

Chronicles of Suran, by Catherine N.X. (catherinenx@yahoo.com). Author's website: <http://www.asstr.org/~holokittynx>

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Third person - childlove, lesbian, mother/daughter, semi-utopian. Synopsis: A fictional island democracy where childlove is legal, as seen through romantic and political vignettes focusing on the people who live there.

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Rachel, chapter one.

Saturday, 1st December, 2074.

Sonja woke up, rolling over into a faceful of snoring black hair. Lifting her head a bit, she identified facing away from her the little munchkin she distinctly remembered nursing to sleep in its own bed the night before. This seemed to be happening more often, this odd magical disappearance of Rachel from her own bed and subsequent appearance in Mommy's bed. Sonja turned in the other direction to see water still dripping from the window frame and clouds dark enough to be the remnants of a thunderstorm she'd apparently slept through. Letting the aforementioned munchkin continue her log-sawing, and glad that it was Saturday so she didn't have to dress or wash yet, Sonja made her way downstairs to check the net news and get some coffee.

She turned on CNN South Pacific. Negotiations with the UN over allowing citizens from other countries to seek asylum in Sonja's country were close to a solution. As of that Friday only a few technical considerations remained to be settled. The Surani government agreed to extradite anyone charged with violent crimes, fraud, and larceny. All were consistent with the Surani constitution's basing criminal law primarily on whether an action violated the individual rights of those it affected. The main points of contention, of course, were the Surani laws pertaining to sexual autonomy. Adults charged with violating age of consent laws would only be extradited if there were evidence of coercion or force, or the child in question accused them of such. On this, the SDC had wavered little if at all. Sonja turned away from the coffee pot with her mug steaming just in time to turn the volume up on the monitor.

"The Suran Democratic Corporate has made clear its position on what constitutes a criminal offense, and with the United Nations are coming close to what we believe is a fair compromise in extradition law. The General Assembly has approved most of the language of this treaty, and most of Suran's Executive Council has been following the transcripts of each day's proceedings. I've been in contact with them and they have agreed to sign this treaty after Parliament passes it. If passed this month, this treaty will take effect in June of 2075. As for the offenses specified as such in the treaty, the SDC takes law enforcement very seriously, and violent criminals can expect swift..."

Sonja slurped her coffee, ready to head back to bed and read until Rachel woke up and decided what she wanted for breakfast. Her interest in the negotiations was academic, as she'd been born on Suran and most of her family was there or on one of its outlying islands. When the subject of sex came up with her daughter, she could be honest and open, without the Western world's still somewhat stifled notions about children and sex. Most of the US and Europe had lowered their ages of consent and enacted adaptive standards like education and signed affidavits, but there were still extreme cultural biases in most countries. These led to insanely harsh penalties, vigilantism, and all sorts of discrimination going unprosecuted.

Suran was a relatively new nation, having broken from the US and ratified its constitution only twenty-three years before. But like the handful of Asian and very liberal European cultures that influenced it and had themselves abandoned taboos about child sex over the past few decades, it allowed children who could speak a language to consent to sexual experimentation and pleasure. Crime was defined in the constitution by objective harm or extreme impracticality. Children having sex could not rationally be proven to cause either in and of itself. Transmitting STDs was illegal regardless of the age of the participants, and prosecuted according to the severity of the illness. Independent childbearing was allowed over the age of 20. Anyone under that age would be allowed to live with their children, but only under direct state supervision and assistance. The measures were not punitive, but practical - to ensure that children and their parents got a good start. The only crimes related to sex were coercion and rape.

With the world's population problem and in spite of its slight decline of late, there was a great deal of bias in advanced cultures against having multiple children, and failing to use contraception was very badly out of fashion. Like most Surani her age, Rachel was an only child. Her father was a very close gay male friend of theirs, and Rachel knew that he had helped Mommy make her. Takeshi and his husband lived in the house (or mansion depending on your perspective) directly behind theirs, and Takeshi was Rachel's legal father if anything happened to Sonja. The houses' backyards combined into one large area,

and Rachel was allowed to play with all of it. Sonja had asked Takeshi because of his chiseled yet pleasantly effeminate looks, reasonably high intelligence and the relative absence of any hereditary health risks in his family. His mother had lived to age 107, and his father to age 103.

