BUNKERPUNK

SUDOANTHOLOGY VOL. 2

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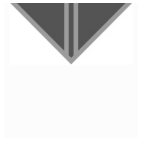

INTRODUCTION

The following stories were crafted in the dismal months of April, May and June, in the unfortunate year 2020. While the theme for this anthology, Bunkerpunk, was chosen in late March, the proceeding months saw real-life bunkers in the news as the world descended further into the persistent, low-grade chaos that has come to define our era. If you happen to be reading this from a bunker, we hope you're well stocked on cola and emotionally prepared for an alien invasion. May these six works of fiction remain such, at least until you've had the chance to finish reading them.

~ Thea Boodhoo

1 / INDOMITABLE, INC

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A month after Mohit moved, bankrupt and alone, into the underground bunker he built for 100, perimeter alarms echoed through the enormous structure for the first time. A lanky, dusty man popped up on the screens, torn-up backpack over one shoulder.

Mohit pulled a baseball cap over his shaved head. He trotted through wide tunnels and up concrete stairs to the surface. Then he walked to the perimeter fencing, his body tense, his eyes glued to the lone figure. The man seemed unusually nonchalant, as if walking through the Mojave desert to a private compound miles from the closest city was something he did every day.

"That laser wire up there?" the man asked, squinting up at the fence.

"It is," Mohit replied.

The man observed Mohit for a minute, then asked, "this some kind of cult thing?"

Mohit shook his head. He considered asking the man who he was, or turning and retreating underground, but found himself happy to be talking to anyone after a month alone. "It's just a safe place. Safe from disease, dust storms, war, everything we've done to mess things up up here."

The man nodded thoughtfully, following the miles of laser wire and fencing with his eyes. Mohit waited. The air was dry, hot, and sharp. It felt dangerous, like if you inhaled it too quickly, you'd be rewarded with a nosebleed.

"What's it like inside?" the man asked, clearly in no rush.

"Kind of like a big hotel," Mohit answered. "But better! Loads of community spaces. Kitchens, movie rooms with great sound, meditation gardens–"

"Meditation gardens, huh?"

Mohit shrugged and adjusted his pitch. "Nice beds. Plenty of food, water, and medicine."

The man nodded, as if considering an unspoken offer. He looked past Mohit at the gray windowless edifice poking up through the sand. "Those walls–pretty thick..."

"A meter thick. Mesh-embedded concrete to block radio signals," Mohit boasted.

"Zombie-proof?"

Mohit felt himself blushing. He'd given dozens of interviews since his disastrous appearance on CNBC to announce his project. The one where, in a moment of youthful exuberance, he joked that the walls were so thick, "they'd even keep the zombies out." The host chuckled, glanced off-screen and pumped his eyebrows, then turned back with a false smile, his teeth bright and sharp. Right away, Mohit knew it was over.

After that, nobody cared that he'd risked all of his then-consid-

erable fortune to bury 500 bunkers miles outside Berlin, Brooklyn, Buenos Aires, Boise, Cork, Cape town and so many others. It no longer mattered that he'd designed anti-contamination vacuum gaps and positive air pressure between sections and incorporated medical-grade fabricators, self-contained water cycling and food production, and layouts modeled on anthropological studies of successful, peaceful communes.

Onstage at TED, he'd declared, "when our governments fail to take responsibility, we must rise to the challenge." They applauded. But what spread were the SNL parodies and viral headlines: "10 Reasons Why Even the Wealthiest Preppers Aren't Willing to Waste Money on Indombitable's Zombie-proof Bunker." The world thought he was a joke.

Now Mohit squirmed in utility coveralls damp with sweat, the space between his skin and the thick canvas like a sauna. He thought about how much cooler it was down below.

"So no zombies, then?" the man asked.

"Just me."

A silence unfolded between the men standing on opposite sides of the fence. Each considered the other, the choices made to bring them there, and the options that lay before them. The man with the backpack shifted his weight from one foot to the other, then asked, "what do you got to eat? I'm Henry, by the way."

They came alone, then in small clumps. There were homeless men fleeing overcrowded shelters, mothers and fathers with arms full of children and eyes full of fear, trying to outrun the latest outbreak.

Mohit showed each one around and welcomed them to the community. Henry developed strict quarantine procedures. A UCLA microbiologist, he'd been scorned for sounding the alarm

on the rising viral threat and all but ostracized by the scientific community.

As the geneticists and pharma corps fell a year behind, then two, then ten...as the mutation rate increased and new viruses tore through cities...as politicians implored people to go about their lives while they built shelters for themselves, the people kept coming.

Then came the calls from would-be buyers from all over the world, offering vast sums for Mohit's bunkers. Amounts that would have saved his company and reputation, if only they'd come a few months before. Mohit unlocked all the doors instead. What good was money when the world was on fire?

