

THE MX

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Cover design by the author and
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1. EXPULSION

“*When the hatch opens, you will pass through it. If you do not pass through, you will be killed. Once you exit, you will proceed on a straight line past the boundary pylons.*

“If you stray before reaching the pylons, you will be killed.

“If you stop, you will be killed.

“If you turn back, you will be killed.”

The words of the unseen speaker reverberated on the bare walls of an above-ground level of Arcdel. Unlike in the populated layers below, the concrete here wasn't painted. Few eyes ever saw it. Aside from housing the machinery to remove invisible contaminants from the air and make it safe for the lungs of Arcdel's inhabitants, this tunnel had only one function: the expulsion of those judged no longer worthy of breathing safe air.

Vara Lyr-CT-Tau had been judged unworthy. She stood near the middle of a line of sixteen men and women waiting to be expelled. Some, like Vara, stood silently. Others, faced with the imminent prospect of learning first-hand what remained of the world outside, sobbed lightly or pleaded in vain with one or more of the six goggle- and respirator-wearing bluecoats spaced around them.

If they chose to, the faceless guards could quickly silence complainers with the hot end of a shocker. But they didn't. This was routine for them. Expulsions happened every twenty-eight days. Doubtless they had seen and heard it all before: I didn't do it. This is a mistake. I don't belong out there. Please, I'll do anything.

Vara didn't want to leave or die any more than anyone else in the line, but she knew the futility of looking backwards now. *If you turn back, you will be killed.*

The fair-haired woman in front of Vara was a sobber, her every indrawn breath emitting a high-pitched squeal.

“Just stop,” Vara said when her last nerve had grated thin and it was clear the bluecoats weren't going to intervene. Telling weaker people what to do

came easily to Vara. It always had.

The cringing woman's head, hunched in fear, twisted to let her peek over one shoulder. Instead of showing outrage toward Vara, the woman seemed almost grateful to have someone acknowledge her suffering, even if only to dismiss it.

"They're wrong!" the woman whimpered. "I don't deserve this."

"No one cares what you think," Vara told her. "Sooner you realize that, the better your chances of living two hundred days."

"You believe we can last that long?" the woman laugh-cried. "The air is poison."

"Then step out of line and let them kill you instead. Get it over with."

With a wounded look, the woman swiveled her head to face front again.

In truth, Vara had no clue whether she could live one day outside, much less the two hundred after which Arcdel's conservators were willing to void a violator's conviction and permit their return.

That aspect of expulsion, revealed to convicts only after sentencing, had come as a surprise to Vara. Like everyone else, she had previously only thought of expulsion as a means of execution that left no mess.

But maybe some had returned.

However long Vara had left to live, there was only one direction to look. Forward. Out the hatch and past the pylons. Never behind at luxuries once taken for granted, like seven minutes of heated running water per day. Two flushes. An egg, boiled or scrambled, three times a month. Cinnamon-dusted rabbit's milk.

That last was Vara's favorite. But there was no point in mourning lost things or even hoping to reclaim them two hundred days from now. No, her life, if it was to continue, would do so in a world that centuries ago had all but wiped out the human species, along with every other animal and plant.

Out there was the MX: the mass extinction, or what was left of a world when extinction was done.

Except it wasn't done. Mass extinction was patient. Maybe one day it would win, and the few humans left would be gone.

Vara was just one human, and her life was to last one more day. Then another and another. Or maybe none at all.

"When the hatch opens, you will pass through it."

The warnings repeated, in the same voice and in the same order. For something that needed saying every twenty-eight days, it made perfect sense to use a recording.

Before the next iteration of “...*you will be killed*,” two bluecoats flanking the door pushed with stiff arms on the metal bars of some machinery housed inside the cracked walls. Just as no one had bothered to paint this level, it seemed the expulsion gates weren't connected to Arcdel's tidal generators. Why waste electric power when a little sweat would do?

A pulsing klaxon filled the tunnel. The sound was familiar. Thirteen times in each of her twenty-three years, Vara had heard it at a much more muted volume. It alerted the many thousands of inhabitants of Arcdel that some insignificant fraction of their stackmates were about to pay the price for their poor decisions.

For most, the sound was a monthly reminder to abide by the rules. For the sixteen in this tunnel, reminders hadn't been enough.

Vara herself had only ever tuned out the sound, never sparing a thought for the convicts sentenced to death. They were pathetic. They deserved it. Everyone in Arcdel thought so, if they thought about it at all. It took a lot to earn an expulsion, either one big violation or a great many small ones committed over time. Expulsion wasn't handed out lightly. It was for the irredeemable.

No one in the stacks hearing the klaxon now, as they reported to their various jobs, would spare a thought for the sixteen wastes of resources lined up in this tunnel. None would know or care that Vara Lyr-CT-Tau was among them. None would miss her when she was gone.

Leaning on the bars with all their weight, the two masked bluecoats cranked open the five-foot-thick door. Air whistled in through the faintly glowing crack between the parting concrete slabs. One breath of it made Vara's nostrils tingle. By the second, they stung. Many in line slapped palms over mouth and nose, muffling cries of desperation.

Vara neither covered her face nor cried out. In front of her, the fair-haired woman dropped to her knees and doubled over, a thin stream of vomit overflowing her lips and splashing on the concrete floor. Averting her eyes, Vara watched the twin slabs grind further apart, moving in steady bursts as the bluecoats heaved and reset.

The expanding gap exposed a gray glow. Sky. It was something the convicts in this tunnel had only ever seen through the translucent blocks of Arcdel's uppermost levels. Likewise, the current of air that stroked their skin was something none had ever felt. Wind. Its whistle deepened to a howl and pushed the sour reek of vomit into Vara's nose as she drew a belated breath. Or maybe it wasn't vomit and that was just how unfiltered air smelled.

Sky. Wind. Clouds. Ocean. Vara had learned these words to describe the ravaged world outside Arcdel's protective shell. Today, those words were to become real things for her.

Poison. Starvation. Zarpavirus. Those too would soon be more than words.

In front of Vara, the fair-haired convict remained on all fours over her putrid puddle. No toxins in the air had made the woman sick, Vara understood. It was fear. Vara felt it as well, deep in her gut where her last meal sat. The difference was that she refused to be so weak as to let that meal escape.

The sliver of sky at the front of the line grew wide enough for a human to pass through. One or another of the bluecoats—the respirators that kept the life-shortening air out of their lungs made it impossible to tell which—bellowed, “Move, move!”

Walking up both sides of the line, they set gloved hands on convicts' shoulders, exerting forward pressure that for now remained gentle. As they neared her position, Vara looked down at the obstacle in her path and wondered briefly whether to drag the woman upright or step over her and let the bluecoats do their jobs.

