

The Garden

Ciela stares at a group of what could be described as water lilies if it weren't for the lack of water. They sit peacefully, luminescent blue, drifting in mid-air as if across an invisible surface, neatly framed by a stone enclosure which is itself floating around waist-height. Behind the lilies there are no walls, floors, or ceilings, only a vast blackness speckled with distant points of light that resemble stars. Across this backdrop Ciela can see a maze of other stone pathways winding through the dark, lit here and there by luminous flora, similar to the path on which she stands.

Ciela lets out a sigh and turns away from the lilies, walking down a branch of the pathway that leads through a series of archways inscribed in blue with lightly glowing hieroglyphics. Her dress floats out behind her, a wrap of bright yellow which appears to flow directly out of her similarly-colored hair. The color sets a contrast both against her skin, which is dark brown with a faint diamond patterning, and against the darkness which extends around the path in all directions.

Without really looking where she's going, Ciela turns a corner into a fully enclosed, circular room framed by a large tree in its center, and immediately spies a figure by the wall. Hauzin is standing in front of a recessed panel whose stone surface is covered in softly flickering contours of blue light. She is wearing a long

brown engineer's coat, its pockets filled with specialized tools for nanolithography. Her light gray skin would blend perfectly into the stone walls of the room if it were not for her intricately braided hair, arranged and technicolored after the fashion of a bismuth crystal.

Ciela draws a sharp breath and steps back instinctively toward the entrance, but before she can exit the room, Hauzin looks over and says, "Hey, Ciela. Nice to see you. I like your dress. Is the connection with your hair real or projected?"

"Oh! Hi! Um. Yeah, it's real. I was... I just got it working recently."

Hauzin nods and turns back to her work. "Do you think you could look at this component? It's not working right."

Ciela hesitates briefly before walking over and inspecting the part of the surface that Hauzin was just looking at. It's tiny, so she has to put her face right in front of it to make out the conducting filaments. "You mean right here? Which part is the problem?"

Hauzin steps in close to the panel as well and uses a holographic pointer to trace one of the lighted paths without damaging the lithography. "See this connection? It's supposed to feed back to the register bank here, but it's in some kind of metastable state because of how the vines grew down here," she says, completing a miniature projected diagram on the surface of the stone. "So since you designed

the template for the vines, I was thinking you would know how to... oh!" Hauzin steps back and suddenly notices that Ciela is grimacing as if in pain.

"Ciela! What's going on?"

"Sorry! Sorry." Ciela loosens her expression, but covers her face with her hands. "Sorry, just – okay. It's fine. It's fine." She takes a deep breath before putting down her hands and turning to Hauzin.

"You don't sound fine," observes Hauzin.

"Well... I guess. You were just... you were standing so close, and I kind of freaked out. I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"I just couldn't stop thinking about... you know, when we talked earlier."

"I thought you said it didn't bother you."

"Yeah." A pause. "Well, I guess I was wrong."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"That would be really nice," says Ciela. Silence stretches out. "Oh," she adds, "I guess I should start."

Hauzin raises an eyebrow, then nods. "Yes, that would make sense. Do you want to walk?"

"Yeah, let's do that."

“Let’s head over to the eastern confluence point.” Hauzin sets off through a nearby archway, and Ciela follows. On the other side, the scene is completely different. Instead of a maze of blue-tinged pathways suspended in the darkness, they are now in a network of rooms and corridors carved out of solid wood, which take up much more space than they seemed to from the outside. The walls are adorned with ornate wood sculptures growing directly out of the rough surface. The sculptures double as lighting thanks to glowing yellow lines which hug their surfaces and run from one fixture to the next along the walls.

After twenty-five rooms of silence, Ciela begins, “I guess what I want to ask is, uh... What do I mean to you?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well... I guess I mean that you mean a lot to me, and – sorry, that doesn’t answer your question.” Ciela stops walking and turns to look at Hauzin.

“Alright,” she starts again. “I love building this place with you. It’s really special. Back home in Blossom, I mean obviously there’s some wonderful architecture and design, because that’s what the place is all about, but there’s nothing like this,” Ciela gestures vaguely at the walls and their decoration. “All the stuff back home has the same kind of flowing, multicolored floral-arrangement aesthetic. And whenever I’m in Industry, it seems like all anybody cares about is

elegance through efficiency and systematization.

“But you’re different. You have this way of taking a design problem and turning it into art. Somehow you create something beautiful in a medium that nobody else would think is artistic. It’s new, and it’s different, and I love that.

“And you’re the only reason we can fit basically an entire universe in here. I remember when we were planning, I said, ‘I like this layout but I’m pretty sure it’s not physically possible,’ and you said ‘That sounds like a challenge,’ and a week later the topology in here had more holes than a leaky sponge. It was inspiring. And... I just... I don’t want to lose that.”

Ciela’s voice fades away, and they stand in silence, their faces lit in yellow and orange, gently flickering. Ciela’s gaze, too, flickers between Hauzin and the floor.

Eventually, Hauzin speaks. “Let me tell you what you mean to me. When I’m here, building this place with you, I feel alive. You might not be able to tell, but this place means the world to me. And it would not be possible without you. Yes, I designed the space, but it’s because of you that the structures inside can grow on their own to make things we never thought to build. I love the aesthetic at home in Industry, but the designs we create here are so much richer. They have elegance *and* feeling. I think that’s beautiful, and I don’t want to lose it either.”

“So... it’s okay that I...”

“Just because I don’t have feelings for you that way doesn’t mean I don’t care about you. Like I said.”

“That’s really... thank you. For saying that.”

“Of course. Hey, do you want to keep walking? I have something I’d like to show you.”

Ciela nods, and they set off again through the maze of wooden rooms. Soon they pass through a doorway and exit into an open space filled with fountains and aqueducts of white stone, all interconnected by a tangle of lightly glowing pathways and waterfalls suspended in the black void extending around in all directions. They stop at one particularly large platform whose fountain is over twenty meters across.

“You know,” says Ciela, breaking the silence, “I feel kind of silly about it now, but I actually made this dress for you.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Well...” she smiles slightly, “it’s based on a new kind of living fiber, so it can bind dynamically to my hair and then adjust its color and texture to blend in. And then there are microcontrollers that make it kind of float a little. Like the ones for the lilies two sections back.”

“That’s so cool. And it’s beautiful.”

“Yeah. Well. I guess part of me really wanted to impress you. And then after we talked, I was like, I guess that plan is a bust so I might as well just wear it. I don’t know. It sounds dumb now.”

“Well... I wouldn’t be *too* hard on yourself,” remarks Hauzin with a sly smile. “I’ve actually been working on something too.”

“You have?”

“Watch this.” Hauzin takes a small implement from her coat and projects from it a holographic panel full of translucent blue symbols and buttons. She types briefly. “There.”

In a flash, the air is filled with a dance of colored lines as far as the eye can see. Each one meanders around like a snake following an invisible network of oblique grid-lines in three dimensions. Their movements are unpredictable, but clearly not without design, as groups of lines sometimes flock together or explode apart in coruscating flurries. The display is mesmerizing.

Ciela gasps and looks in all directions, her mouth agape. “How? ... well, actually, I guess I know how. But it’s so beautiful.”

“That’s what I was going for,” says Hauzin “To a beautiful friendship?”

“To a beautiful friendship.”