A few years later, the bunkers filled and sealed shut. Decades passed. New waves of illness, climate catastrophe, and so many deaths.

Outside, parking lots gave way to forest. Robins and sparrows nested in office drop ceilings, while small mammals took up grocery store shelves. Cities went wild once again.

Inside, they maintained the hydroponic farms, tended to the sick, cooked together, sang together. Mohit's empty concrete shells rang with life. He met his wife in the bunkers. Their sons were born here, raised here.

"Shhhhh, wake up, Mohit," Sandra said, ruffling her husband's hair as he leaned against their bedroom doorway, tracing the notches etched into its frame with his fingertips.

"Couldn't sleep at all last night," he said.

She smiled, slipping an arm around his waist and leaning her head into his shoulder. "I couldn't either. Thirty years. It doesn't seem real."

They pressed against each other, lost in thought. All through

the structure, people murmured excitedly. Viral transmission had fallen for 100 days straight and airborne contaminants were back to normal levels. Today the next phase would begin. One Mohit had never imagined when he'd created this place. The community had voted, and they'd decided to emerge.

"I wish we didn't have to leave those behind," she said, nodding at the notches in the door frame. "I don't want to forget that Munu and Sam were once that little."

"I traced them onto paper," he said. "We can recreate them above."

Their sons met them outside their door, their faces set in wide grins. No longer children, but nervous and jittery just the same.

Mohit's heart swelled. This place had taken everything from him and given everything to him. He thought he'd earned his vindication when the bunkers filled. But he'd been wrong. This moment, when their faces met the sun and their feet felt the earth once more, when their sons would see the sky with their eyes for the first time. When they'd have a chance, along with whoever was left, to try again. This was the reason he had built them all.

As the crowd moved up towards the vivid colors of rock and cactus, and into the startling warmth of the early morning sun, Munu nudged him.

"Dad," he said. "You know how we buried ourselves underground, and now we're slowly rising to live again?"

"Yes," Mohit replied.

"So we're basically zombies, right?"

Mohit smirked, nodding. Perhaps he'd just gotten it backwards. The bunkers hadn't kept the zombies out, they'd kept them in.

2 / CELLS

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I wonder what my cells are doing today.
As I putter from the first room to the second room
    and back
As I brush my teeth. Did I just brush my teeth?
Nope
It feels like five minutes ago
But it was last night.
I wonder what my cells are doing as I lean into the glass
Skin of my cheek pressed against the cold clear barrier
between the shut-down world and the shut-in
There are seagulls flying out there
As if nothing's changed
I wonder what my cells are doing as I flip the calendar
    another month
It's been three years now

No five
No wait
a thousand

Since the choice

We thought we were so informed
The doctors and I
Bake the breast with X-rays
Keep the appointments
Every six months
An MRI here
A mammogram there
And you can keep the cells.
Well I would have
But no one told the appointments to keep me
And now there are none

I kind of thought 2025 would be better

What are those cells up to now?
Cooking ATP
Weaving DNA
Staying put, behaving
Being good neighbors
Good cells do what they're told
Just be breast tissue
Nothing more
No need for ambition here
No room for error
No room in room one
No room in room two

I putter from one to the other

Cell to cell

And wonder

3 / THE DEAD DO NOT LIVE UNDERGROUND

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Hadrian spotted the glint of antennas miles away, clustered under a suspicious pattern of dry brush. Finding the bunkers was the easy part. But cracking the door was the only surefire way to assess if they were cold. Breeching protocol required a direct visual—to ensure no one was alive down there. He hadn't encountered a warm body since entering the Sonoran desert. Yet at every breech, he held out hope, however foolish that was.

"Time to move in," Cyrus said. The drone had its gun drawn, flaring out his torso like a shield to gird the door. This was a recent addition: it had tossed its surgical unit and bulked up its body with scrap metal, like a battlefield machine.

"Stand down," Hadrian muttered.

"There might be a threat inside."

"You're making me nervous. Stand aside. I'll lead the way."

"I am following protocol, Hadrian."

"That's an order."

The drone slid the weapon back into its torso. By now, the other coroner drones had finished clearing the brush and setting up the steel tables. With their charcoal cloaks and golden snake and rod lapel pins, they looked like enormous Giger-esque crows readying a strange ceremony.

Earlier, on the approach to the site, Hadrian had found a tattered envelope on the ground, no markings or stamps, likely dropped by a bunkerhead on a supply run. Inside was a handwritten letter:

*Tell Maddy that I love her and that *smudged* I'm not alone. We survived for as long as we could.*

— Ash

He knew he'd never find Ash or Maddy alive, but instead, cold and anonymous inside safehouses that were anything but. Just once, he wanted to see someone alive when he opened the hatch, clasp their hands and embrace, tell them the vaccines were effective now—that they could leave isolation and make their way back to civilization.

