

Author's Notes:

According to the file info, I started working on this one back 2002, so it comfortably predates Status Quo and Torn. You'll recognise the names 'Janu' and 'Neseva' (they were reused back in Mutabilis). This was an attempt at rather more 'hard' sci-fi, but having started it, I realised I didn't have a good idea of where this story was going and abandoned it – thus it's only five pages long. Having re-read it ten years later, it's not a bad premise, but probably rather difficult to expand, and the writing needs a serious update. You also might want to know the origin of the word 'Lhasa'. Lhasa is actually a real place in Tibet, but I didn't know that at the time. The reason I choose it was because it was the lovely dark colour of my Mk1 Golf GTI – 'Lhasa Green'! – Drew, 3/1/2012.

Terraforma

Janu Neseva felt tears welling up in her eyes as she watched the first drops of rain fall gently on the plexiglass viewports above her head. In itself it was not very impressive, lasting a few minutes and quickly evaporating in a fine mist before disappearing entirely. It was though, the first rainfall on this planet for over a billion years.

Janu's great grandparents had been on the drop ship that had started the process, dropping genetically engineered microbes into the thin atmosphere of this desert world. All their lives they had worked in unimaginable hardship, in restrictive environmental suits, simple pressure domes and strict dismal rations. Slowly, almost molecule by molecule, they had watched as the levels of oxygen and carbon dioxide began to rise, and with them, the levels of water vapour and the overall temperature. Within two decades the temperature had risen above freezing for much of the day, the sky taking on a stronger azure tint with every year, lightening from the deep black of the first days.

Now, the first fruits of their labours were beginning to be realised. The rain today heralded a major breakthrough, the atmosphere was thickening fast, the greenhouse effect raising temperatures almost daily, small lakes were beginning to form and small areas of moss and algae were appearing in secluded areas. It was hoped that within a few years it would be possible to leave the city and walk on the surface with just a breathing mask.

Today the pressure was still too low, but it too was rising fast.

Kevan Tanner beamed at the assembled people, some of them hugging and shouting, others standing still with rapt expressions on their faces. Most remembered their ancestors struggled to colonise this hostile planet, and many of them had lost their lives fighting to establish the basic life support enjoyed by the current generation.

"This is a great day," Kevan said grandly, trying to capture everyone's attention, "Our ancestors worked in anticipation of this day, and now their efforts are rewarded. Within another generation we will be

able to live out on the surface of our home, build new villages, towns and cities and create our own civilisation.”

He pressed a button on his handheld and the screen behind him lit up with images of the planet from space.

“Each week we have thicker clouds developing, more water condensing on the ground and a thicker atmosphere. Lhasa is coming to life!”

Everyone cheered. There was, of course, nothing new in what Kevan had been saying, but there was a general feeling of euphoria, that a significant moment had arrived, that those present would fondly remember in years to come.

“One hundred years ago our ancestors first arrived here and started this great work. Soon we will be able to unpack the seeds and start cultivating our home.”

The screen behind him was now showing images from a hundred years before. Every space on the transport ships was allocated to essential gear and it had been a cause of a major disciplinary procedure that one high tech camera had been smuggled on board. But without these infringements, the early days of landing would only have been recorded in journals. Janu found this especially poignant as it was her great grandfather who had incurred the wrath of the mission planners. His camera, unfortunately now defunct and irreparable, was displayed in pride of place in Janu’s small quarters. It was a relic, but perversely more advanced than any of the technology in general use in the city. All of the equipment bought for the mission was selected for cost and ruggedness, not technological elegance.

Janu never tired of watching the images from the past; her great grandfather’s cheeky smile grinning at her across time never failed to make her smile, especially when she remembered the original footage had been edited out and deemed inappropriate in the strict regime that marked the early years. Now restored to its original completeness, it gave a valuable insight into the people who founded the city. Janu had never known him, as he’d died twenty years before she was born, but she was told by her grandfather that she reminded him very much of her famous relation. Her great grandfather had only been twenty five years old when the images were recorded, only a little younger than Janu was herself.

Janu had maintained the family’s record in playing a major part in the evolution of the city. She was a member of the central quorum in charge of the strategic planning. She had particular responsibility for water, and her importance was growing daily now that the atmosphere was thickening ahead of schedule.

