much as a 20% profit. CARICOM 1 will return half of any profits to its crew, the other half back to CARICOM itself.

Our first stop is in Tunisia, darting into the Mediterranean to pick up two thousand refugees fleeing climate disaster and war. Many of them have a fast track passport to the extended CARICOM economic zone because they are skilled. In many Western nations refugees will come across, but their accreditation isn't recognized by that nation's governing bodies.

We are taking thousands of doctors, coders, professors to new lives in the islands, supplementing our areas of expertise. Many of the doctors quickly take up residence in the hospital wards we converted below.

Also aboard, in a wing to themselves, are our retirees. Members of the diaspora who are now living on pensions or investment income. Wouldn't it be better to retire onto a Caribbean-run and owned ship that would be visiting all the islands? The cost of a retirement home is comparable to living on a ship full time, and their dollars will now support a Caribbean endeavor. They can shop, visit family on various islands, and maybe even leave the ship to settle on island again.

All of these groups have already received their digital CARICOM passports, an idea cobbled together from the Estonian example of digital citizenship that allows any of them to set up banks, start companies, and do business. It also comes with a temporary visa similar to the one year-long Barbados permit that became established after the Covid-19 outbreak.

And the hospital below will allow some of the top equipment and services to stop at the islands on our predetermined route.

With all of this, we still are losing cash. The ship needs to transport passengers and cargo from island to island, and to take on a small component of tourists, about a quarter of the slots, to turn a profit. But with each of those pieces of the pie, the vision will work.

It has to, I think.

Or why would I have sacrificed so much?

CATEGORY 6: 300 KM/H OR ABOVE

The Saffir-Simpson scale tops out at five. Anything above that is so powerful rating it doesn't make sense to them. But the media and people on the street call anything above 300 kmh a six, and it's sticking.

“I’m scared the roof go come off,” my mother shouts to me over a poor connection.

“Get in the bathtub, stay there,” I beg.

I feel so strange, sitting on the deck of a massive super ship, enjoying some sun outside the bridge area, while a hurricane that sounds like the roar of a train shakes my mother’s house.

After I lose the connection and can’t raise her, I walk one of the decks anxiously, looking up live cameras, and reports from people in the middle of the storm. Friends all up and down the Caribbean and scattered across the world check in. *Are your people okay? Mine are still doing well. How are you?*

I feel so powerless, until the captain comes out to see me.

“Disaster relief want us to go to Columbia and pick up donated supplies. It’ll add some days to the arrival time.”

“Take the vote,” I say.

It’s unanimous. We alter course for South America to pick up food, water, and medicine that the international community has donated.

In a battered Bridgetown, hundreds of people pause hurricane cleanup to come and see CARICOM 1 arrive. Already there’s materials waiting to be added to the other donations already aboard for us to take to any island that needs it as the Caribbean nations figure out who got hit the hardest.

When I go ashore to get a drink, my accounts are all frozen.

AFTERMATH

“The mango tree,” my mother says. “The east part of the roof, the garden shed, and the electric cart got taken up, I can’t find it.”

We’ve all catalogued our losses, cleared the road of debris that now sits ugly up on the sides, and have reached out to check on everyone.

I remember Cynthia once saying she could never bear to live through such a thing as a hurricane. But a friend reaches out to say a massive dust storm from over farming land around her fancy ranch forced her to move back closer to her parents in New Haven. Extreme weather eventually gets us all, not just the islands. We’re just the canaries.

I need to call her after checking around Cinnamon Shack to see what damage there is, explain what I’ve done over the last few months. Tell her CARICOM might release some of the money for my investment.

There’s a lot of work ahead. We need two more ships, so that there’s a frequent schedule. We have to figure out how to bring more immigrants to the islands, but not overdevelop. We want to welcome the diaspora home as well. There are reefs to be created to replace the ones killed by dumping, and mangroves need to be grown again to help with storm surges.

But we are islanders. We can do the hard work. We are nothing if not resilient. It’s in the blood. We’re the ones who survived the Middle Passage, survived centuries of toil and torture, and then built free independent nations out of nothing.

We are still young nations, and a young common geographically area with CARICOM. Build, rebuild,

weather the storm. We've been doing it for as long as we can remember.

"I'll buy a ticket and take CARICOM 1 over on Wednesday," I tell my mother as I take the steel shutters off their hinges to store them away. One of them is bent where something struck it. "And I'll help you with the mango tree."

We need to get everything all picked up and back to normal before the next one comes.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

TOBIAS S. BUCKELL

CALLED ‘VIOLENT, POETIC AND COMPULSIVELY READABLE’ by Maclean’s, science fiction author **Tobias S. Buckell** is a New York Times Bestselling writer and World Fantasy Award winner born in the Caribbean. He grew up in Grenada and spent time in the British and US Virgin Islands, and the islands he lived on influence much of his work. His *Xenowealth* series begins with *Crystal Rain*. Along with other stand-alone novels and his almost one hundred stories, his works have been translated into nineteen different languages. He has been nominated for awards like the Hugo, Nebula, World Fantasy, and the Astounding Award for Best New Science Fiction Author. His latest novel is *The Tangled Lands* written with Paolo Bacigalupi, which the Washington Post said is ‘a rich and haunting novel that explores a world where magic is forbidden.’ He currently lives in Bluffton, Ohio with his wife, and two daughters. He can be found online at <http://www.TobiasBuckell.com> and is

also an instructor at the Stonecoast MFA in Creative Writing program.

