

H A L F - L I F E

# URB-LOC 0017 SUMMER 20XX

a fanfic for the 'City 17' zine

by mird

Compiled for the 92nd Annual Commemoration Summit, the following is a literary collage of passages from two oral-historical artefacts:

1. Transcription of a set of voice recordings on cassette tapes, found hidden inside the hollowed-out carapace of a gonarch, standing on a hill near the city of Kryvyi Rih, New Ruthenia; thought to be dated circa 20XX; recordist's identity unverifiable.
2. Flux-shiftings of the vortigaunt 'Pieixoto', elder of a nomadic tribe in the northern highlands of New Pakistan, as recorded by Professor Vijay Bandyopadhyay and archived by the World Memorial Organisation in 21XX.

Both sources, held in the archives of Prifysgol Bangor in Cymru (and kindly provided by Dr. Ann Brenley, chair of the university's renowned specialist historical research group), are understood to be first-hand accounts of events in the city of ██████████, known to its occupiers as URB-LOC 0017, in the summer months of 20XX.

Due to the fact that the cassette tapes were unordered and unlabelled, and the inherent non-linearity of vortal storytelling, creative licence has been taken to arrange the passages into a narrativised order. The author notes that care should be taken not to interpret the work as a piece of accurate historiography, but as a kind of speculative biomythography.

On my twelfth birthday, after some persistent pleading, my father told me that I was *an exception*. Not special, not unique, simply *an exception*. At the time, I'd taken it as praise. I'd accepted it as a fact of life that I had no friends my age. But slowly, I began to wonder what my father had meant. What about me was so remarkable? What was it that everyone else – all the adults – seemed to see when they looked at me? The answer, I came to believe, would never come from them.

We lived in a big building, right at the heart of the city, next to the administrator's tower. I couldn't tell you exactly where...but I remember a statue of a horse, standing on top of a tall column. The nicer part of the city, away from the tenements and the open sewers.

On rare occasions, my father would receive visitors to our house. And each time, almost all of them would always insist on seeing me, too. They'd watch me do even the simplest things with great fascination – playing with dolls, brushing my hair, chasing the purple toads that so often appeared in the garden. It didn't bother me, but each time it happened, I was reminded of the question, and the answers they wouldn't give.

We see them still, huddled in the dark. Clearly we see them in the grip of our former masters. They convey us by means of vehicles native to their world, made of wheels and burning fossils. They spirit us along lines of metal, to places predetermined. Grouped shoulder to shoulder, bodies immersed in the muck and stench of proximity, but our minds sing. Continuation, in the face of such intolerable internment, is a courageous curse, passed to us by ancestors long conquered. And one which remains.

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"Nadia. Sit down."

Being allowed into my father's study was an event so rare that it took me a few moments to comply with his instruction. I was transfixed by the place, filled as it was with a combination of old-fashioned furnishings and complicated, blue-metal machinery of a kind I rarely saw.

I knew my father worked with much more powerful computers than I was allowed to use. My own computer was square and beige, and sometimes made funny noises, like there was some creature – like a rat – trapped inside it, trying to scratch its way out. Something to do with a disk, my father had told me. *Nothing to worry about*, he'd said, *soon enough, everyone will have new computers, much better than any silly old Earth ones.*

"Are you listening to me?" my father asked me, and my focus sharpened.

"Sorry, baba," I said. It was *baba* in private, *father* in front of guests. Appearances.

"It's very important you behave this week. I cannot have a single interruption. The work is critical."

"Yes, baba."

I wondered when I'd get to try one of the blue-metal computers. It didn't seem like they had games on them, or even many of the programs I was familiar with. But the future, so much as I could tell at the time, was bright. Still, I wondered if my father's big computer had a rat inside it, too.

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Enquire, I bid you, of any human: have you but once seen one of our phylogeny engaged in the construction of mechanisms of matter? None shall answer in the affirmative. We do not consider it necessary – except in concert with you, our esteemed yet tragically quiescent allies. That is your realm: to bend reality through means of logical computation and methodical scientism. It is not ours.

Our realm is that of multiplex minds, of transcendence and the unified field. We commune with the unity of all the particles, and all the forces of matter in creation. With that from which all things emerge: unmanifest. We draw from this field our song. The vortessence.

Wherever we go, the vortessence clings to us, and us to it. Beyond our ancestral home, beyond the border realm, beyond an aeon's worth of discordant notes that muddy its song, we hear it. We clad ourselves in it, for protection, connection and commiseration.

Vortikind speaks with one voice, for our mingling minds care not for loneliness. We share the weight of memory, of traumas past and still to come.

One day, not long before the house received another important visitor, I overheard my father arguing with a colleague on a video-screen. I stopped outside his study to listen, secretly, as a voice not belonging to my father spoke.

"I've run seven sequences without a single failure. The initial protocol you developed, and then another I devised with the new specs. Don't tell me you, of all people, aren't functional yet."

"I'm sorry, Elena. It's the power consumption. I promise you, I'm working as hard as..."

"Excuses, Doctor Özbekhan, really? Just get it done!"

I never found out exactly what they were talking about, but I suppose someone will know. They will know my father's name, at least. Haseem Özbekhan, collaborator. They finally tried him posthumously earlier this year.

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The tragedy of your planet will be preserved in our song for eternity. We shall remember Earth not only for its transformation from your cradle to our crucible, but for the intimately familiar image it brings to our mind. It is why so many of us, in the aftermath, now make our home here.

