

Plastic

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Anna opened her eyes and smiled. She was wide awake at sunrise, even before the alarm clock had rung, because she was happy. Stretching under the soft linen sheets, she smiled again before she sat up. The sun's first rays had already filled the room with the soft light of early summer mornings. Chirping from an enthusiastic bird floated through the open window, sounding like a song about the kind of happiness that has no particular source or reason.

Anna's big, black, white-pawed cat sat on the window sill with her ears raised, trying to determine the source of the birdsong. When Anna got up, Kitty barely glanced at her with an air of disinterest, and went back to listening to the distant prey. Anna went around the room, turning on her computer and making coffee. Kitty sighed. The bird had stopped chirping, and the cat began to lick her left front paw with meticulous precision. She stopped for a moment only when Anna filled her plastic bowl with cat food. Then she continued with the right paw.

After a first hot gulp of coffee, Anna looked at the poster on the wall and smiled again. The big poster with her picture on it read "Anna Spring, your candidate for Senator. Thinking with you, about you, like you". Although it was a bit narcissistic of her to keep the poster in her bedroom, she had decided she was entitled to a little narcissism. After all, she was one of the youngest women ever to be elected to the Blue Megapolis Senate. Even now, a few days after the elections, she still had moments of disbelief in her own success, when she had to look at the poster to remind herself she was now Madam Senator.

She was sipping her coffee in front of the poster when the computer made the clicking sound of a new e-mail from administrative services. It read, "Ms. Spring, you are expected in the Prime Minister's office for breakfast this morning."

The PM was a big man whose thin squeaky voice made Anna jump whenever she heard it unexpectedly. She wasn't very fond of the man, even though they were from the same party, and she was especially not fond of the fact that he accompanied his breakfast with a cigar. She coughed attentively while he talked behind a veil of blueish smoke.

"I'm very proud of you, Anna, and very happy to help with your new duties. We have a great number of tasks ahead of us. There are the new entertainment regulations to pass, then tax reform and education guidelines to draft. We have our hands full."

She smiled her official smile while he talked, and when he started to repeat himself, she concentrated on her hard-boiled egg, still smiling as if she were listening to him. Thank God the coffee's good, she thought. It makes breakfast tolerable.

"Oh, and there's one more thing. Today you and I are going on a little trip."

Anna started listening again.

"A trip?"

"Yes. To the outside."

"Outside?"

“Outside Blue Megapolis.”

Anna’s eyes opened wide and she put her coffee cup down with a sharp clink of porcelain. She looked at him for a few seconds without speaking while he explained.

“See, I know this is new to you, but so is being a Senator. Ordinary people don’t go out, but you are no longer ordinary.”

Anna had never felt ordinary but she decided not to go into details, instead continued listening in silence.

“The government has decided that every acting politician must be aware of what’s out there. So we’re going on a trip.”

“But... What is out there? I thought it was just empty fields and wilderness. Why would I need to see it?”

“Well, I personally agree with you but... Regulations. We have to go. I’ll send some clothes for you and we’ll leave at 11.”

“Clothes, sir?”

“You’ll see.”

After this most peculiar breakfast came an even more peculiar package from the PM. It contained knee-high rubber boots and clothes made of a thick wool-like material. They looked like they would last a thousand years, a fact that made her feel strangely uncomfortable.

Anna had always wanted to be a politician. Even when she was little, she’d imagined herself in a formal suit, her short hair combed back, her face open to the world. She wanted to do good and she wanted to work in a suit. It was a strange mix of virtue and vanity which had begun at school, where she’d joined debate clubs and helped with campaigns and elections. Then, at university, her career had started to take off and her suits had started to pile up, until she had to get a bigger closet. In all those years, she’d almost never given a thought to the outside.

For the past century, life in Blue Megapolis had gone on exclusively within its walls (there were actual walls) and people seemed to have forgotten there even was an “outside”. There were, of course, other megapolises, but one got there by plane and had no need to see what was below the clouds. There was just barren land – they were briefly taught at school – a void between megapolises, a blank space. A nothingness that for some reason the PM wanted her to see.

She put on the clothes and boots under Kitty’s slightly-less-bored gaze. Then, once the cat finally decided that the plastic bowl of food deserved her attention, Anna left the flat and got in the black government limousine that was waiting outside her building. It took Anna and the PM to a military airbase on the outskirts of Blue Megapolis. Anna had only been to such a place once or twice before. It was full of grim men in camouflage who nodded their formal greeting to her and the PM. One of the grim men escorted them to a helicopter while another climbed into the pilot’s seat.

“Fasten your seat belts.” He raised his voice over the noise of the propellers at takeoff.

At first, all Anna could see below were the low buildings of the airbase. Then there was a field of prematurely yellow grass which went on for some time, empty and lonely. Only the color of the grass changed, becoming more and more yellow. (Wasn’t it early for yellow grass? It was only June...) Images went by as if from a film, one after another, like in a movie theater. Then they were at the walls of Blue Megapolis.

And then nothing.

