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Practice

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Abstract

Practice

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Practice is that fight to mediate the reality of the world we live in and the world inside us. *Tommy Lee* is a semi-autobiographical story.

Enjoy.

Before I begin to convey tensions that are my muse, I must ask to have with you a particular metaphor throughout the reading of this work—for its purpose is held inside that labyrinth.

Tommy Lee

(Excerpt)

In the summer of 2002, I was a young boy nearing eleven years of age. It was a bright morning and bold were Georgia's red-bricked houses, red-oaks and rolling asphalt streets. Paradise beckoned through the window of the sitting room where I sat on faded black pleather—a remnant of my ex step-mother; of when that heavy-set witch casted a spell over me: demands to address her as mother or “umma” in Korean, to stay inside on a school day, to be otherwise obedient; and the beating that followed from refusal—taking the broom from her, I was upon her with a rage...how could you know his fear? from the man you call husband!; my brother! my champion!; thwack! thwack!; my brother! my champion!—conflated “fatness” with meanness in spirit. Little had I known that she was but a novice of the dark arts; dabbled; more sonorous than sacrificial; never an enchantress, like the lithe woman, dressed in black, of pale mystery, who, walking into the sitting room, smiled through charm and cunning and sweetness.

“You know what to do”— she sat down—“I will be back to test on what you have read...He's been working very hard to provide for you; he shouldn't have to worry. Am I right?”

“Yes, Mother,” I said, nodding turning to the stack of books in front of me; her gaze had left me, but I didn't look up, not until her footsteps faded on top of the stairs. This new mother

kept to the standards of the suburbs before me. My grades now mattered, and so, here I was in summer's full glory—the beginning—deciding which book would dwindle the hours, the days, or my entire life, I thought, grumbling. Half of them were from the reading list provided by the school, marked by gold stars, and the other half were of my choosing— by the flashiest cover and thin as possible method. *Which... one? Which... one?* You should understand my butt was sore from five solid thwacks by a very large stick and yet, far worse than physical injury, were my father's words "You're just like your mother"; and not for reason that lying about my report card being lost could merit to her—*How dare you judge her? What about you? Another stranger comes along and you expect me to sit here in front of her, while you insult my mom!* Father never hits me; never even raises his voice at me, I thought. And what could be the change...or who? Angry and sulking, vowing a thousand curses and promises, I settled on a starred book spelling B-R-I-D-G-E T-O T-E-R-A-B-I-T-H-I-A, but the thought of reading it, through and through, made me sweat.

The words of Katherine Paterson did not come to me, like the beauty of the neighborhood; its starlings and wind chimes chirping in scatters; squirrels scurrying across neat lawns and under jagged sprays from the sprinklers. Grueling was the task to read, as every letter seemed exactly that...letters, echoing as I read them, slowly, carefully so they would not run off into sunshine. But the hours faded on my fingers; noticing the diminished page, I dashed for the light switch and back into the lull of the book—*what?* What was this feeling? This turning of pages, crisp with anticipation, to know; and I must know what was next.

I was in love.

What was next could not be satisfied. Naturally, I began to ask, *what was there?* or what could be there? I thought. There the origin of my troubles began, as curiosity; innocent; tame; the dreaming of myself, with a twist; from another character; from another past; all of which had me along in their dreams of dreams: a labyrinth.

I found myself at the end of the first year of the program, in a room, on a bed, wishing the toxins inside me were stronger; was it my tenth one? Does it matter? The terror and naivety from walking, thinking, sitting in those empty but familiar pathways, with its wide windows, faded to a ceiling fan—swirling cold air. Blades swung round’ and round’; shifting its behemoth form to pixels. The spectrum of colors scattered, spiraling into waves thick with nausea.

I prayed. It wasn’t to the God of my youth. He was absolute by his very own words. I fell to my knees, shedding tears, clasping hands, and accepting that I knew nothing about everything. Through the window, the pale moon invited me to gaze upon it. Its beauty held my troubles, my fears, my heartbreak... Then something held my hands. Its touch, cold but gentle, had its fingers on my wrists but I dared not look, held my gaze upon the moon, and was frozen in fear. A presence shared the room—how I knew is something akin to being watched from the distance. It was in front of me. I looked. There were only my hands, held by my own strength. I was given an answer.

