

The Hydro-core

By Tim Macauley

The man placed the pitcher of guava juice in the corner of the bamboo tray, adjacent to the two plates of scrambled eggs. He very nearly left the kitchen but thought twice on it. “Oh yes,” he said under his breath, remembering what he had so nearly spaced. He found a porcelain vase beneath the sink, filled it with a shot of water and then placed an enormous dahlia blossom in it. It brought a dash of color to the tray, the petals sporting a day-glow orange that receded into a fierce red closer to their tips.

“Bolin, you are a romantic, you,” he said to himself, obviously pleased. He stepped through the blue haze of the particle screen and out onto the wooded veranda. It was still a pleasant morning but rollers were visible on the horizon, far above the sea and he knew rain was on its way. He could see her now, about midway between their bungalow and the water’s edge. She was wearing a white cotton chemise, long in length that flapped to and fro in the temperamental wind. Her legs were planted slightly apart and she was in the midst of doing casual stretches, alternating between each side, her own version of *tai chi*. On her head sat a poorly-constructed straw hat, which required her to keep one hand on it at all times lest the wind claimed it. It *was* poorly-constructed—Bolin should know, he had made it for her. She never took her morning stroll without it and it made him excessively glad.

“Marie!” He hollered above the roar of the tide and wind. “Christina Marie! Come break your fast!”

She was so beautiful to behold—the grace of a being so unlike himself. He cupped his hands around his mouth again, calling louder this time. “Marie! Ma-rrriiiee—“

“—AHHH!” Bolin’s left ear ringed something fierce! He twisted instinctively to the left and found Chaoxiang looming over him, his hand already raised again, ready to strike a second-time if necessary, his mien visibly projecting disgust.

Bolin’s wide eyes blinked repeatedly as he struggled to get his bearings. A metallic web harness stretched across his chest. He was sitting in a rough-and-rumble bucket seat behind the pilot’s. The pilot whose wrath he was now facing. Chaoxiang reached forward, gripped the squid peripheral from the back of Bolin’s head and wrenched it off in one deft motion. Bolin gasped from the sudden change in cranial pressure and the abruptly broken feed. It was unwise to not cycle down properly.

“I was just...trying out this therapeutic disc I bought recently from two guys in Dredge. Supposed to make me calm, they said. Supposed to bring me peace.” Bolin looked up dejectedly, softly palming the back of his head.

“We’ve talked about this before, comrade. You don’t need that garbage. Especially when you’re about to perform a magnificent and wondrous work today for the goddess *Iemanjá*! May she watch and guide us from the sea as we help reclaim what is rightfully hers.” Chaoxiang said, making the sign of the Umbanda faith as he did, extending his hands—palms outward, fingers splayed and wiggling.

Bolin gave a conciliatory, muted nod, his eyes downcast. Reality could be such a bitch. “It’s just that—“

“I know you miss her, comrade. I do too, and she wasn’t even mine. She was the *crème-de-la-crème*, a real bonita. With a heart of warm butter and a spirit of fiery agave. But she is gone, comrade, and we can’t disappear into fantasies. Especially when fate awaits us. Come now. The children disembarked several minutes ago already. Sophia led them in. Let’s do this.”

Bolin looked up at Chaoxiang and saw only sincerity, the hostility from a moment before already gone. He looked away

again as he spoke, rushing the words before Chaoxiang shut him down.

"It's always the same memory. I see her from behind, and everything is as I recall, except she never turns around. I can never see her face, amigo." Desperation began to return to his voice. "If we can just find a SIN architect, maybe I could commission this small job. I'd promise to not overindulge. Recreational only. Anniversaries and the like."

"Comrade, this is beneath you. You don't need this." Chaoxiang said, as he firmly returned the squid peripheral to its case, making a show of storing the case beneath his flight seat, as though ownership was now entirely his.

"Come. Let's not speak more of this now. Destiny awaits us." Chaoxiang reached up and flipped the last of the kill switches on the dropship's overhead console. The final whine of the Omnidyne 3X-A engines dissipated. "May no innocents be hurt today," he whispered as a prayer. "May no innocents be hurt today," Bolin repeated.

Chaoxiang hammered the hatch release valve with his hand and the side door hissed with steam. There was an unnerving sucking sound as the hatch pulled outward and up. The two men disembarked to a large black tarmac and the irritating whirr of heavy machinery deep underground. They had landed in the large central clearing of the Hydro-core. It wasn't Chaoxiang's best work, evidenced by the dropship resting completely outside of the circular landing pad.