Anna wondered again what they were doing there, flying over barren fields, but she couldn't ask the PM over the noise of the machine. As they continued flying, she noticed the land became more grey than yellow, and it was all flat, without a single tree, or river, or anything. For a moment, she thought it looked like another planet, one where vegetation didn't yet exist.

Her eyes had begun to grow tired from the monotonous view when suddenly she saw it. In the distance, almost on the horizon, there was a big pile she couldn't identify at first. It was like a mountain, but the texture was different. As they came closer, she noticed other, smaller piles around the first one.

"What is that?" she yelled.

"Trash," the MP yelled back.

Anna bent forward, trying to see more clearly. At first she couldn't make out anything in particular, but as the helicopter flew over the piles, she began to see it. Trash. And a lot of it. Huge piles of plastic bottles, containers of all shapes and sizes, clothes, shoes, automobile tires, broken glass, crooked metal parts, smashed radios and old TVs, and more and more plastic.

Anna looked without moving, unable to speak. The piles went on and on and seemed to become bigger and bigger. As the helicopter banked slightly to the right, she noticed something so strange that she was almost shaken out of her speechlessness. There were no flies clouding the air. No birds. No animals at all.

It was all dead piles of plastic.

The helicopter was now heading in a different direction and the piles were fewer and fewer, finally being replaced by the same grey land they had first seen. Anna looked on unblinking as they neared a cluster of low buildings surrounded by a fence. The helicopter descended, landing on a spot between the buildings. The propellers slowed to a full stop. Anna still wasn't talking or moving.

"Not a pretty sight, I admit," the MP said in a low voice.

"No," Anna replied dryly. "Is it... Is it ours?"

"Some of it. Some of it is our great-grandparents'. Our inheritance, so to speak."

His attempt at a joke fell flat as Anna looked at the buildings around them.

"What's all this?"

"Monitoring base. We have to keep an eye on what's happening here. On the piles."

"How does it end up here? The trash?"

"We fly it in."

"We?"

"Yes... Let's go in."

Before Anna could say anything else, the pilot handed them a pair of gas masks.

"What's this for?" she asked.

"Just in case. The air's not so good around here," the pilot said.

As they put on the gas masks and left the helicopter, Anna thought she would faint. They trotted across dry, grey land with the remains of yellow grass scattered over its cracked surface. Anna took a deep, artificial breath through the gas mask and looked up. The sky was also grey and the sun was barely visible behind a veil of smoky clouds. The light was muted, and it felt like it could be any time of day. Time didn't seem to exist in its natural form here.

Anna and the PM entered one of the buildings. They took off their masks in a semi-furnished lounge. Almost bare, it had only one table, a few chairs, and a kitchenette.

“Coffee?” asked the PM. “They purify the water here,” he quickly added.

“No.”

Anna sat down, beginning to gather her wits about her.

“What about Blue Megapolis? What’s the water like there?”

“Also purified. For some more than for others.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, let’s just say you’ll be drinking better water now that you’re a senator, when you go live in you new quarters.”

Anna nodded.

“I’m not saying it’s fair. It’s not. But there’s really nothing we can do about it.”

“Nothing?”

“All this – the waste – has been accumulating for generations. We’ve never really managed to, well, manage it. Garbage is fine, because it’s managed in Blue Megapolis. But plastic... It takes more than 400 years for a plastic bottle to biodegrade. Some of it is managed, but there’s simply too much.”

“So we just dump it here? There’s no better way?”

“We haven’t found one.”

“Have you tried?”

The PM sighed.

“Look, Anna, it’s not all black and white. We... after a certain point we weren’t able to...”

He continued to talk and his words began running together until they formed a pile of trash. At least, that’s what Anna imagined. She wasn’t sure how long he’d been talking when she interrupted him.

“And people don’t know anything?”

“Of course not. Can you imagine what would happen if they knew? It would be chaos.”

“We’d lose power, you mean. Us politicians.”

“Yes. And it would be chaos. We may govern poorly but it’s better than having no government at all.”

“And nobody asks any questions?”

“Very few people do. After all, one of the government’s tasks in recent years has been to encourage pop culture. Mass entertainment. None of this ridiculous diversity business – that’s too complex. Pure mass culture full of popcorn. People don’t ask questions when they’ve got enough entertainment. And popcorn.”

“Is it the same in other megapolises?”

“Pretty much, yes. Look. I brought you here because you need to know all this now that you’re in the Senate. And you need to keep it quiet.”

Anna nodded mechanically. After that, everything she did was mechanical. Leaving the monitoring building with the gas mask, getting in the helicopter, taking the mask off, looking out the window at the grey field with the piles of trash that grew smaller and smaller as they flew away.

She returned home in a daze. Kitty came to her in a rare display of affection, but Anna didn’t notice. She went to sleep, remaining awake until morning.

Then, at dawn, she picked up the phone and dialed the number of her publicist.

“Yes, Annie?” Sarah’s sleepy voice answered.

“I need you. I want to issue a press release.”

“Now? Can’t it wait?”

“Not really, no.”

Sarah sighed, and Anna heard the rustling of paper. Then the short search for a pen.

“A press release about what?”

“Plastic.”