Supernova

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About this Piece

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CHAPTER 1

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Dolora closed the last of the feeds. Nothing but personal ads and the usual organs and eggs. The lump in her throat hummed. Down, she told it. Quiet.

From the counter, the Mister Coffee chimed and spoke. Your beverage, Delores.

It had never gotten her name or her coffee right, but what could she do? It had come with the studio, and though she could have afforded to replace it when she first moved in eleven years ago, she could never do so



now. Just last week she'd sold the last of her mourning vessels on the black market for a pittance. Apart from the funerary robe she'd inherited from her grandmother, she owned nothing anymore of value.

She shuffled to the coffeemaker and picked up the chipped and steaming mug.

Thank you, Mister Coffee.

My pleasure, Dolores, it answered and switched itself off.

She envisioned a single sugar cube at the edge of her tongue and took a sip. When she first moved in, right after the first Happyness Decree, she'd spent hours trying to teach the machine to say her name correctly, to brew her drink the way she preferred, but either it could not be taught or she could not teach it. Besides, it wasn't real coffee being ruined. Real coffee had gone the way of the dodo decades back. Still. She enjoyed the ritual, and the drink was hot, its synthetic caffeine a small but reliable thrill.

She moved back to her kitchen table—a small metal desk that had once also doubled as an altar—and sat down, a small headache gathering along her brow. The lump in her throat swelled. She swallowed and placed a hand, warmed by the mug, against her throat to calm it, but she could not feel it through the soft, loose folds of her neck. She fingered the sagging skin and sighed. It had been a long time since anyone would have thought her young, but the drought in performances, the absence of the death song from her mouth and throat, the austerity she now endured—all of it had increased her symptoms of age.

When the first Happyness Decree went into effect, little changed. The Wasting had been at its height. So much death. So much work. Even now there were bald patches on her scalp where the hair could not grow back.

By the time of the second Happyness Decree, The Wasting was over. She still found work, but it had changed. Customers requested a lower volume, less movement. Could she tone it down a bit. Those with means still wanted a professional to signal their loss, but the role became perfunctory, un-visceral. Following the third decree two years ago, she became no more than a signatory on death certificates. Where she had once been

an indispensable player in the drama of grief, she now became its notary. With the abolition of the death certificate a few months later, she became an anachronism.

She finished the rest of her morning beverage in two large gulps. She needed to get out. Today was Market Day, and though she had no money, the two-kilometer walk, the fresh air, the reliable and distracting longing for useless items she could not buy would all add up to some kind of succor. Her stomach clinched and bit, but it was too early in the day to eat. She had less than a week's rations and ten days to stretch it.

Dolora stood and began to braid her thick, silver hair along the front of her torso until it reached her waist. A thick, sleeping snake. In her youth and middle age, long hair had signified her profession, but these days all the young, their numbers dwindling every year, refused to cut their hair. She felt a kinship with them, their hair—to her—a marker of sorrows. Sorrows no one could express or acknowledge any more.

She pulled her poncho on, opened the door, and stepped out into a soft rain. All around her, small, white domes dotted the landscape, studios like hers, identical in form and function down to the standard-issue Mister Coffee.

In her childhood this part of the country had grown corn, wheat, and soybeans, fields of deep and majestic green and gold that stretched beyond the horizon in every direction. Those same fields had scorched and withered away in years-long cycles of drought and fire. Billions starved. Most who survived adapted or just died later in regional nuclear skirmishes that killed millions and decimated what remained of old alliances and power.

Here on the shrinking continent of the Second Republic, the government oversaw almost all food production—the growing of rice, the raising of fish—opening the vast fields to the skies whenever it rained and covering them with giant, solar-collecting tarps when it did not.

Her stomach pinched at the thought of fish. She'd eaten nothing but a handful of rice the day before, and she could afford little more than that amount today. She had one piece of salted eel left and intended to save it until her rice ran out—something to both fret over and look forward to.

