

Zawad Chowdhury  
500 Memorial Drive  
Cambridge, MA 02139  
[zawadx@mit.edu](mailto:zawadx@mit.edu)

2300 words

### High Stakes\*

Suzy's back was starting to hurt from sitting on the straight chair. Its resinous material, the best approximation for wood that her ancestors had found on the hostile planet of Nuovo Mondo, made it very uncomfortable to slouch on. *If I'd known the meeting would go on for so long, I'd have asked Jenny for a comfier chair.* Suzy shifted, leaning forward to rest her arms on the ochre resin of the table. But the table had been designed for grown-ups, and her stubby hands could only reach it at an awkward angle. The chubby bracelets where the fat folded at her wrists barely touched the table's edge.

Suzy scowled at the useless relic, her pudgy double chin becoming prominent. She stood up, wincing at the ringing pain of blood rushing to her thighs. *How long is Jenny going to take for a simple search?* Suzy knew Jenny was just stalling. She'd have to search for more than a few hours to find a

---

\* Intended to be read after *Like Them*, as a prologue short story.

better savior than Adriann Jang. And Suzy could use those hours to practice negotiation talks, or to advance her plans for once Jang did arrive!

Suzy took another glance at the door. No sign of Jenny, indeed nothing remarkable on that wall. Except for an iron cross, covered in splotches of dull crimson giving it an unclean look. Suzy knew this happened when Ferrous Oxide formed on the outer layer of iron, but this room was the only place she'd seen the results of that reaction. Perhaps a grown-up had brought it from Earth, centuries ago?

A figure appeared beside the cross. His thin, receding hair, hunched posture and tray in hand meant that it was not Jenny returning. Suzy narrowed her eyebrows at him, and the wrinkled face smiled back at her.

"I don't think you should be here without permission," Suzy snapped at the intruder.

He stopped smiling, and replied haltingly, "I'm... sorry, Madame... ermm..."

"It's Suzanne!" He saw Suzy every week, but he still had trouble remembering her name. If he were her subordinate, she'd make him bang his head against the wall till names started sticking in his fat head. Though of course, he'd collapse to the ground with whited out eyes before the first bang. *Little Ones can do no violence.* "Now stop being sorry and go away! This is an important meeting." She shouted.

“Some cakes and tea are great to have, even at important meetings,” a high-pitched voice waltzed in, followed by its speaker. Jenny was much lankier than Suzy, her thin frame almost too small for the huge head atop it. The metal tubes worming out of her curly blonde hair had smoke radiating from them. Suzy gave an involuntary shudder. Getting to float untethered through cyberspace was not worth getting zapped by a hundred volts each time.

Jenny picked up a glass of iced tea from old geezer’s tray and sauntered into her meeting room, sitting down on her own uncomfortable chair with a glance out the windows. “I sent Harold here to see what you’d like with tea.” she said without facing Suzy, as if that fact settled the matter. And she was using the Blanker’s formal name, to boot! Even if she might be Suzy’s senior on the Technocratic Council, Suzy wanted to tell her off. But she would rather get the meeting over with. It was already noon, and she wanted to be on time to watch *Purple Power* when it aired.

“Alright, Harry,” Suzy turned to the boy, who was silently staring down at the doorsill, “get me some vanilla cheesecake. And three spoons of sugar in the tea. Got that, *Harry?*” She would’ve called him *Hairy*, if he had any hair past his ears, to show Jenny how someone so useless should be addressed.

Harry bowed, and left. Once he was out of earshot, Jenny started, “You know Harry has the worst case of Blanking. Come on Suzanne, at least be nice to the diseased.”

Suzy ignored the admonishment, her bowl-cut hair an angry halo around her face. “Did your search turn up anything, Jennifer?”

