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Cover by Denny E. Marshall.

Multimart

By Nina Kiriki Hoffman

I was emping a copy of the latest Geeta memory module when my adopted Zillian parent, Rilma, fringed my shoulder. I came back with a thump to the rear of our Robowear booth, in the Zillian quarter of the Multimart at Nexus Station, a node where many skip routes met and most travelers paused before skipping farther.

I unplugged the sensorium and blinked a few times. It was hard to let the capsule world go, even though I knew I could replay it. I liked being in a world away from both the lives I'd actually led.

In the memmod, I'd been under an alien sea, and light came in shafts from the surface, greening as it reached down into depths. In the Multimart, the light was brighter, and much more yellow. Our booth was one of many on a ground-floor aisle. Above us, the webwork of arboreal and flyer booths stretched, with cable bridges between, and landing stations at the booths' outer edges. Higher than that hung the false sky of Nexus, colored and animated at the whim of whoever was in charge of interior weather that day—currently purple, with green-tinged clouds.

Chatter and clatter from the layer above reached us, and the sound of foot traffic from shoppers at our level, though the aisles between the booths were padded and bouncy, and the grav was light enough to make shopping comfortable for the majority of species for hours. Languages and scents mingled in the air: vocal, singing, clicking, and hissing tongues, many of which I understood, and the charred scent of fried locusts and leaves from the booth across the aisle, along with fainter scents from other food booths more distant, and species scents and the personal choices of perfumes from those passing by. The spice booth next door also had many odors, most of which I liked. Rilma and I didn't have one of those fancy booths that filtered out noise and smell; the Multimart was always an assault on the senses.

I had elected to work in the Multimart the year before, rather than stay on Zillia and study tech component manufacturing, Zillia's chief export, something Zillians could manage masterfully with micromanipulation of flagella. My thick fingers were clumsy at tasks Zillians accomplished with ease.

The Multimart was a place where my facility with languages was a valuable skill to the Zillians, who had no spoken language, and I thought if there were anyplace I might find my lost twin brother, it was here. Sooner or later, all folk came to Nexus.

"Fret." Rilma's fringe of legs on hiser right side spoke against the bare skin of my left shoulder. "We have a humanoid customer."

I unjacked from the sensorium, smoothed my service apron, and stood up. Rilma, an elongated, semi-transparent sphere dotted with eye spots and furred with flagella, danced on hiser many legs toward the front of the booth, and I followed her.

A woman stood inside our booth, glancing at the samples of Robowear on display. She wore a silvery robe that hid whatever clothing she had on beneath it, and her headdress was a sleek cap of brown and silver feathers that concealed any hair she might have. Her skin color was the reddish brown of rosewood, and her eyes were so pale they were almost white, except for diamond-shaped pupils in the center.

"How may I help you?" I asked in Interling.

"I'm interested in the complete SPAM," she said, pointing to our most popular Single Person Atmospheric Module.

"This is the best one we have," I said. "I use it myself whenever I leave the mart. You can set the temperature for anything that feels comfortable to you, and it will recycle everything your body lets go of in near-perpetuity. It self-repairs and will respond to many vocal commands. The helmet is ultra clear."

"May I try it on?"

"Of course, serra. Can you tell me your size?"

"I don't know it. Can't you guess?" Her silvery eyes widened, and she opened her cape to display a heavy-breasted figure clothed in very thin, almost spray-on stretchtight.

There was a scent that came from her, too, something with unfamiliar florals in it, and something muskier. It burned a little on my tongue, yet there was an enticing taste to it.

Rilma, who hovered behind me as I spoke, fringed against my bare back. "What signals is she sending you, Fret?"

I put my hand against hisher side and moved my fingers in my approximation of Zillian. "I don't know. I think she wants me to want her, but I can't think why."

"You are an attractive singlesex of a similar species," hishi said. "Why should she not want you?"

The woman came closer. She lowered her arms, and her smile shifted into something sadder. "Don't you remember me, Lyall Sununder?" she asked.

I froze. I had not heard my twin brother's name since we were ten. Our family had been part of a cultural diaspora that sent people to planets at the edges of explored space. Our parents and their siblings had wanted to live on a world where few Terrans had ever been, to start life over with a better system, and isolate until they had achieved social perfection.

Even though our parents and the others in the colony had a dream of starting over, they had brought humanity's history with them. They hid it, but they kept it. Bored and curious, Lyall and I had broken into the archives when we were eight, reading about the way life was on other worlds in other times, though our parents tried to keep us innocent. We had longed for different ways of life. The colony seemed too small and too ordinary.

When the colony collapsed from Chinek Plague, only a few of us survived, Lyall and me and three little girls. The first ship to visit after the collapse was from Zillia, only one skip node away, trading partners with the colony before the collapse. The Zillians took all five of us off the planet, but they left Lyall and the girls at the nearest skip node station, a tiny place with few residents and almost no amenities, and kept only me.

