

Language, Dialect, and Power:
The Effect of Language on Social Status

Ryann Lannan
Department of Languages and Literature
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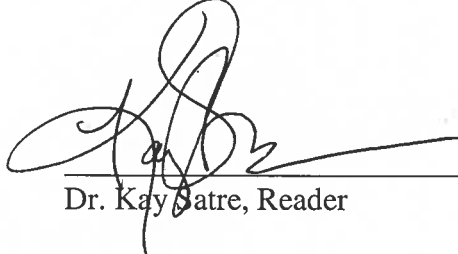
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Dr. Ron Stottlemyer, Director

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Date



Dr. Kay Patre, Reader

3/28/13
Date



Fr. Dan Shea, Reader

4-2-13
Date

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Abstract

My thesis consists of two parts: a critical essay on language and power in social relations and an original short story which shows the power relations between social classes. It is easy for a person to assume that language is a value-neutral aspect of human culture since it serves most basically as a means of communication between human beings. The principles of language are ingrained so deeply into the foundations of society that such an assumption seems only logical. But to view language in such a way is to overlook the ideologies from which it is manufactured. My thesis seeks to reveal those ideologies. I propose that instead of a value-neutral tool for communication, language is in fact a tool for oppression. Drawing on theorists such as Norman Fairclough and James W. Tollefson, I show that language and language learning are controlled by an elite ruling class in society and used as a defining element of social and economic class. The minority elite use the “standard” dialect, the language of power, as a requirement for high status jobs and political positions and deliberately keep the majority from a thorough knowledge of this language, which preserves socioeconomic inequality. Using this Marxist approach to language, I develop my own dialect in a short story, “Counterpoint.” The story is set in the future where the upper and lower classes speak different dialects, and it is the poor who are stuck in perpetual cycle of subjugation reinforced by the language differences.

Introduction

Language, Dialect, and Power: The Effect of Language on Social Status

Imagine a world without language: no speaking, no writing, no words, no meaning even in a simple gesture. Such a world is unimaginable for our species. Language is the most basic means of communication among human beings. In fact, it is built into the structure of society so deeply, that its value seems natural to our species. But this value-neutral view of language overlooks a more important aspect of language—the social power, or lack thereof, it can hold for a person. The language, or languages, in which the economic production processes take place in a society, for example, governmental proceedings and laws, consequently becomes the language(s) of power. If people do not have a formal grasp of the language of power, they are forced into positions of low political, economic, and social status. It is the attainment of this language of power that is the gateway to wealth, prestige, and power in a society. And while each individual is encouraged to learn this language in order to gain such power, most are simultaneously kept from acquiring a full understanding of it by those in the ruling class. Looking at language this way shows that it is in fact a strategy designed by those in power as a tool to oppress others and to promote their own self-interests.

The Language of Power

There is no formula for determining which language should be the “language of power”: This language is simply the language of the people in power. This fact does not make the language “better” than any other language; it is simply more powerful socially. But how does a language become the “language of power”? It is the common assumption

that languages develop naturally over time. This is not the case, however, as Neville Alexander points out in his article “After Apartheid: The Language Question.” Alexander suggests that rather than developing naturally, languages are deliberately formed and manipulated: “It is not true that languages simply develop ‘naturally’, as it were. They are formed and manipulated within definite limits to suit the interests of different groups of people” (2). This is quite clearly seen in the difference between what are called standard and non-standard dialects of a language. The “standards” are the preferred dialects of the ruling class. They are symbols of economic and political power, not “natural” in any way (2). It is this “standard” variety of a language that becomes the “language of power.” Of course, in order for any language to become “standard,” there has to be enough cooperation among individuals in power, and they must have the ability impose their language on others, or the others must accept the imposition of their language—coercion and consent (Alexander 3). Likewise, in his book *Language and Power*, Norman Fairclough contends that “a language had been jokingly defined as ‘a dialect with an army and a navy’” (21). This “standard” dialect is simply the dialect with enough firepower behind it to guarantee its prominence. This language’s importance is *given* to it by people in power, states James W. Tollefson in *Planning Language, Planning Inequality*. Moreover, he notes that the “standard’s” importance is passed down through generations in order to insure its continued influence on social culture:

There is nothing inevitable or ‘natural’ about the way that language influences social and economic conditions. Instead, the role of language is essentially arbitrary, meaning that human beings through their action have

made language a determinant of most of our social and economic relationships. (2)

Because language's role is in fact arbitrary, states Tollefson, "each generation must be taught its importance. This knowledge must be learned through a process of education" (2). The educational process through which humans come to learn language is so effective at teaching the importance of the "standard" dialect that it seems the *only* "natural" one.

An effective educational system could guarantee that a language remains the "language of power" for an indeterminate amount of time. But, more often, as Karl Marx writes in his *Communist Manifesto*, the proletariat (the oppressed working class) will rise up and destroy the ruling class's means of production (in this case, their language of power) (29). Marx separates society into two distinct classes pitted against each other for power: the proletariat who owns no means of production and must sell their labor and the bourgeoisie who are a "class of modern capitalists" and own the means of production (13). According to Marx, the bourgeoisie deliberately keep the means of production from the proletarians in their own selfish desire for power. But, the ruling class cannot impose their will indefinitely on the proletariat through coercion or consent. When the proletariat no longer consents to their rule, the productive forces of bourgeoisie are threatened, and their power and existence become endangered:

[The members of the proletariat] direct their attacks not against the bourgeois conditions of production, but against the instruments of production themselves; they destroy imported wares that compete with their labour, they smash to pieces machinery, they set factories ablaze,

they seek to restore by force the vanished status of the workman of the Middle Ages. (29)

The proletariat seeks to destroy the bourgeoisie by destroying the source of its power. With its hold on the means of production in danger, and consequently its power, the ruling class must counter the proletariat's attack on their power by further oppression (26).

This same ideological power play is at work in the standard vs. substandard language war. The proletariat seeks, in this case, to change the language. It rejects the "standard" and revels in its own socially defining dialect dubbed non-standard by the bourgeoisie. Contemporary theorists in sociolinguistics find evidence proving this ideological struggle ongoing. In "American Language Policy and Compensatory Opinion," Thomas Donahue argues that an attempt to divide society, be it along lines of class, language, ethnicity, occupation, or geographic region, is an attempt to create "a cultural division of labor in which a marginalized minority is held subservient to the economic and political interests of a core majority" (115). The history of the United States is riddled with examples of this discrimination among Native Americans, blacks, Asians, and white women. In fact, even labeling a group of people "minority" marginalizes it as "minor," "insignificant," and holds them under the thumb of the ruling class as a group of people who still need "protection" today. Donahue relates this class struggle to the language struggle by showing that a small, central elite population deliberately restricts the social and political power of minority-language speakers:

In the official language issue, core-periphery arguments allege that a central elite that owns property and the means of production purposely

restrict the political, social, and economic power of minority-language-speaking groups on the periphery of society in order to sustain and expand their own core wealth and power. (115)

This tyranny does not mean that there are never changes to the language of power. A class of people called the “emerging elite” can challenge the core elite, and if they are successful, their efforts result in a change to the language, or what Selma K. Sonntag calls an official language movement: “[O]fficial language movements are espoused by emerging elites in their attempt to challenge the existing power alignment” (107). But there still remains an imbalance of power among classes in society. This language movement results only in a new core elite speaking a slightly altered “standard” language of power. Minority-language speakers remain on the periphery of society and are disadvantaged by limited access to political and economic power. The standard language may have been changed to various degrees by the formerly emerging-elite, but it still remains the language of power and the means of production.

This is not to say that a “standard” language holds no value. Fairclough notes that a standard language has the advantage of improved communication; if everyone knows what everyone else is saying, work can progress more quickly with fewer misunderstandings: “Standardization is of direct economic importance in improving communication: most people involved in economic activity come to understand the standard” (56). Tollefson also describes how in any multilingual marketplace, which may exist in a single city or nation, a common language evolves out of necessity rather than from coercion:

In order to communicate in such settings, people acquire a common language, either a simplified and specialized market pidgin or one of the languages of the surrounding area used as a lingua franca for inter-group communication.

Regardless of the variety used, language acquisition results from the immediate need to communicate and from actual use of the language in the interactions of buying and selling. (5-6)

In the modern world market, Tollefson continues, English is used as the lingua franca for communication among people of different mother tongues. Regardless of the setting, a common form of communication enables people of different tongues to understand one another. Another reason a “standard” variety of a language is important is its cultural significance. Fairclough states that the “standard” variety is of “great political and cultural significance in the establishment of nationhood” (56). This “standard” language becomes a symbol of the nation state just as the state’s other standard—its flag. Just as a flag, an army, or a navy is a feature of the nation state, “so too is the linguistic unification or ‘standardization’ of large politically defined territories which make talk of ‘English’ ... meaningful” (21). In other words, when we talk of English, we automatically have Standard English in mind because it is the language of the nation state.

