

THE GASTRO-VEGAN PUB EXPLOSION

V and P walked away from their impending act of violence with speed. In counterpoint, the bright September morning around them seemed to slow, bringing the specifics of the bustling city street, with its walkers, workers and street-side table talkers, into sharp, hallucinogenic focus.

As he strode along behind V, trying not to break into a guilty run, P saw a woman step out off the curb in liquid slow motion, looking to her right for traffic. She wore a summer frock that reminded him of the ones his mother would wear when she and his father would head out on a summer evening to the local dance. Lemon yellow flowers on clean white linen flowing through the sun filled air. Sunlight flash-filtered through the cloth, showing the shape of her legs as they stepped her out into the road. P could sense the curve of her thigh and the sharp line of her shin. Her foot kicked from beneath the flowing hem of the dress with brown sandals, orange toe-nail polish and, in the halting frames of time that surrounded them, P saw that the smallest toe on her right foot was circled by a silver ring. His eyes flicked to her face and dusty red hair, and he imagined the faint trail of her scent following her. She was beautiful. She gave a small jump to the opposite curb as the soft, magneto hum of an e-cab passing between them broke the spell. He turned his attention back to the pavement ahead, his mind locking onto the purpose of their escape.

V turned to look behind them, checking for following danger. They were ten, maybe twenty paces from the hole-in-the-wall entrance to the popular vegan gastro-pub restaurant. They had calculated they needed to be fifty to be safe and before they could risk breaking into a run. She saw a couple approach the doorway they had just exited. He had the dress and manner of a grown up, holding the door and guiding the woman with a hand in the small of her back, but his mouth flickered at its corners, making him seem on the point of breaking into a teenager's rakish grin. The sun caught the flat metallic sheen of a permit card dangling from a lanyard around his neck and the flash of it across her eyes made V blink. When she opened them again the young man's eyes met hers briefly before following the woman inside. In that brief look V recognised that the man-boy was in the first blush of love. Its energy was shining in him, lighting him up in a purity of expectation that would shortly be snuffed out. A pang of sadness squeezed her heart and she turned away quickly as the couple passed into the darkness of the doorway.

When V and P had themselves stepped across that doorway barely twenty minutes earlier, the sunlight of the street had spilled sharply across the floor, showing their boots browned with dust and dirt. Country dirt, not city. They should have cleaned them. It had taken a few moments for their eyes to adjust to the muted, cool interior but then, just as they had studied in their training, they saw a corridor with four tables set along one wall that served as the front section of the restaurant. It led to a

small reception counter which guarded the larger, main seating at the rear.

Patrons had glanced up as they entered. A couple with only drinks in front of them occupied the nearest table. He was having something green in a tall thin glass that he'd placed distractedly on the face of a tablet lying in front of him. The tablet's screen was busy with active charts and open frames that dripped numbers in ribbons of apparent meaningfulness. As his partner turned her back on them and toyed with her glass of dark red coppoca, V had glimpsed the bright, hard edge of a permit in the pocket of the woman's well-cut jacket. Deep, metallic maroon, the permit of a Special Inspector. V had an unexpected urge to caress the material of the suit, feel the quality, to know what cloth that fine and expensive was like on her skin. She had quickly looked away.

At the second table was a single man with a full meal half eaten in front of him. He was an old-school Beard, well beyond middle age. Something in the depth of his eyes as he looked at them made V wary. She scanned his table quickly but couldn't see anything that gave him away as a permit carrier or other functionary of the Province or City. Maybe he was just an old brewer who liked to come uptown to catch the vibe of the New-Set in the sacred spaces that he and his peers had established in their trended youth, before the generations turned and they got lives and wives and two kids in the system. Maybe.

P stood scanning the art work on the walls. It was arbitrary and simple; panels of colour supposed to nostalgically catch the

flavour of the Bo-Kaap architecture. The old Bo-Kaap, not the new. The suburb now was a monody of sleek, expensive apartment blocks rising up the face of Signal Hill to the ultra-smart homes of the wealthy bio-tech crowd that glittered in the sun along the crest of a steel, glass and concrete wave. He felt V nudge him forwards.

