

# C-Rock City

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WHENEVER THE UMS *Katie O’Harra* called at C-Rock City, I called on one Rocky Muldoon. Twisted with him in my hammock, his soft snores in my ear, I ran my palm gently over his stubbled scalp and marveled that such a weird-looking guy could be so cute.

Rocky was a big man—asteroid-big as they say—which means all long, skinny bone and not much muscle mass. Comes of being raised by people who don’t ever plan to dive down a’ gravity well again. C-Rock City had enough frac-gee to stick you to the floor out on the Number One and Three rotating ends, but that was about it.

Me, I was about as statistically average as a guy gets with a body not built for any particular environment. I could be uncomfortable anywhere.

“Business,” muttered Rocky, his ice-blue eyes slowly opening. I sighed and released the hammock closures, letting Rocky unfold his long limbs, before reaching for my clothes. He pulled on a pair of briefs and went for his datapad. I retrieved my own pad from my pants pocket and sent him *Katie O’Harra’s* manifest, along with forty thousand Althean marks coded to the bearer. *Katie’s* old man had permits for C-Rock City, but business still cost. As second mate, it was my job to manage those costs.

Rocky smiled and held up his pad. “Thanks, Porkpie. Should’ve taken care of this before we... you know.” He nodded toward the hammock, then shrugged. “Not complaining, mind you.”

“Hope not,” I said. “You’re still my favorite port of call.”

He shrugged again, a blush spreading from his cheeks to his shoulders and on downward, then glanced at his pad. “Anything here I should know about?”

“Dancing girls for Mercury and forty thousand liters of Fundy Station Wine,” I quipped. Actually *Katie* was just hauling machine parts and Jovian lace-crystals. Nothing exciting. Nothing C-Rock Port Control needed to worry about, anyway.

Rocky laughed dutifully. “Same old lies.”

No, I thought, laughing convincingly in return. This time, different lies.

Rocky, as honest a port control officer as I'd ever known, spent another few quiet moments looking over the manifest before indicating his satisfaction with a nod.

"Everything looks good, Porkpie. Including you."

We exchanged glances appropriate for people who liked each other well enough.

Rocky put on his pants. "So. You taking a liber-ty while you're here?"

"Yeah. I got thirty hours of shore time coming up in a watch or so." I planned to spend it touring the slave carvings within the tunnels and on the exterior of C-Rock City's three rocks. The visit wasn't quite illegal, not technically, but it wasn't anything I needed Rocky to know about. The Proctor of Ceres, the petty little tyrant who ran this place, found the carvings embarrassing, and Rocky had a streak of loyalty as solid as Vestan ore.

My papers said I'd been born here before the Proctor opened the place to settlement and com-merce. My mother was a slave named Violet4264. I'd always wanted to see where she'd carved her life in stone. I figured that was a story just for me.

Rocky frowned. "Mmm. Be careful."

"Careful? Of what?"

Rocky smiled, but it wasn't very warm. He fin-ished getting dressed, gave me an impersonal peck on the cheek, and was quickly gone.

Puzzled, I tried not to be hurt. I told myself that if he'd had more to tell me, he'd have said it.

\* \* \* \*

## C-ROCK CITY.

There wasn't anything like it in the Solar System before or since. It was carved from a set of three Class C asteroids by blind slaves imported from the mines of Mercury. The Proctor of Ceres brought them up on the old atomic cruisers, which finally got scrapped after the Cancer Wars, but

nobody cared about short-life slaves or convict crews.

Those boys and girls went down into tunnels they tore themselves, with mining lasers and pla-nar explosives, and they shaped a staggering work of art. The slaves and the bond-engineers bridged the whirling rocks with cables spun of diamond and buckystring so that a man could walk bare-foot and shirtless among the stars.

Looking down on the surface in the right light, with the right shadows, with just the right squint, you could see where the slaves had written the stories of their lives in high relief. Every time I came to C-Rock City, I was struck by the whole weird majesty of it.