English as the International Language of Power

More and more, Standard English is becoming the language of international commerce and power. But, Alastair Pennycook of the University of Hong Kong fears the internationalism of English may be less beneficial and more problematic. He calls English “a Trojan Horse.” The international power and appeal of English and the gates it

opens for non-native speakers “poses a threat to other languages,” threatening “linguistic genocide” (39). With English being the international language of power, non-native speakers have little motive to learn any other language, even their mother-tongue. These languages are forgotten and unwittingly killed in pursuit of English and social power. While children in the United States are lucky to receive even four years of second-language education, children in other countries are taught Standard English and encouraged to learn Standard English from a young age because of the international doors the language will open. Pennycook describes how many countries use English education as a means to power, meanwhile still reinforcing social stratification with other languages:

With English taking up such an important position in many educational systems around the world, it has become one of the most powerful means of inclusion into or exclusion from further education, employment, or social positions. In many countries, particularly former colonies of Britain, small English-speaking elites have continued the same policies of the former colonizers, using access to English language education as a crucial distributor of social prestige and wealth. (40)

To emphasize this point, Pennycook describes the experience of Ngugi wa Thiong, who in Kenya, was forced to earn an English language “credit card.” Ngugi could not simply “pass” English; in order to complete his education and graduate to move to higher education, he was required to get a “credit” in English. “English was the official vehicle and the magic formula to colonial elitedom,” said Ngugi (qtd. in Pennycook 40).

This hegemony of English in the international arena is reinforced because English speakers control the economic and policy-making arms of the nation state. It is in everyone's interest to learn this language of power, English, but "non-standard" speakers are often excluded from proper education, often through conscious policies implemented by those in power. This "elite closure" is defined as

a tactic boundary of maintenance. It involves institutionalizing the linguistic patterns of the elite, either through official policy or informally established usage norms in order to limit access to socioeconomic mobility and political power to people who possess the requisite linguistic patterns.

(Alexander 5)

Pennycook describes how such a policy was implemented in South East Asian refugee-processing centers during the late twentieth century that deliberately limited the refugees' improvement in English. This restriction also limited their "capacity for cultural adaptation, and pre-employment skills, there by contributing to the covert goal of ensuring that most refugees will only be able to compete effectively for minimum-wage employment" (41). One theory for this discrimination is that the fewer people who are proficient in the language of power, the more value that language is seen to have (Alexander 5). But since the language of power is the gateway to economic status, it is in everyone's interest to learn it.

Another country where the English language marks the social class of an individual is South Africa, both during apartheid and post-apartheid. During apartheid, the ruling white class spoke what was called Afrikaans, a daughter language of the early Dutch settlers. The minority elite used Afrikaans to "entrench its economic power, based

initially on agriculture but increasingly also on mining and much later, on manufacturing industry” (Alexander 7). When apartheid ended in the 1990s, the Afrikaners were sure that Afrikaans would continue to be the dominant language of South Africa and lobbied for it to be the one and only official language of the country. For the African nationalists, however, this language was a symbol of their own social, political, and economic disenfranchisement. Their alternative was to push for English to be the official language of post-apartheid South Africa because English provided the promise of “liberation, unification and empowerment” (7). Neville Alexander notes that the new leadership did not make English the only official language for two reasons:

To begin with, there was the simple political fact that if the representatives of the black majority conceded equality of status to Afrikaans and English, they could not justify not doing the same for all the indigenous African languages. Had they done so, they would have been seen as adopting a neo-apartheid language policy that it would have been impossible to sell to their constituency. The ironic consequence of the Afrikaner nationalist demand, therefore, was the wholly unplanned for and unexpected officialisation of 11 South African languages. (7)

The liberation leaders also knew that multilingualism was the norm across the globe, and that multilingualism was a key to “intercultural communication and social cohesion” (8). However, for all that, apartheid’s legacy of inequality is still rampant in South African education. Dr. Nic Taylor, a South African education analyst, notes “we haven’t made much progress in realizing the potential of poor children in terms of giving them quality schooling.... The legacy of apartheid-era education is seen in the poor education of black

teachers who, generally, teach black children” (qtd in Alexander 12-13). These children, since they have received inferior education, will not be able to compete with whites for high-status jobs and will remain impoverished. In addition, while the emerging-elite replaced Afrikaans with English as the language of power, African languages have absolutely no market value in current high-status functions. This devaluing of the languages of the already underprivileged black community further deprives them of chances for jobs and status in society.

Pre-Second-World-War Australian governmental policy favored immigration, but forced assimilation and language discrimination (Tollefson 173). With approximately 150 native Aboriginal languages and close to 100 immigrant languages in the country, the assumption was that learning English would lead to fast and full assimilation into Australian society. In the 1960 and 70s, the assimilation policy was abandoned in favor of one of integration in the belief that English education would solve the economic and social problems of immigrants. But, as Tollefson points out, there remained the problem that immigrants did not speak English:

Despite official confidence that education could lead to integration, many immigrants continued to live in ethnic enclaves, work low-paying jobs, and have educational levels below those of the English speaking population. (173)

In 1984, a senate committee report on a national Australian language policy declared that competency in English was the primary policy goal and that “at all levels of Government it is recognized that English is, and will remain, Australia’s national language” (qtd. in Tollefson 176). One reason for this blatant devaluing of over 250 other languages spoken

in the country is revealed in a 1987 study of migration and social class by Tait and Gibson (Tollefson 183). The study reveals that since WWII, migrant workers in Australia have held unskilled, and undesirable, jobs. As the study points out, language is a form of labor control:

Migrants are particularly attractive workers for [unskilled] jobs because they cannot easily organize or fight for their economic rights. As Tait and Gibson point out, ‘migrant labor is attractive because it is cheap and easily controlled.’ Among the mechanisms for control available to the state [is]...the covert control of language barriers and migrants’ lack of knowledge about their political rights. (184)

The key issue in the Australian language issue, Tollefson says, is language rights—the rights speakers of a certain language have under the law (187). Rights are granted by those in power to those in inferior social positions. Power is determined by education, but those without power are most often without the means of obtaining sufficient education. Even if they do obtain some measure of social power, the struggle is not over. Just as easily as rights are given, those same rights can be taken away (188).

A History of English Education Inequality

Around the world, schools choose one or more languages in which to conduct educational instruction (Tollefson 43). If a student does not fully understand the language of instruction, he will be at a disadvantage to native speakers. With the dominance of English in the international economy and political world, countries are putting high emphasis on ESL learning (English as a second language). Even in English-speaking

countries, “proper” English is acquired in school. Thus, those who cannot afford education, or who don’t have the time, or who attend substandard programs will be unable to participate fully in the policy-making division systems which require English. Tollefson notes that with the growing emphasis on school-based learning, English education has become a concern of the state, and it is the state that decides who has access to a full education: “[T]his fundamental shift in the manner of acquisition means that state policies play a decisive role in determining who has access to the institutions of the modern market and therefore to political power” (6). Ironically, societies that place high value on language teaching and learning and dedicate large amounts of resources to them, “have been unable—or unwilling—to remove the powerful linguistic barriers to full participation in the major institutions of society” (7). Current modernization theory states that western societies are the best model for achieving industrialization (82). The English language has accordingly become a tool for achieving modernization around the world and a symbol of modernization—a better way of doing things. The monolingualism of the western world—English monolingualism, that is—is a “practical advantage” for modern society and social organization while multilingualism is seen as characteristic of an “unmodernized” and “traditional” backwards society (82).

Furthermore, the motives behind English education are dual in nature. On the one hand, English education provides students with access to it greater social opportunities while, on the other, it promotes social inequality and discrimination of other languages. English education has been permeated with this paradox since the codification of the standard dialect. As Huntington Lyman and Margo Figgins observe, “Historically...teaching standard English had been simultaneously motivated by a

democratic impulse to provide students with greater opportunities and an authoritarian impulse to maintain the purity of the language” (Lyman and Figgins 40). Fairclough explains that the “standardization” of English began with the written form, and eventually moved to other aspects of speech, including grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, before taking over other major social institutions (56). It is these institutions—education, law, religions, media, and the family—that “collectively and cumulatively ensure the continuing dominance of the capitalist class” (33). In this way, Standard English became the dialect of political and cultural power; since the 1940s, it has been recognized as “correct” English.

The standardization of English began in the late 18th century when Standard English was codified in grammars, pronouncing dictionaries, spelling books, and dictionaries to ensure “minimal variation in form” (Fairclough 57). Once this happened, high-class language became accessible to everyone, and language became the primary goal of learning (Schweiger 536). With the laws of the language of power in written form and available at the cost of only a few pennies, “rail-splitters, weavers, rag-pickers, and former slaves everywhere...[began] to speak and write with eloquence. By unlocking its mysteries, even the self-taught believed they might ‘converse with a thousand worlds’” (535-536). By the mid-nineteenth century, 44 percent of all books printed in the United States were school books (540). But the self-taught grammarian lacked the formal education of those who could afford such. *Quality* of speech became a defining factor. And, as language education was extended to women, language began to be seen as a “domestic adornment,” says Beth Barton Schweiger in her article “A Social History of English Grammar in the Early United States.” She continues by showing that the woman

of the house was responsible for the quality of speech of the rest of the family: “The order, and the refinement of the whole family is much dependent on the accuracy and elegance of speech of she who presides over it,’ a pastor told graduates of a Georgia women’s college” (548). A gulf emerged between those with access to a good language education and those who were self taught, since blacks could not afford the liberal education open to whites with money. Class and racial distinctions emerged on the basis of knowledge of English grammar, and one’s ability to use language “correctly” defined him.

