



Cerbo en Vitra ujo
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About Kowal:

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Grete snipped a diseased branch off her Sunset-Glory rosebush like she was a body harvester looking for the perfect part. Behind the drone of the garden's humidifiers, she caught a woosh-snick as the airlock door opened. Her boyfriend barreled around Mom's prize Emperor artichoke. Something was wrong.

The whites showed around Kaj's remarkable eyes, a blue-green so iridescent they seemed to dull all the plants around them. "Mom and Dad got me a Pass to a down-planet school!"

The blood congealed in her veins. Kaj would leave her. Grete forced a smile. "That's the outer limit!"

"I didn't even know they'd applied. Fairview Academy—game design." His perfect teeth flashed like sunshine against the ink of space. "It's wacking crazed. Should've been you, you're a better hack than me."

"I'm already entitled to school." Grete winced as the words left her mouth. Like he didn't know that. He was the middle of five children, way past the Banwith Station family allowance. She picked up the pruning sheers to hide the shake in her hands. How would she live without Kaj? "So, I guess you got packing to do and stuff."

"They provide uniforms. All I'm taking is my pod with music and books. Zero else." Kaj slid his arm around her waist and laced his long, delicate fingers through hers. "And I want to spend every moment till launch with you."

She loved him so much, it hurt. Grete leaned her head against him, burning the feel of his body into her memory. She breathed in the musky smell of his sweat and kissed his neck, sampling the salt on his skin.

After a moment, Kaj hung a chain around her neck. The metal tags hanging from it were still warm from his body.

"What?"

"Dogtags, like they used in the oldwars. I put all my bios on there so you'd remember me."

"Kaj Lorensen, don't think I could forget you."

But if he was away at school, he might forget her. She studied her rosebush and freed the most perfect rose with her sheers. She held it out to him, suddenly shy.

He kissed the rose and then her palm. Grete sank into his gaze, lost in the blue-green of his eyes.

#

Grete buzzed the Lorensen cubby and waited as the comunit scanned her retina for i.d. If her mom knew how to hack into scanner records, Grete would get major grief for skipping school, but she couldn't stand the waiting anymore. Around her, the kids who weren't entitled to school played a game of tag in the corridor. She watched to see if any of Kaj's younger sibs were there.

The door hissed open. Kaj's mother, belly starting to round with another pregnancy, glared at Grete. "What."

"Sorry, the address I have for Kaj doesn't respond." A month. She'd pinged him and waited. Pinged his mom, and waited. She'd even asked the counselor at her school, but he had never even heard of Fairview Academy. Grete was tired of waiting.

Ms. Lorensen's eyes were as flat and grey as her voice. "You leave him alone. You want to mess this up for him?"

"No, ma'am. I just miss him."

"Maybe he doesn't miss you." The door hissed shut.

Grete stared at the mute door for a moment, and then started looking for Kaj's sibs, hoping they would know how to contact him. The older two would be in school, which was where Grete should be, but Kaj's younger sibs were not entitled.

On any other station, no parent in their right mind would let their unentitled kids run free, for fear they'd be taken by a body harvester on a job for some rich-ass client. Banwith Station didn't allow that; you got born with a withered arm, you lived with it, so there were lots of kids running around.

She snagged the first skinny kid who ran past. "Hey—you know where Margrit or Poul are?"

"Nah. Ain't seen them for a while." The kid wriggled free and disappeared into the throng.

Grete's stomach twisted with apprehension. It didn't seem possible that Ms. Lorensen could have gotten scholarships for all her younger kids. Something was not right. Grete sprinted for home, she'd be spaced if she was going back to school now.

#

When Grete scoped Fairview Academy, she turned up 203,000 hits ranging from a golf course to a cosmetic surgeon, but nothing dealing with game design.

She stared at the interface, trying to figure out ways to contact Kaj. It didn't make sense that he wouldn't write. He'd made wacking dog-tags for her to remember him by.

His dog-tags.

He said they held his full biometric info. If she cracked into them, she could find Kaj by his retinal scan. She popped the dog-tags into her reader, made a dup for safety and got down to hacking.

