



It is the day of the Feast of the Immaculate City.

The sun has risen and plugged itself into the sky. The streaks of fog have burned from the foothills. The alluvial plain of the city below gleams and burns in the sunlight. There is no grass, no shrubbery, no dirt to soften the land. There are no flowers, no leaves, no hair of any animal to bristle in the rare wind. The black photovoltaic plane burns, blank and hot as a cooktop. Pearls of grease—what look like pearls of grease from above, silvery and luminescent—gather on the blacktop. Now the grease hops and scatters in the heat with nowhere to go. Watch them burn, burn, burn until they disappear.

11:02 AM, THE CITY

It is the hour before lunch hour, and desperation is creeping through the City. It trickles like sweat beneath the stiff, silvery headscarves that crowd beneath the patterned tent on the patio. It trickles like melted ice in the rapidly warming cart of a vendor, who is dishing out rare icy treats for the morning. It wedges itself like a splitting stone between the bricks in this particular alley, chaotic with the wings of a gray nylon tarp that has ripped loose from one corner in the night.

Despite the desperation, the feeling is still—determinedly festive? The children are the source of the festivity. The alley shouts with the coordinating commands of one child as he directs five others. They are mixing face paint (charcoal paste made from charred wood and water; red ochre from pulverized brick and, the children giggle, mostly spit); sorting sapphires and rubies and garnets and jades (pine pitch resin that has been dyed and molded) into small piles; and matching feathers by size

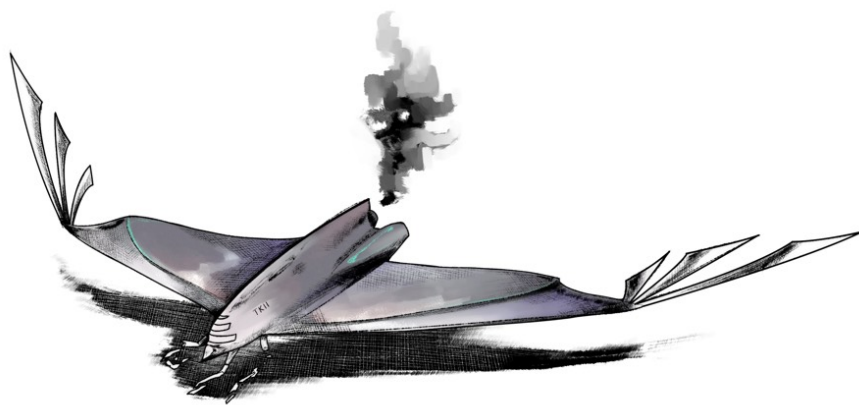
(some of are dyed crimson or black or amber, others left plain). They guffaw and gape as they adorn themselves, slapping paint across their noses, gluing gems in patterns on their cheeks and brows.

Across the City, the adults (who have left the children, this independence its own small rite of passage on this day, each year) decorate themselves similarly. Their laughter is less raucous, but they do smile as they swipe marks across their cheekbones, and place jewels in funny patterns over their noses. The vendor, securing his cart, sucking on a sweet, dripping ice shard, is waved over to have his face painted, too.

So silly! So fun! Artists and artwork alike stand back to behold themselves to each other, agreeing that they look like birds and fairies; like elves and demons. So resilient, these people who can find a game in anything.

They are not dressing for a celebration, after all; they are camouflaging themselves to survive. It is The Feast of the Immaculate City!

They have less than an hour to get home before the feast begins. They will proceed, in slow ceremony, across the City, toward home (the apartments that they squat in). They will sing songs of hope and survival. *We are alive! We belong!* their songs and rituals remind them. *No matter where we are, we make each other whole.* Their bright and sparkling faces assure them that even utilitarian surveillance blocking measures—feathers, gems, face paint to obscure their human features—can be made whimsical. Rituals of happiness are important, in life as in death, and today is a day that promises both.



| Art by Brianna Castagnozzi

11:03 AM, THE SKY

Hunger stalks, sometimes bounds, and always hunts in the City. For all its greasy, oily burning, there is never enough meat.

Except for today.

