

SLUMBER FARM JANITOR

by Greg Stolze

Cika double-checked that her phone hadn't fallen out of her pocket and made sure she had her lunch sack as the bus pulled up in front of Restful Acres. The driver was expressionless as Cika dismounted by the chain-link gate topped with razor wire. On the other side was an immense parking lot and behind it a windowless one-story building, just as big. She tried the gate, but it was locked.

"Hello?" she said as the bus pulled away. Looking up, she saw a camera aimed down at her, its casing thick with bird crap. She waved at it.

After a few minutes, there was a clunk and the gate started rattling open. After a moment looking across the mostly empty, potholed asphalt, she started walking to the only visible door. There were five cars parked near it.

"You must be Cika!" a woman yelled as she opened the entry. She did it a little too soon, so there was an awkward silence while Cika covered the last thirty steps to her. "Here, I got your badge." The woman looked from the plastic ID on a retracting lanyard to the new arrival and said, "I guess that's you."

"Yeah, it's not a great picture," Cika said, examining it.

"Check mine," the woman said, pulling hers away from the clip at the waistband of her jeans. The name on it was 'Khleo Morrill.' "Looks like a mugshot."

"Mine too," Cika said. "What do you think, drunk and disorderly?"

"That one looks more like larceny. I think mine's GTA though. I'm Khleo. C'mon in."

Cika did. The entry was surprisingly nice—tufted sofas, patterned rugs over a floor that at least looked like hardwood, a stately desk that might have been an antique.

"Here's where they onboard the families," Khleo said. "They don't mind if you take a break here, long as nobody's visiting, and we don't get many guests. Just don't smoke or vape or eat." She rolled her eyes.

"So, is there a dress code?" Cika asked, glancing from her own scrubs to Khleo's jeans and concert T-shirt.

"Nah girl. Nobody around to see, nobody cares. You might run into a tech gnome, but they mostly stay in their little nerd dungeon."

Cika stifled a giggle. "What's a tech gnome?"

“You know, the white boys who maintain all the automated junk, monitor the flows, drug levels, everything’s all wired together. Doing backend on the matrix. The stuff with good pay. They don’t, like, interact with those of us who run around the floor all day.”

Khleo showed her the utilitarian chamber where she could put her lunch in a fridge and hang her coat when the weather turned cold enough to need one. Then she flexed her shoulders and asked, “You ready to meet the residents?”

“Sure.”

They left their fluorescent-lit break room and followed a narrow linoleum corridor past the unisex bathroom to a metal door with a keycard lock. Khleo gestured for Cika to try her badge and, when she pressed it to the sensor, the door clicked and a dingy light went from red to green.

Behind the door was a warm, dark, echoing chamber. As she stepped inside, motion sensors activated buzzing LEDs overhead. They shone down on row after row of waist-high tables. Lying on many of the tables, murmuring, were human bodies.

“All the gurneys are standardized and attached. If you need to release it for an emergency, there’s a knob here,” Khleo said, striding down a row between mostly occupied platforms and pointing. The lights followed her, sometimes too bright, sometimes flickering, sometimes just right. Cika felt concrete under her feet, and noted drains set into the floor every twenty feet or so. “They’re lettered from east to west, fifty-two rows, A to Z and then AA to ZZ.”

“Wait, wouldn’t AA and AB and AC mean a lot more than twenty-six more?”

“Mm, look at the big brain on Cika! But nah, it’s just fifty-two rows, it goes AA, BB, CC. Just so, if an alert comes up, you know where to go.”

“And numbered north-south?” Cika asked, examining the table in front of her. It was BB-5, and it was empty.

“Yep. It goes ten deep, but we try to keep the way-back areas empty. For efficiency. Or, hell, past ZZ-10 is where the tech gnomes have their *area*, so maybe they just don’t like us being around.”

“Maybe they don’t like having the patients nearby.” Cika sniffed and frowned.

“Ooh, looks like someone needs freshening up,” Khleo said, with a tsk. “You’ve changed the diaper on a comatose client before, right?”

