

### Third World Gleaner

I first saw the woman from Earth on Harvest Day, or as we non-Imperial citizens like to call it, “Gleaning Day.” She was tall and square, but perfectly toned, and clearly military. You could tell from her uniform but it was even more obvious in her face and body language. I thought she must have been bred for the position like a thoroughbred racehorse. And it was clear why her government had chosen her as envoy to the Emirates—her keen eyes pierced everything they set their sights on, filtered by the weight of those indomitable, military-trained eyebrows. Even from my distance I could see that those eyebrows were working overtime to cast away or reinterpret the cacophony of alien information assaulting her from every side. This one might not have a panic attack.

She stood beside the Shah and his chieftains on the hovering platform, receiving the refreshments that were thrust upon her with a stern courtesy. Even at this distance I could see her uniform—once crisply pressed—wilting under the blistering sun, but she stood tall and dignified as the Shah explained to her the process of harvest transfer.

The enormous Collector had descended to its target altitude, five hundred meters above the stubble fields with their odd contours of luminescent magenta, and cast a shadow the size of a football field. Dozens of Harvesters had lined up in half a dozen parallel queues and began sliding forward across the fumes of boiling air churned up by their ventilators. To the untrained eye it looked like a procession of tanks marching off to war, and I

wondered briefly if the Earth woman would understand it. But when each Harvester slid under the belly of the monster Collector, the transfer of Perillian Grain was unmistakable. The harvest load was propelled upward with a shocking amount of force and speed almost invisible to the naked eye aside from the cloud of gold and magenta dust which was produced. It was from this cloud that the rain came—a warm, earthy, nutritious rain of magenta tipped stalks. It was for this life-giving rain that I had come—I along with about seven thousand others.

You may think it far-fetched that she would spot me in all that crowd, moving back and forth like the waves of the ocean under the belly of machines. But as soon as I saw her, I knew she would. Anyone who's traveled abroad knows how remarkably easy it is to pick out a fellow countryman. My skin had tanned, but its smooth quality practically glowed next to the rough, textured patterns of any given Emiratee. My dark brown hair stood out like a weed among their naturally ethereal silver manes. I knew there was a strong possibility that she would spot me, especially if I remained in the fore of the mob. I hadn't planned on causing a scene. But those heavy-filter eyebrows, so determined to keep her own understanding of the world safe inside, proved irresistible.

Her gaze fell on me, but her expression didn't change. I could almost see her considering the possibility that I was simply a mutant Emiratee. I decided to clarify the matter for her with an impromptu performance of "Single Ladies" that would have brought the house down in my non-English speaking karaoke club back home. But when I looked back at the platform she had vanished. The Emiratees had ignored my antics, accustomed to my peculiarities and much more concerned with getting their winter store of Perillian grain. But now they suddenly

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stirred and parted and I caught sight of a very red-faced Captain hurtling toward me. I panicked and ran.

Now, I'm no couch potato. I like to think I'm the spoon in the silverware drawer of athletics. I really only have one area of expertise, and I'm a little round in some places, but I can substitute for a fork or a knife if I have to. Unfortunately running is not my area of expertise and the furious female Captain with the indomitable eyebrows tackled me in under a minute. Now, I do pride myself on being pretty scrappy. But pit scrappy, spoon-girl against thoroughbred fighting machine with a point to prove and you get a pretty pathetic picture. I didn't imagine she'd put me in a chokehold. I guess I need to expand my imagination. And she didn't let up when I tapped out—not until I had nearly blacked out. Well, I had majorly misjudged that situation. You live and you learn. But now she was hauling me to my feet as the ground tilted dementedly and the brown-cloth shoes of the Emiratees around us blinked in and out of focus. Before I knew what was happening my hands had been bound with a rough cord and I had been dragged into a small transport. The world had stopped vomiting at me and it was time to assess the gravity of my situation. My fellow earthling sat across from me looking very angry. I wanted water. I could ask for it, but in her present mood she was likely to water-board me. Luckily she spoke first.