By the time she had the top layer of encryption pruned away, her mother had come home from work. She set up a secondary pass at the biometrics and left the system chugging when her mother called her to dinner.

Mom passed her a bowl of noodles with real tomatoes. "I miss having flowers for the table."

Grete had not been to the garden since Kaj left. It echoed with emptiness. "Sorry."

"Heard from Kaj?"

"Not yet."

Her mother sighed. "It's probably just as well."

Hot and cold coursed through Grete, leaving her shaking with anger. It wasn't Kaj's fault that his parents kept having children. "Space that!"

"A boy like that will drag you down."

This argument again. Grete pushed her chair back from the table. "I have a project I'm working on. I'll eat in my room."

"Grete—" Her mother stopped and shook her head. "Fine."

When Grete entered her bedroom, Kaj's biometrics bloomed across her screen. She extracted the retinal pattern and asked for the most recent scan. The query response gave an address on Kordova Station in Earth Orbit.

That was the luxury station next to theirs. But he had said the school was down-planet. Why was he on Kordova station?

She searched Kordova Station for his name and found nothing. No Kaj Lorensen, no Fairview Academy—but the timestamp on the last scan was only five minutes ago. He was there.

A current of yearning surged through Grete; Kaj was so close. She sent a ping to the address requesting voice and vision.

It bounced back immediately. This address does not accept unsolicited connections.

Relief and fury boiled inside her. Kaj had not been ignoring her pings; the stupid school had set up a whitelist and her address wasn't on it.

Grete pulled up his other retinal scans, most of them were at that address. She grinned as she duped the address. Now that she knew where he was physically, she could send him a snailmail. A shuttle ran between the two stations a couple of times a day and he might even get it that night.

Or—she could take the shuttle to visit him. By this evening, she might be in Kaj's arms.

Except there was no way Mom would let her go.

Grete clutched the arms of her chair, fighting the urge to throw something at the interface. Kaj was so close. Fine then. She'd had her mom's credit info since she was thirteen and she'd be spaced if she was going to sit here when he was next door.

Grete surfed to the shuttle page and bought herself a ticket.

#

On Kordova station, Kaj's address lay in the heart of the "Emerald" level. The closer Grete got to his door, the more conscious she was of her clothes. The tunic, with its sheer overlay, had seemed sharp enough when she left Banwith Station, but the money walking through these corridors made her feel like a squatter.

Maybe Kaj hadn't written to her because things were so much better here. Her hand strayed to his dogtags around her neck. What if he didn't want her anymore?

Grete shook her head to chase that thought out. If he didn't want her, then he'd darn well better tell her that himself. Wacking great coward.

She stopped in front of his address and buzzed the comunit.

The door opened. "Bran! You're here ea—" A woman with pale-white skin looked at her in confusion. Her eyes were an iridescent blue-green.

Eyes so rich they dulled the world around them.

Kaj's eyes.

Grete stared, unable to get sound past the knot in her lungs. No one had eyes like that, not even his family.

The woman's brow furrowed. "This is a private residence."

Grete tried to form words, but only images flashed through her mind. Body harvesters cutting Kaj open. His eyes sparkling. His mom telling her to leave him alone.

"Who are you?"

Grete closed her eyes so she wouldn't have to see his eyes in the wrong face. She had to be mistaken.

The woman said, "I think you have the wrong address."

"No." Sweat coated her skin. She forced her eyes open and met the blue-green gaze of her love, in a dead-white face. Nausea rose in her belly. Grete gasped, trying not to vomit. "Your eyes—"

The woman's face went pale, showing the faint remains of bruises under her eyes. She slammed the door.

Not possible. Cosmetic overlays. Someone had seen Kaj's eyes and had cosmetic overlays made. That had to be it.

Except the retinal scan matched his.

The green marble swirled in front of her and her ears filled with static. Grete put a hand against the corridor wall trying to steady herself. Kaj's eyes were in that woman's head.

A body harvester had gotten him.

Her knees buckled. Wrong. She had to be wrong. Please God, let her be wrong.

A pair of men's boots stopped beside her. "Got a complaint against you." The man seemed to tower above her, with his hair caught in a nimbus of light from the overheads. His uniform had a Kordova Security patch on each bicep.

