

Cornflower

Victoria Navarra

Reza Saintsbury used tweezers to place each seed smack in the middle of the sterile aeroponic pads. Each pad went into the vertical germination chamber, where it was spaced precisely two inches apart, one on top the other, for the first five days of growth. After five days, Reza rotated the chamber to horizontal, and all the little seed pads shifted in their cradles until they were side by side. After five more days the seeds cracked open, and little sprouts and roots popped out of the germination pad. Reza then removed the sides of the chamber, leaving the pads in their cradles. The cradles connected in a matrix and could be pulled farther apart to allow more room for growth as necessary. The machine did that, though. All Reza had left to do was sort the plants to their proper position in the aeroponics farm. The tomatoes with the tomatoes, the bell peppers with the bell peppers, the carrots with the carrots. The machine took care of the entire growth cycle for each plant. Reza only had to harvest the vegetables at the end of each cycle and place the produce on the conveyers that ran to the kitchen for processing.

Each day he planted new seeds. Each day he harvested ripe produce. The aeroponic farm was designed for humans to participate in the agricultural process without requiring skill or knowledge. Vegetable gardens, the research stated, contributed to human happiness. So instead of being fully automated, the farm required human participation. Ideally, a new person would plant and rotate and harvest and marvel at the wonders of plant biology and growth each day. The aeroponic system was constructed to be so easy that even a child could plant and harvest, finding happiness and fulfillment in growing new things. And that was the trouble. The aeroponic system was boring. No one wanted to plant the seeds, rotate the chambers, or harvest the crops. So the station only assigned one person to the farm. One person was all that the farm needed to operate. And the Personnel Department assigned Reza.

Reza had never seen dirt in his life. The closest thing to dirt was the rings of Saturn, rotating in the distance beyond the artificial orbit of the station. Reza had been born on the station. He had been placed in the station crèche, with all the other infants, shortly after he was born. He never knew his parents; all the adults were his parents. It takes a village to raise a child, the saying went, and the station was built on the principle of community. Instead of family units, there were family groups. No one in the group knew their biological parents or siblings or children, so everyone in the group treated each other like family. The other children in his crèche, Generation H, Year 10, were his siblings. All the parents of H10 children were his parents. He had

23 living parents and 22 siblings. They grew up together, went to school together, learned safety and math and language and history and physical conditioning and science together. They met other years, of course, and other Generations, but H10 banded together like any other group of students or siblings. They were their own tribe.

When Reza and his siblings turned sixteen, Personnel assigned them each to a job. Everyone on the station worked. Work was life. The first job was a rite of passage, a mark of blossoming adult hood. Reza had wanted his first job to be something special, something that would show him the direction his life should go. He wanted his first job assignment to be a sign. And instead, he ended up with the farm. Placing seeds. Rotating chambers. Picking tomatoes and carrots. Everyone else had an exciting job, something worthy of a first job. Vanessa and Thom worked in Postal Communications and helped sort non-priority communications and parcels throughout the station. They knew everything happening on the station. Sam, Priya, and Angelique worked in the Medical Bay, assisting the medical technicians. They healed illnesses and learned the basics of genetic manipulation. Martin worked in Engineering, and Yombay worked in Navigation, both integral to the functioning on the station. Everyone had a better first job than he did. And even though his next job would be different, it wasn't the same as the first job. What did being assigned to the farm say about him? What did it say about his potential? His prospects? His life? He felt doomed to mediocrity and boredom. His whole life would be nothing but doing work that should have been automated but wasn't.

"Hey, Reza!" A voice called out. He turned. Amalia was walking toward him. He was pretty sure her name was Amalia. Amalia Clairry. He'd been so lost in thought he hadn't heard anyone request access to the farm. He certainly hadn't granted access. His confusion must have been apparent on his face, because Amalia laughed.

"I worked the farm for my first job last year," she said, still smiling. "I requested permanent access after my rotation, just to visit, keep an eye on things. You know."

Reza tried to keep his face polite and friendly. Permanent access to anything was rare, and he was floored that someone practically his own age had it. And to the blasted farm of all things.

"Uh, cool," he said. "So where are you now?" He didn't know her very well. She was a year ahead of him, H9, and she always seemed a little alone. He wasn't sure how he felt knowing that she'd also had her first job at the farm. What did that say about him? He had thought he was well-liked, maybe not the most sought-after person in his group, but sought to some degree. Did being at the farm really mean he was just a nobody?

"Testing and Telemetry," she said, "In Exploration."