Hard thing to figure out. The slaves made some-thing beautiful and more than a little awful, and they never even saw their own work.

How exactly they did it remains a mystery, or a dirty secret, depending on how you viewed things like forced labor. There were stories of the Proctor doing some interesting neuromods on the slaves, giving them a way to maneuver without seeing, a way to coordinate their efforts without speaking. Surgeries like that can go very wrong. They kill, vegetablize, or leave a person stark raving. Doing that to people, even slaves, is the kind of thing that sends ordinary folk to prison, but makes extraor-dinary folk like the Proctor fat, rich, and hysterically happy.

In the end, when the Proctor wanted the keys to his city, the surviving slaves were spaced from the cargo locks. They were told that they'd be boarding ships to freedom, herded into those cold, echoing spaces and the hatches were opened. That was it for them. After, the maintenance crews never could get the moisture out of the seals. Not in the whole lifetime of the city. They called that stuff "miners' tears." I never knew my mother, but those were her tears.

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I SIGNED OUT of *Katie*, snatched up my liberty tag, and hand-overed down the docking tube to the port collar and into Number Two rock. Number Two was the center of gravity in the little whirling three-body problem that comprised C-Rock City. It was the place to be for guys like me, far away from the Proctor and his yacht, his friends and his ass-kissers, and his security out in the playground privacy Number One.

I hoped they'd all stay there.

There were some very fine tunnel carvings, even in the docking tube, once I got past the metal and plastic locks. Frieze work showed what I took to be coronal flares, the sort of image that would be on the minds of people who'd gone blind on Mer-cury. It looked to have been carved with something a lot finer than a mining laser.

The slaves hadn't had much else to do but work, whether on the Proctor's time or their own.

Someone back during the build-out phase of construction had enjoyed a weird taste in eleva-tors. To get down to the core I had to grab a handring and ride a chain rig that looped through a descending shaft. I'd never encountered anything else quite like it in my travels—dogbone links joined together on little pivots, dripping grease that reeked of algae, the groaning rattle of gearing at the coreward end of the shaft as it dragged you in.

I got off when the getting was good, where it ended at the Number Two core. There was a gallery of shops, service establishments, and bars catering to a low-gee clientele, all arranged in a sort of inward-facing globe of storefronts criss-crossed with railings and grip cables. It was also where the primary connector cables were anchored. I wanted to walk down to Number Three, out in the glittering darkness, stare at the shadowed carvings, then check out a suit and go rock hopping on Number Three's skin.

"Porkpie." It was Rocky. He was in his city civvies, an ice-blue shaved velour number with bows at the knees and a white silk shirt. He looked like a Martian pimp.

"Nice outfit, Rocky." I steadied myself in the microgravity of Number Two's core by grabbing onto one of the manuestrian rails. "You're the rage."

Rocky's hand brushed my arm, as if he were thinking of steering me somewhere. The motion set us counter-rotating slightly with respect to one another. Most places in the Solar System, people don't touch strangers. Life's too crowded. And outside a bunk-down, Rocky had never touched me before.

"Rocky, you getting sweet on me?"

"Go back to *Katie*, Porkpie. This isn't a good time for you to take liberties."

I stared up at him as we spun. “You planning an armed robbery or something?”

“I’ve seen your papers, Porkpie. All of them.”

I knew what he meant by that. There could only be one he’d ever care about. “My mother.”

Rocky nodded. “History’s a hot topic around here right now.”

History, I thought. Over ten thousand slaves died here, during the construction or afterward. In my archive searches over the years I’d never found any record of births from back then. Except for my own. Thousands of slaves, and my birth was the only one thought worth mentioning.

One of us had been special, my mother or me. And I didn’t think it was me.

“I like you, Porkpie. You know that, right?” He grinned, but his lips stretched too tight for it to be real. “For a lot of reasons.”

I supposed I did know that. We liked to roll around with each other, Rocky and me, but that by itself wasn’t necessarily special. Cramped ships and cold outposts—card games and needlepoint can only fill so many hours. But with Rocky and me it felt a little different. I supposed he liked me, and I supposed I liked him. The haunted look in his long face told me plenty.

