

Unsubscribe Me

After a long day of microjobbing, Rill Jadhav was ready to slide up to her convolution, kick back and binge some cheap narrative.

When she got to the arched entrance of her naga, a drone was perched on the stoop, clutching a package addressed to her. The drone scanned her. It made a cranky little buzz, kicked the package to her, and then melted into a blob. Rill picked up both her package and the blob. She could turn the spent drone in at the nanofluid bank for a small credit.

Rill walked through to the naga's central cavity, worrying the tape on the package with her thumbnail. Thus preoccupied, she didn't notice someone follow her in from the street.

She had the package open by the time she stepped into the up-tube. Her bare feet touched the tube's wall, and it pinched. She braced herself as the tube's peristalsis shoved her upwards.

There was a note in the box from Uncle Nikhi. Rill smiled. The old crabapple had sent a housewarming gift, even after all his speechifying. The naga district was a den of abominations, he said. Living buildings were unnatural, and their serpent-like forms proved they were here to devour us, not shelter us. Rill was fond of reminding Uncle Nikhi that his own bionic eyes were made of the same nanofluid as the "slimy" nagas. The same viscous solution of polymorphic, macromolecular machines.

Uncle Nikhi had sent her a seedling. The helpless tender shoot of a curry tree. It had suffered some damage--that drone!--and needed TLC. It would also need light.

Rill emerged from the tube, and found that the passage to her apartment had moved again. She remembered how Porphyry (who was usually her next-door neighbor) said it was a

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good idea to take your bearings before entering a naga. First make sure you've got the right naga, because they sometimes trade places. And take a look at its shape. This naga had once bent over into an arch, putting the penthouse on the ground floor. Porph had joked about how the occupant demanded a rent credit.

“Which way home, Naga?” she asked the hallway. The walls to her right contracted. A kind of hiccup--and her answer. She went right.

Sometimes, as she weaved through the convolution that led to her private space, Rill wished nagas had proper doors. But the curvy, winding hallways were optimal for airflow, temperature control, and sound dampening. Sure, it was like living in a stomach. But she really couldn't complain.

“Oh Naga, dear Naga,” she said, as she reached her inner sanctum.

“Yes,” said a voice. Or rather, a muffled collection of voices, both masculine and feminine.

“I have a favor to beg,” Rill said. “This immature plant will need natural sunlight.”

“You have asked for a window before.”

“I know, dear Naga. Not for myself, but for this helpless plant, I ask it now.”

She had learned the trick of elevated diction from Porphyry. When he had come over to introduce himself, she was trying to adjust the humidity in her fungiculture chamber, and getting nowhere. Porph had explained how the nagas, for some reason, preferred to be addressed like gods.

Finally, the chorus said, “We will move your chambers to the skin, facing south. Murrya Koenigii will live or Rill Jadhav will leave.”

This took Rill by surprise. Not the taxonomic name of the curry tree--she figured the naga had scanned its DNA. But she hadn't expected the naga to become so invested in the seedling's survival.

"I promise, oh Naga, to care for the curry tree like my own child."

The walls started to melt. They didn't collapse exactly, but went soft and gooey. Rill had decorated her space with giclee prints and a framed himroo shawl. Now the walls grew stubby tentacles, which passed the decor along, from stub to stub. Rill watched with fascination while the same process moved her bed and other belongings. The naga reabsorbed the cabinets, lights, and other fixtures that had come with the apartment.

Her living space started to shift, like a bubble in gel, toward the south. Rill followed her decor and furniture, carefully carrying the sapling through the convolutions which, even as she passed, closed behind her.

No sooner had Rill resettled, and positioned Baby Curry on her new windowsill, than she heard a ping in her earpiece. Someone wanted to enter.

She sighed. Porphyry. His apartment had probably been jostled and redimensioned as hers slid past, toward the south face.

Another ping. He was probably pissed.

She was subvocally composing a do-not-disturb text when she heard a muffled voice call, "Please!"

Rill recalled two things. Something her uncle told her about hospitality and gods in disguise. And where her taser was hidden.

She activated her earpiece with a wave, and said, "Enter, stranger."

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The stranger loped through her entryway, and then paused to catch his breath. His clothing was well-cut, but dirty. His hair had recently been coiffed, and was now askew.

“I’m so sorry to bother you,” he said, “but I’ve just been in an accident.” He winced. Took in a sharp breath.

Rill put her hand to her mouth. “Are you okay?”

“Hit and run,” he said. “I’ll be okay,” he added quickly, though he sounded unsure. “Yeah, yeah. Can I possibly use your naga? I think my--” he tapped his earpiece. “I need to get in touch with my--oh.” He swayed.

“Sit down for a second,” said Rill. “I think you’re in shock.”

He sat. Rill watched him for a moment. Then she called on the naga.

“Merciful Naga, Guest access for--”

“Shadler,” said the stranger. “Ethan Shadler. Sorry again.”

“Access granted,” said the voices.

Ethan suddenly perked up, and subvocalized some commands to the naga. He listened to his earpiece. He smiled. His breathing became regular.

“Thanks for being so kind, Ms. Jadhav,” he said. “For your trouble I’d like to offer you a valuable opportunity.”

“What?”

“You’ve logged a lot of hours as a microjobber since your arrival in the naga district--” Ethan paused, stood, approached Rill. “Six days ago. Correct?”

“Uh, yes?” Rill retreated to a defensive position behind her kitchen island.

“Many in the gig economy lack adequate health insurance coverage. Imagine if you were in a hit and run, like me, and--”

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“Hold on,” said Rill. “Full disclosures, please.” This was another trick she learned from Porph.

Ethan sighed. “I am a nanofluidic construct licensed for canvassing in naga district 419-B. If you no longer wish to receive visits from agents like myself, you can opt out by visiting--”

“Why did you ask for naga access?”

Ethan bit his tongue, and instinctively glanced at the door.

Rill flashed a knowing smile. Legal print-ups, as Porphyry called them, never asked for login privileges.

“Oh Naga, seal entrance please,” she called as she rounded the island.

“I’m legal,” said Ethan, stumbling backward. “I swear.”

In a flash, Rill fired her taser. Her visitor crumpled, letting out a grunt. Then his clothing, skin, and hair lost resolution, melting like wax.

Rill pinged Porphyry.

“Yah?” came his groggy voice in her earpiece.

“Got another spam visit,” she said.

She heard him chuckle. “They always target the noobs.”

“Yeah, yeah. Want a cut?”

“Huh?”

“60 kilos of unlicensed slop, Porph. I could use some help carrying it down to the nanofluid bank. I’ll split the cred with you.”

He laughed harder. “You learn fast. I’ll be right over.”