Bending down, she hauled up the convict by her fashionable collar. If there was one thing Vara knew how to do, it was keep lines orderly.

“I can't!” the woman whined to anyone who would listen. “No, no, no, I can't!” Despite her words, she wisely remained on her feet.

“Get yourself killed then,” Vara advised.

A bluecoat put a hand on Vara's back and gave a light push. She twisted away from the unwanted touch and resisted a foolish impulse to push him back.

“Keep moving,” the officer said from inside his mask.

The way he said it made clear that this was just his job. It didn't matter to him personally what the convicts did or didn't do. Later, he would stroll

back to his stack, eat dinner and shower off the residue of another day's work.

With just as little conviction, he added, "Good luck to you all."

In as much haste as one could reasonably expect of people shuffling to their deaths, the line advanced. Ahead of Vara, the heads and shoulders of the first few outcasts became shadows against the dim gray slice of an uninhabitable world.

Vara's throat itched. Her eyes watered. Somewhere in the rush of poisonous wind, a boy screamed at her, "*What's wrong with you, bitch?*"

But no, that voice was from the past and best forgotten.

The woman in front of Vara stopped moving again and sniveled, "I can't. I can't."

Just as the nearest bluecoat stepped toward them to close the resulting gap in the line, Vara raised an open hand to fix the problem herself.

Before her hand made contact with the woman's back, Vara froze and stared at its spread fingers. They shook. She clenched them into a fist, drew an acidic breath and opened them again.

Her hand still shook, but she used it anyway to give a shove. The sobbing woman took a lurching first step then resumed shuffling into death under her own power.

The bluecoat regarded Vara through the goggles of his mask and raised a gloved palm in acknowledgment of a problem solved. It was one less nuisance for him to deal with.

This was just his job.

2. PAST THE PYLONS

0 days since expulsion

Vara stepped across the hatch's threshold onto a new world made solid. Rock. Arranged in a series of interconnected mounds, the material resembled brown concrete with a less regular surface.

If she couldn't tell from its appearance how difficult the rock was to navigate, she had the evidence of the outcasts in front of her, several of whom lost their footing. It didn't help that the rock, or rocks, sloped downward from the hatch like a staircase with rounded, randomly placed steps.

At least the wind wasn't as strong out here as it had been inside, where it was funneled by the walls. Its howl was gone, replaced by a new sound, a roar which, if one listened closely, had a pulsing rhythm to it. Vara might not have known what the roar was except for the direction of its origin. Behind the outcasts, on the other side of buried Arcdel, lay the vast source of energy that provided light and heat, among myriad other conveniences, to those smart enough not to forfeit the privilege of enjoying them.

What she heard could only be the ocean.

Not only the threat of death but also the risk of falling forced Vara to keep her eyes down while she moved. Still, the slow pace of the outcasts in front let her crouch on the rock mounds from time to time and expand her field of vision to take in the wider MX.

Ahead, in the direction opposite the ocean, a largely flat expanse of brown and gray stretched as far as she could see, a distance she couldn't rightly judge because it fit nothing in her experience. Even if she knew the words for things out here, she had no units capable of measuring them.

Above, the sky of the MX was the color of bare concrete on which someone had carelessly painted streaks and whirls of darker gray. The twin surfaces, sky and land, reflected one another in their boundless desolation. Above and below, they stood poised to squeeze or crush all that dared try to reach the hazy horizontal boundary between them.

Was it even possible to walk that far before dying?

The exertion of climbing down the rocks with her fellow convicts, forced out of their neat line by the roughness of the terrain, made Vara's breath quicken. The air felt heavy in her chest and smelled of wetness. Breathing it was less sharply painful than it had seemed at first, as if her body had adjusted to it already, but she felt its effects.

It was common wisdom that every breath of the poison air of the MX shaved a minute off a person's natural life. How many minutes had she lost already? How many breaths added up to the two hundred days a violator needed to live in the MX before being allowed back in to breathe the good stuff again?

A grinding sound reached Vara's ears from above and behind. Careful not to fully turn around, Vara glanced back to witness the heavy hatch finish closing, sealing Arcdel and the convicts' fates. Higher up on the slope, Vara glimpsed the smooth faces, corners, and edges of concrete boxes sticking out from otherwise irregular mounds of rock, the faint outward evidence of human construction.

Metal tubes jutted from dark slits in four such boxes. Cannons. Vara only understood what those were because the authorities had explained them. Cannons could rip holes in a person's body so all the blood ran out of them until they died.

No sooner had Vara turned her eyes ahead again than a sharp sound rang out, like something heavy dropped from a height. The outcasts on the slope froze in their places and gasped or screamed. Flinching as bits of debris flew at the edge of her vision, Vara craned her neck in search of the sound's source. She wasn't sure, but she guessed that a cannon had fired.

When the sound repeated, she became more certain. A second later, at the bottom of the slope, bits of rock burst up from the ground then fell back down with a pitter-patter.

There were more screams. In front of Vara, the fair-haired woman slipped in a panic and fell a few feet before catching herself. She wasn't bleeding. Vara looked beyond her to see whether any outcasts further down had had holes ripped in their bodies.

They all looked intact. The cannon-booms, if that's what they were, must have been a demonstration, a final deterrent to thoughts of turning back.

If she were to return along this very path two hundred days from now, Vara wondered, would the cannons hold their fire long enough for someone inside to see her face and know she was allowed back? Or would they just start ripping holes?

Maddeningly, Vara's hands shook again as she used them to brace herself on cold, rounded stones and resume her descent.

She was done looking back. In two hundred days, she would most likely be dead, rendering it pointless to wonder about the cannons.

The first in line completed the descent. Not long after, Vara took the final short leap onto a less rugged surface that crunched under her thin-soled shoes. The same brownish color as the rock, more or less, it was comprised of fine powder intermixed with fragments of varying sizes.

Vara knew the word dirt. In front of her was a whole world's worth of it.

Rising from the dirt about a hundred feet away was a row of tapered concrete fingers at least three times a human's height. Their once sharp edges were uneven now, missing large chunks that lay scattered in broken pieces at their bases.

If you stray before reaching the pylons, you will be killed.

Here was that boundary the outcasts must cross and not pass again for the rest of their lives—or two hundred days, whichever came first.

A handful of outcasts, the fashionable vomitor among them, hesitated at the base of the slope, as if waiting for the cannons to nudge them along, or do worse. But Vara joined the majority in striding past the loiterers and straight across the crunching earth toward the pylons.

She was done looking back.

With every foot of her steady advance, the pylons loomed larger, even as the distant haze visible in the spaces between them remained unchanged. She wondered again if it was possible to ever reach that mist.

