

The Taste of Promises

Rachel Swirsky

They approached the settlement at dusk. Tiro switched the skipper to silent mode, grateful he wouldn't have to spend another night strapped in, using just enough fuel to stay warm and breathing.

A message from Tiro's little brother, Eo, scrolled across his visor. *Are we there yet?*

Tiro rolled his eyes at Eo's impatience. *Just about*, he sub-vocalized, watching his suit's internal processor translate the words into text.

Is it someplace good? asked Eo.

I think so. Be quiet and let me check it out.

It was a big settlement. Three vast domes rose above the landscape like glass hills. Semi-permanent structures clustered around them, warehouses and vehicle storage buildings constructed from frozen dirt. Light illuminated the footpaths, creating a faintly glowing labyrinth between buildings.

For such a big place, it seemed strangely deserted. There should have been volunteer patrols, weapon caches, watchtowers where settlers would take turns on duty to scan for thieves or poachers or, worse, gang convoys studded with skulls.

On Mars, civilization only extended as far as the pressure seals on the domes of official colonies sponsored by Earth governments. Settlers who left the government's shelters gained the freedom to claim homesteads from the vast tracts of empty land, but they lost the protection of settled society. It could be a hard life on the wild frontier. Everyone feared the gang convoys that sold whole settlements into slavery, slaughtering those who weren't strong enough to work in the mines.

Tiro eyed the settlement nervously. He messaged Eo: *Do you see any security?*

After a pause, his brother replied, *A few charge guns in the domes.*

Nothing else? Too weird.

Maybe their God doesn't like weapons.

Maybe.

Tiro could explore more after nightfall, but in the meantime, he decided to investigate the warehouses. No one stored anything valuable outside, but Tiro was skilled at living off things other people didn't value.

He parked the skipper, sealed his helmet onto his suit, and got out. Nearby, there was an igloo made from frozen dirt. He ducked inside; crates filled the cramped space from floor to ceiling, leaving Tiro barely any room to stand. He pulled down the nearest crate and braced himself against the wall to pry it open. His jaw dropped.

Eo? he sent. *Did you check all their computers for security?*

Yeah. The word flashed resentfully.

You sure?

Eo inserted a picture of a kid blowing a raspberry.

Sorry. I'm just having trouble believing we struck gold.

You found gold???

Food! wrote Tiro. *Crates and crates of frozen rations.*

Eo sent a picture of a dancing kid. Tiro grinned.

Tiro hauled the crate back to the skipper. A few trips back and forth and he'd be set. He could even sell the extra and buy rooms for the rest of the trip.

His thoughts were full of good food and warm beds when he caught sight of four men clustered around the warehouse entrance, their faceplates reflecting the darkening sky so he couldn't make out their faces. *I thought there was no security!* he messaged Eo.

There wasn't!! Eo messaged back.

Tiro flattened against the wall.

What're you gonna do? asked Eo.

I don't know, said Tiro. *Shut up and let me think.*

Tiro figured he could make it the ten meters back to the skipper, but he doubted the skipper could outrun the settlement's vehicles. His only option was to get out of sight. Slowly, he started scooting along the wall.

By his second step, he knew he'd been caught. "Did you see that?" one man mumbled to another. The second reacted with fighter's instincts, whipping out his flashlight like a gun.

"Who are you?" the man demanded, voice gruff through the suit's transmitter. "Are you a scout? Who are you leading here?"

Tiro winced as bright light shone into his eyes. *Get out!* he messaged Eo. *Quick! Get into their systems.*

But-

Go!

The man with the flashlight crouched like a cat and leapt. Dust flew into the air as he landed beside Tiro. "Who are you?" he repeated.

Tiro shrank away. "I didn't mean any harm."

The man twisted Tiro's arm painfully behind his back. "Go on. Keep lying. We'll get the truth either way."

The man with the flashlight was their leader. The others called him Jirair.

They marched Tiro into the smallest of the three domes. "Nothing to see! Get home!" Jirair bellowed. Settlers flashed alarmed looks their way before dispersing.

They halted in front of a squat building, metal beams glistening in the newly fallen darkness. One man removed Tiro's helmet. Another opened a reinforced door and shoved him inside. He tumbled head-

first into the dark, falling against the wall with a thud.

Someone switched on a light. The dank cell was floored with dirt. Manacles gleamed on the wall.

Tiro tried to edge away. Jirair gestured to his men. They chained Tiro's wrists and ankles.

Jirair pulled off his helmet. Underneath, he looked surprisingly young, maybe twenty years old. His scarlet hair stuck out in stylized spikes.

"Get the nerve ripper."

"The nerve ripper!" repeated a man leaning against the wall. "I love the nerve ripper."

"Think he'll be able to walk afterward?" asked the short man beside him.

The first one laughed. "Depends on how much he lies!"

The man who'd thrown Tiro inside the cell fidgeted uncomfortably. "Come on, Jirair. He's just a kid."

"Just a kid?" Jirair turned, lips peeled back to show his teeth. "Gangs use kids as scouts all the time. You want that to happen here?"

The man shook his head silently.

"Then get the nerve ripper," he repeated. The man rushed away.

Tiro struggled. His chains clanged as they reached their full extension. He tapped the bud implanted in his wrist that let Eo monitor his life signs. Tiro used it when he wanted Eo's attention—but this time, there was no answering pulse.

Eo was safe. That was what Tiro wanted, of course, but it didn't make him feel any less alone.

Jirair paced in front of Tiro. "I'll ask again. Who are you leading here?"

"I'm just a scavenger," Tiro said.

