

# Exploring the Intersectional Experiences of Minority Female Authors of Speculative Fiction

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EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

Exploring the Intersectional Experiences of Minority Female Authors of Speculative  
Fiction

Honors Thesis

Submitted

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By

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Exploring the Intersectional Experiences of Minority Female Authors of Speculative  
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Abstract: This creative thesis seeks to understand how the intersectional experiences and history of minority female authors of speculative fiction have impacted the content, style, and response to the works they produce before incorporating the understanding of that background into a speculative fiction short story. Representing diverse voices through the paradigm of intersectionality, which posits that social identity is a function of multiple, interwoven factors such as race and gender and the relationship of those aspects of social identity with wider social power structures, is a way of acknowledging the role of minority female authors in the speculative fiction genre. The first portion of this thesis describes the historical representation of minority female authors in speculative fiction and its relationship to the emergence of four waves of feminist thought in mainstream American society and how the social forces that facilitated those outbreaks of feminism also infiltrated the genre of speculative fiction from the 1970s to the present day. The background component of this thesis also includes a review of the backgrounds themes of three current authors of speculative fiction, Nalo Hopkinson, N.K. Jemisin, and Benjanun Sriduangkaew, extracting some general themes and examples of intersectionality within their bodies of work. The conclusion of the first section discusses the nature of the creative work which comprises the second component of the thesis.

Keywords and phrases: honors thesis, speculative fiction, minority studies, gender studies, science fiction, fantasy, creative thesis, short stories, intersectionality

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## Part 1: Background Research

As an individual navigates through the world, they are influenced by a multitude of factors, all of which coalesce to form their background and history. These factors can be as mundane as their personal preferences for food or as polarizing as cultural background. The life experiences of members of minorities result also from a series of complex interactions between their race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic class, age, disabilities, cultural background, and ethnicity. For minority female authors writing in the genre of speculative fiction, this tenuous relationship between intersecting aspects of their identity plays a powerful role in their experiences as an author as well as the stories they choose to tell. Minority female authors must grapple with the consequences of their personal identities and the way those identities interact with other external social structures such as privilege or oppression (Gopaldas 90). Consequently, minority female authors experience the realm of speculative fiction with respect to the intersectionality of their backgrounds, their complex feminist history within the genre, and the current social trends and perceptions about their contemporary relevance in speculative fiction. In this creative thesis, the way the experiences of minority female authors of the speculative fiction genre are translated into the content and scope of their respective works is explored to the lens of the paradigm of intersectionality. The thesis is structured in a two-part form. The first section of this thesis describes the historical background of minority female authors as well as some of the forces which influence the contemporary experiences of those authors. The following section presents a creative interpretation of the background research in the form of a short story.

The intersectional perspective was first described in a recognizably contemporary sense in 1989 by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, a founder of Critical Race Theory in American legal scholarship, as a research paradigm interested in relating identity and power structure to social categorizations and culture (Carastathis 1-3). Crenshaw's first use of intersectionality focused on black women in the workplace and was sourced from a long history of work founded on black feminist thought (Carastathis 1). Intersectionality is an important perspective to apply to the challenges minority female authors face in their daily lives as members of a wider society and as participants and content creators of speculative fiction because intersectionality helps to delineate how the human experience is a sum of multidimensional interactions shaped by the relationships between identities and social power structures (Hankivksy 2-3).

Minority female authors of speculative fiction must grapple with barriers within the speculative fiction community and those challenges that arise from their intersectional backgrounds which impede their ability to share their stories and communicate with others of similar experiences. They are subjective to the persistent influence of larger social and political structures in a way that other authors are not due to their minority status. As a community tied to a genre concerned not only with the tantalizing siren call of what could be but also with the nuances of reality, it is vital for the speculative fiction community to acknowledge the relevance of diverse experiences and welcome representation of individuals of those backgrounds. All people, especially women of minority backgrounds, have the right to imagine the world through the speculative lens.