Tommy Lee woke up on a plain of rolling hills. “There must be hundreds of them” he thought, for one after another slopes of bronze rose and fell. Directly above him was the luster from a pale disk of moon, stretched on an invisible curve, fading beneath stars; it was a sky washed by the sun shading of Blue. “I’ve never seen anything so...”

“... Wait—” his temple began to throb. Then a light—bright, sudden, and vast—swept in. Tommy fell to his knees; then quickly shouted “Show yourself!” for he could feel the luminance as some phantom; and the thought of this, and the blindness, despite his eyes being open, was enough to still his breath. He waited on the grass.

The next wave of throbbing returned, and something began to stir within him: a feeling—impressions at their first contact became words; words became thoughts; thoughts became possibility, fleshing out further to a grey sky and a country jingle and the ‘ra ta ta ra ta’ off a vent. There was a musty odor: sweat, tobacco, gasoline. He was in his Ford pickup. Rain battered the windshield in pellets, relentless, obscuring the road to fractals from a red tail light.

Immediately, Tommy stripped out of his t-shirt and jeans, touched for marks on his body, and face but there was nothing; not a bruise or a scratch he could find. And his clothes were dry when it should have been drenched.

He had lost control of the wheel: there was too much rain that night. He could barely remember the...but surely... he could not have survived. But this wind, he thought, was it wind? cool on his skin, and settling on the tips of his hair, on his trembling body. He was too real to be a dream.

“Hello! Hello! Hello!” said a woman’s voice.

Tommy searched for the melody; on top of the hill, sheltered by a lone willow tree was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She’s blue? Not blue, he thought blankly.

“You’re awake!” The woman exclaimed. On the crest of her braids, decorated with many-colored beads, tossing back and forth, was a flower; a dandelion. “Thank the heavens you’re alright!” —she scanned him head to toe— “The transmutation can go awfully wrong;

sometimes entire limbs are detached, or sprouting from... ah! Does it matter? I am Lazaria of the Seraphim—oh! I almost forgot... and if I remember correctly the most fitting term to...”

Tommy had blinked over several times; kept on blinking as if she would reanimate into a cinderblock by the forcing of his thoughts; she didn't. He felt, suddenly, that he should be wearing more than his briefs.

“...Now before you say anything, I must tell some pleasant—and not so pleasant things. You must have so many questions but rest assured, this, this talk will be much more amenable, if you could wait until I am done, as I may answer questions—” She was suddenly alarmed and asked, “there’s something on my face, isn't there?”

What nonsense are you ... what? What! Don't you look at me like you're serious! He wanted to scream these complaints at her but the calm voice of reason said, *were they not meeting for the first time?* “You have—uh, a bit of...” Tommy tapped his nose and the most beautiful woman he had ever seen flushed. She took out from between her breast and white garment, laced with gold trim like wrapping paper, a handkerchief; and this motion, wiping off a bit of cream, such a small thing, Tommy thought, was much better than dying in the Chattahoochee River—he had been imagining the news as she babbled; “What is supposed to save life in the incident of collision, a seat belt, became a nightmare for twenty-six...” A seat belt had held him down to a rush of dark depths, but such an end was now bearable to swallow; he did.

Her voice became small, like a mouse squeaking. “That cupcake had icing a cup too tall for the cake, if you know what I mean?”

Oddly, he knew exactly what she meant.

“If you could wait on all questions, poignant or trite, until—”

“Poignant or trite?” He said, fumbling into wet jeans. “Now, wait just a fucking minute ... erm, lady. I don't know your name! I don't know where I am. Just what in the hell is going on!”

“Sca-ry,” she said.

“Fuck you.” There was no hesitation to insult—she, though beautiful and heavenly, had been eating sweets! Fucking cream on her nose! And, *he*, had just drowned; yet, such wounded expression from her... genuine, quick to reveal itself like autumn left him colder than he had felt. He looked into the distant clouds and was ruminating on whether he should leave or stay.

He decided on the latter as she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen—and for what he knew, the only person around, maybe for miles, he thought, squinting at small lines which could be more rolling hills—and where would he go? He had no money, food, water or a sense of direction either north or south, west or east to find them.

“So you are coming to your senses,” she said, nodding at him, and raising the strap on her bare shoulder—the cut-off dress slipped to show quite a bit of skin. As he looked away something sparked: a flash of light. Smoke forming into the shape of a rectangle, floating above her hands, slowly, became... the all-too-familiar eight by eleven dimensions! The hazy figure became a stack of papers! She began to read from it: “Twenty-six years of age, death by drowning—”

“How'd the—”

“Please!” She said, with raised fingers to her lips. The universal sign to be quiet? Apparently so, he thought.