This disparity of access to “proper” education is still rampant today. A knowledge of Standard English is an asset as it is the vehicle by which one attains positions of influence and power in society. Fairclough notes that “Access to a high level of literacy is a precondition for a variety of socially valued ‘goods,’ including most rewarding and well-paid jobs” (64). But access to a high-level of literacy, he points out, is unequally distributed. As Alexander noted with the discrimination still dominating South African education, education from an underprivileged society turns out poor literacy in students. This weak education in turn ruins their chances at high-status positions in society. Fairclough gives an example of interviewee behavior. Unless one is taught the “proper” behavior and language expected at an interview, one is sure not to get the job and will be forced into minimum wage work, but this type of education is restricted to privileged classes (64). Not only is the written form of Standard English essential, but so is standard spoken English. Dialects other than “standard” English, meanwhile, have been dubbed “nonstandard,” often “in terms which indirectly reflected on the lifestyles, morality and so forth of their speakers, the emergent working class of capitalist society. They were

[characterized as] *vulgar, slovenly, low, barbarous, and so forth*" (Fairclough 57).

Dialects are defined by geographic and temporal regions, and by racial and social classes (Klammer 20). Standard English is simply one of these dialects. But, Lyman and Figgins argue that Standard English is not any "better" than any other dialect of English:

Standard English, to the degree that there is such a thing, did not emerge because it was a thing of beauty, precision, and grace; it is a form of English that became standard because it codifies how the rich and powerful talk. (41)

However, it is obvious that speakers of nonstandard dialects need to become proficient in the standard in order to gain access to power and prestige. While requiring the use of "standard" English, policy makers were, and are, simultaneously disempowering speakers of other dialects and languages:

The self-esteem, self-confidence, potential creativity and spontaneity that come with being able to use...[one's 'mother tongue'] is the foundation of all democratic policies and institutions. To be denied the use of this language is the very meaning of oppression. (Alexander 4)

Differences in language and in dialect are symbols of a people's shared culture and identity (Gumperz 407-408). Denying one the use of his mother tongue is essentially denying him his cultural heritage. Sonntag notes that language is essential to one's social and cultural ethnicity: "Language is a common bond uniting diverse elements of a society, language shows a primordial connection to one's ethnicity" (117). Yet, one is faced with the choice of maintaining one's "mother tongue" and being subjected to low

social status, or abandoning one's heritage for a language that will ensure social mobility and elite access.

As the concept of national identity—patriotism—has become associated with language, the ideology had reinforced and legitimized social inequality based on language differences (Tollefson 12). For example, in the United States, being “American” is associated with speaking Standard American English. Tollefson states that those who do not speak this variety are, therefore, not “fully American” and are subsequently denied “political rights such as voting, economic opportunities, and social equality” (12). In order to obtain these rights, people must abandon their previous dialect in favor of the “standard.” By doing so, they are stripping themselves of the cultural identity associated with their mother tongue. This choice between social mobility and native culture is one reason Jane Schrader, an American linguist and social scientist, believes some language learners are more successful than others. Her research shows that learners who wish to assimilate into the culture of the target-language, or who identify most fully with that culture, are more successful in learning the language than those learners who are more concerned with retaining their cultural identity. They are also more successful than learners who are concerned mostly with increasing their salary and employment opportunities. Yet, she notes, often even the most motivated of learners are unable to fully grasp the language (Tollefson 23). Outside influences such as inadequate education or government policy are holding these learners back despite their internal motivation to abandon their mother tongue.

Conclusion

Language and language education are perhaps the greatest contradictions of our time. On one hand, there is an expectation in modern society, as there has been for centuries, for people to speak and write in a proper “standard” dialect. But, on the other, this “standard” dialect and language of power is deliberately denied them by the state, and they are disparaged for not being able to use the “standard.” This language of power did not grow out of a “natural” development of the language; it is simply the language of the powerful elite in a given society. Language, like a city, is planned and governed by the ruling class. This class determines what the standard is and when and where dialects are appropriate, either through official language policy or engrained social norms. But although “proper” language use is a requirement for full participation in society, education in standard language usage is far from equally distributed. Part of what makes the elite class elite is their language. They deliberately withhold knowledge of it from what Karl Marx calls the proletariat. By doing so, the elite further draw the lines of class in society and grant access to “proper” language use only to those with money. In order for a member of the proletariat to change his social class, he must have education in the standard language. But having this education is often made unaffordable by the ruling class. There is indeed the need for some standardization in language otherwise communication would be far too difficult. However, requiring this “standard” threatens the important cultural and social ties that grow out of a shared “mother tongue.”

Language is part of one’s identity. By creating and enforcing a “standard” language, and making it the gateway to success and power, the ruling class has deliberately disempowered the “nonstandard” culture. Until there is a complete democratization of

language, one that allows for full social legitimacy of “substandard” dialects, the language basis of class inequities will remain.

The story that follows is one that incorporates this idea of social class and dialect. The rich ruling class speaks one way, while the poor “uneducated” people speak another. Also incorporated is the Marxist idea that changing one’s dialect can change one’s social class. In modern America, going to school and learning how to write and talk “properly” is essential to status mobility. Interviewers judge applicants on their spoken and written dialects, so people holding high-power, high-paying jobs are those who had access to language education. The idea that one’s dialect determines one’s brain capacity has polarized our society and kept those with access to education in these high-paying jobs, while poor people with little means to get education are stuck in menial jobs that will never provide the money necessary to get higher education (Klammer 23). My story, “Counterpoint,” attempts to reveal this bias in society’s views of language. The story is set in the future where the upper- and lower-class people speak in different dialects, and it is the poor who are stuck in perpetual cycle of subjugation reinforced by the language differences. It is a futuristic story about a “low-class” girl and her brother who take on a corrupted government intent on keeping the uneducated poor in their place.

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Counterpoint

Quin's heart pounded as she ran further into the tunnel. Her head lamp lit the darkness a few feet in front of her, but her height kept it from reaching the ground unless she stooped over as she ran. But a neck cramp half way through her run was not going to improve her mood so she didn't keep the light trained on the ground. The partial blindness was half the thrill anyway, and the high from that thrill was what would cure her bad temper. Brant always wondered why she ran so much; Quin told him she'd end up killing him one day if she didn't.

Brant was the reason she found herself alone in the darkest tunnel she could find, seven miles into a hard half marathon that would leave her blissfully doubled over by the end. The sweat soaking her clothes began to cool in the frigid tunnel. The air was beginning to thin and Quin knew her turning point was coming up. The synthetic oxygen circulated through town didn't reach this far into the caves.

"Fook!" Quin cursed when she tripped over a rock she hadn't seen.

Catching her balance, she continued on. She wasn't nearly tired enough to turn back now. Her doubtless broken toe nail would just have to wait until she ran out her anger at Brant. Even though Brant is what drove her to run as much as she did, something he referred to as a "masochistic habit," Quin really did love her brother and would be terribly upset if she ever did kill him in a fit of irritation.

He had brought up the surface again. Quin couldn't remember how many times she had told him to drop the subject, but he still continued to bring it up almost daily. If it wasn't the sunny weather, it was some half-cocked plan to get them there. And every time she told him that the surface was for Riches, not for orphans like them. He always

said that that didn't matter, that with money they could change their station, buy their way into the upper strata and live on the surface with money and friends to spare. Quin just didn't have any interest in the surface. An elevation in geography was not going to change society's behavior and values in her opinion, so why make the move? Money wasn't going to change who she was.

Brant didn't see her point. He was still a hopeless romantic who thought everyone lucky enough to win a ticket to the surface, lived in luxury like the Riches in the upper caves. Quin knew it wasn't luck though. It had never been luck that won the lottery. It was power. With enough power and money, anyone could buy their way to the surface, and Quin and Brant were about as poor and powerless as people underground could be. Brant's job at the shop paid the rent, and Quin paid the bills working at a diner that catered to the perverted and unbathed. Often her tips filled the cold-box, but not every month. If business was slow at the shop, Quin's tips had to make up the extra rent money, and the cold-box held only cold air.

This time Brant's brilliant plan to get them to the surface entailed her running in the annual General's Cup, and then using the prize money to buy their way to the surface. The purse would be enough, but plebs like her never ran in the big race. The General's cup was for Riches and Officers, and Quin was neither of those. Common soldiers didn't even run. And if they weren't allowed to run, Quin was positive that a Bottomer like her would be killed before she could even suggest it.

Forty minutes later, Quin turned onto their street and slowed to a walk. As predicted, the 13.1 mile loop left her doubled over for a minute. Hands on her knees,

Quin glanced at her watch. 1:32:19. Two minutes faster than last time. Smiling to herself, she straightened to see Brant on their front porch, arms crossed over his chest. The light from the porch lamp cast his face in shadow so she couldn't tell his mood, but she guessed it wasn't remorse over his foolish plan.

Quin took a deep breath and started across the shabby lawn of their corner lot. Years ago, scientists had figured out how to make the light bulbs in street lights emit the rays plants and grass needed to grow, but the plants still needed water. And, Quin and Brant didn't have the money to care if their lawn was watered every day. They lived in a neighborhood known as the Bottoms because it was built on the floor of the huge cavern that was the town of Nueva Roma, the first town built after people moved underground. Richer people lived higher up the cavern wall and ventured down into the Bottoms only if their business included shady bars or questionable clubs. Every shiny bauble they could want was provided for them up there. Down here every lot looked the same: overrun with weeds and in need of paint.