She thought of simply running toward that distant line, reachable or not, abandoning the weak and far-fetched belief that she could return someday to a life of filtered air and cinnamon rabbit milk. Instead, she could just run until the MX claimed her life by whatever means it possessed: poison air, disease, starvation, or—a danger she only thought of for the first time, at this moment—other desperate, homeless, lawless humans.

Any of the people around her could attempt to do her harm at any moment, she realized. The same was true of convicts who'd been expelled in the past,

if they'd managed to stay alive for at least twenty-eight days. That far in the future, it was possible she herself could be the one doing harm to people in her present position.

If every breath in the MX pushed your body closer to death, what could it do to your mind?

Without slowing down or straying from a direct line to the pylons, Vara put some extra space between her and the other outcasts. The fact of her expulsion suggested she wasn't great at making decisions, but she made the decision now that once she passed the boundary, she was on her own. It simply wasn't safe to trust any of these people.

Except maybe the fair-haired woman, who'd shown herself to be weak of will and hardly a threat. For the very same reason, it hardly seemed likely she could be useful.

In any case, Vara resolved that it wasn't sixteen outcasts together against the MX. It was one, alone.

As she reached a point more than halfway to the border, subtle motion in one of the wide gaps between the pylons drew Vara's eye. Seeing it made Vara stop walking, but only briefly, in light of the voice's warning.

On resuming her advance, she squinted to correct vision that seemed less sharp out here than it had been inside. She saw the movement again and understood what it represented. An outcast ahead of her saw and understood too. In panicked tones, he called the others' attention to it.

Vara walked past him. There was nothing any of them could do except cross the boundary now, and once they did, that convict was on his own, just like her and everyone else.

Another several paces gave Vara a clear view past the pylons. At the bottom of a shallow slope, a group of at least a dozen humans stood, waiting.

3. WELCOME TO THE MX

“Don’t be afraid!” a stranger in the waiting group called up to the sixteen outcasts standing at the edge of a ruined world. “We’ll take you to a place where you can live!”

None of the sixteen moved. Vara’s heart thrummed in her chest, fingernails bit into her palms. She didn’t want to speak. She wasn’t even sure she could. But someone had to.

She yelled down the slope, “Why should we trust you?”

“You don’t have to,” the man returned. “But you’ve got no chance on your own. Up to you.”

The stranger sounded reasonable. That could be faked, but having been lied to regularly throughout her adult life, Vara had a fairly well honed instinct for deception. Even if she wasn’t ready to believe this stranger’s promises yet, what she’d heard made her willing to give him a chance.

He’d used the word *live*. That was a strong word. If these people turned out to be lying, she could fall back at any time on her plan to run for the horizon until she dropped dead.

Without bothering to look at her fellow outcasts, since she didn’t care much what they chose, Vara started down the slope. She moved slowly, ostensibly to avoid stumbling but in fact to give herself time to examine the waiting assemblage.

She counted fourteen individuals, some male, some female, others indeterminate from a distance. Their skins ranged a spectrum of tones from milky white to dark brown, with most, like Vara, on the lighter side. The mood among them was subdued. Many just stared, while a few engaged in quiet chatter among themselves. Whatever their purpose in coming here, it wasn’t the spreading of good cheer. That suited Vara, who was less inclined to trust smiling faces than serious ones on any given day, much less this particular one.

Apart from being scrawny and unwashed, the strangers weren’t fundamentally different in overall appearance from the people of Arcdel. As

Vara drew nearer, a major point of similarity presented itself. The clothing worn by many of them, even if it was dingy, tattered, or patched, looked to have originated in Arcdel.

Had they all been expelled like her? The thought gave Vara a glimmer of hope until it further occurred to her that their origins didn't much matter as to whether they could be trusted or not. She didn't even trust the people expelled alongside her, never mind ones who'd lived outside, where presumably no rules existed for anyone to worry about violating.

Whoever these strangers were, they hadn't come empty-handed. Crudely woven satchels laden with unseen contents hung over many a shoulder. Tall, straight poles rose above the group's heads. The occasional swaying of the poles' sharpened tips was what had earlier given Vara her first glimpse of movement beyond the ridge.

Other weapons were less conspicuous, but Vara spotted them during her approach: handles with blades sticking out and Y-shaped bars resembling the slings Vara had confiscated from miscreant juves in the past.

She halted outside the range of sharpened poles and blades, but not of slings. Slings were less deadly anyway, depending on what they fired. Several of Vara's fellow outcasts stopped around her. Maybe all fifteen did. Vara didn't take her eyes off the locals, or whatever they were, long enough to look back and find out.

Her gaze fell on a long-haired, unshaven male whose position at the front of the group, coupled with the way he looked back at Vara, gave an impression of leadership.

"Welcome to the MX," the man said, somewhat indifferently. His dusty voice proved him to be the one who'd previously called out. "That's what you call it," he added. "Out here, it's Stamerka."

"What do you want?" Vara asked, ignoring the rest.

"I told you. We'll take you to a place where you can live. You want to survive, don't you?"

"What place?"

"Cam Rohi. Not far up the coast. Be there by dark." The man's casual manner made it seem like he was accustomed to answering these questions.

"Who are you?" Vara asked. "Did you come from Arcdel?"

"I'm Dillan Pau-XF-Dor," he said. "That should answer both questions. People here call me D-Lan. I'm gov—that means leader—of Cam Rohi."

Vara took her eyes from the speaker to study those around him. She noticed now how young they all looked. D-Lan's facial hair marked him as one of the oldest. Most of the other males probably couldn't even grow any yet, to the extent the frail-looking boys among them were distinguishable from girls of the same age.

Most of these people couldn't be outcasts, Vara realized. Despite her frequent wish to the contrary, Arcdel didn't punish juves with expulsion.

While reaching this conclusion, Vara missed her turn to speak. Since none of her own party leaped to fill the void, D-Lan did.

"We come here and do this every twenty-eight days," he explained and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Rian here came out in the last expulsion. We try to bring one of our newest each time so they can tell you it's no trick. Ask him whatever you want."

Vara looked at the man in question. Gaunt and stoop-shouldered, he did not look to have been treated especially well by the last twenty-eight days. But he was alive. Vara didn't recognize him, but that wasn't surprising. The population of Arcdel was immense. A million, maybe? The conservators knew.

The only person Vara might recognize in the MX was female, and that individual wasn't present in this group. Vara had made sure of that, first thing.

"Is this a good place they'll take us to?" Vara asked the recent outcast, Rian.

"Good as you'll find," he testified glumly. "The people are friendly. No one will hurt you. If you work, you'll get what you need to live."

Not liking the prospects of conversation with the blank-faced Rian, whom she had no more reason to trust than she did anyone else, Vara returned her attention to D-Lan. "How long have you been out here?"