As V and P approached the reception counter, a young woman rose from the table beside it. She was wearing a slicked-leather orange one-piece that incorporated spike-heeled boots and stretched over her head to leave just the creamy oval of her face exposed. The material was taut across her hard, toned body, a second skin that titillated the eye down the ridged muscles of her abdomen to a pair of salacious cuts in the material on either side of her groin which flashed soft, pale, clean-shaven flesh when she stood. Thin lines of fibre optic circuitry traced weak, pulsing current throughout the suit as she moved, congregating at glowing nodes around her neck. The New-Set cherished tech above all things and no doubt this outfit performed several electronic functions beyond its fashion. It made P think of the viciously poisoned Capensis scorpion of the dry Karoo. Beautiful to look at, very dangerous to touch.

As this glowing creature stood, one of the men sitting at the table with her leaned back and raised his feet to rest them on the vacated chair. He was physically trim and expensively maintained in a very pale sky-blue silk shirt, loose but accentuating his dark, toned physique as he moved. His shoes gleamed in the cool light. Reptilian, P recognised, but treated somehow so that they

had an iridescence, an internal gleam. He was definitely from Gauteng. Either visiting or moved down. Too young, perhaps, to be as rich as his demeanour, so likely connected to someone or something keeping him in opulence.

There had been a rash of these types in the last ten years. Young, single, vibrant, multi-ethnic. Bringing with them from the gleaming money towers of Gauteng a deep sense of power and entitlement. P had heard the stories about Gauteng. How it had almost failed as a city. Collapsed in on itself under a weight of greed and desperation. How the dissolution of the Union and ensuing Partition had spurred the local populace to stage their own uprising and destroy the last vestiges of the old ruling party in a not very humane, though thankfully short, blood letting. Since then that city had been governed quasi-independently by a loose cabal of former and current titans and technocrats whose only motivations were to restore financial stability and ensure profit. The system worked for some and the city was again phenomenally wealthy, but was now fortressed heavily against the vast informal areas on its perimeter that an unstoppable river of migrants, following the smell of the money, had self-created in ever more convoluted conurbations.

"D'jufuna saht?" asked the young woman as she rounded the counter to face them. Absolute New-Set thought V, recognising the dialect that these youngsters had coalesced out of several of the old official languages. To know the patois gave right of passage to the most coveted private spaces and secret, whispered places

that the city had to offer. V took a snap decision.

"Fully. Shweet." she replied.

It was old-school rustic, only really used outside the city, but V recalled hearing that some in the New-Set thought of it as having a retro-cool authenticity. She hoped that her blunt confidence played them through. The woman behind the counter blinked like she hadn't understood. Or was about to deny them seating. She stared at V curiously for a moment then she looked down at the electronic top of the counter.

"Schoh! But ju inlhanhla!" she said, her finger dabbing at a colour coded diagrammatic of the restaurant that glimmered in the electronic counter top.

"Inside shweety?" She pointed to the deeper recesses of the restaurant, "Or out? Jo curseh..."

"In." said V and smiled, "Baidunk."

V pushed P toward the interior. As she did she felt eyes on her back and she turned to find the third person at the table staring at them. She felt the prickle of goose flesh skitter across her arms as flat, cold eyes met her own. The face was absolutely immobile, the muscles and sinews fixed to reveal nothing. Instinctively she tried to match the blank stare but she felt her face flush slightly when she saw that in his left ear was stapled a discreet metal earpiece. She looked down from his gaze and saw the bright green metal of a Security Permit dangling on his sternum. She turned away as calmly as she could, the crawl of her skin transmuting into droplets of sweat along her spine.

Behind her she heard the chair-scrape of someone standing.

"Nix Johaan! Eks vaya sunset namhlanj." a dark, rich voice that she knew must belong to the man in the gleaming shoes. She sensed P wanting to turn at the sound of the voice so she pressed him forward again.