Throughout the body of this thesis, speculative fiction is used as an umbrella term that encompasses several different subgenres and styles of fiction literature, including science

fiction, fantasy, and horror works. Speculative fictions' roots as an umbrella term emerged in the late 1880s (Nicholls). However, it is still occasionally considered an imprecise organizational tool for its subgenres, generating arguments about its validity as a commercial category or merely as an informal genre description because of the various connotations associated with its subgenres (Nicholls). Some argue that one major benefit of the use of the term is its distance from its subgenres such as fantasy, science fiction, or horror, which have been historically considered genres of poor literary merit (Nicholls). Others argue that the connotations of speculative fiction as a type of story form most concerned with the far horizons of imagination and its potential to transform the world speaks to the value of speculative fiction as an umbrella term (Gill 71).

The history of women of minority backgrounds in speculative fiction is best understood when juxtaposed against the history of mainstream and subculture feminism in the United States. Feminist theory and burgeoning ideas of social justice work paved the way for the inclusion and eventual celebration of minority women in the general speculative fiction community. The connection between literature and social issues makes logical sense considering that nonfiction and fiction function as microcosms of the societal atmosphere of their time. As people ponder and grapple with potential solutions for social problems, they inevitably import those questions and conflicts into literature because writing is a powerful medium of communication. Similarly, the emergence and acceptance of women in speculative fiction, followed by the recognition of the importance of the intersectional aspect of womanhood, were gradually incorporated into the historically hostile world of speculative fiction as feminist ideas gained traction in some spaces of American society.

In the United States, feminism experienced its mainstream growth from the 1960s to its current status over the course of four waves consisting of movements, campaigns, critical analysis, subcultures, media, and literature (Walker 39-41 and Humm 251). As with any time period, these categories are artificial as these time periods represent organizational tools to link, represent, and label convoluted major historical occurrences. The first wave of feminism, which occurred during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, focused primarily on securing women's suffrage and actualizing the reach of women's political power. Campaigns for the sexual, reproductive, and economic rights of women also blossomed during this time (Rampton). The era of first wave feminism is generally considered complete with the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment, which granted women the much-coveted right to vote (Rampton). As the first wave of feminism waned, the second wave of feminism emerged from the foundations of its predecessor, touting a platform against the injustices linked with the female role in society, culture, and politics. This period was most concentrated during the early 1960s to the late 1980s, but continued many first wave ideas as women sought to further explore their roles. The concepts of first wave feminism were further developed by the Women's Liberation Movement which occurred during this time as well.

Second wave feminism was interested in understanding how social and power structures encouraged gender inequality (Rampton). The subgroups of feminism that flourished during the second wave were highly theoretical and academic in nature (Kroløkke and Sørensen 15). During this time, female authors also produced important critical works such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. During the second wave of feminism, identity feminism, or womanism,

also grew in popularity, which began to explore the idea of race and was spearheaded by Black feminists (Kroløkke and Sørensen 13). Third wave feminism evolved as women began to analyze the successes and failures of both first and second wave feminism. The movements and campaigns that flourished during the height of second wave feminism were countered by numerous mainstream backlashes and third wave feminism sought to fight against those responses (Kroløkke and Sørensen 17).

Due to the political and social foundation assembled by first and second wave feminism, many third wave feminists perceived themselves in a more assertive, activist-like light, which precipitated shifts in the tone of their period toward a less serious and unrepentantly contrary attitude (Kroløkke and Sørensen 15). Third wave feminists experimented with the meaning of empowerment, often reclaiming and repurposing what were once considered negative labels for women (Kroløkke and Sørensen 16). Much of the criticism against earlier waves of feminism centered around the narrow scope of the movements and their failures to incorporate minority issues into their campaigns. In contrast to those perceived shortcomings, third wave feminism gradually adopted a greater number of intersectional perspectives (Snyder 125). Feminism had been closely linked with the civil rights movement, many criticized, but it had failed to acknowledge the importance of socioeconomic backgrounds or race in its purview, instead heralding the grievances only of white women of the upper middle-class (Rampton). In an extension of the focus on issues of equality, women operating under the tenets of third wave feminism also reimagined the meaning of gender roles and its relationship with social conditioning (Rampton). The third wave of feminism included analysis of the difficulty of reconciling feminist ideas with mainstream perceptions about womanhood as

well as how to reinvent and rewrite the negative impressions in media regarding feminism (Walker).

