

The Botanical Gardens

By Tim Macauley

"I tell you, this lack of consistency with SIN is really what's torqueing me. I've always been of the belief that I'd rather have all of it—in all its wondrous glory, or none at all. But it's the not knowing...will SIN be there for us when we badly need that databank of maps or known enemy troop movements or, on more serious matters, did Manchester United make the penalty shot? It's bollox. It's for the birds." Laudes grouched as the three soldiers wended their way through the thick jungle vegetation.

Tatyana remained on point, followed by Laudes and then finally Jae-Hwa. Laudes had the monotonous task of waving a plasma-baton back and forth in front of him, clearing a two-meter wide swath through the brush. Behind him, Jae-Hwa directed a power grav-mag sled, a pallet-jack that hovered a foot above the ground, casting a blue haze on the underbrush and a loud hum in the air. It went unspoken, but all of them were aware of how noisy the power sled was and it set them all on edge. They let Laudes prattle on, knowing it was his means of distracting himself.

"Which reminds me. The last time they shipped me off for holiday, they sent me to a casino in Smokestack. Right. So get this. No sooner do I land, then SIN goes down an—"

"Just a sec, Loud," Tatyana said, turning around to face the others. "I don't understand it. We should be right on top of the target. The last coordinates we received from a SIN tower were four hours ago. We've been averaging three clicks per hour since." Her eyes darted to the side of her viewport and she grabbed the outdated topographic map, bouncing it to her two colleagues.

"Look, you see that smaller rock formation? That was the one we—"

"Yeah-yeah, we passed that two hours ago. And that little creek bed there too. Yeah, you're right, boss. We should have found them already. Bizarre." Laude said. He looked up at the sky and felt his anxiety rising. It was only 4 pm, but already the sky was dark, the jungle canopy filtering out most of the daylight. All around, the light patter of rain could be heard, striking the large open leaves of plants. "Maybe we should—"

"Quiet," Tatyana said, finger held to her lips. "Jae-Hwa, kill the sled."

At first, they heard off in the distance what sounded like the repetitive *pop-pop-pop* of a mechanical weapon, maybe an assault rifle discharging rounds. Then a woman wailed out. But something was off. She kept wailing and the popping was rhythmic, the clip never running out of rounds.

"It's...music...I guess?" Jae-Hwa suggested. "Those are bongos...I think..."

Jae-Hwa had the right of it. No sooner had he deduced the nature of the noise than a whole chorus of men's and women's voices joined in, undulating wildly and not appearing to be singing words, but more a cacophony of sounds. Other instruments joined in as well, although it sounded like a hodgepodge of amateurs. It had a very tribal, primal feel to it, as though they weren't performing a piece, but playing for the sake of simply playing.

“That isn’t music in my book,” Tatyana said. “But that must be our target. Sounds like a half-klick southby-southeast. Let’s get this done.”

“Anyone these days think they can play music,” Laudes continued his grouching, shifting the focus of his attention now that he had a more fresh target than the shortcomings of SIN. “And write. Writers are the worst of the lot. Always blabbering on about some fantasy or other. Unwilling to pick up a plasma and give the Chosen a what-for.”

Within minutes of having headed toward the tribal sounds, Tatyana discovered something quite queer before them. It was an enormous palm leaf, a meter in length and a half in width. Its middle was a fiery red and its edges were indigo. There was also a pattern across its center of indigo lines, as though painted ribs. All along its edge, there was a centimeter of tawny hair that bristled upright. Tatyana carefully thumbed it. All of the hair follicles around the entire palm leaf suddenly collapsed, wilting down upon themselves. She looked at the others.

“Have you guys seen this species before?” Both of them shook their heads. “Peculiar. Let’s push on.”

They hadn’t gone another ten meters before they encountered three more unfamiliar plants. The first was a series of meter-high butternut-yellow cones that tapered from the ground up like an anthill. They were firm, but slightly pliable near the top. The second was a short leafy tree that reached only shinheight but whose offspring looked like eggplants, save for being soft-edged star-shaped and four times an eggplant’s normal size. They were also annoyingly easy to trip over. The third new species they discovered was a thicker strain of vine, which seemed to have defeated the previous vine species they had been cutting through. It had remarkable strength. Previously, Laudes had been using the plasmabaton to cut effortlessly through the former inch-wide vines. But this new gauntlet of vines was more on the order of three-inches thick and, shockingly, the plasma-baton could not cut through them. Fortunately, though, being vines and not trunks, the trio found they could still be pushed slightly to the side with some concentrated effort. It was, however, clearly the end of the line for the power sled.