Bolin gave an incredulous look at his partner. "Some excellent piloting skills there, comrade."

"Oops," said Chaoxiang, with a shrug and a nonchalant grin.

A dockworker was sitting idly in a nearby front loader, its engine purring. He was slumped over the steering wheel and made no effort to hide his lethargy. "You're late." He grunted.

"Yep." Chaoxiang said matter-of-factly. "Took some heat above Blackwater. Listen, payload bay code is 3412. Two pallets of glucose and glycerol for Professor Rosilaine. Courtesy of the Academy. Careful not to nick my left stabilizer please with your loading forks. It's showing some wear."

The dockworker grunted again and with that, the two men quickly crossed the open space into the nearest structure. It was gray and unassuming, the largest of a cluster of similarly nondescript buildings.

A series of four enormous pipes could be seen extending from the backside of the structure toward the ocean and the deep harmonic hum of pumps could be heard as a background layer to everything else.

"That's gonna get old," Bolin said, motioning toward his ear.

Chaoxiang nodded. "I suppose it's like anything, you get used to it after a while. Still. A crazy amount of water they're moving." Then he leaned in closer. "Or should I say, *polluting*," he said with a knowing look.

They stepped into the foyer of the visitor center at the Hydro-core. They were in a five by three meter room, with twenty or so chairs that had all been pushed to the edges. A woman in a white lab coat stood at the front of the room and on the floor sat twelve children, attentively listening. Bolin still wasn't used to seeing children. There were so few of them in New Eden and their presence was especially rare in the EarthFirst movement. One might think that EarthFirsters would be especially bountiful in producing children, but that was a misconstrued perception that their members were anti-technological Luddites, eager to return to basics. EarthFirsters were principled first and foremost, and they saw no reason to welcome children into a world so badly damaged and bruised as this one. Not until they had set some wrongs to right.

Nevertheless, the site of children did cause a train wreck of memories. The silhouette of Christina Marie suddenly

rushed into his consciousness again, her curves, the slight motion of the fabric of her chemise and the rustle of her hair by the incessant wind. He pushed to repress the thought, but the image would not leave. Her shoulders and hips shifted in slow-motion, as though she were practicing *tai chi*, her weight shifting ever so slowly from the left hip and then to the right.

Professor Rosilaine glanced up at the men and gave a polite smile and nod and then returned her attention to the students. “Now which of you gifted scholars would like to explain what we do here at the Hydro-core?”

A half-dozen hands darted up and the doctor selected one.

“The Hydro-core serves a critical role in New Eden’s terraforming endeavors. Water from the Atlantic Ocean is pumped inland and processed in this sixteen hectare facility.” The child spoke, repeating from rote memory the line from the formal brochure.

Bathsheba hid her desire to smile. “Yes and how do we process it here? How are we doing our share to help humanity’s terraforming endeavors?” She was answered with a barrage of ideas.

“My dad says you’re putting bugs and stuff in the water to eat at the Melding and—“

“—I heard you’re pumping metal-eating bacteria out into the sea, in hopes of making the Arclight just disappear before somebody finds—“

“—my folks say you’re intentionally contaminating the water, poisoning the well so to speak, so the Chosen can’t live here—“

“—mother says you’re destroying the final bit of *Earth-that-was* so we have no choice but to have to flee to Alpha Prime.”

“What?!” Professor Rosilaine raised her voice for the first time. “NO! No, no, NO!” She sighed loudly, unconsciously pushing her glasses back in place and tucking a loose strand of hair behind her left ear. She immediately felt guilty for having reacted so emotionally to one of the children’s wild ideas. They were, after all, only a byproduct of the homes they came from and the views and rumors that had just been expressed were representative of the mindsets of adults throughout New Eden. It seemed impossible to combat ignorance.

“I apologize for my reaction. That was...unkind.” She said, offering a grim apologetic smile in particular to the girl who had offered the Alpha Prime explanation. “There was a lot of truth in what many of you suggested, at least the gist of it, but the finer details were all off. We are working so hard here to make everyone’s lives better that it is difficult not to react when I hear that some people question even our intent.”