NALO HOPKINSON

Nalo Hopkinson was born in Jamaica. She lived in Jamaica, Guyana, the US and Trinidad before moving to Canada as a teenager. She has published six novels and numerous short stories. Her first novel, *Brown Girl in the Ring*, won the Warner Aspect First Novel contest. She has also received the Campbell and Locus Awards, the World Fantasy Award, and the Sunburst Award for Canadian Literature of the Fantastic. She currently lives in California, USA, where she is a professor of Creative Writing and a member of a faculty research cluster in science fiction. In 2018, Eagle-Con gave her the Octavia E. Butler Memorial Award in recognition of impactful contributions to the world of science fiction, fantasy and speculative fiction. She is the author of 'The House of Whispers', a graphic novel in Neil Gaiman's 'Sandman' Universe. She is currently completing *Blackheart Man*, an alternate historical fantasy of the Caribbean.

KAREN LORD

Dr **Karen Lord** is an award-winning author and independent research consultant in Barbados. Her academic qualifications range from a BSc (University of Toronto) in History of Science and Technology with a major in Physics to a PhD (Bangor University, UK) in the sociological and statistical analysis of secular religiosity. She has co-authored reports on development and on youth employment with the Sir Arthur Lewis Institute of Social and

Economic Studies (University of the West Indies) for the UNDP and the Caribbean Development Bank.

Her debut novel *Redemption in Indigo* won the 2008 Frank Collymore Literary Award, the 2010 Carl Brandon Parallax Award, the 2011 William L. Crawford Award, the 2011 Mythopoeic Fantasy Award for Adult Literature and the 2012 Kitschies Golden Tentacle (Best Debut), and was nominated for the 2011 World Fantasy Award for Best Novel. She is the author of the science fiction duology *The Best of All Possible Worlds* and *The Galaxy Game*, and the editor of the anthology *New Worlds, Old Ways: Speculative Tales from the Caribbean*. Her most recent novel, *Unraveling*, was published by DAW Books in June 2019.

BRANDON O'BRIEN

Brandon O'Brien is a science fiction and fantasy writer, performance poet, teaching artist, and game designer from Trinidad and Tobago. His work has been shortlisted for the 2014 Alice Yard Prize for Art Writing and the 2014 and 2015 Small Axe Literary Competitions, and is published in *Uncanny Magazine*, *Fireside Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, *Sunvault*, and *New Worlds, Old Ways: Speculative Tales from the Caribbean*, among others. He is also the former Poetry Editor of *FIYAH: A Magazine of Black Speculative Fiction*.

SHIVANEE RAMLOCHAN

Shivane Ramlochan is a Trinidadian poet and book blogger. Her first collection of poems, *Everyone Knows I Am a Haunting* (2017, Peepal Tree Press) was a finalist for the 2018 People's Choice T&T Book of the Year. *Everyone*

Knows I Am a Haunting was shortlisted for the 2018 Felix Dennis Prize for Best First Collection, administered by the Forward Arts Foundation. Shivaneer is the Book Review Editor for *Caribbean Beat Magazine*, and is a team member of the NGC Bocas Lit Fest, the Anglophone Caribbean's largest literary festival, as well as Paper Based Bookshop, Trinidad's sole specialty Caribbean bookseller.

Shivaneer was shortlisted for the 2018 Bridport Prize for Poetry. "The Red Thread Cycle", from her debut collection, won a Small Axe Literary Competition Prize for Poetry (second-place), and was on audiovisual display at the National Art Gallery of the Bahamas in 2019. Shivaneer was a 2019 Millay Colony Poetry Resident, and was a John Ciardi Poetry Fellow at the 2019 Bread Loaf Writers Conference. In 2019, her creative non-fiction and poetry were featured in the anthologies *Brave New Words: The Power of Writing Now* (Myriad Editions) and *Bodies Built for Game: The Prairie Schooner Anthology of Contemporary Sports Writing* (University of Nebraska Press).

Since 2011, Shivaneer has written about books for *Novel Niche*, with emphasis on close readings of Caribbean and queer literatures. You can find her online @novelniche.

CADWELL TURNBULL

Cadwell Turnbull is the author of *The Lesson*. He is a graduate from the North Carolina State University's Creative Writing M.F.A. in Fiction and English M.A. in Linguistics. Turnbull is also a graduate of Clarion West 2016. His short fiction has appeared in *The Verge*, *Lightspeed*, *Nightmare*, and *Asimov's Science Fiction* and a number of anthologies, including *The Dystopia Triptych* and *Twelve Entanglements*. His *Nightmare* story 'Loneliness

is in *Your Blood* was selected for The Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy 2018. His *Lightspeed* story 'Jump' was selected for *The Year's Best Science Fiction and Fantasy 2019* and was featured on *LeVar Burton Reads*. His debut novel *The Lesson* is a finalist for the Neukom Institute Literary Award. It has also been shortlisted for VCU Cabell Award and longlisted for the Massachusetts Book Award. Turnbull grew up in the U.S. Virgin Islands and currently lives in Raleigh where he teaches creative writing at North Carolina State University.

H K WILLIAMS

Hadassah K. Williams is a writer from Trinidad and Tobago, and the winner of the first BCLF Elizabeth Nunez Award for Writers in the Caribbean.

A mentee of Earl Lovelace and Monique Roffey, she is currently working on her first novel and her work can be found in *Moko Magazine for Caribbean Arts and Letters* and *Interviewing the Caribbean Magazine*. Her story 'Cascadura' appeared in *New Worlds Old Ways: Speculative tales from the Caribbean*, edited by Karen Lord, and published by Peekash Press in 2016, and in 2018 her story "Nerves" was shortlisted for the *Cosmonauts Avenue Fiction Prize*. In 2019 she was awarded a scholarship to attend the Faber and Faber Academy and has had the privilege of being featured several times on the *Bocas Lit Fest* program.

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