While the three waves of feminism build upon each other, it is important to recognize that many of the ideas they contemplated remain the subjects of ongoing debates. Post-feminism, then, can be traced back to the 1980s and evolved in tandem with the subjects of the second and third waves (Rampton). In its broadest sense, post-feminism is not necessarily anti-feminist, but is instead a series of responses to the theories of second and third wave feminism. One important component of the post-feminist movement is the rejection of the label of feminist in concert with a recognition of the importance of the thought processes underlying feminist ideas (Rampton). For example, post-feminists may posit that feminism is no longer relevant because of the goals of the three waves of feminism have been achieved for the most part (Rampton).

The broad historical background of speculative fiction echoes the history of feminism in America and provides a framework to understand responses to minority female authors in speculative fiction. Traditionally, the speculative fiction community was sparsely populated by female authors, especially those of minority backgrounds. However, as first wave feminism seeped into popular culture, it also invaded speculative fiction as feminist works during the late 1960s began to emerge (Freedman). This period was marked by an upwelling of feminist themes in works characterized by a desire for female representation and to explore the potential nuances of the social roles of women (Merrick et al.). These works emphasized conflicts between gender while also reexamining traditional gender norms. Female authors fought to secure a place in speculative fiction, determined to utilize the genre to explore new directions for themselves. Many themes included utopian

and dystopian societies as well as explorations of sexuality (Merrick et al.). However, widespread critical analysis was lacking and only grew more prevalent during the late 1980s (Freedman).

Speculative fiction also faced a unfavorable reputation as frivolous or escapist literature which prompted many mainstream feminist and minority authors to avoid the genre (Rutledge). As a result, few female authors of color were active in speculative fiction during this time, though some, like the African-American author, Octavia Butler, begin to produce work in the 1970s (Obeso). During the 1980s-2000s, those female authors operating in speculative fiction refined their earlier themes, following the trends of both second wave and third wave feminism (Merrick et al.). Speculative fiction experienced a time of critical response centered in the theoretical backgrounds established during the feminist waves (Merrick et al.). Nonetheless, a divide between mainstream feminism and feminist authors of speculative fiction remained because feminists preferred to focus on the real concerns and struggles of women. Speculative fiction was considered too intangible and irrelevant a form of fiction (Merrick et al.). Many female and minority authors were dissuaded by the traditional, aggressive masculinity that characterized speculative fiction as well (Freedman). That antagonistic and unwelcoming atmosphere of speculative successfully discouraged a great deal of interest in feminist perspectives in the genre (Merrick et al.). However, in the later years of the period, critical interest began to flourish and grow, providing the infrastructure for communities of female authors to gain a greater foothold in speculative fiction. Feminist paradigms of criticism also grew more reputable as a meaningful component of the wider speculative fiction community (Merrick et al.). Intersectional themes also began to

emerge in works as black, queer, and other minority authors found purchase in speculative fiction due to the interest in intersectionality (Merrick et al.). Just like the progressions in feminist history, the contemporary environment of speculative fiction built upon the foundations of its earlier periods.

For minority female authors, their position in contemporary speculative fiction reflects a long and complex relationship with feminism and wider social trends influenced developments such as the internet and social media as forms of communication which alter how speculative fiction is produced and analyzed. As such, current works of minority female speculative fiction authors should be considered with respect to those historical and ongoing waves of feminism, and even the post-feminism movement as well as trends in social media and the internet. The rise of intersectionality cleared a path for critical recognition of the ways that various aspects of social identity influence the experiences of minority female authors as they write in speculative fiction. For the modern minority female author writing about themes that reference social identity and social or political structures is perceived in a variety of ways, as social media and social justice perspectives become more visible in parallel with identity politics (Merrick et al.). These authors face conflicting responses to their work that reflect the historical interactions between speculative fiction traditionalists and those interested in promoting the feminists and intersectional perspective in speculative fiction.

