

Green Thumb

“The removal decision is final,” she said, closing the file.

She didn’t add: *and there’s nothing you can do about it*, but it was implied.

Roger had handed me the notice that morning, with an apologetic smile and a shrug. He didn’t know what it was all about. His entire demeanor, however, smelled of embarrassment with a touch of relief that he wasn’t the one summoned to the Department for an interview. Interview! After ten years of dealing with management I knew how they massaged words and flexed them till they were so misshapen they might as well be spoken in reverse. I missed the times when face-to-face meant exactly that and not a conversation with a piece of machinery with exactly five emotional features, which was probably one more than the woman seated behind the desk in front of me was capable of mastering.

She cleared her throat. “Don’t you have anything to say, Ms. Cameron?”

Like what? Why, oh why are you doing this to me?

I was a good worker bee, I toiled diligently, I was careful in my social interactions, I ate healthy and exercised regularly, and I didn’t think I had done anything wrong. So, why, oh why did I get the sack? Now, that woman, that corporate drone, wanted to know if I had anything to say to her? Stuff it, lady!

“We have this cubicle for another hour,” the woman said, irritatingly prim.

I sensed a whiff of discomfort. I was not reacting as expected. Corporate drones hate that. I bet she regretted doing the interview in person. That was a good question, wasn’t it? Why

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wasn't this menial chore delegated to the Human Resources gofer AI? Maybe I should ask for a smidgen of clarification.

“How was the analysis performed?” I said.

“The usual. Sampling.”

“My last medical was over a year ago. Did it take that long to get results?”

She shifted in her hard metal chair – the same model my butt was in, a tailbone crusher – and reopened the file.

“This doesn't say when the samples were taken.” She frowned. “You're working the bio unit. Aren't measurements taken all the time?”

They were and as soon as an irregularity was spotted, shrieking alarms sent everybody to the decon showers. “We haven't had an alert in nine months,” I said. I knew because my friend, Sharon, got pregnant right after the last one and the baby was right now destroying her parents' precious hours of sleep.

“The spike in the medical indicators is very steep, Ms. Cameron. You were exposed. The effects might have dissipated but the security breach certainly justifies management's decision. We do not issue this kind of ruling on a whim. You are a valuable resource.”

I was a shining asset. The best minds trained me. I was nurtured and groomed to perform a task vital to the successful completion of moonbase Alecto's mission – terraforming Planet 5684. My removal would leave a gaping hole in the roster. Nobody is irreplaceable of course but my departure would create a major inconvenience. Call it conceit but I believed the woman when she said the decision hadn't been made lightly. I did not recall any biological exposure and I sure felt perfectly fine. What the hell was going on?

“Would you mind telling me who initiated the disciplinary procedure?” I said.

She sighed, pondered for a while, and slid the file toward me.

I was surprised she was so accommodating. This wasn't a court of law where the defendant was granted unfettered access to the prosecution's materials. My powerful employer, a government branch, was notoriously secretive, and for good reasons. What we were doing in these far reaches of space, preparing barren chunks of rock for colonization by our eager citizens, was eminently sensitive. The woman shouldn't have given me the file. In fact there shouldn't have been a file at all, only data in digital form that could be erased for all eternity with a casual tap on screen. The old-fashioned paper file was a glaring aberration.

The first sheets of the report were covered with the usual combo of boxes and codes tracking version numbers and reviewers' credentials. It documented the mysterious and protracted progress of my case through the arcane hierarchy of the organization. The dates were puzzling. Six months ago, A.J. initiated the file – Antonia Joris, manager of the ag section. I had no reporting line, dotted or otherwise, to her. We did not interact at all. The other initialed boxes were as baffling. I knew these people from seeing them around base but I did not work with them, never crossed paths with them in any official capacity. I had a drink in the bar with some of them, even dated one of them for a couple of weeks. Could that be called toxic exposure?

It made me wonder if they confused me with somebody else. Unless... Could it be that *thing*? It happened six months ago... Page three removed my doubts. It didn't clearly describe the incident. In typical bureaucratic fashion it danced around the truth.