Sonja looked out over the dewy grass and dripping palm trees as the sun started peeking out from behind the clouds, and thumbed the controls for the bedroom windows. As the glass became translucent to diffuse the sunlight, she opened her copy of Koontz's *False Memory*, sat down next to Rachel, and picked up where she left off. As usual Koontz scared the hell out of her, but this time she wasn't sure what threat the protagonists were facing - only that they were all losing their minds and there must be a cause.

Forty minutes later, Sonja was chuckling at the genius of Koontz's explanation for the dementia, and wondering at the potential this revelation offered for the story and its resolution. As she turned the page, Rachel moaned and opened her eyes. When she sat up, her hair flopped into her face only to be smoothed back by her mother's hand.

"Hey silly. Thunderstorm scare you?"

"No, the storm was pretty. Lots of lightning. I wanted to snore at you."

Sonja set the bookmarked novel on her nightstand and snuggled Rachel close. "You're silly. And you've got some lip for a six year old. Hungry?" Rachel lit up, suddenly reminded that she had a stomach. "Pancakes? And scrambled eggs?"

"Simple enough. Come down in 15 minutes." Sonja started for the kitchen as Rachel flopped back onto the pillow. The kitchen was a bit chilly, which Sonja hadn't cared about when she got her coffee. Rachel would be a bit more particular, so Sonja turned up the climate controls and started mixing pancake batter. She prepared half a dozen pancakes and put them in the convection oven to stay warm while she whipped the eggs and cooked them. Just as she started shoveling the eggs onto plates, Rachel came down in cotton pajamas, slippers, and with her heavy terry cloth robe trailing behind her. Sitting down at her usual chair, she made a show of lightly banging her little fists on the table and chanting "food, food, food."

"Bite me, kid. I oughta make you cook me breakfast." She suspiciously eyed the grinning sprite. "No, on second thought, you'd make me fried banana tofu and chocolate covered roaches."

"Yep. And you'd eat it because I'm your daughter and everything I do is wonderful."

"Sure. Keep telling yourself that. Cuddly little nutcase." Sonja set Rachel's plate in front of her next to the blueberry syrup and butter, then went back to get boba and orange juice. As she moved about the kitchen and finally settled in front of her own plate, Rachel was eating eggs with one hand and thumbing through the movie listings with the other. A live action version of "Ghost in the Shell" had been made, and both Sonja and Rachel were interested in seeing it.

Cybernetics were not yet so advanced in 2074 as to cause the social issues addressed in the anime classic, but those issues were becoming more and more relevant with every new advance in neural interfaces. Most of these were used to help the blind or deaf when simple nerve repair or cochlear implants would not work, but they were gaining in popularity for recreational and business computer users. Computer games could be experienced in three dimensions, with some rudimentary tactile sensation from more expensive systems. Everything felt like warm glass in such games, and delicate sensations like wind, taste, gravity, or sexual pleasure could not be generated by anything but human nerves. Still, they could be great fun. Rachel had requested a sensory implant to play these games and watch VR movies, and the hair on the back of her head had grown back to shoulder-length over the past three months with the use of hair-growth cream. Unlike a few kids who liked their jacks showing all the time, some even connecting decorative lights and glowing fiber-optic "ponytails," Rachel was rather enamored of her bone-straight black hair and had wanted it back as quickly as possible.

Smoothing the hard-grown crop back on her head and tucking it behind her ears, Rachel piped up, "'Ghost in the Shell' is showing at the mall at 13, 15, 17, 19, and 21 hundred."

"How many tickets available for 13:00? I want to do some Saturnalia shopping."

"Me too. Everything before 17:00 is sold out. Eight tickets for that show have sold while we've been talking."