"Petty criminals know to stay away from us. You're no scavenger. Why are you here? Did you come to steal our seeds?"

"Your . . . seeds?"

"Where are you from?"

"New Virginia."

“Who did you bring with you?”

Tiro’s heart pounded. “No one.”

“No one?”

“No one!”

Jirair shot him a disdainful look. “Only fools travel alone on Mars.” He burst into motion, punching the wall in a sudden fury. “You poachers! You think your lives are the only ones that matter! Do you think we don’t know what you’re up to?”

Tiro whimpered.

“Calm down, Jirair,” came a woman’s voice from the back of the room. “There’s no need to act the fool.”

Jirair whipped around. “What are you doing here, Sahar?”

A woman moved forward. Layers of heavy gray clothing swathed her from neck to ankles, but her head was shaved bald. “Naghmeh said you were up to your old tricks.” She looked Tiro over, gray eyes shining from her angular face. “How old are you?”

“Eighteen,” Tiro said.

“There is no possibility that you are eighteen.”

“Sixteen.”

Sahar scrutinized Tiro’s face. “Possibly.”

“It doesn’t matter how old he is,” Jirair said. “I’m in charge of security. If you have a problem with it, run against me next cycle.”

Sahar lifted a hand in objection. “I’m here on Naghmeh’s behalf, not mine. She says the boy’s not alone.”

“I knew it!” shouted Jirair.

Sahar moved smoothly past him, coming to Tiro’s side. She held up a data globe. Its read-out lights flashed in morse code. *S.O.S.*

“Who is this?” Sahar asked.

Tiro slumped. “My brother.”

Sahar instructed the men to unlock Tiro’s restraints. Rubbing his wrists, Tiro collected his helmet and followed Sahar out of the cell and down the glowing path to the dome exit.

“What did he threaten you with? Iron drops? The pain candle?”

“Nerve ripper,” Tiro mumbled, heart still pounding.

“There’s no such thing. He was trying to scare you.” Faint light illuminated her harsh features. “Jirair’s a good man. He’d be harmless in any other job, but give him security work, and he starts to think like a tyrant. He thinks the only way to protect the colony is to act like a bully. I argued against electing him, but too many people think aggression is the same as defense.”

They approached an air lock leading out of the dome. Sahar used her retinal scan to open an adjacent storage locker. It was filled with space suits. Sahar began putting one on over her clothes. “Put your helmet back on,” she instructed.

Tiro hesitated. “Where are we going?”

Sahar gave him an amused look. “You’re bold for a prisoner, aren’t you? I’m giving you a room in my compound tonight.”

“Aren’t you worried I’m a gang scout?”

“Are you a gang scout?”

“No.”

Sahar paused to adjust her suit. “Naghmeh says you are who you say you are. A teenager making a suicidally stupid journey alone—well, almost alone—from New Virginia to Kaseishi.”

“Who’s Naghmeh?”

Sahar grunted impatiently. “Enough for now,” she said, sealing her helmet.

Tiro sealed his, too, and they made their way outside. The lights lining the path shone like fairies at their feet as they hiked to the largest dome.

They stopped at a small, dimly lit dome entrance. Sahar spoke through her transmitter. “This is my door. It has security you can’t break, even with your brother’s help. Do not try to go through without me.”

Once they were inside, Sahar started removing her suit. She glanced at Tiro. “Don’t you want to get out of that thing?”

Tiro paused. He’d been traveling for so long that his suit felt like a second skin, but it would feel good to wear just a shirt and pants again. He stripped down, enjoying the sensation of air on his arms—until he noticed Sahar tossing his discarded suit into a bin in the storage locker.

“What are you doing?” he demanded.

“A little insurance,” she said, locking the crate.

Sahar started toward a large building. Fuming, Tiro followed.

The structure was larger than any private building Tiro had ever seen. He gaped as Sahar opened the door onto an unbelievably enormous room.

It smelled of baking bread. Bowls of fruits and vegetables glistened on the counters that ranged across the back wall. Chairs sat stacked on two long, parallel tables, each of which could seat at least twenty.

“You live here?” he asked.

“I do,” said Sahar, heading up the immense staircase that stretched away from the dining hall. She took a right from the first floor landing and opened one of what seemed like an infinity of doors, revealing a narrow bedchamber.

She nudged Tiro inside. “You’ll sleep here until your arbitration with our elders. I’m locking you in tonight, but I’ll come by in the morning for breakfast.”

Hesitantly, Tiro reached toward the polished headboard. “What’s this made of?”

“Wood. From settlement trees.”

“You harvest *wood*?” Tiro asked incredulously.

This elicited a genuine smile. “Get some sleep.”

Tiro turned. “Wait!”

Sahar stopped with her hand on the door. “Yes?”

“Please. My brother. Can’t you give him back?”

“I’m sorry—”

“Please!”

“We’ll return him after arbitration.”

Tiro started toward Sahar. “When will that be?”

“A few days. . . .”

“But he’s never spent the night alone!”

Sahar held out her hand to prevent Tiro from coming further. “Calm down.”

Tiro stopped advancing. He dropped his balled fists to his sides.

When Sahar seemed satisfied that he’d regained his self-control, she continued. “Your brother will be fine. He’ll stay with Naghmeh until your arbitration.”

Tiro’s patience snapped. “Who’s Naghmeh?”

Sahar paused. “My daughter,” she answered at last. “She was lifted, too.”

Tiro was too surprised to know how to respond.

Sahar closed the door.