“Student of writing, single, poor, prone to daydreams and idolizer of night-shade, I, Lazaria of the Seraphim, hereby grant sanctuary for a thousand years in the 177th dimension, Absinx!”

“Absinx! 177th dimension!” Tommy was beyond himself; laughing at her and at the sheer absurdity of it all: the drowning, and the squirming for anything useful or sharp, neither of them around, forcing him to push, punch, flail until his last thought: the taste of a melon, bursting. This land of hills and alien claiming to be an angel and could summon objects from the ether, was that outrageous he couldn't help but contemplate on life—the life that brought him to this moment of insanity. How did he get here? How trivial he had deemed worthiest of his time; how he had rationally talked himself into needing this and that; to do that and this; all to become this and that; and he had dreamt idly many a lonely night. He had been seduced by possibilities and promises, visions within a mirror. Lies had led him on with its cruelty; cruel in the agony of its comfort—his comfort of doing nothing.

Lazaria watched him. “Absinx,” she said softly, and looked at the stars. “A realm alike to the lower realms, it will be the home you never had. Absinx is created within the lost. Within you. At the twilight of a soul's life and when they are no longer able to walk through the cosmos as agents of their own will, they are deemed worthy or unworthy. The River of Life which flows through time and sustains them has chosen to wash you ashore, neither worthy nor unworthy. But without my protection, you will fade or most likely, very likely, be gobbled up by the myriad of entries that pass on through; I say all this without delving into delicate matters. To say it simply, you have been saved...”

“... Okay?” she said, as if the situation was more about her than it was about him. “In addition to a thousand years of sanctuary, I'll grant you two questions and one wish— believe

me, it's *much* better than what some of the other angels would offer—and of course, it's within the powers I am allowed. It can be anything you want but think carefully, as you will be spending the next thousand years here. She looked again at the stars. “And we’ll just keep going on and on, concerning the boundaries of the wish until it is secure, final and appropriate. So don't worry about tricks or stutters or anything of that territory.”

There was silence. “Am I speaking English?” Tommy asked.

She looked at him; the pain in her eyes fading before he could presume it must have been from leaving the sight of the stars. “Is that your question?”

“With all due respect, angel or demon, you don't know me. I mean, sure, you have everything there about me” —Tommy looked at the stack of papers in her hand, and returned his gaze to her eyes— “but it’s not everything...” he trailed off, surprised at the words.

“I know you.” He felt the roof of his mouth. “I know you... thank you... all these years and I was thinking you forgot about me—I thought maybe since I got older I couldn't see you anymore. Then I realized how stupid that was. I made mistakes. Too many to remember them all and then I was in a room that wasn't my home; I couldn't remember the last time I felt anything like home. There was no one I could talk to about it.”

Poetics

I've come to understand poetics as anything out there and everything that could be seen by the artist's vision and controlled through language and space—the tangential space of accessibility and expectation from the reader; words and their arrangement through syntax and narrative are about commitment to a depth mysterious as the brevity it continues.

Daydreaming until oblivion, animated by scenes of heroism and drama, coursing on through tantalizingly plausible spheres, held by the ego and plausibility itself—are white lies; perhaps, there is something intimate in lying to yourself, especially when the intention is to consume the lie for escape. There are obvious dangers: the constraints necessary to move within the world are weakened, and subsumed by wild and hidden shadows. But if the dream is reflected upon, it can evoke an intimation of the self; specifically the “selves” seldom confronted by cognizant activity. And by them there might be more tact and less luck when moving between what is asleep and what is awake. I think, as a writer, the challenge has been for me to sublimate them. The challenge is by the very words themselves for Post-modernism and Semiotics has taught me that the individual is its own system of connotation. We express ourselves through collective definitions—codified history—coupled by an interior reality that can sense a shared system of connotation—aesthetic in its nature. Language directs that sense from multiple domains; each of them has their ideologies, which the individual, through expressions, is accountable for their power.

