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The Gateway to Forever

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The queue at the Preservation Affairs office seemed to stretch on for kilometres. Its inhabitants all lined up, files in hand, some rehearsing out loud, some staring into space. The entrance to the office is crowded and tight. Those near that section of the queue prepare themselves mentally to smell and taste the sweat of their fellow sisters. Nala had heard all kinds of horror stories about the queues at Preservation Affairs, but, ever the optimist, she chose to "meet the experience with an open mind". Now confronted with reality, she wishes she had been better prepared. In front of her, two hominids down, is the familiar smell of fruit, lemons? No sweet, sweet juicy oranges. Nala watches the owner slurp and chew, admonishing her stomach, bidding it to refrain from grumbling.

The coughs and throat scratches saturate the air with impatience and a hint of desperation. Feet shift loose soil to and fro, creating imprints screaming, "My legs are about to give in". Backs hunch and then rise, only to give in and hunch again. No one complains; this is Preservation Affairs, and they see you when they see you. Grumbling only makes the wait feel longer. Nala watches as a woman zips past, back hunched, with a serious look on her face. She braces herself for the inevitable. There is always that one hominid who tries it.

"I am just coming to ask something quickly, I won't be long."

"Everyone in this queue is here to ask something, ma'am. Please return to the back of the line."

Another one bites the dust. This is the third queue dodger to try this trick. No one gets past the guard with the big head. Nala tries to stretch, but one of her pioneering hands lands on the face of the hominid behind her.

"Sorry, sorry, I didn't mean to," she cowers, willing her body to shrink into itself.

The glare of her victim pierces right through her, burning a hole in her already empty insides. She looks away, trying not to appear wounded. A scratch on one of the walls catches her eye as she shuffles forward. A huge monitor with rotating announcements stands out in the otherwise analogue room. A series of faces on the screen asks her to rate her experience of the service at Preservation Affairs when she steps out. Nala wonders if that will be this century. The image disappears, making way for an advert.

> *Welcome to Rising Star Estates, where your memory lives on long after you are gone. Rising Star Estates is more than just a burial plot; it is a gateway to forever. We use the latest in radiometric dating systems to ensure that your resting place is as old as time itself, because tomorrow isn't promised, but forever can be.*

Nala stares at the screen with renewed hope. This was a sign. The ad came on just as she was about to give up. She's back, headstrong and focused once more. She knows why she's here. Rising Star Estates is the goal. That's what brought her to this god-forsaken office and queue with its sweaty inhabitants in the first place. She goes over the documents in her larger-than-normal backpack. The plan is simple; all she has to do is convince the officials that her body is worth preserving. Only hominids with future fossil status are buried at Rising Star Estates. Everyone else just gets thrown anywhere and everywhere.

"I don't know why you care about what happens to your body after you die, Nala."

Nala didn't have the words to explain to her mother that becoming a fossil was about more than just what happened to your body after you died. It was about living forever. See, her mother wouldn't understand that these things had been foretold. How would she even explain that one day the hominids would rise again, not as flesh but as fossils, and *she*—Nala—had to become a fossil buried in the Rising Star so that she could be the first to rise. Nala didn't just want to die and be dead forever; that was the fate of those with no purpose, not her.

The collection of feet in the queue inches forward ever so slightly. Chests meld into backs, jolting heads out of their daydreaming. To the passersby, they appear to have all merged into one giant body—separated only at the feet, like a centipede. They are one consciousness with a thousand toes, moving forward one painstakingly slow shuffle at a time. Nala opens her pack one more time to go over her papers, shifting her body weight from one leg to the other. She tries to ignore the cramp blossoming in the back of her calf. "A forever home in the Rising Star Estates," she repeats; both manna and mantra. To reach Rising Star, Nala needed fossil status. Yet her hunger rears its head once again as the "Next" call moves the queue forward. Nala straggles along with the rest of the centipede. Now is not the time to let self-doubt creep in; it's time to silence her stomach and remember that she is called for this.

Nala looks around at all the hominids in the queue to distract herself. She never felt like she belonged in her community. Optimism is a rare in these parts, yet she always had enough to build a mine dump. When others frowned, Nala smiled. When others conformed, Nala rebelled. She questioned teachers, refused to stand still or do as she was told. She hated the mundane, the everyday, the repetitive. Her mother dismissed her, her sisters called her distracted, and no matter how hard she tried to stay focused and blend in, she couldn't help but stand out. Nala always felt that her life was bigger than her; her bones, bigger than her. She knew that thoughts of being a fossil were above her station. Only those with exceptional skill (or vast resources) could become a fossil. Being all over the place and full of

unbridled energy wasn't considered a special skill, and her family's resources were anything but vast.