Everyone is hungry in the City, and the drones are no exception. They have been hunting since dawn, through the fog that streaked their sleek, black sides, before the sun ate up all the moisture. They advance, looking powerful and silky, over spiky gray pine and redwood snags, over skeletal umbrellas of dingy white yarrow, over dense silver mats of sagebrush, over the dead, dusted river. They whine toward the old, empty condos, toward the mica-sparkling sidewalks; toward the hollow blue water tower, toward the shining solar-paneled streets that ping faintly as they tick toward the sun.

They've captured so much in the past four hours, as they survey the hundreds of miles between the State and the City, but still they haven't eaten. They too are becoming desperate.

11:04 AM, THE STATE

Yes. There is a State, some few hundreds of miles away from the City. And how can we understand the City, if we don't understand its antagonist?

Cold gray-and-white-marbled hallway, white fluorescent lights, the rubber mallet *click clock click clock* of a confident stride, banging and clanging, heel-sole against the hollow floors.

Her jacket whips around the corner before she does. Made of metalliferous fabrics, the coat flows like liquid silver. Its pointed hood peaks over her head of tight curls, drapes around her exaggerated shoulders. It folds and swishes elegantly around her taper-trouser legs. The shoes that came clicking down the hallway are silver, and shining, and pointed. Audacious, this one, extravagant. It must be expensive, the coat. Lower-end signal blocking fashion (and even low-end is still too expensive for most people) is heavy, stiff, holds fast to its wrinkles; more crumpled dollar than quicksilver mercury. This woman has money, as well as taste, as well as guts; the guts being what allows her to whip around corners in this hallway at all.

She stops in front of a door. A name is etched into a soft brass plate: McNally Waste Removal.

She tries the knob; it gives a millimeter, and then stops short.

The State is a technological safehouse: biometric access, homomorphic encryption, neuralinked databases. The marvelous has become mundane, even common criminals know how to exploit their weaknesses. The safest storage place in

the State is in the past: few people have the patience for analog tech. The woman slips a hand into one voluminous pocket of her magnificent coat, and pulls out two pieces of steel wire bent into loops. She unbends one entirely, folds it in half until there is a narrow eyehole at its end; she opens the other to a 45 degree angle. She slides the eyehole into the keyhole, thumbs it down. She inserts the straightened wire of the other, fiddles, fiddles again. Twists the eyehole, which twists the keyhole, and the lock clicks open. A thrill of satisfaction tightens her lips against her teeth. Ah! The endlessly adaptable technology of the paperclip!

11:05 AM, THE CITY

It is not even five minutes into the ceremonial hour (the hour before the Feast), and things are not going well.

The children secure their tarp, but Mateo (the child who was in charge) darts away, sticking out his tongue and waving his hands in the air. His face is garishly red and abundant in rubies. He always is the daredevil, this one. "I bet you I can make it!" he yells over one shoulder, long black hair and crimson feathers whipping his words as they fly from his mouth. He will run to the dump, grab something to prove he's been there, and run back home fast. *Being brave is easy, he thinks, but no one is as brave as me!*

Across the City, the adults have begun their procession. The vendor begins to lower his heavy metal cart from the sparkling white curb. There are no pedestrian ramps in this City. Those that had been in place, when this City was a different city, have been *cut out*. After all, there are officially no pedestrians, and they officially deserve no accommodations. The vendor is practiced at this calisthenic operation—but, ah! Curse his luck today! The wheel of the cart (a relic he really should abandon; but there are so few joys in this life that he keeps putting it off) pauses for just a fraction of a second too long. The cart jolts sharply down as the shoddy curb fragments in two. The vendor jerks right to compensate, but his desperate grip ensures that, already off-balance, he trips. His foot slides from beneath him, and he pulls the cart down on top. It does not just crack his tibia. When the cart finally settles on the ground, the vendor's leg is snapped in half. A bloody, sharp, shard of tibia blazes white from the reddish black mess.

He cries out before he can help it, a muted howl of agony and fear. *No, no! Not today!*

The people nearest to him stop and turn back, fear stricken and nauseated by what they see. They look to each other, and to the Sky. One of the three retches;

another's eyes are overfull with tears. Of course, they consider running. But, in the City, it is almost impossible to be heartless. Oh no, not because they are better people than their kin in the State. And not because if they do not follow some barbaric ritual or rule, they will lose their place in their City. There is no prescriptive answer programmed into their brains. There is no ritualistic response for every possible scenario.