There are two kinds of dreaming I'd like to define and give distinction. (1) Day dreaming - dreams which arise during wakefulness. (2) Night dreaming - dreams which arise during sleep. The distinction is simple. Both are distinct to when their activity occurs. However, daydreaming

has the more controlled construction on their substances: images, sounds, feelings.... (I will not discuss lucid dreaming and astral projection for the sake of sanity). These substances must come from our own memories and capacities for imagination; the limits of the mind, you could say, to “insert connotation; motive” for thoughts, scenarios, abstractions. And if they manifest to a schematic then you could speculate its relations and oppositions, like the psychology of an individual, on species’ mythology, or orientations to social behavior; Joseph Campbell and his books, *Myths to Live By*, *The Power of Myth*, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, explores the mythologization of society; Carl Jung, the father of archetypes and his book, *Man and his symbols*, identifies, analyzes and interprets dreamscapes. I won't pretend to be an expert on these books and their topics. What is important is that when given definition and attention to daydreams, or themes, or motifs—they become finer, less subtle to where and why and how the image or scene or narrative moves. Those (directives) are useful in writing because now you have two structures; one is linear and the other possesses metaphysical abstractions, tensions held by emotions, and associated to its linear structures, but more “fluid” or adaptable to changes; punctuation manipulates pauses, breaks, inflections; chronological structures layer character’s experience of moving from A to B and the reader’s experience moving from A to B; experiences conveyed through a form, within a framework of rules and constraints, only become more complex, in regards to the expectations of how those rules are understood.

Samuel Delaney’s essay in *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw*; ‘About 5750 Words’ gave me much wisdom on this subject of expectations; admonishing that what you write is the story. With the step-by-step lesson of this simple phrase, “the red sun is high, the blue low,” he explains—for over 4 pages—the vast permutations of meaning that can shift with certain ground rules at play. He says, “the subjunctive level of SF says that we must make our correction process in accord

with what we know of the physically explained universe” (12). Within genres, the ground rules at play are affected by the subjunctivity which informs all the words within a story to a certain expectation. Fantasy: could not have happened. Science Fiction: events that have not happened. And within SF, there are teleological connotations from subcategories, such as, events that will not happen, events that have not happened yet, events that have not happened in the past.

The freedom of control I thought in SF to define terms, to offer the reader an immersive experience where chimerical lifestyles, technologies, cultures factor in the thinking of characters and are of themselves the narrative; and where you must trust the author on a position, dynamically intricate in its affecting of how the individual must express themselves, is for me, inhibiting the movement of story-telling—or likely, I’m just not that good. The resistance of creating something plausible and accessible and entertaining within these spheres, without so many tethered complications, is madness. And not the fun sort of madness I found enjoying when writing *Tommy Lee*.

For me, reading or writing, with its interconnected space—memories, fantasies, soul—is about converging to standstill; there, time is soft as love. There, I think of life as a labyrinth. There are twists and turns, hallways and dead-ends; and valuable is the object and its shadow, that can guide you—the Self; the Man—through the darkness.

Practice I

Ran folded laundry, dividing his clothes into piles, and setting aside another pile for the pack. “There’s something wrong with her,” he said. The zipper got caught on a pink shirt. He felt the worn fabric between his fingers—the monster between them; its eyes were fading. What would mother say? if she saw him holding her Mishu Mishu t-shirt. It was her attire as she lazed back and forth near the couch, watching the gram, waiting for the danger alert to blink green; she would’ve complained on “conditioning the masses” and “marketing ploys” and he would’ve agreed while laughing to himself—she never noticed the irony. Ran closed his eyes. He could see her.... She was like the rain, like its onset, humming taking a person into the present.

“If you weren't so beautiful... I would have forgotten what you looked like,” he said, looking into the city; and at the downpour.

Practice II

Ran was early for the new episode of Mishu Mishu; commercials played on the gram. He had tiptoed to the edge of the hallway, and after a look down its length, he had shot the gap with a tumble, rolling farther than planned and into the gravity of the chair.

“What in the devil are you doing?” mother’s voice asked—and a mask of cream and lacy underwear walked towards him through his covered eyes. She pressed the sensor for the field to compress until the chair sunk low enough for him to climb onto. Ruffling his hair, she asked, “Just where are my cigarettes?” as if the question was not to him at all but to the cabinet, which she opened and closed; then opened again, taking out the box of Mishu Mishu Crunch Cereal.

She looked on the island messy of keys, ashtray, and books. She took out a set of plastics from a drawer. She went to the refrigerator for the milk. She gave the bottle a shake; whiffed it before pouring the last of its silky froth.