To you, as they did to us at the precipice of our journey out toward the stars, your once-masters appeared first as messianic saviours: abolishers of misery and promisers of rapturous ascension. In the chaos of the cascade, they crept across the barriers bearing banners betraying false intent. Then, they plied the arrogance and ambition of your greatest minds in exchange for your secrets, and began to extract from you repayment owed for your own survival.

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In the middle of the night, sometime in the summer, I began to suspect we had another visitor. I remember that it was too warm to sleep that night, but the noise – a heavy scraping sound that echoed through the hallways – would have surely woken me anyway. Being the curious child that I was, I crept out of bed, and tip-toed through the house to follow the sound.

I quickly found it: a gigantic cylinder, ribbed with metal and quietly humming. I watched from the landing, two stories above the commotion, as the container was brought into the house on a platform – an operation supervised by kevlar-covered soldiers. At the time, of course, I had no idea what the cylinder contained. I thought it was a machine part, at first. And I suppose, to my father and those that he worked for, it was. The only hint at what it contained was a scattered, green light that leaked through its seams – and the quiet, lamentful song that accompanied it.

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To be contained within a prison of the kind that was employed in those days was to be ripped from ourselves. All that remains in the absence of sensory input is the ability to sing – which, of course, is the intent of the design: to sap from us the power we wield that they cannot.

With secession from the vortessence comes first depression, then longing, and eventually, desperation. At that latter stage, bewilderment and delirium are also common. Most would rather their tethers cut than frayed. A clean cut, as the husband's blade to the spawning sac. In those days, our sanity was worth more than our bodies.

We have heard it said that a man can die but once, for it is a death that they owe. This is not true for our kind – then, as now, our bodies were but vessels. We have known many deaths. But the cruel imprisonment of a vortal body within one of those devices is a death multifold.

After losing sight of the visitor's container as it passed under the balcony, I wasn't sure where the soldiers had taken it. But the morning after, it didn't take long to realise; the housekeeper, Miss Callaghan, told me that the dining room had suffered a disaster in the night.

She spun me some story about an infestation of Xenian flora. But I knew better than that; even if I hadn't witnessed the visitor's arrival, I would have investigated. But Miss Callaghan had accounted for that eventuality.

"Nadia," she intoned to me as I ate breakfast in the reading room. "Your father suggested we go to see the market today. Would you like that?"

It was a cunning ploy – and it worked. I'd been asking to go to the market for many weeks. I happily agreed to forget what I'd seen.

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In the safety of the cities, many blind eyes were turned. It is a custom of your kind which we have observed through both our own eyes and the accounts of your past. You find it shameful, but we recognise it as necessary. In the dark, sometimes it is better not to see.

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The streets still glowed in the summer. I'll always remember that. The trees were withered, but they held on – as did the market stalls. I'm sure it was paltry to those who had seen a real market, but to my young mind it was a wonderland, full of treasures.

Our protection detail – two members of the metro-police, identities hidden behind their grey masks – stayed close behind as Miss Callaghan and I moved through the street. It wasn't unusual, you see. They'd been there all my life. But I do remember the way the sellers reacted to our presence. They were intimidated – as much by me as the officers that followed us. I returned home that day with a dozen new toys and new items for my wardrobe, and Miss Callaghan with bags full of groceries, including a large watermelon.

When we returned to the house, the doors to the dining room had been opened. The visitor's pod was gone, and covering the floor below the grand old dining table, there was now a sheet of that familiar blue metal.

The next afternoon, I asked my father "Baba...what happened in the dining room? Is it something to do with your work?"

He answered first with a smile. He liked it when I asked questions about his work.

"It is," he said. "We installed a new generator in the basement. It's going to make my work a lot easier. But it's very dangerous – you mustn't go down there."

I agreed, of course. But my curiosity was interminable.

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It is in that dark undercroft that a great change takes place. A conversion of belief, necessary for the final victory. For it is not only a talisman of victory that was needed to secure our freedom. Even with our foreknowledge of a deliverance slow to come, the slipping of a single free man between worlds is nothing without the promise of a future beyond the day of freedom.

Then and now, we bear witness to the dark tragedy of humankind's demise. But in that rot-darkness we also see the slivering traces of a refulgent future. It is these fortunately-bestowed glimpses of fleet-light which sustain us now, then and forevermore, carried backward through time and space, passed around campfire refuges, and carried onward into the uncertain future.

The entrance to the basement was behind a black door. But the door itself was not technically part of our house – it belonged to the theatre next door, and led sideways down to below our property.

The city was old, and strange architecture like that wasn't unusual – but the fusing of our building with the theatre was purposeful. Machines – racks of servers, I think – had replaced the chairs in the auditorium. Another part of my father's work that I never questioned.

Someone told me, once, that the practice of collapsing multiple buildings into one space was part of some greater strategy by our benefactors. They said that the disrespect of architecture, and the uncertainty it induced, was a way of ripping away familiarity and stability, making us compliant.

I don't know if I believe that theory. But as I crept through the mangled brickwork with a key stolen from Miss Callaghan, I began to feel dread of a kind I'd never felt before.

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We see her still, emerging from the dark of that accursed undercroft into the orange light spilled out by the cell that contained us. Though the eyes through which we saw her quickly expired, the memory is sustained in song across the vortessence. In that moment, time forks perpetually toward innumerable futures. In many of them, you are not our unlikely confederates, but our enemies still.

She, that first child of Earth to behold our suffering, who wore the same yoke which vortikind has known around its neck for countless aeons, and whose name we still do not know, was instrumental to our shared cause. In her, we saw humanity's true quality. We saw an exception to cruelty. The antidote to violence done to us in steel corridors, and the limitless potential of our unity. It was on that day that a bridge, hitherto unbuilt, formed between our species.