The last time I saw Lyall, he looked so sad. My face must have mirrored his. We held onto each other's hands as long as we could, but Rilma, who had already taken some of my cells into herself and made part of herself a match to me, tightened flagella around my arms and pulled me away from my brother. Other Zillians herded my brother and the three little girls off the ship and onto the station. Matching me meant Rilma matched Lyall as well, but hishi wouldn't listen when I begged her to take my brother with us.

"I'm not Lyall Sununder," I said to the woman. "He's my brother. Where did you see him?"

She pulled her cloak closed then, and her scent faded.

"I have made a mistake." She turned to leave.

"Wait! Where did you see my brother?" I cried, but she slipped away, and when I would have followed, Rilma restrained me.

"We have another customer," hishi said against my back, with some side strokings that meant sympathy and an overlay of anxious love. I knew hishi wouldn't let me go after the woman. Hishi had never answered any questions about my brother after we were separated, though I thought hishi had tracked him. "You have work to do."

I turned to face someone new in the booth. It was an Acra, two legs ending in wide flat feet, two grasping limbs ending in double-thumbed hands, two wings (vestigial, but used to signal strong emotions), and a squawking voice that gave me a headache. I squawked back, though, persisted past the automatic insults that pass for conversation among the Acra—"May all your eggs be born hard-boiled"—and managed to get it into a SPAM. Though it pretended dissatisfaction, it bought three of the climate suits. Acra usually bought in quantity if they met a salesperson who could put up with their rudeness.

Afterward, Rilma stroked my back without language, sending me wordless comfort. "Go back to your Geeta," hishi said at last. Perhaps my stiffness told her I was not appeased.

I went into the back room and plugged in again, but I didn't go back to my replay of Geeta and the jellymer, though I knew that world waited for me, calling me back to comfort and Geeta's joy. Instead I worked my way into the Nexus net and scrolled through surveillance eyes, looking for the silver-cloaked woman. A hopeless task; Nexus Station was enormous, as big as the interior of a small moon. We Zillians held a booth here not because we sold much from it, but because we could collect cells and information from this, the biggest crossroads among the known worlds. Most of our real business was conducted when we were off-duty. We went out pretending to be shoppers to see what others had come up with. Sometimes I played the customer and Rilma stood back and watched, and sometimes we reversed roles. Other people tried to copy Zillian Robowear, and sometimes they were successful. Then we had to alert the home planet, and someone had to come up with new innovations to keep us ahead of the rest.

Rilma had hisher other mission, which was collecting cells from every new species we encountered. Hishi was a multipotent sampler, a collector and replicator, a rare and valuable type on Zillia, much honored. Soon we would go home so Rilma could offload all hishi had acquired. The Zillia were syncretistic organisms; they could add pieces of other species' genes to their own if they saw an advantage to it. Even when they didn't, they cultured and experimented on what they brought home, using some of it in biogear.

There were two other teams of Zillians who staffed the booth in turns; it was open all hours.

I pretended I was one of the many-eyed Ikshasa, whose brains could process much faster than mine, as I stared from a hundred different eyes at scenes of chaos. I saw Multimart from above, below, knee level, eye height, sky height, and in the cave networks in the loam layer that catered to subterranean species. I scanned aisles on the ground floor, skyways in the arboreal sector, other areas of the station entirely, where the machinery that kept it going hid behind multiple facades.

I saw Stirda on the ski slopes, black short-limbed folk who rolled down snow instead of riding anything over its surface.

I saw Pacheki bobbing in the ocean egg, a clear-sided bubble kilometers in diameter, half-full of seawater, attached to the station for life support, but with a full view of the local stars.

I saw pleasure studios and waste receptors, food prep and trash collection, connection sites and isolation sites, but mostly selling, selling, selling on the floor, under the soil, and in the air of the Multimart. More beings visited here than anywhere else, and numbers of them dressed in silver, but I saw no one in a silver cloak with a cap of feathers.

While I was watching for the woman, I looked for my brother, too, just in case she had met him here. Eight Terran standard years since we had seen each other. Would he still look just like me?

Rilma sent two stings against my shoulder blade to jolt me alert. "I know what you're doing," hishi said.

I unplugged and looked at herm.

"Searching," hishi said. "Always searching. *I* am your family now."

"Why can't I know where he went? Who adopted him? What happened to the girls?"

"You do not need any of that," hishi stroked over my back, hisher language broader and more emphatic than usual, using wider expanses of skin and more flagella.