"Holy suns, that's great!" Reza crowed. What fantastic news! T&T was the most prestigious job anyone could hope for. Almost no one got it before their fourth rotation, and she got it on her second! Well, that certainly made the farm look better. Maybe the farm was a test, then. If he could prove himself on the monotony of the farm, it would prove to Personnel that he was ready for something real, something serious.

Amalia nodded. "Yeah," she said, "it's great." He wasn't listening to her anymore. He was imaging the rest of his group when they learned he was assigned to T&T. The look on Priya's face! Or Martin's! He felt full of electricity and destiny. His body buzzed with purpose. He was special after all. He knew it; he had known it all along. He was destined for something bigger, something amazing.

He hadn't noticed that Amalia had asked him a question, and he realized that she was looking at him expectantly. "Excuse me," he said, "I'm sorry, I spaced. What did you say?"

"I said," she repeated, patiently, and he thought he could sense a camaraderie now, a kindred spirit, after all, why else had she come to talk to him, "how do you like the farm?"

"The farm!" Reza burst out laughing. As if anyone could like the farm. He was glad that she could be funny, that she could make a joke. The farm. Liking the farm would be like enjoying dental health annuals. He smiled at her, as warmly as he could. This was a friendship he would like to have, he decided. "I'll just be glad when I can move on," he confided, "You've given me hope. T&T is something I never would have dreamed of."

She was looking just over his shoulder, her blue-violet eyes slightly unfocused. Was she reminiscing about when she was stuck in the farm, imagining her relief when she found out she was assigned to T&T? He felt her empathy for him. It was a relief to admit that he wasn't happy with his assignment.

"That nutrient balance is off," she said, moving toward a row of cradles.

"What?" he startled and turned his head. "Oh, that. No, it was off when I started, but I readjusted it to the procedure parameters. I fixed it." She would see that he was attentive to detail, that he was worthy of being placed in T&T.

"It's wrong," she said and began adjusting the dials.

"Hey!" Was this some sort of test? He wondered.

"No," she explained patiently, "the procedure was wrong, and I changed it. I can't change the instructions, but I can change the nutrients. The levels are wrong. You get a better yield if you adjust the proportions."

"But that's not standard."

"I know," she smiled. "But it's right."

He wasn't sure what to do now. Was this a test? Should he change the levels back? Should he leave them alone? He felt cautious now, his sense of camaraderie vanished. She did have permanent access. Was she a superior, an agent of Personnel? What would be his best move here? What would ensure he was assigned to T&T next year?

"I miss the farm," she said.

He felt like her statement, quietly spoken, almost to herself, had a physical force that pushed him off balance. He didn't know what to say. He didn't know how anyone could prefer the farm to T&T. He stayed silent, watching, even when she turned and smiled before touching her hand to the access pad, and walking out the sliding door.

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She was there the next morning, examining the aeropod cradles, when he entered the farm to begin his shift.

"These calibrations have all been shifted back to standard," she said, without looking up at him. She swiped her fingers across the surface of programmer, and Reza heard the chimes that indicated a new program had been implemented and accepted.

"What are you doing?" he exclaimed in horror. It had taken him hours to reprogram the farm back to spec. Calibrations and adjustments were standard in any line of work. Sure, the entire job could have been automated, but that was the misery of the farm. Automated work that needed to be done manually, turning humans into living robots. Whoever said agriculture was an enjoyable part of human existence should be ejected from an airlock, he thought angrily. And now he would have to do it all again!

"I'm fixing it," she said. She yawned and stretched her arms out above her head as far as she could reach. "Almost done. Pay more attention to the plants, not the specs," she said. She retracted her arms suddenly and rotated her neck. "This is a lot of reprogramming, and I'd rather not do it again, thank you very much."

"No one asked you to do it this time!" He strode forward, pulling the programmer toward him and away from her. "You changed all of it? Seriously?"

"Took me all night," she said and grinned. "I haven't lost the knack." She looked at her watch and frowned. "Crap. I'm late for T&T." She touched the watch face and began tapping out a message, presumably to whoever was her director. Reza hoped her director was as mad as he was. Who did she think she was? This wasn't her job anymore. It was his. And he was going to do it perfectly and get a plum job like T&T. And she was ruining everything.

She saw the look on his face. "You don't get it, do you," she said. It wasn't a question. He looked in her blue-violet eyes and found no answers. Her hair was as black as space. She took his hand and began pulling him toward the harvesting section of the farm. "Let me show you something," she said. He pulled his hand free but followed her.