“History’s always a hot topic for me, Rocky.”

He closed his eyes and our friendship changed. Then he shrugged and let go of the rail, the Proc-tor’s man once more. “I tried, Porkpie. I did. Just remember that.”

Ignoring Rocky and the history he was sworn to defend, I hand-overed away from him, along the manuestrian rail that led to the bridge cables.

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A FEW YEARS ago, when *Katie* had called into C-Rock City, after a long night of not much sleep, Rocky had gotten himself in a mood for conversation. He was fascinated by my life. Compared to him, I’d been

everywhere and done everything. He was eager for me to talk about my rise from port monkey to deck-hand to cargo officer to second mate. I could almost believe I was a dashing pirate captain or something, the way Rocky had listened to my tales of mercantile shipping, eyes wide, asking questions.

It was adorable.

Rocky had never been off C-Rock. Never gotten more than a few kilometers away on the odd EVA from those three tunnel-ridden boulders.

Crashed out on a stack of packing blankets on the floor of my cabin, Rocky had rolled over on his back and stared at the ceiling. "I ever tell you they nearly killed me in my crib?"

"Don't think so," I said. "Believe I might have remembered that."

"I was a crèche kid. Mom died when she was three months with me. Clogged suit line, I think. Had enough wages saved to get me machine-gestated, but not enough to support me once I reached term. The Proctor could have had me killed, right in my box. Med techs would have thrown a few switches, tagged me and bagged me and flushed the garbage lock. They did that shit plenty. Still do. It ain't like air is free."

I leaned down toward him, close enough for warmth. With a fingernail, I lightly traced a long, long line from his collarbone to his belly. I couldn't imagine Rocky Muldoon as a baby, crèched or otherwise. "Buddy, you live in one fucked-up place."

"Aw, it's not so bad." Rocky laughed, uncom-fortable and edgy. "I'm here, aren't I? The Proctor signed papers that let me live. He didn't have to do that. C-Rock fed me and schooled me, gave me a fancy job that lets me meet interesting people." He winked. "C-Rock's not such a bad place, Porkpie. I try to take care of her, and she takes care of me. That's the problem with you spacers, you don't know what a real home is."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I let my hands do the talking.

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MOST OF C-ROCK City's inhabitants zipped about their ordinary inter-rock business on little elevator cars that crawled up and down the buckystrings linking the three cores together. I chose the walk-way instead. One notch more sophisticated than a service tunnel, it had air pressure and even

some temperature control. I wouldn't freeze to death here, but my breath was a fog of crystals.

Snow, I think they call that.

The true majesty of the walkway was its emptiness, a splendid isolation. It offered a vantage from which I could readily imagine Violet4264 and her fellow slaves.

Which was why the inhabitants of C-Rock City avoided the tunnels. History, Rocky Muldoon's "hot topic," lived in those tunnels like a troll in a cave.

I paused just outside Number Two to look back. Safety lights incidentally illuminated those few of the thousands of carvings closest to the tunnel breach, each a signature and story of a slave's life. They'd never been fully cataloged, due to a lack of appreciation for the work of blind nonpersons. Or other, subtler motives, perhaps. It was like living inside a museum and turning all the paintings to face the walls.

Still, some of the carvings were so obviously spectacular that they couldn't remain unknown. "Three Ships" was almost famous. Most people don't realize it, but Wu's great mural in the Hall of Commerce at Tharsis, a work that made him as wealthy as an artist gets, is a near-copy of the "Three Ships." Some blind slave, nameless and dead, possibly a friend to my mother, did it earlier and better.

The first ship was a seagoing vessel, an improbable thing, squat and fat and top-heavy with masts like trees, as if wet-sailors of yore expected to grow fruit on their voyages.

Wu's painting names the ship *Amistad*.