"This is the fifth expulsion since mine," D-Lan said. "That's what, a hundred and forty days?"

The number surprised Vara. "You can go home soon."

Almost as surprisingly, D-Lan's reply was just a shrug.

Vara pressed for more information. "How long is it possible to survive?"

"That depends on several things," D-Lan answered. "The biggest is whether you choose to come with us."

If Vara's body could have tensed any more than it already was, it would have. "Is that a threat?"

For the first time, D-Lan smiled, albeit briefly. "No. The threat is all around you." He pointed at her. "Inside you, too." His gaze shifted from Vara as he addressed the sixteen as a whole. "We're the opposite of a threat! We're here to help. Anyone willing to do their fair share of work for a fair share of food is welcome to come live with us in Cam Rohi. If you'd rather take your chances alone, and probably die much quicker, go in any other direction."

Quite quickly, outcasts began filtering past Vara and down the hillside to join D-Lan and his entourage. A glance behind eventually confirmed for her that all fifteen had made the same choice. At the bottom of the slope, the members of the two distinct groups remained apart until some of the younger MX-dwellers crossed over and mingled with the outcasts, touching them in a way that made Vara glad to have stayed back.

When she saw one young stranger finger the fabric of an outcast's sleeve, she recoiled in horror.

"They want to kill us and take our clothes," Vara shouted in warning. She narrowed her eyes at D-Lan. "You just don't want to get blood on them by taking them now."

The two groups parted again as the outcasts suddenly scrambled to evade the admiring touch of thin fingers.

D-Lan's lips twisted in an aggrieved frown. "I usually wait to say this back at Cam Rohi, but you just messed that up, didn't you?" he said. "So I'll have to say it now. The fact is, most of you are going to get very sick soon, and half won't live through it. That's just how it is. So, yeah, we've got our eye on your clothes."

4. VARA FALLS FLAT

“S ick from what?” Vara asked.

D-Lan’s answer was simple: “Zars.”

“You mean the zarpavirus?”

“That’s the one.”

Vara exhaled stale toxins from her lungs. “Then it’s fine,” she hoped aloud. “Before we left, they gave us a vaccine.”

“Yes, they did,” D-Lan said. “They always have. Maybe that’s why only some of us die and not all.”

Without intending to, Vara brought her arms across her stomach and dug her nails through the fabric of her shirt. Evidently, the environment of the MX was as inhospitable to feelings of relief as it was to life.

Undoing her momentary display of weakness, she looked across a drab, monotonous landscape crushed under the weight of a concrete sky. Her first plan, the one where she ran off alone, seemed attractive again.

“I won’t get zarpa if I don’t come into contact with anyone,” she said. “Go. I’ll make it on my own.”

Cocking his head, D-Lan shot a look that Vara found insultingly familiar. She’d often used it herself on recalcitrant juves. “You absolutely will not make it,” he calmly assured her. “But go ahead. Try.”

“I’m with you,” one of the new outcasts announced and started back up the slope. Others muttered their agreement and followed suit. Vara backpedaled to keep her distance.

“No. You’re all contaminated. Stay away.”

Since she found herself unwilling to look her fellow outcasts in the eye after saying this to them, it seemed like the right time to run. With her direct path to the misty faraway blocked by potentially infected people, Vara sped off along the line marked by the pylons, making sure to stay on the side that wouldn’t get holes ripped in her.

“Hey!” D-Lan shouted at her back. “Stop being a delk, lady. If you come to Rohi, ten of you will live, give or take. Alone? Zero.”

Whatever else he may have added before giving up was too faint for Vara's ears.

On the chance that someone, either Stamerkan or fellow outcast, might be chasing her, she kept up her pace even as her footing grew precarious. Having never run on anything but flat, hard surfaces, she wasn't at all prepared for the way the ground of the MX could shift underneath one's feet.

Glancing over her shoulder to see whether it was safe to slow down proved to be Vara's literal downfall. Slipping, she tumbled in a puff of dust almost as big as the ones kicked up by Arcdel's cannons.

While scrambling to her feet, she looked back to determine whether anyone had witnessed. They had, of course. She didn't hear it, but if juves in the MX had anything in common with the ones in Arcdel, they'd be laughing at her now. The outcasts might have laughed too, if today wasn't the worst day of their newly fragile lives.

Thankfully, Vara didn't feel injured beyond scuffed palms. She looked down to find them coated in a layer of dark brown dust that also clung to her clothing on the left, the side she'd fallen on. Even if she didn't join the people of Cam Rohi, she'd look like them soon enough without showers or laundry drop-off.

Eyes down, walking instead of running, Vara resumed her departure. Maybe just for something to do with her hands, she slapped and rubbed them together to remove the layer of grime. It wasn't enough. As she set to scraping at the residue with her nails instead, the reality of solitude in the MX set in.

Her last meal in Arcdel had been hours ago, and it hadn't been substantial. A day from now, she would be desperately hungry. Beyond that, she didn't even want to know. Yet, in no direction she looked was there any sign of a potential food source. There was nothing at all, just stone and grime and sky.

Being dirty wouldn't kill her. Starvation would. Soon her body would begin to waste away like Rian's had.

Besides dusty palms, Vara detected another effect of her short, disastrous run. She was winded. That wasn't normal. She could run three times the distance she just had on a track in Arcdel without feeling much of anything. Or tripping, of course. Reduced stamina seemed to be another fact of her new world. It wasn't quite as significant as lack of food, but there it was.

Over the sound of her own heavy breathing, Vara heard faint footfalls, too fast and out of sync with her own. Deducing their direction, she looked back to spot a lone slight figure running toward her.

5. SHINE

Vara sped up for a few paces before abandoning flight in favor of a different approach. Turning, she commanded her unknown pursuer to stop.

Judging by its size, this person was a juve, so naturally it didn't listen. Saying things once was rarely enough with them.

"Stop!" Vara repeated with slightly more force. Then, with less: "Just go back."

For some reason, she couldn't get her heart into the argument. Maybe her flesh knew what her mind didn't want to admit: that these strangers were right, and Cam Rohi was her only hope.

The figure got nearer, stopping only when Vara took a long, backward step and warned, "That's close enough."

From a distance of a few yards, the figure was recognizable as one of the scrawny juves of D-Lan's group. He or she wore clothing of apparent Arcdel origin: torn leggings and a faded sleeveless shirt that displayed the navel of a concave stomach at its jagged hem. A shabby sack of woven plastic hung from a strap over one shoulder. Dust-brown hair, just a shade darker than the youth's skin, was cropped short. If the considerable time Vara had spent around juves in Arcdel had any relevance out here, she put this one's age at somewhere around thirteen.

