

Your first view of Torei from space is a bit of a disappointment, all told. You suppose you've seen realistic images before, but the picture of the planet in everyone's heads is the stylized diagram used for their celestial ensign: a grey globe circled by a green sash at the equator, black ziggurats sprouting clouds from the poles.

Whenever someone spots the image above a starport berth, wild tales fill the corridors and canteens. The Toreans have no shipyards of their own, and the sight of their flag on a second-hand haulier or cruise vessel is often the only hint that anything may be different within. You always hear one or two maintenance techs swearing oaths that they serviced it and saw a brothel of chattel slaves inside, or customs clerks confiding that one entry on the manifest is code for human cargo.

In the years you've been starfaring, you began to think of the planet itself as a bit of a tall tale in its own right. That's why you're a little disappointed to come into high orbit and not see cartoonish terraforming pyramids jutting visibly out into space, no iridescent green band edging sharply onto grey badlands. In some ways, it loses some of the magic to see that it's just another spherical planet with clouds, city lights, and a space elevator sticking like a splinter into low orbit.

But if the view from space is mundane, even as you dock at the elevator's top, the view from the surface is breathtaking. Immediately at the border control desk you found yourself transfixed by a sea of local female beauty. Border agents, car attendants, and shop girls are all stunning in their glistening slick-wear uniforms and jangling heavy jewelry. You discover a whole service industry run and staffed by gorgeous women.

You remember reading that women on Torei outnumber men nine to one, a result of the entire population descending from bio-engineered vat embryos. Thousands of years ago the un-manned

AI ships arrived to begin terraforming, and they carried with them a DNA bank of plants and animals to kick-start the native flora and fauna. Everything that lives and breathes on Torei, tourists excluded, came over as dessicated seeds or frozen eggs and spermatozoa.

Breeding is always easier if you have a harem of females fertilized by a single carefully-chosen stud. Bootstrapping a population was the primary goal of the colonization AIs, and they tuned the human genome to produce Y chromosomes in only 10% of sperm. Planetbuilding by the numbers, engineered by calculating artificial minds. It makes for quite a beautiful crowd, though, you have to admit.

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While walking a busy street, you catch your breath as you notice an emissary of an AI walking through the crowd. You have a circle of friends back home with an uncanny interest in these women, dressing up in black catsuits and faceless egg-shaped costume helmets to emulate their isolation laminates. You may even have enjoyed a good show or two where dancers pretended to be slaves of the machines in their own burlesque way. But none of your research prepared you for actually encountering one in person, however momentary.

You can't imagine what she sees through that helmet of hers, or what the computers at the poles allow her to see and hear. Her toned legs stalk forward like those of a greyhound, her laminated body sliding glossily between the real objects of the world you live in. A suit designed to protect the human body from the harsh environment outside the atmosphere-generating ziggurats now protects the human mind from the comforts of the lush world on the equator. You shudder, feeling a twinge of regret for ever fantasizing about their plight.

In the diplomatic compound at the anchor of the space elevator's immense tower, you have easy access to a number of independent equatorial nations on Torei. Centuries ago the fertile band of agricultural kingdoms joined together in a single empire, but now they each scabbled for a thin stripe of land connecting to the neutral territory that leads up to orbit and out to the greater galactic civilization. The nations on the antipode of the elevator are harsh and bitter, but they are the bread basket of Torei and they have the same pride in their agricultural life as you'd find in any agrarian world.

Each of the neighboring "ringdoms", as they're sometimes called, has erected a tower of its own next to the space elevator. The value of land next to the Way Up is so high that it would be wasteful not to. You explore the towers idly, tourist districts showing you exactly the forced sort of "local color" you saw splashed across all of the holiday pamphlets that brought you here.

Each kingdom has its own culture and society, but there are a few constants. First and foremost is that every nation on Torei permits and recognizes the chattel slavery of women. The degree to which it is practiced and how depends on the rule of the realm, but a slave on Torei will never find an abolitionist haven anywhere on the planet.

You play a little in the pleasure palaces, along with all the other tourists. You did your research, and you know that the women serving you are all freewombs or freeclits working under contracts entered into with knowing consent. Most real slaves only service their own masters or mistresses, and never deal with off-worlders. It still makes you wonder what kind of society would create a population of such beautiful creatures so eager to enter into this line of work. You convince yourself it's at least partly to do with differing sexual mores.

The parties are wild and intense and like nothing even your little kinky communities back home ever managed to enjoy. It's really true what they say, you think, and you wonder why it isn't enough for you.

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From the top of the tower belonging to the republic of Oshaz, you can see the subtle curvature of the planet. You look toward the South and imagine, some impossible distance away, a computer with a body the size of this whole country. It breathes in the core of the world and breathes out the air you're living on now. Utter fancy anywhere near anywhere, but out on this most distant of human settlements, it has been a simple fact for millennia.