The second ship was a dirigible, similar to what the Jovian Inspectorate uses in the layers of their vast upper atmosphere, marked with weird little pinwheels, or broken crosses.

Wu calls that one *Hindenburg*. I've actually heard of it.

And the third ship... It was hard not to hate it, all the way down in my gut. One of the long-vanished atomic cruisers that had brought the slaves from Mercury. The background was a positive riot of stars and planets and tiny humans tumbling naked away from the hull.

Wu doesn't give that one a name.

I don't know what message Wu's painting imparts to the financial elite who walk the far-off Hall of Commerce. But down here, on the outside of Number Two rock, "Three Ships" tells a story, life of a man, life of a slave, maybe the life of slavery itself. The carving moved me every time I saw it.

Understanding how much more was lost in the dark moved me more. Especially because I knew that somewhere on the unseen surface of this conclave of wealth and privilege was Violet4264's story.

My mother's story.

My story.

I muttered something like a prayer for "Three Ships" and walked among the stars toward the massive bulk of Number Three rock.

The walkway was like a downward stair, each step I took achieving fractionally more gravity, until eventually I was descending a ladder.

I'd avoided Number Three in my previous visits, avoided the Proctor's administration there with its managers and fiduciaries and judges. Born of a slave, under his law, I might well be a slave too. As a practical matter, almost no one's been held in actual slavery or bond since the Cancer Wars. But there are many old laws to entrap the unwary.

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THE CORE OF Number Three wasn't much different from the core of Number One, which I had visited several times—it had floors and a definite sense of down, courtesy of the centripetal force of the three tethered bodies in rotation. At Number Three, I descended from the ceiling on a spun-diamond stair. Below me, shops were arranged in descending tiers to the apparent bottom of the roughly spherical core, all set at a slight twist to compensate for the Coriolis force. At the bottom was the glowing red gate to the Ruby Palace, seat of the Proctor's administration, set in one of the two heavymost locations in C-Rock City.

This was where the wealthy consumed. The shops offered exotic jewelry, strange tailoring, services for highly individualized kinks. You'd find fewer spacers here than in Number Two, more tourists, more upscale locals. Unlike a lot of stations and cities, C-Rock didn't segregate access to the more well-to-do sections. The Proctor was apparently pleased to



allow the stark and visible realities of economics dictate who passed where within his domain.

I was hard to embarrass.

Alighting from the stairs, I pulled out my data-pad. I'd downloaded maps to the exterior accesses here. There were no suit rentals in Number Three—the wealthy don't spacewalk much—but I had a few options available, an outfitter and a couple of maintenance shops where I might beg or bribe a suit. Two of them lay reasonably far away from the Ruby Palace.

I liked that direction better and set off to climb the stairs leading me back out of the base of the core, toward the number seventeen antispinward passage as guided by my pad.

Someone overtook me on the stairs. "You have to come," she whispered as she passed. The woman looked back at me over her shoulder. "Fol-low," she said, picking up her pace.

Most places, I'd avoid trouble like that the way a deckhand dodges work. But here, looking for my mother, Rocky's warnings still in my ears, I found a rare, reckless mood. I took the stairs two at a time, trying to catch up.

"Why?" I called after her, but she did not answer.

I reached the next landing, where two men with electrostatic sweeper wands exchanged quiet words. I stepped around them, but they stepped with me. The charged wands swung my way.

"You're here," said one of the men. He was short, dark, with ballooning muscles. Someone who'd been raised in a centrifuge, or from the intermediate depths of a gas giant.

"You've been expected," said the other one. He was short too, but not nearly as thick as the first. A man who could have been from anywhere.

"Porkpie!"

I turned to see Rocky scrambling up the stairs. And then the woman who'd passed me, who'd told me to follow her, came running back down and stumbled into him, sending them both flying.

Rocky cursed, tried to disentangle himself from the woman, tried to get to me.

“She wants to see you,” said Balloon Muscles.

“Her?” I said, indicating the woman now keeping Rocky occupied, obviously very much against his will.

