

Travellin' Show

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Gypsies, Tramps and Thieves. It was the title of an ancient song from the Twentieth Century that echoed with my voice, my life—for all that the singer was a woman, and planet-bound. She and I shared the same nose, and perhaps a dark, unfathomable gaze, but not much else, other than the soul of that song. I don't even know her name, though we had fragments of old dig-vids of her singing the words in deep, whisky-rich tones.

I hated her for seeing so clearly. For making me see so clearly.

For many Ages of Man the human race had longed for the stars. I had them and didn't much care for it. Me, I wanted dirt beneath my feet miles deep, moving in a slow, massive spin I couldn't hope to feel were I as still as dead. I wanted to look up and see the stars twinkle and find nothing but satisfaction in the fact that I could see them through the filter of a planet's sky. I wanted roots, just once in my life, if only for a moment.

I believed someday I would. Someday ... if I had to live up to every rotten thing they said about us. The kindest folk said we were all glitz, glam, and sham; everyone else ... well, you get the idea.

You see, the frontier of space was much more dangerous than any similar state of existence planetside. People were desperate, harsh, and took what they could get in the way of easing the darkness all around them. They got to believing everyone else would gladly do them worse, so do it first.

That's why there are rules that every Caravan holds to and ruthlessly enforces. Cheat us, and we're gone; harm us, and we're gone for good; kill one of our own, and don't ever sleep again.

The dark is deep and cold. We—the Rom—are a touch of golden warmth in the black, a laugh when the universe is crying, passion where most bodies are worn down to indifference. We are welcome everywhere ... once night falls and the stage lights are lit, the carnies

booths are pitched, and everyone young and decent is tucked away in bunks. We bring the things that can't be had, the little pleasures, moments of forgetfulness, news from home ironically delivered by those who have never had one, unless you count the caravan ships.

No matter how they looked down on us, there wasn't a man jack in space who would risk being stricken from our travel circuit by mistreating us.

Or so we believed.



“Paulo, come on ... it's time to dock.” Terlinda startled me as her voice crackled from the wall intercom. My sister sounded annoyed.

I said nothing and finished shaving, rebelliously scraping an antique straight razor across my scalp with slow care, revealing smooth, bare skin that was every inch a lie. On the Kalderaš Caravan there wasn't a patch of skin on any of us above the age of three that wasn't tattooed with vibrant, nanite-embedded ink. Some claimed it was because in space we couldn't paint our caravans as our ancestors did, so we patterned our skin instead.

Maybe that was true, but more importantly the tattoos were both warning and defense, though none but our own were aware of the latter. As far as the universe was concerned it was just one more difference between us and them. It was an easy way to tell who not to trust ... or piss off. But other than that, it was just elaborate skin art.

Little did they know.

The markings of the Rom did more than earn us those labels of glitz, glam, and sham ... at a silent mental command the nanites in the ink projected sensory holograms, creating the illusion of hair, clothes, and even ready-changing features by means of hard-light holo-projections complex enough to fool even complex electronic recording devices. Mostly we used it to enhance our performances, but it was equally handy when we had a need to vanish without a trace, or appear as something other than what we are.

The universe knew us by our ink. This is why—when not among the *gadje* ... outsiders—my silent protest was to appear unmarked by any color that wasn't flesh, and to retain the growth of hair most of my people had chemically switched off as a practicality of traveling in space. Yes, it meant I had to shave before docking with other vessels or outposts for a show, but I still held the hope that my life would be differ-

ent someday, and even just that fringe of hair that was not illusion made me feel it might be attainable. Little did *I* know.

“Paulo! Now!” This time Terlinda snapped at me from the cabin hatch, sending my hand and the razor it held sluicing sideways in a shallow cut across my scalp.

“Ah!” I hissed with the pain, however brief; I felt a sharp tingle across my damaged skin as diligent nanites rushed to repair their roof. Glaring back at her I took the time to clean the blade and carefully put it away before rinsing the blood and shaving foam from my head. In moments, the only clue I’d bled myself was the fading metallic tang on the air.

“What is the point of all of this?” she asked, her hand gesturing at my illusion of normalcy, annoyance, and exasperation coloring her words. “It isn’t like you will ever fit among them, no matter what you look like. All you do is waste our time. And cost us double docking fees for holding up station traffic.”

I didn’t bother to argue anymore. It was an old battle of strike and counterstrike etched into the temporal memory of the ship a thousand-fold. In silence I moved past her, lowering my head to kiss her brow—which annoyed her further, as I’d had a growth spurt that left me six inches to the advantage of her own five-feet. While she sputtered I strode down the corridor toward the docking portal and my assigned task. We were not at risk of fines, despite Terlinda’s claims; not this time and never again since the first time, before I’d learned to feel the changes in the drive that indicated power-down in preparation for docking. Since becoming attuned to those subtle variations in the engines’ sounds I have never, ever been late to my post.

Terlinda growled behind me, her breath huffing ever so slightly as she hurried to catch up. “Are you so ashamed of what we are that you want to be like them? Are you so eager to be *gadje*?” She spat the word, a bitter insult when applied to one of our own.

What she said stopped me, but it was what I heard beneath the words that had me turn back to her. Her surface scorn mingled with a deeper hurt that she tried to hide, bringing glimpses to the surface. I met her eyes, so like my own, deep and dark, if rather more deceptively doe-like. I closed my own against the pain she let me see there. It nearly gutted me to be the cause of it. She was like my own mother, for ours had long ago joined the stars as we never could this side of life. How to explain to her and not hurt her more?