Tiro had hazy memories of the day Eo was born: the blue blanket his aunt shipped from Earth for the new baby, the red bag his mother packed for the hospital, the burned toast his father made for breakfast. He didn’t remember putting on a space suit and trying to run away, but that was what his parents always told stories about. “At first, Tiro wanted to get away from Eo so badly that he ran away from home,” his dad would say. “Now they’re inseparable.”

At first Eo seemed healthy, but soon he stopped eating. His stomach swelled. One night, their father found blood in Eo’s diaper, and then it was back to the hospital for test after test. By the end, they’d plugged him into machines that breathed for him and machines that pumped his heart, even machines that

spun tendrils into his brain.

Tiro didn't remember any of that. He did remember his parents taking him to the hospital where they put his hands into gloves mounted in a clear plastic wall so he could touch his brother one last time. His mother cried because it was so sterile and remote, but Tiro didn't feel that way. To him, it felt like touching anyone through a space suit. Just part of growing up on Mars.

Scientists had never reached a consensus on how lifting occurred. They did identify the responsible technology: a recently introduced monitoring system intended to track global mental function. The system kept records of brain activity for physician review and, over time, these created a holistic representation of the brain in motion.

Dead patients' records were dumped into the hospital system. When cognitive development specialist Dr. Joshua Roanoke went to access the records for his research, he discovered the presence of distinct personalities haunting the system like ghosts. He told the press, "It's as if the children have been lifted from their bodies and moved into the machines."

Only patients in a narrow age range seemed to be susceptible. Dr. Roanoke hypothesized that, in order to transfer successfully, infants had to possess a concept of object permanence but still be in the sensorimotor stage. Except for the fact that affected infants fell roughly into the predicted age range of three to twenty-four months, no proof had been uncovered to substantiate his claim.

While scientists argued over how the lifted children had been created, politicians debated what to do with them. Mars was still recovering from high profile technological disasters: six hundred colonists had died at Juel when a new biotic system poisoned the air instead of providing oxygen, and another two thousand died planet wide when an innovative dome synthetic developed microscopic fractures. The technophobic climate combined with calls from a number of dominant religions for the lifted children to be exorcised so they could properly enter the afterlife.

The governments of Mandela and Marston—the other two colonies which had used the brain monitoring technology—ordered their hospitals to purge the lifted children. Working under more stringent property laws, New Virginia ruled that the lifted children were equivalent to remains and left it to the

parents to dispose of them. All three governments placed heavy restrictions on the brain monitors to prevent further incidents.

Average citizens called the lifted children ghosts. They told each other horror stories about haunted machines.

Most parents, already grieving, had their children's remnants wiped. A few brought them home.

"Even if it's only an echo, how can we throw that away?" asked Tiro's mom. "He's our little boy."

Eo grew on the home computer. He navigated data streams like a rafter in white water, skimming through the public nets with abandon. He pulled pranks on the neighbors' private machines, too, until their parents lectured him about trespassing.

Their family shaped itself around Eo. All day, they laughed at jokes he sent their visors. During the evenings, they watched movies he spliced together from free footage on the nets. At night, Tiro wore his visor to bed so he and Eo would never be apart.

Everyone adored Eo, but their father still drank in the evenings, his expression tired and forlorn. Once, Tiro asked what was wrong. His father gave him the saddest look he'd ever seen. "I want what any father wants. For both my sons to become men."

Tiro went to their mother. "Doesn't Dad love Eo?"

She sighed. "Of course we love Eo, but it's hard. We'd give anything to fix what happened. To make him what he should be."

Tiro never forgot what his parents wanted for Eo. A body, so he could be a man.

Tiro was still sleeping when Sahar returned. She wore even more gray this time, a heavy ankle-length dress. She led him downstairs to the kitchen where she picked up a basket of red fruit.

"We'll eat outside," she said.

Tiro blinked as they emerged into brightness. Trees arched toward the dome, branches woven into a dense canopy. Creepers garlanded the trunks with emerald, scarlet, and amber leaves.

Tiro wandered, dazed by the mingling scents of flowers and wet leaves. He paused beside a whip-slimmer sapling that was putting out new fronds. “I’ve seen these in New Virginia.”

Sahar was crouched a meter away, spreading a blanket over the grasses. She looked up. “Those are comfort palms. We export the seeds.”

“People pull off the fronds to wrap up in. They keep you pretty warm.”

Sahar settled on the blanket. “That’s why we made them. All our plants are engineered to be useful. We call it anthropocentric ecology. Once there’s a thick enough atmosphere to sustain life, we’ll seed our plants across Mars. Think about it. Our jungles won’t be hostile. They’ll be full of plants that exist in symbiosis with us, that help us survive and prosper.”

Tiro kicked a clump of bluish weeds. They released a pleasant almond scent. “What’s the point? It’ll be centuries before plants can live outside.”

Sahar held up a chiding finger. “It’ll take centuries under the plans made by government colonies. They’ve introduced oxygen-generating and nitrogen-fixing microbes, but we can do better than that. We’re engineering microbes with more efficient metabolisms. Once they’re ready to be released, our new strains will accomplish the process in decades.”

“Why can you do that better than the colonies?”

“We have better computers.” Sahar smiled. “But more about that later.” She pulled a fruit from her basket and held it out to Tiro. “Try a promise. They’re superficially a mix of pomegranates and apples, blended with more supplementary genomes than I can remember. They’re calorie rich and extremely nutritious. Humans can survive on them for weeks at a time.”

Tiro took the fruit. The first bite was a perfect, pulpy mix of sweet and acid. His spine prickled. “Why are you telling me all this?”

“Why are you going to Kaseishi?”

“Didn’t my brother tell you?”

“I want to hear it from you.”