“No.” Balloon Muscles smiled. I swear I could hear his cheeks creak. “Don’t you know?”

Oh.

Everything stopped for a moment, even my heart.

Of course.

Of course I knew. My breath shortened.

Behind and below me, Rocky was shouting my name. I glanced down to see purposeful movement all over Number Three’s core. The Proctor’s security was deploying.

I should have gone back to *Katie* right then and there.

I should have sat down and let Rocky “help” me.

“Take me,” I said to the sweepers.

The two men lowered their wands and led me into the tunnel I had already chosen.

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PURSUED BY DISTANT shouting, we moved quickly through a forest carved from stone. Tree trunks pillared the walls, a frenzied canopy of leaves over-head. In the years since the carvings had been done, utility lines and access ports had been hacked into place, but even those crude trenches and cuts served mostly to accentuate the beauty.

Balloon Muscles swerved and ducked between two imposing trunks set close together. I followed, the other sweeper behind me.

We were in a short maintenance tunnel, much more dimly lit, the walls

carved to resemble run-ning courses of brick or stone. Little niches inset contained small objects—tiny specimen bottles with tissue floating in muddy fluid, old coins from Earthbound cultures, scraps of paper with scratched marks that could have been drawings or attempts at writing. I was reminded of the honey-comb churches of Zha Madrid. These were devotional objects. This was a place of worship.

A collection of buffers, sprayers, parts, and sup-plies blocked much of the room. My two guides pushed on through, rolling a tank of cleaner aside to reveal more carved bricks. Balloon Muscles cast me a quick glance before he tapped on three of the bricks. A small portion of wall opened into darkness.

One by one, we crawled out of the light.

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I WAS IN a narrow tunnel that looped and dove through odd angles and sudden drops. My sense of down, my sense of any direction, was twisted past any following. Which was logical enough once I thought it through. The slaves who'd carved these secret passages through C-Rock City wouldn't have even tried to make them decent walkways. They would have wanted their tunnels to remain undetected by normal engineering surveys.

We stayed in total darkness. Every spacer has nightmares of being locked without power or life support in a derelict ship, and this was not much different, except for the smell. The passageway reeked of damp, of mold, and sometimes occa-sional drafts of other smells—machinery, food, people. My own pulse pounding in my ears, I brushed the cold stone walls with my fingers. Carvings passed beneath my touch.

The sweepers seemed to know their route well. They never paused. Both were shorter than me by at least twenty centimeters, an advantage down in the tunnels. Three my size and we would have tan-gled and trapped ourselves to death.

This was my mother's country. Secret tunnels within the walls. A life buried in darkness under tons of stone. Though I hadn't found a carving that gave me her specific biography, I was being shown a secret far more precious. In here was the place in which she had lived her life. This was the where and the how of it, if not the who.

And I realized something else—I might have been born in this tunnel, or one just like it.

\* \* \* \*

AFTER WINDING THROUGH passageways for what might have been hours, my guides finally paused, still in total darkness. “You’re here now,” whispered the one following just behind me.

“Are you ready?” whispered the other.

I lied and told him I was.

A hatch opened before me, red light streaming through to shock my eyes. I closed my lids, rubbed my face, and then peeked. It was only a dim glow really, much like the emergency lights on *Katie’s* bridge. My eyes had been tricked. Time in the dark had robbed me of my sense of brightness.

I followed the balloon-muscled sweeper out.

It was a strange room, extending in all directions until it vanished from sight around the curve of Number Three rock’s tiny horizon. It was curious-ly absent of the decorative carvings that filled the rest of C-Rock City’s otherwise unfinished spaces.

The floor was below me, at a substantial fraction of nominal gee, so that I had to jump down from the hatch. Fat pillars punctuated the emptiness around me.

People sat scattered among those pillars, barely more than silhouettes. Everyone looked toward me. Faces in the dark and blind eyes, staring right at me, locked on and tracking.

I flashed back to two memories.