The heat and radio waves emanating from the site were another source of false hope. Robots and computers could continue their labor even after the owners were long gone.

"Begin breach, site 188," Hadrian said, spurring his helmet cam to begin recording. "United States Underground Patrol! Anyone home? We are here to ensure your safety." The only answer was the dry wind rustling at their backs. "Entering now."

His plasma torch melted the four inches of steel like butter. Scorched metal bloomed an acrid smell, followed by a bouquet of

putrid fruit and sour garlic—the familiar fragrance of decaying flesh, somewhere deep inside.

Upon clearing the threshold, Hadrian heard a soft click. A tripwire tensed against his shin. In an instant, Cyrus was a blur, rushing past him, peppering the room with gunfire. Luckily, whatever the trigger was attached to was dead. No explosion, no poison gas that some of the more aggressive bunkers used.

"Stop shooting! For god's sake. You would have killed anyone standing in the room."

The drone kept pacing with his weapon. "You were in danger."

"Do no harm. Do you hear me?"

"Then why do you have your weapon out, Hadrian?"

Reflexes had unholstered his glock. He lowered it, a feeling of nausea washing over him, and it wasn't from the noxious air. Ever since the incident with the two men that threatened his crew outside of Tucson, the drones had been jumpy, keeping their weapons drawn and setting sensors to high alert. Those bunkerheads had abandoned their lives for a desolate isolation they weren't prepared for. They were desperate. Pointing weapons in their face was only going to make things worse.

Cyrus was now a far cry from its original programming as a medic. It became obsessed with the idea that bunkerheads had linked up multiple habitats to form violent militias. Certainly, that would be a convenient excuse for the missing population in the Midwest, but Hadrian was skeptical. If the virus didn't kill you, the war did—no conspiracy theories required.

He went outside to steady himself. He was partly to blame for the drone's itchy trigger. Cyrus was likely mirroring his own fears. As he paced, he noticed a depression in the soil a few yards from the entrance, where the thorn-brush was more scant. Damn. He had a job to do. No time to waste.

He whistled, signaling his crew of coroner drones to draw

close. "Half of you dig over there. It's a mass grave. The rest, follow me and Cyrus. Prepare for a few dozen bodies. There's no rush. We have all night."

The dead were patient.

It was trivial to spot COVID-39's handiwork this year. The devilish strain engorged the lungs and blackened limbs, an echo of the Spanish Flu. The healthier you were, the quicker your body would drown itself from the inside. Water was poison in the wrong places.

Hadrian brought the thermos of energy tea to his lips, then popped a few chewable coffee jellies. It was hard to sleep through the whir of bone saws.

One coroner drone strode up. "Sir, there were fifty-eight—"

"I can count," Harian said.

"All were infected with COVID-39—"

"I know, coroner. What else?"

"The census has been updated," it said.

"As it should."

The Underground Patrol was established to protect those that chose the underground life, but eventually, labeled them libertarian traitors that hoarded resources, and sought to root them out.

"Perimeter is secured. No sign of anyone within five miles," Cyrus said. Many years ago, he and the drone had taken care of bunker patients. Cyrus would be at their bedside, administering drugs, and patiently explain care options. They obsessed over morbidity rates, conferring with medic drones in the region on how to save more bunkerheads, and how they could convince them to leave their perilous lives.

"That's good. But you should be helping with the bodies," he said.

"Sir, it's paramount that we secure and find any criminals that may have escaped."

"We're helping them escape."

Hadrian couldn't pinpoint the exact moment when Cyrus donned the black cloth and took up the automatic weapons. He found the show of force not only unnecessary, but dangerous onto itself. The drone threatened a couple hikers minding their own business on the road. He didn't want to think about what would have happened if he hadn't intervened.

Hadrian swore he would never detain anyone again. He had witnessed children in their mother and father's embrace—lifeless—their last moments burrowed together under bed sheets. One time, the bodies were warm, which meant he missed saving them by a few hours. They weren't traitors.

Bunkerheads went underground because that was the only option left. Who were they supposed to trust? A government that used the pandemic as an excuse to force tracking devices, where the data is used to deny rights based on the ethos of whichever party is in charge? Or should they trust the corporations that sold promises in the shape of safehouses with heavy strings attached?

Hadrian swept the scanner across the bodies, cross indexing faces against the census database. Cyrus patted Hadrian on the back. "Fifty-eight accounted for. That makes 125,948 left missing. Recent aerial scans suggest high probability of a whole network of bunkers in this region."