Jenny yawned, her wiry frame jutting out at awkward angles from the chair. “Not yet,” she turned towards Suzy. Her nonchalant tone ignored the younger girl’s flaring nostrils, just as she ignored the change of topic. “Give me a couple of months. I’ll expand the search parameters, try some new databases. With enough time I’m sure I’ll find someone better to invite as the First Contact Ambassador.”

*She makes me wait an hour while she plays on the StarNet, and now she comes back without anything good?* “And what will you do if Mr. Someone Better shows up with friends?” Suzy needed to start the reintegration talks a month from now, and she wouldn’t be able to negotiate for a specific person without knowing who the person is! “Adriann Jang’s utter lack of socialization with grown-ups means he will understand us, and he is rational enough to understand why we must get more babies! He will be perfect to bear our message to the Institute.” *And to fill some useless wombs on his way out, if my plan works out.*

Jenny shook her head, her hands playing with the straw in her tea. “Too risky. His records during orbital repairs make him seem good enough, but we have no idea what he will be like in a scenario which doesn’t require engineering! Just give me some time, let me crack open a few more firewalls, and we’ll have the whole Federation’s records to search through.”

“And then Jennifer will leave the oh-so-easy task of negotiating for her perfect person to poor little Suzanne!” Suzy snapped, “I’m sure it will be much easier to convince the federation to send over some average Jane. You know, compared to the galaxy’s most famous orbital engineer!” She wanted to stop talking and go home to her latest tinker project already. But she needed the whole council’s approval, and that included Jenny. “All the other Technos have signed off on him, Jennifer. Why won’t you just trust me? You’ve stopped trusting me ever since Alexis started here full time!”

Jenny’s line of a lip went from neutral to a frown. Suzy smiled without showing it; bringing up Lexi had worked. *I get it, Jenny, she can play with you on StarNet unlike me. But I’m still going to bite you for picking a new favorite.* She waited, and after a while Jenny replied, “I’m sorry, Suzanne, but I can’t trust a pick with so little data. Just let us try the firewalls for a bit longer, and I’ll present the Technos with enough for an informed decision.”

Suzy scowled, but did not let up on the offensive. “And you think it’ll be alright, if your darling Alexis keeps abusing our unauthorized access into the StarNet?” She was not going to give Lexi any outs to be promoted to Techno. “The grownups on Earth will just look the other way while we hack all their data stores, before even becoming a proper member of the Federation?”

Jenny’s eyes narrowed at Suzy. She picked up her glass, letting the sun glint on it before taking a measured sip. “You’ve never even seen a grown-up, Suzy,” she began, “and you’re trying to lecture me on them?”

Suzy could feel her eyes watering up. It wasn't her fault that she was always the youngest in the room, not her fault she'd been born after the grown-ups were overthrown.

Suzy turned away from Jenny, wiping her eyes. The sun's glimmer on the cross seemed much shinier through her tears. She knew it was a symbol of hope. From those scriptures her ancestors had deemed holy, the three Testaments Old, Middle and New. Their holy books hadn't saved the grown-ups, instead serving as warnings to inspire the Little One's revolution. *Just like the grown-ups, she's got too much hope. Got to break that out of her.*

"You don't care about the Little Ones as much as I do, *Jenny*," Suzy said, still looking at the cross.

Jenny's eyes widened. "This is... this is a formal setting, Suzanne. Choose your words more carefully."

"Don't have to choose words for a Blanker." Suzy muttered.

"What?"

Suzy turned towards Jenny. The girl was trying to stay composed, but the glass in her hand was shaking. Suzy ignored all that. "If you're forgetting what I've done for the Little Ones, then you must be starting to Blank out, Jenny. I don't have to address Blankers by their formal name."

*CRASH!*

Suzy's eyes blinked at the light shining off the regular ice cubes and jagged glass pieces now littering the table. Tea crept between them, its pale color invisible on the table's yellow. Jenny's gaze was fixed on the spot where she had hurled the glass moments before. Suzy could see her breathing slowing down, her arms relaxing, her eyes rolling to their whites.