“How did you get here?”

“Umm...I ran into a merchant a couple years ago,” I suddenly thought this information might put those eyebrows over the edge, “the Emiratees have been watching earth for about ten years now.”

“I know that,” she snapped. She swallowed hard, “They've been making contact with Americans?”

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“Earth products are in high demand: silk, chili powder, scented candles... The merchants have become pretty good at blending in.” Her jaw contracted. I hadn’t thought she could get any angrier. My imagination really is pretty limited, I guess.

“Where did he contact you?”

“She didn’t *contact* me, I met her in an open air market in Kenya.”

“What were you doing in Kenya?”

“That’s where I was born and raised.”

“But you live in America?”

“No, I live in Hong Kong.”

“You’re not American?”

“I am.” She looked confused. I didn’t want to have to explain it to her.

“And who gave you permission to leave the planet?” she asked very seriously. I laughed.

“Are you kidding? Who was I supposed to consult—the Extra-Terrestrial Consulate?”

“You have a passport to travel outside the U.S. don’t you?” I nodded.

“Although I never really understood the point of them. They’re supposed to grant you rights and protection outside your country or something. But it always felt more restricting to me—like governments do everything they can to discourage people from living outside their home country. And I think it’s ridiculous.”

“Well, if you want to live in another country, why don’t you change citizenship?”

“Because you have to jump through a series of very specific hoops just to find yourself limited in new ways. People are more complicated than that—their heritages are more complicated than that.”

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“Right. And you obviously believe that people should be able to run all over the universe, doing whatever they want.”

“You’re telling me that if you met an alien on the street and she offered you transport to her world you would stop to ask permission?”

“Is that a serious question? You could have just submitted yourself to alien slavery.”

“I know there’s a lot of people in the world with evil intentions—but they are still the minority. And I’ve learned not to build relationships with new cultures on fear.”

The Captain laughed cynically, “You’re so naïve.”

“Maybe. But I’m the one who’s been living in an alien empire for three and a half years.”

“Illegally.”

“Are there really any laws against visiting aliens without federal permission? Whatever happened to America’s enterprising spirit? You make it sound like one giant prison.”

“And you’ve got some ego to think you are the best qualified person to enter negotiations with an alien species on behalf of Earth.”

“Yes, I’m sure that’s what the colonists thought in their unimpeachable interactions with the Native Americans.”

“It’s a scar on our history—that’s exactly my point. And I intend to hold you accountable for your careless actions.”

“Why is the government so well equipped to represent Earth? I don’t even feel like the federal government represents the majority of its citizens anymore. Your citizens aren’t incompetent. And by the way, I’m hardly the first earthling to visit the Emirates. I

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know of three others, which probably means there are at least twenty more." The Captain's face paled. "So how much trouble are you putting me in?" I asked soberly. My friends always said I was good at reading people, no matter what country I was in and this Captain didn't do things halvesies.

She pursed her lips and looked doubtful for the first time.

"You could make an example of me. And I'd make a good scapegoat for all the problems of the next ten years," I knew my voice was hard and critical. I wanted her to think about her actions before she threw me to the bureaucratic lions. "I should have been born a hundred years ago," I muttered to myself.

"What took your parents to Kenya?"

"My father was a doctor."

"Humanitarian organization?"

"Yeah."

"In the city?"

I cleared my throat, "No." She looked at me studiously. I looked away—not because I was ashamed, but because of the onslaught of memories. They were always waiting like boulders balanced precariously on the edge of a slope, just waiting for a stone to tip off the avalanche. The avalanche had been tipped and the memories flooded in. Thick red clay that caked the bottom of hard working feet, blaring traffic horns in the rain-soaked crevices of inner city Hong Kong, the way the rain swept across the savannah and filled my nostrils with the scent of wet grass, American malls decorated for Christmas and smelling like warm pretzels, the silhouette of the acacia trees in the blinding golden light of sunset, quiet hours where two hundred strangers all slept side by side on inter-continental flights, and the sounds and smells

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of market day. They were all a part of me. I looked back at her.