Life in the City is not *easier* than life in the State. It is not a utopia, after all!

But it is different.

The people who live in the City *are* different, but not in the way you might think. There are systems in the City that encourage certain behavior, and systems to account for deviations. Out of necessity, kindness, generosity, and collectivity are emphasized and rewarded. When reasoning and nuance fails, blunt requirement will sometimes suffice. That accounts for some of the difference. Systems shape people, it's true.

But the biggest difference is not a policy or a system. It is just something that they practice, from a very young age. But I digress!

Three people return to the vendor. Together, they heft the cart from his leg. The first man pulls off his scarf and rips it into strips. He directs another person to kneel, hard, on the vendor's thigh. Press until the spurting blood stops. He ties the strip right above the kneeling woman's knee, yanks until the pulses of blood pulse more slowly, and then stops.

They grab the vendor beneath the armpits and pull, and now he does pass out. His ruined leg drags behind them. A slurry of blood and meat is left in his wake.

11:07 AM, THE SKY

They scent it. They intake air through the three small holes in their blunt faces. The air is held for assessment in a small chamber, the smooth walls of which are synthesized from metal oxide nanoparticles. Every odor has a pattern; this odor is matched to its pattern in the time it takes for a desire to flame, a muscle fiber to twitch, saliva to squirt. They swivel in the sky, not unbeautifully, not unlike a murmuration; but perhaps, and forgive the overt comparison, more like a murder.

Two minutes after the adults have heaved-carry-stumbled the vendor into a building, the air over the field shivers into pieces. A black hull, surprisingly silent, glides through the sky. Seven strong but spindly legs unfold from where they have been tucked smoothly against the belly. It lands with a clattering of feet. Its electric motor—audible now that it is not in the sky—whines to a stop. It is larger on the

ground than it appears in the air: four feet from nose to tail, thick as a dog, about half again as tall. The wings stretch six feet, from tip to tip. But it is run-of-the-mill, worn out, as far as machinery goes these days. A long, angry gouge scars the parabola of its body. Its nose is slightly concave from some blunt force trauma (probably crash landings, but sometimes there are head-to-head collisions). Its right wing is canted at a slightly off angle.

It lowers its rigid proboscis to the pavement with a soft, mechanical *shirring*. It sucks the sticky red substance and shards of bone and the few chunks of flesh through the tube. The flavor profile sends shivers of what can only be called pleasure all through its circuitry. The intensity of the voltage corresponds to its programming: what it sucks and licks and cleans from the pavement is its favorite flavor.

As the drone rises to rejoin its pack, it falters. It jerks and whines and stutters and stops. It spirals twice in the air as something—old wiring, too dew-damp, overdue for servicing—short circuits in its brain. The drone spins to earth a few hundred yards away, putting out its legs to stop itself. The three that touch ground snap away in pieces, but it lessens the impact enough so that the hull itself does not explode. It shudders across ten solar panels, shattering the perfect black tops, and then lays, crumpled and ticking and broken.

11:10 AM, THE CITY

They don't have cute pet names for the drones; they aren't cute, and they aren't pets. They call them "drones." But Mateo, who heard the crash while he was sprinting to the dump (*Most Brave Kid in the City, Best Looking One Too* flashes in neon lights inside his mind), once he falls in love, will call this one "Takkee" after the letters and numbers on its composite sides: TK11. Mateo doesn't see the acrylic "MWR" peeling off the hull (yes, for *McNally Waste Removal*). After he skids to a stop, after he has stilled to make sure the drone will not lunge toward him, he holds out a small hand to the drone's... nose? Allows it to...sniff?