“...yeah.”

“So what’re you waiting for?”

With a sigh, Cika got to it. There was a supply of replacements in a cabinet beneath the patient, who muttered “Patty? What’re...?” and moved weakly as Cika saw to it.

“Easy there,” she said on instinct. “This’ll just be a minute.”

“He can’t hear you,” Khleo said, pointing to the heavy band that wrapped around his aged head, covering both eyes and ears. “He’s off in synth-land. Here, you look on the side? Vital signs.”

“What’s that one?” Cika said. She was used to standard medical monitors, but there was a window on this screen with a multicolored shape, something like an umbrella or a kite on a string.

“Oh, that’s brain wave shit. Above our pay grade. Means something to the top geeks, the medical dudes who come in once a month to debug the magnets and the med flows.”

“...let’s...let’s go to... let’s go... go to...” the man mumbled.

“Magnets? They doing trans-cranial on these folks?” Cika asked.

“Sure are,” Khleo confirmed. “They tell me it’s well-shielded, but I wouldn’t lean my cell-phone pocket against those headsets for any reason.”

“What’s it do?”

“Keeps ‘em in synth-land.”

“You said that before... what’s that mean though?”

Khleo looked resigned to explaining when both their phones chirped.

“Ah, you have the app in, good. We got an issue with W-5, that’s going to be a hike.” Khleo set off at a trot, and Cika followed, glancing from the path lighting up in front of her to the program her employer had installed on her phone. It had a red exclamation point next to W-5, and the words ‘moisture alert.’ Listed below it were other beds with yellow exclamation points—less urgent issues like ‘scheduled sore turn’ and ‘standard bath.’

“W-5’s new, she sweats a lot. Once the pounds come off she should dry up. Or in the winter—they went cheap as all hell on the HVAC here.”

“I guess we get our steps in, huh?”

“Yeah,” Khleo said. “I don’t mind. I used to work in an Amazon warehouse before the laws? Now *that* was an aerobic workout every day, and hotter than this for sure. Kept my ass tight, y’know?”

“I’ll get used to it. Plus the hike across the parking lot, why’s that so huge?”

“Oh, this used to be some kind of assembly plant. I think it was machinery for boats or something? They went out of business. I heard the Chinese undercut

'em, but I also heard there was some kinda toxic thing and they got fined until they shut down."

"Toxins? What?"

"Nah, don't flip, they cleaned it up before they sold off to the Acres. But anyhow, this little operation—two orderlies, three technicians and an on-staff gerontology specialist—it ain't exactly using up all that asphalt."

"That's all, for *five hundred* people?"

"The clients are pretty chill. It's not like a normal retirement home where you get slip and falls, people setting sofas on fire with scented candles, getting worked up yelling at the TV and popping an aneurism. Ah, W-5, you old bitch."

"Girl!"

"She can't hear me," Khleo said, positioning herself and manipulating a pair of big handles on the guerny's end. The entire top had gimbles to rotate it along its axis, like a drillbit, with the bulky woman atop it strapped in place. They rotated W-5 to the left, then the right. She mumbled "...nice to meet'cha..." as the two orderlies mopped the sweat off her pasty body.

"We'll leave her on the side," Khleo decided. "She'll probably flop back on her own if she gets uncomfortable. She's still got muscle."

"Huh?"

"I mean, after a few months, they atrophy and shrink," Khleo said. "They're wired up for electronic muscle stimulation, but they only get it every three hours—making a grown adult twitch all over adds a lot to the electric bill, so they do the minimum."

"They can't even move on their own? What if there's a fire or something, how are we 'sposta get 'em out?"

"If there's a fire, everybody gets a free shot of adrenaline and all the lights go crazy-disco pointing people towards the exits. Twice yearly we have to do a drill and those days are *not* fun unless you like being yelled at by panicky, confused old folks."

Cika thought about it. "Five hundred atrophied seniors marching outside must be *wild*. People get injured?"

