

The Librarian

As Nedra drew a deep breath, her nostrils burned a little. The creek smelled like fish, the acidity of mangrove mud warming in the heat and the coolness of saltwater, a combination that felt distant but familiar. The wooden jetty in front of her sliced through the turquoise water and mangroves like an old friend taking a short cut through the overgrowth. It backed onto a plateau of contrasting red earth and a string of buildings made of white tin, aged orange as though rusted by the dirt. There were three children at the end of the jetty, perched at its edge with fishing lines dangling into the water. This early in the morning, it was usually only children out and about, fishing and swimming.

She knew this part of town from her Nana's stories, from visits here as a child and from the data she held at her fingertips on the maintenance scanner. Although she rarely got time to visit here now, lines of code, information layered with culture and various histories told her everything she needed to remember.

She listened for the buzzing, a high-pitched frequency that was barely audible even to her trained ears. It was less of a sound and more a feeling that hissed in her eardrums and rippled behind her temples. She turned away from the jetty and started walking down the street, following the coordinates in her hand.

The buildings made up a section of the seaside town that was once filled with Chinese restaurants, tailors, a pub, and a warehouse where pearlers who'd docked at the jetty wheeled their loot and gutted the pearl shells free of their treasure. It later became a hive of jewellery stores and cafés, mostly for tourists. Nedra knew that locals still referred to this part of town as 'Chinatown', a name that had stuck since the early settlement of the area, but it was labelled in the data as 'Main Shopping District 2'.

The street was empty, but the stores were due to open soon and it was best that she wasn't seen. The presence of library professionals tended to ruin the immersion experience, particularly for tourists, who were usually responsible for complaints in the online shopping sector.

As she took a closer look at the coordinates, she felt a shift in the sky, a small quake as it's pure blue blocks loosened to make room for a patch of gentle white clouds. The sky's movements were slow, a little glitchy, and she made note on the scanner, bookmarking her location. It likely just needed an update, but protocol dictated that she run a check of the security parameters and a standard 'clean' of the area to remove any trace of viruses, pop-ups, or trackers.

As she reached the end of the street, the buzzing became clearer, impossible to ignore, and she knew she was in the right place. Suddenly a bird fell from the sky, appearing flat at her feet with a thud that startled her. She scanned the bird. A Black Kite. Beautiful but glitching between versions of alive and dead.

She followed a prompt on the scanner, erasing the bird at her feet and temporarily removing birds entirely from the space. She bookmarked her location quickly then exited the town.

Back at her desk in the library's workroom, she removed her headset. She typed up her findings, reporting the glitches discovered on her visit and her recommendations for 'clean up'. When she was done, she slid back her chair and made her way down a short hallway to the manager's office. The door was open a little, as usual. She knocked gently but didn't wait for a reply before entering.

'How'd you go?' Sara asked, turning away from her computer to face Nedra.

'Pretty good, I'm getting a lot better at the instinctual stuff.'

'Good', Sara nodded.

'I think a standard clean and update should do the trick', Nedra said.

'Great. Request permission from the appropriate traditional custodians first.'

'Of course.'

'Oh, and Nedra, liaise with the IT department, please. Just remind them any updates need to happen after hours. We don't want people getting removed without warning again. That's always a headache.'

'Will do. Thanks'.

Back at her computer, she entered Archival Room 1, a large compactus of on-site visit reports. She scrolled through the locations, thousands of towns and shires all monitored and maintained within the national library system flashed before her eyes; fragments gleaming in virtual reality, their real counterparts unliveable, swallowed long ago by rising waters and temperatures. She searched 'Western Australia', then 'Kimberely', reducing her options, before depositing her report in the correct file.

Nedra thought back to the Black Kite at her feet and, just for a moment, let herself feel the twist of grief tightening in her chest.