Mateo, who has watched these metallic birds hunt through the Sky all of his life (all nine years) has always wanted to see one up close. Now that one is right in front of him, he is in awe. It is both more and less magnificent than he had imagined, and this combination seizes him more than if it had been exactly what he envisioned. For this is a mystery, a conundrum, a mirage. It is bigger up close than it looks in the sky, but it is lighter and slighter as well. This *slightness*, along with its crumpled front legs shattered around it, and its sounds like huffing sighs, is what seals the deal. The drone's vulnerability and need seduce him, work on him completely, meet the not-

particularly-difficult puzzle of Mateo's bravado and aloneness to pop him open like a lock. He is suddenly, completely, irrevocably in love. He presses his fingertips to the drone's cold nose; when nothing happens, he presses his whole palm. A shiver of pleasure and fear bunches around his neck and scatters down his arms. "I will call you Takkee," he says, and smiles his first real smile in a year.

There are so few pleasures in the City, it is true.

11:13 AM, THE STATE

Inside McNally Waste Removal's office, shadowed light dusts mahogany. A blocky desk takes up the middle of the room, in addition to a high-backed chair, and a row of leather-bound books behind. Tasteful, old-school. The office is nice. Not ostentatious, but clearly very expensive. And while for decades the State contracted with private firms like McNally, paying reasonable sums to manage the dwindling business of mundane philanthropies like waste disposal, water treatment, and subsidized access to energy grids for public citizens, there is less need for these services, now that the State has surpassed its population goals.

No, McNally makes their fortune elsewhere. The woman pushes the hood from her face, letting her curls spring free. She slips off her shoes, and stretches her toes. Why not get comfortable; this could take awhile. She turns to the bookcase and fingers the rows of books, stopping at a fat, green leather volume. A-ha. It is what she is looking for: a ledger, analog. The best way to keep your data clean in a place like this. She takes out a small leather case and snaps it open. There are times that call for more advanced technology than a paperclip, and this is one of them. She removes the eye glasses from their case, and begins to scan, line by line, name by name. The data is in no particular order; it could take *hours* to find the single name she seeks. *Nothing* takes hours anymore! The woman laughs quietly to herself; she has slightly less than one hour to spare. But it is amazing what one can accomplish with patience and focus, those relics of the past.

11:17 AM, THE CITY

Back in the dusty building, they believe they can save Miguel, the vendor. Maybe. It will require a trip to the outskirts of the City. A woman, Lisa, will go because she is the fastest. Less than an hour before the Feast, but probably she can make it. She ducks her head out of the building, and absent-mindedly wipes a hand across her sweating forehead. A sapphire clatters to the ground, and her hand comes away

smear a deep, luscious green. No matter—brown skin, green paint, scattered jewels: the mess obscures her face just as well as the design. She goes! The City streets tilt beneath her, canted east for sunlight until noon when they will lie flat, raised a few inches off the true ground. She finds her course, then leaps from tilted tile to tilted tile, too fast for gravity to catch her.

She stops to check on the kids, in the alley. They don't *live* under the tarp, they'll have to come inside soon. But the kids find it cozy, like a fort! Lisa's own children, Mark and Jamilah, are cuddled together, in a nest of soft rags (they are pretending, with their feathers, to be baby birds). She nods at them. "Wait here," she says. "Miguel may be dying." She does a quick headcount, and—teeth sucking displeasure. "Where's Mateo?" she asks.

"Trying to be brave," Jamilah says, rolling her serious brown eyes.

11:18 AM, THE STATE

Resting her eyes from their task for a few moments, the woman takes three steps to the window and peers between blinds. The State is—clean. Very nearly antiseptic.

Do you need to know when cities became illegal? Or is it enough for me to tell you that it was not so different from what you and I have lived through? More droughts, more fires. When there weren't droughts and fires, there were floods and landslides. Infrastructure, especially power grids, were overworked and failing. And yet, people continued to demand power. The problem, the State decided, was not that people wanted too much power. The problem was that there were too many people.

It took some time. The culling of a population always does. But privately owned states were able to achieve their goals relatively quickly—without the fuss and tangle of public government bureaucracy.

The State instituted birthing quotas and death quotas. Stripped back the Medicare system. Eased regulations everywhere: firearms, food, drugs, education. And sat back for one hundred years. The very rich percent prospered. They relied on private goods and private systems. These, greased with money and unimpeded by principles, flourished without regulation.