"It happens but so far nothing serious. I think it's only a matter of time until we get a broken bone or worse, but for now, the big bosses like it as is—some money comes in, less money goes out."

"That sounds wonderful," Cika drawled sarcastically.

“Well you know, the big dog eats first, but us little puppies get a taste too. The pay here is better than at a standard retirement home and the work, I think it’s easier. Different, but easier.”

The rest of the morning was pretty laid back. Khleo showed Cika how to do regular bedsores, where to empty the catheter jars and colostomy bags, what the procedure was for changing IVs. It was just after lunch that Cika saw the lights kick on back in the darkness, a preceding spotlight indicating fast movement. At the same time, a notice for FF-12 popped up on the app—a red notice, but undefined. As they walked down row FF, Cika realized they were converging on the person who’d tripped the lights.

He proved to be a pale young man in a Linux gimme shirt and track pants. He’d leaned a skateboard against EE-12 and made some consistently tragic facial hair choices.

“Hey Gary,” Khleo drawled.

“Khleo! Who’s your friend?” He’d balanced a tablet computer directly on FF-12’s chest and as he turned, it started to tilt, then fell off the side with a crash. “Oh shit!”

“This is Cika, and you made a great first impression.”

“Sorry! Sorry.”

“Nice to meet you Gary,” Cika said, stifling giggles.

FF-12 shifted and made a noise that wasn’t quite a word. Gary stood up on the far side of the body, waving his tablet. “It landed flat, it’s fine.”

“Cool. So what’s the issue?” Khleo asked.

“OK, well, Tatum—er, Cika, did you meet Tatum?”

“Not yet.”

“He’s the medical staff on shift? He says the scrips are balanced, the fields are good and there’s no biological reason for Mr. 12 here to be in distress, so he thinks it’s something on the cyber side of the trance-state.”

“You lost me there,” Cika admitted.

“He ain’t sick, so there’s a bug in his helmet making him bust out of the matrix,” Khleo said impatiently. “He’s doin’ a Neo.”

“I mean, not really,” Gary said, with a nervous smile. “But a bit. I can probably just... it could just be a loose connection or a wire that got kinked, but if it’s a hardware to hardware issue, we may have to move him so I can...”

“...behind the garage!” FF-12 said, and his hand moved feebly.

“When you say ‘we,’ you mean me and Cika, of course,” Khleo said.

"It probably won't come to that! Um, lemme just see, if I can..." He stooped and started busily checking the cords from the ring encasing the patient's ears and eyes.

"I don't know why you called us over here, we still have our daily mani-pedis to do," Khleo said.

"I *didn't* call you over! Chad did it, I wouldn't have called you unless I *did* need you."

"Oh, 'cause you don't want to spend time with me?" Khleo demanded.

Gary gave an uncomfortable laugh.

"Nah Gary, I'm playin'. But do we have to lift him or not?"

"I think... not?" He swiped at his tablet and squinted at it. "Yeah. I think that's it. Shaky ethernet cable is all."

"The *matrix* runs on *ethernet*?" Cika said. "Is this the synth-state you were talking about?"

"Gary, can you explain it to her?" Khleo said.

"Sure, I explained it to grandma enough times," Gary sighed, and unthinkingly leaned against GG-12 before feeling the table shift and abruptly righting himself.

"...what was...?" GG-12 asked in a low, dry voice

"OK, right, so you saw that movie *The Matrix*? Good, yeah, everybody did. It doesn't work. Or, at least, the tech we have now, VR headsets and everything... nowhere near close. Turns out that people notice—and *do not like it*—when their visual inputs don't match with their inner ear and proprio- er, their sense of where their body's at?"

"Sure." Cika folded her arms.

"Sure," he repeated. "It spoils the illusion, so you can't fool people. Even with great graphics, people know it's fake. Plus, they feel the weight of the rig, even if they're not getting, like, seasick-times-ten from the inner ear, um, stuff. So you can't keep people in a shared MMO illusion reality... if they're awake."

"What," Cika said flatly.

