

The Forbidden Move

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On the surface of a faraway world, a woman is walking toward a tall, white tower.

The planet is known to humans as 381, and to its inhabitants as a complex sequence of back-and-forth steps about which every possible Riverdance joke has already been made. The woman is a translator, of a kind, or at least she hopes to be.

She crosses spongy ground that ripples eggshell-blue phosphorescence with each step she takes, passing between low, domed dwellings beside which the insistent upward thrust of the tower looks like an imposition, a boast. She is sweating, because of the soggy humidity, and because today she will meet the Council. If her command of the language does not impress them, she'll be on the next ship off-world and back to the welter of disappointments that awaits her at

home. Her head whirls with images from the digital grammar package she's been studying since Earth—steps and foot-positions, moves and phrases. She supposes she should be grateful this language doesn't use any other part of the body.

Her name is Efa and she wanted to be a dancer, once. Hours of practice on aching feet while her friends danced in clubs instead of studios, got girlfriends or boyfriends, ate pizza and chips while they still had their zippy teenage metabolisms, until a mess of stress fractures rendered it all useless.

She moved back home to Abertawe. A series of short-lived jobs; a matching series of short-lived partners who vanished in puffs of frustration once they realised they couldn't fill the yawning purposeless void inside her. Someone persuaded her to take a BSL class. After that, Spanish. After that, Introduction to Xenolinguistics. The tutor, moonlighting from the local university, spotted her wide-eyed look when he talked about 381 and its language that was all movement, no sound, and its mouthless people who humans called Dancers. Six years

later, here she is on an alien world where the ground kisses her feet with light.

The air within the tower is frigid compared to outside.

Gooseflesh rills up Efa's arms. Her footsteps send harsh echoes off the high, polished walls.

A Dancer is waiting in the whited entrance hall. Efa calls him Siegfried (a joke—their relationship is as romantic as a corned-beef sandwich) and he is her local guide, conscientious and ever-dependable, perhaps even a sort of friend by now. Most Dancers she's met so far have two limbs, but Siegfried has four. The front pair, lissom and slender as a squid's tentacles, depend motionlessly from his shoulders. Efa has not asked what they are for, whether they are vestigial, or maybe injured. The question feels too personal.

Today, Siegfried sketches a circle with a jointed grey hind-limb, then stamps it twice: a more formal greeting than they normally use, but the surroundings seem to call for ceremony. Efa returns it, and a tiny nervous wobble in her ankle makes her wince.

Siegfried sketches out more words, feet moving deft and easy.

You'll be fine. Try to relax.

She nods, sinks into a plié to indicate a question. *Where now?*

In answer, he turns for the stairs. They make their way upward without further conversation. There's no railing, and Efa's damp hands clench and unclench as she walks. She wishes she had a handkerchief.

The Council chamber has no door. It stands open at the end of a long, bare corridor, so the sounds of their footsteps announce them long before they reach the threshold.

Efa comes up to Siegfried's shoulder, but the Dancers of the Council tower above both of them in their raised seats. Their milky-white eyes gaze down from elongated heads with a blank expectancy that does nothing to settle her nerves. Efa notices that none of them have forelimbs, but the observation is straightaway lost in the blur of her anxiety.

The one seated in the centre—the eldest, Efa guesses, from the ridges of white that band her torso—rises to her feet and sketches out that same formal greeting. This time, Efa manages the reply without

wobbling. She imagines she feels Siegfried's approval radiating from where he stands at her left, a halo of warm light.

The questions are the ones she was expecting. She runs through her practised responses, hesitantly at first, later with increasing confidence. The Councillors cannot smile, but she thinks she detects a new ease in their movements, a loose-limbed expansiveness that might just mean she is winning them over.

At last, the final question: *Where do you come from?*

This requires a more complex answer. *My homeworld is divided into countries. We call mine Cymru. It's a new name, and an old one.* The official change came only a few years before Efa was born. Some older people, monoglots, still call it 'Wales'.