"Let me get my debit card." Sonja stepped into her office for a moment, and came out fishing her debit card from her purse. Rachel had clicked through the purchase menu on her tablet, and Sonja ran her card over its scanner just before the ticket count reached zero. She and Rachel would have to show up early

to get good seats. She set her purse on the counter and went back to her eggs before they got cold. The sun was quickly drying the windows and backyard as the clouds broke up, and while the weather had been unusually brisk for a December in the South Pacific, the day would be a gorgeous one to look at. Clear blue skies and puffy cumulus clouds were out in force by the time Sonja and Rachel finished dressing and headed out for the day. Sonja was in a faux leather pantsuit - close fitting, but warm enough. Rachel wore a bulky, bright blue skirt, wide copper belt, and matching blue shoulder wrap over her black jumper. The wrap was perfect with her Asian eyes, bobbed hair, and her mother's pale European complexion.

Sonja had a minivan for group outings with Rachel's friends or nights on the town with her own, but when it was just the two of them, they took her new T-Rex. It was a low, speedy two-seat cross between a car and motorcycle. The vehicles had been produced since the late 20th century, but become more affordable and gone through some technical changes. This latest iteration had a large trunk behind the rear wheel, an electroshaded glass canopy, and an electric fuel-cell powered engine. For the time, 50 thousand Surani pounds was a steal for such a smart, fun machine. It was Sonja and Rachel's mischievous indulgence between them. Little more than a three-wheeled go-kart for adults with money. Sonja plugged in her key, and the low hum of the engine slowly built as she swung her door shut. Rachel closed her door, affixed her harness, and slowly the trike rolled forward as Sonja put the transmission in gear and applied her foot to the accelerator. The garage seemed to melt away as the trike bounced out onto the street and turned towards the main street that led to the mall. Sonja hit the garage door control, Rachel looking back to confirm that it was lowering. Like the rest of the garage and most of the house exterior, it was mirrored glass that let occupants see out but allowed no one to see in. Most of the time, it was translucent white inside and let light in much like Japanese paper windows. When a current was applied, it became fully transparent to let one enjoy the scenery. The windows curved upwards in a quarter circle, meeting the ceiling on the second floor and ensuring that little artificial light was needed in most rooms.

Sonja had already done her shopping for Rachel's Saturnalia presents, and Takeshi had taken Rachel to shop for her mother. He had helped her wrap them at his house, and Sonja had promised not to peek at them in Rachel's closet. Today they were shopping for Takeshi, his husband Geoff, Sonja's parents and Rachel's friends. Takeshi was seriously into cars (and had suggested the T-Rex), so they were eyeing a model of a classic Dodge Viper for him. Geoff liked his wines, so Sonja had reserved a bottle of Chateau Louvois vintage 2035 at a posh winery downtown. It was pricey, almost six hundred pounds, but he was family.

First it was to the mall. They arrived at about 10:00, and immediately

headed to the video store to see what movies and games would suit Rachel's friends. Then it was off to Zap for jewelry they would enjoy. As was the fashion, most of the jewelry for sale consisted of fun, chunky synthetic diamond and metal shapes. Most of the diamonds could be lit from the inside, and some of the metals changed color while you looked at them. Rachel was partial to copper and stainless steel, but most of her friends were into glittery things. So each got matching androgynously styled steel and diamond necklaces. Sonja thought they were a great idea - fun, a symbol of friendship, and easily replaced at 40# apiece. They were smooth link chains half a centimeter thick, with a rounded cube-shaped half centimeter synthetic diamond pendant. It was on a lit setting, easily recharged by putting it on a charge pad. When turned on, the diamond would glow from the inside. Rachel had four friends she hung out with at school, so she got them each one lit with their favorite color. Sonja made a note to get Rachel a matching one lit blue.

