

Issues in Earth Science

“Eww, There’s Some Geology in my Fiction!”

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Teacher Resources

Sara longs to become an Architect and bring back beauty and love to the buildings of the outer city, and perhaps push back against the oppressive sameness that keeps the people there in line. But a degree at the Academy takes money that only the illegal black carbon gems can bring her...

Umbrella Luck

by

Meridel Newton



Sara walks on the street by herself, and that alone is enough to set her apart. In this jewel-bright metropolis, the more-oft-used pedestrian routes arch high overhead, forming a delicate gridwork of iron and garden. From

beneath, the highlines look only like strong industrial

beams woven into the city, both connecting the buildings and holding them rigidly separate. One would hardly imagine the rich bounty of life and movement they cradle a hundred feet in the air, the verdant greens of the plantings and the candy sprinkles of suits and dresses moving amongst them. Those busy workers can scarce remember the last time they descended to ground level. Why would they, when their garden of Eden towers above them, climbing the skyscrapers and spilling through archways and courtyards? No, the ground-level streets are left to drones and delivery vehicles, and few enough of those.

And so, Sara.

She is a small thing. Her hair close-cropped and dark, her eyes big and bright in a fine-boned face too hungry for beauty. She moves with the grace of a crane and the speed of a striking snake, darting from the lee of one building to the overhanging shelter of the next. Her eyes are wide enough to take in the whole world, and she alternates between a waiting watchfulness and a laser focus. At each new building, she bends close to the vines that twist across the facade, seeking only one thing.

They are thick, these vines. Strong as the carbon fiber and diamond that support them, they are as much a part of the city as the gleaming windows and distant highlines. The foundations of the buildings are almost completely covered in woody growths that twist and climb, sending out liana and searching tendrils as they go, leafing into broad green fans as large as dinner plates. The woody stalks are streaked as though with charcoal, and Sara plays her fingers along the dark marks, reaching blindly into the profusion of leaves, feeling them brush against her skin as she seeks—and finds.

She grips and pulls, her eyes narrowing with the effort. At last she feels the give, and she pulls her treasure free. It is a stone—or it looks like a stone. Black and shiny, round as a drop of water, she holds it up to the sun to examine it more closely.

“Twenty thousand cubic meters, I bet,” she mutters to herself. “At least. Maybe as many as thirty.”

Such a small stone to represent so much. Thirty thousand cubic meters of rank, unbreathable air, compressed down to the palm of her hand. A wonder, if not a natural one.

She takes a deep breath, smiling to herself, and slips the heavy stone into her pocket before moving on to the next stalk. Find the dark track of the sap, follow it along the stem, grasp and pull. It is a now-familiar sequence of movements, and she performs it another three times on the vines of this one building.

The last time, her fingers trace the outline of a gem twice the size of the first. Her breath catches as she pulls, but it is too big, too firmly entrenched in its setting. She gives a small sound of exasperation and with her free hand, gropes in a pocket for a knife. She plunges her second hand into the foliage and tries to work the knife around the gem by feel alone.

“So much for umbrella luck,” she mutters.

So intent is she on her work that she fails to notice the high whine of machinery making its inexorable way closer to her. A drone works its way around the corner of the building, a dozen spidery legs surrounding a crate twelve inches on a side. Its legs dig into the leaves, gripping the vines with ruthless efficiency as it probes for its bounty. When it finds a gem, four of its arms reach through the

leaves and pull it free, scarcely pausing before depositing the black stone in its cargo hold.

Sara is nearly buried in broad green leaves, and so it is barely ten feet away before it sees her. It emits a single, piercing beep and switches programs.

“Thief.”

“No, I—” Sara pulls back as though burned, the fear plain on her face. There is no use arguing with it.

“Thief.” The drone lunges at her, half its arms extending in an instant as Sara dodges.

She can't help a small scream, more an exclamation than anything else, as she turns to run. She has no real hope of evading it, she knows. She'd let herself relax, let her guard drop as she'd tried to collect the carbon gem, and now she would pay for her crimes. She has no illusions of escape; she's seen the harvest drones capture thieves before and knows how hopeless it is.

She's just made it to the far corner of the building when she feels a metallic arm brush against her shoulder. She throws herself to the side, off-balance on one leg, and

slams into the corner of the building just in time to see the drone itself round the corner. She closes her eyes, taking a shaky breath—

A human hand reaches through the leaves and grabs her by the shoulder, pulling her past the bases of the vines and into a dark, cool space. And a boy—

He shoves her behind him and snaps, “Be quiet!”

There’s a small hissing sound, and the air around Sara cools in seconds. She squints back at the boy. He stands framed in what little light filters past the thick forest of leaf and vine, holding up some small device that seems to be emitting a gas or mist. The tableau holds for long seconds, maybe a minute, before he slowly bends and, his eyes fixed on the outside, places the device on the ground. It’s another long moment before he is able to look away, and then he moves with a deliberate, measured economy as he joins her.

“You—” she starts.

“Are you *stupid*?” he whispers, waving a hand as though to physically cut off her words.

She jumps back, the hurt plain on her face. “I didn’t—I just got—”

How much to tell this strange boy? She frowns at him, trying to make out what details she could in the murk. He is tall and young, maybe her own age. He is dressed in a style she recognizes, the soft cottons and undyed fabric endemic to the central core of the city. And he is here, just as she is. Perhaps for the same reason?

“I didn’t hear it,” she manages.

“Of course you didn’t, they’re designed to be silent,” the boy says. He grabs at her wrist and draws her further into the dark until they come up against a cool, smooth surface.

“Where are we?” she asks.