As the assembled crowd began to disperse, Kevan signalled for Janu to join him. Janu found Kevan difficult to work with. He was chairman of the quorum, and demonstrated considerable ability, but tended to always be cautious and conservative. Janu liked to push things forward and often found herself at odds with Kevan. More importantly, Kevan was obviously attracted to her, and as their genetic profiles were listed as compatible, Janu felt under pressure with him around. With such a relative small population, couples had to be selected from a limited pool to prevent genetic instabilities, giving each prospective individual a limited choice. Kevan had obviously done his research as was pleased with what he’d found.

Unfortunately for Kevan, Janu was less than enamoured. Unfortunately for Janu, it was mandatory to procreate to maintain the population. For the moment, she had left the problem at the bottom of her list of priorities, but it was always nagging at the back of her mind.

Kevan smiled, and hugged her. Janu returned it half-heartedly. Wishing she could be left alone to enjoy the moment.

“Come on,” he admonished, “This is a great day, especially for the Neseva family.”

That was the wrong choice of words again, something Kevan should have known. Whilst the name Neseva was famously associated with Lhasa, Janu was the only member of the family left. Her grandparents had both died in the terrible flu epidemic that had somehow infected the city five years before and her parents had both been killed in a transfer accident when their shuttle had been conducting a routine surveillance mission to the great lakes. Janu barely remembered them, as she’d only been four years old when it happened. Her grandparents had brought her up, giving her some old fashioned views by modern standards. She felt their loss keenly.

“Yes, it is a great day.” She managed, trying to gain control of her expression. She hated giving away what she was feeling. She needn’t have worried. Kevan missed her struggle.

“I’m afraid we have to convene a meeting of quorum at short notice,” he went on, quickly changing the subject, “Some new news we have to discuss.”

Janu decided not to correct him. News was new by definition. Her grandfather would have torn him off a strip for such sloppy use of language. She was surprised though, hardly any ‘news’ arrived on Lhasa at all.

“What is it concerning?” she queried.

“We can’t discuss it here,” Kevan replied evasively, “The quorum will meet in half an hour.”

Kevan left her then, smiling, shaking heads and socializing with the remaining people in the plaza. Janu was bewildered. What could the news be? Had something gone wrong with the terraforming timeline? Was there a problem with the atmosphere? There couldn’t be, things just didn’t go wrong overnight. All the current problems were long term and could be managed in appropriately long timescales. She couldn’t imagine any ‘news’ which would require any kind of emergency discussion. Certainly nothing had shown up on any of her meteorological data in the past few weeks that would indicate a problem, quite the reverse actually, as most of the indicators were well in advance of her predictions.

“What’s the matter dear?” said one of the old folk who had managed to single her out. Janu smiled at her.

“Oh nothing, I’m just thinking a lot of thoughts right now.”

The old lady waggled her finger, “You’ve worked hard my dear, you ought to learn to take a break. It’s time for you to think about other priorities.” She winked.

Kevan overheard and caught Janu’s eye. Janu smiled at the old lady, excused herself and quickly left the plaza.

Janu left it as late as possible to join the quorum meeting, without actually being late. She wanted to concentrate on the issue at hand and avoid any extra attention from Kevan. She needn't have worried as Kevan hadn't yet arrived. The rest of the quorum was gathered around the circular table in the central administration's simple conference suite. Space was always at a premium, and only a few rooms had been assigned for meetings by the original designers. Some aesthetics had been catered for though, as the room had been graced with four of the largest windows in the city, overlooking the sandy plains to the west. It was early afternoon and the sunlight shining into the room as noticeably warm on Janu's arms as she sat down.

The other four members of the quorum who were present were, like her, descendants of some of the most important original settlers of Lhasa. Carille Leanna was sat next to her and smiled in greeting. Carille was in charge of the greenhouse committee, concerned primarily with heating up the planet. That too was ahead of schedule.

"Do you have any idea what this is about?" Carille asked.

Janu shook her head, "No. I am puzzled. Nothing has shown up on the projection reports has it?"