"I haven't done anything."

"Harassing a private citizen."

Her gut twisted; no one knew where she was. She scabbled back on the floor away from him. As he bent to grab her, she rolled away and pushed herself to her feet.

He snatched at her, catching her collar. Grete jerked away. The sheer outer layer of her tunic ripped free and she ran.

Her pulse chattered as she sprinted down the corridor. The heavy footfall of boots chased her. Grete's breath burned in her lungs. At any moment she expected his heavy hand to grab her, to shake her. But she did not look back.

Grete twisted and turned through the pedestrians as if she were playing tag in the corridors back home. If he caught her, no one here would care. Behind her, an outcry told Grete that the larger man had trouble getting through the crowded corridors. Her legs trembled as she ducked past business types, and fancy-dress matrons, laying her course through the thick of the crowd.

She ran until she reached a commercial sector, until she no longer heard anyone chasing her and then she forced herself to walk. Sweat coated her, sticking her tunic to her body. A cramp stitched her side together. Grete pressed her hand against it and kept walking until she found an e-cafe.

She slumped in a chair in front an interface, her brain still full of the image of Kaj's eyes. They did not belong in that rose-white field. They belonged in Kaj's smooth chocolate face. God. What had they done to him?

Grete held her hand over her mouth, smothering a keen. The oxygen mix in the cafe seemed too low. She couldn't catch her breath.

She had to focus on this like it was a hacking problem. Like she was pruning roses to find the perfect shape. Like anything except the images in her head of Kaj with blood streaming from empty sockets.

Biting the inside of her mouth, Grete focused on what she knew. The woman had bruises under her eyes. How long would it take a bruise to fade?

Grete logged into the workstation and accessed her home station remotely. She looked at the other retinal scans going backward in time until she found when they came Kordova. Nearly a month, nearly as long as Kaj had been away.

The earliest scans were on the spacer Chickamauga bound for a station in Jupiter orbit. It had docked first at New Kyoto Station in Lunar orbit. There was no record of Kaj getting off there. His next scan was a week after that inside Kordova station. She could not find a record of Kaj boarding the station.

Which meant it was not him. His eyes had already been harvested and put into that woman's head. Maybe they had cut him loose as a blind squatter on New Kyoto.

She could not let that image into her head. Grete pulled up his other biometrics and extracted his fingerprints. The screen lit with prints scattered across New Kyoto. Those did not appear until two weeks after the Chickamauga had docked there. The prints were not as frequent, either, mostly purchases at restaurants.

When she unfolded the data packets tied to Kaj's fingerprints, the name listed with each purchase was Fairview.

Grete grasped at understanding. Fairview. Kaj must have had to sell his eyes to a body harvester to afford the school. The nausea still churned in her belly, but if he was buying food and registered with Fairview, then he was alive. She held onto that thought; Kaj was alive.

Grete looked up the flights to New Kyoto. The fee for a last minute flight was astronomical, but what else could she do? She bought the ticket and hid the purchase in her school fees. The last thing she wanted was for Mom to put a block on the card.

#

On New Kyoto Station, Grete hung out across from coffee shops, grocers and piano bars, looking for Kaj. The second night on the station, a boy with skin like chocolate ducked into Doc's Piano Bar.

"Kaj!" Grete chased him into the foyer of Doc's and grabbed his hand. He turned.

And someone redrew Grete's world. This man was older than Kaj, with hard lines around his mouth. But his hands were long and slender like a fifteen year-old boy.

The man laughed. "Kitten, you want Doc, you got to show me some action first." He leered at her with a perfect smile, like a flash of sunshine against the ink of space.

Grete backed away. Teeth and hands and eyes. How much of himself had Kaj sold?

Doc turned to one of the waiters. "Get me a Whiskey Tom Collins. Tall." He held his hands up and waggled Kaj's fingers. "The new hands are itching to play tonight."

If Doc had Kaj's hands, then none of the fingerprint scans belonged to Kaj. Despair escaped Grete in a moan.

Doc turned back to her. "Ooee. The little girl likes that." He put a hand on her cheek and stroked. "And my hands like you too."