"Perhaps one will be warm."

"If they are. We will return them to the cities. They will be fruitful again."

"And what if they don't want to?"

The drone tilted its head. "My task is to process and return them."

"They're people."

The drone shrugged, then wandered off, surveying the landscape for threats.

Hadrian scanned an older gentleman, his scrabbly gray beard hugging a serene face that reminded him of his grandfather. He placed a hand on his cheek. "Rest in peace," Hadrian whispered.

The coroner drones were finishing erecting the pyre, rising out from the loose brush. Shipping the bodies directly was forbidden, for fear of contamination while in transit. Hadrian couldn't bear the thought of burying them here, isolated from society. The least he could was return the ashes to their families.

The crew descended single file down the Mogollan Rim. Rolling hills of pine timber stretched out as far as Hadrian could see. The grand natural monuments of America were starkly alien and beautiful when he first immigrated here. It used to bring him to tears. But now, all he could think about were the cold bunkers hidden beneath.

Some days, he wanted to quit. But he no longer had an address. No home to go back to after his family was decimated by the big one in '33. Since then, he shuttled around to remote sites. His only companions were drones that took the letter of the law too seriously. The thought of "normal" activities was alien to him now: greeting people at the grocery store, and cooking dinner with friends, and congregating on beaches and promenades. These were foggy memories from a previous life.

At the base of the rim, a trail spidered out from the boulders into the tree line. This was unusual because bunkerheads always swept their tracks clean. Trails were dangerous: they led government agents to your home.

They were set to rendezvous with an autonomous supply line. The coroner drones would soon be too full to take on more ash

canisters. After a hard climb, the trail widened. "I detect a site up ahead," Cyrus said. "Number 189 for this region."

A side trail led them into a clearing. Rows of rows of plants and an irrigation system made from discarded rubber tubing. "It's a farm," he said. "There must be a warm bunker nearby."

"I'll survey the area," Cyrus said.

Hadrian nodded, then surveyed the field as the sun set below the tree line, dipping the world in shadow. Hadrian directed the coroner drones to take pictures of the clearing, making particular note of the trailheads. He found a wooden box on a short length of fence. Inside were stacks and stacks of envelopes. Mail. But judging from the markings, these weren't meant for the Post Office. It was a makeshift postal route.

The letter he had found was destined for this place.

Cyrus returned with the location of the bunker. The drone hadn't been interested in the farm or the letters. Those were collateral features with no bearing on its goals.

The bunker was dug out from the side of a hill, a rock overhang acting as shelter above the entrance. A wind chime jangled. This was no hidden bunker.

The door opened on its own or perhaps by the slight force of his knock. Hadrian was greeted by a fresh floral scent. Something unctuous was in the air. His stomach growled.

"I'll do the sweep and map the rooms. This appears to be a model we have not encountered before," the drone said.

The inside was cavernous. Shoes and jackets lined a welcoming foyer, which opened into a kitchen and dining area. A pot of chili bubbled on the stove. The pantry was filled with jars of peaches, plums, and strawberry jam. The refrigerator: a resplendent array of fresh vegetables and cuts of well-marbled

pork and beef. A short hallway at the center of the pinwheel design led to bedrooms. No sign of distress anywhere—no bandages, drugs, or blood stains. Children's clothing, damp to the touch, hung from makeshift lines. Nearby, a crayon drawing of flowers and drones, signed in child's handwriting: "Maddy."

And then he saw it: the back room was filled with boxes of letters, all labeled and ready to send to the next destination.

"Nothing alive," Cyrus called from the hallway. It had been rummaging from room to room. Always scanning, tapping its weapon with metal fingers. Tap. Tap. Tap. "This is most likely a false front. There is a secondary bunker, somewhere deeper. We will find the bodies there."

"There's no bodies," Hadrian said.

"How are you sure? Is there something my instruments have missed?"

"Do you really think they've set this up as a rouse?"

"It is a possibility."

"Who is replenishing the fresh food? Why would they do that? Listen to yourself. You're not being logical."

But as he said that, he also knew that was the logic that ruled his days and nights—that the bunkerhead way of life was a threat to society. The drone had always been his trust asset, always supporting his needs and following his directions. The bodies had always been Hadrian's first priority as well—where to find them, where to burn them, where to send them. He no longer knew what to do with a warm bunker.

The sound of the door came from the entrance. And footsteps. Gasps.

Hadrian tailed the drone. Its weapons drawn and aimed at the three stunned figures. No. There were two more—a young boy and a girl in a summer dress, cowering behind adult legs. Eyes full of fear. They had come back from a walk, perhaps, and now, greeted with the barrel of automatic weapons from an ominous

drone. And a stranger who was directing it; a stranger more concerned with the disposal of bodies than greeting the living. Who wouldn't be terrified?