“Look! There, in the trees!” Tatyana pointed ahead. They could just make out the corner of a structure nearly swallowed in the surrounding vegetation. It was a typical, angular corner of a tall no-frills building, maybe ten meters above the ground. Vines strangulated the entire corner and no rays of light shone from within.

“That must be it, boys. The Botanical Gardens. Not what I expected. Maybe we’ve come too late.” Tatyana eyed the unlit facility nervously. “Looks like the juice isn’t on.” They abandoned the power sled and completed the final stretch on foot. As they approached the final fifty meters, they could make out the orange aura of a massive bonfire ahead, which cast strange shadows amongst the already strange backdrop of vegetation. The trio finally emerged from the thick underbrush into the courtyard for the Botanical Gardens, a clearing that was anything but clear. None of them were prepared for what they found.

The place was absolutely packed with people, dancing and gyrating to the pulse of the drums. Laudes gave a low whistle. "Oh boy." Tiki torches flickered around the edges of the clearing and seven giant red Chinese lanterns with yellow kanji hung suspended from the low-hanging jungle canopy above. Streams of colored Christmas lights crisscrossed everywhere, drooping down to neck-height.

"Guys...this is like a rave with 150...200 people." Jae-Hwa observed. "Not even people....scientists!"

Sure enough. Nearly every one of the revelers had a lab coat or jumpsuit on, though many looked to have made alterations to their uniforms. Everyone looked in disarray. Some had torn both of their sleeves off, while others had tie-dyed their lab whites with an assortment of lavish patterns and colors. Many had a triangular symbol painted on their foreheads or the breast of their lab coats. The corners of the triangles were rounded and arrowed and all were done with the same paint, a deep cerise red. JaeHwa recognized it as an old, archaic symbol from his *Earth-that-was* class from long-ago.

The massive bonfire set slightly in one corner made the natural focal point of the party and just behind it rose a giant wicker platform, woven from brambles and vines. Under the present circumstances, it was impossible to know if it had formed naturally or had been manicured and shaped by the horticulturists. On top of it sat a woman, her legs lotus-folded, her palms upward. It was she who first spotted the trio in the brush and gave a warm, welcoming smile. She whispered to one of her attendees who quickly worked his way through the crowd to greet the newcomers.

"*Boas-vindas, my siblings, boas-vindas!*" the technician shouted to be heard above the revelers. He kissed them each on both cheeks. "Welcome to the Cycle! Come, come! Our venerable guru, Leticia, she wants to welcome you! Make you feel warm and at peace! Come, come my friends!"

He grabbed Tatyana's hand and, without discussion, began leading her toward the guru on the wicker platform. Tatyana flashed a curious look at the others, but the trio made their across through the masses and approached the dais.

"Welcome, brothers and sisters, welcome to the Cycle!" She beckoned them each forward in turn, and she repeated the same pleasantries that her attendee had: a kiss upon both cheeks.

"It is so good of you to join us! We welcome guests of all kinds. Our home is your home. Our good fortune..." she gestured to another attendee, who handed them each a two-foot long midnight-blue stalk, "is your good fortune," she said with a silky smooth voice. The stalks were bowl-shaped on both ends, not unlike an hourglass, and their tops had been hollowed out and filled with a frothy pea-green liquid within. Tatyana made a quizzical look at the beverage.

"It's good, my siblings, drink it and be at ease." She said in her honey voice. "Is it not exquisite? Is it not unlike anything you've ever seen?" She paused, a look of playfulness on her face. "That's because it's never been seen." She giggled. "You are holding *Echinus melo*, the keeper of joy. There are only two hundred of them in the universe...and we know this, because they are all...right...here!" She giggled again, this time at a pitch that seemed unbecoming of her age. "This is a hybrid that we here at

the Botanical Gardens painstakingly made, and it has taken quite well, thank you very much.” She positively radiated with pride.

“Renata, do you know where Keris is?” she asked of a woman to her left. At first, the woman appeared to be in a vegetative state, but she looked up with heavy eyes and an impish smile, as though she’d just been caught dosing.

“Keris? Hmm...Keris....” her eyes looked star-struck. “I saw him last in a dream, near the bed of slumbershrooms...” She pointed half-heartedly to the distant left, and then corrected herself, pointing more to the right.