Bolin and Chaoxiang casually moved over to stand with Sophia on the outskirts of the room. There were only three of them for today’s mission. Bolin knew Chao was solid but he wasn’t very familiar with Sophia. He had been reluctant to go in with her but Chao had convinced him otherwise. The idea of using the guise of a classroom tour to get access to the treatment facility was clever. Very clever actually, and as Sophia was the genesis of it, she had the right to participate in the operation. The soft, feminine demeanor she was projecting at the moment helped further the charade of this school outing. How she had convinced the kids that they were their substitute instructors for the day, he hadn’t a clue. His job was as the comm guy. Visibility. Outreach. There was no point in doing this Op if once they secured the facility, they couldn’t make their case to the world. His job was to hack the local SIN feed so that their message could be broadcast. The debacle of terraforming had to end, period.

“As you know, following the Nine Year Winter, mankind has engaged in an extensive effort to reheat the surface. We call this *planetary ecosynthesis*. This effort continues even to today, despite the arrival of the Melding and the Chosen. Our campaign to reheat is three-pronged. One part involves the use of especially powerful fluorine-bearing greenhouse gases, including sulfur hexafluoride and halocarbons such as chlorofluorocarbons. The second part involves the use of orbital mirrors—what we all commonly call the ‘winking pixies’—we see them all the time, right? The only constellation we can see during the day?” The children all nodded. “These orbital mirrors use a thin aluminized PET film to increase the total insolation we receive. It directs the sunlight on to our surface, adding just a slight amount of heat.”

“The third part of our reheat endeavors is what we do here. Our work here at the Hydro-core is focused on doing what we can to keep the heat once it’s here. For example, when the orbital mirrors bounce extra sunlight down to our surface, most of that sunlight will just reflect back into space and the heat will be wasted. What we do here is called retention.” Her eyes flitted to the side of her viewport and she grabbed an interactive GUI educational package on the Hydro-core that was designed for an audience of this age. She dragged it into her broadcast shout queue.

“I’ve just sent you each a packet, which you’re welcome to follow along with.” She cleared her throat.

“Retention of heat means that we focus on reducing the albedo of Earth’s surface. That is, we actively strive to make our surface less reflective, to make more use of incoming sunlight. We are achieving this by introducing dark extremophile microbial life forms such as lichens, algae and bacteria. This microbial life floats largely near the surface of the ocean, absorbing more sunlight and warming the surface. In return, these extremophiles contribute a small amount of oxygen to the atmosphere. So far, our studies suggest this is having a positive effect on our pursuit of global warming. There are, however, some legitimate criticisms and concerns. Can any of you think of any?”

Bolin liked that the doctor was asking such a question. It was wise to push the children into critical thinking, encouraging them to speak even if their thoughts conflicted with the entire purpose of the facility. He felt a pang of guilt for the unpleasantness they were about to put the professor through. She seemed nice enough, even if she was part of the problem. They all were. They should have left the earth good and well alone. What right did they have to meddle with her soil and seas; with her very air?

One young girl raised her hand and Rosilaine gestured toward her.

“What if the dark algae campaign is too effective? What if the Earth reaches the target temperature and then planetary engineers have trouble reining in the growth of the microbial life?”

“That is an excellent observation. Well done! This is indeed a very valid concern. This type of terraforming on such a widespread level has never been done and it is very risky. We have an entire division that is already working on this problem. Our preliminary results show that barley straw is especially effective at combating algae growth, believe it or not. Ultimately, we’ll need a number of tools such as this in our toolkit to control the dark algae as we near our atmosphere goals. However, we expect this to still take another fifty years, at which point we’ll begin tapering down the level of dark algae we introduce.” Prof. Rosilaine smiled pleasantly. “Any other ideas or concerns?”

Another girl raised her hand, this one in the front left of the room. “How can we introduce this level of dark algae and the like without impacting the upper levels of the ocean’s biosphere? It seems to me like once you impact the surface and the first 10 meters, that there must be ramifications that run all the way down, impacting the food chain from those species in the 10-100m range, from the 100-1000m range, and so on and so forth.”

Rosilaine beamed proudly at the student. “Outstanding, Anahi! Again, another excellent observation. Anahi is absolutely right. Even the slightest change in the lowest level of the food chain will have ripple effects throughout. There is no question that we are taking some calculated risk here.” She paused briefly, considering how to best approach the

question.

“One of the things that I need to impress upon you is just how bad things were during the Nine Year Winter. It was an extraordinarily difficult time, filled with tremendous suffering. Since that time, the quorum has voted to aggressively combat what is lightly referred to as ‘the whims of Mother Nature’. We are taking matters into our own hands, for better or for worse.” She paused, casting a meaningful look amongst the students.