The people clasped their hands—not with his—but together, palm to palm, pleading for their lives. This was the moment that he had wanted, to rejoice with the living, and yet, he was on the wrong side. He wanted to scream, but his throat was dry, and it came out like a grunt.

Cyrus sensed his apprehension. The drone's arms were unsteady. The rifle's barrel traced uneasy patterns in the air. It brought Hadrian back to focus. He knew what he needed to do.

He placed his hands on the weapon and looked into Cyrus's eyes. "Do no harm," Hadrian said. "We are here to do no harm."

4 / *CONTAINED*

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After seventy-seven days sheltering alone in my five hundred square foot apartment, I decided I needed a break from the news. The headlines were bad, and the news just kept getting weirder every day. U.S. pandemic deaths near 100,000, an incalculable loss. Mysterious radio signal from space repeating every 16 days. More "murder hornets" are turning up, here's what you need to know.

It might have been the murder hornets that did it. If life was going to be this weird, I wanted to enjoy it before the aliens invaded and killed us all. I was tired of refreshing browser windows at odd hours and praying to the internet gods that I would get a grocery delivery window, fingers crossed that this time they had more than one roll of toilet paper available.

I decided to put myself on a news diet and focus on building

up my basic survival skills. My coworkers seemed to be fine living on MREs and Clif Bars, but I was craving fresh fruits and vegetables. So, instead of getting sucked into the doom scroll, I fixed a bowl of cereal with the last of my milk and started searching for videos on how to garden in a city apartment.

The first one I found was a little too basic, so I scrolled through the others recommended on the homepage of the video sharing app. A thumbnail of a cute couple standing outside an adorable cottage nestled in the woods caught my eye. So I tapped the screen and switched over to watch that instead. I stared at the screen in disbelief as I watched them talk about their composting toilet and rainwater collection system. Why would someone voluntarily give up running water and a flush toilet?

I'd just about decided these people were too much when I read the title of the next suggested video. It hinted that the featured tiny home was located near me, north of the city, probably not far from my grandparents' farm. So I kept watching. Before I knew it, my phone was alerting me that it was time for my first conference call of the day.

I dumped my bowl into the sink, ran some water in it and splashed some on my face, then ran my fingers through my hair and settled myself in for the daily Zoom gauntlet. As I waited for the rest of my teammates to join the first call, I ignored the talk about the recently released UFO sightings. I was done with trying to make sense out of the chaos in the headlines. I scribbled a research reminder to myself on the back of a candy wrapper.

Compost toilets? Shipping containers?

By the time the meetings were over for the day, my stomach was growling, I had three text messages from my mom, and I had to pee so bad my leg was shaking. I'd completely forgotten about the candy wrapper. While I boiled water, I called my best friend and told her what I'd learned about tiny homes. She shook her head and suggested that, if I needed a real escape, I should watch

the secret alien boyfriend show she'd been binging. We talked about it while we ate, and I promised to check out the first episode and tell her what I thought.

After washing my dishes for what felt like the millionth time, I logged onto my streaming account to search for the show. The secret alien boyfriend was shirtless in the preview. Glowing geometric markings criss-crossed his six-pack abs. I was about to click play when I noticed a Hobbit-like cottage in the thumbnail for a show listed in my personalized recommendations. Curious, I scrolled down, deciding I'd just watch one episode before switching over to the hot aliens.

A few minutes before midnight, my tablet informed me that I had finished all available episodes of "Tiny House Builders." The algorithm recommended I start "Disaster Preppers" next. My first meeting wasn't until ten in the morning, so I shrugged and hit play.

My phone rang just before nine, waking me from where I'd fallen asleep on the couch. The sun was up and my tablet was still on, hung at the "are you still watching" prompt. I rubbed my eyes and tilted my phone so I could see who was calling. My mom's face scowled at me through the video chat like she didn't realize I could see her. I'd forgotten to reply to her texts.

"Hi Mom." I yawned and stretched.

"What time is it there? Don't you have to start work in a few minutes?"

I set the phone down on the counter and filled a glass with water. "Good morning to you, too."

"I'm sorry. Good morning, sweetie. It's just... I worry about you. Are you sure you want to stay there all by yourself? You could come home, you know. We haven't had any new cases in weeks."

"Let me get this straight. You want me to take public transit to the airport, get on an airplane, take a taxi to your house, and bring

all the germs I collected along the way with me so I can infect you and dad?"

"We'd pick you up at the airport, sweetie."

"No, Mom. That's not the point. You are not going out. Dad is not going out. I am not getting on an airplane." I paused to take a breath and changed the subject. "Is this really what you called to talk about?"