Tiro hesitated, choosing words carefully. “We heard there’s an engineer there who can make special

mechanical bodies.”

He stopped. “Yes?” Sahar prompted.

“Ones that lifted kids can move into,” said Tiro. “To make them normal.”

“It’s only worked once. It may not work again. The integrated body frames were built to interact with computers, you know, not for lifted kids.”

Tiro said nothing.

“How are you going to afford one?”

Tiro shrugged. “We’ll figure it out.”

“Your brother said you had a plan.”

Tiro clenched his fists in frustration. What was the point being careful if Eo told them everything? “Kaseishi takes contracts for indentured servants, okay? If someone buys my labor for ten years, I can get a body for Eo.”

Sahar ignored his exasperation. “If I accessed your records from New Virginia, how old would they say you were?”

“Sixteen.”

“Really.”

“Okay, fourteen. But that’s old enough! I’m a man. I can sign my own contracts.”

Sahar’s eyes narrowed. “You look like you have African ancestors. If you’re from New Virginia then your parents or grandparents probably came from the United States. Am I right?”

“Yeah. So?”

“So you’ve probably got a family history of slavery. I can’t imagine your ancestors would be happy about one of their sons selling his freedom.” She gestured to herself. “My people are Parsi. For generations, they were marginalized in India. We know what it is to be not-quite-people under the law.” She paused. “What do your parents think?”

Tiro thought fast. “They’re dead.”

“Are they?”

“I have to do it for Eo.”

“What if it’s not the best thing for him?”

“He needs a body!”

“My daughter runs this settlement. The computer enhances her so she thinks faster than any human, and she enhances the computer so it works better than anything on Mars or on Earth.” She paused, eyes searching Tiro’s face for his reaction. “Do you understand what that means? It’s a gift beyond measure. With Naghmeh’s help, any plant I design can become reality in months. Without her, I’d have been lucky to construct even one species. That comfort palm, for instance. That would be my life’s work.”

“That’s nice for you and Naghmeh, but Eo needs a body.”

“Does he? Or do you need one for him?”

Tiro turned away, flaming with anger. Sahar called after him. “Think, Tiro! What does your brother know about flesh and bones? Are you doing this for him or for you?”

“I’m doing it for Eo!” Red anger flowed through Tiro’s face and fists. He bolted into the trees, feet pounding across springy ground cover. At first he was surprised that Sahar let him run—but then, where could he go? She’d taken his suit.

He slowed in the middle of a grove and sat among the fallen leaves, trailing his fingers through the wet soil.

He remembered when his parents had first read about the mechanical bodies. They spent weeks arguing over their finances, trying to conjure what they needed. His father examined Kaseishi’s laws and discovered the corporations there had agitated to legalize indentured servitude so they could bring up the droves of willing but impoverished workers from Earth and force them to repay their travel costs. He considered selling himself, but he was too old to get a contract.

“I’ll do it,” Tiro had said.

Both his parents looked at him like he’d just turned pink and sprouted wings.

“The devil you will,” said his mother.

His father just shook his head, slowly. “No, Tiro. We won’t sell one son’s potential for the other’s.”

So Tiro ran away. What was ten years of his life if it could buy Eo's humanity?

Tiro didn't know how much time had passed before he heard Sahar's footsteps. He looked up. She held out her hand to help him stand.

"I shouldn't have pushed so fast," she said. "I'm passionate about what I do, about Mars and plants and Naghmeh. Please accept my apologies."

Every morning, Tiro asked when his arbitration would be. Every morning, Sahar answered, "Not yet. You need more food and rest anyway."

She took him to look at water-filled flowers that could be plucked and used as canisters, and at creepers that froze into durable ropes. She showed him how they planned to incorporate mechanical elements into future plants, such as trees that could monitor human heart rates and issue distress signals.

Tiro asked whether they could change humans the way they were changing plants. "I'd like to live in the cold. Or maybe you could make us fly . . ."

"Perhaps once the atmosphere is ready," said Sahar. "For now, we have more than enough to do."

Tiro enjoyed helping Sahar plant seedlings. Infant plants couldn't save lives, but they were fragile and green. He loved wriggling his fingers like worms in the dirt.

Sahar told him about the settlement. "Things have changed since Naghmeh integrated with the computer. We have more money now, more time, more knowledge. If people hadn't reacted ignorantly to the lifted children, more settlements could prosper as we do."

The settlement had welcomed Naghmeh by agreement of the elders and also by popular vote. Some of the population had been ready to surrender total control to Naghmeh, while others worried about what would happen if they allowed a child—however mechanically enhanced—to take authority over delicate systems like life support. In the end, they compromised, walling off a section of the system where Naghmeh could live, separated from processes that could threaten the settlers' lives.

"The settlers here are good people," said Sahar.

“Except Jirair,” grumbled Tiro.

Sahar looked chagrined. “Some people are damaged by their pasts. There’s a lot they can do with psychological programming these days, but . . . Jirair was your age when he came here as a runaway. He’d been kidnapped by a gang who murdered his parents and forced him to scout for new victims. He’s convinced the same thing will happen here. The settlement has always weathered strikes by poachers, but three years ago, a gang convoy mounted a full attack. Naghmeh dealt with them. But ever since then, Jirair has seen any traveler, even merchants, as a threat. His housemates say he wakes screaming from dreams where we’ve all been slaughtered.”

Tiro rubbed his wrists, remembering the manacles. “He still shouldn’t treat people like that.”

Sahar looked away. “Some people think anything is justified if they’re certain they’re right.”

That night, Sahar warned him that she’d be coming early the next morning. “Why?” asked Tiro. “Is it my arbitration?”