The first was Os-Tan Station, where I’d once been granted the privilege of spending the night with a band of underdeck gypsies who were always suspicious of a stranger, but who nonethe-less shared their food and drink and music with me.

The other memory was when I’d wandered into the wrong section of the Deimos bubble camps and the residents there had beaten me to within an inch of my life.

I shouldn’t have been so quick to ignore Rocky’s warnings. He’d always been a friend. A little more than that, maybe. He’d only been trying to

help, and I'd fled from him back on the stairway.

Too late for regrets. "Now what?"

Balloon Muscles looked at me as though surprised by my question. "Now you find her."

And so I took a few more steps into the room, looking for Violet4264.

Would I know my own mother?

Would she know me?

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THE FOLK AMONG the pillars were all old. Very old. I'd never seen such people in all my travels.

Most humans either died young and ruined or aged gracefully in a cloud of medical nano and genomic therapies until accident or time claimed them.

Not these people. Their skin had long since tanned to leather, then wrinkled past reclamation. Their eyes were crusted shut with scars. Their hands were missing fingers, some crushed or bent or palsied.

Slaves. Still alive in the tunnels.

My mother's people.

"Violet?" I asked softly as I moved among them. As with babies, I couldn't, even tell male from female among these elderly. Let alone such conceits of wealth as chims, neuts, or herms.

"Violet?"

A bald head shivered no.

I walked on, "Violet?"

A clawed hand took mine, turned it over, peb-bled skin dragging over my own calluses. Then it dropped away.

"Violet?"

“Violet4291,” creaked a voice that I had to bend close to hear. “Not your wavelength.”

After that, I asked for my mother by her full name. I had always thought of Violet4264 as a name and a slave number. Not as a mark of dignity.

On and on I walked, getting farther and farther from the sweepers’ hatch. I would never find my way back from this place without their help. But I didn’t want to, not without my mother.

Every step was hell, a stride back into a time I had no memory of, but I knew I belonged there.

My heart burned for vengeance on the Proctor and his kind. My heart burned for my mother. Where was she?

\* \* \* \*

PERHAPS AN HOUR later, when I had spoken to forty or more of the elderly slaves, Balloon Mus-cles finally caught up with me and pulled me aside. “Have you found her?” he asked, his fingers clutched tight on my elbow.

“No.” I tried to shake him off—there were more of my mother’s people half-hidden in the shadows ahead. They clustered just past the short horizons, all the ghosts of my history. I strained, but his heavy-gravity grip was far too strong for me.

“Will you find her?” His eyes glinted.

“If she’s here. Let go of me.”

“Will you find her?” He gave the words a strange emphasis.

I held my tongue and stayed my fist. Something was to hand. So I simply stared him down.

Finally his grip softened. He looked at his feet, then past me, not meeting my eye again. “She’s lost to us,” he whispered. “We thought you... her son...”

“She’s dead?” My voice pitched up. “You brought me here, through all

this, just to tell me she's dead?"

"No." Balloon Muscles sounded desperate. "She's not dead. Violet4264 still speaks to us. We simply can't find her."

Around me, one by one, the ancient slaves began speaking. Their words were in synch, a single voice moving dozens of mouths.

"Disperse."

"Leave him."

"He will be safe.'\*

"The Proctor's men are coming."

"We will not."

"They're coming."

"The Proctor."

"My son."

"Leave."

"Stay."

"My boy."

The whisper faded, and in a scuttling rush; the old people were gone. Someone shrieked, and close by I heard Balloon Muscles crying, the weird, slow sobs of someone with heavy gravity lungs. Joy, relief, sadness.

My mother had come back to me. To them.

"How?" I turned to ask Balloon Muscles, my own eyes stinging. But my guide was gone too.

Then Rocky Muldoon loomed out of the dark-ness, amid flickering riot-control strobe lights, there with his port security crew. He pointed and a concussion grenade landed four or five meters from me, knocking me hard onto my back.

Rocky and his cops surged forward. In my rage I tried to fight them all.