They finished their shopping, picked up Takeshi's car model, left the lot of it in the trike, and headed back into the mall to see the movie. Shot scene for scene to match the original, it was 82 minutes long and worth all of them. Neither Sonja nor Rachel could stop talking about it as they headed out into the waning daylight, and downtown to pick up Geoff's wine and see the sights. Leolua Street, the center of culture and nightlife in downtown Tashkana, was lit up like a circuit board with holiday lights. They hung by the hundreds and thousands from every tree, palms and imported alike. All of them twinkled in unison with each other and with their reflections in the glass and steel skyscrapers, like stars singing to the patrons and tourists. This yearly spectacle had no small role in contributing to the bustle of the street as an attraction in and of themselves. Sonja found parking, and they began walking along the street hand in hand to enjoy the hum of the season.

Over the past sixty years, the Suran islands had become a hub of business, international trade, tourism, and research easily rivaling Chicago, London, or Tokyo sans population density. Small, out of the way, its population had exploded in the 2010s with the discovery of a vast supply of uranium ore and rare metals like neodymium just offshore. The US, upon whisperings of the fortune to be made and potential security ramifications, had purchased it just before this news broke worldwide. They were right about its importance. Mining companies all over the planet readily invested billions of American dollars to build enclosed areas of dry seabed for mining operations, and these billions had built a vital economy in a few short years. Thousands of workers and engineers moved to Suran, and for their trouble were afforded all the amenities of home. Which in most cases was Japan, the US, or western Europe. With them came families, and cultures, and the willingness to make a home on the temperate island chain. As

the world's phone system was replaced with broadband video connections and satellites, the islands seemed less remote from friends and family, making staying that much easier.

Suran was also within a single flight of several Antarctic cities and research stations with similar promise, serving as an easy waystation between them and Asia or Australia. As techniques for mining through ice improved, surely the shipping and air traffic through Tashkana Harbor would follow suit. Most of the population was Japanese and European, with a large smattering of Americans who'd stayed after the islands had seceded. The government was a model for others to follow, with many advantages of American or Canadian democracy but more efficient. The bridges connecting the islands were engineering marvels the likes of which even Japan had not attempted, and the megafloat airstrips off Tashkana Harbor were larger than any in Tokyo Bay. From space, the tiny avant-garde nation looked like a glittering spiderweb, with Tashkana in the middle and the capital just to its west. The bridge connecting them was an eight lane highway ten kilometers long and thirty meters above the bluest seas in the region. Down its center ran a maglev track for speedy transit between the chain's two largest islands.

Besides the bridges and trains, another amenity perfected to a science in Suran was municipal air transit. Helicopters were cheaper, safer and quieter than ever. Antigrav vehicles were becoming available to very wealthy consumers. But far more numerous were dirigibles. With the advancement of tough, ultralight plastics and metal/polymer composites, they could be made for maneuverability and easy piloting, and streamlining was the rule. Hundreds of such airships moved about the skyscrapers and between the islands, many for sightseeing but most for commuters. Slung between buildings were landing pads allowing the country's engineers and programmers and bankers, thirty or forty at a time, to enter their workplaces on the 20th floor, or 30th, or 200th. A few buildings were variations of the Japanese "Sky City" concept, hollow inside and a kilometer or more tall, with trains and inclinators connecting the hundreds of floors and multilayered parklands. The proliferation of these self-contained communities had cut the flow of traffic relative to the country's population of over ten million, and there were fewer passenger cars in Suran than in Los Angeles or New York. The few truly massive buildings, like Tashkana One, had populations in the hundreds of thousands apiece, and were connected by trains and highways. Rarely were these thoroughfares moving anywhere near their capacity, and the roads were built to evacuate each building's maximum occupancy in under two days if necessary.

However attractive and optimistic was the Suran of today, its exact opposite had stood there 23 years before. Its initial industrial development had been short-

sighted and aimed at efficiency rather than sustainability. After the gloss of new careers and corporate perks had faded, the workers and engineers who had moved to the islands had seen labor shortages and safety concerns go unaddressed as the demands on them increased. The United States government was long on money to throw at its protectorate, but short on ideas for using it wisely. The resources needed exploiting, but the workforce and equipment to do so could not be crammed onto the islands by traditional Western means. Eventually the Japanese partners, with experience in massive industrial undertakings, were afforded the discretion and money needed to apply their expertise. Workers were gradually relocated to Australia, and mining operations ran skeleton crews while new vertically-oriented living spaces were constructed and roads were widened. In a given area where 30,000 people had lived, now could safely and comfortably live 150,000. The drop in industrial output cost money in the short term, but began paying off hugely once work could resume. In just over ten years, Suran went from being overcrowded by a relative handful of people and machinery, to comfortably housing vast amounts of each with wilderness to spare. By the mid 2040s, most development on the islands was for recreation and scientific endeavor, with little remaining support from the US financially, and a divide between Suran and its parent country becoming apparent.