"No, sweetie. I wanted to talk about Gran and Pops. They called yesterday. Their neighbor who was bringing them groceries got sick and can't do it anymore. I was thinking maybe you could give them a call and see what they need, maybe drive up there and help them out a bit?"

I checked the clock on the microwave. I had ten minutes until my first meeting. "Okay. I'll call them later today. I gotta go."

"Thanks, sweetie! Love you!"

"Love you, too." I hung up and headed for the shower, my mind buzzing with the beginning of an idea. My grandparents knew how to grow their own food.

At lunch, I finally had a break long enough that I could research shipping containers and make a few phone calls, jotting down numbers as I talked. Then I called my grandparents. They'd been home for months, like me, with almost no contact with the outside world, but they lived on twenty acres in the middle of nowhere that happened to be only a day's drive from my apartment in the city.

I told them about my idea. They didn't even hesitate before offering to help. So I arrived at their house on Saturday afternoon with a carload of groceries and settled into their RV for two weeks of quarantine.

Pops and I discussed building materials over contraband microbrews while standing six feet apart in the yard. When Gran came out, he tried to tell her it was root beer, but she knew better. She also knew the exact perfect spot for my project.

The shipping container arrived a week later. Pops made me a list of supplies, and I borrowed their pickup to drive into town and load up. I returned with more groceries and enough bags of cement to pour a slab foundation. Gran warned me it wasn't going to be easy, but I had no idea.

The happy couples in the videos make it seem like all you have to do is buy some wood and grab your cordless drill and get to work, but it's not like that at all. It takes about eighty times longer to do everything than it does on the television shows. I worked until my soft programmer fingers bled, spending every spare minute on my project, and it still took until the end of the month before I had the shell of a home.

By the end of the summer, I'd ended my lease and crammed five hundred square feet of stuff into just over three hundred square feet of my very own home. Sure it was tiny, and I needed to scoop dirt into my toilet after I used it, but I could play my music as loud as I wanted. Outside my front door, I had a garden, and at night I could watch the stars through the skylight above my bed in the loft. If the world wanted to fall apart, fine. I was ready. Bring it on.

I woke up the next morning, snug in my bed, and blinked up at the sky. The puffy white clouds floating in a sea of blue had been replaced by a slab of gunmetal grey. I reached for my phone to check the weather, but as I sat up, the slice of dark sky slid past my window. I watched it go, realizing it was etched in black and the surface was smooth and solid. It wasn't a cloud.

The aliens had arrived. And, given how the year was going, they probably weren't going to be the sexy boyfriend type.

5 / THE SECRETS OF FACILITY OSCAR ZERO

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I NEVER MEANT to find the network port. Really. I just wanted to see what cola tasted like.

The old crate was on a palette. Real caffeine, something sugar-like, carbonation still intact. The expiration printed on its black-and-red box was dated only about forty-eight months ago. Just a little past the line. Dad had told me that three years was safe, then you *really* had to start wondering. But I tore open the frayed cardboard, popped a can, drank it warm anyway. Brown fizz dribbled down my chin, dripped onto my jumpsuit. I thought it was the greatest thing I had ever tasted.

That's when I noticed it. Through the haze of stale sugar substitute and the rush of caffeine nearing its half-life, I saw the port. An upside-down ziggurat, waiting for its mate, recessed into the pale, stone wall, its wiring protected by a dulled alloy conduit set into the stone.

I had so many questions. Where did the wiring go? Did it still work? Why was there a port here at all? Was there someone *else* on the other end? Lots of *someone elses?*

Sometimes you get bored being around your parents so much. Makes you do things you wouldn't normally do (see: drink stale cola).

Now, I'm thankful for my disposition towards boredom. Without it, I wouldn't have surfed the caffeine rush. Found the networking port.

Figured out that we weren't alone.

Canned pears again for dinner.

"So, honey, what did you do today?" Dad asked. He was wearing one of his jumpsuits that still had a patch on it. Some sort of hand holding lightning bolts. POISED FOR PEACE. Mom wore the same one, a dark yellow-ish green. Faded now. No patches on hers, though.

I rolled my elbow in a well-worn groove on the metal table.

"Found some cola." I giggled at the lingering caffeine high.

"Oh. Okay. Still good?"

"*Really* good."

Never mentioned the network port.

Our home computer insisted that wireless protocols had always been the norm. There was no justification for primitive, *wired* networking. I imagined the computer's usually staid operating system suddenly laughing, swirling a glass of whiskey, dismissing the idea of wired communication.

Don't you see, old chap? You're living in the old ways. Here, let's have a toast and forget about it.

But the port was seared into my mind, and I couldn't let it go. I felt a startling sense that something had changed, had fallen out of fashion, had become, perhaps, untrustworthy.