Sahar shook her head. “It’s time you met Naghmeh.”

Sahar woke Tiro before dawn. They navigated the maze of her house, finally emerging on a rooftop observatory beneath the translucent curve of the dome.

“Naghmeh is everywhere the computer is, of course,” Sahar said, “but the settlers prefer their privacy, so we ask her to speak only in certain places. This is my favorite, close to the sky.”

“How do I talk to her?” Tiro asked.

“Just talk.”

Tiro edged forward. “Hi.”

A breathy voice whispered from the nearby audio outputs. “Hi.”

“Why does she sound like that?” Tiro asked Sahar.

Sahar shrugged. “Caprice.”

Tiro wandered between shining pieces of observatory equipment. “Sahar says you’re with my

brother.”

“I am.” With a laugh, she added, “He’s sparkly!”

“Sparkly?”

“All over spark-raining! Showers and showers. Luminosity spikes like radiant flow.”

Tiro balked. He looked at Sahar for an explanation.

“They see things differently than we do,” said Sahar.

“I guess so.” Tiro wondered if Eo saw things differently, too. He never said so, but was he trying to make himself seem normal for his family? Tiro looked up at one of the speakers. “Can I talk to my brother?”

A whir. “Later, maybe,” said Naghmeh.

“What are you two doing together?”

“I’m showing him around. We go here. We go there.” The outputs blared a bash song overlaid by high-pitched chatter. Noisemakers sounded in the background. “It’s a party!”

“Are you showing him how to make plants?”

The party noises disappeared. The voice became whiny. “We just want to play. I work hard enough, don’t I?”

“Doesn’t the computer do the work?”

An elephant brayed, which seemed to be the equivalent of Eo’s icon of a kid blowing a raspberry. “Isn’t your body doing your breathing?”

“You work very hard,” interjected Sahar with a peacemaker’s tone.

“Eo’s more interested in learning about machines anyway,” said Naghmeh.

“Naghmeh,” Sahar went on, “what would you think if someone said you could have a body?”

“A me-extension to make me mobile?”

“No, a human kind of body, not part of the network.”

“A me-extension would be vroom! Mobile-network-me could prank and chat and fun.” She paused. “Work more, too, if I had body *and* network.”

“But humans can’t do that. This body would do only what humans can. Would you want that?”

“For keeps or for play?”

“Keeps. You couldn’t leave. You’d be in the body all the time.”

“Why?”

“So you could think and act like we do.”

“There’s no scarcity of you, but there’s scarcity of me. You should give up your bodies and live with me.”

“There’s nothing you’d want about being in a body?”

A pause. “Might be fun awhile.”

“But not forever?”

“Forever?” Naghmeh’s voice rose with distress. “Why be small in oneplace onemind onethought?”

A cacophony of bird and animal noises poured from the outputs.

“Why trapbe?” asked Naghmeh. “Why cagebe? Why prisonbe?”

The screeches grew deafening. Eo had never acted like this. Was this what Sahar meant by seeing things differently? Would Eo be like this if they let him stay on the networks? Tiro slapped his hands over his ears, but the noise kept mounting.

“Naghmeh!” shouted Sahar. “Please! Quiet down!”

The noise waned, replaced by quiet keening. Sahar paced to one of the outputs, running her fingers over the mesh as if caressing an infant’s cheek. “Shh, Naghmeh. I’m sorry we upset you.”

When Sahar came to Tiro’s room later, her eyes were red.

“Is Naghmeh okay?” Tiro asked.

Sahar nodded. Her fingers fretted at her cuffs, nails bitten and raw. “Do you understand now why you can’t force Eo into a body?”

Tiro didn’t want to meet her gaze. “He has to become what he was supposed to be.”

Sahar's expression looked almost as sad as his father's. Wordlessly, she turned and left him alone.

The next day, the elders scheduled Tiro's arbitration.

Sahar pestered him so much that Tiro didn't even feel relieved when she returned his spacesuit.

"You need to reconsider," she pleaded. "You're acting like Jirair. You know that? You're so certain it's right for Eo to have a body that you'll do anything to get him one, even hurt him."

"You just want Eo to grow your plants," Tiro snapped, switching off his receiver.

The second dome was smaller than Sahar's. Rows of flowers created a maze of red, blue, and yellow. The hexagonal meetinghouse rose above the other buildings like a megalith.

They stopped by the entrance to remove their suits. Sahar shot Tiro a worried look that would have annoyed him if his heart hadn't been pounding.

Inside, a smoky scent drifted toward the exposed rafters. The three elders sat on wooden stools, their gray robes sweeping the floor.

Sahar bowed from the waist. "This is Tiro. His brother is the lifted child—"

"Thank you, Sahar," said the female elder on the right. "You may go now."

Sahar opened her mouth to object, but reconsidered. "I bid you good judgment." She bowed again before departing.

The door closed, leaving silence in its wake. Tiro shifted, waiting for the elders to speak.

"I'm sorry I stole the food," he ventured. "After I finish in Kaseishi, I'll come work it off."

The elders exchanged glances. The man on the left said, "Sahar and Naghmeh spoke on your behalf. Accept it as our gift."

A prickle crept up Tiro's spine. "Why?"

The middle elder leaned forward, the beaded ends of his braids clattering across his back. "We hope you'll feel grateful and return with your brother," he said. "We would also welcome your parents."

"They're dead," said Tiro.

“They aren’t.”

“They—”

The left-hand elder lifted his palm to halt Tiro’s protest. “We understand why you lied. We don’t begin adulthood at fourteen here. But you are not one of us, and we accept that our rules don’t apply.”

