

Overseer

Two's company.

Crack!

My whip cleaves the air inches from Mr Harmond's face. The noise is enough — I never use anything more than noise — to bring his attention back to the now. He stoops down, and his hands squish into the mud under the ankle-deep water.

He'll plant another five or six paddies before he gets distracted again.

I imagine my father shuffling slowly from our flat to the market. A bright yellow used and reused polythene bag hangs from the crook of his elbow. When he gets to the market, the shopkeeper scoops out rice with his aluminium scoop, into a paper bag, and then my father shuffles home. He's bought the rice I helped to grow.

My father would have bought other things too. Vegetables, and fish, if it's fresh. He always buys much more than he can carry, then insists on carrying it.

Another Mr Harmond rises, slowly, until he is upright, slack-jawed, his face in alignment with the first glimmers of dawn.

I let him be.

The sun crests over the hills and one by one the drenched paddies fill with light: a thousand broken mirrors carpeting the valley in white and gold.

The light dazzles the Harmonds every day, and no work is done for two hours.

My mother sends me letters.

I imagine her getting on the bus to the comms tower, the two-hour ride through noisy streets. She waits in line. How long? Finally she gets to a terminal and some person — maybe another young girl that reminds her of me — helps my mother to fill out the forms.

My replies are always about the sun and the fields and the Harmonds because there are questions I have that I don't feel brave enough to ask. My father was shuffling when I left. Can he still walk? With

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me gone, who carries the groceries up to their flat?

Sometimes I imagine a day when I get a letter. In it, my mother tells me that my father has passed away. His pension is half, for a widow, and she says she's found work in a restaurant. She doesn't say what kind of work but I know it's cleaning the toilets. Work an old woman can do, slowly.



The corp uses my fields as a training model. New Overseers, fresh off the starships, gawk at the Harmonds planting rice in business suits with rolled-up grey synthasilk trousers and muddy wet cuffs.

The Harmonds get very upset in anything other than grey suits. I can't keep them indoors during dawn; Mr Harmond used to begin his workday at 5:00 a.m..

Because he's from our corp, we have his backstory. Some

rumour, but mostly fact: He was only our chief financial officer, but the chief executive played golf, and Mr Harmond picked up the slack. One day, he had himself Twinned.

Some people can Twin just once and they're non-functional. Halved. But Mr Harmond remained as sharp as ever, and now there were two of him to do two men's work.

Every new Overseer sees the next part of the story coming: the work bred and multiplied, and Mr Harmond had himself Twinned again.

And still he was fine, and now he could do the work of four men.

When people Twin themselves too far, their planet sends them to us and Pasha VI. The self-quartered (and eighthed and sixteenthed) humans plant and harvest millions of acres of paddies in double gravity.

There was a musician who lived on Gambon-Gambina. One day he said he'd composed his last concerto. Then he Twinned himself into sixty-four.

The government allowed him to play the concerto, once.

All the parts.

Then they sent him here.

Sixty-four is too much, even for a genius, and even for us because he couldn't learn anything, not even beating the rice to separate it.

In his memory, Gambon-Gambina forbade that music from ever being played again.

I am not a genius, or a dedicated corp-suit. I just need a single Twin. Tonight I will go to the Clinic.

"All just for show, m'dear," says the old man.

Do I look frightened? I'm not. But the cold concrete and rusting pipes in the room are very different from the pictures in the brochure.

"Post-industrial industrial," he says. "We paid the designer a fortune."

I nod.

At least the operating theatre is shiny, bright and clean. A woman waits inside with a clipboard. She's there to witness my signature.

I insist on reading the contract carefully. They give no guarantee about how functional I'll be once I'm Twinned, but I already knew that. And the contract says it, but I still ask about keeping my job.

"If you can still do it."

Being an Overseer doesn't take brains, just a little bit of care. And there will be two of me. One of me will keep sending all the money home, and one of me will go home.

"We can't ship you back to Earth if you're not functional," says the woman, making a face, "I'd advise you not to —"

"Let it go!" says the man. "She's a bright young woman! She can handle it."

Crack!

I blink. What was I dreaming about?

Crack! A line of fire blossoms on my back. I blink.

My mother. I was remembering my mother. Smiling, I bend down and my hands squish the ropy strands into the mud until they stay upright.

I will carry groceries up the stairs for my mother. ▣

ALDOUS MERCER likes to build worlds, then populate them. He uses his degree in engineering to ensure that none of the spaceships in his books have cubic pressure vessels.