Frozen, Grete let Kaj's hands trace lines of fire down her cheek, across her mouth. They brushed her eyelids like the kiss of rose petals. Revulsion made a bubble in her chest but she not look away from Kaj's hands.

One hand dropped down her body to fondle her breast. "Maybe I'll play something besides the piano tonight." Nausea twisted Grete's bowels. She forced herself to smile. Doc could lead her closer to Kaj. So. Grete swallowed. So, she had to be nice to him. She had to get him to tell her where he'd gotten his hands. Kaj's hands.

She smiled at him. "I might like that."

"Would you now." Doc turned to the waiter. "Get her something to drink."

The waiter led her to a table, and left her trembling in a chair. On stage, Doc sat down at an old-style piano and began to play.

Kaj's hands caressed the keyboard and pulled melodies from the keys. The music slid through the air, writhing up and down scales.

Grete fought to think of something besides Kaj's hands on that monster. People called him Doc and the scans were registered to Fairview. Doctor Fairview, then. Grete's mind slipped back to the scope she had done looking for Fairview Academy; one of the listings had been a cosmetic surgeon. That might have been this man.

He held the key to finding Kaj. He would know if Kaj was still alive. And if Kaj were not alive, this man, wearing his hands, had killed him. Grete waited while he played and she sipped the drinks the waiter brought her.

When Doc finished playing, he wove his way through the tables to her. "Let's go."

Slipping a hand under her elbow, Doc guided her out the door. Grete stumbled next to him.

"Maybe my boys give you too much to drink."

Grete forced herself to smile. "Just dizzy with excitement."

As if to warn her, Kaj's hand squeezed her elbow while Doc laughed. "That's nice. Real pretty."

Doc led her to an apartment on a restricted level. Inside, art covered the walls, lit with care. A tiger skin, with its head stuffed and staring, lay

on the floor in front of a wide leather sofa. Grete put her hand against the wall to steady herself. How much money did this man have?

Enough to buy Kaj's life.

Doc dropped onto the sofa and stared up at her. "Undress for me."

"I—" Grete put her hand to her chest as if that could hold her panic inside.

"Don't be shy now, kitten. You didn't want this, you wouldn't have waited for me." His hand slid down beneath the waist of his pants and his eyes closed in pleasure. "The hands ain't all I got that's new."

Breath dragged out of Grete in a moan. Doc smiled, his eyes still closed. "Wait for it, kitten."

She had to find out if Kaj were alive. Grete opened the top of her tunic. "I might need some help undressing."

"That so." The leather creaked as he stood. "I think these hands knew you before they were mine." Kaj's long fingers twined in her hair. Doc's arm wrapped around her waist and pulled Grete against him, hard. "That's a rare opportunity, kitten. Rare indeed."

Grete lifted one of Kaj's hands and kissed the fingertips. She closed her eyes and willed herself back to the garden on Banwith Station. His hand plucked at the collar of her tunic and pulled it open. Grete gasped when he pinched her nipple.

"You've got real pretty breasts, you know that? None of them pimply things on the nipples. Nice."

She knelt to escape Doc's voice. It was like a weed in her garden of memory. She pulled on his trousers, rooting through to find the bit of Kaj clinging to this man. When the trousers fell away, she took Kaj into her mouth.

Doc moaned above her.

She held Kaj's hands and pictured him. Coffee skin amid the roses. His delicate hands drawing pictures on her back. Kaj laughed in her memory.

Doc shoved her back, onto the floor of the apartment. Grete opened her eyes. He leered at her and she focused on Kaj's teeth. With more force than she thought Kaj's hands possessed, Doc pulled her trousers down and forced her thighs apart.

Grete tried not to struggle; she shut her eyes again, but the weight above her did not feel like Kaj. Doc smelled of whiskey and smoke. His

hands clutched her, bruising the flesh of her shoulders. When he thrust inside her, it hurt. She cried out as he pushed in, too deep.

"You like that, kitten?"

He ground against her and she groaned at the twisting pain. Kaj had been gentle, she thought he would be gentle. His hands held her arms over her head, so she could not move, while Doc thrust into her again and again, chafing and tearing her until he spent himself.