It had been six months since her last job, a middle-of-the-night affair hosted by the mistress of a wealthy and well-connected party official. The payment had been made in ration coupons, and the performance had taken place in an airplane hangar, empty save one floodlit corner where flowers Dolora had long assumed to be extinct—Singapore orchids, snapdragons, lilies of the valley, hydrangea, rose—seemed to bloom right out of the metal walls and concrete floor. So saporous was their aroma that Dolora's mouth and eyes watered upon entry.

The funeral was small, just the mistress, Dolora, and two men in dark suits who stood off to the side. She'd performed in a frenzy, ululating, beating her head and chest with ceremonial shells and stones. By the end of the contracted five hours, she was spent, her voice and cheeks raw, her back aching. When at last she rose from the floor, the woman gathered her into an embrace, her powdered face cool and dry against Dolora's wet and welted cheeks. For a while, three minutes, maybe longer, she held Dolora and stroked her back the way a mother would, shushing her, telling her that everything was going to be okay, the woman's lacquered eyelashes strumming against Dolora's temple in rhythmic comfort. Dolora sank against that consoling, dispassionate body, and it felt just like the old days, before Happyness had been meted out. Before, the bereaved had often given their sympathies to Dolora, the paid mourner, for doing what they'd hired her to do. It was their way of putting pain and mortality beyond their own bodies without denying the existence of either. In the hangar, she knew it was the woman, the dead man's lover, comforting herself, but she let herself be soothed. What a balm it had been to be taken into those young arms and pressed against such firm and fragrant flesh, her hair and skin more aromatic even than the flowers.

A splash. Dolora looked up from her reverie as a tram approached. She'd reached the edge of the housing enclave. A lone woman stared out from inside the tram car, her mouth in a line, eyes distant. The gray light of the rainy morning rendered her flat and two-dimensional. She met Dolora's eyes, and almost instantly, her mouth turned up into a smile, but

nothing about her eyes changed. She looked away, technically Happy. The tram rolled past.

Twenty minutes later Dolora stood beneath the atrium that led into the market. Rain had found its way into her poncho, wetting the top of her underwear. Water streaked down her neck and nose and dripped off the tip of her braid. She pulled the poncho off, folded it carefully and tucked it under her arm, too proud to step indoors in raingear, like someone who did not even have enough money to take the tram.

She leaned into the heavy door and pushed her way into the market, a dimly lit warehouse with towering beams and walls that led up to skylights and rafters. Robotic pigeons flew back and forth, speckling the light. Vendors, cordoned off into three-wall cubicles, sat or stood behind tables, their wares spread out in front of them. People milled and pointed. A couple to her left discussed a tray of spices. A man to her right haggled with a fishmonger over a large piece of what looked like tuna—a delicacy only high-ranking party officials could afford.

She looked away, stomach rumbling. Music, a little too loud, a little too chipper, poured out of a giant speaker hanging from a rafter in the center of the space. Screens lined the walls, the images morphing every few seconds from advertisements into PSAs into party guidelines and back to advertisements. The last time she had been here—three weeks ago now—a woman had been selling large scraps of high-quality material, as well as a dozen or so yarns, some twine, and even jute, items that could now only be foraged or found. Eager to run her fingers along organza or velvet, Dolora hurried down the center aisle, but when she drew up in front of where the woman had been, an older man stood smiling.

Would she like some dried bean curd?

She shook her head.

The woman, she began, looking left and right. The one selling cloth. Where is she?

The man shrugged his shoulders good-naturedly. He sold bean curd. Very fine and inexpensive, too. Wouldn't she like some?

Again, she shook her head no, her brow now furrowed, her hands now fists.

A cloud passed over the man's face, and she remembered herself. She relaxed, adjusted her face into a quick smile and waved a hand dismissively in the air to show she was not so disappointed.

Thank you for your time, she told him.

They bowed to one another as was the custom, and Dolora, dejected but not showing it, wandered among the aisles. One booth overflowed with mildewed books. Another sold upscale personal tracking devices—small, wire-thin bracelets in a variety of colors that could be worn around the wrist, neck, or ankle. The party had recently decided to keep digital tabs on all citizens for their safety, and though compliance would be voluntary until the end of the year, many were already participating. It was never too early to score points, to look agreeable, to go the extra, acquiescent mile to prove one's self a good citizen.