“Though Sahar does not,” interjected the woman. “She wanted us to permit her to contact your parents.”

The middle elder pinned Tiro with a firm gaze. “It would violate our ethics to do as she asked. Nevertheless, we urge you to consider our offer.”

Tiro swallowed. “Thank you, but my brother and I must go to Kaseishi.”

With a sigh, the middle elder reached into his voluminous sleeve. He withdrew a data globe. “You may use this at any interface to speak with your brother.”

Uneasily, Tiro reached for the globe. “Is that all?”

The middle elder nodded. “That is all.”

Tiro’s fingers closed around the globe. He fled before the elders could change their minds.

Once outside, he rushed to put on his suit. He ran for the nearest interface, forcing the globe into its input recess.

The globe lit up. Text scrolled across his visor. *Tiro!*

Eo! Are you okay?

Did you know we can race more than a thousand times per second? I beat Naghmeh more than half the time! She showed me this engine trick that works out-world, too, and—

Race what? said Tiro. *Nevermind. Tell me later. We have to go now.*

Blankness followed.

Come on, Eo, get in the globe. We have to go to Kaseishi.

Maybe later, wrote Eo. *I’m having fun.*

We won’t be able to go later.

But I like Naghmeh.

We don't have time! Tiro stopped, breathing deeply to calm himself. Now wasn't the time to upset Eo. *Can we talk alone? I don't want anyone listening. This is private, you know?*

A brothers thing? asked Eo.

A brothers thing, Tiro agreed. *Please move into the globe?*

The lights on the data globe blinked rapidly as Eo moved inside. Tiro waited until they held a steady color before yanking the globe from its recess. He switched it into energy-saving mode. The lights dimmed as it entered hibernation.

"Sorry Eo," Tiro whispered.

Hastily, he sealed his helmet and headed for the nearest exit. He had to reach the skipper before Sahar or Naghmeh realized what he'd done.

When the settlement was out of sight, Tiro placed the data globe in the skipper's pit. Its lights brightened, but no words appeared on Tiro's visor.

Eo? wrote Tiro. *Come on, talk to me.*

Nothing crossed Tiro's vision but endless dust.

I'm doing this for you, Eo. You were born into a body. You should have the chance to grow up in one.

It's what our parents want.

Nothing appeared. Hours passed under the skipper's wheels.

They stopped at dusk. Tiro warmed some frozen rations from Sahar's settlement. After supper, he strapped himself into the driver's seat, lowering the skipper's energy output to the minimum required for heat and oxygen.

He woke to see the sun's rays mounting the horizon. The stale air smelled of food and plastic. He considered breakfast, but didn't want to stay in one place any longer. He initialized the skipper and started driving.

At first, Tiro had been enraptured by the landscape's shifting, ruddy hues. Now, travel just made him

tired. As morning seeped into afternoon, he began to drowse.

Sometime later, he woke with a start. Text scrolled across his vision. *Tiro*. He blinked, wondering if he was dreaming—but no, it was real. *Tiro, stop the skipper. Go to low energy. Now!*

Tiro didn't pause to think. His hands moved rapidly across the machinery, cutting the skipper into silent mode. He shivered as the nonessential heating dissipated, leaving bitter cold.

What is it, Eo? Tiro asked.

Gang convoy, wrote Eo. *They'll be visible in . . . 20 . . . 17 . . . 15 . . .*

Gang convoy? Where?

Northeast. 5 . . . 3 . . .

Tiro shrank in his seat as the convoy rumbled past. Skippers zoomed alongside thunders and ground-eaters. Some vehicles were huge, armored like enormous beetles. All were painted red as Mars dust, the color of the landscape, the color of blood.

They're headed toward Sahar's settlement, Tiro wrote when they were past.

I know, wrote Eo.

We're lucky they didn't see us.

I know that, too.

There's no point in going back. There's nothing we can do.

Eo fell silent.

Tiro swallowed. *The gang will be there long before we can. Everyone would be dead by the time we arrived.*

That would be true, wrote Eo, *except Naghmeh taught me how to make the skipper go a lot faster.*

A lot faster?

Eo sent an enormous, toothy grin. *Ohhhhhhhhh yeah.*

They parked the skipper behind the warehouses. Jirair lay panting in the dirt nearby, a comfort palm frond

wrapped around his leg.

“You,” said Jirair as Tiro approached, “The elders said they invited you to stay. You came back?”

Tiro nodded. Now didn't seem like the time to get into why he'd run away.

“I guess you're as good as one of us now. For as long as there is an us.” He jerked his head toward Tiro's skipper. “Get out before you get killed.”

“You're injured,” Tiro said.

“My suit is ripped. Not that it'll matter when I run out of oxygen . . .”

Tiro hated being forced to help Jirair, but he knelt beside him anyway and plugged their suits together. “If you need more air, find my skipper. It has a two week supply. Will the palm keep your suit sealed?”

Jirair nodded, savoring a deep breath.

“Where are the others?”

“Hostage in the garden dome. I kept running while they shot at me, grabbed a frond and got out. I'd rather die out here than. . .” He trailed off.

Tiro looked up at the domes. The gang vehicles were parked around them in an enormous red mass, like fire ants swarming a kill.

“Can you walk?” Tiro asked Jirair. “I'll need help.”

Tiro offered his hand to help Jirair stand. After a moment's hesitation, Jirair accepted, but as he pushed onto his bad leg, something made a snapping sound.

Jirair choked off a scream. Panting with pain he said, “I warned them! I told them the gang would come back. I told them Naghmeh can't be our only protection. They wouldn't listen.” Jirair punched the igloo wall, dislodging a cascade of ice.