Saturnalia 2051 had not been as happy as this one. Sonja remembered being her daughter's age and watching Leolua Street during the rainy season. But that year the street had been bustling with military aircraft about tasks slightly more dangerous than shopping. To defend its interests, the United States had assigned Suran some of the most advanced (and island-friendly) warplanes money could buy. It was these craft which had used Leolua Street as a runway when war broke out. It was necessary, as in those days, megafloats were easy to target and sink, which was exactly what the Americans did to prevent the use of their planes against them. Another thing they had counted on until then was that the Suran state assembly would defer to them when the Asian and European sponsors wanted to take over, having contributed ever larger portions of the cost for the development of the chain's resources and potential. Washington somehow didn't think that legislators, pilots, and Guardsmen who had been born and raised on the islands might side with their friends and families over foreign interests. Foreign meaning Americans as much as Britons, French, or Japanese. Knowing better than to get into an open conflict with the US, the Europeans and Japanese decided to support Suran's independence from any other power, both politically and industrially.

To an American sitting at home watching the news, the Suran conflict might have seemed like an interesting news story - somewhat more titillating than Iraq or Afghanistan or Colombia. To a Surani, there was no sitting at home

watching the news. Outside communications were jammed and cables cut, usually for months at a time. Air battles to get traffic in and out of the country were constant, and it was only PR concerns that kept the American navy from targeting the cities. This fact, as much as the willingness of the average Surani to take up arms, allowed Suran to mount an effective defense. After three years of conflict, nearly a hundred thousand Surani deaths, and the near collapse of the Surani economy, the combined expertise of its native engineers ended the war literally and politically. Antigravity technology was in development before the war started, and with smuggled supplies from their overseas sympathizers the Surani government had constructed the first antigrav warship, with the class name Nemesis. Most of the American planes used in the conflict were a bit older and less advanced than Suran's, but with constant maintenance and reliable weapons stores were slowly outclassing and outgunning the Surani force.

On February 20th, 2054 at 9:20, eighty-two Surani warplanes, more than could normally be spared for one mission, took off from various parts of Tashkana Island, heading in the direction of the outlying island where the US Marines had established a foothold twenty thousand strong. Five minutes later, a pale gray shape nobody had seen before roared from beneath Adanji Falls, hull so smooth that water sheeted off of it. Weighing essentially nothing but for inertia, Nemesis was accelerated by its scramjets to Mach 2 within a few minutes of clearing the rocks. Three hundred miles away, out of range of Surani land-based plasma weapons and Tesla coils, the American carrier group was nestled too closely together. With their planes having launched at a rate of one every 15 seconds, nearly the entire American air wing was off trying to protect the suddenly threatened Marines. The half-dozen protecting the carrier were in no position to intercept or outaccelerate Nemesis. The slightly insectoid craft wasn't heavily armed, but didn't have to be for its objective. Essentially a bomber, it carried a defensive plasma cannon, some electronic countermeasures, short-range conventional explosive rounds...and one tactical EMP warhead secretly donated by the Sino-Russian Federation. The warhead was delivered too quickly for the carrier's close-in weapons systems to target it in time. By the time it detonated over the group, Nemesis was over a mile and a half away. Seven thousand sailors were leaving breakfast, operating reactors, or charging catapults when all the lights went out. Even the group's submarines were affected by the pulse. Suddenly sixty American warplanes were less concerned about shooting down Surani than about where they would land. The island held by the Marines was fit for landing on by VTOL craft and little else.

