

Unity

A red sun seared the sky as the doors to the transport hissed open, the airlock's magnetic system holding firm despite the rattling and occasional thunk behind the bulkheads.

Devan walked down the metal grating onto the dusty street, cinching his travel pack tighter before looking up. He had known that Arcturus was bigger than Sol, but actually seeing a star take up two thirds of the sky was something else. The solar storms on its surface could be seen with the naked eye, angry hurricanes the colour of blood that exploded into showers of yellow when they collided.

"It's quite something, isn't it?" a voice behind him said, and he turned around to see a young woman with red hair held up in braids, and her rich copper skin showed under the short sleeves of her crisp white short sleeved shirt when she held out her hand to greet him. "I'm Rez, your designated guide. Thanks for choosing the executive package, we've got a great day planned."

They headed off down the boulevard of paved rock, a deep ochre colour that had been processed in a way that made it shimmer and shine like newly varnished wood. On either side were tall buildings constructed of green glass, though the sun made them all appear black to his eyes. The street level was even busier than the spaceport had been, with hawkers and vendors crammed into every nook and hole.

"What's good to eat here? I haven't had anything but rehydrated meals for a while and I'm craving something actually grown in the ground." Devan could feel his stomach growling at him as the smells of charcoal and sizzling street food wafted around them, the telltale smell of the beating heart of any city.

"If you are interested in local cuisine then can I suggest that we head into that building?" Rez pointed at a skyscraper that looked indistinguishable from all the rest. "That's the Executive Experience Center."

An entrance hatch slid open with a beep, revealing an elevator with marble walls. Ushering him inside, Rez selected the floor and they started moving up.

"Do you know much of our history?" She asked.

"Not really. I know that solar mining was a big thing here once, and now it's mostly tourism and financial services, but that's it." Devan wasn't really in the mood for a history lesson when he was so hungry, but he listened politely as Rez told him about the planets early terraformers and the way they mined the twin star to extinction.

"That's why the original settlers all became wealthy. They used their money to build this city."

The doors opened with a 'ding' onto a vast lobby, glass walled and with marble pillars supporting the ceiling. It seemed to be one dining hall, with tables lined exquisitely with delicate white cotton cloths, complete with serviette origami. She motioned him to a seat by the window, and ordered from the menu.

"Wow!" The view from the window was spectacular. The other green spires around him were much smaller, and he could see straight to the horizon. On one side of the window was the spaceport and the streets through which they had come, and on the other side was a scarlet ocean, pulsing and seething violently against the red rocks like a living supernova.

"That's the Sizzling Sea. It's actually liquid iron, superheated by the planet core and the sun's heat. All the land you can see was artificially reclaimed by the first families before the uprising."

"The uprising?" Devan asked.

"The uprising was the only physical conflict to ever happen in this system. It was a worker revolt against the first families, who had become increasingly insular and protective of their wealth. The workers united, stormed their houses and cast them into the sea."

"That's barbaric!" Devan was revolted at the thought of killing in any situation.

"It might seem that way, but actually it ushered in the age of prosperity that we now enjoy."

The food arrived, served by staff in crisp white uniforms and aprons, steaming and piled high on silver platters. Their glasses were filled with a bitter champagne, and Rez called for a toast 'to new experiences' before they tucked in.

She showed him how to pull apart what looked like sea urchins, violet in colour and extremely sour, and dip them in the tangy fruit sauce that accompanied the dish.

"So what happened after the uprising?" Devan asked, tearing at his crusty bread and mopping up the sauce.

Rez dabbed daintily at her mouth to wipe away any grease before answering.

"The Unity was formed."

"Isn't that your government?" Devan leaned back and swirled his drink around his glass.

"Yes and no. Arcturus Prime has no formal government. Every major decision is put to a popular vote, and the result adhered to at all times."

A ship lifted off from the spaceport and drifted out across the sea, its thrusters igniting with a super sonic boom as it shot up into the atmosphere.

"So there are no elections? Who speaks for your people during diplomatic visits?"