"Ayyo," the MX-dweller chirped. The voice sounded mildly feminine, but that wasn't a reliable giveaway at this age. "You frealz otta come with us to Rohi."

Vara's mouth tightened and curled downward, an almost involuntary reaction she experienced when a young person addressed her. "Did D-Lan send you to tell me that?"

"No, he told me not to bother. But I bother most people. They say I do, at least. I'm Shine."

Vara looked away, helpless to ignore the only association that word summoned in her mind. "That's not a name," she said.

“It is to me.”

“Well, it’s a stupid one.”

“Says a kitty mixed from bottles.”

Vara asked, “What’s that supposed to mean? Any of it.”

“You know,” the juve taunted. “What’s your name?”

Instead of giving it, Vara asked, “Are you a boy or a girl?”

“I won’t answer you if you don’t answer me,” Shine said. “Sept I want to, so I’m a girl.”

Shine looked over her shoulder to where the combined band of MX-dwellers and Arcdel outcasts had started moving in her direction.

“You coming with us or what?” the girl asked. “Hope so cause you’ll defs die if you don’t.”

Rather than give a hasty reply she might regret, Vara yielded to curiosity and asked, “Were you born out here?”

“Yip.”

That didn’t fully make sense to Vara, but she withheld questions on the subject as less important than others for now. Reaching into her sack, Shine produced a dented, cylindrical container made from compressed bands of some dense material. She pulled a stopper out of its top, held it toward Vara and shook it. It sloshed.

“Want water?”

“No,” Vara said.

“It’s safe.”

“I don’t want it.”

Shine stepped closer, persisting. “Frealz, I wanna share.”

“I don’t.”

“Kays,” Shine conceded with a shrug. After taking a sip herself, she resealed the bottle and returned it to her bag. “What about eats? I have worms.”

“What’s that?”

“Oh, right,” Shine muttered to herself. “You don’t know. You will. It’s our main food. It’s like a tiny rabbit with no legs or face. Not that I’ve seen a rabbit, but you probably have. Arkies told me about them.”

Shutting out the girl’s babble, Vara considered the offer. On one hand, it was sustenance in a place where none was to be found. On the other, accepting it meant risking zarpa and its fifty-fifty chance of dying.

There was no good answer. No pleasant one, anyway. Maybe in the MX, there were no good answers.

A moment's thought ended in resignation. It wasn't reasonable to think she could stay alive in the MX for any amount of time and still avoid the virus. She'd have to eat and drink eventually. She'd have to interact with humans too—maybe not even voluntarily. Other groups, if they existed, might not offer choices like this one did.

Best just to expose herself to the danger and get it over with.

“Yeah, I'll take... eats,” Vara said.

Shine opened a small translucent tube and instructed, “Like this.” Looking up, she held the tube horizontally over her face and tapped it with a finger twice. Each tap sent a trickle of dust into her waiting mouth. Righting the tube, she sucked her lips and looked at Vara. “Four taps, kays?”

The girl started closing the gap between them in slow, deliberate strides, as if fearful Vara might flee if startled. Vara might have, had she not made the choice to confront zarpa sooner rather than later.

As she neared, Shine proposed, “If I'm gonna share eats with you, you could at least share back your name, kitty.”

“Vara Lyr-CT-Tau,” Vara recited.

“Vara,” Shine tested. “Varaleer... setrasetra. That's kitch. I like it.”

As Vara took the tube from the girl's outstretched arm, she resisted a native urge to avoid allowing their fingers to touch. Instead, she made sure they did, an invitation to infection.

Inclining her chin, Vara placed the tube's opening directly onto her lower lip and fully upended it. Enough dust flooded out to surround her tongue. It was tangy but largely flavorless.

“Hey!” Shine shrieked.

Working to force the dry mouthful down her throat, Vara backed off and extended the tube for the juve to snatch back, which she did. Shine's lean face puckered in anger as she peered down the mouth of the now empty container.

“Motherkeffer!” she screamed.

Throwing the tube to the ground along with her shoulder bag, Shine exploded forward. Vara raised a bare arm across her face in defense, but instead of grappling or hitting, as expected, the girl stopped short and dug sharp nails into the delicate underside of Vara's exposed forearm.

Vara stifled a cry of pain and instinctively yanked the arm away, a mistake that only got the skin of her arm raked from wrist to elbow in a double claw-grip. Without a further thought, Vara drew back her free arm and struck her attacker across the jaw with the heel of her palm.

That worked. Reeling, Shine unburied her nails and retreated into a crouch while Vara rubbed at raw, pink welts.

The girl glared, massaging her cheek where she'd been hit. Past her, the mass of strangers and outcasts had moved near enough for some of Shine's people to have witnessed the scuffle. Vara watched it carefully for any sign of D-Lan or someone else breaking from the group to help or avenge her, but none did.

For a moment, Shine looked away from Vara to recover her worm tube and plastic sack then glared once more before racing off to rejoin her people.

Vara knew that look: the tiny mouth, the creased brows, the hurt in her eyes that ran deeper than the skin of her cheek. No words were needed. The girl's message was clear. *What's wrong with you, bitch?*

6. FIRST SIGHT OF THE OCEAN

After the incident with Shine, Vara wasn't sure she'd still be welcome at Cam Rohi. She didn't trust D-Lan any more now than when she'd met him and couldn't know if Rohi was what he claimed. Who knew if the new outcasts would even make it there before being betrayed? It said something about how bad her options were that, despite all that, following these strangers still seemed the best one available.

If D-Lan did void her invitation after hearing what she'd done, she couldn't count on her fellow outcasts to put in a word on her behalf. After all, how many heartbeats had it taken her to abandon them in favor of saving herself? Those fifteen were allies no more, if they ever had been.

Moving in two distinct clumps, the mass of almost thirty outcasts and MX-dwellers, now rejoined by Shine, continued on a course that would take it past Vara's position without actually meeting her. Vara would rather not have just stood there looking stupid until it passed her, but with the inviolable boundary of the pylons at her back, there was nowhere to go. By bad luck, it seemed she had tried to flee the people of Cam Rohi by running more or less in the direction of Cam Rohi.

If she raced in front of the group before it passed, she could head for her second choice of destinations, previously her first: that distant line where earth and sky met in a haze.

Maybe it was partly intentional that she pondered that option until it was too late.

"Vara! Are you with us?"

The voice was D-Lan's, though Vara couldn't pick him out from the crowd at this distance. He knew her name now and could only have learned it from Shine. That probably meant he knew about their misunderstanding too. Yet the invitation stood.

Accepting it was the third-to-last thing Vara wanted to do. But since the last thing was getting holes ripped in her by a cannon, and the second-to-last was starving to death in a featureless waste, there really was no choice.