"Not that I'm aware of." Carille replied, "Perhaps the infringers are up to their old tricks again."

Janu grimaced. The infringers were a loose organisation in the city which were suggesting in an underhand way that Lhasa should never have been settled and that returning back to earth would be the best objective for the colony. In particular they cited the recent epidemic as saying that the project was too vulnerable and that they didn't want to die on a desolate planet beyond the fringes of civilisation. Janu had publically faced down their leader two years before, angrily criticising him for undermining the hard work of generations. Little had been heard about them in the meantime.

"Let's hope not".

Kevan walked in, holding a tape. Janu reflected idly on something her grandfather had said about 'tapes'. "They haven't really been 'tapes' for over three hundred years," he'd expostulated, as she often did about many subjects, "And they still call them tapes! Idiots, the lot of them". Janu smiled as she remembered her grandmother giving him one of her looks. Then she sighed, wishing they were still here.

Kevan began to greet each of the members. Janu wished he'd get started and stop wasting time, but she knew Kevan relished his role and that she'd have to put up with it.

The other committee members always looked to Janu as if they'd been born to the job. All three were old men, not quite as old as her grandfather had been, but they'd been doing the same job for the last thirty years. Janu and Carille had wondered whether they had been allowed on 'the board' as a token gesture when they were initially requested to join. She had almost refused on principle at the time, but her grandfather's outrage had changed her mind. She had never seen him furious before, or at any time afterwards either.

"You damn fool girl!" he had shouted at her, "Who gives a damn what the reason is? There was a Neseva on the board since day one until your father was killed and now you want to throw the opportunity to shape the future away on some damn fool stand on discrimination? On the board you can do something!"

She had learned an important lesson that day; not every fight was worth fighting.

Marek, Reager and Craig nodded to Kevan and then waited expectantly. Reager was the oldest member of the group, as old as Janu's grandfather had been

Kevan began at last, "I apologies for calling such an unorthodox meeting. But we have some matters to consider. We have some difficult decisions to take and we must make them soon. We have received an unscheduled transmission from Sol."

Janu was surprised, and so was everyone else. A small gasp of surprise went up from the quorum. The last time that had happened was over forty years ago when Earth had announced major political changes to the structure of government on the homeworld. Most of it had made little sense to the current population of Lhasa, but Janu's grandfather understood some of it.

"There was unrest brewing when my father left Earth," he'd said, "All the core planets were exerting their independence, Mars, Venus, Alpha Cenia and Eridania all wanted real independence. Everything was getting quite oppressive, troops and law enforcement were getting stronger, and a lot of civil liberties were being abused. Father said we were lucky to get out when we did, a few more years and the whole project might never have got sanctioned."

And it was forty years ago that they'd had a 'news' message from Earth, Janu thought quickly, and why has Kevan said the message is from Sol, rather than Earth? Sol was the shortened name for the homeworld solar system, of which Earth was, of course, the third planet. She looked questioningly at Kevan.

Kevan inserted the tape into the reader on the table. The screen at the far end of the room lit up and text began to scroll across it.

"Communication, QS-SS03-TD21/08/2378 +T Lhasa."

Janu recognised the code, the transmission was being transferred using a known quantum string oscillator, effectively allowing faster than light data transfer, the source was Sol system 03 or the planet Earth, with the target date being about two weeks before. The plus 'T' indicated the message date was to be corrected with reference to Lhasa.

The screen went blank again before showing the image of a man, dressed in a rather severe black suit looking at a set of papers on his desk rather than at the camera. The wall behind him was a featureless grey.

"People of Lhasa, due to the increased financial requirements from the population of the inner Sol planets your government is hereby notified that mandatory exports from your planet must begin within six months of the receipt of this message. The accompanying information lists the specific exports required from your planet. Failure to meet these target exports will result in immediate revocation of independent rights and local government will be subsumed to report to Sol. During the transfer martial law will be imposed. Good day."

The screen went blank. For a moment no one spoke, then everyone started at once.

"What the hell is going on?" Reager yelled staring at the darkened screen, "They can't just..."

“They can and they did.” Marek interrupted.

“But it’s a violation of our treaty,” Carille responded, “It’s not possible to revoke it like this!”