“Well anyway,” Leticia continued, “you can’t see him from here, too many happy people, too much joy!” she made a full open-mouth smile. “But somewhere back there, near the softest bed of fungus you have ever seen, is a man named Keris. And Keris...well, he made these!” She thrust her own midnight-blue hourglass stalk forward and the newcomers all clunk their stalks together, so to speak.

“We knew others would come! We knew word soon would get out of our utopia here and that others would want to join and... and... we have waited...we have waited so long...” Leticia’s voice now took on a sad tone and even her eyes looked to weep. “It is...such a blessing that you have come. It is...auspicious!”

“Thank you, mam,” Tatyana replied. “We’ve managed to bring a power sled up to your—”

“You’ve managed to bring so much more, my sister. What could be more valuable than the presence of yourselves? In this lonely world, a world that constantly needs resources and material...a world that eats and eats and eats...what could be more valuable than you yourselves, hmm?” She practically purred the words in her singsong voice.

“And speaking of eating, you have not yet met Dionéia! Come! Look!” she led them to the left end of the dais and pointed downward. Immediately below was a three-foot wide hole in the ground. It was surrounded by four carmine petals, reminiscent of the inside of a tomato. The petals all led to the hole and it took a moment for Tatyana to actually make the connection. She was staring at some giant plant, burrowed in the ground. Probably quite hazardous.

“*Dionaea* alpha muscipula... Dionéia we call him.” Leticia smiled proudly. “This is carnivorous plant originally from Alpha Prime. We struggled and struggled to keep him alive inside the incubator in the facility.” She laughed. “We were so foolish. There we were, trying in vain to reproduce the environmental and atmosphere properties of his home world, when everything he needed...the Earth already had! It wasn’t until the containment cells failed due to the lack of power that we got to see how little Dionéia performed. And look at him! He does just fine on terra firma!”

Tatyana cast a leery look down at the plant. “He’s like a venus fly-trap?”

The guru chuckled. “Something like that, love. Once his petals have retracted about his prey, he releases digestive juices which slowly digest the tissue within. The juices seem to have a cauterizing

effect, likely leading to quite an excruciatingly painful and slow death, I'd imagine." She laughed gaily again.

"Now go, eat, drink, make merry amongst us! You have chosen a most fortuitous night to arrive, for tonight...tonight we celebrate the Cycle!" she cried out.

"The Cycle! The Cycle!" Revelers who were nearby took up the call and soon the entire floor chanted the words, with a unified fist-pump after each round. Tatyana looked out upon the crowd. Their faces were all in various states of euphoria and transcendence. Never in a million years would she have imagined the scene that was before her...a packed outdoor rave of botanists and horticulturists.

"These guys are off the reservation," she said to her colleagues, and then laughed. She couldn't help it. It was pretty crazy. "I'm kinda glad for them," she said with a smile.

Jae-Hwa flashed a maniacal look at them both and then said, "They're off the charts! I like it!" And with that, he suddenly disappeared into the throng of revelers, a sea of raised arms. Everyone's inhibitions seemed to have fizzled at the same time that the power had.

Laudes gave Tatyana a bemused look. "And that was the most words we've heard from him this entire mission. Jae-Hwa, ladies and gentlemen." He said jokingly under his breath.

Tatyana shook her head in disbelief. "This is...certainly...memorable."

"That sir, is an understatement." Laudes gave her a salute. "Permission to join the natives in the pursuit of hedonistic debauchery and the like?"

Tatyana smiled. "Permission granted. Enjoy yourself. You've earned it. Still...keep your wits about you."

"Aye-aye, sir," Laudes said, before diving into the masses himself.

Tatyana tilted her hourglass-stalk up and peered into its base. Whatever its contents had been, it must have been quite tasty, as nothing remained. It was sweet, and alcoholic, and now...gone. No sooner had she inspected its interior, though, and another reveler handed her a new one. She took a long draw and began to relax. It had been such a long trek to reach here...it would be good to unwind for a night. The power sled would be safe where it was for the time being. A feeling of contentment began to wash over her. It felt really good to know that all their hard work schlepping that damn power sled here would help all of these people. These were good people, she could feel it in her bones. These were society's nurturers. Like teachers...only they nurtured...plants. She giggled to herself. It felt so good to step away from the war, even if just for a moment.