Names can be a struggle. Efa has come up with her own translation, a variation on the series of movements meaning 'friend', and she slides into it seamlessly. The beginning is something like third position, the heel of one foot nestled like a chick into the arch of the other; then the front leg swings up in a battement and rejoins its fellow;

finally, the rear one slides around to take its place and repeat the movement.

She looks up at the Council and finds them gazing back at her with the absolute stillness that indicates bafflement.

Not good. Dancers accord no meaning to vocal sounds, but Efa bites back a grunt of frustration—a habit she'll never break—and dances the word again, muscles taut, fighting a tremor.

Again, that nonplussed stillness. She sighs, looks at Siegfried, but he too is careful not to move.

This time, Efa thinks to sketch out the original phrase with her hands as she dances, so the Councillors can see the relationship between the two. Perhaps that will help them understand. She lifts her arms, pressing the wrist of one hand to the palm of the other.

Siegfried darts in front of her with sudden, feline speed. Neck bent in apology, he dances out excuses: *Perhaps enough for today? She is tired.*

Before Efa quite knows what is happening, they are clattering back downstairs, Siegfried keeping up the rear, herding her like a

sheepdog. She has no choice but to wait until they are outside, light flaring beneath her aching feet, to ask him, *What happened?*

Siegfried glances back at the tower and keeps walking. Efa sulks along in his wake. It's easier to glower than give voice to the fear hatching in her belly and creeping up her throat.

He doesn't stop until they've put the tower well behind them. When Efa stumbles into his back, she brushes off his concern with a dismissive shake of her foot. *Just tell me what I did wrong.*

In answer, Siegfried raises his forelimbs. They float skyward with such slow grace Efa is mesmerised where she stands, put in mind of sea-creatures drifting like angels through the oceans of Earth.

Not every Dancer has these, he tells her, and the fronded tip of one tendril brushes her palm. It feels like feathers. *Not here, in the Council's city. Only where I come from, up North. To use them is...*

Rude? she suggests.

Siegfried lowers his eyes, draws one hind-limb across the ground in an abrupt slash. *Forbidden.*

Days pass without an invitation back to the Council chamber. The human quarters with their functional white rooms become unbearably claustrophobic. Uncertainty crawls like a swarm of ants beneath Efa's skin.

She passes the time listening to messages from home. There's no talking directly to people—the delay makes that impractical—but she replays the most recent set of videos to fill the silence. In the latest, her Mam is in the kitchen of Efa's childhood home in Sgeti, rain stippling the glass doors behind her. A half-drunk glass of wine stands on the table. The sound is poor: it turns the pouring rain to electric fuzz and layers a worn, gauzy softness over Mam's words, so they feel like hand-me-down garments.

“Rioed wedi dweud,” Mam says, with a wistful little smile. “Ond, fi mor falch weld ti'n wneud rhywbeth fel hyn. Ar ôl... wel, ar ôl popeth.” She lets the words hang a moment, then clears her throat and commences the latest chapter in the saga of the Robertses next door and their encroaching hedge.

Efa feels a pang in her chest and presses the flat of her hand there as though she might snuff the hurt out. If she gets sent home, it will only be one more failure to add to the list. Mam is usually more careful than this—she avoids letting her hope show.

“A fi, Mam,” Efa whispers. “Sori.”

A sound at her back startles her from her misery. The cabin door is half-open, as she left it, and Siegfried is watching her through the gap. He ducks his head, a gesture that usually means embarrassment, and Efa flushes, feeling as though she’s been caught at something private.

She rises to her feet and sketches out a question: *Do you need something?*

She expects Siegfried to change the subject, but instead he eyes her curiously, letting the door swing back so he can respond with a question of his own. *The woman on the video. Your mother?*

Yes. She isn’t sure where this is going.

Her lips moved differently to most of your species. I didn’t recognise the words. Another language?

Again, the cautious, *Yes*.

I haven't seen it before.

I'm from a small country. Efa hesitates before launching into her explanation.

The names and dates are ancient history, the stuff of high school lessons. Single Parliament Act (UK), 2048. English Language Act, 2055. The Independence Riots. The hard-won referendum, the victory, and the slow rebuilding afterward. She does not feel the history as a wound. It happened long before she was born. Still, telling it to Siegfried, she finds a lump in her throat and is grateful she does not have to use her voice.