A result of those responses is a tendency to group the work minority female authors into niche categories as author N.K. Jemisin noted in a 2010 blog post about the difficulty of even being shelved in libraries or bookstores under the genre of speculative fiction (Jemisin "Don't Put My Book"). These attitudes toward literature from minority female

authors illustrates how even the modern speculative fiction community has failed to accord space for the creations of minority female author as anything other than special interest works (Jemisin “Don’t Put My Book”). Jemisin also notes that modern minority female must be prepared to be embroiled in bitter debates over social justice issues, such as dealing with the racism of other honored and popular authors, or even at speculative fiction conventions (Jemisin “Don’t Put My Book”). Authors may also experience threats of physical harm and sexual harassment online and in the physical world (Jemisin “Things People Need”). Modern minority female authors choosing to incorporate aspects of their background into their works are likely to encounter a mixture of vitriolic criticism and critical acclaim as acceptance of diverse perspectives are countered with traditional, conservative outcries.

The perception of diverse female authors in fiction and speculative fiction is tied not only to social media movements, but also to the lack of representation that results from lingering apathy toward minorities (Obeso). The absence of representation manifests also in the publishing industry, which is marked by such widespread racial homogeneity that just 11.3% of employees in the industry self-identified as members of a minority race in a 2014 survey (Obeso). That deficiency influences the type and quantity of books published in genres like speculative fiction. Despite those daunting figures, there have been some positive responses to these in support of diverse authors. One such response was the 2014 viral social media campaign “We Need Diverse Books” which focused on young adult books and began as a twitter debate between authors Ellen Oh and Malinda Lo, who used the hashtag “#weneeddiversebooks” to discuss the importance of diverse representation for youths and teenagers reading fiction (Obeso). The popularity of the

conversations of that social media phenomenon led to mainstream media coverage as well as the creation of a nonprofit organization concerned with encouraging the presence of diversity in fiction (Obeso).

While the “We Need Diverse Books” campaigns are an example of a positive contemporary movement hoping to open speculative fiction and fiction to diverse perspectives, examples of the backlash against the growing popularity of diverse works also abound. Two recent and sprawling controversies, the Hugo Awards in 2015 and 2016 as well as Racefail 2009, transpired over social media platforms and in physical locations such as conventions. The Hugo Awards of 2015 and 2016 were marked by two campaigns led by a group of authors who labeled themselves the Sad Puppies in companionship with various splinter groups which aimed guide popular opinions in speculative fiction away from what they considered to be a deluge of social justice issues and political correctness (French 29). The Hugo Awards are a prestigious series of awards presented at the World Science Fiction Convention and recipients are chosen by vote from members of the organization (French 30). The Sad Puppies arranged their arguments around the idea that speculative fiction had been overrun with “issue books” focused more on social justice theories than the creation of stories of quality (French 30). To the combat 2014 award rosters featuring large numbers of diverse authors, the Sad Puppies and their allies proposed and campaigned for slates of potential Hugo candidates that were tailored to their literary preferences (French 30). The 2015 Hugo award nominations were notably dominated by the Sad Puppy slates (French 30). The conflict during the Hugo Awards represents some of the external politics minority female authors experience from the critical responses to their work. Racefail 2009 was a controversial

debate about racism, sexism, education, and activism in speculative fiction between authors, their readers, and other members of the community which also surfaced across various social media platforms and real-world settings (Gatson et al.). In particular, Racefail 2009 highlights the need for more critical discourse about intersectional and social justice issues in the speculative fiction community, as well as the challenge of capturing and recording these discussions when they are plastered across decentralized social media networks rather than in scholarly archives (Gatson et al.). In contrast to the use of social media and the internet as a medium of communication, in 1990s and before, these types of analysis and educational movements occurred in mailing lists and archives (Merrick et al.).

As further background for the creative portion of this thesis, three minority female authors of speculative fiction- Nalo Hopkinson, N.K. Jemisin, and Benjanun Sriduangkaew- were briefly reviewed to explore some of the intersectional and diversity related themes expressed in their bodies of work. Nalo Hopkinson, born in Jamaica in 1960, traveled between Trinidad, Jamaica, and Guyana as a child before living in Canada and later the U.S. as an adult (Watson-Aifah 161 and Hopkinson). In a 2003 interview, Hopkinson discussed obstacles such as the frustration of finding her voice as a storyteller, her lifestyle as an author, and the limitations of her socioeconomic status (Watson-Aifah 165-167). She described her desire to write about her roots as a Caribbean woman, and how that heritage influenced her view of language, culture, and stereotypes (Watson-Aifah 167). Hopkinson also explained her interest in themes of family, rituals, and cultural traditions as well as why she has thus far chosen to produce “woman-centered” works (Watson-Aifah 167-168). Nalo Hopkinson’s work also features themes such as