Still, for a long while she just stood there, watching the group's slow progress and mining the pockets of worm-dust between her teeth with the tip of her tongue. The taste wasn't so bad. It hardly had one. It wasn't enough, though. Barely a bite. And Shine had told her to take only four taps. How much sustenance did these people get in a day? No wonder they were so scrawny.

She would be them eventually.

"Last chance!" D-Lan called out when the group passed its nearest point of approach, directly between Vara and the gray, endless nowhere.

In no hurry, she set to walking. Her aim was not to join the group but trail behind it at a distance, and that was how it worked out. With the crumbling boundary pylons of Arcdel on her right, Vara walked well behind the main body of travelers, moving with newfound attention to her footing.

They traversed rocks and dust and not much else. Within minutes, Vara's former home was invisible behind her. Apart from the conspicuous pylons, Arcdel seemed to have been designed to disappear.

Vara's dry, stinging throat craved water. Her vision seemed cloudy. Her breath weighed heavily in her chest. Her palms were still sore. The long, pink welts on her forearm throbbed. The soft droning of the ocean spoiled any chance of quiet. She focused on the physicality of these unpleasant things rather than the reasons she felt them. This was no time for regrets, no time for looking backward and wishing she had done things differently. No, there was only forward, and that was where her thoughts needed to be.

Shine had been born in the MX and reached her teens. Even if that kind of longevity was unique to natives, at least one outcast from Arcdel, D-Lan, was nearing his two-hundred-day mark. These facts proved it was possible to survive out here. And if it was possible, Vara resolved that she would do it.

She would live. Day by day, hour by hour. No matter what came.

Vara's first hour of survival was spent walking. The sights around her didn't change much, but the sound did. The pulsing rush she had ascribed to the ocean grew louder. Eventually, cresting an upward slope a few minutes behind the main party, she found out why.

She had seen it in images, but now the ocean was real. Water stretched to the limits of her vision. Unlike in pictures, this real ocean ceaselessly writhed, its uneven surfaces smashing the dim glow of the low-hanging sky,

which threw the water back in broken fragments. As with the land in the opposite direction, the ocean's most unimaginably distant reaches merged with the clouds in a gray mist.

The water looked bluer in pictures. This ocean was almost black.

Nearer to Vara, if she looked down, the dark water formed white lines that arose from nowhere, slid toward the land then shattered in foaming splashes on the rocky shore. Wave after wave was created and died in this way, heedless of the fates of those before.

The wind blew more strongly here, making Vara blink. She didn't want to blink. She felt she could look upon this ever-moving, ever-changing surface for hours on end and not be bored. Now that she saw it, she even liked the rushing sound that until now had bothered her.

Maybe she had another choice, after all. She could just sit here and watch and listen to the waves until death came.

Looking at it now, she couldn't even bother to care that she had accidentally rejoined the main group of travelers, which had likewise halted along the ridge. The other fifteen fresh outcasts stood as transfixed as Vara, unable to simply give this wonder a quick glance before moving on. The MX-dwellers didn't feel the same, of course, but they must have understood. If they made this trek every twenty-eight days, they had to be used to stopping at this spot.

Some of the outcasts sat down, whether deliberately to rest or because the view made their legs weak. Vara's reason for sitting was somewhere in between the two.

Uncounted crashing waves later, she became aware of D-Lan approaching her and sitting on a stone a few feet away.

7. IT STINGS

“Can you believe we lived right next to this all our lives without seeing it?” D-Lan remarked. “I’d ask what you think, but I’ve been you. I didn’t run off or steal food or hit kids, but I’ve sat where y—”

“What do you want?” Vara asked, resenting him for dragging her attention from the sight that most deserved it.

D-Lan offered her a bulbous container, as Shine had earlier. “Water?”

Vara made no move to accept. “Can’t I just go down and get some?”

He set his water container on a rock between them, where she could reach it if she wanted. “I thought the same at first, but no,” he said. “That water isn’t for drinking. Gotta get water from the river and boil it first. It’s one of those things living in a birg like Rohi can help with that’s hard to do yourself.”

Down below, Vara saw a few MX-dwellers walk onto a flat spot at the ocean’s edge where white-crested waves met the shore and became transparent sheets. Foam-laced water enveloped their feet.

“You can’t drink it, but it’s safe to touch?” Vara asked.

“Yes. Just don’t go in deeper than your waist. It’s not like a pool in Arcdel. The waves will take you, and you’ll never be seen again.”

“Where will you end up?”

“Sometimes your dead body shows up on the shore a few days later. So I’m told. I’ve never seen that happen.”

While he spoke, D-Lan caught Vara eyeing his container of water.

“Go ahead,” he prodded. “You should drink. There’s only a little in there, so you might as well have it all.”

Vara’s skin burned from the comment that she felt certain he intended as an insult. Without looking at him, she reached over, took the container, unplugged it and drank. D-Lan had been right to say there wasn’t much in it. Four swallows and it was empty. Just enough to make her body want lots more.

She reached to set the container on the stone but ended up transferring it to D-Lan's waiting hand as he rose and stepped nearer. Vara drew her legs up in front of her and inched further back on her rock.

"I almost forgot the main reason I came over," D-Lan said. It was probably a lie, since he didn't seem absent-minded. "What was your occupation inside?"

"Why do you need to know that?"

"Simple. We like to match people with work they know how to do."

Vara let a few waves crash before answering: "Turbine maintenance."

"Really?" Vara wasn't sure D-Lan believed her until he continued, "Glad to hear it. We can use you."

Vara said nothing. She didn't know yet whether being considered useful in this world was a good thing or a bad one.

"That looks like it hurts," D-Lan remarked of Vara's exposed, clawed forearm. "I've never known Shine to do that to anyone, so you really made an impression. But so did she."

As he turned to pick his way back down the rocky slope, he added, "You're lucky Shine doesn't know how to hold a grudge. I let her decide whether we'd leave you behind or not. Enjoy the view."

After a short while, the group resumed moving. At first they followed the water's edge, keeping it on their right, but eventually the ocean fell out of view. As before, Vara lagged well behind the main body, keeping to herself.

At least, she tried. Soon enough, a scrawny figure with short, light brown hair and sharp nails detached from the group, reversed direction, then stopped and waited for Vara to cross her path.

Vara slowed her steps to make that take a little longer than it needed to.

"Ayyo," Shine said on their inevitable meeting.

Vara didn't return the stupid greeting. In fact, her teeth clenched in abject refusal. She did spare the girl enough of a glance to see that her cheek showed no trace of the blow it had taken. Vara hadn't hit her very hard anyway.

Undeterred by the silence, Shine joined Vara on the uneven, gray-brown terrain. As they walked, the juve held up a plastic container different from the one she'd offered Vara earlier.