In the harvesting area, the plants were thick and heavy with crops. Large leaves fanned over the cradles, and roots zigged and twisted in the nutrient solution. Some plants bent and swayed

under the heaviness of the ripe produce. Others stood upright, waiting. In the furthest section, artificial pollinators attended the flowers and trees and plants filled with pollen. The air here was sweet and heavy and thick, like dreams. He always thought that gravity felt different here, even though he knew it wasn't.

"The farm supplies the food needs for the entire station. All the food we grow, all the plants we germinate and raise, are processed into food. This is how we stay alive. We have the fish from the fishery and the produce from the farm."

He nodded. Everyone knew this. Blah blah blah, the importance of the farm. Everyone learned it in school, and then he'd had it all repeated when he'd been assigned the farm as his first job. But everyone thought the farm should be automated. It would be safer and more reliable that way. Food was important, so it should be regulated and controlled by the minutest detail that only automation could provide.

"On Earth, plants were grown in soil. In open air. Exposed to sun and wind and rain and snow and insects. Entire crops could be destroyed by unexpected climate shifts. Farmers had to know the land, know the cycles of the Earth. They had to rotate crops in the soil to preserve the nutrient composition of the soil. They had to fight insects and pests and birds who tried to eat their harvest. The farmers toiled. Farming was physical labor. In sun and heat and rain and cold. Without farmers, there was no food then, either."

She touched the leaves of a corn plant. "People made things like scarecrows to try to protect corn. Farming was an art, as much as it was a job. People had to balance the ecosystem. Reap and replenish. Before Earth's climate was destroyed and farming was impossible, the goal of good farmers was sustainability. Giving back to the land and nourishing the land in exchange for being nourished by it."

Reza found himself listening and imagining an ancient farm, on the ancient Earth, in sun. What must it have been like, he wondered, to stand beneath a sun? To feel sun on your skin? She kept talking of ancient Earth, of life on ancient Earth, and he was interested in what she had to say.

Her wrist unit beeped. "Crap," she looked down at her watch, "I need to get to my shift. I'll see you later."

When he harvested the crops later that day, he wondered how they would have felt sun-warmed. He wondered what it would have been like to brush dirt off the carrots. He wondered if vegetables grown in dirt tasted different from vegetables grown in nutrient solution.

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Amalia's next visit came three days later. She was there in the farm when he walked in, checking the nutrient flow. "I see you kept it the same this time," she said, and he wasn't sure what to say until she smiled at him. "I've been thinking about what you said," he told her. "I've been thinking about the sun."

He didn't ask if she needed to be in T&T this time. She helped him finish the planting and germination as if she had always helped him, and together, as if it were already a habit, they walked into the pollinator area. "There are so many seeds," she said, "that we've stored but haven't been able to grow. The conditions we simulate, some seeds seem to know the difference. I think humans know the difference, too. I think we miss land."

"But we've never been on land!" Reza laughed. "How can you miss something you've never known?"

"The Welsh called it *biraeth*," Amalia said, "Longing for a home that's gone. I think we've been longing for the Earth ever since we lost it. Even though we stopped looking for new planets. That's what I'm trying to do at T&T," she confided, "I'm trying to find a new Earth."

"A new Earth!" Reza was shocked. Living on planet? Living on mud and dirt?

"Don't you want to see what some of these seeds are? Don't you want to see what our lives should have been? Don't you want to feel the heat of a sun?"

He didn't answer. He hadn't thought of their conversations as anything immediate, as anything but ancient history. Interesting, yes. But real? Impossible.

She didn't bring it up again, although for the next four months, they talked of farming, and

types of planets, and environmental simulations that could mimic ancient techniques. They never made plans to meet. She just showed up in the farm some mornings, and they did the work together and talked while they worked. One morning he showed her a nutrition adjustment he made, and when she questioned it, he explained his reasoning. When she nodded approval, he felt something akin to grace. He was learning. He came alive in the rows of green leaves and blossoms. Her blue-violet eyes became as familiar as the leaves and roots and flowers they nurtured.

"Before I met you," he told her, "I never thought beyond the station. I mean, I knew the history of Earth, and evacuation, and the rise and spread of stations. But I never thought about life on Earth. I only ever wanted to be here." He laughed. "I used to think the farm was boring!"

She laughed with him. "I did, too!"

"What changed?" he asked. He liked the way she took time to answer. The way her eyes grew distant and dreamy as she searched for what she wanted to say.

