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The Tram Ride

I will reverse the disastrous policies of my predecessor. I promise to end this destructive war and bring our children home. I promise to build a lasting peace built upon mutual respect, cooperation, and the humane treatment of prisoners of war.

—Andon-Roon, Imperial Investiture
Ceremony, 3991 AFS

ROON, 4025 AFS

It is 4,025 cycles after the first settlement, or 4025 AFS, and thirty cycles after the Caderyn War. Krissa, a woman in her early sixties, opens the shutters covering the window in her studio, and the light floods in. Her hair, which is cut short, is graying, and her skin is sagging in places, but she is still physically fit. She walks over and grabs a staff that is propped up against a large bookshelf overflowing with books.

Books are stacked everywhere in this room that doubles as a storage area, which has all sorts of objects pressed up against the walls to allow for the exercise area in the middle. There are planters on the floor,

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planters on stands, and various boxes and cases. All this clutter is neatly arranged, however, and every plant is healthy and kept trimmed.

She takes time to stretch and then starts a martial arts routine by moving her body slowly from one pose to another, sometimes thrusting, sometimes swinging, sometimes blocking with her staff. Primarily using both hands, she makes precise movements that involve not only skill but strength as well. Her motions are very fluid, like a dancer's, but also forceful, like a soldier's in hand-to-hand combat.

She gradually moves from relaxed motions to fierce, intense movements. Now her routine is punctuated by grunts and yells as she repeats her entire routine at a faster pace. Finally, she winds down and comes to a stop. After setting her staff up against the bookshelf, she grabs a cloth and pats her face with it as she passes through her bedroom to the bathroom.

In her bathroom, she does her daily routine of taking her morning pills, followed by a shower, getting dressed, and then standing in front of the mirror engaging in the continual quest to make her hair stay in place. This is generally accompanied by exasperated sighs. As usual, she is not satisfied with the results, but she has to finish getting ready. So, she walks into her kitchen to prepare some breakfast.

The first thing she does is open the refrigerator and take out a container labeled "Bleater Premium Milk." After pouring some milk into a small bowl until it is half-full, she places the bowl on the counter near the window behind the sink. This window is always open to allow her little houseguest to enter, whom she could hear meowing the moment she opened the refrigerator. As soon as the bowl is placed on the counter, an animal, popularly known as a "skritcher," jumps through the window and lands right next to it. This skritcher is a bit roughed up. One leg is out of joint, and there is a big scar across one eye, which is now an empty socket with the skin sewed up. "Hello, Punk," Krissa says with a smile.

Leaving Punk to lap up his milk, she boils some water in a pot and stirs in grains that she pours from a small packet. When it has finished cooking, she transfers the gruel from the pot to a bowl, grabs a spoon for eating, and sets her bowl down on her dinette table. A book is waiting for her there, which she reads while having her breakfast.

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She wishes she could stay and read all day, but it is her last day of work and her friends are taking her to lunch in honor of her retirement. Reluctantly, she puts the book down on the table and walks through the living room, which is kept relatively free of clutter compared to the other rooms. There are two comfortable chairs and a small couch arranged in front of the entertainment box, or EB, as it is called, and in front of the couch is a small table to hold snacks and drinks while she watches her favorite shows. All the walls, which are a little dingy and need painting, have several framed photos and artwork. Against one wall is a long table displaying photos, martial arts mementos, and an item that is one of her most prized possessions. It is a framed photo of herself at forty, proudly holding out her deputy badge as she stands with her police friends Alma, Payad, and Jaris.

When she approaches the door of her apartment, Krissa hears a beep. Stopping, she takes the government-issued communication device—her comdev—out of her belt pouch and looks at the screen. She is delighted to read a response to the roommate ad she posted. As with any response on this service, it includes a name with a photo and a comlink. The photo is of a woman, around thirty, with thick brown hair and a broad smile, who has a long name. Krissa is sure she will not be able to pronounce it. Returning the comdev to her pouch, she grabs a staff that is propped up against the wall near the door. Almost an extension of herself, a staff is something she always carries with her when she walks outside.

In the hallway, the apartment door closes and locks behind her, and she makes her way to the front entrance of the complex. Stepping out onto the street, the decay in the city is obvious. She doesn't react to it because she is so accustomed to it. The buildings have not been properly maintained, and the streets, which are jammed with vehicles, are filled with cracks and potholes. The designated walkways for pedestrians are narrow, and the concrete is broken and raised up by tree roots. Skritchers seem to be all over the place, and pidgees flutter and coo, leaving their droppings everywhere.

There is almost no way to keep from being bumped and jostled as she makes her way through the crowd. Fortunately, she does not have far to go, and she arrives at the tram stop, which is essentially a metal

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awning mounted on poles, stretched out over several backless long benches. The area is already crowded with commuters who are waiting to board the CenStat Direct Line, so named because it goes directly to Center Station without making any stops in between.

She checks her comdev again to see if there might be another reply to her roommate ad. She can't believe there is only the one she received before she left her apartment. Why aren't more people interested? Is the rent too high? Maybe she needs to rewrite the ad. She puts her comdev back just when she hears the incoming tram apply its brakes. Normally quiet, the city trams are propelled magnetically on a cushion of air. When they brake, however, they make a screeching sound that seems to last forever as they slow from high speeds. Gradually, the tram comes to a stop; the crowd waits for all the arriving passengers to exit from the other side. Then the doors open on their side and everyone piles in.