Others fled the State. First, they settled in abandoned cities, and tried to establish themselves permanently. But the State followed on their heels, declaring public cities to be public health crises. During the Great Waste Removal movement of the 2070s, they bulldozed homes and padlocked apartments, covered over parks and lawns, and installed thousands of yards of solar panels over the streets.

You don't believe that a government would do this? Bulldoze homes, trash belongings, leave people with *nowhere* to live, functionally murder its denizens simply for being...unsightly? Nuisances. Disorderly. Really? *Really?*

But, people always find ways to live between tyrannies. Now, the City is just that: a people. Nomads, squatting and resisting. They move from place to place. They do not build permanent residences. They scavenge scraps and repurpose leftovers. They use very little power. They farm, gather, and hunt (small game, mostly). And they pass down new ways to live. They may survive the apocalypse with their humanity intact. Sometimes, the diaspora does.

The woman looks out the window, and remembers this. When she leaves, *click clocking* on those shiny bright sidewalks, she will heave a big gob of spit right onto the State. A little message, just for fun.

Her eyes light on the name she was seeking. She writes the relevant information down (paper and pen!), and replaces the book. Time to go.

She leaves the building, jacket swishing, heels a-clopping. Hawks a giant lugey on the sidewalk. And gives a finger to the cameras that *tick tick tick* along with her.

She knows her way around the State, having lived there for most of her life (since she was nine!). Now, hood thrown off (it's amazing how quickly the jacket morphs into a fashion statement without it) she follows the wide white sidewalks (*click clock click*) half a mile past the gleaming square, with its ornate marble fountain spurting out gallons of crystal clear water (there's hardly anyone to see it, let alone steal a drink), past the stone and glass mansions set far back on their grassy hills, past the manicured rose gardens, and into the cozy downtown. Small cafes and pastry shops and clothing boutiques, farm to table restaurants, and even an outdoor market—people love their quaint, healthy pleasures—line the cobblestone way. She orders a latte and a real-butter croissant, and watches the glistening mechanics of the shop do its work. So beautiful, the shopkeepers are! Silver and gold and glass and bronze. Pleasure shivers down her spine as she takes her ceramic mug from its joint. Beautiful, beautiful, all!

Once in her office (no paperclip here; palm pressed against a cool stone wall that slides into itself with a *whoosh*), nestled right in downtown, full of light wood and long rows of glass, she taps her finger to one flatscreen. A few keystrokes here, another few there. She enters the data (encrypted passwords, domain names, birth dates) she has gathered in order to locate McNally. Not Robert McNally, Sr. (the founder of the great waste removal conglomerate). Robert McNally, III. His young son.

11:22 AM, THE CITY

The window in which Lisa can help Miguel is shrinking, but she cannot find Mateo. He is not at the dump. He is not at the park. He is not in the alley. She can cross the river, collect the yarrow, find the supplies their friends from the State hopefully dropped (they have ways of communicating; Lisa has asked for antibiotics); or, she can continue looking for the wayward boy. If he is outside, alone, come noon—well, it is the Feast of the Immaculate City. The drones have permission to kill any human they find.

Mateo has always been prone to choosing selfishness and adventure, traits that will not serve him well in the City. Lisa makes the decision. She will choose in the way that makes her people so different, that enables them to survive. Her heart breaks a little bit. This will be painful.

11:37 AM, THE STATE

The woman locks up her office, takes the stairs to the roof, and summons her own sleek, silver heliplane. Over the State she flies: over the glass and stone mansions, over acres of rolling green hills, over the fabulous rose gardens, over the sloshing water towers.

The sprawling school sits inside its forested grounds, its classroom windows spotted here and there with the ruddy faces of healthy children. She lands on the (outdoor) basketball court, but the children barely glance her way. They are studying for some test or other, and are used to remarkable entrances. The young Robert in his finery (wool pants and silk shirt) is brought to her, handed over, and buckled right into his seat. Someone has told the school that his father wants him home; has said so over McNally's private communication channel.

They fly now, quickly, over the pinyon pines and over the snags, over the yarrow and over the sagebrush, over the river bed and toward the empty condos. The woman points out the empty water tower and makes a comment on the heat, on dehydration, on what it feels like to die very, very slowly. Robert shifts, uneasy, finally asks, "where are we going?"