She paused in front of a cubicle overflowing with broken pieces of brick and cinder block, and a wave of despair passed through her. All around her people bought and sold items that did nothing to change the shape of their lives. Her own life had grown so meager, so stark that even attempting to orchestrate a moment of distraction seemed now beyond her reach. Disaster was her inheritance, for no other reason than she had been born. For the entirety of her life, even during the feast years, she had known the end was coming. Like a piece of rice forever caught between her teeth, she had felt it and known it. Now she could no longer avoid what she did not wish to see—that she was the grain of rice. The world, the teeth. She would be dislodged one day, chewed down and either swallowed or spat out.

Laughter. Up ahead a young woman and child, mother and son judging by their matching hair and skin, pointed and giggled at items for sale. Dolora could just make out bits of what they discussed, the mother, laughing behind her hand. Not choke-lot, she said. Choc-o-lit. She pointed at a Hershey's bar, a plastic or ceramic rectangle painted to resemble the candy, sitting among some old magazines and a stack of loose, warped vinyl records.

People ate it? the boy asked. He was five, maybe six, years old.

Yes, the mother said, still laughing. It was sweet, and the bar could be bitten into or it could be melted and put into something else.

Have you eaten it? he asked.

The mother shook her head.

No. There has been no chocolate for a long time. This is just a sculpture, a memento. Your grandmother says she had it once. She stole it from a friend of her father's.

They walked on, and Dolora's mouth watered. She had tasted chocolate in her twenties at the funeral of a famous musician. A single morsel. It had brought tears to her eyes. Tears welled up now, and she hurriedly blinked them away. What a treat to see a child! What a shame as well.

She kept moving, but slowly now, surrounded on all sides by conversation, money, and ration coupons changing hands, a gasp, now and then, of delight. It was no wonder Happyness had found such willing soil; there was no more good news. True, it was rumored that the party had reinvigorated the space program, but who among them—among these souls at this market—would be saved? And saved to what? A lifetime spent searching for some mythical, Earth-like planet surrounded by the yawning, cold black of space? Still ruled by the party's dictates to deny the sorrow of a ruined planet? To never weep over the destruction of the orca or opossum, to never talk about simple pleasures like bathing at the time and temperature one wanted or growing a garden, to never reminisce with another about eating a banana or falling asleep without the assistance of government-provided sleep aids?

She suddenly became aware of a flush in her face, a heat in her armpits. Glancing around quickly, she exhaled, relieved to find not one eye in the market trained on her. Inwardly, she berated herself. To lose control could cost her everything.

Once when she had been a girl of eleven, right in the middle of the stress and wonder of her first menstruation, a group of boys had followed her home from school. Desperate to duck out of their sight, she had turned

onto a sidestreet that was completely blocked by a construction trailer. No workers were present, and there had been no path to escape, her back against a corrugated steel wall.

The boys closed in, hissing like cockroaches, sticks, stones, and scraps of metal in their hands. Afraid, she had opened her mouth to scream, to beg for mercy, but another sound, another sensation roared forth from between her teeth. The wind itself, or so it seemed, and the sun and the trees, the dirt and moon, all uncoiled from her throat, so that when she let loose the sound, the world let loose, too, cried out from within her for salvation.

The boys, as one, had fled, their weapons abandoned against the surface of the Earth. When she finally closed her mouth, the silence the act created felt timeless, eternal. Only when she started running did the sound of birds, the far-off machinery in the quarry where her father worked and her own haggard, sticking breath return. Once home, she discovered she had bled through her cotton pad, a waterfall of ruddy brown coating the insides of both her legs. Even her socks inside her shoes were bloody. It had been that day that showed her what she was, and she'd requested apprenticeship with her mother soon after.

The market was now full, boisterous. Here and there Dolora brushed up against an arm or a back, and that brief contact awakened another need. When had she last been touched, but on purpose? The mistress? No, surely there had been someone else since then, some small meaningful touch from a stranger or acquaintance…

She could think of nothing.