“Then tell me what to do.”

“There's nothing. They're trained fighters.”

“There must be something. Tell me what you know.”

“There's nothing! Naghmeh runs all our security. They've trapped her.”

“How?”

Tiro coaxed the story from him. Three years ago, a gang convoy had attacked the settlement. Naghmeh took control of their network. She fired their weapons randomly, killing some, disabling others, and forcing the rest to hurl their defenses away. She used the vehicles to herd the infantry, the drivers helpless to control their rebelling machines.

Jirair had warned the settlers that the gang would nurse a grudge. “A well-trained force they could have understood,” Jirair said. “But this was an insult, a challenge to their prowess.”

Sahar and other respected settlers had argued that it didn’t matter. Naghmeh’s relationship with the settlement computer was unique. As long as they didn’t know what Naghmeh was, they couldn’t fight her.

They remained confident when the convoy began offering a reward for information about settlement security. But someone—no one knew who—had betrayed them all.

The gang arrived with a program that was designed to invade the network and seek Naghmeh out, enfolding her in a coded prison that protected itself by creating the illusion that it was the portion of the system where Naghmeh lived. Naghmeh didn’t even know she was trapped.

“I’ve seen these work on simple AIs,” Jirair said, “but never something sophisticated enough to fool Naghmeh. They must have bought the technology from Earth. The settlement’s not *that* wealthy. . . . They must really want us dead. . . .” He shook his head, his expression hard-worn beneath his visor. “If you could get her back in control—but you can’t.”

Jirair must have been in considerable pain from his wound, but the plight of the colony seemed to be causing him even more pain than that. Tiro almost understood why Jirair had threatened to torture him. Sometimes you’d do anything to protect what you loved.

He glanced at his brother’s data globe, strengthening his resolve. “Maybe I can.”

Can they trap you like they did Naghmeh? Tiro asked as he trudged toward the domes.

They don’t even know I’m here. Get me to an interface.

They'll know you're there if you get into the network. They got Naghmeh and she's been doing this a lot longer than you!

She didn't know they were coming. The gang could trap me now because I don't have any defenses, but if I get into the network, I can trounce them. Just get me to an interface!

Luck was with them for now. The attackers had been warned to expect one computer enhanced by a lifted child. They would never expect a second.

Sneaking through the vehicle perimeter was easier than Tiro thought it would be. The drivers were relying on their vehicles' security. Eo confused the scans, telling Tiro when to duck to avoid visual confirmation sweeps.

Isn't it dangerous for you to interfere with their systems? asked Tiro. *Won't they find you?*

Not if we move fast.

They emerged near Sahar's dome. Tiro searched for her private entrance. She had told him it was guarded by security that even his brother couldn't break. If that meant Naghmeh, then it would be undefended now. But what if it wasn't?

Detect anything? Tiro asked.

No, said Eo, but Tiro couldn't help thinking of the last time he'd been wrong.

The airlock opened with a smooth hiss. Tiro's heart pounded as he went through both doors and entered the dome, the groundcover springy beneath his boots. He opened his helmet's circulation to admit dome air, inhaling the scent of flowers.

Now that they'd made it inside, Tiro could feel his perceptions growing sharper as his body flooded with adrenaline. He looked up uneasily at Sahar's enormous house.

His visor flashed with Eo's alarm. *You're not going in there!*

When I was staying in this dome with Sahar, I only saw one interface. He craned his neck upward. *It's on the roof.*

There are gangsters in there!!

Can you tell me where they are?

If they're carrying things connected to the network.

Are they?

Eo seemed loath to admit it. *They have wrist chatters.*

Eo continued to convey his misgivings by sending a stream of anxious faces, but he assembled a floor plan for Tiro with the gangsters' locations marked by moving red dots. One stood in the entryway, blocking the stairs. Tiro began searching the deadfall for something to use as a club.

Suddenly, the gangster veered into the hallway. Tiro straightened. *What did you do?*

Sent a fake letter to his chatter. He thinks it's from a woman upstairs.

Tiro blinked as Eo's message scrolled across his visor, virtually steaming with innuendo.

Where did you learn that? asked Tiro.

Nevermind, it'll get you in!

Tiro entered and ran upstairs without pausing to think. Each of his footsteps seemed to boom on the wood like strikes on a bass drum.

He wove through the maze-like corridors, darting left and right as needed. Eo sent more fake messages, but not all the gangsters took predictable courses. Tiro hid whenever one turned an unexpected corner, willing himself to be invisible among the shadows. On the third floor, he crouched behind a door for an agonizing fifteen minutes while two gangsters finished playing dice. Eo sent a letter to one of their chatters, but the woman only glanced at it and laughed, blanking out its screen for the rest of their game.

Finally, Tiro emerged in front of the narrow, rickety staircase leading to the roof. *Stop*, Eo warned as Tiro put his hand on the railing. *There's someone up there.*

Tiro's stomach churned. *Can you get rid of him?*

No prob, Eo replied, smugly.

A minute passed. *Eo?* Tiro prompted.

His visor flashed red. *They figured out I was faking messages! They're looking for me!*

They can't find you if you don't do anything else, right?

I don't know!

Calm down, Tiro directed with more confidence than he felt. *I'll take care of it.*

Ignoring Eo's protests, Tiro started upstairs.

When he reached the top, he pressed himself into the shadow of the open door and peered out. At night, the observatory was full of glints and shadows. A tall man in leather sat beside one of the telescopes, eating a promise fruit. An illegal compressed-gas projectile gun sat in his holster. The interface lay beyond him, its recess gleaming like water in an oasis.