social themes, myths, sexuality, class, and Caribbean history (Hopkinson). N.K. Jemisin, a self-described speculative fiction author currently residing in Brooklyn, NY, is another author known for her dedication to writing about intersectional and diverse experiences (Jemisin, “Biography”). Jemisin, who won a Hugo for her novel *The Fifth Season*, frequently writes about intersectionality in terms of cultural conflict and oppression, weaving together aspects of sexuality, gender, race, and power in her stories (Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*). She extends her discussions to social media, often analyzing her own experiences with representation as well as the backlashes, double standards, and logical fallacies she has encountered as during events like Racefail 2009 (Jemisin, “Hello! You Just Used” and Jemisin, “Why I think Racefail”). Benjanun Sriduangkaew, a Thai born author who first began publishing in 2012, is a controversial figure in the world of speculative fiction because of her history as an infamous critic of other works of speculative fiction (Azarias). As the author of the review blog, *Requires Only That You Hate*, Sriduangkaew wrote scathing online criticism of writers of speculative fiction while operating under pseudonyms before her exposure and resulting apologies (Sriduangkaew, “The Things that We Do” and Mixon, “A Report on Damage Done”). Her professional short stories frequently concentrate on depictions of East and Southeast Asian culture, identity, the effects of colonialism, and the nuances of female representation and relationships (Sriduangkaew, “Scale Bright”). The dichotomy between Sriduangkaew’s current professional career and her past personas as an excessively vicious critic as well as the conflicted response of the speculative fiction community to her history has resulted in debates about anger, tone policing, forgiveness, double standards and extremes, as well

what solidarity means for speculative fiction authors (Mixon, “A Report on Damage Done”).

As it is apparent from the author review, the experiences of minority female authors and the way they translate their backgrounds into their works are considerable in reach. For the creative portion of this thesis, I attempted to draw inspiration from those authors, the history of speculative fiction as it is intertwined with greater socio-political forces, and from my personal experiences as a consumer of speculative fiction, a student of biology, and as an amateur writer of a minority female background, and compress them into a short story. A large component of speculative fiction is imagining new worlds, whether those worlds are nearly indistinguishable from reality or completely fantastic in nature. In respect to that theme of worldbuilding, I attempted to explore the relationships between science, magic, and art, while also balancing themes of identity, immigration with those of the beauty and brutality of the academic world, as well as themes of nature. The result is Suleh’s Story, a brief foray into a world where science, magic, and art are intertwined.

## Part 2: Suleh's Story

By the time you receive this letter, I will have already arrived at the labs. This will be a good decision. A good change. The pay is better, at least. I have all the credentials necessary for the position. It will only be a year. You need not harbor any concern for your wayward daughter.



“Suleh. Suleh! Suleh, wake yourself. The transit will leave without you. “

“Suleh? Suleh, I know you can hear me. “

Suleh drags her apartment door open. Stepping backwards, she avoids the edge of the binding-strengthened door just barely, shifting aside in a well-practiced motion. Raising a brow at her sister and narrowing her eyes, Suleh peers through the doorway. Dim illumination from the hallway glowlights filters past the threshold, alighting on a desk cluttered with notes and piled with books. The air that fills the room is heavy with moisture and the complex, faintly moldy scent of the moss that softens the hardwood of the hallway floor.

Suleh's sister looms in the corridor, a gloved hand still pressed against the door panel, her lips twisted in irritation above the ornate, high collar of her work cloak. Some subtle, green pigment shimmers across the ridges of Ninaya's cheekbones, accenting their sharpness. Suleh suppresses a brief spike of irritation mixed with admiration for Ninaya's looks. Suleh has spent too many minutes of her life wishing for foolish things. Still, a part of Suleh cannot help but recognize that Ninaya has the sort of features the Taleneh most

admire. Resolutely, Suleh shoves away those thoughts, quirking her mouth into a dim smile. “Sorry. I’m ready now. “

“And your bags?” Ninaya prompts, head tilting, bird-like. The brisk gesture somehow emphasizes the sleek lines of her tailored jacket and trousers. She always looks so out of place here, in the drab atmosphere of Suleh’s apartment. Ninaya might be as highly ranked as Suleh in terms of technical skill, but consequences of her choice of binding work show in the richness of her attire.