"You'll be back." replied a voice harder still than the eyes behind it. A voice that had no feeling. A sharp edged thing of danger. V had a flashing realisation that if he was on to them there was nothing, no training or experience possible that would save them. She pushed P yet again, moving him faster into the opening space of the main restaurant.

"Manje moet tokolosh vasgevang." said the voice.

V felt her body tense, waiting for the grip of a capturing hand. Then heard the soft relief of shoes walking away. Gleaming-shoes laughed loudly and called out 'Siens Comrade!'.

V allowed herself to breath out gently and she looked urgently for an empty table, tremors of anxiety still prickling across her body. She scanned the room, noting how full it was; a popular place humming with affluent energy. She saw a couple rising from a table against the back wall. Perfect. She pointed lightly to show P and they moved through the tables to the rear of the restaurant.

They had spent several weeks under brief for this mission, learning, training for, and practising each step, each variable, each possible outcome. They felt honoured to have been selected, though V knew, without hubris, that given the requirements of the task, she and P were the most skilled of their Commando. V also

acknowledged the privilege of the mission was, in part, because they were both still young. Though many of the older Fighters were from The Mother City, including their immediate commander, they now found it hard to merge into the fast trends and mutating dialects of that metropolis of the young. Once home, now it was a foreign place to them, a manifestation of the ideologies the Division was rebelling against.

Their commander had a deep reputation in the history of the uprising. In the first spasms of the revolt, he and his group had held the Hope and Glory Gap, fending off repeated assaults from the city. In the end they had only abandoned the position because the coast road had been surrendered at Judas Bend. Appropriately named as the story went. His legend was that he then made it to Cape Point, pursued across the mountains by the Provincial forces, and had eventually escaped capture by diving in to the cold, cold ocean and swimming the shark-riddled width of Madikizela Bay. V suspected that part of the story was unlikely but whatever he had done to evade the Provincials must have entailed a significant effort of body, will and cunning.

The Commander was also the best bomb maker in their section of the Division and very quickly recognised that P was similarly adept at creating explosive devices. P had impressed the commander with his instinct for choosing just the right amount and type of explosive for a given set of circumstances. This was a valuable skill given the Partition's limited resources, and P had felt proud of this ability even whilst admitting to V that he had no

idea from where its intuition came.

He and the commander had trialled several combinations but none were an acceptable fit for the parameters of this operation. P became despondent, then sullen and withdrawn, thinking that the job would be called off. On V's suggestion he had requested a break and had disappeared into the emptiness of the Karoo. V had watched him walk down from their rough camp that surrounded the ancient frontier outpost and out onto the flat basin of the vast desert caldera. She wanted to see if she could catch him in the moment he disappeared, a game they had played when they were growing up but, as he had done then, so now, and at about half a kilometre he seemed to simply evaporate into the scrub. Back then the game would end when he would suddenly stand up ten metres from her, just out of her line of sight, and scare her by imitating the coughing rasp of a leopard and laughing at her startled delight. This time she had known not to wait and for two days she had trained and prepared by herself, playing out potential obstacles both human and practical. Then, in the late afternoon of the second day he had reappeared in her tent, dumped a bunch of wild herbs and tubers on the floor, flopped a dead hare on top of those, smiled broadly at her, and gone to see the commander.

His solution was elegant and simple. By combining two of the explosives they had in stock, and using a very high temperature detonating system, he had created a bomb with four times the power of either component. Carried separately into the city, these could then be combined easily for detonation at the target. He had come

back from reporting to the commander with an even bigger grin. They had eaten the hare and tubers with calm satisfaction that night, knowing the job was back on.

Now the purpose of the job was at hand. They drew back the chairs to sit and placed their backpacks, hers concealing the detonator and one of the explosive compounds, his its partner, under the table and against the wall. V piled the detritus of the previous diners aside and looked up for a waitron.

A short, flat-topped machine was already making its way through the tables towards them. Watching it, V had the faint recollection of a pretty waitress wheeling a small birthday cake towards her on a trolley through the dining room of a country hotel. She recalled the light of the eight candles as her parents sang happy birthday and remembered blushing at the attention of the other diners. Not long after that her parents had disappeared and she felt the keen stab of that distant loss still alive in her gut.