11:42 AM, THE CITY

Mateo *yowls* as he's yanked upright, away from his Takkee. One look at Lisa's face tells him he's in trouble. He bursts into immediate and inconsolable tears. "Takkee,"

he wails, as Lisa drags him away. As angry as she is, she knows she cannot take him home like this, no matter what monsters are hunting them from above. She forces herself to stop dragging the child, to stop scanning the horizon. "Mateo," she says gently, looking into his eyes. "Please, take a moment to breathe deeply, before we must say goodbye, my love." And in this way, she eases what must come next.

11:45 AM, THE CITY

If Miguel dies, it will not be *because* of Mateo, of course not; it will be *because* of the systems of pain and oppression the people of the City must try to survive within. And yet, Mateo's selfishness made it more likely that the vendor would die. Mateo cannot continue to put more people in jeopardy: selfishness can spread, recklessness is a contagion.

"He is just a boy," you cry. "It isn't fair!"

Life in the City is not fair. It is *life*.

The adults all prepare for what they must do.

12:00 PM, THE CITY

It is done. Mateo lies, curled in Lisa's arms, immobile. She is crying; everyone is crying. It was painful, but they have done it.

After a moment, they each look up. It is 12 pm—the hour of the Feast!—but they don't hear any drones. Lisa places Mateo on the ground, and peeks outside. The Sky blazes above, quiet and empty.

No drones on the Feast of the Immaculate City? But—no, nothing they've done could have changed that. She is too exhausted from what they have just done to consider what this means.

She lays back down on the mat. Mateo's little body heaves with another great sob, and then stills. Lisa kisses the top of his head, murmurs sweet things in his ear. They will have to repeat this, over and over again, as many times as necessary, until he can do at least some of it for himself. As they all must learn to do some of it for themselves (They'll never be able to do it *all* by themselves; nor should they).

Hold on. Wait...you didn't...what did you *think* had happened? I see, you forgot that I said this isn't a utopia? This is not *Omelas*, after all; not even *Um-Helat*. No one is murdered here. Certainly not for anything so human as selfishness or curiosity or the desire for fine, even extraordinary things. This is, mostly, just an ordinary City. Maybe you still don't understand.

Let us go back to the vendor (who is resting in a nearby room; he may yet survive). When his friends stopped, and paused before helping? They were stopping to *feel*. They felt their fear and desperation, and did not bludgeon the sensations away. They felt their love for their friend, and their horror and pity for his pain. They felt their concurrent, and natural, desire to avoid sharing any more of his pain. They felt their love for their families (if they have them), and for their friends (they all have them). They felt their desire to return home to their loves, alive and whole. They felt their helplessness and their sadness and their apathy and disinterest.

Their ability to feel is, partially, how they survive, in the City.

But that is not all. The City is made of the ones whose parents and grandparents and great-grandparents walked away, while the State was choosing death and suffering of some, in order to cater to the comforts of the chosen. Their descendants have learned that walking away is its own burden to bear. They have learned how to carry this burden. That is, they have learned how to tolerate *shame*. When they do something wrong, or harmful, or terrible, or mean—especially when they have done something unforgivable, or turned their back on pain—they are taught first and foremost to call the sensations that they feel *shame*. They are taught how to feel, how to hold, how to soothe their shame. They are taught, above all, that regardless of what those sensations make them think, they are still lovable, still human, still whole, even more so because they are imperfect. To be imperfect is to be human; to be perfect is to be a drone!

This is what distinguishes the City from the State. The State, where everything is possible because nothing is felt!

This is what they have been doing with Mateo. Explaining to him the consequences of his actions, and helping him to feel the shame that spirals through his small body. Selfishness, they explain, is human. Falling in love with a drone, even! So human. They assure him and reassure him. But they do not allow him to protest, to armor himself with excuses, against what might have been the crushing loss of another being. *Yes, yes, you are human*, they teach him gently. *And to be human is to hurt others. You must learn to bear this truth. You must learn to make decisions with wisdom.* He sobs and yells and rages and sulks. He refuses to speak, refuses to look at them. But they speak to him, and they look at him. They hold him, and they nudge him. Until finally, he collapses in Lisa's arms, exhausted, and sleeps.