Not speaking, Brant stepped aside to let her in the house, then followed her in and locked the door behind them. In their neighborhood, locking the door was not just a good habit—it was a necessity.

“Wer'd you go?” he asked.

Ignoring him, Quin made a beeline for the cold-box and opened the door. She bent from the waist and made a show of finding what she wanted. She could feel Brant's annoyed presence behind her, no doubt tapping his foot with impatience waiting for her answer.

Quin grabbed a yogurt (her desire all along) and let the door to the cold-box slam shut. Not facing him, she opened a drawer and fished out a spoon. Turning, she leaned her butt against the counter and ripped the top off her yogurt carton. Strawberry: her favorite. Taking a bite, she looked up at Brant.

He was angry. He always was when she stormed out of the house without a word and didn't return for hours. She understood his concern, and when she wasn't mad at him, she always made sure to tell him where she was going and when she'd be back, and he always did the same. But when he made her as angry as he did when he brought up the surface, Quin just wanted to run, not explain every step of her route to her over-protective brother.

Quin took a bite of yogurt, slowly dragging the spoon from her mouth upside down, savoring the creamy texture.

"On rune," she said once she had swallowed.

"Ou know, I hate it when ou take off."

"Then mae anry dona make."

Brant sighed. "Quin, unreasonable ou are. About this think! God enough to wine ou are. And more than enough us to the surface get tha prize money woad be!"

"To go to surface I dona wa'an!" Quin cut him off. She noticed his speech slipping as it always did when he was angry or flustered.

Bottomers were always looked down on because of how they talked, and anyone who talked like them was considered low class. Brant made a conscious effort every day to correct his Bottomers dialect and instead speak like a Rich, thinking at it somehow

made him better. His accent was always slightly different, but if he concentrated, he usually got the structure right.

“To get out of hire ou do na want? To leave thys filthy dump and live wer the sune shines and ayt ays na dark all tha time?” Brant gestured around their small great room.

“Wha ou are saying, ou dona know. Sune ou never hive seen! Tha surface wile be any better than thys how do ou know?”

“Ayt ayes. Ayt has to be. Ou too the stories hive hird. Sune, sky—”

“Hyde froom ass pull, Bran! Froom surface actually com back na one has! Tha thyns are tha wa’ay they wer ayn Golden Days we dona know.”

“They are I believe! I hiave to. Otherwise thys ays all there ays, and we are joost poor kides from the Bottoms, and that is all we ever wile be. I need more to believe than that.”

Quin sighed and rubbed her aching temples. “Bran, tired I am. And tonigh agine work I hive to.”

“Fine. God night.” He turned and left the room.

Quin sighed again. Believing in the surface was like believing in God. No good would come of it. She wanted Brant to see that, that poor kids from the Bottoms *was* all they would ever be. But he thought he could change that.

Try, he can, she thought as she made her way to the shower. But never happen it will. The Riches would see to that. And she wasn’t going to run a race so he could get himself killed for trying to change what was set in stone.

It was the soldiers in the diner that night who got her thinking otherwise. They were squished into table 5, all four drunkenly trying to sober up with coffee and bacon. Quin stared at them from behind the counter across the diner, wondering how she should punish them for ruining her already awful night. So far all she had come up with was spitting in the coffee pot, or spilling fresh coffee on the big one's dick. Not a perfect plan of revenge, but it would do. He'd grabbed her ass, she'd scald his little boy.

How could it not be little? The rest of him was so god'dra'am big. All those muscles had to be compensating for something. And his teeth were too perfect, she noticed as he smiled at his own joke, which had the other three howling in time. Only officers and Riches had good teeth anymore. She didn't like the way they flashed in the florescent lighting of the restaurant. Or the way that same light gleamed on the blond highlights in his dishwater hair. God'dra'am prick was too pretty, and he knew it.

He needed a haircut she noticed. Military regulations called for short, almost shaven, and his was getting to that point where it would be just long enough to grab and—

“Sumeone ‘or interest ca’ augh?”

Quin jumped out of her skin at the voice behind her. So far, she dropped the coffee mug she'd been checking for spots and it shattered on the tiles beneath her feet.

“Sha’ate!” Quin turned on her friend. “Na nice up on people like tha to sneak ayt ays, Copeline.”

“And tha rea’action myss? Fook no!” Copelin glanced out at table five before turning back to Quin with a sneaky smile. “Preteye hie ays.”

“Fook ou,” Quin said and dropped to clean up her mess. “A pryck hyole like ress of them hie ays. Now get down hie and mea clean up help.”

“Prick hyole or no, probably tha hyottest thng thas ever into thys pla’ace wa’alked hie ays.” Copelin pointed out. “And dona deny tha same ou werna thynking.”

She was right, Quin thought. Steve’s Diner did not attract a particularly handsome crowd, especially at 3 am on a Saturday night. The food was cheap, and the service cheaper. Those who could afford better after a night at the bar, got better. So four pretty-boy officers stopping in after a night of barhopping and stripclubbing was an occurrence Quin never would have bet on. Officers were rich, and often enjoyed their food served by a prettier waitress than you’d typically find at Steve’s. Sometimes enlisted lackeys would stop in to sober up after celebrating a night off after a week on duty, but never officers—so far as she could tell anyway. No officer in his right mind would be caught dead drunk in uniform. These four must be passing through, or simply know that Steve’s was the one place they might get away with a drunk and disorderly.

Quin threw the rag she had wiped up the small shards with into the trash and stood up.

“To hiell as fa’ar as concerned I am they all can go,” she said.

Stopping to grab the coffee pot from the warmer, she made her way over to table five. “For ou anythyng eylse I ca’an get?” she asked, hoping they’d say no.

“Yesss,” said the redheaded captain in the left corner leaning forward to get a better view of her breasts. “You cann get me a liiittle more of tha slweet ssulff.” He pushed his coffee cup towards her. The men had been sitting in her best table for over forty minutes, and this one was still drunk enough to be slurring words.

Quin leaned over to refill it when the dark haired major sitting next to him grabbed her breast. Not the first time such a thing had happened, Quin finished pouring the captain's coffee without spilling, then carefully reached for the major's thumb, forced it to his own wrist, and detached his groping fingers. She caught a glimpse at his name tag. Major Fitz.

“To tha house a'cross street ca'aers, Major,” she said.

His dark eyebrows slanted down, and his brow furrowed in pain and anger. She'd had plans to keep him in such a state until he apologized, but two large hands pulled her to the other side of the table, and she found herself in the lap of the colonel who'd grabbed her ass earlier. She struggled to get up, but his hands on her waist forced her to stay where she was.

“Sit,” he growled into her ear. She was so confined, she could feel his steel chest against her back, smell the coffee on his breath, and it wasn't masking any alcohol. The command wasn't loud—she bet the others didn't even hear it over the force of their laughter at her current predicament—but his tone was enough to leave her frozen in place against her will. The man to their right reached over to put his hand on her thigh and squeeze. She turned to glare at him. Major Campbell, she read. She still had the mostly empty coffee pot in her hand, and a variety of ways to smash it into the Major's face.

“Think about it, and regret it,” the colonel whispered into her ear. His hands dug further into her hips. “I could have you arrested for what you just did,” he said even lower.

Quin slowly set the pot on the table.

“Good choice.”

His right hand released her and reached up to refill his own cup.

Major Campbell's hand slid further up her thigh to her crotch and rubbed. Quin was grateful her skirt had still been wet when she'd dressed for work and had been forced to wear pants.

The colonel's hand reached down and forced the major's hand away. "Do not," he growled at the other man.

"Come on, Briggs. A don't be a hog," The captain whined to the colonel.

"Shut up and sober up," Briggs ordered. "We have training and a meeting with the General in three hours."

"The General can suck my cock," the captain said into his coffee.

"Yeah, we all know Fitz here is going to win again anyway," Campbell said around mouthful of bacon.

"I don't care if they cancel the damn thing due to rain," Briggs barked. "You will be on time and sober. Now hurry up"

"Calm down, man," Fitz said to Briggs. "We're just having a bit of fun with the help."

Fitz' eyes dropped to her breasts, and his mouth turned up in a sick grin. Quin's v-neck T was by no means skanky like Vanessa's had been the shift earlier, just low enough to encourage a few extra dollars in tips as it usually did. Quin swore that from now on she'd wear nothing but turtle necks to work.

"Shut up, Fitz, and finish."

Fitz did as his superior told him.

“Think if I fail training tomorrow, the General will not make me race?” the captain asked. “I mean, I don’t even understand why I was picked.”

It was tradition that military personnel always won the big race. Anyone could enter, but no one had ever yet beaten the General’s men. He called them in to Nueva Roma from every town to train and run and win. They kept the prize money, but the General kept the fame.

“Now here is what you are going to do,” Briggs whispered into her ear while the other men continued to talk about the upcoming race. “Get up, walk into the back, and stay there for five minutes. Then you are going to come back out here and work as if none of this happened. Got it?”

“Yes,” Quin breathed.

“Good. Now go.”

His hands released her, and Quin slipped from his lap, and walked through the swinging door that led to the kitchen and storage area of the diner. Edge, the night cook, stared at her curiously as she leaned against the wall, breathing hard for a reason she couldn’t figure out.

“Ou okay?” he asked.

Quin could only nod.

She hadn’t been scared. No, she told herself. She *definitely* had been scared. Not terrified, but scared. Fitz and the others she figured she could have handled if she had to, but Briggs was a different matter. He was dangerous, she could tell. A man trained in military combat used to getting his way was always dangerous.