This electric waitron buzzed quietly as it drove four chubby wheels sturdily across the wooden floor. A concertinaed scaffold of red metal supported its tabled head which was covered by a mess of trendy stickers slapped on by hip young patrons as the machine passed them by or took their orders. V thought it made the machine seem somehow vulnerable, without the faculty to defend itself against the abuse of being made a mobile marketing device. It came to a sharp stop next to them.

"Good morning." Its voice was female, confident and with only the faintest tint of robotic timbre. "Would you like to order?"

"Yes," said V, "I would like a cop..."

"Would you like to know the specials first?" asked the machine.

P glanced nervously around. V blinked at the interruption but then continued confidently.

"No. Thank you. I would like a coppoca with soy and some Berrybread."

"And for you?" said the waitron.

P paused, his eyes blinking, he had forgotten what he was supposed to order. V looked at him and mouthed something he didn't catch but it jogged his memory.

"Orange tea! Please."

"And you can take these away," said V, lifting the used cups and plates and placing them on the flat top of the waitron.

"Your order will be with you in six minutes and twenty-five seconds approximately." said the waitron, then manoeuvred away towards the kitchen.

P giggled. It was so strangely absurd all of a sudden. Where they were, what they were doing, and then this machine masquerading with a human voice. V looked at him quizzically.

"Very precise approximately," said P, indicating what had set him off. V smiled. She was pleased it was P and her doing this. The fact that he could giggle, even if it was partly out of tension, gave her the release to breath normally and think

clearly.

She slowly and carefully scanned the restaurant. Thirty or so patrons filled the space between bare walls of exposed, rough-hewn brickwork. There were no distractions of artwork, but the entire one side of the restaurant was a huge atrium where tropical plants grew, sealed behind a thick wall of pale blue glass. A warm light filtered down from somewhere beyond the ceiling and orchid and lily showed here and there, popping the density of green foliage with their flamboyance of flower. The raw ochre red and burned black of the walls, and the indulgence of the tropical plants, counterpointed the overt new wealth and technical modernity of the clientèle who sat at gleaming electronic tables. Plug points and a range of interface ports were available in the sides of the tables and the surfaces were lit by information and images that the patrons pulled up, played with or swept aside as necessary. Work and leisure available all the time, everywhere, at a fingers touch.

V watched a table of four Inspectors poking and flicking away at a game on their table surface. One of them leaned back with a winning 'Yes!', whilst the others groaned. Pink permits. Low level adjudicators on a break from their filings.

V and P were never told the exact purpose of this job. Maybe it was just a disruption, an act of indiscriminate violence meant to shake the City's preening confidence, but the precise training, the particular location, the exacting care taken with the explosive indicated a more specific target. A target who was in

the room at this moment. V kept her gaze moving across the clientèle.

Up against the softly glowing atrium, four Bio-Techs were eyes-locked into their personal tablets. They all wore the glasses that V knew were another level of contact with the rivers of information in which they thrived. The intensity of their focus made V feel anxious. Somehow inadequate. They were people who were secretly shaping the future of everyone around them and knew what power that gave them. Wealth and power. The fifth member of the table was talking to someone through a device on his wrist. A watch, thought V, though she knew the functional simplicity of a watch was far in the conceptual wake of what this device could deliver. The man's head was bent over his hands, one resting over the other on the table top, as if making earnest invocations to an undisclosed deity. V saw the metal sheen of an ear piece sown, irremovable, into the cartilage of his ear.

A long table in the centre of the room was inhabited by New-Set youth. A chattering coterie, as preened and confident as the pair at the front desk, their barely comprehensible language bubbled freely across the restaurant and was transported out across the invisible spread of the web by their various devices, drawing in others from afar so that they were both here and elsewhere, attendant in places that they were not, all everywhere, in an instant. V imagined the babble spreading like a net over the landscape of the Karoo and stifling its silent, deep etched reality with their vaporous, imagined importance. She shivered,

knowing that had she been born inside the City, she might have been just like them.