Suleh grimaces, scuttling to side corner of the common area of her apartment. She does not keep her living space particularly well-ordered, but she spends so little of her time in this dingy hovel that she easily ignores any guilt at the state of her apartment. Ninaya taps her foot as she waits for Suleh to gather her pack and Suleh, aware of Ninaya’s waning patience, shoves aside a faintly moldy, heavy cloak, unearthing her worn, familiar carrying pack. She notes the state of the garment without any bitterness. Who could manage such a thing in a like this? Everything in Taleneh is damp.

“I’m ready,” Suleh murmurs, dragging herself from the river of her thoughts, lifting her chin toward her sibling. She hadn’t packed much after all, since her acceptance of a temporary position as lab master at Jentu meant that she would be receiving clothes and other needs upon her arrival.

Ninaya smiles wanly, something thin and tired flickering across her dark gaze. “Come then,” She beckons, a slow grace in the flick of her fingers. There are vines twined in her hair, replete with tiny, eggshell blue flowers. Ninaya is always in fashion, Suleh knows. She wonders if the flowers serve some purpose, but knowing Ninaya, they have been

merely a bred for adornment. Suleh approaches Ninaya, her stride methodical to disguise her own exhaustion. Suleh is no longer a lowly student, fighting for apprenticeships, but studying in the city of Taleneh teaches the young to mask their weakness quickly or suffer. She spares one last glance at the cluttered space of her apartment before she presses her door shut, feeling the reverberations of her security wards. She turns, unhurried. Ninaya is not only scrupulously punctual but quite observant, so Suleh is careful to keep her composure intact.

Ninaya angles her head away from Suleh as they stride down the short hall, their boots muffled by the light coating of floor moss. Suleh occupies a room on the highest floor of the apartment block, which is both a nuisance and a source of pleasure for her as much as it is a benefit of her hard-won rank of master-binder. The height means that she must take the lift- which is frequently busy- or tramp up and down half a dozen flights of stairs to reach the branchway that leads into the maze of suspended paths that crisscross the inner city of Taleneh. Once she left the protection of her parents, she no longer has cause to walk among the beautiful streets of the core city, among the wealthy Taleneh who merely glanced at her face and shunted her into a familiar, painful category. Provincial. Yes. She knows what she looks like already. No need to avert your eyes. She'd grown up in the same city as them, but her facial features easily presented her mixed heritage to the other city dwellers.

The lift is free when they arrive at its entrance and Suleh overtakes Ninaya, easily hefting her pack over her shoulder. Sliding the latticed fiberwork door aside, she enters the tubular lift. The lift trails down the side of the apartment block wall, one wall entirely exposed to the elements but for the safety latticework of the sturdy treated fiberwork and

the lift's overhanging roof. As she and Ninaya descend, Suleh gazes out at the tangle of inner city Taleneh's branchways, observing the interconnecting buildings and the small platforms spread between them, all jumbled together in a complex mess above the city's ground level. Somewhere below her world in the sky, canals litter the ground level of the city, brimming with algae rich brown waters, shrouded in mist and damp, of course, as always, with from the constant showers that plague the city of Taleneh. Beside her, Ninaya shifts, and her attire catches Suleh's attentions again. They are binders of vastly different disciplines. Suleh is a creature of the labs, but Ninaya delights in weaving the energy of green, growing things into beautiful fashions that draw in rich clients, insects to light. It is difficult to sense, much less decipher the workings of an another's binding, but Ninaya's bindings have always been so bright and rich with depth to Suleh, brushing at the edge of her awareness.