Knowing Copelin would come looking for her as soon as she was done taking table 10's order, Quin untied her apron and hid in the bathroom. She waited eight minutes instead of five hoping to avoid Copelin for the moment. Thankfully when she emerged from the back, Copelin was taking an order in Quin's section. An order Quin should have been taking while trapped in the colonel's lap.

Sure enough, when she checked table 5, the four officers were gone. But on the table was enough money to cover the tab, and a generous tip.

Immediately after getting home from work, Quin changed and went for a run. The officers had left her feeling angry, annoyed, and dirty. And Briggs' voice left her feeling... Well, she really wasn't sure what she was feeling or why. Her body felt super charged, and her nerves were on overdrive. If she didn't run and run hard, she thought she might go insane.

She left the yard at a sprint and didn't stop sprinting until the terrain forced her to slow down. She kept her headlamp firmly focused on the rocks as she descended the ridge that would drop her down into Sheep's Gorge. It was one of her favorite places to run and to think. The gorge led to some of the original caves, the ones the First People inhabited over two hundred years ago before Nueva Roma, the glorious symbol of their return to civilization, was built. Quin always ran to the caves when she needed to think.

As soon as she hit the flat rock of the gorge, Quin sped up again. She sprinted until her lungs were on fire, and still it wasn't enough. She could still feel their hands, and their eyes. *And his arrogance!* Quin could have handled Fitz without Briggs' help,

she was sure of it. Fitz was just a slimy ball. And even if Briggs had helped in the way he had, she still hadn't forgiven him for grabbing her ass earlier.

Quin hoped she would never see them again, but she doubted it. The race wasn't for three weeks, and if they were all running in it, they would stay in town to train. Doubled over, she glanced at her watch. 6:30. She hoped they all were hung over and groaning during their training. But Briggs hadn't been drunk. She wondered at that fact for a moment. It made his change in behavior very odd. It was one thing to be a drunken prick fondling a waitress, another to do it sober for fun, but a completely different thing to extract her from the situation. Then Quin wondered why she was putting so much thought into people she may never see or talk to again after the race was over.

"Ga'ah! Forge't hym, gerl," she told herself. He was a jerk. But a pretty jerk, and Quin couldn't deny her infatuation, or wait to get over it.

Straightening, Quin started a slow jog into the cave. She realized that she was feeling cheated out of her revenge. Yes. That was why she could quit thinking about them when she never wanted to talk to them again. Revenge had to be the reason. Had to be.

Sure, she'd put Fitz in a little pain for grabbing her, but she hadn't gotten the satisfaction of seeing him squirm. Same with Briggs. Quin was sorry she hadn't dug in and crushed his prick. Would have been better than scalding it, and served just as well for his arrogance. She vowed that she'd get her revenge. If they were staying in town to train, she knew she'd get her chance at some point. And she'd take it, no matter what the cost.

Satisfied with her plans, Quin's attention was brought back to the trail she was running. She realized that she had no idea where she was. She slowed to a stop. She knew that she must have taken a wrong turn, but couldn't remember where. She swore at

herself for not paying more attention to where she was running. Looking at her watch, she swore again. Almost 7:30. She'd been running for almost an hour in an unknown direction.

She looked closer at her surroundings. She was in a big cavern with three tunnels leading into it: the one she come in through, one straight ahead, and one to her right. Deciding it was a good idea to simply turn around and try to make her way home, Quin noticed something on the walls at the entrance to the tunnel. She stepped closer and aimed her head lamp at it. Paint. Severely faded with time, but she could still make out the pictures. One scene showed a big yellow circle with people and animals and plants beneath it. In the next, everything was dead. People were fleeing; the picture showed chaos. Then the pictures dropped further down the wall. People were going underground, and the entrance was sealed. Further right showed how people carved out life, how the built into the cavern walls. Back tracking to the left, the pictures showed great buildings with smoke rising from their towers.

Quin gasped as she realized that she was looking at the real story of how people come to live under ground. Everyone had heard the stories. For hundreds of years children had been told of how the surface ran out of oxygen and people had to move underground, but no one ever knew *why*. There were several versions of how it happened. Some say the sky burned with fire the day of the Great Dying—that it erupted like a volcano and unleashed a tornado of flames. They say the screams of the burning people were louder than the roar of the crowd at the annual big race. Others say that it happened with ice—that the air literally stood still with cold and people froze how they were. They say they froze faster than they could suffocate from the lack of oxygen.

Every version of the story was cataloged in the archives. The paper they were written on years ago carefully preserved and never taken out for public viewing.

No one knew the real truth of the Great Dying. Only that the oxygen in Earth's atmosphere was gone in a matter of hours. Schools taught that it just happened, that the human population got too big, and in the year 2124, the breathable oxygen in earth's atmosphere simply ran out. Those who believed that such an apocalypse would come had prepared. Underground caves were sealed and furnished for human habitation, almost identical replicas of the cities above them. They moved underground when the Dying started. Many people followed, but more died before they could reach the caves.

But Quin guessed she was looking at the truth, the real story as to how and why. She looked at the pictures and saw it. The smoke from the towers—it set the sky on fire; it choked the people and the animals; it killed the plants.

No one ever told of this, but they had to know. Someone had to know. If all the other stories were preserved in the archives, this one had to be, too. But, of course, the version taught was so much nicer than this one so Quin could guess with certainty why it was covered up. Most people didn't care why it happened; they just wanted to get to the surface.

About fifty years ago, scientists had figured out how to terraform small areas of the surface using the same technology people had used to make the caves habitable over 200 years ago. The idea had been revolutionary, and the project had taken ten years, but it was a success. The terraformed areas could only sustain small amounts of life, however, so the government started a lottery to choose who went to the surface. Quin bet that even when the lottery started it hadn't been a true lottery.

She stared at the one picture that showed peace. The land was green, and the sky blue. She'd always wondered what it would be like to feel heat from a source other than a furnace; to go outside and look up and not see darkness; to see by light that wasn't synthetic. She had to admit that she understood the draw. But doing any of those things was so far out of her grasp that she'd accepted her fate a long time ago to live underground.

Quinn's family had always been poor. Both her parents had worked minimum wage jobs to put food on the table and send her and Brant to school. They died in a transport accident when she and Brant were 17. Brant had quit his part time job at the market for one at the transport shop which paid better but required more hours, and Quinn had applied at Steve's. They had both dropped out of secondary school to survive, and university had always been out of the question. Brant, however, had always believed that knowledge equaled power. Her brother had always been top in their class and spent hours pouring over books for fun. He still spent most of his time off work in the public library reading books of every subject. Their parents had always encouraged him while they were alive—they'd said education was the key to success. Their parents had had a dream, an impossible dream, to send their kids to university as neither of them had finished secondary school. But now that they were dead, Quinn begged her brother to drop the ridiculous notion that they would ever, could ever, be anything more than what they were: a poor mechanic and a poor waitress. Knowledge may equal power, she told him, but all the knowledge in the world would be useless without money and people to listen. The people who lived in their neighborhood were different from the Riches. They dressed

different, talked different. Everything was different. And they would never be allowed to rise above that. Not without money from the jobs only Riches had.

Quin's thoughts flashed to the prize money of the annual race. With that kind of cash, she could send her brother to school. He could get a degree, a better job, and then maybe they could move, maybe not to the surface, but certainly out of the Bottoms. Five years without their parents had been hard, but now she had a chance to make it a little easier.

Quin had never run in a race before. Until recently she'd never even been concerned with her times. After her parents died, Quin found running as a way to escape her grief and anger. Becoming a good runner had happened by accident. It simply started to take her longer and longer to reach that point where she was so tired she felt numb.

She still wasn't very good. Her best mile was still over five minutes, and her best half marathon was over an hour. Quin had never even run a full marathon yet. The only thing she had going for her was the fact that she could run forever if she paced herself.

The General's Cup was a 30-mile sprint over varied and dangerous terrain. The distance wouldn't be her problem, and she ran dangerous terrain almost every day. But could she run fast enough to beat Fitz, the apparent reigning champion? She couldn't remember his time from last year, having never paid attention to the race before, or ever had a real interest in the race or the people who ran it. But she guessed it was about 2 hours 40 minutes. With some training, and a lot of luck, she might have a chance. Besides, she thought, she had nothing to lose.

“Fookin bloody ba’alls!” Quin’s heart sank when she read the advertisement. She’d known there was an entrance fee to the race, but she hadn’t counted on it being so much. No wonder only sponsored military personnel ran. No one else could afford to.

Quin sighed and continued on her way home, desperate for a shower and bed. It had taken her another hour to make her way out of the caves and into town. It was well past her bedtime, and Quin was not in the mood to find out that the race was not in her budget. If she saved all her tips for the next three weeks, she could afford it, but she’d probably drop dead of hunger before the day of the race. But just maybe, maybe there could be a way. Maybe she could talk to Rick at the diner and get an advance. That is, if Rick had a heart transplant in the next week and turned into a caring person. Quin was beginning to see her twin’s point about being poor, and she wasn’t going to accept her position any longer.