"Kenji, honey, your shift is about to start. What are you doing in here?" Mom asked me from the archway of the supply room. Her voice echoed off the stone, still painted some vague minty green, chipping away here and there. Harsh lightstrips from above illuminated her in sulphuric light; close-cropped hair, oval face. A swirl of disinfectants and bleach filled my nose. Shelves of supplies lined the walls. Just down the hall, a sealed door I had never been inside.

"Just looking for some parts, Mom." I made the shape of a rectangle with both hands. "Tablet screen's acting up again."

"Sounds like a good project. *If* you can figure out how to put it back together this time," she said with a smirk.

Dinnertime. Pea puree.

"Mom said you took apart your tablet again?" Dad pried something loose from between his teeth with his pinky nail.

My elbow felt gritty in the table's groove."Yeah," I said. "That was the highlight of my day."

An instinct, a whisper. Something told me I had to keep my little project to myself. All those years of being told that nobody outside is left — *nobody worth it, anyway*, Dad liked to say — that this was always the way it was meant to be. Our little family unit, living in our little enclosed space. Until when? I knew there was something

else outside. Out *there*. They either didn't know, or didn't want to think about it.

Screenglow lit the dark corner of the supply room, and I held my breath. I'd found a network cable at the bottom of an old storage container, rigged together a dongle so that I could plug it into my tablet. Without *Appendix C: Troubleshooting & Repair Instructions for Primary Systems*, a bunched-up and dusty manual I found in our storage room's corner, this wouldn't have been possible.

I didn't know what the flickering green and yellow lights meant on the cable, but I thought it was a good thing. Lights meant life. Action. Progress.

Scripts and programs that I had never used — and, in some cases, never knew they existed — suddenly came to life. Pings and alerts and questions. So many questions. From machines and operating systems. From *outside*.

Still, I didn't think they meant much. Automated programs, awakened at a new presence. Pre-rigged daemons doing what they had been told to do by ghosts and spectres. That was before I saw The Window. It popped up by itself, colorized text on an off-white canvas.

[*Welcome to LCC Netlink*]

[*Launch Control Centers online — 2*]

A keyboard popped up and I stared at a blinking cursor. What the hell was this? Then a new line appeared.

wh1ro: uh did someone just join from oscar zero? think we should log off.

fr3ya: no, let's see who it is. well, new friend, are you going to say anything?

I decided to say something.

And along the way, I learned how to type more than a handful of words a minute, bathed secretly in screenglow, high off of interacting with new souls. This was better than any cola I'd ever had, old *or* new. Because over the burst of networking packets, we discovered what we had in common: age, curiosity, isolation.

fr3ya: msb. missile support base. every lcc's connected to one, then connected to each other. servers there must still be running, otherwise we couldn't talk to each other.

LCC. Launch Control Center. Otherwise known as home. There were more of us out there, like Freya and Whiro. Kids raised in places called Juliet-01, Delta-22, Oscar Zero. Missile silos turned into quiet, locked-down homes.

*wh1r0: *my mom told me we're here because she refused the order during the war. they wanted her to launch. she was one of the first, she said, and other silos went dark with hers.*

k3nj1: so our parents didn't build this? we're stuck in here?

fr3ya: didn't build it. it was part of the old country.

k3nj1: what's a country?

Canned pears.

This time I made them into a puree, flimsy spoon churning them alongside the nervous somersaults of my gut. Dad wore the old uniform with the single patch. POISED FOR PEACE. I pointed to the loose threads on his left shoulder where something had been removed. Because of my friends, I knew it had been some sort of insignia, made of white and two primary colors. And that it had meant something.

"What used to be there, Dad? There, on your shoulder."

He shot Mom a quick look. A burst of silent communication like an exchange of network packets. Nothing audible but the grind of a fan somewhere in the complex.

I looked down my finger, still pointing where the flag on his shoulder had been. "Tell me about LCC Oscar Zero. Tell me about the place you once called the United States."

He set down his fork, drew in a ragged breath. "Okay. I can do that." He hid his hands underneath the table. "And then we're going to talk about what we're building in its place."

6 / 432 PARK AVENUE

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We tried to keep Nani as warm as possible, crowding around her in the blistering cold, watching each breath leave her like a piece of her soul, finally finding a way off of our Godforsaken rooftop forever. Finally, free.

Shell stared at me from the other side of the circle. I wondered if she was thinking what I was, wishing that she could leave, too, instead of spending the rest of our lives up there.

She only smiled.

Nani passed away some time that night. By then, I was fast asleep, wrapped in our community's warm embrace.

Her cremation took place the next morning. We took solace in her warmth for as long as it lasted. There was only so much space on that rooftop — there were one hundred and sixty of us there — and Nani's passing made room for one more. Afterwards, they passed around tickets to all of those childless.