They were all too happy to be forced down one by one, detonating their weapons over the ocean before landing wherever they could to be placed under arrest. The carrier group was in no position to help them, and using it as a

bargaining chip had been the point of the Nemesis' attack. The surface vessels could only last for a few days without power, and the submarines were already sinking. The Surani Executive Council was eager to explain this to the American president via satellite, and in less than an hour he had sworn the withdrawal of American forces from the region in exchange for Surani assistance in berthing the crippled surface ships and surfacing the submarines.

One of the planes protecting the carrier had fallen into the ocean (sans ejected pilot) from the EMP, and its reconstructed form sat in Independence Square. The curvy, somber monument was just barely visible to Sonja in the distance as she walked out of the winery with a sleepy Rachel straddling one hip and a very expensive bottle of hooch in her shoulder bag. Rachel seemed to be tiring out earlier than usual of late, and had mentioned not getting much sleep for one reason or another. The drive home was quicker than Sonja expected, but driving was always fast once one cleared the city and got to the freeways cutting through the forest-smattered suburbs. She got the trike into the garage, and let Rachel snooze in her harness while she carried the presents into the kitchen and put Geoff's wine in the refrigerator. Carefully she extracted the cuddly little blueberry-attired girl from the cockpit, getting her halfway up the stairs before Rachel awoke and hugged her, whispering "Mommy."

"Hey, silly. Do you want to take a bath before you go to bed?"

"Okay." Sonja carried her into the bathroom and turned the water on, removing the silver clip holding back part of her hair and gradually extracting her from her blue and black ensemble as the tub filled. Gradually Sonja's own clothes joined her daughter's on the dressing bench as Rachel soaked in the sweet-scented water and bubbles. She moved forward as Sonja sat behind her, with one leg on either side for easy scrubbing and shampooing. Not many kids were interested in old movies and comics, but Rachel always liked quoting young Pasquale from the 1990s American comic strip 'Rose is Rose.'

"Never settle for shampoo. Demand REAL poo!" she lazily quipped as her mother laughed, checking to see that Rachel's jack had a seal in before reaching for shampoo and working her hair into a fruity lather. Water in the neural jack wasn't dangerous, but would interfere with its use and take forever to dry out. Sonja was too engrossed on keeping the bubbles from Rachel's face to immediately notice her slight squirming. Not at all an uncomfortable movement, more like that of someone enjoying a warm blanket or exquisitely hot shower. What she did notice while rinsing the shampoo out with the hand sprayer was Rachel closing her eyes and rubbing her thighs together. Between them was her tiny right wrist being pressed inward, hand flat against the warm porcelain.

Unsure what to do and not realizing this subject might come up so soon, Sonja slowly inched closer to her baby, slowly caressing her tiny shoulders with a fluffy sponge. Rachel began rocking back and forth a bit, and Sonja decided not to rush things or make her talk about what she was feeling yet. She snuggled up to her daughter, rubbing her tummy and letting her soak for a few minutes before asking if she was ready for bed. Rachel smiled and nodded, and Sonja stepped out of the tub, drying herself off before standing Rachel up to dry her. Rachel stepped out of the tub onto the fluffy bathroom rug, and her mother knelt before her. Smiling, Sonja wrapped the towel around her and slowly rubbed it up and down, concentrating on her sides and legs. Rachel's eyes drooped a bit, and she sighed as her mother dried her neck, back, and bottom. Setting her up on the counter with the towel wrapped around her body and tucked under her arms, Sonja got a smaller hand towel and tousled Rachel's hair dry with it before donning a thick robe. She left the robe open, snuggling Rachel to her pale chest as she picked her up.

"Do you want to sleep in my bed tonight?" Sleepily, Rachel nodded, and was carried into Mommy's room and put in bed naked. The room was reasonably warm, so the comforter would prevent any goosebumps. Sonja wanted to ask Rachel if she needed to nurse, but the girl's snoring answered that question. Sonja slipped on a satin nightie and slowly wrapped its matching robe around Rachel, then pulled the covers up and put one arm around her. In a matter of minutes the snoring became a team sport. And the house was quiet.