Quin let herself into the house and made a beeline for the cold-box and a strawberry yogurt. Just as she was opening the container, the door to her brother’s bedroom opened and out came Afton, his girlfriend of six months dressed only in a shirt that fell to her thighs. Afton was gorgeous with her long brown hair and perfectly arched eyebrows, and she was the best thing that had ever happened to her brother. Quin liked her well enough and enjoyed seeing her brother happy, but she found herself jealous of the pair. The closest thing Quin had ever come to a relationship was a two-week stint with the box boy at the market last year. She’d had to switch markets after she’d ended the fling.

Afton smiled at her, flashing her brilliant set of teeth. “Good morning, Quin.”

“Hey,” Quin said back, launching into her yogurt.

Afton's family was well off. She was about to finish her last year at the university with a degree in psychology. Her love of knowledge made her good for Brandt. The two had actually met at the library. And had been in the fast lane ever since. Afton's parents wanted her with someone of better quality than Quin's twin, but Afton, thankfully, was one of those rare people who didn't care about a person's pocketbook. Her parents finally gave up trying to end the relationship a couple months ago when they realized Afton couldn't be swayed. They'd become tolerant of Brant and Quin, but not exactly accepting.

Quin had met them once and decided that once was enough. Afton had invited Brant and Quin over for dinner to meet her family when she and Brant first started dating. Afton lived in the upper-middle caves with her parents and two sisters in a house that attempted to be just as extravagant as those above them. Her mother Patricia was a wispy thin woman with the opinion of a charging boar. Her blonde hair was curled to perfection and her face piled with make-up. Her younger sisters looked like twins even though they were two years apart in age. Both had been dressed in dresses with skirts so large and stiff they could have stood up without the tiny bodies poured into them. Her father Roland thought there was more to his status than there was. In his shiny red suit, Quin lost him a few times against the bright oranges, greens, and reds of the decorations. The whole affair had been so excessive that it had made Quin sick. Oddly, Quin thought Afton seemed as at home with Brant and herself as she did with her nauseating family.

“Bra'an asleep?” Quin asked.

Afton nodded. “Good run?”

“Interesting. Lost I gosd and a new tra'ale found.”

“A good one?”

“Yeah. Afton, wha of surface do ou thynk?”

Afton looked a little startled at the question. “Brant finally get to you?”

Quin shrugged. “Na. Joost wondering.”

Afton sighed and ran a hand through her hair. “I don’t know, Quin. It is so far off. It is like a dream, you know?”

Quin nodded.

“Brant is stuck on it, as you know,” Afton continued. “And maybe he is right. Maybe things are better up there, and someday maybe I will be lucky enough to see it. But if I ever got the chance, I would not take it without him.”

“Tha’anks, Afton.”

“Any time, Quin. Everything okay? You look a little stressed.”

Quin mentally tried to relax, but didn’t think it did any good. Afton was going to make a wonderful psychologist someday. The woman had a knack for knowing things people didn’t want to say.

“Nothyng a ha shower wona cure,” she said throwing the empty yogurt container away. And soap, she added silently heading toward the bathroom. Lots and lots of soap.

After a scalding shower that emptied the hot water tank, Quin slid beneath the covers of her bed and slept hard for nine hours. When she woke up and went out to breakfast, she found Brant at the kitchen table already halfway into a bowl of the cheap tasteless cereal Quin stocked the cupboard with and reading the morning news wave. Afton, she knew, had already left for class. Quin and her brother both worked nights, but Afton had classes most of the day, so the two hardly got to see each other.

“Sleep well?” he asked looking over the top of the tablet he was reading the news on. The device had been cheap and outdated when they’d bought it three years ago. Those who could afford the devices on which to do so, watched the video news wave. Theirs could only receive written news announcements, but even those came over the wave agonizingly slow. Quin had decided that the wait was never worth the news she read and simply never turned the thing on anymore. Brant, however, needed to *know*.

“Yes, actua’ally,” she said. Sitting opposite him, she poured dry cereal and milk into the bowl he’d set out for her.

“Hiow was work?”

Quin kept her head down to hide the immediate flush that crept over her skin.

“Sa’ame old, sa’ame old,” she said.

Resting her head in one hand, Quin absently stirred her cereal, wondering how she could broach the race to him.

“The soldiers from North Town arrived las nigh.”

Quin looked up at Brant before returning her attention to her cereal. “Dyd they?”

“Ya. They are hier for the race. They cam early to train. One of them, a Major Fitz, won ayt las year, but thys Colonel Briggs ays favored to make ayt hard for Fitz thys year. Ayt says he moved to North Town last year, but ayt does not say wer from. Anyway, ayt should be a good race.”

Quin heard Brant set the tablet down. “Ou okay, Quine?”

She sat up and turned to him again. “Wha?”

“I asked ayt everything was okay. Ou look a little distracted.”

“Oh, um...” she dropped her spoon and picked it up again, twirling it between her fingers. “Ayt’s joost... abou ra’ace I was thynking. And, I dona know, but wha ayf well I coad do. Wha ayf wine I coad? For sure I’m na saying, but, we the money coad use.”

Brant looked at her in disbelief. “What changed ‘or mind?”

“About tha surface? Budged on tha one I na have. But on tha ra’ace... really I dona know. Tha money we need.” She didn’t think it necessary to add that beating Fitz would be the perfect revenge. “Expensive entrance fee ays, but the money somewher we coad find I thynk.”

Brant was nodding along with her words. Quin could tell he was doing mental math with their finances and his chances of getting her to agree to the surface. “Don’t worry about the entrance fee,” he said. “I wile talk to Don at the shop about an advance. He owes me a favor.”

“Bran, ou sure? He was pretty ha’ard about those ou said I thought.”

“He ays, but he owes me a favor.”

“Okay then. Mea name ayn I’ll put. Tha money by ra’ace day I need.”

“Ou wile have ayt.”

Three weeks later, Quin was more ready to run than she ever had been in her life. She stood in line at the registration table, bouncing on her toes, keeping warm and trying to lose her jitters. When she got to the front the severe looking woman with slicked back hair asked for her paper work. Quin handed it over.

“Quin James,” the woman mused. “Never heard of any James before. I assume you have your entrance fee?” She looked up at Quin with raised brows obviously surprised a no-name was entering.

“Yes, I do.” Quin handed her the wire transfer receipt, proof that the money had landed in the proper account.

The woman stamped her paperwork and put it in a pile with the others, then handed Quin an anklet. “Fasten this around your ankle. Your spectators, if you have any, can monitor you based on the chip inside. The red button is a panic button. Press it if at any time you need to drop out. A transport will come, and you will be automatically disqualified. Do not lose the anklet or your time will not count. And,” she added with a vicious smirk, “no one will be able to find you if you get lost.”

Quin took the anklet from her. “Tha’anks.”

“Race starts in twenty minutes.”

Quin made her way back over to Brant who had already purchased a viewing screen so he could watch her progress during the race.

“Ou ready?” he asked.

“I hope.”

“I have ou down as number 256.”

Quin checked the anklet. “256.”

“Good. I wile be able to see ‘our progress on thys. Ou will be a lyttle red dot on a course map, but stile.” He shrugged.

“Mea com find, ayf lost or anythyng I ges.”

Brant smiled. "Always." He gave her a tight hug. "Good luck, Sis. I am going to go get a seat. Knock them dead."

"Do my bes," she said.

Nervous and alone, Quin didn't know what to do. She already knew where the starting line was and was already pretty warm. She bent down and clipped on the anklet. Standing, she saw what she'd been hoping to avoid. Fitz. Walking towards her and obviously recognizing her.

"It appears you have many skills."

"To thynk I do I like."

"Get that thought out of your head and withdraw before you get yourself hurt. People like you do not belong here."

"Ah, come now, Major. Afraid you cannot beat a single little girl?"

Quin shuddered at the voice behind her. Briggs. She turned and stepped to the side so she could have them both in her sight.

"Na," said Fitz. "I find her presence here an abomination. Her kind should not be allowed here."

"Everyone has a right to enter. If she is as low as you think, surely you will beat her no sweat." Briggs looked her up and down, his gaze stopping a moment on her ratty shoes. Quin froze under his scrutiny.

Fitz made a disgusted sound and spat at her feet before stalking off to the start line.

Still rooted to the rock under her feet, Quin's heart beat like a terrified rabbit's. The man in front of her was a good half foot taller than she, and about twice as wide. He

was reported to be good, but he didn't look like a runner. He looked like a soldier. The running tights and tech shirt he wore didn't hide the fact.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"Sa'am reason ou are, I presume. To run a ra'ace."

"Na, I am here because I was paid to be. Surely it is not so with you." He crossed his arms over his chest.

Quin copied his pose. "Na. It is na. Hiere because I wa'an to be I am."

"You should not. You do not belong."

Quin narrowed her eyes at him. She had a few choice words for him, but decided he wasn't worth the argument. The pair of them had already made her angry with their judgmental discrimination. Angry enough to need a good hard run to cool off. And to have renewed motivation to win. She turned from him without a word.

"Prove me wrong, Quin," he said as she walked away.

At the line up, Quin made sure she was as far away from them as possible. Looking at the racers, she noticed that not only was she the only nonmilitary runner, she was also the only female. Now she was determined to win. The grandstands around the stadium where the race started and finished were packed full of people. Quin grew nervous at the sight of them and bounced on her toes to quiet her stomach.

The announcer counted down the seconds. 10...9...8...

Quin took a deep breath. "Nothing ayt ays," she whispered.

...2...1...the gun went off.