"Show me your scratches," she said.

“I’m fine,” Vara returned. “If it’s water, I already got some.” Her body wanted more, of course, but it could wait.

“It’s not to drink,” Shine explained. “It’s ocean water. Good for wounds. I’ll pour it on. Show me.”

Keeping in mind that Shine could probably still change her mind and tell D-Lan to leave her, Vara opted against sending the girl away. With a sigh, she extended her scratched arm.

Shine hissed softly on seeing the red tracks. A second later, she tipped her container above the injured skin. The liquid that spilled out was not black or blue, to Vara’s mild surprise.

The next surprise was the burning sensation the water caused. A yelp escaped Vara before she could suppress the sound. Jerking her arm out from under the flow, she rubbed frantically at it with her other hand.

“What was that?” Vara demanded. “What are you doing to me?”

Shine stopped pouring. Rather than laughing at her, as most juves would, she appeared genuinely distressed. “Grets,” she said. “I shoulda told you it was gonna hurt.”

8. WHEN NATURE CALLS

“If it hurts, why would you do it?” Vara raged.
“If you don’t wanna, don’t. But people do it. It’s real. I wasn’t tricking you or anything.”

Vara’s pain began to subside. After a few deep breaths, she held her arm out again and braced herself. Silently, Shine poured. Pain flared. Vara grit her teeth as ocean water cascaded off the marred skin and onto the rocks. It trickled down to Vara’s elbow and streamed onto her calf. When the last drops had escaped, Shine lowered the vessel.

“Grets again,” she said. “I hope that helps.”

“What’s grets?” Vara asked. She shook her arm to dispel the moisture and ideally, some of the pain.

“Grets is what you say when you did something you wish you dan’t,” Shine said. “Like taking more than your share of eats, just as a random example.”

Vara bit back harsh words and resolved to say nothing. Maybe Shine would get the hint and leave.

Then again, maybe she could be useful. Not only did she know things Vara didn’t, she seemed too simple to lie about them.

With renewed interest, Vara asked, “Is Cam Rohi a real place?”

One of Shine’s thin brows arced up. “Must be, since I lived there mosta my life.”

“Is it like D-Lan says? People work and get their fair share?”

“Yip.”

“If I don’t like it, will I be free to leave?”

“You’d be loops to do that, but yip.”

Vara studied the juve’s face closely while interrogating her. Shine wasn’t lying.

For good measure, Vara posed a final, catch-all question: “Will anything bad happen to us when we get where we’re going?”

Shine's expression darkened. Her lower lip puffed out. "You're gonna get the zars," she said. "Most of you will. But I hope you make it, kitty, even though you're not so nice."

Vara limited her response to a contemptuous sneer that the girl didn't witness. If she'd retaliated every time a juve insulted her in Arcdel—

Well, it was hard to see how her life could have turned out worse than it had, so she probably might as well have.

Studying Shine's profile as they walked, Vara asked, "How old are you?"

"That means years, right?" Shine replied. "You people use them, not us. An Arkie guessed thirteen for me one time, but that was milla days ago. What good does it do to have a number, anyway? What's your old?"

"Twenty-three."

As they talked, a certain feeling had begun to nag at Vara. From below.

"Where can I—" she started to ask, stopping when Shine stared expectantly at her. Looking away, Vara finished quietly, "I need to pee."

"So go," Shine said. "In Rohi, you can't just do it anywhere, but we're not there yet, so—anywhere."

Vara scanned the largely featureless expanse of gray-brown all around them and saw no obvious place offering any degree of privacy. Faced with the prospect of squatting over rocks in the wide open, her mind commanded her body to wait a little longer. She didn't waste a question finding out from Shine if there were bathrooms in Cam Rohi. She would learn soon enough, and she had a feeling she knew the answer already.

Instead, she asked, "How much farther?"

Shine looked up at the gray, streaked sky. "We just started, kitty. When the glow gets dim, we'll be close."

"Three hours?" Vara guessed. "Six?"

"One of those numbers," Shine said. "Or a different one. Hey, can I axe you something, Varaleer?"

"It's just Vara. And it depends on the question."

Shine gestured at the mass of people walking ahead, well out of earshot. "All the Arkies who came out with you are up there," she said. "But you're back here. Why?"

"I like to be alone," Vara answered. To reduce the risk of being asked to elaborate, she quickly pointed out, "You're here too. I could say the same about you."

Shine didn't seem offended. "I like to meet new people," she said casually.

"There are plenty of us to meet. Why talk to one you don't even like?"

"I didn't say I don't like you," Shine disputed. "I said you weren't nice. And that's true. I told you grets for hurting you, and you didn't even say it back."

"Is that why you're here?" Vara asked. "Waiting for that? Then you'll go away?"

The girl cast a disappointed look and didn't answer. After a few more steps at Vara's side, she sped off without looking back to rejoin the main body of travelers.

Shine's departure came as a relief. Alone again, Vara breathed and tried not to focus on her bladder. Then she tried not to think about how each breath helped to kill her, just in case the MX's other dangers failed: zarpa, starvation, even an ocean that could drag you in and spit back your dead body.

Paying closer attention to the contours of the dirt and stone around her, she began to detect apparent traces of human construction: partial walls, upright metal rods, rocks with sharply angled corners. Maybe these were all just crumbling remnants of a forgotten past, but what if some weren't? This world was so big and Arcdel so small by comparison that you could miss it if you weren't looking hard enough.

Not that it had ever felt small while she was inside it. Too big, if anything.

Could other safe places like Arcdel exist? Even now, were there people eating eggs and using bathrooms under her feet? For that matter, what else lay between here and that misty faraway? Or beyond, if it was possible to reach? There couldn't just be nothing. If humans were able to survive here, they could survive elsewhere too.

Vara shut down that line of thought, which veered dangerously into past and future. It was far safer now simply to exist in the present.

In the present, she still had to pee.

9. SPLAINING

At least two hours later, when the group stopped to rest again in sight of some jagged leftovers of the ancient times, Vara didn't squander the opportunity. Peeing on the ground wasn't the easiest thing she'd done, but it wasn't the hardest either. The feeling of intense relief far outweighed the annoyance created by the small amount of urine that ended up on her clothes. At least it was her own. She could do better next time—and the thousand times certain to come after.

With the pressure in her lower half gone, a pounding headache became Vara's primary source of discomfort. Maybe it came from exertion. Maybe the toxic air. Maybe it was zarpa. Perhaps she just needed water.

While she sat alone in sight of the main group, a familiar bottle landed with a thunk near Vara's feet, sloshing as it bounced and rolled. Before it came to rest, Vara looked up and saw Shine staring back from within throwing distance, thin arms crossed over her chest.