“Here at the Hydro-core, we take our impact on the environment very seriously. We approach terraforming like medics taking the Hippocratic Oath...first, do no harm. Unfortunately, desperate times call for desperate measures, and so we need to take far greater risk with our biosphere than we’d prefer. At the moment, we have fifty-two oceanographers who are entirely dedicated to studying the impact of dark algae on the rest of the food chain. They use aquatic bathyspheres to col—“

“Professor, why can’t you practice your terraforming strategies someplace else first? Like Alpha Prime, for instance?” A boy with tawny, disheveled hair asked.

“That is a very valid question. In a perfect universe—in a perfect situation—that is exactly what we would do. But those are not the circumstances we face. For one, Alpha Prime does not have identical properties to Earth. Yes, it can be colonized, and yes, we believe certain terraforming endeavors can make it more to our liking, but it will require its own unique approach. For example, Alpha Prime has a mean temperature that is fifteen degrees warmer than *Earth-that-was*. So if anything, we might prefer if that planet were to cool slightly rather than to remain slightly hotter. Although some of you might enjoy another fifteen degrees, hmm? Am I right?” Rosilaine’s solicitation brought some laughter and a couple of raised hands. She smiled.

“I’ll tell you what. Everyone has been very patient and you’ve asked some excellent questions, how about I quit yakkin’ and we go take a tour of our culture room! Who wants to see the world’s largest agar plate? At this *very moment*, you are sitting only one floor above a half-kilometer-wide Petri dish *filled* with a nutrient broth, where we help microorganisms grow before we flush them out with water cycled from the ocean. But I gotta warn you, it’s gonna smell something awful!” She said playfully with a scrunched up face.

The kids gave a collective ewwww sound, but eagerly stood to continue the tour.

The professor motioned to her assistant to lead the class into the next room and then approached the three visitors leaning on the side wall.

“Auditing the tour, friends? The two picogram admission fee too much of a barrier?” She said with a smile. “All joking aside, thank you for bringing the delivery. Our glycerol supply was quickly dwindling. We burn through it all the time as a carbon source on our agar plate. Our primary supplier won’t be able to deliver until tomorrow.” She turned to face Sophia. “And thanks especially for bringing the children. It is so important that the next generation understand the investment that we’re making for them and the generations after.” She smiled pleasantly.

Sophia pursed her lips. “We’re always happy to broaden their minds. And besides, it’s a distraction from the war.”

“I agree wholeheartedly,” Rosilaine said. “Shall we catch up with the group?” She gestured toward the wide turbo-lift doors ahead.

“Certainly,” said Chao, making eye contact with his two cohorts. They were fast approaching the point of no return.

Prof. Rosilaine and the three adult visitors stepped off the turbo-lift and into an enormous, industrialized cavern that reminded Bolin of his high school biology lab enlarged by a factor of 1,000. The majority of the cavern's floor was dominated by the half-kilometer-wide agar plate, its rim a mere two feet off the ground. Its surface had a wet sheen to it and was notable in its consistency: every meter of it had the same gelatinous ruby red tint. The running lights from countless robotic harvesters reflected off its surface as they zipped back and forth. A series of catwalks ran alongside the plate's edge and it reminded Bolin of a stroll he had taken long ago around the Ashworth Memorial Fountain. It had been winter then, he recalled, as the water had been shut off. And he had had Christina Marie on his arm. It was indeed another place and another time.

The odor from the nutrient broth was overwhelming. He tucked his nose into the crook of his elbow and pretended he was filtering it out, but he knew it was no use. A loud klaxon began blaring left of the agar plate as a gigantic centrifuge began to speed up. It was interesting to watch for the first few revolutions but then he got nauseous and had to look away. To the right of the agar plate, he saw several large enclosed tanks, their ceilings covered entirely with bright halogen bulbs. He could see waves lap at the glass sides lower in the tanks and surmised that the researchers must be using them as test beds for various versions of the dark algae. He had always believed that places like this existed, but until he'd seen it with his own eyes....it was hard to stomach. It was a factory for producing life. It was an artificial womb. It was bloody-well time that EarthFirst put a stop to it.