“Mom!” Ran said, pointing at the flashing letters on the gram. Wobbling on empty legs, the gram repeated “Charge Station required...”

With a sigh she turned to shut down the gram, but stopped—her pack of Marlboro was camouflaged to the charging station. A cigarette was hanging between her white teeth when she arranged the gram inside the port. She lit the cigarette with her pinky. A single red flame; a waft of smoke followed it. “After you eat—” she set the breakfast in front of him “—you need to wash up.”

“But—”

“Don't make me tell you twice,” she said, crossly; to the gram she tickled its underbelly, “Spyder’s going to record your show. Aren't you Spyder?”

Practice III

Ran rested his palm on sleek glass. An airlift, a black B-45, zoomed across; its red, cross-shaped tail-light disappearing amidst a darker expanse of skies. He rapped the window, pushing off memories reflected in his eyes: mother coughing in the middle of the night and the small, shuffled steps she had taken to his room. From the dimly-lit hallway, bloodshot eyes smiled.

“Want anything from the store?” she asked alongside a yawn.

He climbed down to the lower bunk of his bed. “It’s the middle of the night.” He began to unroll the socks he had left on the nightstand while thinking of another excuse.

“Uh-huh,” she said, “Ran, I have to get my things.” She had nodded; she had winked. It had been their “thing” to signal that the argument was over.

“Damn it!” He slammed his fist against the glass. “You—” He rammed his fist harder, screaming, and punching with nothing held back. Every cubic foot of the room of the high-rise, pissed him off—the damn place had to cost a thousand fractals!

Practicas IV

Miya heard the bolt unlatch. Then she heard glass shattering. A chill sprang from her toes to the palms of her hands; shivers that followed settled at the base of her neck, prickling to the cold air. She manually locked the access closed.

“It’s only you,” Ran whispered. Her brother was a shadow sliding against the panel until he sat stooped and leaning against it.

“Co-mmand—lights on!” she demanded. The ceiling lights flickered. Miya cringed: red droplets were scattered on the floorboards. Ran’s long, dark curls were matted, hiding most of the green in his eyes, except a sliver which caught the moonlight as she ran to him.

She held the source of the mess: a nasty gash on the elbow. “Get off me,” Ran muttered.

“Should I fucking care? Like you! All these years and... you could have messaged or called back! I left like... you and dad—” Miya tore into the skin beneath her nail to fight back the tears, “—are mad at each other, but have you thought about me?”

Say something... anything, she thought, remembering the ‘hello’ she had gotten from him this morning. He had made her completely lose it—yelling, biting and clawing at him until father had to wrench her off. She had cried; she had thoughts racing on how to make him feel

worse than she ever felt; the spiteful fantasies becoming more severe, like trapping Ran inside a giant freezer; he would beg for mercy, as the cold would slowly reduce him. The thought forced a smile.

“What’s so funny?” Ran asked.

“Oh, now you want to talk,” she retorted. She was walking to the restroom, and took a deep breath when Ran was out of sight. Her hands were shaking. “Command, Mirror.”

The glass shone a pale blue and reflected on her highlights, freckles, and eyes. With the faucet pouring, she said, “Miya, how I’ve missed you! I can’t wait to make it up to you. I know it’s been seven years since we last talked so you probably have been wondering...what-the-hell-has-been-going-on!”

She replied to her own voice, “What’s seven years anyway? You’re here now, so everything can go back to the way it—”

“No!” she said. “No—no it can’t.”

Ran walked passed her, grabbed a towel on the rack and walked over to the shower station. Searching the marble wall for some time, he turned and met her eyes. “How do you turn this on?”

“You’re-such-an-idiot!” she said and sprinted and tackled him into the shower. “I-I haven’t seen you for ... years! And you—you...”

“My head,” he said, groaning.

“You’re head! You’re head!” she spat. “That’s all you have to say to me?”

“I’ve missed you... It’s just not a good time....” He tried to smile but grimaced instead.

“Can you please get me the FA cream?”

She got up like a spring and was rummaging and throwing items from the drawers. She found it; showed it to him. Kneeling she tore off the capsule's top, removed the safety lament, and began to set its settings on the screen. She wrapped the bandage around his hands, wiping off any exuded foam. As she cut the bandage she met his eyes. His long, dark lashes had a hint of tears on their tips.