The ache burned through her groin and belly when Doc rolled off of her. Grete shivered on the floor where he had left her. The stench of his body clung to her like filth, coating her inside and out. What if Kaj saw her like this? All dirty with another man's—she bit her fist. She had only let Kaj enter her. No one else. Surely he would understand that. He would forgive her.

Doc squatted next to her. "You like that?"

Imagining Kaj, she nodded and put her hand on his crotch. "I did."

He ran Kaj's hand through her hair. "He your boyfriend?"

She felt her way forward with careful words. "You know how to handle the equipment better." The tiger stared at her. If Kaj weren't dead, if Doc had kept him like the tiger skin then she could not leave him like that. She had to know. Grete sat up and pushed the hair out of her face, arching her back slightly. She studied Doc and said, "But he had a better ass."

Doc threw his head back and laughed. "That so? Well, let's see."

It had to be a trick, but it was what she had been working toward... He was getting dressed and humming the song he had played in the piano bar. Grete rolled onto her knees and dragged her clothing on. Her pants clung to the sweat on her thighs.

At the door, Doc smoothed the hair out of her eyes with Kaj's hands. "Don't want you looking so rough out there. Smile for me."

Anything. Take her to Kaj and she would do anything. Grete smiled.

"Very nice." He wrapped an arm around her waist and opened the door. Holding her firmly, he walked her down the corridor to a lift. He leaned against the side of the lift and let it do a retinal scan. "Fairview Academy of Redesign."

Grete twitched in his grasp. It was a real place.

The lift chimed. It slid past the public levels. When it stopped, the doors opened on a private lobby. Quiet piano music played amid the orchids.

A perfect, beautiful receptionist looked up from the desk and smiled with impossibly white teeth. "Dr. Fairview!"

All trace of the lazy, sliding rhythm vanished from his voice. "We'll be in 412."

"Of course, doctor." The receptionist did not seem to see Grete, as Doc—Dr. Fairview, walked her down the hall.

At room 412, he opened the door and drew Grete inside. "This is what you wanted."

The door hissed shut behind them. In the dim glow of medical monitors, ranks of hospital beds stacked three high. An inarticulate murmur scabbled at her ears. Each bed held part of a person, without eyes, some without arms or legs. A woman so flat-chested she could have been a boy held a teddy bear in her remaining hand. Her legs and other arm ended at the body.

On the bunk above her, a child without a face clutched a blanket with ducks on it.

"See, we keep our donors comfortable." Doc bent her down to look at the bottom bunk. Kaj lay on the bunk. His head lolled to one side, lids stitched shut over empty sockets.

Tubes wormed in and out of his body.

"Oh God." Grete's heart rolled in her chest.

Under the thin sheet, his truncated arms stirred uselessly. He turned his head, as if he had heard her. Where his cheek had lain, a dessicated rose clung to the pillow.

A wordless cry ripped through her.

"Shush." Dr. Fairview's breath was hot in her ear. "Stress is bad for the donors, and it's hard to find someone with my skin tone."

"Kaj."

Kaj's mouth opened and closed like a wound.

"He's missed you. I can tell." In one movement, Doc pushed her pants down and entered her.

She cried out as something tore inside her. Grete twisted away from the stabbing pain, but Dr. Fairview pinned her against the bed.

With each rip and thrust, Kaj's head rolled further off the pillow. His blind eyes seemed to stare at her as if reminding her why she was there.

Kill him now. Now, while the bastard was riding her. Now, while he stood too close to the beds to see into the bottom one. Sobbing, Grete fumbled for the pillow and pressed it over Kaj's face. She bent over him, holding him, trying to block out his hands squeezing her breasts. His cock ripping her open.

Kaj bucked under her. Dying. "I love you," she whispered into his perfect ears as she killed him. "I will always remember you. I love you." The scent of roses surrounded them.

He had stilled under her hands long before Dr. Fairview finished. Grete cradled Kaj against her, remembering the feel of his perfect body.

Doc squeezed her breast. "You know. I could do wonderful things with these breasts." His hand trailed down her neck. "No one knows where you are, do they, kitten?"

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