Quin broke from the line last and found herself behind thirty men fighting for the lead. She didn't let it get to her. She needed to run her race, and let them run theirs. She

had faith in her times and wasn't going to waste energy on a flashy start. Running was about the finish, not the start.

Quin welcomed the quiet when she exited the stadium and left the crowd and the lights behind. This was what she loved, the complete darkness and the quiet, alone with her thoughts and her breath. This is where she flew.

The course was lined with glowing lights every ten feet or so, but the light emitted was soft, just enough to keep the runners on the right path, not enough to brighten the dark caverns. Quin was careful to keep her head lamp focused on the path in front of her, not wanting to trip over anything.

It was about six miles in before Quin could see the first grouping of head lamps in the distance. There were about seven she guessed. Encouraged, she sped up. She caught them just as the course started up a steep rock face. The single track made it impossible to pass, but Quin wasn't flustered. She bided her time a few yards back, waiting until they had finished the climb and the path leveled out again. She pushed her legs faster, and passed them, eight in all, to a chorus of curses and threats. She slowed her pace up about a mile ahead of them. She was still feeling good, better than she ever had before on a run.

About two miles later, she passed two more men. She didn't recognize them, but she didn't care. She kept her pace and flew past them both. Her legs wanted to speed up, but she forced herself to wait.

At the half way mark, Quin checked her watch. She was making great time. In fact she had never run so fast before. She passed two more men, and at 16 she checked her time again. She was going too fast. At this rate she'd be out of energy by mile 25. She made herself slow down and find her pace again. Miles 17 and 18 were a descent and

ascent of Sheep's Gorge, but half a mile out of the gorge, her quick pace and the hilly course began to catch up with her.

"Dona stope. Dona stope," she chanted in her head. "Dona you dare stope." She slowed down even more, her breath coming in pants, her lungs on fire.

The path turned up again, and Quin saw the light of a headlamp coming from behind her.

He passed her before the course leveled, and when it did, Quin could barely pick up her feet. The mile marker ahead said 21. "Do thys you ca'an," she told herself. "Joost dona stope."

Quin caught her breath on the next descent and sped up again on the flat. It was a mile before she passed another man. She didn't know if it was the same one or not, but she didn't care.

Her feet were beginning to ache in her shoes. The shoes had been old before she'd decided to train, and the miles she'd put on them recently hadn't done them any favors.

At mile 25 she forced herself to forget about the sharp pain in her left foot and speed up. Her heart and lungs felt great, but every other step had become agony. She forgot about it, and just ran.

She passed another group at 26 and two more men at 27. With three miles left, she picked up her pace even more. She was no longer running for revenge or anger, she was running for pride. For her brother who wanted so much to be like the people who looked down on them. She wanted to prove that she and Brant were just as good as they were, that she could do anything they could. It was no longer for the money; it was for the win.

She passed a string of men over mile 28. She pushed hard up the next hill and saw the finish line in the distance. Two head lamps bobbed up and down between her and the bright lights at the finish.

She picked her way carefully down the steep descent and hit the flat harder than she'd ever run before. The man in front of her was running all out. Fitz. She could tell as she got closer. He cursed her as she passed him, and she mentally laughed at his waste of breath.

One light to pass and about three quarters of a mile to do it in. It was Briggs. It had to be.

Quin pushed harder. Her heart slammed against her chest, her breath coming in gasps, but she wasn't stopping now. With less than half a mile to go, she caught him, but just as she did, he sped up. Quin sprinted after him, legs moving so fast, she wasn't sure her feet were hitting the ground.

They were neck and neck as they entered the last quarter mile. The roar of the crowd barely registered with Quin. Briggs sped up again, but she met him step for step. She could hear Fitz behind them, gaining ground. She pushed, but so did Briggs.

Finally, at 100 meters, she gained half a step. Then another. She willed her legs to move faster, and somehow they did. She passed him, but he was right there on her shoulder, fighting her every step of the way. He caught her at 50, and Fitz was right behind them still gaining.

She had a split second thought that Fitz might pass them, and that he was right about everything. It brought her anger back. He was wrong. They were down to the last 25 meters and she was still with them. She belonged here.

She found a small pocket of strength deep inside herself, the one she always saved for the end of a run.

It's all about the finish, she told herself. Finish strong, or don't finish at all.

She pushed...

And with ten yards to go, she broke ahead.

Briggs was one step back, fighting to the last. Quin leaned forward and flew over the line.

She slowed to a walk, then a stop, and bent over hands on her knees. She felt a barrage of hands patting her back and voices saying congratulations. None of it registered. All she wanted to do was throw up, but she refused to do so in front of these people. After two more deep breaths, she straightened, put her hands on her head and waded through the crowd, knowing she had to keep moving.

She looked up at the score board and saw her name next to the number one.

1. Quin James
2. Chase Briggs
3. Jamie Fitz

She did it. A nobody from the Bottoms beat the General's best men. She almost didn't believe it herself. 2:30:56. No one had ever finished in such a time.

She straightened and looked around for Brant. He was the only one she wanted to share this moment with. But he was nowhere to be found.

Quin was ushered to the podium and stood between Briggs and Fitz as the three of them were given medals.

It all happened so fast. She was still searching for Brant and coming to terms with winning. Hands pulled her from the podium, voices congratulated her, camera flashes blinded her.

“Quin James.” A voice broke through the loud din and she met the face of an officer, one she hadn’t met before. “Come with me.”

“Wha for?”

He didn’t answer her, just forced her through the crowd and out of the stadium.

“Wer are we going?” she asked again.

Again, he didn’t answer and forced her to continue through the lot of transports outside the stadium. They were making their way to one that was all white and windowless.

Quin stopped. “Wha’s going on?” she demanded.

Officers jumped out of the transport. He escort forced her face first against the side of the vehicle.

“Quin James, you are under arrest.”

Unforgiving metal locked around her wrists, and she was forced into the back of the transport. And there, lying unconscious, bleeding from a wound on his temple was Brant.

“To hym wha dyd ou do?” she screamed, struggling in vain to get to her twin.

The officers held her still. She felt a prick in her arm.

Then, nothing.

The room was dark when she woke up. Her hands were still cuffed behind her. The chair she was tied to was metal and cold. She looked around and tried to move, only finding herself bound ankles and wrists to that chair. The table in front of her was made of the same dull metal, perfectly flat and unyielding. The solitary light over head was bright, making the dark room eerily well-lit in the middle where she sat. How long she'd been out, she didn't know, but she could still feel the cold sweat soaking her running clothes. Quin could already feel muscles cramping all over her body. She tried fruitlessly one more time to stand. She needed to find Brant.

The door on the left wall opened and in walked Fitz like he owned the place.

"I would not do that if I were you. It is not worth it." His eyes danced with mirth as he regarded her in her current predicament.

Quin remembered his hand griping her breast and swallowed hard. She was alone and tied to a chair, but he couldn't possibly do anything to her no one else had done before. She steeled her nerve and gazed at him haughtily.

Too late. He'd seen the flash of fear in her eyes, and it amused him all the more.

He sauntered to the opposite side of the table and tossed a folder on to its surface. He pulled the chair back, its legs scraping harshly on the floor. He sat down lazily and opened the folder, seeming very interested in its contents. But Quin could feel his attention focused on her.

"You have friends in high places," he said.

Quin didn't know what he was talking about. The only Rich she knew was Afton, and Quin certainly wouldn't classify her as in high places. "Poin?"

“My point is, how can two poor orphans afford the entrance fee you paid to race?”

“A loan mea brother gos.”

“You mean the loan he defaulted on?”

“Wha? No!” Quin was confused. “Wer he ays?” she demanded.

Fitz ignored her and went on. “It seems your brother’s boss made several complaints about your twin. Apparently he has been late on several loan payments.”

Quin’s head was spinning with the lie. “Na, only for tha one three weeks ago hie asked.”

Fitz nodded. “He asked three weeks ago for another, but Mr. Granger did not agree to finance the entire fee.”

“Wha? Wer Bra’an ays?”

“Granger reported that his account was hacked, just after your fee was deposited.”

Quin’s head was spinning. “Do tha Bra’an woadna.”

“But he did.”

Fitz got up and stalked around that table.

“And then there is you.”

“Wha about mae?”

“How do you, a little wisp of a thing from nowhere, the beat General’s best men?”

“Fa’aser than ou I ra’an.”

“Did you? We are testing your blood now, so you might as well tell me now what you used, and I will tell the DA that you cooperated.”

“Fook ou!”

It happened so fast Quin didn't even know it until after it happened. One second she was preparing to spit in his face, the next blood was streaming down her chin, her nose throbbing from impact with the table. Fitz's hand fisted in her hair, forcing her head back at an unnatural angle.

"You little bitch. How did you do it?"

His face was so close to hers, she could see the pimple scars on his skin, smell his alcohol-laden breath.

Quin rolled her eyes to meet his. "Sook 'orself, dyk."

Again her face was slammed against the table, only this time when he pulled her back, he pulled hard enough to tip the chair. Quin screamed as the handful of hair ripped from her scalp. Her head cracked hard against the stone floor. The room spun even behind her closed eyelids. Pain throbbed throughout her entire body; her hands ached beneath the weight of the chair. Tears leaked uncontrolled into her hair.

"What did you take?" he roared, but it was distant in Quin's ringing ears.