And when that computer wants to see what the rogue humans around the equatorial belt are up to, it simply sends itself there, wrapped around living bodies and playing in their heads. If it could feed them and maintain itself without the bounty of these free states, it would rub them out tonight. And its twin to the North is no different.

You lay awake on your hotel bed, thinking of the tar-black ghost of a woman you saw earlier. Your mind is trapped in a loop, undistractable. And then there's a visitor at the door, ringing the precise moment that the clock rolls over. You let her in, her black featureless head showing your own face in its reflection.

She is all business, wordlessly holding out the contract on a smooth obsidian slab. She silently adjusts the terms as you haggle, but you're not really speaking to her. You're making deals with a computer half a world away.

The two polar arcologies have been trading manufactured goods to the equator in exchange for food and other agricultural materials for centuries. But now the grain belt is happy to get what it

needs by selling sex to the greater cosmos, and it's squeezing the poor ziggurats out. With things left as they are, the habitability of this world will be compromised within a decade, and that's why the two of you are negotiating right now.

You've got what they want, easy. It's all about raw organic compounds, oils, grains, and fresh fruit. Sure, this star is on the ass end of space, but the goods are chump change to you. What you need in return is much more interesting. This world has human bio-engineering technology that thousands of years of singular focus developed far in advance of the rest of human science. The emissary's lamination suit alone is a masterpiece, never mind the life extension treatments and body modification techniques...

You have to calm down.

You regain your nerve and negotiate smoothly, finally settling on three of the five technologies your company wants to market. Your target was two, so you're feeling rather pleased with yourself. The moment that the transfers are solemnized, the emissary quickly turns to leave without even a farewell gesture.

You grab her wrist.

She has the strength of a machine, should she choose to use it. She could flick her wrist in a way that would break all your fingers, if willed by her computational master. And yet she pauses.

There is a moment when you're convinced that your motives have been misinterpreted. Or that it's glaringly obvious what you want and you'll die painfully for daring to try taking it. You've tickled the tail of a monster the size of a moon, and this fragile-looking rubber goddess may just decide to feed you to her sisters.

But with delicacy and grace she pulls her arm away from you and places her palms together behind her back. You gasp as the rubbery coating of her lamination writhes and merges, joining her elbows in a perfect monoglove. She drops to her knees and

places the black porcelain egg of her head on the floor at your feet.

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On the liner back to civilization, you feel justified in splashing out on a first class cabin. You've had a fantastic trip for both business and pleasure. You are a rising star in your organization, now, and you can write your own terms.

People have been trying to crack this kind of technology transfer deal for years, but all the cultural studies were focused on the ringdoms. It was only people like you, people with a strange dark patch in their minds, who had the necessary level of obsession with the grim mechanical hives. You had to be a special kind of broken to get a square deal from those monsters.

Alone in your luxury room, you unpack the spoils of your expedition. Most of it is simply encrypted data, key shards to complete the unlocking of a vast body of science on the modification of the human body. It's not the sort of treasure you can hold up to the light or run your fingertips over. There are some biological samples sealed in blocks of something not unlike lucite, and some peculiar devices for synthesizing symbiotic materials to match cell samples.

But this is just a shallow platter of trinkets, and the chest is too large for this to be all that lies within. Lifting up the tray, your breath stops. You were so pleased with yourself, so sure that you'd figured out the robot masters of Torei. You thought you'd walked into their palace and walked away with the crown jewels. But they must have researched you far more than you ever pried into their way of life.

You set the tray on an ornate laquered table and reach with both hands into the shock-foam of the spacing crate. Your palms slide over the near-frictionless object inside, finding purchase on

the seam that must vanish the moment the thing is activated. Lifting it to the light, you run your fingers adoringly over its perfect surface.

The helmet is blacker than black, and yet it manages to reflect your awed face back to you. It is open in two parts, but you can find no hinge at all. Turning it over to look inside you see an impression of a face—your face.

This isolation helmet was made for you, and you alone. Reaching inside, you run your fingers over the inside-out shape of your own lips, and the object comes to life. The eyes glow with the light of an image meant only for you, and the mouth shape parts as a slick black protrusion probes into where your own mouth would go. It hunts like a worm in the dark, seeking... your tongue? Perhaps your teeth?

You cast a forlorn glance at the small tray of baubles you pried from Torei. To any lab in the core worlds, they're irrelevant toys compared to this helmet. If you brought this home, you could buy whole stars with the money you'd earn.

In flight or at your homeworld, the helmet would be too far from Torei to communicate with the polar AIs. All the same, it would have enough smarts and storage to hold training protocols and previously issued orders and directives. Torean ships must travel the stars all the time with emissary Isolates on board. Perhaps computer equipment running in the hold carries a fragment of the home ziggurat's consciousness, ready to merge at journey's end.

Maybe there's one on this very ship. It would be an extravagant expense to just toss such a thing onto an off-world passenger liner, to be sure. But the calculating mind that bargained with you, that gave you this gift... it made one very safe bet:

In the three months your ship traveled from Torei to your destination, it bet that you wouldn't be able to resist putting it

on.