She began working her way through the masses in the direction where the guru had said the slumbershrooms were. Everyone was very touchy-feely, and navigating the crowd took five-times as long as one would ordinarily need, as people didn't move out of the way and instead seemed to playfully press into her as she made to pass. It was really rather funny, and as she went on, she found herself less and less giggly about it and more and more titillated. She was surrounded by beautiful people. She was

struck by that very thought—that everyone here was beautiful. She suddenly felt as though they were all on the same frequency, this mass of humanity who desired nothing more than for communion with one another. *Hmmm, communion*, she thought. She felt inebriated and relaxed and...happier than she had in a long, long while.

She broke through a click of three women dancing with held hands who tried passionately to keep her inside their ring and she practically fell unto a bed of the most firm mushrooms she'd ever felt. A couple was already canoodling on one side of the bed of slumbershroom, but when she gestured toward the unused side, they welcomed her. She lay down on the bed of fungus and was stunned—stunned by how relaxed she felt. It was as though the micro-fungus stalks beneath her were vibrating, as though the species were giving her a natural massage.

It was impossible to gauge the passage of time, nor whether she had drifted off or not. It seemed every time she looked to her left, she saw a different couple snuggling next to her. She tried to respect their privacy and kept her eyes on all of the beautiful dancers before her—on the Christmas lights that dangled all around—like some surreal star chart, shadowboxed by the dark jungle canopy overhead.

And then the crowd took up the call again. “The cycle! The cycle! The cycle!” and there was some muchto-do going on at a place she could not see, and so she exercised all of her will to get off the bed of slumbershroom and stand up. It took a heroic effort, but she managed it, feeling at once lethargic, just as one does after having sat in a jacuzzi for too long. Far ahead above the masses, just behind the massive bonfire, she could make out seven people standing on the wicker dais where she had met the guru. She was such a nice lady, Tatyana found herself thinking. Pretty too. As if a byproduct of her thoughts, the guru suddenly stepped onto the dais as well. Tatyana smiled. Things felt truly harmonious.

“Brothers and sisters!” the guru called out. “We gathered here tonight are THE very few privy to the most glorious creations of gods and men!” The crowd cried out with thunderous approval. “We have looked upon the life of Earth and we have looked upon the life of Alpha Prime, and we have seen that it is goooood!” The crowd roared again.

“Not a single sparrow goes unseen, nor a single spore! They should all be free to go forth and multiply!”

“Multiply! Multiply!” the crowd shouted as a mantra.

“Cross-pollination!” Leticia bellowed, her hands raised high.

“YES!” a man next to Tatyana cried out orgasmically.

The guru brought her palms down now, motioning for the crowd to quiet.

“And we recognize that we are all a part of this cycle of life. We are all a part of this chain of life, of death, of rebirth!”

“YES!” the crowd cried out again.

“Most of us don’t know when our Last Day is. But is it nothing to fear!”

“NO!” the masses called back.

“Today...we celebrate...the Last Day of one of our seven volunteers up HERE!” she cried out, motioning to the seven people standing next to her on the wicker dais. Tatyana squinted at the people. The man on the far right looked remarkably like Jae-Hwa.

“And now, we do the Drawing of the Straws!” Leticia shouted out.

The people to the sides of Tatyana could barely contain their excitement. “The drawing of straws!” they whispered loudly to one another. “Who will be so lucky?” “Who will it be today?”

Leticia walked before the volunteers and let them each draw a straw from her hand. It took a moment for the participants to compare their lots, but as fate would have it, the man who looked like Jae-Hwa won the draw. He beamed with blissful pride. The other volunteers lifted him high above their heads and carefully carried him to the left side of the stage, where the dais looked over the gaping maw of the Dionéia. Its moist interior quivering in anticipation of being fed, its exterior fronds completely depleted of spores. The carnivorous plant gambled everything with its strategy, and it seemed to be paying off in spades.

It was hard for Tatyana to make out what was happening up ahead, but one instant, she saw Jae-Hwa raised high for all to see, and the next he was gone. Just like that...the volunteers had dropped him from the dais. And the crowd went ballistic. They cried out in unreserved ecstasy and adulation. For only a moment, she thought she heard a scream of pain, but it was as if the crowd responded even more, the deafening noise rising even more in decibels. She had the slightest nagging sensation in the back of her brain, but she hadn’t a clue what it was about...as though there were something she should not have forgotten, or...well, it didn’t matter. She didn’t understand why the crowd was so excited about the activities up by the bonfire, but she was happy to see others so fulfilled. She lay back down on the slumbershroom, prepared to let herself sink into its seduction. No sooner had she lain down on her back, however, then she felt a firm hand cover her mouth. Her assailant’s other hand pulled hard on her ponytail. Tatyana’s eyes looked up, more surprised than frightened. She saw an upside-down skinny girl who had a very serious look about her. The girl pulled so firmly on Tatyana’s hair that it was a toss-up on how much Tatyana’s movement was her own scooting and how much the girl’s. She yanked Tatyana a full meter off of the fungus bed, into the shadows of the adjacent underbrush.