He watches intently as she spells out phrases with her feet. When she's done, she feels very tired, suddenly, and sinks into her desk chair.

Siegfried shakes himself. *I have things to do*, he dances, and turns abruptly, and is gone.

Efa gazes into the empty corridor after him. She was not expecting understanding, and sympathy would only irritate her, but

she'd thought he'd have some kind of reaction. His sudden absence leaves her discomfited, and when she turns back to her messages, she barely sees what's on her screen.

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But Siegfried comes by again, later, after hours, when she is almost ready to give the day up as a bad job and go to her bunk. He dances a short phrase—*Something to show you*—and sets off, too fast to allow further conversation, down the corridor and to the exit, out into the night.

Efa doesn't normally stray far from the human quarters. Strictly speaking, it's not allowed, and though some of the more established staff are cavalier, she's not about to get booted for sneaking out. She's never gone wandering after dark before.

381 at night is a thing of startling beauty, bioluminescent patterns flashing everywhere, the paths of distant walkers picked out by tiny trails of light. Efa can't help but pause and twirl where she stands to take it all in. She wants to dance an exclamation, something to encompass this sudden shining sight, but Siegfried doesn't stop to wait

for her, and when she sees she's being left behind, she has to scramble to catch him.

They descend under a forest canopy. Here, the ground changes. It's thick with mulch and the light beneath their feet is muted, only visible if Efa strains her eyes. They pass low, domed buildings like the homes around the Council tower. A little older, perhaps, a little less well-kept. At length, they stop before one of the structures, no different from the others except that somebody is waiting outside.

Efa has to peer through the gloom to make out that the Dancer, like Siegfried, has forelimbs.

Before she can ask the question, Siegfried dances out a single term: *Husband*, or at least, that's the closest equivalent. Next, a pattern Efa hasn't seen before, which must be a name. She does her best to commit it to memory and turns to the newcomer to introduce herself, but Siegfried isn't done.

Another word—*home*, one of the first Efa learned. Then, watching her carefully, he raises his forelimbs again.

This time, he dances one word with his feet and sketches the outline of another with his... arms, Efa supposes, though they flow more than they wave, with a grace she couldn't muster in a hundred years of practice. One word sits atop the other: *husband/home*. Siegfried finishes the phrase and reaches for his husband with a forelimb, hugging him close, indicating with the other the low domed dwelling behind them.

And Efa sees layers of meaning unfolding like a fan—a relationship, a home built together. It's a whole new dimension to the language she's been learning for the last several years.

Her feet can't keep up with her questions. Siegfried is patient; explains in slow, simple phrases.

We are poor, where I come from. Many come to the city to work. The bosses don't like that we talk with our arms. They can't keep up with two words at once. Fear we're plotting against them. So, we talk like them. Feet only.

Except at home.

Efa is lost for words, and movements. In the end she only dances one. *Thank you.*

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The verdict comes through the next day. Not only were the Council unimpressed with Efa's faux pas, she was spotted returning to the human quarters late last night. She's out.

Efa realises, with sick resignation, that she was expecting this. She feels leaden as she prepares for the voyage home, and on the shuttle, she spends most of her free time lying on her bunk, staring at the ceiling.

A few weeks in, she receives a video. She grits her teeth, expecting it to be from Mam. She still hasn't decided how she's going to explain everything.

But when she presses 'play', Siegfried's slender grey-white shape fills the screen. He dances words, two at a time. Written characters at the bottom of the video do their best to explain the nuances of each phrase, the layers of meaning.

It was a risk for him to send this. Efa's throat chokes up with gratitude, and unexpected tears prick her eyes.

She gets to her feet and turns on her own camera. Dances new phrases in reply, arms swaying like fronds of kelp.

Secret/Safe.

Friend/Memory.

Word/Heart.

She will never stand on a stage with an orchestra and spotlights. She has an audience of one. But she practices until each phrase is a perfect, polished jewel, more stirring than music, more precious than applause.