Little Ones can do no violence. Not without blacking out, losing control as rage is replaced by apathy. Another little gift left in them by the grownups, by rewiring their prefrontal cortex right after birth.

There was a soft knock at the door. Suzy turned, and saw that Harry had returned with a tray for her. She nodded at him out of instinct. Harry crept in, but his hunched figure ignored the table and the guilty mess on top of it. He kept walking till he reached the corner by the window, and started laying plates and cups on the floor with etiquette fitting a queen's table. *The dolt's forgotten the one thing he's good for!* Suzy groaned. Harry spotted Suzy's abandoned chair and shoved it to the corner, creating a seat at the table he'd set on the floor.

Seeing all this, Jenny wiped her face and got up. She crouched besides Harry as he was trying to set a handkerchief down on the floor. "It's ok, Harold. I'm sorry the table didn't look like you remembered it. I'll get it cleaned up. It's ok." As they both hunched on the floor, Suzy noticed how similar their bodies were. She imagined, if Harry's hair had been thicker, how it might've curled

between his tubes just like Jenny's. *She's always nice to dolts and suckups, but I guess they need to be in the family!*

"You've done a good job, Harold." Jenny smiled at him, without even a glance at Suzy. "You can go now." Harry shuffled out. The sad smile stayed on Jenny's face, as she picked up the plates from the floor and started setting them properly on the table.

*This is what I'm working for.* Suzy had called Jenny a blanker as a targeted attack. But if they did not join the Federation in time, one neurodegenerative disease or the other would catch up to all Little Ones. Sooner or later, Jenny would be as mindless as Harry. *And she's still stupid enough to want more time! Your perfect candidate won't help you if you're a blanker, Jenny!*

"Alright," Suzy started. The meeting had gone on too long. "That should settle it. We need to act fast, Jennifer. Give me your approval, and I can start negotiating to get Adriann Jang. There's talks with the Institute, and stuff to do once he arri—"

"No." Jenny did not look up from clearing the table of glass.

"What do you mean?" Suzy filed the rudeness of the interruption away for later. "We need to start soon, Jennifer. Give me the approval already."

"I'm afraid not, Suzanne." The ritual of setting the table had restored Jenny to her previous confidence. "I will need a couple more months to get the data from the StarNet, and then we'll discuss all options with the rest of the Techno



Council. You don't need to rush into this." Jenny shook her head as she strolled to the other side of the table to pick out the glass.

"I'm not rushing, you are!" Suzy shouted. She turned, stamping her feet as she walked to the door. *Look, I'm storming off and everything! This is your last chance Jenny, don't regret it!*

As she reached the door, Suzy took a last glance at the cross. There were crosses on the *Purple Power* show title. And Jenny's blabbering had made her miss today's show. *I've worked so hard to set up Adriann Jang as Babba. And now she's abandoning my plan. Just like she abandoned me for super-cyber-savvy little Lexi.*

Jenny's back was towards Suzy. Her shoulder blades were prominent on her thin frame, rising and falling as she adjusted things on the table. Ignoring Suzy's presence, just as she'd ignored Suzy's ideas. *And if we could ignore her, I'd have the votes of all Technos.*

The cross let out a dull ring as it hit metal and skull.

*We can't risk getting caught on StarNet. Not when all Little Ones are at stake.*

Dark red splashes drowned out the splotches of rust.

*She didn't care about us. Those who care will understand.*

The red seeped through the pale tea, its color finally a match for the resin below.

*My plan is the only hope. I'll buy ads, bribe the Technos. They will understand.*

White brainstuff now seeped in with the red, its semisolid mass pushing through the viscous liquid.

*I had to do it.*

Suzy realized her body wasn't stopping the violence. In fact, she was enjoying it. She let the enjoyment take over from her rage, until a few pieces of Jenny's head split off.

"It's okay Jenny! You can stop being dead now!"