“No need swee—” Tatyana started to say, but the skinny girl kned her in the base of her back and Tatyana crumbled to her knees. “Ow, ow!”

The girl circled round Tatyana and slapped her hard once in the face. She gave her a fierce look and then slapped her a second time.

“You’re in serious trouble.” The girl said, barely audible over the sounds of the crowd nearby. Tatyana looked stunned. She didn’t understand what this was all about.

The skinny girl placed a funny-looking piece of plastic on Tatyana's nose and then slipped an elastic band over her head.

"Pay attention, sergeant. This is serious. I've salvaged two carbon monoxide filters from the facility and fitted them with surgical tubing. This should keep the spores out for a short period of time. This is for your other colleague." She handed a second mask to Tatyana. "It's very important that you save him....and yourself. Don't worry about all the others here. They're not your concern." She said with a tone of authority.

"I've got two colleagues with me actually. Do you have a third mask?"

The skinny girl made a grim face and pulled a two-meter long rusted pole from the ground. At its tip was a dull shearing-blade.

"I took this from a derelict landscaping bot inside. This is for your second colleague."

"I...I...I don't understand." Tatyana said, still trying to make heads-or-tails from this hostile encounter. Spores? Masks? This conversation was making her anxious and paranoid, as though she was the butt of everyone's jokes and not even aware of it.

"You will. Come." The skinny girl helped Tatyana to her feet. "Keep your own mask on. Remember, this mask for Loud. The shear-blade for the other."

Tatyana felt claustrophobic with the mask on. She suddenly felt very conscious of the sound of her own breathing and immediately felt the urge to rip it off. She could practically feel her buzz dying with every moment she kept it on. She would later credit her military discipline, but somehow something deep inside her held on to the look of severity that the skinny girl had had. Something within her believed that her mysterious friend was looking out for her best interests. It took every ounce of her will power to stay focused...to not rip off the mask and dive back into the slumbershroom.

She walked slowly forward now, negotiating the crowd with her shear-blade upright, like a shepherd with a walking stave. She found Laudes swaying mindlessly, his lids half-shut, and she slipped the mask on him. He offered no resistance and when she took his hand, he followed readily. She headed toward the wicker dais and the closer she got, the more things began to fall into place. The unspoken fear that had been brewing in the pit of her stomach was growing at an incalculable rate, a black hole that was hungrily eating at any morsel of hope that lay in the surroundings, and so it was that by the time Tatyana reached the dais, she already knew what to expect on the far side, near the celebrated and hazardous petals of Dionéia. She rounded the corner and found the pit of Dionéia closed, its petals retracted into the earth, the folds of itself fluctuating as it pumped its digestive juices around its enclosed prey. And as for the prey itself, only his head remained above ground, his face purple, his eyes and cheeks bulging, several veins on his forehead fit to burst. Worst of all, he was still alive. Without a single moment of hesitation, Tatyana walked purposefully forward and drove the shear-blade straight through Jae-Hwa's head.

With Laudes in tow, she walked into the surrounding vegetation and didn't look back. They kept their masks on well into the afternoon of the following day, and then even then, she didn't let them rest, forcing them through another grueling night of trekking.

The two battled the symptoms of withdrawal from the euphoric spores. The thick jungle canopy overhead gave the sense that they were perpetually in shadows. On the verge of dropping from exhaustion, Laudes asked Tatyana again about their female savior.

"I've told you, Loud, and I don't have anything new to say about it. She was young, she was skinny but strong, stronger than most teenage girls. Felt like my head was gonna come clean off when she held me firm and forced the mask on. And she was forceful. She knew what she was on about, she did. She looked me straight in the eye...all I remember is she had a look about her. She knew what she wanted. But god, she was funny looking. Her mohawk cast the scariest shadows...I recall her face emerging from the dark like a head suspen—"

"A mohawk?! She had a mohawk, you say?" Laudes asked excitedly.

"That's what I said, isn't it? And it gave me the willies."

Laudes' disposition suddenly lifted. He glanced about at the thick jungle. It was good to know she was still out there, kicking ass and taking names. And that she cared...his own little guardian angel. Laudes smiled to himself. *There was still a chance!*