Coming to terms with the burden of being human (it is *always* a "coming"; no one will ever arrive) takes many, many years, and many, many pillars of support. To survive shame, they learn, over and over again, they need love. For love, they need each other. On balance, knowing this allows them to help each other more. On

balance, they hurt each other less. On balance, it is what has enabled them to survive.

“But what about punishment!” you cry. “What about justice?”

Have you never felt shame? Do you think learning to feel it is not punishment enough? Look at the boy, look at his body. Is it punishment he needs, or holding?

11:55 AM, THE SKY

But fine. Sometimes punishment is necessary, too.

There is another reason they survive: friends. Connections. Infiltrators who quietly (and stylishly) smolder on the inside. In fact, soon, Mateo will be given a choice, like the woman was at his age. Given his love for beautiful machines, given his bravery and, well, recklessness, he will be offered the chance to train with her (as she was trained by the woman before her). To become as she became: a poisoned thorn plucked from the City, embedded deep within the State.

“Robert,” the woman, the thorn, says now to her unwilling passenger in the heliplane, “do you see these drones hovering beside us? Did you know what they were programmed to do, in approximately five minutes?”

Robert shakes his head.

“They will spray lethal gas on the City. They will spray, and spray, until people have no choice but to come running out from their shelters, to find clean, un-poisoned air. And they will shoot the people—anyone with recognizable human features—who come running out of their shelters. Even children. Like you.” The woman is not a monster, so she does not elaborate further. About why the day is called a *feast*.

Robert shakes his head again.

“They do. And your father, and his father, make money from this business. They call it *waste removal*. They say it is to keep the world clean and spotless. They say, because people are not allowed to inhabit the cities, that any life they find cannot be *people*. No matter that the drones are programmed to recognize, and shoot, *people*. I don’t think that’s right. Do you?” The woman does not wait for the boy to shake his head one more time. “As the only heir to the McNally Waste corporation, your father likes to know where you are at all times. There is a chip embedded in your wrist that can send a message to your father via any drone in the State. With a few tweaks—and I am the queen of tweaks—this chip will also let me deprogram these awful killing drones. Will you allow me to use it? I don’t want to have to cut it out.” (It pains her to say this. She *is* from the City; she knows that she is traumatizing him. She hopes that he will heal, in time, with support.)

Robert holds out his wrist—he has been so well trained to obey anyone who speaks with enough authority; he hadn't even thought to send a distress message before this moment—and she holds out a scanner. Punches in some numbers. And punches in some more. In just a few keystrokes, she has deprogrammed the drones, and deprogrammed the boy. The drones can no longer kill—at least not for now, not until they are re-programmed. And the boy is no longer searchable. They will have to find him—manually, potentially even on foot! And that will be difficult. The City will move after today. They never stay in one place for long. They will gather themselves, and their ways, and find a new home. (Why did they wait until after the Feast to move, you wonder? Why not flee before it occurs? It is an act of resistance to move on one's own terms.)

“I am going to drop you off right here, in these wastelands. You have no way to call for help, no way to beam yourself to safety. We are hundreds of miles from the State, you know. But we aren't too far from the City—where the City is, at least until tomorrow. If you want to survive, you can choose to make your way there.” She points. “It's up to them whether they'll take you in or not. They *will* help you, if they take you. If you decide you want to feel what you feel. You can learn to understand why this happened. But it won't be easy.”

She lets the boy out. She points him in the right direction. She lifts off in her heliplane, and heads back home.

And this is all you'll get to satisfy your blood lust. The boy is left. But he is left with a choice. He can run back towards the terrible State, and certain death on the way.

Or he can choose life in the City.





Endria Isa Richardson is a black, malaysian, and gay american writer from Worcester, Massachusetts. Endria writes about ghosts, monsters, and the catastrophic failure of systems that are supposed to keep us safe. Her stories are in *Lightspeed*, *Clarksworld*, *FIYAH*, *Nightmare*, and other fantastic/al magazines. In her past life, Endria was a prison abolitionist lawyer. You can find more of her work at www.endriarichardson.com.