"This form of aquaculture is called, not surprisingly, algaculture." The professor's assistant said. "We practice monocultural production here, and as such, we go to considerable lengths to maintain the purity of our cultures. One method by which we obtain pure cultures is called serial dilution. Cultivators dilute a wi—"

"That'll be quite enough, we'll take it from here, thank you kindly." Chaoxiang said, a short, snub-nosed X41 pistol in his hand. It was such a surprise that no one took the threat seriously. He may as well have been holding a clipboard or a coffee. Aware that the severity of the situation still hadn't sunk in, Chao raised the weapon high above his head and discharged a round at the ceiling. It got the reaction he was looking for. Everyone crouched or cowered, save for the professor who remained standing, albeit with a confused look on her face.

"Please, this isn't necessary." She put her hands up in appeasement. "We've nothing of value here. We've very little crystite. None of it is weapons-grade and its decay signature is traceable...it'd be of no use to you."

"We're not here for your crystite. And we're not here for your dark algae. We're here to put an end to your polluting of our oceans." Sophia said, her voice thick with disdain.

"Polluting of our oceans?" Rosilaine repeated back, her expression changing to one of comprehension.

"Oh....you're....you're eco-terrorists?" She asked.

"We're *activists*," Sophia countered firmly. "YOU are the eco-terrorists. We don't agree with what you're doing. We've tried the normal channels and nobody seems to be listening. The Accord has even given us the run-around. Nobody is taking us seriously. Well, that ends today."

Rosilaine knew she had to act swiftly. "Listen, there's no need for us to introduce violence here. Your grievances are legitimate, I recognize that. Please, let the children go, keep me as your hostage. The facility cannot run without me. You'll have as much leverage with me as with anyone. Let the children go and I'll help you in any way that I can."

Chao looked quizzically at Bolin and Sophia. Bolin nodded curtly and Sophia gave an indifferent shrug.

“The children can leave with your assistant.” Chao said. “In exchange, your assistant agrees to these terms: power will not be cut and our feed will not be jammed. Additionally, you agree to provide us with internal documentation about this facility’s operations—we want accurate figures. And you will speak on our behalf during our SIN broadcast.”

Rosilaine nodded softly at her assistant, who then quickly herded the children into the turbo-lift. Once the doors had closed, Rosilaine breathed a sigh of relief.

“You can holster your weapons. I assure you, I’m not a threat.”

Chaoxiang ignored her and set about disabling the turbo-lift.

“Are there any other entrances to this facility?” Sophia asked.

“None, other than the water chutes. The fresh water enters there,” she pointed to a large series of pipes. “But it is strained and filtered prior to this building. I assure you it is neither an entrance nor an exit. Once the water is ‘engineered’, it leaves—“

“—corrupted,” Sophia interjected.

“—the facility over there, past the giant centrifuge.”

Chaoxiang started a fuse-delay and quickly jogged back to the others. There was pop and a brief cloud of smoke from the turbo-lift’s control panel.

“Now then, it’s time for us to have a talk.” Sophia said coldly.

“Really, none of this is necessary, I assure you.” Rosilaine said.

The professor led the three activists into her office, a low-key room full of journals and papers, second-rate furniture and a musty smell in the air. “Sorry for the odor. It’s difficult to keep the algae stench out.”

She gestured to a well-worn couch and planted herself in a plaid chair that gave a tired groan. She folded her hands behind her head and studied the ceiling for a moment while she collected her thoughts. Rather than ask how they imagined this getting resolved, she decided most of all that they longed to be heard. They wanted their voice to matter in a world which had too long neglected them.

“As deputy ops for this entire facility...as well as one of your fellow citizens of New Eden, you have my undivided attention. Tell me why you’re here.”

Sophia cast an incredulous look at the two others and then led the charge. “We’re here to put an end to this nonsense. You lot have been messing with things beyond your expertise. This level of bio-engineering...this type of industrialized science...it’s what led to the Arlight fiasco. You thought you understood arc-folding, and you—“

“I had nothing to do with the Arlight, nor its technology.”

“Well, the organization you represent did. You’re just a cog in the greater machine, yeah-yeah-yeah, but you’re still in that machine. You and the type of people you represent are what caused the rip in the space-time continuum. This sort of messing about is what led to the Melding’s arrival, isn’t it? Isn’t it?!” she pressed.

“Listen, missy. It’s a dangerous game to go lumping different people and different endeavors together.

There are two angles on this where I think you might be mistaken.”

“Is that so? Show us! Show us!” Sophia angrily said atop of Rosilaine’s voice.

The professor sighed. “You,” she pointed at Chaoxiang. “You look to be early 30s...no older than 34, am I correct?” He nodded.

“And you,” she gestured at Bolin. “Mid-twenties at most? So young to be caught up in this.” Her face looked tragically sad.