“My work is done. You on the other hand...” she trailed off, laughing “... you have to clean all this blood. You know how my mother gets.”

“Step-mother,” he retorted, flexing his fingers; clenched them into a fist, repeating the movement several times.

“Whatever,” she said.

“Miya?”

She waited in the doorway. “Yeah?”

“Do you want to come with me tomorrow?”

“For the exam?”

“After the—”

“—where are we going?”

“...I'll surprise you.”

Miya kept her smile as she approached the room's access; her heart skipped a beat at the faint green light—blinking. Its duration was set to blink for thirty seconds after closing; only then would the automatic feature trigger the lock. “Command, override guest permission.”

A feminine voice emanating from the access replied, “Lady Miya, the master code is required for—”

“3793W0”

“Access initiated.” Hundreds of white rectangles appeared over the access, glowing and sliding down her hand.

“Show me today’s log report.” Scrolling through, Miya could see the logs were blank—all of them. She scanned the week’s maintenance and traffic, but nothing else had been tampered with.

But someone had walked through here, just moments ago, and must have wiped the data—meaning they had had the master code. When Miya and her family moved into the four bedroom high-rise, the landlord had given them explicit instructions to set the HF system. Unlike their last apartment, the access—minus the restroom panel—calibrated on fingerprints for regular entry and exit; on retina for extenuating permissions. After biometrics was scanned into the system only the master recognition status could override settings to default. Since Ran’s bedroom was set as Guest—and it would probably stay that way, she thought—the access, here, granted permissions to anyone.

Miya thought about her mom, scrolling through warranty documents on her hologram. Yesterday, she had complained to her Dad, ‘the light on my screen is gone already?’ Her dad, who liked to think himself as a tech wizard, had rudimentary knowledge—he could change the settings to brighten the display.

Her asshole of a brother, Chryss, was savvy but nowhere on the level to deconstruct the encryptions of their access, protected by round the clock updates and firewalls from Agnon Corp.

You closed it shut, Miya. You did. And if one of her parents had called in for a reboot or maintenance, she would have known about it. Her inputs were specific between zones but maintenance would have made a log on the system.

Practice V

Ran entered the lift with the crowd. The lavender aroma from his hoodie had been overtaken by perfumes and colognes. Amidst a wave of briefcases and purses he caught Miya's highlights; braids of pink streaks were jostling towards him. With more people crammed inside, he had to shuffle further into the corner; he gripped onto steel bars as the lift descended; booming.

The sky around him dazzled in complexions of blue and gold; was serrated by wafts of thin clouds as it approached the city—hundreds of cylinders; yet speckled curves to his eyes, besides the Ponapticon, with its twenty tons or so bulkheads—an overpass of interconnecting passages, protecting its belly of walkways, centers, apartments; the “talking heads” as his mother would say, had given another impression—but in reality, only the poorest districts had supports and ceilings of concrete, which deteriorated quickly in the storms; and if the stray block didn't kill you then gangs or prostitution or drugs would eventually. On the official Federation census, 45th district had the highest crime rate, mortality rate, and the lowest average life expectancy at 25 years of age—and despite the fact, in 2097, people were living longer than ever; “people” as those who could afford gene plasmas and nutrient stocks; “people” who lived outside the parallels of the Ponapticon.

“They say you can see half the federation from here,” Miya said while tapping at the glass, rapt, as if there was more to the city.

Ran tilted his head. The other half isn't worth seeing, he thought. She was smoothing out strands from the end of her waist-length hair. She looked away from him. Behind the distance in

her eyes, neon on passage walls zipping to a blur in those deep emeralds, she was obviously irritated.

“Heavens be praised! You’re gorgeous,” said a man who had risen from his seat and gesturing to it, he continued, “Forgive me for staring. It’s just...well, you look like Kennedy Star or...” and smiling, he waited for Miya to take the seat, as if the choice in the matter was obvious. What the man said was high praise; the highest praise one could compliment a woman; that and maybe telling her she was the epitome of Martin himself. “Please, take my seat.”

“I couldn't,” she answered, waving her hand in apology.

“If I left a woman such as yourself to stand than—”

“—Sir, thank you for the kinds words but...”

“I insist,” he said, with a matter of fact sweep of his hand.

“Thank you...”

“Its John. Sir, John of the Goodmans.”