Rez laughed a little. "No, no elections. We all speak equally here. We send an avatar to all state meetings, but every decision is put to the people immediately."

The intercom overhead crackled into life and a series of digital bleeps played into the room. Rez reached into her trouser pocket and pulled out her comms device, flipping open the silver top to reveal the screen.

"Lucky for you, I can show you now!" she said, moving around the table to sit next to him.

The screen lit up on her device, and two lines of text appeared.

**EDUCATION CENTRE #77 DAMAGED IN STORM.
RAISE TAXES TO REPAIR?**

Devan watched as Rez hit the 'yes' button, and replaced the device in her pocket. All around the room he could see that every other local had their comm in their hands, presumably voting too.

"See?" she said. "Just like that, everybody has a say. Now wait for one minute..." She held up a finger to stop him talking, and they waited in silence for sixty seconds. A second series of beeps came over the intercom, and a muffled robotic voice spoke. **"The people have spoken: taxes will be raised to repair the education centre. Unity is achieved."**

"That's incredible!" Devan exclaimed.

"Like I said, this truly is a golden age. True democracy, true representation, no corruption."

The tour continued after lunch with a walk around the hydroponic gardens. "I love this." Devan said, motioning around to the stout green trees and the colourful flowers that nestled in bushes that closely resembled giant dandelions. "It feels so good to see real plants again."

He breathed in deeply and reached out to touch a particularly furry looking leaf.

"Don't touch that!" Rez's tone was harsh as she reached out towards him, and he pulled his hand back.

"Is it dangerous?" he asked.

"No, it is forbidden to touch the plants." She regained her composure quickly, the smile returning. "We don't want to affect the way that they grow, we need the oxygen in the atmosphere."

"I didn't know, sorry." He shoved his hands in his trouser pockets and walked on.

"You must be very careful here. Ignorance of the law is no excuse for breaking it, which is why we insist on a guide for first time visitors." Her tone had returned to pleasant, but there was a sharp tone underneath the

words. They walked on in silence, with only the crunching of the soil beneath their feet and the susurrations of the leaves to accompany them.

The dry heat of the streets had become humid under the canopy, and Devan found himself frequently wiping the perspiration off his forehead.

"You look uncomfortable, let's get you a drink." Rez turned to a booth by the side of the path and obtained two glasses of iced lemonade, passing one to Devan that he gratefully drank, before proceeding to wipe the cold glass across his forehead.

"There's one thing that's confusing me about all this." he took another drag of his drink before continuing. "If everyone gets an equal say, how do you educate people to know enough about complex systems before they are eligible to vote?"

"What do you mean?" Rez asked, confused.

"Well, how are people who aren't politically inclined supposed to vote on something as difficult as inter system trade? How are land disputes settled when two parties have a claim? And who decides what's right or wrong?"

Rez laughed again. "Oh, that's easy. We are all born knowing right from wrong, aren't we? That's all the training we need!"

Devan didn't quite agree, but didn't feel like a confrontation. "So where next?"

Leaving the gardens they wound their way through some narrow streets, thankful for the shadows the buildings cast that provided some blessed relief from the pounding sun.

"We've got to cut through the workers quarter to reach the shopping court." Rez said, stepping out of the way of a group of labourers who were clearly headed out on shift, their overalls stained with dust and reeking of oil.

"I'm sorry it's not too glamorous, but it's the only way there. We want to make sure that everybody remembers the workers are the soul of this colony." She continued as they entered a courtyard surrounded by apartment buildings, clothes hanging out on wires that stretched

right across the middle of the open space. Devan could see people on their balconies, relaxing with a drink and chatting to one another.

"You know, I haven't seen any homeless people at all." Devan said to Rez as they continued on.

"That's because there aren't any!" She replied.

"Oh come on, every colony has some people that fall through the cracks, it's part of life." Devan's grey eyes lit up as he laughed in disbelief.

"No, really. We voted a long time ago to fix the homeless problem. If anyone loses their home we deal with them immediately!" Rez said proudly. "When the people decide together, society gets better!"