Vara pondered whether to accept but wound up yielding to the potential for relief from her throbbing skull. Reaching out, she opened the bottle and drank. Water in the MX didn't taste like what she was used to, in that it had a flavor at all when water shouldn't. It was vaguely unpleasant but hardly bad enough to deter drinking.

As she did, she decided that having her fill wasn't worth the price of making Shine angry a third time, so she stopped while her body still wanted more. Shine continued to watch from afar, leaving Vara with the choice of how to return the bottle. Rather than just throw it, she first tried extending the bottle toward the girl to see if she wanted to come retrieve it.

She did. Within a few seconds, Shine stood in arm's reach, hugging her reclaimed bottle. She looked everywhere except at Vara, then huffed and turned to leave.

Before she could go far, Vara asked, "Where did you come from?"

In her ample time alone, Vara's mind had settled on that question as the one she wished she'd asked when she had the chance. Now she had another.

Shine stopped and spun. “Cam Rohi,” she said. “What are you, jammed? It’s where we’re going.” She turned her back again and started to leave.

“Not that. I mean, where does everybody born out here come from?” Vara tried to clarify. “The babies. Does Cam Rohi have its own Woom?”

Shine stopped again and backtracked a little closer, frowning all the way. “Is that what you Arkies call the place where you pour out your bottles?” she asked, perplexingly. “No, we don’t have that. Back at Rohi, they’ll splain some stuff to you. Just wait.”

Once more, she made to leave. Vara chased her for a few steps, prompting Shine to stop and look back again.

“It’s not my job to splain to you about mothers and fathers.”

Tellingly, Shine didn’t follow up her words by turning to leave again. The satisfaction she seemed to draw from possessing knowledge that Vara lacked made Vara think idly about hitting her again, even if she didn’t let herself consider actually doing it.

She recognized a word as one that Shine had used before, during their first encounter.

“Motherkeffer,” Vara repeated, recalling the word’s earlier, longer form. “What’s it mean?”

Shine scoffed, a sound that made Vara’s cheeks burn. “That’s different,” the juve said. “Looky, if you gotta know now, a mother is the person you came from. I don’t remember mine cause she died when I was small, like most mothers do. After that, my dad brought me to Cam Rohi from another birg.”

“Came from?” Vara echoed. “How can you come from a person?”

With a groan the girl dropped to the ground and sat cross-legged, indicating for Vara to do the same. Once Vara complied, Shine proceeded to explain how she and every other juve born in the MX had come into existence.

As she heard it, Vara’s face burned hot. The water she’d just drank gurgled in her belly, threatening to burst back out the way it had gone in.

The first part of what Shine described, Vara was passingly familiar with. But then—

From there? That big?

It was revolting. Barely believable. Perhaps Shine was just taking revenge by making up lies. Absurd ones, at that.

Unfortunately, Vara's own well-honed instinct for truth told her that wasn't the case.

So much for ever being able to look at this girl or any other MX-born juve again without wanting to vomit.

10. CAM ROHI

As the clouds' gray glow dimmed, the terrain underfoot gradually became less stony. Here and there, plants grew, although they were not the green type that Vara knew from the oxygen-processing bowers and hydroponic pools of Arcdel. No, these wretched growths resembled stiff, tangled coils of spike-adorned wire. Maybe it wasn't alive at all but only had been in the past.

At one point, the travelers walked single-file through a patch of the brown vines on a pathway that must have been cleared intentionally. If not for the path, the tangle would only have been passable at the expense of scratched and bleeding legs.

At the path's end was Cam Rohi, a chaotic sprawl of crooked lines, odd angles and washed-out colors. Each of its dozens of structures looked to have been cobbled together independently of its neighbor from mismatched panels of blotchy metal and discolored plastic fastened together with wire. The whole sprawling mess seemed ready to collapse if leaned on in the wrong spot, each falling wall knocking down another in a chain that only ended when all lay flat. Perhaps a strong air current could achieve the same result.

Rising up behind that mess, further from Vara's point of entry into the birg, was something more familiar, if only just: a half-toppled, open-sided structure of concrete with a flat roof that doubled as the floor of an incomplete second story. Like the crumbled pylons outside Arcdel, it appeared ancient, much older than the rest of Cam Rohi. Both its levels were filled to their ragged edges with still more shelters of metal and plastic and wire.

Rohi was vastly different from Arcdel, where sixty-two residential stacks were each divided into ninety-nine orderly precincts, all identical apart from uniquely identifying color schemes. Barely twenty days ago, Vara's home had been a smooth-walled apartment in precinct 44 of Spruce stack, whose freshly repainted scheme was of purple, yellow and orange. From there, she

had relocated to a holding cell. Now home was to be this even more dismal place.

Vara warned her drifting mind to remain in the present, where D-Lan led the arriving travelers into a flat, open space ringed by makeshift homes. Near the center of this area stood a cube of blackened concrete pieces covered by an even more blackened metal sheet. Smoke, almost the same color as the sky, wafted from a foot-wide gap between wall and lid. Occasionally, licks of flame or a wafting spark escaped from the same gap.

Inside Arcdel, fires of any size were forbidden. Because of her work, Vara knew more than most did what a fire was and how to prevent one. Yet until now, she had never seen an actual flame.

What else could this day be but a day of firsts?

Standing in the open space around the fire-cube and ducking in and out of the irregularly shaped doors of its dwellings were Rohi's inhabitants. Their voices coalesced in a low, indistinct murmur. On the whole, they resembled the group with which Vara traveled, a mix of scrawny youths and recent or not-so-recent outcasts. She couldn't hope to count them now, but her first guess would be between a hundred and two hundred persons.

If this was the full extent of Cam Rohi, as it appeared to be, the birg wasn't even as large as one precinct of one stack of Arcdel.

From where Vara stood, the ocean was visible in the same direction as it had been on their journey. That much she liked about Rohi. The ocean might not be an escape, but based on her single experience, looking at it could at least feel like one.

The denizens of Rohi mostly stared without engaging. A few came close and studied the faces of the outcasts. It didn't take long to figure out that they were trying to determine if anyone they had known in Arcdel had arrived. But since none of the studying was followed by interaction, it seemed not.

No faces in sight were familiar to Vara either. There could be only one of those, really: the face of the person responsible for everything bad in her life. If Armony lived, she was out here somewhere. It came as a minor relief not to see Armony's face, since Vara couldn't be sure what she would do if she did.

"Ayyo," more than a few of Rohi's residents said to Vara and the new outcasts generally. That was the extent of their welcome. No one smiled at her, not that she wished them to.

Her first impression was that the people of Rohi were neither content nor miserable. They just existed. They survived. What else was there?