To distract herself from her discomfort and anxiety, Nala thinks about the events that led up to her being in this queue.

It happened on that fateful night. She bolted after dinner, after yet another explosive confrontation with her mother.

"You have no direction, Nala. How will you find your place in this world?"

"I don't want to find my place in *this* world! I want to be remembered."

"We are not here to be remembered. We are here to survive!"

Nala stormed out of the house, breathing thunder and lightning with every exaggerated step. Her mother's words echoed and followed her. She tried to outrun her mundane existence. Every day was the same, the same lessons about how to spot a predator or what to do in case of a landslide. The same chores foraging in the same forests. The same faces of the same old hominids at the market or at the town square. She found an opening in the ground. The softness of the sediment surprised her. She had been in a cave before, but this felt different. The smell of the cave made its way into every part of her being. Mud, dry mud that somehow smelled like it had just been rained on. Both musty and fresh at the same time, she was intrigued. She touched the walls, stumbling, tripping, eyes adjusting to the dark. Eyes acquainted with the dark. Eyes at home in the dark.

The cave welcomed her, walls as old and young as Earth breathed in and out. Lines giving away their age, their story. Nala turned her head when she heard voices. Chants filled the air as a line of matriarchs spread their bodies all around the chamber.

"Come in, Nala, come and see."

Nala abandoned all survival instincts and followed the voices. She was drawn to the peaks and valleys they promised. A faint glow surrounded the oldest. She, their leader, sat in the centre of the cave. She beckoned, saying nothing while the others called out to Nala.

Nala felt her legs move without provocation. Suddenly weightless, she floated towards the matriarch's light.

"Come and see"

This was Rising Star. She didn't know then that this cave would be turned into a luxury burial estate by the council, the landlords and the Preservation Office. It was still a cave, unnamed and undisturbed. The head matriarch pointed to a bowl of water. Hands pushed down the back of her head, bringing her face to face with the universe reflected in the liquid. That's when she saw it. Creatures walking upright, new, foreign creatures. They crawled in the cave, shifting, poking and prodding at the sediment. She followed them, trying to see what they saw, hear what they heard.

"We found something."

Nala followed the scratching and digging. The creatures moved with precision; their delicate hands had a grace to them that enchanted her. She had never seen anything like this; their curiosity intrigued hers. These creatures wanted to know more. They weren't made to live in the caves, but here they were, rebelling against survival instincts. They wanted to know more than they wanted to live. Nala took it all in. The one in charge swept away the mud and showed the others the bones. She didn't know how but she knew those were her bones. Nala felt chills with each stroke. This was her. They had found her—

The matriarchs pulled her out of the water. Their leader motioned for Nala to sit.

"My child, what did you see?"

Nala hesitated. What if she sounded crazy? The matriarchs softened their faces, lowered their chants to whispers that put Nala at ease. She told them about the creatures in the cave, with their smooth faces and tiny hands. She told them about the burial site and the bones. She told them what Rising Star would become and who would lie there.

"You are chosen," the matriarchs sang in unison. Nala looked confused.

"The creatures will come to this cave many, many years from now. You saw that. Our kind will be long gone—and forgotten. The

Almighty Mother has shown you this in the water. This cave is the Rising Star, the place that holds our stories. You know that. When they sweep away the mud, our people will be reborn. The Almighty Mother has chosen you to be the first to be uncovered. Your bones will be the first to see the light."

"But how? I don't have preservation status. I am no one. They will never bury me here."

"It has to be you. It will be you. It is you. The Almighty Mother will show you the way. Your bones will rise again."

A loud sneeze brings her back to the present, back in the queue, the end nearly in sight. Nala breathes a sigh of relief. Someone shares their nuts, another shares their fruit. The sight of the meeter-greeter inspires ubuntu amongst the members of the queue. Only one head stands between her and the surly face and beady eyes. This is it. Fear threatens to creep in, but Nala shakes it off. She looks at the pack one more time. "The Almighty Mother will show me the way, right?" Nala exhales loudly.

"Next!"

It is time.