Ninaya is unusually quiet today. Perhaps Ninaya will miss the infrequent company of her younger sister. Perhaps not. Even if they are alone, decorum will not allow Ninaya to express any strong sentiment. Someone is always watching, and while Ninaya and Suleh are not the most wealth or influential members of Taleneh, their family well-connected enough that people are always looking at them hungrily, scenting for a moment of weakness. Ninaya and Suleh have never been particularly close either. When they reach the transit platform after winding through a series of lifts and stairs, the thick braid of Suleh's hair, a composite of tiny ropes of twisted strands, feels heavier than her pack. The single strap barely presses against her shoulder and collar bone. There is a crowd of people here, bustling with life and laughter, their jewel-toned jackets melding in a wash of color. The transit station is covered, nestled in the ground level bowels of a larger

building complex overflowing with small businesses, tiny residences, and suffocating offices. Despite the overcast weather and the rain, the heat of so many bodies pressed together is stifling.

Like all the wood and plant matter based architecture in Taleneh, the exterior of the station is covered with greenery and algae dusts the few free inches of real estate untouched by creeping vines and unknown cultivars of artificially bred plants designed to feed on the deadlier variants of flora that crept out of the swamps and forests bracketing Taleneh city's southern borders in a steady, inexorable march. That was one battle that the Taleneh have not yet won.

A child wails, startling Suleh from her musings. The sound, attenuated, fades into laughter that rises above the chatter of the crowds of travelers before it is swallowed up by commuting citizens. The Taleneh empire is vast, spreading its roots across the northern regions of the continent, as implacable as an invasive species, flourishing in the absence of natural competition, and the incredible works of innovation just like these transit lines help fuel its dominance. Suleh gazes at the transit line's boxy compartments, strung together like blocks on the raised, highly modified branchway that served as the elevated arteries and veins linking the city of Taleneh to the most prosperous and advanced cities within the borders of Taleneh. Once, there was a time before the empire engulfed all the Southern provincial regions that were once separate countries and people. Now, everyone is a citizen of Taleneh. Everyone is united. Mostly. The original Taleneh certainly considered their provincial brethren Taleneh enough to pay taxes, but not to warrant actual respect.

Ninaya tugs on Suleh's sleeve, her face shuttered and faintly tense, as if she is straining to against some inertial force of emotion. "Transit's here," She calls, raising her voice above the muffling cacophony of the crowd.

Suleh snorts. "I have eyes as well, sister." Wrong response. A frown almost dips the edges of Ninaya's mouth, but Ninaya knows her manners well enough not to dignify Suleh's comment with a rejoinder. Suleh recalls them too, but her mouth is a traitorous creature. She winces, listening to the mechanical clatter and rumble of approaching and departing transits in lieu of acknowledging the tender shoot of guilt that sprouts within her chest. It is easier to simply wait for Ninaya to fold her arms in a quiet sign of unhappiness.

Ninaya's features break from those tense lines for only a moment and Suleh watches as Ninaya moistens her lips, drawing in a deep breath. People are boarding the transit now, some carrying luggage of various shapes and sizes, others scolding overly energetic children. "You won't like the country life," Ninaya murmurs. Pauses. "But I suppose you already knew that. Safe travels, sister." She presses her gloved hands together, her thumb slipping between her second and third finger, the other digits clasped over the top plane of her hand.

Suleh mimics the formal farewell wordlessly, forcing her mouth to lift in a faint smile. "Our roots are linked," Suleh breathes, before she adjusts her pack and steps into line of straggling passengers entering the transit carriage. She ventures a final glance over her shoulder to catch sight of her sister, a lone, still figure in a kinetic sea of people, the flowers twined in her hair now an artificial stormy gray.

Gray reminds Suleh of the skies above Taleneh, perpetually weeping drizzling rain, the slow fall of rain punctuated by staccato bursts of stormy weather that blows in from the east.



Suleh is dreaming. She is in her lab, in the quiet area set aside for her personal projects. A glowlight lamp shines steadily down on the table, but its light fails to unravel the complex problem that sits before her, a sample of the most prolific fungal species plaguing the city, out-competing the artificially bound plants that formed the basis of much technology that facilitate the prosperity of Taleneh city. From the lifts, to the aerial branchway paths, Taleneh is a city woven of bindings, the system of magic that allows Taleneh binder-engineers to create new plant species that form the foundations for the towering, organic architecture that are the hallmark of Taleneh civilization to the tiny soft plant fiber threads of Taleneh clothes, or the complex medicines that help buffer the Taleneh from the diseases that thrive in their wet climate. The lab is Suleh's world. She is at home among shelves of experimental specimens, among the flat surfaces of the work tables, scattered with papers littered with diagrams, calculations, and procedures. She loves the thrill of tackling the puzzle of maintaining that delicate balance between the impossibility of magic with the rationality, the insatiable inquiry of science- for binding requires both a mind with the will to wield magic and to set oneself toward challenge of discovery.