“The world I grew up in...the world I thought I lived in—it doesn’t exist anymore.” The Captain cleared her throat several times.

“They put me through six months of intensive training before they gave me this position. The man before me was invited to spend three days with the Shah in his palace. The second night he had a psychotic breakdown. They said it all ate away at him—the two moons, the smell of the air, the minute difference in the gravity—not to mention the kulli-kulli bugs that are the size of your shoe.”

“Yeah, they eat those.”

“My grandfather used to tell me that a flower that has plenty of water and sunshine will grow to be beautiful—until the weather changes. But the weeds which have to fight for existence, fight well in any weather.”

“This has been a really weird day.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not calling you a weed...” The Captain’s eyebrows had relaxed considerably. Now they sat comfortably on her forehead, where they belonged. For a moment I was reminded that I missed humans.

“I’m pretty sure you just called me a weed.”

She straightened her shoulders and her eyes dropped to my shoes, “Do you have somewhere to go?”

“What?”

“You were at the harvest ceremony thing, with the people picking up the leftovers,” she was stuttering to find the right words.

“Gleaners. They were gleaners. I know it’s not a common American term. Those harvesters and collectors were invented almost three hundred years ago, but the designs haven’t been changed for the last seventy-five.

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There is an imperial ordinance that won't allow the collectors to surpass ninety-three percent efficiency—that way those in need can come and glean from what's left. Actually, some countries on Earth used to have a similar custom."

"So you're struggling?"

I smiled, "I'm doing fine. I clearly don't have the bloodline to get any of the upper tier positions. And compared to the tradesmen, I'm completely incompetent. I tried an apprenticeship for about three months but in the end I had to accept that compared to the average Emiratee tradesman I have significant physical limitations."

"So you can't find work?"

"Well, the Emiratees aren't perfect. They have a complicated social structure—each tribe is steeped in its own tradition. They depend on each other for trade but they're too proud to learn each other's complex manner systems so they are constantly insulting each other. I'm good at picking up customs."

"You've become a middleman?"

"Yeah."

"They pay you for this?"

"They don't see it as a viable career. But they give me gifts to show their gratitude. I pick up the gleanings during the harvest season and barter for my other needs. I travel a lot, so I don't need much. It's a good system," I wondered where this conversation was heading. She showed a lot of interest for an officer dragging a fugitive home. "Well, it was fun while it lasted." The Captain studied me for a long time. But I already knew what she would answer. Because her filters were up and her eyes were clear. Those keen eyes understood me.

"You're risking a lot out here on your own," she said quietly. I smiled. I couldn't help it.



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“I was never going to live a safe life. This one suits me far better than a nine-to-five.” She untied my hands.

“If anyone asks—we never ran into each other.”

“Are you sure you’re comfortable taking that kind of responsibility? I mean aren’t there skyscrapers full of protocols against it?”

“Nothing that specifically addresses extra-terrestrial emigration.” The transport was stopping. “I’m sorry. I’ll have the transport take you back.”

“Nah, the gleaning will be over.”

“And it’s my fault you missed it.”

“There will be another gleaning tomorrow a hundred miles from here. I live flexibly.” The transport driver opened the door for us. I noticed the Captain flinch. She still wasn’t accustomed to his striking features: his silver eyes matched his hair, contrasted by the dark brown-gray of his textured skin. I knew how she felt. At the beginning it took some time for me to shake the feeling that they were all glaring at me. “Twate nxala xidobra. Nyenye,” I spoke to the driver then turned back to the Captain, “He’ll take you back to the Shah. I hope you enjoy the rest of your stay. Good luck, Captain.”

“Good luck.” The Captain returned stiffly to the transport. I noticed her two filters clamping firmly into place above her chocolate eyes. She would find out soon enough that pursing her lips like that was offensive to the Emiratee lower class. But she’d figure it out. Those eyebrows weren’t about to have a panic attack. Maybe the Captain would be alright.