P nudged her knee. She glanced back at him and he flicked his eyes downward, indicating with an outstretched finger that he was ready for the detonator.

Whilst V had been scanning the room, P had worked efficiently to prepare the bomb. He had first discretely removed the roll of more powerful, but stable explosive from V's back-pack. Pre-shaped into a three centimetre thick, puttied sheet, its width was squared off to match the length of tube, carried in his bag, that contained the highly volatile paste of the second explosive. In another intuitive stroke of brilliance, he had formed that tube out of sheep's gut, creating a stable, organic package that would not interfere with the chemical instability of the compound and would, perhaps, have disguised its purpose in the event of a casual inspection. It looked like a strange artisanal sausage, which made him smile given the location of their mission.

Concealing his activity in the depths of his back pack, P had unfurled the rolled explosive, peeling away it's waxed paper cover as he did. He wrapped it carefully around the gut tube and pressed its edges together to form a firm, cylindrical casing. In less than a minute he had the bomb ready and tapped V gently on the knee.

V smiled at him innocently. They needed to be as calm and natural as they possibly could. She laid her hand gently on his knee, a gesture of intimacy between a couple, and simultaneously

bent to reach into the side pocket of her pack. She drew out the detonator and placed it casually on the table.

Her clever contribution to the job was to disguise the detonator as a generic vaping device; a sharp-ended, silver tube, connected to a clear glass section, containing what looked like an aromatic smoking oil, and a shaped, porcelain tip. P let it lie on the table a moment, then picked it up and held it, as if he had just, or was about to take a draw of its flavour. Then he reached down again into his bag and punctured the metallic length of it into the sheeps' gut skin of the first explosive, leaving the porcelain tip sticking out like a short, cold candle. A splurge of the pasty explosive leaked onto his fingers and he conscientiously wiped them clean on the straps of the bag before sitting up.

He looked at V and nodded gently. She blinked acknowledgement, and noticed the waitron approaching, their order placed on its flat-topped head.

"Coppoca, Orange Tea, Berrybread." it said, stopping beside the table.

P efficiently removed the dumpy glass of coppoca, the single-cup tea set and the Berrybread.

"Thank you," he said, feeling foolish about this politeness to a machine.

"You're very welcome. Enjoy it. Will that be all?"

"We'll pay now," said V, a little sharply.

"Very good. Please, insert your identity card."

P pulled the polished aluminium card from his jacket pocket.

It bore an scanned image of his face next to two thumb prints and an embedded gold chip containing any information about the bearer that the Province deemed necessary; identity, education, access level, accounts and bank facility. This one was a forgery. Costly and dangerous to come by but, for a job like this, essential. V was carrying one too but hers was brand new and they had been instructed firmly that, as far as possible, they were not to use it, to keep it clean and unaccountable so that it could be used again in other, future jobs until it started to flag on the central computers of the Provincial security department.

P's card was on its third outing. On average the Division commanders considered five jobs per card a safe limit. If the use of a card was high on one job, they would take it out of service earlier. Fighters had been lost when they had transacted with cards that were too intricately linked to previous jobs. It was not wise to test the algorithms of the Provincial security systems too rigorously.

P slid the card into the appropriate slit on the side of the waitrons flat top. A soft, sucking intake pulled it from his fingertips, there was a brief pause, then the machine exhaled the card and said;

"Thank you for your custom Mr. Oliver. Enjoy the rest of your day."

"Thanks, I will." said P as the machine moved off, and he smiled lightly at V.

A sharp stab of laughter snapped both of their heads out into

the restaurant. It was the crowd of New-Set. Someone had said something that had tickled the girls of the group and they were giggling suggestively now, conscious that their laughter had turned heads and basking in the attention.

"Let's get this done." said V.

P nodded.

"Let's finish this lot." he said, "Less obvious."