On the tram, she remains standing, holding on to the handrail. To alleviate boredom, she always brings a book to read. But today she keeps looking at her comdev, vainly searching for nonexistent replies to her ad. When not doing that, she watches the other people on the tram, most of whom are also looking at their comdevs. Krissa has always marveled at the variety of skin color and facial features among the inhabitants of Roon. How did the first settlers, from whom everyone was descended, have so much diversity? No one knows for sure since all knowledge of the planet of origin has been lost. At any rate, there is no diversity in the clothing style of these commuters, which is drearily consistent with drab, dark colors. Of course, she is not one to judge since she is wearing her work uniform, consisting of gray business slacks and a blouse.

Finally, the tram comes to a screeching stop. She exits with the crowd. She is at Center Station, which is a sprawling maze of tramlines, walkways, and tunnels. It is always under construction and has expanded under ever-changing management and ever-changing plans. Even though Krissa is an old hand at using the station, she still needs to stop and get her bearings whenever she arrives. Other people appear to be completely lost, desperately trying to decipher the multicolored lines on a kiosk map. Krissa takes a few moments to decide where she needs to go and then sets off to catch her next tram.

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As she winds her way through the labyrinthine station, she stops to look at one of the many giant screens overhead. What had grabbed her attention was a news report showing Andon-Roon, the current emperor, and the president of Caderyn shaking hands. Krissa smiles at the emperor's iconic face. Now in his seventies, with fully gray hair, his ears are distinctly stretched and elongated by multiple rings, which he still proudly wears. She does not know much about the new president of Caderyn, other than his name, which is Denoriv. Thin, with close-cropped hair and a steely gaze, he seems to be reacting to Andon-Roon's magisterial demeanor. The news report then switches to a scene of the two men sitting at a desk signing documents. The text at the bottom of the screen reads, "Yesterday Emperor Andon-Roon signed an agreement with Caderyn that lifts most trade and travel restrictions between the two planets."

She suddenly feels a presence next to her, and she turns to see a stout man wearing a hat. This man remarks, "How things have changed! We used to only get reports about the other planets when we were at war with them."

Krissa smiles. "That is a nice change, isn't it? Now if we could just make peace with Inara!"

The man thinks about that for a while, shakes his head, and says, "That probably won't happen in my lifetime." He then walks away.

Krissa knows he is right about Caderyn. Since the war ended when she was in her thirties, all communication with that planet stopped. There was never any news from Caderyn, no Caderyn products were in stores, and only imperial elites could travel there. But she hopes he is wrong about Inara. For ages, her home planet, Erunanta (which everyone calls "Roon"), and the planet Inara have been locked in a perpetual struggle, with no end in sight.

She continues walking until she arrives at the largest hub in CenStat, which is always jammed with commuters because it is a connecting point for tramlines that carry people to and from downtown businesses. Her tram stop in this hub is the least crowded and has some nice decorative tiles in the walls, along with posters trying to attract people to come and enjoy the cultural amenities of Pioneer Plaza. That is where the Great Library is located, and that is where Krissa is headed.

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Right on schedule, the tram arrives, and she gets on, this time taking a seat. Soon she is on the last leg of her morning commute. She has always enjoyed this route, which gives passengers an elevated view of the oldest parts of the city, including the first settlement on Roon. Now a historical preserve, the settlement's only present-day inhabitants are displays that simulate what life was like back then. The buildings are unadorned paneled structures with metal roofs, reminding her of military barracks. She had heard that the first settlers were scientists, and she always wondered, *Why couldn't they have been architects?* To her, all the buildings on Roon, from early times until now, have one distinguishing characteristic—they're incredibly boring.

As the tram gets closer to her destination, it descends from the elevated rails and continues at street level. Soon she is at a familiar, albeit irritating, landmark. Right on the corner where the tram makes its last turn to Pioneer Plaza is a storefront sign: "Mindas Fight Academy." She is happy she will no longer have to see that every day. Then the tram pulls into a vast plaza surrounded by cultural buildings like the history museum, an art gallery, and of course the Great Library.

Unlike most of the city, this area is kept clean and the buildings are well maintained. The architecture is at least tolerable, and there are some pleasant restaurants and shops nearby with views of the plaza. Krissa gets off the tram and walks unhurriedly toward the library. She knows she should be happy. She is one day from retirement! After that, she can do anything she wants—no more long commutes, no more logging her hours every day. Now, however, she simply feels the pain of loss at leaving her friends and a job she truly loves.

Finally, the only thing between her and the library doors is a long stairway. Krissa climbs up the stairs and walks onto a circular courtyard at the top. After only a few more steps, she is at the entrance to the Great Library. "Well, this is it." She feels a slight nervous shudder as the doors swing open and she walks in.

Once inside, she immediately hears someone say, "Krissa's here!" The voice is from Mildriss, the head librarian sitting at the central desk.

"Hi, Krissa!" other voices chime in from different locations in the library.