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AFTER A LONG but fairly courteous interrogation— they broke no bones, for one, even though I had energetically resisted arrest—Rocky hauled me out into the diamond-walled walkway to talk beneath the stars.

“*Katie O’Harra’s* undocking in about an hour.” His voice was rough, tight, over-controlled. “You can be on her, or you can rot beneath the Ruby Palace.”

“Ah.” I searched his face for any sign of the Rocky I knew. The one I’d shared my bed with. The one who’d begged me for stories of life between ports, who’d listened to my tales of spac-ing like a little kid.

I saw none of that in him now. All I could see was a man whose mother had left him with an unpayable debt to the Proctor.

Blank as a mirror, Rocky was.

I couldn’t say anything. My words had been drained by needle and electric shock. I stared uncaring at the stars, trying to ignore the pull of the carvings on the dark rock nearby.

“It’s got nothing to do with you,” he said. “They’re a... a cult, down there. People go into the service tunnels and blind themselves and call themselves slaves. They claim this Violet4264 as their prophet. Nothing you saw means any-thing.” There was urgency in his voice. He was desperate for me to believe him. “It’s not real. It’s just a little social problem peculiar to C-Rock City.”

I managed to dredge up a word, echoing one of our earlier conversations. “History,” I said from somewhere far away.

“Yes.” Rocky was relieved. “History. And now drugs, delusions, pretense of psychic powers. And an attempt to undermine the Proctor.”

“Ah,” I croaked.

Rocky—and his Proctor—wouldn’t be this afraid of a “little social problem.” It was real, what I’d seen in spaces between the tunnels.



Real.

“Go back to *Katie*, Porkpie. Forget all this. You’re nobody’s son. You never had a mother. You’re on your own.” Rocky paused, gathering his lies. “But I know you. You don’t need anything else. You’re fine without it.”

“Ah,” I said again. Real.

He chose to take that for assent.

Stumbling, I was led in steps and stages to the outer ring tunnel of Number Two rock. The docks there were passage home. Rocky signed me in, retrieved my liberty tag, and bent to hug me. His breath was hot and fast in my ear. “Don’t come back for a while. Maybe ever. You got me, Porkpie?”

“I got you,” I said, surprised that the words had found me. I turned my back on him before he could turn his on me, and then I was aboard *Katie O’Harra* amid laughs about drunken sailors and unfunny jokes about dereliction of duty.

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I AWOKE ALONE in my hammock, mouth dry as shuttle rations. Even now my little cabin still smelled of Rocky’s aftershave. There was a hotbox on the floor, the message light on my comm station blinking red. People wanted me.

Though there was still something wrong with my words, courtesy of Rocky Muldoon’s interro-gation chemistry, there was nothing wrong with my memory.

He’d lied. It was real. Far too real. My mother had awoken from wherever she slept. I’d somehow brought her back to C-Rock City.

I wondered now why Rocky had let me live. Maybe he was afraid of my mother. To fear her the way he did, he had to believe in her.

The Proctor believed in her. He had to. Other-wise his minions would have swept the tunnels of the surviving slaves long ago. And he’d have had Rocky dump me out of an airlock.

I think Rocky loved me, maybe a little. Some-thing like that. But I knew he loved C-Rock City more.

I sat up in my hammock, then fought off the lurching pain in my head. The hotbox blinked at me, a little throwaway timer indicating less than an hour remained of its thermal integrity.

I opened it. Inside was a steaming hot pork pot-pie.

There was also a note, written in actual hand-writing on an actual scrap of paper. It was a brittle, torn manifest printout. Not the kind of thing worth keeping, certainly.

But the paper was decades old.

At least as old as me.

I turned it over and my hair prickled when I saw what was written there in fresh ink: TO MY BOY, WITH LOVE.

I resisted the urge to clutch the paper for fear of ruining it.

Someday *Katie O'Harra* would return to C-Rock City.

Someday I'd be back. I'd change things.

Someday.

For now, not knowing what else to do, I ate the pie.

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