Finally, she found herself near the front. Smile affixed, she stepped out into the atrium. The rain had cleared. Birdsong filled the space, or the echoes of it rather, recordings made long ago now pumped out from speakers hidden high in the branches of trees. Perhaps she should head out into the central wilderness, forage some mushrooms or tripeberries for tea. It would take a few hours to reach, and, because it was rarely patrolled, it could serve as a sort of stage, a place where she could let loose

the woe building like a bomb in her throat. But there was always a chance she could be discovered and caught. She shook her head. It would not do to go.

Up ahead she could make out the heads of the woman and child she had seen earlier. She quickened her pace to get a better view: their hands clasped as they stepped out into the bright, wet world, the mother's head tipped down so as to better hear whatever it was the child was telling her. The boy talked animatedly, his free hand swooping up and down and around, then up and down and around like he were conducting an invisible orchestra.

When the tram hit him, it had been when he was about to take his arm up again, so that, for the briefest moment, Dolora thought he had somehow conjured flight, his body lifted up just a bit before it was sucked down beneath the wheels.

The mother was knocked backward, and as soon as she hit the ground she was up again, but not to her feet, just to her hands and knees, sliding and kicking herself forward along the ground. She moved like a snake Dolora had once seen her father take a hoe to when she was a child—skittering, epileptic, her mouth a soundless O.

The tram stopped, empty of riders and driverless. Fully automated, there was no one to blame, no one to drag from the wheel and beat, no one to shudder, white-faced, at the boy's stilled body and his mother crawling toward it, one wound approaching another.

The tram backed up, turned, and went on its way.

Dolora ran to the crumpled body, so small and bent. An origami bird. The mother was there now, her mouth opening and closing, opening and closing. Blood pooled beneath the boy's head. His mother, still silent, petted his hair and spoke words without sound into his ear.

A crowd gathered. In the distance: sirens and the whirring of a helicopter's blades.

Dolora felt the swell rise inside her, a rushing water at the back of a dam. She focused, fighting with all her mind to hold the deluge back, to

keep the sound contained. She squeezed her eyes shut but they kept popping open. She bit her fist until she could taste blood, and then she bit it harder. She breathed deep and slow, deep and slow.

The lump contracted. For a moment, she believed she had won, that her willpower had been enough to overturn the decades of practice, the generations of women whose wailing blood coursed in her veins, each modification she had paid for that had given the delicate twin folds of her voice box more power, more urge, more range. She looked into the cavernous eyes of the mother, blood now matting the front of her hair, and she felt her power fail.

The lump flexed, gathered energy and weight. It was no longer her charge. Like a collapsed star approaching supernova, it drew air and light into her chest and eyes and mouth. A wind whipped through the crowd and entered her. Her shoulders rose almost to her ears and then dropped down and back. Her diaphragm engaged. Her throat lengthened, and her jaw fell open. When the sound began, it emanated from deep inside her, far below her reverberating vocal folds. From inside her intestines, her ovaries, her womb, her bronchial passages, her femur and shank, the whole of the dying world brayed out and thundered, splintering the crowd so that some fell to their knees and others ran.

She clawed her braid loose and squatted, her hair now a storm around a storm. She picked up a stone with sharp edges from around her feet and cut at her face and arms until she could feel the blood flowing down. She tended the roar like it was the beginnings of a great fire, punctuating it now and then with yips and cries to give the sound depth, volume, and height. She thrashed to the ground, soiled her underwear. Tears, blood, snot, sweat, urine, shit — her hands found it all and rubbed it all over her skin and hair and clothing, matting and tangling her hair. By the time strong hands pulled her up from the ground, she no longer looked, no longer sounded, human. A fist landed against her mouth, then another and another, but she could not stop the sound. When finally they stuffed her own hair into her mouth and down her throat so that she began to retch

and choke, her keening ceased. They threw her, bound and still gagged with her own hair, into a metal box that quickly began to drive away, but not before she could just make out—rising like a tide from all sides—the sounds of others in lamentation.

Source

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