"Wow. This place is so good I might just move here after my trip!" Devan said.

Far above them a series of beeps took place, and all around them the people stopped in their tracks to take out their comm devices. It was eerie to him how the entire society froze at once like a video being paused. He wondered what happened to doctors performing operations when a vote came. Did they just stop too? He was going to ask Rez when he saw the words on the screen.

**SURPLUS OF RESIDENTS UNDER AGE OF 7.
RELOCATE OVERSPILL TO FOOD PRODUCTION?**

He watched her press 'yes' on the screen and a moment later the same robotic voice from earlier came over the speakers. **"The people have spoken: surplus population moved to food production effective immediately. Unity is achieved."**

"Isn't it illegal for children under 13 to be put to labour in any of the colonies?" Devan asked Rez once she'd put the comm away.

"Of course it is. Is that what you think we just voted for?" It was her turn to laugh at him when he nodded. "No, they are just going to help out. Right now there's too many mouths to feed, and we want to make sure there's enough food to go round."

"But shouldn't they be in school, or daycare at that age?" He pushed a little harder.

"If they don't help, they would go hungry. Would you rather we had starving children?" She retorted, the edge coming back to her voice.

Admonished, he let it drop. "Come now, don't worry about that. Voting is our duty, and sometimes hard decisions have to be made to keep unity. You'll understand once you've been here for a few days." Rez was back to being the perfect guide again it seemed. "This way!"

They left the tight alleys and headed through the maze of streets towards another large building, though this one was much shorter than the sky scrapers, stout and made of ordinary looking glass. Rez explained that this was the shopping and leisure centre for tourists. It was packed to the brim with the sort of tacky paraphernalia that always seems to appeal to travellers everywhere: hats with "I got hot on Arcturus", endless mugs and magnets adorned with logos and slogans, and boutique shops selling vastly overpriced clothes that he was informed were the latest in Arcturan fashion. He found himself drifting into one and looking at some of the dust coloured shirts, sure that they would be cooler than his sticky interstellar vest. Reaching for the price tag he struggled to read the local script and turned to find his guide.

"Hey Rez, what does this mean?" Devan couldn't see her in the store. That was inconvenient, especially as the only shop assistant was busy with another customer. He considered putting the shirt back, then decided that he really needed better clothing to cope with the sweltering weather. Just at that moment he saw a flash of red hair through the crowds, just outside the store. Walking to the entrance he waved towards her, but she was on her comms and clearly didn't see him. "Rez?" He called towards her, without any luck. He took another step forward, leaning out of the doorframe and shouted out a little louder. "Rez, I need you."

She glanced at him, before whipping her head back around and staring at his foot. He looked down to see his right foot outside the painted line that demarcated the shop from the concourse.

"Oh Devan, I'm so sorry." Was all she said, before alarms sounded and two security guards grabbed hold of his arms.

The intercom beeped and the giant display screen in the mall lit up.

**SUSPECT APPREHENDED IN SHOPPING DISTRICT #19 ATTEMPTING
THEFT
AWAITING DEFENSE PLEA...**

Devan cried out. "Wait, this is a misunderstanding, I'm a visitor. I wasn't stealing, I was trying to ask my guide's advice! I didn't know we weren't allowed across the line!"

DEFENSE PLEA: NOT GUILTY ON ACCOUNT OF IGNORANCE.

EVIDENCE:

- HIRED EXECUTIVE GUIDE.
- ARRIVED TODAY FROM SPACEPORT
- HOLDING ITEM OVER STORE LINE
- DENIES GUILT

VERDICT?

He stared up at the screen as the silence stretched before him. He could see Rez shaking her head in disbelief.

The robotic voice appeared back on the intercom.

"The people have spoken: the verdict is guilty. Unity is achieved."

"What's going to happen to me? Am I being deported?" he called out to Rez.

She couldn't look him in the eye.

Arcturus only had one punishment for all crime.

The uprising had decided it long ago.