I remembered Lyall's and my frustration when we were little, knowing the adults knew more than we did. They had huge, unspoken histories. We were supposed to believe they had sprung up on Kichi like newborns, with no memories of any other way, but we could tell—some of the words they used, some of the things they said had taught us there was more to life than they had told us. We had found a picture hidden in our mother's memory cube that we knew could not have been taken on our planet, and that had started our quest for the rest.

Rilma didn't tell me there was no other way of life than the Zillian way, but hishi was trying to lock me away from what I treasured.

"How do you know what I need?" I asked in Interling.

"Part of me is you," hishi said.

I looked at herm. What hishi said was true; hishi had dedicated part of hisher body to being me. It was a small, fist-sized bald spot low on hisher front, with skin the same color and texture as the skin on my arm. When hishi first adopted me, hishi had made that spot from a sample of my cells, and it had taught herm what I needed to eat, how much I needed to sleep, and much about my other needs. Most of the parts hishi constructed with borrowings of other species' cells were much smaller, internal, and separated from Rilma's body by self-formed walls of armor cells; sometimes hishi kept them in Robowear capsules inside of herm.

"Part of you is like my body," I said, my hands against Rilma's body, my fingers mimicking flagella speech. "Most of you is like yourself, and none of you is like my brother."

"Your brother is no longer like your brother," Rilma stroked back.

"How do you know?" I asked in Interling and in Zillian at the same time. Then I thought, my brother is like my brother no matter what he becomes. We are still identical.

"We have kept track," hishi said, in movements so small I almost couldn't sense them.

"Where is he?" I yelled. I looked at Rilma, watched the waves of movement race across hisher front as hishi pondered what to say next. A part of herm bulged toward me and I put my hand on it.

"Hishi is in a pleasure house here on Nexus, the Pocket Universe of Desires," Rilma said, hiser flagella whispering as though hoping I would not be able to understand.

I surged to my feet so suddenly I ripped away some of Rilma's flagella, the tender ones used for small talk, but hishi did not restrain me with the labor ones that were stronger than I was, nor did hishi scold me. We had never gone to the pleasure house section of Nexus together, though I knew Rilma went there sometimes alone; cell gathering was much easier when disguised as a paid transaction between consenting adults.

I paced toward the outer door of our booth, then turned and grabbed the sensorium. I scanned through the eyes I had access to until I found the Pocket Universe of Desires, and then I Ikshasa'd all the eyes inside. I found many small opulent spaces, each with a comfort person waiting to welcome visitors, or already entertaining some. I had looked through eyes into places like this before, watching actions, not faces. Now I searched for my brother and found him.

He was alone in a room furnished in the yellow and orange of the first spring flowers on Kichi. He was curled in a comfichair, studying a screen with text on it. I zoomed in on the text and saw he was reading about Zillia. I zoomed out again so I could look at my brother. His face had the same shape mine did, though I had changed and grown since I had last seen him. His hair was much longer than mine, down around his shoulders, thick, several streaked colors, unlike the plain light brown I had; I kept mine about the same length as the majority of Rilma's speech flagella.

A chime sounded, and Lyall looked up, his face sliding from a frown into a smile. I touched my own face, trying to feel how that smile shaped itself on my mouth. From inside, it didn't feel real.

A female Arca came into the room and squawked about how scrawny and ugly my brother was. He kept the same shallow smile on his face. He rose, slipped the textscreen into a slot, and stood, arms half-outstretched toward her. There was no comprehension on his face, as the Arca's squawks and insults grew louder. If he didn't reply, he would not exist for her, I knew; you had to answer an Arca to get anywhere with them.

Finally she called him a nonreproducing runt and turned and left. He sighed and sat again, but he did not relax. He faced the door, his eyes anxious.

A tall woman with a twisted leg came in a moment later and yelled at him, saying she would dock his pay because he had lost them a customer.

He shrugged, his face blank. She left, and Lyall's face stayed blank.

I stared at my brother. He looked healthy, not injured, and yet his face stayed still and stupid. I wondered how long it would take me to teach him all the languages I knew, so he wouldn't be helpless against an Arca again. I wondered what he would say when I came through that door.

Did he long for me the way I did for him?

I felt Rilma's touch against my back. "He will not know you," hishi said. "Your germs have gone on different journeys. The cells know some of it, but much is shaped by stimuli. I own what is at your core, and I could not create another you."

I laid my hands against Rilma's warm, soft, flagella-furred body, and said in flagella-speak, "He was reading about Zillia."

I took off the sensorium and looked at my adopted parent. "Why didn't you take both of us?" I asked herm in Interling and flagella-speak. The question at my core.

Hishi turned away so that I could not see the part of herm made from me. Hishi put distance between us so I could not feel herm speak.

I rose and went to herm, pressing my hand against hisher flagella, demanding an answer.

"We only needed one," hishi said.

The End

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