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It was still clear in my mind. How I stared disbelievingly at the object in my waste basket. How I was unable to suppress the sudden surge of panic. My first reaction was to peek cautiously over the metal partition that separated my cubicle from Roger's. Nobody looked in

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my direction. I slid back in my chair. Cold sweat was soaking the collar of my uniform. Was it a prank? Somebody's idea of a joke? A sick joke if the thing in the basket was what it seemed to be. With trembling fingers, I reached inside the basket.

It looked innocent enough. A green twig about half an inch thick that had been neatly cut. From what? A tree, a bush, a potted plant? It would have been innocent if this happened anywhere else. Here, all the potential sources were equally dismaying.

There were trees, bushes and potted plants on moonbase Alecto. They grew in the restricted ag section, under stringent security monitoring. They were extremely valuable. More valuable than the scientific equipment that made their existence possible. Eventually, when the surface of Planet 5684 was ready to receive them, and if all worked according to plan, they would kick-start the dramatic process of transforming a desert into a livable habitat.

This green twig did not belong in my waste basket.

I could have wrapped it in tissue paper, given it to my supervisor and faced embarrassing questions. In retrospect, that was the sensible thing to do. Too late for regrets now. And anyway that wasn't the worst mistake I made.

I put the thing in a pitcher of water and kept it in my bathroom. To see what happened, to find out what it would turn into. I thought, if it dries out and dies, I'll drop it in the recycle bin with the kitchen stuff and it will go to the compost heap. It didn't die, it thrived. And, foolish me, seeing buds appear made me happy.

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The names on the disciplinary report, Antonia's in particular, made it very clear. I had committed a major crime. The bureaucratic wording was ominous. It didn't say: Dinah Cameron attempted to grow a tree in her bathroom, an experiment that should only be conducted in

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specially equipped and monitored labs. No, it said: Officer Cameron was careless in handling sensitive biological material. Nowhere did it say what the material was. The reader was left under the impression that I was an idiot that misplaced a deadly virus and got contaminated, as my highly improbable medical data showed. I wasn't a medic, but logically, I should be dead.

No wonder the panel recommended my immediate removal from Alecto. I was Typhoid Mary reincarnated.

Ludicrous. If this was true, I should be in the isolation ward, not talking to an HR specialist. "This is not what happened," I said.

The woman straightened in her chair. She expected this kind of reaction and she was prepared. "As you can see from the dates and the names, management took the time to assess the situation. Officer Joris is second in command of Alecto. Your case was examined and ruled on by the highest authority."

"That doesn't make it right." I sighed. Arguing anything against Antonia Joris was pointless. "When am I leaving?" I pushed the file back to the HR woman. "It doesn't say in here. It also doesn't say where I'm going. What penal colony is it? Unless it's a leper colony?"

"You're expected in the departure lounge at 0800 hours tomorrow. Boxes will be delivered to your quarters later today. I've not been informed of your next assignment." Her sour expression made it very clear. She didn't want to be in my shoes.

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I spent exactly twenty minutes emptying my desk. Roger watched me from his side of the partition. He had a sad dog facial expression that made me want to laugh.

"Come on, Rog! It's not the end of the world. Ten years in this damn place, I'm sure ready for something new. Fuck Alecto, hello wherever." I pointed at the flotsam gathered on my

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desk. “Take anything you want. I’m keeping the pencils.” They had to leave me something I could kill myself with!

By the time Roger and the rest of the team had descended on my worldly possessions, the stash was picked clean.

“What about getting drunk tonight? *Asteroids*?” Roger said. “You drink free, it’s the least I can do. I like you Dinah.”

Oh no, he was going all mushy on me. “I’ll pop in,” I said. “After I pack up.”