He reached forward and helped himself to half of the Berrybread. It was very fresh, soft and dark with fruit. He sniffed at it and the aroma filled the back of his throat with ripe, juicy scents. He dipped a corner into his clear tea before fingering it into his mouth.

"Good?" asked V.

"Exceptional," he replied, his mouth full of the succulent treat.

V took a sip of her coppoca. Though served chilled, the spicy bitterness of it made her pull back sharply, as if it were hot. Almost immediately she could feel the focused rush of the coppoca entering her blood stream. She felt her pupils dilate and then contract, her fingers tingled, and a faint electrical pulse skittered through her brain. What a strange thing she thought, to have this vaguely unpleasant distillation of an obscure root such a thing of coveted demand. She sipped again, a more substantial mouthful. With a mild embarrassment she felt her vagina tighten slightly and grow moist as the affect of the drink focused in her groin. This was the true attraction of the plant and its brewed

distillation.

P had finished the Berrybread, helping himself to the second half of it to soak up the last of his orange tea. V noticed that he was staring at her and she realised that she had been sitting in a mild trance, feeling the spread of the drink through her body.

"Are you ready?" said P.

V nodded and took a final swig of the coppoca.

P reached for the last time into his bag, felt for the detonator and activated it by snapping off the exposed porcelain tip. He zipped the bag closed, pressed it back against the wall in the shadow of the table, and stood, pushing his chair back and around to further mask the bag. He looked V in the eye.

"Two and a half minutes."

V reached down, grabbed her back-pack and stood. The coppoca had sharpened her focus. She smiled at P before leaning in to give him a light peck on the cheek. Then she moved off, briefly leading him by the hand, playing out their casual intimacy. He followed, glancing back once in a show of checking that nothing had been left behind. The innocent image of used cups and the spoilings of Berrybread struck him, knowing that beneath them the detonator was steadily heating to the point that it would ignite the explosive. Then would come a violent concussion and, a moment later, conflagration.

One and a half minutes.

In the front corridor there was a moment of fleeting panic

with the Beard now stood patting his pockets and blocking their way to the door.

One minute.

V had not hesitated and walked determinedly past so that he was forced to shuffle up against his table. P heard him grumble at the imposition. Then they were out the door and moving up the street.

Thirty seconds.

They were just on fifty paces out, by V's count, when there was a muffled thump, a half seconds pause, and then the restaurant door-frame and its sharded mass of glass was spat across the street by a thick tongue of fire. Both of them winced at the punch of sound, and, still moving, turned to look. The broil of flame and dark smoke sucked back into the restaurant. P saw the attractive woman lying still on the opposite pavement, her pretty dress now twirling with florets of flame.

In the restaurant the blast had shattered the wall of the atrium, blown up through its skylight, and was projecting flame, smoke and debris against the clear city sky. V saw several bodies falling through the dirty, blossoming cloud. The sight was so surreal, so unlike anything she had seen before, that she slowed her pace almost to standing. Turning fully to watch, she remembered the bio-tech talking into his device and wondered if he was one of these pieces of limp flesh being pulled by gravity out of the explosions' grasp.

P watched wide eyed as the Beard, his eponymous facial hair

smouldering, staggered out of the shattered doorway. The man made as if to walk towards them, as if nothing untoward was happening, but P saw that half of his body was almost stripped of clothes and the exposed flesh was mottled black and raw pink, his skin hanging like grim moss on a charred tree. Then his one knee seemed to melt beneath him and he went clumsily to ground, his face burning on the pavement.

Suddenly there was a string of six sharp explosions, metallic and percussive. Gas tanks. They had not discussed this in the planning but of course, it being a restaurant, there were gas tanks. A further cloud of thick smoke belched out into the street, underscored by a thin, high note of tearing metal. They stood transfixed now, looking up as the floor of the building above the restaurant folded slowly into itself, collapsing the floors above in an accelerating cascade of brick, glass and metal. And they both clearly heard a single, screaming cry of pain and terror that cut short as the mass of the building crushed everything within it.

Then dust filled the street and more smoke billowed upwards, and they turned and they ran.

END.