Several of the passengers had been glancing at them; now almost everyone nearby had their attention. He was royalty; there was no mistaking the badge on his pinstripe suit: the black heron about to take flight was one of twelve emblems of twelve families that shared Agnon Corp. And he was practically drooling as Miya crossed her legs and straightened the end of her skirt. His beady eyes seemed they could pop out of its sockets.

“It would be wrong for me not to accept. Martin bless you Mr. Goodman. I have heard the comparisons, but frankly, my following doesn’t reflect the kind words—it does make a girl wonder why I haven’t been selected to serve such honorary of roles.

“Hmmp! I cannot speak for those fools! Your beauty is of the fruit in Martin’s sacred garden; please, tell me your tag and I will vote for your honor.”

“Oh, John—can I call you John? I couldn’t ask a civil official for his following. It wouldn’t be right.”

Miya put her hand on Ran’s palm. “My boyfriend and I will be taking the ATAV in the Panoptican,” she said. “Thank you for the seat.”

Out of all the students in the seventy-two districts of the Federation, his sister had scored near perfect marks, a 3400 out of 3600, on the standardized ATAV test. She never opened the letter for her marks but had found out the score a month later on public announcement when the government released its ranking of the top one-thousand students. Her low physicals notched her at 17th. But more distinguished and far more important than academics, were her gene abilities, ranking 3rd best in the field exams.

Practice VI

Across the substation platforms a torrent of people, garbed in black and white apparel, headed for the Son-shu station exit. Its bordered sign flashed red, voicing “All carry on bags must be stowed in the overhead. Ten minutes until departure for Son-shu Station.”

“Come on, Ran.” He caught a glimpse of her eyes before she grabbed his hand, pulling him alongside a wave of passersby. Conversations on hollows and the clap of soles, slapping the tile floors, followed their venture through the tunnel. Miya led a swift pace. Soon the clattering of noise began to synchronize to a monotonous rhythm. It was the uniform lights above—a sickly yellow—which gave a dream-like effect to the tunnel; of not knowing if you were just another part of the tunnel.

Terminal A of Son-shu station came into view, with several lift platforms as its entry. Exhausts of steam drifted outwards in clouds from an ascending lift.. The ventilation flaps, above him, inscribed with large blue letters—Besman Supplies— flattened its wide sheet of metal and the mist was swept into its gap. The moisture touched Ran’s cheek. It annoyed Ran. It wasn't just the vents or the AI. The station was clean. The AI scanned his ID badge. On the hollow, he saw the credit on the account dwindle; a smiling Miya twirled before he could speak and ran ahead.

“Wait Miya—Miya!”

Practice VIII

The tall and blonde Dr. Aedins greeted him with a wide smile. He had read her tag. Digging his nail into the soft folds between his fists, he gathered himself at her eyes.

“Hi, you must be Ran. Come on in.”

Her white, hip length coat brushed his arm as he walked into the office.

The door closed behind him.

She walked like someone accustomed to being watched. Gesturing toward an expensive looking chair with armrests, she sat down on the opposite, identical chair and crossed her legs.

“Enjoying the view?”

He paused the scan of the room on a shelf—“It looks expensive.” With a finger, Ran had trailed across the shelf’s surface. He settled on a framed photo of a child, tapped its glass and turned to her. “Is he yours?”

She cleared her throat, “I suggest you sit. We have... quite the day ahead of us.” She gestured at the chairs.

“I suggest—” he cleared his throat “—not to play games. I don’t have the temperament for small talk. Let me sign to get on with the test.”

“Your brother and sister must have explained quite a bit. These tests, as you know, can be... painful.” Her voice sounded compassionate. She pulled up a hollow and slid the panel towards him. “I’m required by federal law to answer questions, pertaining to the waiver before you sign. The exam is based on parameters of stress tolerance. You will have one ten minute break between sections. The exam will continue at the examiner’s discretion. Conducted by myself and a team of board-approved experts, certified by the Federation, we will review and score your assessment. Failure to comply with the exam’s policies, after you sign, will result in reprehensible action. If you pass, accommodations can be arranged for this coming trimester. Attendance is mandatory and refusal of acceptance will result in reprehensible action. The details are in the waiver.... and I expect promising results from you, Ran Destron.”

Dr. Aedin smiled. “This is your only chance to refuse the conditions of the waiver. I’m sure a cute, cute boy like you can find work in the private sector and lead a happy, fulfilling life.”