I didn’t expect what I found in my quarters. The boxes were there as promised, with the correct labels affixed – no destination, however – but so was my green, wonderfully leafy sapling. How come the ag team hadn’t scooped it up? It was in its usual spot, on the bathroom shelf, healthy and lush, thick tendrils sucking water from the pitcher, but with one major addition, a terracotta pot filled with rich black dirt. A white card was propped against the pot.

The message was brief: Plant it and join me for dinner at seven, *Seasons Lounge*.
Antonia.

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Antonia Joris was impressive. She was *the* authority on terraforming. A superior mind, constantly looking for innovation and groundbreaking technology, and a great manager to boot. I didn’t resent her for having signed the dismissal report. She was known as a stickler for rules. In her position, she couldn’t afford to let things slip.

“I didn’t expect the invitation,” I said.

“Somebody has to tell you where you’re going,” Antonia said.

“My boarding pass will be the big reveal tomorrow. A little welcome excitement before I get underway. Something to look forward to.”

She laughed. “You’re peeved. Pretty rotten the way we broke the news to you. I apologize. We couldn’t do it any other way. Higher considerations. Let’s order, then we’ll talk.”

I was totally confused.

Seasons Lounge is a really good restaurant. Too pricey for me and my cohorts. They have a lobster bisque that’s to die for and I have no idea where they manage to get the ingredients for their filet mignon sauce poivre vert, *flambé* if you please! The wine selection, needless to say, is as perfect as everything else. By the end of the meal I was starting to wonder if this was a considerate way to send me off to the beyond, like that tradition of the last cigarette before the firing squad cut you down in a hail of bullets.

“This is exquisite,” I said, “and undeserved. After all, I put everybody’s life at risk with my reckless behavior. Bacteria, microbes, plagues and such. Horrible rashes, I’m sure.”

Antonia leaned back in her chair, chuckling. “It was a test, Dinah. You passed.”

What was she talking about? “The twig in the dustbin?”

We sat in a corner of the restaurant. The other occupied tables were at a safe distance. Antonia still lowered her voice to a barely audible level. “For a year we’ve been recruiting for a key project. We’re looking for something extra, qualities that do not come to the surface in standard assessments. Different base managers use different selection techniques. That is deliberate. We want diverse personalities, as wide a range as possible. When you found the sapling we planted – pun intended – you didn’t follow procedure.”

“Was there a procedure?” I said. “I don’t recall anything written down anywhere.”

“Foreign bio material. There’s an entire book on the subject.”

“It’s from a fig tree,” I said. “If that’s foreign, the entire ag department should be torched.”

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She tapped her fingernails on the table, impatient. “Don’t give me that attitude, girl. You had no idea what the thing was when you found it. If you did, you’re a freaking genius.”

Definitely not but I had an inkling, though. “It had a fruity smell,” I said. “At the cut. And the angle of the cut reminded me of grafting.”

Antonia straightened up. She gave me a long look. “Very observant, Dinah. You passed the test a second time. I’ll change your travel orders, out of the lab and into the field. You have a talent to make things grow, anyway. It’s a logical assignment.”

“What field? Where?”

A place I had never heard of, in a constellation I didn’t even knew existed. Linden, Galatea Major. A two-year-long journey and light speed all the way.

“Linden was a promising water planet,” Antonia said. “Half of it is land now. A beautiful place, lots of resources. A year ago, we decided that it would be our next jumping point. You will be at the beginning of the next great exploration onward, Dinah. I wish I could go with you, but we need young people. Bright, talented, and most of all curious young people.”

I understood the need for secrecy now. Wars, in their violent, explosive and massively life devastating forms, were a concept of the past. Competition, however, for resources and territory had never been harsher. The battle was fierce for new footholds in space – stations, satellites and precious habitable planets that could support exploration, always further, always pushing the limits of colonization, under new stars that no human eye had ever seen before.

I was going to be part of that. All because I had decided to drop a green twig in a pitcher of water. In my dingy bathroom, of all places!

“Do you still think the dinner is undeserved?” Antonia Joris said.

I laughed. “Could I get a gallon of that lobster bisque, to go? As an inflight meal?”

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