She opened her eyes, his image reeling in her vision. His boot pressed against her throat. Instinctively she struggled, but she could do nothing more than scream in silence.

"You thought that you would get to the surface, didn't you? You Bottomers are all the same, thinking you can get up, become a Rich. You do not look so high right now. In fact you look about as low as you can get."

Abruptly, he released the pressure on her throat and hauled the chair upright. Quin breathed deep and coughed reflexively.

"You think you are so high up?"

Quin could faintly hear his boot steps going towards the door. Then the bolt locking into place. Quin's breathing was ragged and fast with fear as he walked back to where she sat trapped.

"But you will learn your place, bitch."

Quin rolled to the side and spat the blood in her mouth onto the floor. She coughed up more, wincing at her bruised throat. Surprisingly, no teeth landed in the pool of blood she created on the floor. Quin laid her head down, opting to stay on her side rather than roll back onto her hands. The metal of the table was cool against her damaged cheek.

She shivered, but lacked the strength to draw her legs up. All she could do was lay there, barely able to breathe. She could feel the blood leaking over her naked skin and pooling on the table.

Quin closed her eyes and wished for death.

She heard the door open, the breathy "Bloody hell," the heavy boots against the stone floor, and then felt hands working the cuffs on her wrists. Quin groaned and tried to move away from the touch.

"Shh," she heard him say.

The cuffs fell away, but Quin lacked the strength to move her arms to a more comfortable position.

Briggs stepped around the table and helped her roll onto her back. At this point she didn't even care.

He brushed the hair off her eyes and examined her face. "My God."

Quin wasn't sure if she heard it it was so quiet. His gaze moved down and stopped at her ravaged throat. One hand came up to touch it, hesitated inches from her skin, and trembled. He looked down the rest of her, bleeding and bruised. She watched him clench his eyes shut for a moment.

“Can you sit?” he asked.

She didn't even bother to answer him.

He pulled her up slowly into a sitting position. He held her with one hand and began unbuttoning his jacket.

“Bra'an?” she asked hoping he would know who she was talking about.

“Your brother?”

Quin gave the tiniest nod in response.

He didn't answer, just took off his jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders. One by one he put her arms through the sleeves and buttoned the front.

“I need you to walk,” he said. He lifted her from the table and set her on her bare feet. The stone was colder than she expected, and slippery from the blood coating her feet.

Her legs were so weak Quin almost fell to the floor. She grabbed for him and found herself steadied.

“Wer hie ays?” she asked weakly.

“Quin—”

“No. Wer hie ays?” she asked more firmly, staring at him with conviction.

He sighed. “He was dead before he got here.”

Quin did fall then. She grabbed for the closest thing and found herself gripping his shirt, crying into his shoulder, not even caring that she hated him. Brant had been the one constant in her life, the one person who was always there for her, and now he was gone, and it was all her fault. She should have been there for him. She should have stopped it. He was dead, and she should have been there to stop it.

Brant was a mechanic, a nobody. A dreamer he might have been, but he didn't deserve this—to be killed for trying to achieve his dream. And she had caused it. She had encouraged him to get that loan so she could run and show up a couple sceevy officers. She'd killed her brother with her damn pride.

Briggs pried her away from his body. “We need to go.”

“Wer?”

He took her arm and began tugging her to the door. “I am getting you to the surface.”

Quin balked. “Surface? Wha? Hyow?”

At the door, Briggs turned to face her, staring down at her. “You have three choices, Quin. One: Stay in jail living through that”—he indicated the table—“every day until you die, kill yourself, or get sentenced for execution like your brother. Two: join up as a foot soldier in the General's army and live in complete subjugation to him, going through that every day. Three: take your chances on the surface. It will not be more than you had before, but you will be alive, and you will be free.”

Quin thought about it quickly. She didn't want to go to the surface, but she knew she wasn't going to be allowed to go back to her life. Prison or the army would be worse than slavery, the surface couldn't be worse than that. In the choice between life and

death, Quin decided to live. Some instinct inside her *needed* to live, even if just for a little longer.

“Okay,” she said.

Briggs nodded tersely and took her hand. He opened the door and peered out. Then he opened it wide and shoved her out ahead of him. “Go with it,” he said in that growling voice she remembered from the diner.

They were in a dark hallway. The only choices were left or right, but Quin didn’t know where he wanted her to go so she stood still. The door slammed shut behind her and Briggs gripped her arm in a hard hand, pulling her after him to the right. Legs wobbly, Quin found it hard to keep up with him. But Briggs didn’t slow down. He pulled her down a maze of turns, half dragging her along, but Quin couldn’t muster the energy to walk any faster.

Suddenly he stopped, and Quin stumbled into his back.

“Where are you taking her?” Quin heard a man asking.

“To see the General,” was Briggs’ reply.

“Clean her up first.”

“Yes, Sir.” Briggs saluted before tugging her forward again.

They didn’t go much further before he pulled her into a deserted hall off the main one.

“The dock is just down there. There are five pods. Get inside one, and it will take you to the surface as soon as you shut the door.”

“Wait. Wha about ou?” Quin didn’t think he was going to get away with this after they’d been seen.

Briggs gave her a wan smile. "Don't worry about me. I am not going anywhere."

Quin didn't believe him, but nodded in understanding.

"Why thys ou are doing?"

There was that weary smile again. "Everyone deserves a chance to change their stars."

Quin blinked at the tears prickling her eyes. "Sa'am thyng Bran wa'and."

"Then do right by him."

"Best I wile do."

"Alright. Let's go."

He took her hand and led her back out into the main hall. Quin could see the pods not 20 yards ahead. She picked up her pace, her path to freedom so close.

"Halt!"

The command came from behind them. Quin froze automatically and turned to the voice. It was Fitz, his gun leveled at Briggs. He took one hand from his weapon and turned the collar of his jacket to his mouth. He bent his head to the fabric and said, "I found them. Pod shaft 2."

Then he drop the fabric, gripped his gun in two hands. "Stand down, Colonel."

Briggs raised his hands out his sides and walked slowly towards Fitz. "Do not do this, Fitz," he said slowly, calmly, like he wasn't walking toward the loaded end of a gun.

"Colonel, freeze!"

"I am not going to do that." He continued forward.

Quin stood rooted to the ground, heart pounding.

"They are on their way, Colonel," Fitz continued. "Stand down."

Quin bet that the General wanted his traitor alive, but she could guess his second choice. She was about to tell Briggs to stand down, that she wasn't worth it. But before she could even open her mouth, his arm swept up. Fitz' gun was knocked to the side. A shot rang out; the gun clattered to the ground.

"Quin, run!" Briggs shouted.

The two men were grappling, each trying to reach the gun. Quin turned and ran towards the pods. She could hear the blows landing behind her.

She opened the first pod she reached and turned to face the fight. Briggs landed a punch to Fitz' left jaw, and his opponent crumpled to the stone.

"Comon!" she screamed.

Briggs' head whipped around at her voice. She motioned for him to come with her. He ran towards the pod full out. Behind him, Quin saw Fitz stir, the gun just a few feet from him. He looked up at Briggs, then scrambled for the weapon. She screamed desperately to Briggs, her hand hovering over the controls that would shut the door as soon as he was inside. He was sprinting, faster than she saw him running in the race.

But it wasn't enough.

The shot echoed in the tunnel. Briggs' eyes went wide with shock. He stumbled, fell to all fours. Behind him, Quin saw Fitz, gun gripped in two hands, the smoke drifting eerily around his head. Slowly, Fitz rose from his knees.

Briggs tried to get up. Fitz took aim again and fired. Briggs fell forward, laid out on the ground. He looked up at her, the motion visibly agonizing. She couldn't look away. His pain held her: his pain, anger, confusion, regret, love, respect, sorrow. And his fear.

“Go,” she heard him manage, blood falling from his lips.

She looked at Fitz, his gun now aimed at her.

Quin closed the door.

Five months later, Quin made her rounds refilling empty coffee mugs and picking up her tips. She had already passed out all her checks, now all she had to do was wait for her replacement, Kimmy, to show up so she could go home. Quin looked at the clock behind the counter. Kimmy was a minute late, and Quin was already cursing her. Every minute spent in the dive that was Rick’s Café was hell, and the best part of every shift was when Quin clocked out. But the work paid the rent on her apartment and put food in her belly. Most days.

Quin made her way back behind the counter and put the now half-empty pot of coffee back on the warmer. No one was sitting at the counter so Quin leaned her forearms on the cheap plastic and stared out the big windows across the diner, counting the extra seconds she was spending on the clock. A couple strolled past the diner outside. Quin watched as the woman giggled at something the man had said. Behind them, the sky beyond the invisible terraform shield was turning orange in the fading afternoon. Across the street, the bars were just beginning to open for the early birds.

Quin heard the swinging door that led to the kitchen squeak open. She turned and saw Kimmy coming in from the back. Immediately, Quin untied her apron and stepped over to the register to clock out before making a beeline for the front door.

“Have a good night,” she called to her relief, wanting to bite her tongue at how easily the new words rolled out of her mouth.

Without waiting for a reply, Quin stepped out onto the sidewalk and felt the warm air on her skin. The acidic red sun shone low over the horizon, slightly veiled by the orange-grey haze that constantly clouded the sky. The terraform shield kept out the pollution but let in the warmth of the sun. Quin closed her eyes and savored the feeling, just as she did after every shift, before starting for home.