



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

CORRIDORS

This is where you live.

BY RAHUL KANAKIA

You live in a city that is a planet. Humanity has reached its full maturity. The Galaxy is empty. The Galaxy is full. Your life is built atop a trillion tonnes of steel that your forefathers pulled from the core of planets that are now black and empty.

When you go to sleep, you hear your neighbour arguing with his wife through the wall. He wants her to become a dancer, and she wants to sleep for a thousand centuries. You wish you had someone to argue with.

You live in a city that spans a planet. You go to the gardens on the surface, but you don't stare at the greenery or at the Sun. Instead, you look down into the latticework, at the millions of miles of tubes and wires and structural shapes and spidersteel webbing.

A woman is shrieking and crying, and you wonder why the medical robots haven't yet injected her with a dose of reality, but she says, "No, no, I won't suck down any more of your nasty drink! I've already lost too many years!" and you realize that she is not insane. She is simply bereft.

You live in a city that covers a planet. And within that city you live in a box that has one thousand square feet of surface area. The box has windows, and when you stand next to those windows, you see either: 1) the dark of the inner corridors; 2) the neon gleam of the night districts; or 3) the Sun beaming down through the interstices above.

All three views are the same, of course.

Your mother lives in a chip implanted above your left eyebrow, and your father shot himself into the atmosphere before you were born. You have two clone brothers who look nothing like you, even though everyone says they do. Chalub is the innamorato of a

not-yet-famous composer, and Zohern lives in a stairwell 2,000 miles from here.

The next time you go to the garden, it has acquired a yellow tinge, and you wonder if it's dying. All things die, eventually. That is something your mother told you a long time ago, but she must not have believed her own words, because when you repeated them back to her, she went silent for many years.

Even now, she does not often emerge. You can feel her, basking in the sunlight, thriving on your blood. And her silence is not an awful thing. Some people — their heads sparkle in the sunlight — are forced to wear the chips of a thousand others. They are never free of other minds, other voices. You are not like that. You are almost allowed to be yourself.

A shrill voice pierces the garden, and you look up. The woman is there, carrying on, and you avoid her eyes because you know that if you see each other too many times, then you and she will order a love elixir and choose to drink it with each other, because that is how the city works.

You live on a planet that is covered by a city, and the city has nine trillion inhabitants, and if you repeatedly bump into one of them, then you know that the city has chosen for you.

This is a mystical belief. The city bureaucrats insist that they do no choosing. They insist that the world is cruel and meaningless, and they say the only order is that which arises from a rigidly logical mind.

The woman falls to her knees and shrieks, "A-we! A-we! A-we!"

You are crying. But it is okay, because sometimes these tears are tears of joy. The maybe-crazy woman

kneels opposite you, and the flow of traffic passes between you. A child — she has wisps of wire hanging from her eyebrows — turns around and around and you expect her to fall over, dizzy, but she doesn't. She simply gets faster and faster and faster, until she explodes with light and is gone.

When you were young, you believed that disappearing children went to a better place, but then your mother said no — the children were dead, and death equalled nothingness.

Years later, though, you learned the truth: no one knows where the children go, or why they leave.

You see the girl's father, standing next to the empty space, and her father looks at you. Then he gathers up his daughter's clothing and zips it into a bag, and he walks onwards too.

The woman — the woman who cries and might be crazy — stares at you.

"The city will crumble," you say, but the woman is too far away to hear it.

A-way, A-way, A-way. Some say the world will go on and on, extending into the foreverness, but you don't believe it.

In the meantime, you know that you are lonely. You know that the city is full of lonely people. You know that someday you will meet another lonely soul. And you know that you and she (or you and he) will drink the devil's drink and bind yourselves together in an intimate union that will go on and on and on for centuries until some sideways and mysterious shift of the ghost-brain turns you back into strangers. ■

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