"I did," she said. "I didn't want the farm, so I thought I would work my way to something better. I read everything I could about agriculture and ancient Earth and botany. I even accessed remote catalogs from other stations. And the more I learned, the more I realized that the farm mattered. Not just for food, but that's obviously part of it. But for life. For how to live life. Paying attention. Slowing down. Caring about the things around you. Learning from the things around you. I tried to live that way, slowly, carefully, paying attention, giving generously, finding balance and harmony. And I liked it." She studied his face. "I think you like it, too."

Reza smiled. "You're right," he said, "I think I do."

Amalia smiled back. "It suits you, you know. The farm. You fit here. You look happy here. You never looked happy before. Not really." When she said it, he realized it was true. He had found something in the farm that he hadn't known he was looking for. He had found himself.

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Years later, when he was given an award for his contributions to humanity, he would incorrectly remember the exact moment that he decided to fulfill her plan of finding a new Earth. He would remember it as the moment he stood in the pollinator garden, and his wrist unit beeped, telling him about the accident. The experimental array that she had been servicing had snapped, her oxygen tether had failed, and she was gone. A tragedy of spacelife, the news report bleeped. The back-up oxygen supply had failed, she was out too far, Rescue had barely been able to recover her body. He would remember falling, grabbing a cradle of tomato seedlings, crushing the fragile plants as he collapsed to the walkway, weeping onto their broken stems. But in reality, he only felt her loss in that moment, like his own tether on life had snapped. His decision to find her new Earth had happened gradually, like falling asleep or falling in love, over the months as he learned to live in the spaces of her absence. He began almost unconsciously, when he set aside an area of the pollinator grove, and he began to reprogram the cycles of the pollinator garden, using different type of climates, models of different types of planets. After the fifth hypothetical environment, the fifth time trying to sprout some of the seeds that had never successfully sprouted in aeroponics, he knew that one day he would set foot on a planet. One day, he would plant seeds in the dirt.

The Personnel Department assigned him to T&T for his second job. He turned it down and requested to stay on the farm. No one had ever turned down a job, much less a job in T&T. He showed them his research on agricultural practices, the adjustments he had made with Amalia's help, and the increases in crop yields. He was apprenticed to the farm in his second year, the first student to ever be apprenticed so early. He studied ancient vids and guides. He experimented with new practices and techniques. He found solace in the routines, in study, in germinating new seeds, new hybrids, and he rarely left the farm. And people noticed.

Priya, from his family group, H10, was the first to come see him in the farm. She brought him her coveted handmade teacakes to draw him out of isolation. Reza repaid her kindness by showing her the pollinator garden. They sat on the walkway, among the flower cradles, where he had spent so many hours with Amalia. As they savored her delicate cakes, he told Priya about the flowers, about the artificial pollinators, and the bees and butterflies they were modeled after. He

took her to see the tea plants and showed her how to harvest the tea leaves. She told him about her work in food processing, her current job, and what happened to the crops after harvest. The next time she came to visit him, she brought Sam with her. Then Vanessa and Thom and Yombay, then Martin and Angelique. She brought all of H10, and then she brought others, students from other groups, starting with H11 and H12. The idea of farming, of farming in dirt, scattered across the H generation like seeds. And Reza nurtured them, like he did the rest of his plants.

By the time Reza was 45, the farm was no longer automated, and the quest to find a planet formally began. Working on the farm was the most prestigious job of any year, and the wait list to apprentice on the farm became a joke because anyone who wanted to learn would be taught, officially or unofficially. Reza opted to join with a life partner, and he and Lia had three children, all girls, who were inducted into crèche I4. He brought the children of I4 special treats from the farm, and he taught them with as much love and attention as he taught anyone who wanted to learn about the farm. He was happy, and his life was good.

He was an old, old man when he finally set foot on a planet. He felt the sun glow warmly against his skin. Every morning he watched the sunrise and marveled at the colors of the sky. He leaned into the evening breezes and spent hours listening to leaves rustling in the wind. And he did what he always had done. He planted seeds. He planted the seeds that had never grown before, seeds he had carefully engineered, and kept viable, and dormant, for all those years. He watered them with memories. And when they sprouted, and grew, and flowered, he realized he had only ever seen that color once before, the blue-violet of Amalia's eyes, watching him, teaching him, laughing with him. He finally knew the color of her eyes. They were cornflower blue.

Victoria Navarra writes science fiction, fantasy, and horror. She lives in Atlanta, GA with her husband, dog, two cats, and as many books and craft supplies as she can cram into their house. "Cornflower" is her second fiction publication (her first was in ParSec—thanks, Ian!). Her website is <https://victorianavarra.com>.