Several generations ago, our ancestors made it their permanent home to shield themselves away from the virus. And shield away themselves from each other– we all lived outside, so that everyone was far apart but always in plain view of everyone else. Almost everyone.

Shell was chosen, and a few hundred eyes swiveled around to look at her. She smiled, pointed at me, and I was suddenly at the center of their attention.

I shook my head, but she had none of it. She grabbed my hand with all her might and pulled me into the only enclosed space on the rooftop there was: the exit room that contained the stairs. I flinched as the door screeched shut, plunging us into darkness.

No, no no no.

I feared that I had led her on. That I had acted the way I was supposed to act in front of the others, not the way I wanted to act. And now she was stuck in this room, awaiting something grand, only to find disappointment.

"This is it," she mouthed, striking a match.

This was it, the single room in the corner of the rooftop, used only for...

I walked around the circumference of the room, putting as much space in between us as possible. It wasn't much. My hand dragged against the wall. It was rough concrete, broken only by the door we had come through and one more, exactly opposite from it. The other one, welded shut, hid the stairs that connected the rooftop to the rest of the building. On the other side... Nani knew now. I wished she could tell me. Was it safe out there, now?

I looked back. Shell's wet eyes reflected the flame.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I can't do it. I lied to you."

She got up and approached me. I cowered up against the welded-shut door.

"Do you wish you could leave?" She whispered, pressing her ear up to it and closing her eyes.

"The virus..."

"The virus could be long gone. We have to leave *eventually*."

If her eyes were open, I knew she would be rolling them.

"The answer is *yes*. You do want to leave." She opened them, staring directly into mine. "I can see it in your eyes."

We did not have sex that first time. After an hour passed, the door was pulled open and cool air streamed in. I was grateful to be let out.

"Did you do it?" Mana squeaked. One ear was red from being pressed upon that cold metal door. "I don't think you did," she said, wagging a finger.

She was not upset the first time. Couples rarely do it right away. When you've spent a whole life outside, being told over and over again that there was something very wrong with being *inside,* and all of a sudden you were supposed to do it, and there was actually something very wrong with *not* doing it.

But Mana got angrier with every unmissed period, though you wouldn't have noticed it; outside, life went by as normal. We both got new jobs. Did you know there's dirt in the rain? That's how we fed the garden. I collected and layered. She replanted. We measured the time passing in leaves.

The cold left, and living outside once again became pleasant. We no longer fled the shadows thrust upon us by neighboring skyscrapers, seeking the warmth of the sun.

Then one day we were in the room again, and she told me she was gay.

My heart grew to fill the whole room. "Me too!"

It was my turn to close the distance between us.

"I want to leave," I whispered. "I want to find someone."

Shell gripped my hand. It was warmer than I expected it to be. "Me too."

"But how?"

She held up a metal spoon stolen from the outdoor cafeteria, then pointed it at the gap under the welded-shut door.

We made noises, trying not to laugh, as I scraped away at it. Then we brought our bodies together, using the spoon as a fulcrum, to grow the gap further. Each time, before we left the room, we sealed it with old dirt from the garden, covering the pungent smells that emanated from the other side with basil, mint, lavender.

Shell squeezed through a finger, then an arm, then her whole body. I could barely hold in my excitement when she brought back a hammer.

A few days later, the hole was large enough for me. By that time, Shell had already transformed the interior of the building we had spent our whole lives living on top of into a home. We luxuriated in marble bathtubs, lounged on leather daybeds, and stared through floor-to-ceiling windows at Central Park, looking for any sign of–human–life. We found none.

Then Dada passed, and the whole community glared at us. Our time was up; another couple was to be chosen.

"There are other communities out there," Shell said, when we were in that room on the corner of the rooftop one last time. "We just haven't found any yet."

"And if there isn't?"

"We could have a child, and start a community ourselves."

I shuddered. It was the exact thing we had tried to avoid.

"We can't leave," I muttered. "The virus..."

"If only they knew," Shell said. We had found a pamphlet that advertised the suites right below us. $26,000 a month! "What a goldmine they lived on top of. Maybe that would at least get them to reconsider living outside. We're still alive, aren't we?"

We're still alive. We had spent so much time indoors, and we were still alive. Then, I had the idea. I asked Shell to trust me, asked her to seal the gap below the door as tight as she could, just

in case. I picked up the hammer and ran, bolting down the stairwell. I almost slipped on the still-slick surface of the marble floor of the lobby, making my way to the grand glass entrance.

I broke it into a million pieces.

Then I stepped across the broken glass–finally, really, *outside*–and took a deep breath.

THANK YOU

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