"Well, *fully* awake, conscious, whatever you want to call it. A self-reflective, curious, er, suspicious or critical state? If you're trying to figure anything out, you always figure out you're in VR."

"Unless you're stoooooned," Khleo intoned.

"Um, well." Gary actually blushed a little. "We prefer the phrase 'receptivized'."

"But f'real, they're on all kindsa drugs, right?" Khleo pressed.

"Some, but not as many as you might think. Melatonin to keep most body movement suppressed, that's the stuff that, there are parts of the brain where... I mean, when you're asleep, you don't get seasick from the disconnect between what you're seeing and being still, right? So they aimed for that. And for an accepting frame of mind, like hypnosis or..."

"Trippin' balls," Khleo finished for him.

"I don't know," Gary said, lifting his hands. "All I do is monitor the virtual framework."

"What's that then?" Cika asked, hoping he'd be less exasperated talking about what he knew.

"Really, just a series of visual and auditory prompts to lead them in a shared, guided dream state. Like, a fishing hole... pictures from where they used to live... favorite songs, sets like a diner and a beauty salon and a grocery store."

"Wait, they *think* they go to the grocery store but they never eat anything?" Cika said, gesturing to the IV full of nutrients hanging beside GG-12.

"I don't know how much they hallucinate flavors, but people who've been removed from the state *remember* tastes and aromas."

"How often do people come out? I mean, there's that twice-a-year fire alarm thing but... do you bring 'em up for family visits? What do people think when they see grandma all atrophied and whatnot?" Cika asked.

Gary and Khleo exchanged a glance. "We don't get a lot of visitors," Gary said at last.

"But that nice front office...?"

"That's for people who might *wanna* park granddad here," Khleo said. "Look, most of our guests are... um..."

Cika had figured Khleo for a pretty blunt speaker, but even Khleo seemed reluctant to come out and finish that sentence.

"We get a lot of folks who are socially disconnected," Gary said.

"What does *that* mean?"

"Look, you know that one uncle you only invite to Thanksgiving because you're obligated?" Khleo said. "The one who's going back for seconds on the peach schnapps instead of the peach cobbler, and then he starts talking about the Jews, or Illuminati, or some shit?"

"Qanon," Gary said nodding. "Remember Qanon? Lotta true believers wound up here."

"Really?" Cika said.

"There's a reason the virtual framework doesn't have an option for checking Facebook," he said. "No news, really, except generic 'unrest in the Middle East' stuff. For some reason, they tend to pay moderate attention to news about a war in Iran and stalled budget talks in Congress."

"Some reason," Khleo muttered.

"Wait, you script an entire fake war for them to ignore?" Cika asked.

"It's really vague. Just like 'spring offensive on outskirts stalls,' nothing specific." Gary gave a little chuckle. "Actually, for a while we tried basing their 'news' on the results of our after work LAN party games. But we got bored."

For a moment, there was a lull in their conversation, broken only by the low sussuration of the residents muttering to one another in half-awake exchanges picked up by throat mics. For a second, Cika thought she heard a slur, but it was hard to be certain. Even though it was warm, she felt cold.

"It's not a bad option!" Gary said, finally. "I mean, obviously, *obviously*, if you have family who want to take care of you in your, what, your golden years that's, that's the best. But a lot of people don't have that."

"And if you're rich as fuck, you can go to a luxury retirement home with water aerobics and cultural enrichment," Khleo said, "But you want that, better be ready to add a zero on the end of what you'd pay here every month."

"I've seen the statistics," Gary said. "A patient who checks in here, or a, y'know, a setup like this one, that patient has a 15% chance of dying within four years. Compare to a non-entrancement retirement home with a similar price tag, there your chances rise to 40%. It's just safer."

"Cause you never slip and fall going to the bathroom," Khleo muttered.

Gary looked down, then around aimlessly, then at his computer. "OK, I should get going now that he's all set," he said. "Um, nice meeting you Cika. I'm sure I'll, like, see you around." He gave a smile that didn't look very happy, retrieved his skateboard, and headed off beyond ZZ-10, to the land of his tech gnome people.