“Make your point,” Sophia pressed.

“And you’re likely the eldest, but still under 40,” Rosilaine said. “The Queen Bee of today’s fiasco.” She cast a disapproving motherly look. “The point is that none of you were alive during the Nine Year Winter. None of you have any firsthand idea of just how severe the suffering was.”

Rosilaine took off her left shoe and thrust her foot forward. Only three toes remained. “All I lost...were two toes. Two toes...and every member of my family, every friend, every parishioner at my church. Every single member of my social world DIED from exposure or for want of food or shelter.”

She put her shoe back on and pinched her eyes. Even now the memory wrought a heavy emotional toll.

“We understand and sympathize with your loss, but we disapprove of your meddling with the environment.” Sophia replied, this time with her voice more tempered. “We are in *lemanja’s hands*.” The three silently made the same open-palmed, splayed-fingered gesture as before. “Who are we to question her judgment and her intentions for us? We should not interfere with her domain.”

Rosilaine’s lips made a thin line. Perhaps she was approaching this incorrectly. “Perhaps this is my fault. Perhaps I’ve done a very poor job of communicating to the masses—people not unlike yourself, who feel like they’ve been on the wrong side of a whole lot of ill fortune lately. It’s true...big science has gotten us into a bit of a pickle in this past year. And yes, there is always—always, always—the looming threat that our incomplete understanding of nature will cause us even more folly, or that our technological progress will outpace our moral maturity, leading inevitably to more suffering. But it also has the potential to alleviate *so much* suffering. Please! Let me share with you some charts. Let me show you how we know—*without* a shadow of a doubt—that our efforts have succeeded in helping warm the Earth since the Nine Year Winter. I have petabytes of data that you’d be—“

She stopped suddenly, making a terrible gasping sound. On the forehead of each of the three activists, a bright red laser dot suddenly appeared. Before she could even utter a warning, there was a high pitch *crack* followed by a thudding sound in stereo. The three recon bullets that were fired simultaneously had all found their mark. All three of the activists’ brains had burst onto the video displays behind them; their gray matter ran slowly like pulp down the screens.

Rosilaine screamed, gripping the forearms of her swivel chair with a white-knuckled clutch. Her shock at the situation immediately turned to rage. “NOOOOooooo!” she howled.

A squad of five Accord filed into the room. Three examined their targets, one held the entrance, the last addressed her.

“Professor Rosilaine?” he said, more as a statement than a question. “My name is Cpt. Carvalho, we’re with Task Force Five. We specialize in domestic resolutions and industry relations. We make sure everything runs smoothly, we deal with hiccups like this.”

"I gave them my word!" Rosilaine lashed out in anger. "Why must everything be resolved with violence?! I could have talked them down. I could have talked them down! They were misguided...but wholesome people! They wanted to do what's right! They lived by their creed!"

"And they died by it too. Are you done, mam?" The Accord sentinel asked impatiently. "We don't have time for this tomfoolery. The admiral has enough on his plate without worrying about the occasional cracked egg or hippie that gets too big for their britches. Now you do important work here. The admiral knows it. No use in defending this planet if she's gonna be nothing but a husk at the end of it. I've been authorized to speak on behalf of the admiral and let me assure you, he considers your efforts to be of the highest importance to our future. You know the admiral's opinion that there's no reason to be looking to Alpha Prime when we've got a perfectly good rock here. If we can't learn to live here, we don't deserve to live anywhere else. The admiral has no respect for those individuals who always want to cut bait and run." The sentinel paused, as though the weight of his words needed time to sink in. "I encourage you not to get tripped up by the day's events. Take the afternoon off. Get some R&R. I'm authorized to give you a lift to Copacabana if you're so inclined. Then wake up fresh tomorrow and you can go about getting the operations here flowing again. I know it may not feel it...you may forget it from time to time, working deep underground here, but your work with dark algae is critical to the war effort, in a roundabout way."

Rosilaine flexed and released her right hand. Her arthritis was acting up and she could feel her blood pressure rising. "Maybe taking the afternoon off is a good idea." She said, in as neutral a tone as she could muster. "I'll pass on your offer for Copacabana, however. I think I'd rather sit on the surface and watch the paddles churn the algae pools."

The sentinel gave her a queer look, but motioned for the rest of his squad to leave. "Remember, you're important, professor." She nodded faintly. It was good to know she was prized. She found herself fearing the day she was not.

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