Tiro's heart thumped. The man was sleek, with runner's muscles, built for speed as well as strength. There was no way to get past him.

Tiro cleared his throat. He'd always been good at thinking up lies. His father said they flowed from his mouth like scat from a pig's anus. Thinking of lies was easy. It was convincing people to believe them that was hard.

"Hey there!" he shouted, coming into the light. "I'm Tiro. I'm the one who gave you the info on the lifted kid. Where's my reward?"

The gangster looked up at him, slowly. He set aside his half-eaten promise fruit and got to his feet. "No you're not," he said, flicking his gaze up and down Tiro's body. "We've got the woman outside. Some religious bat."

"Yeah, but I gave her the information."

"Yeah?" echoed the gangster. "Why would a kid turn in his settlement? They send you to bed without supper?"

Tiro swallowed, trying to conceal his shaking hands. "They made me work with the lifted kid because we're the same age. They think they can give her friends like a normal person. But she's an abomination. She's just a copy of some poor dead kid, keeping its soul from going to the afterlife."

A flash of darkness crossed Tiro's visor, Eo's expression of pain. Eo had been told he wasn't a real person all his life, by strangers, by the news. Maybe even by his family—did Eo think that's what they were saying when they wanted to get him a body?

Tiro wished he could comfort Eo, but he didn't dare send him a message.

The pirate circled Tiro, coming between him and the door. “Why didn’t Benita tell us about you then?”

Tiro darted a glance over his shoulder at the recess. He hoped he’d seem to be looking for an escape route. He backed a few steps away from the gangster as if afraid, moving toward his goal.

“I . . . don’t know . . .” he stammered. “Maybe she forgot.”

The gangster advanced. “Forgot. Sure. Or maybe you don’t want to go to the mines?”

Tiro kept walking fearfully backward.

“Want to know what happened to Benita? She’s dead. If she betrayed you, she’d betray us too. So we killed her. Now tell me how you got up here.”

That was enough. Tiro turned to run, palming his brother’s data globe. He was halfway across the roof. Could he make it the rest of the way?

“Stop,” the gangster shouted. Tiro’s feet slammed against the wood. He heard the smack of metal on plastic as the gangster drew his gun. He hardly registered the blast of pain that erupted in his side as he twisted in midair, his arm sweeping outward to toss the globe the last few centimeters into the recess. He crashed to the ground. The gangster’s boots struck the boards as he approached for a final shot, but already the data globe’s lights were pricking the darkness with blue and yellow.

A child’s voice sputtered from the audio outputs. “I don’t like all this violence.”

The gangster shouted with pain as his gun’s internal chip heated the metal until it was excruciating. The gun clattered to the floor.

“That’s better,” Eo continued. “Can you take it from here, Naghmeh, or do I have to do everything?”

Tiro twisted to get a better look at Sahar as she entered his room. “Did you bring another plant book?”

“Don’t,” she said, setting a bowl of mushroom soup on his nightstand. “You’ll hurt yourself.”

“I’m fine,” Tiro grumbled, but Sahar bent to inspect his wound anyway. Before condemning Tiro to three weeks’ bed rest, the settlement’s physician had said that the bullet missed his major organs, but

made a major mess.

“You finished the volume on diseases already?” Sahar asked.

“What else do I have to do?”

“I should shoot all my apprentices.”

Sahar wore her clothes from the garden. Traces of soil on her boots and cuffs gave her a budding, green smell. Tiro hissed as she touched a tender spot.

“Are you done yet?”

“Momentarily.” Sahar completed her inspection and withdrew, letting Tiro tug down his shirt. She paused. “We heard from your parents.”

Tiro’s mouth went dry. “What did they say?”

“They’re furious,” she said. “But they’ll get over it.” She went on, “They want to know how you survived, and what you were thinking, and how you’re going to pay them back for their skipper. They also want you to know they’ve quit their jobs in New Virginia and they’ll be here in a month.”

Tiro sat up. “They’re coming?”

Sahar grinned. “We’re offering them large salaries, rewarding work, and a place where both of their children can grow as they are. How could they refuse?”

Tiro matched her grin. For a moment, he was ecstatic, but then a sliver of worry worked its way inside. He slumped onto the bed, his smile gone.

Sahar frowned. “What’s wrong? Are you in pain?”

Tiro shook his head.

“I thought you’d be happy your parents were coming.”

“I am. It’s just—” Tiro trailed off.

Sahar sat beside him on the bed. “You must have known Eo wouldn’t leave if you let him back into the system.”

“I didn’t think I had a choice. The gang . . . but I didn’t have to come back. I could have kept driving.”

“So why did you come back?”

“I think, in the back of my mind, what you said about me and Jirair got to me. I’m not him. I couldn’t hurt Eo, not even for his own good. I had to let him choose.”

“And now you wish you hadn’t.”

“No!” Tiro looked up to see if he’d upset Sahar, but she stared back with placid green eyes. “It’s just, sometimes. . .”

Sahar sighed. “Sometimes you listen to them talk and play, and you realize they’re not like you, and they won’t ever be. They’re themselves—and that’s good. . . But sometimes it breaks your heart.”

Tiro nodded silently.

Later, when Tiro recovered, he and Eo would commune on the rooftop observatory. He’d tell Eo all about working with plants while Eo went into flights about mechanics and computing that he could never hope to understand. Tiro would start sleeping in his visor again so that they could spend their nights together as they always had.

But just now, Tiro was afraid he’d cry if he spoke. He closed his eyes, letting Sahar stroke his hair as he mourned the way he hadn’t known how to the first time he lost his brother’s body.