"Come on," Khleo said. "Let's get some of these beds turned and nails trimmed. We can do it as a team today, but it's faster and easier solo, once you get the knack of it."

They moved along, until Cika stopped and said, "Oh shit!"

"What?"

"This one's flatlining!" Cika said, staring at the vitals for RM-8. "Get an ADR, I'll start compressions!"

“Don't! It's fine, she got an art-heart! Look, her blood flow rate is fine, it's steady!”

“Oh shit.”

“Yeah, she signed up for the organ disuse relief program,” Khleo said, and Cika turned her whole body in order to frown at her.

“Organ disuse what what?”

“It's just a thing where people get a discount on their bill if they agree to permit nonvital organs to be removed.”

“Like her *heart*?” Cika squawked.

“The heart is pretty rare,” Khleo admitted, “But if you agree to have your ticker pulled, yeah, they give you two free years. Some people don't have much of a choice.”

“I thought it was illegal to sell donor organs!”

“OK, it's complicated, but actually the regional VP explained this to me at the Christmas party. Oh, sorry, they call it the holiday party.”

“Whatever, tell me about the hearts!”

“It was actually pretty interesting! So you can't sell your organs for donor purposes, but they got a legal carve-out for rebates on necessary medical services. Just like how the Acres got an exception to some drug guidelines to keep 'em high all the time.”

Cika just blinked. Khleo continued.

“So, they can't *buy* the hearts, but they can trade for them if they're already providing the medical service of trance-care here. Also, they can't sell the hearts but, shit, who wants an eighty-year-old heart full of bad muscle and sclerosis? *But*—and I was drinking Canadian Mist, the holiday party has an open bar, only reason I went really—so I might mess up this next part...”

Cika gestured for her to continue.

“It's like there's this... goo? Inside every heart? Like, if you clean off all the muscle and connective tissue and whatnot, there's a film of biological something or other, and it's like DNA neutral.”

“Girl *what*?”

“I'm just saying what I remember! So if they took out someone's heart and cleaned off all the other tissue, down to this, like, membrane, they could take stem cells outta your bones—yours, Cika, say—and then this membrane would grow a new heart out of the stem cells, and it would be a second Cika heart.

Like, the DNA would match, so your body wouldn't reject it like a normal donor heart. Ain't you heard of this?"

"Maybe?"

"Anyhow, the company can't sell a donor heart, but they can sure as hell charge a good fee to generate a replacement heart. So whatever they get for it, I'm very sure it costs more than they charge for two years of attendance. Slick, huh?"

"What do they put in instead of a heart for her?"

"Artificial one. It's like a screw or a drillbit? Ugh, there's a word for it, lemme look it up," she said, fiddling with her phone. "'Impeller'. That's it. She's got an impeller. So it doesn't even beat just... flows." Seeing Cika's expression she said, "Look, I'm sure it's no good if you're tryin' a play tennis or run up some steps, but I guess it's good enough for someone who just lies on a gurney all day."

"And it gets her two years here, huh?"

"Two years," Khleo said. "One year for a kidney—I don't know what their revenue stream is on that—and four months for a piece of liver, I think. Livers grow back."

"Sure."

When the next shift's staff showed up, Khleo introduced Cika to Fleur and Arista.

"Fleur keeps saying she's only doing this to pay for beautician school, but she's been here longer than I have," Khleo confided as they left for the day.

"You seeing this as a long-haul job?" Cika asked.

"I've had worse. Been called a bitch to my face instead of just overhearing it from sleepy old cranks."

"Hm." Cika paused as Khleo got into her car. "I saw a thing on the contract where I could put away part of my pay every month towards staying when I retire, and they'd double-match it."

Khleo chuckled. "Yeah, they told me about that too. I think Gary's actually doing it. You gonna?"

Cika laughed too. "Hell no. *Hell* no."

"Mm hm. See you tomorrow."