The lab here is woefully underequipped, as I expected. No, I am not worried. I applied for this position with full knowledge of what the job would entail. I am settling in well enough. I did receive your package yes. Two weeks late, but that is to be expected in the provinces. The material of the coat is pleasant enough, thick and waterproof. It will be useful here, though it does not rain quite so much as the city. But, the labs. The technicians do well enough. A few even have a city education, but their adherence to proper lab procedure is horrendous. They've seemingly very little concern for their own safety, or for that of their lab mates. Lab accidents happen, of course. Chemical Binding is a dangerous and delicate discipline, especially in a lab of this security class. I've been forced to discipline the lab workers constantly for their infractions, but they're an unruly bunch, though not to my face, of course. In the provinces, it seems that my rank holds both more and less weight. My face is no boon. They know that I am from the city before I part my lips to speak. Still, by completing this favor, I will secure that funding we need. Our competition has made a breakthrough, I've heard. A small one, but progress is still progress. We cannot fall behind.

Enough of that. How is experiment B-83k running? You'll have to complete the replicant trials without me, but I've trained you well.



The lab isn't as much as an escape as it ought to be and Suleh is exhausted and frustrated. Exhaustion seems to have become her ground state, it seems. The lab's research is progressing smoothly, if not slowly, but she still spends a good quarter of her time supervising the lab technicians. With her stern gaze pressing against their backs, the technicians tend to work faster and harder and it is only through that discipline, to the

rigorous commitment to their work that they will continue to earn success. When Suleh can wrestle a moment of peace to herself, she fits herself into the space of her tiny private work area and loses herself in calculations that she will code and wrap in countless security measures, before dropping off the bulging packet of her intellectual labor to the transit station to be transferred back to her colleagues in Taleneh's inner city. A month has already drifted past in the dreary Provinces and Suleh is sick of wandering the unfamiliar flat branchways that comprise her new, temporary home. She is only here for the favor, she reminds herself. She needs that funding. People are dependent on her for that grant, but the provinces are no different than the city, really. Suleh is not so naïve to have expected a warm welcome, but this is the homeland of her father and mother. The people here look like her father, sometimes. They carry the strong set of his shoulders, the tight curls of his hair and the deep, rich tones of his skin, but when she visits his family, those people who share more than just superficial looks with him, her cousins peer at her with the thinly veiled contempt. She had sacrificed precious lab hours to make the half-day long journey to their estates.

She supposes their response is only fair. After all, she had always directed similar looks of loathing and fascination toward those Taleneh of the core city who were the children of wealthy parents who'd had the privilege of growing up with a proper Taleneh bloodline. Two Taleneh parents, not just citizens, but two parents who could confirm the purity of their genetics both in their physical looks and in their family trees. Except, unlike those children, Suleh doesn't belong to the Taleneh of the city or the thick forests of the Jentu Province. Her mother had been the daughter of a wealthy Taleneh core city family, before she'd run off to marry Suleh's father, who had been born in Jentu. He'd

come from good Jentu stock, a healthy, intelligent young man, but he wasn't really Taleneh, of course, and that was all that mattered. The Jentu had been conquered long ago, after all, and that sort of stain lingers. Unlike Ninaya, Suleh will never look Taleneh enough to live uncommented upon in the Taleneh core city. But if her face belongs to the Jentu Province, the cadence of her speech, the materials of the few pieces of clothing she'd brought with her from the Taleneh inner city, even the nuances of her body language—each characteristic is an injunction against her, another mark labeling her as outsider. Other. Always other, even among the people of her father whom she closely resembles. The hard-won wealth of her parents, the prestige her sister had garnered for her creative pursuits in binding, even her own rank of master-binder that expressed her ability to lead a full research lab of technicians—none of it was enough.



But Suleh is still dreaming.

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