The boy shrugs. “Probably an old doorway. These buildings were originally designed to open to street level, a lot of them have these places hidden behind the leaves.”

She nods. The space feels small, somehow, and regular. Even their low voices echo around them.

“The drones don’t know they’re here?”

The boy shakes his head. “They’re solar powered, so they stay on the outside whenever they harvest. And the vines don’t grow inside because it’s so dark. Shouldn’t you know this? You were collecting carbon, right?”

She blushes, and is glad it’s too dark for him to see. “It’s my first time. I just needed some extra money. Just once.”

He snorts. “Amateur. It would have detained and arrested you in another second.”

She drops her gaze, staring down at her canvas shoes. “Thank you. For saving me.”

“We’ll have to wait for hours to be sure all the patrols clear out,” he grumbles. He sighs, puts his back to the wall, and sinks to the ground.

“So much for today.”

Umbrella luck.

After a moment, she joins him. The diamond glass is cool through her thin clothes. “You...do this a lot?”

He doesn't answer, and a second later she knows why. The mechanical whine of a drone approaches—no, more than one, a whole patrol. The light at the entrance dims as shapes pass before it, and she shrinks away. Her shoulder touches his, but she is too scared to move.

The silence holds long after the patrol moves on. Then she feels him shrug.

“I'm Kai.”

She straightens up, suddenly embarrassed by her actions.

“I'm Sara.”

“So, Sara. What were you doing, that this was your first time collecting carbon?”

She reaches into her pocket and pulls out the small handful of gems she had managed to find before the drone appeared. Even in the near-dark, they gleam.

“I wanted—” she shakes her head. “I need tuition. For the Academy.”

His quiet is so long that she looks up, but she can't make out his expression. “The Academy?” he asks at last. “You

want to waste all that money? Just to go to a fancy school?”

The contempt is clear in his voice, and she flinches away from it. She knows him, now. She’s seen him before, in the inner core streets. He ran with a gang, one of the small neighborhood groups that was equal parts protection and menace. If that was the life he’d chosen, what need indeed would he see for schooling?

“I got in,” she tries. “I passed the entrance test and the interviews. They even gave me a scholarship. But it’s not everything, and I still need...” More money than she’d ever seen in her life.

“You were never going to get it like that,” he says. “I’ve never seen anyone so bad at collecting.”

She swallows. “I thought...it only needed to be once. I only needed one cubic kilometer.”

“Let me see.”

He holds out his hand, and, with only a moment of hesitation, she passes over her bounty. The gems click and tumble as he runs them through his fingers.

“This is half that, at most. You have a long way to go.”

She can't quite stop the small cry of dismay as she jumps to her feet. “I have to keep looking!”

“You have to stay here! Unless you want to get arrested, and then they'll never let you into their precious Academy.”

The truth in his words is evident, and she sits back down in silence. He hands the gems back to her, and she pockets them without looking. The silence stretches between them.

“What do you want to go to the Academy for, anyway?”

“Huh?”

She can almost hear him roll his eyes. “Like, what do you want to study? Singing? Drawing?”

“Oh.” She hesitates. “Architecture.”

“Like how to build buildings?”

She shakes her head. “How to design them. I want...”

“I like our buildings in the core,” he says, surprising her. “I always have. They’re real. Comfortable. The diamond towers have always looked...”

“Soulless,” she finishes.

“Yeah.”

They smile at each other, and she ventures a little further.

“The core is the old city. From before they had the carbon vines. So they couldn’t build as tall, and they couldn’t use diamond. People expected to be outside.”

“My grandpa said the air was dirty back then. Hard to breathe.”

She nods. “The vines changed all that. But the old buildings weren’t strong enough to handle them, and people didn’t want their homes destroyed. So they built the new buildings around us. Around the core.”

“And... what?” She can just about make out his frown in the gloom. “You want to bring the vines into the core?”

“No!” And she is so loud in her vehemence that they both freeze, listening hard for any signs of reaction.

“...no,” she repeats. “I want to bring more of the core to the outer city.”

“What do you mean? They’d never let us.”

The darkness seems to pool between her knees, and she stares down into it. She’s never talked to a complete stranger about this before. She’s barely talked about it with her family.

“Have you ever noticed,” she says, “the glass windows of the church on Queen Street?”

His answer is immediate. “I love them. The colors, right?”

She nods. “And the ironwork on the fences at Tanah Merah? The medallions on the community center?”

“Medallions?”

“The...the circular ornaments. Above the windows.”

“Ah. I think so?”

She nods. “The core buildings may be old and dirty and small, but they’re beautiful. They were built with love, by people who cared about making them well.”

“You really notice these things, huh?”

She ducks her head, blushing again. “The outer city is beautiful too. The diamond shines and the vines...the trees are beautiful. I love the gardens on the highlines. But it’s all...the same. Like it’s all one building with a lot of legs.”

“And...what? You want to make them different? Add colored glass and medallions?”

She flushes, but she looks up this time. “I don’t know, exactly. But I think that it’s part of the problem, you know? The differences between the inner and the outer city. The way the outer city is all so similar. I think it’s about keeping people in line. It’s about oppression.”

She waits, but the expected scorn does not arrive. “I think making things so different...makes it easy for them to forget we’re just as human as they are. It makes it easy for them forget us, or let our buildings degrade, or let our power fail. I think...if there were more of us in the outer city, if the outer city and the inner city looked just a little more alike...”

She isn't expecting the touch on her cheek, or the softness of his skin.

"I've never heard anyone talk like that," he says softly.

She can't manage a smile. "I need to get back out there. Nothing will happen if I don't have the money for tuition."

"It's too dangerous, you'd get caught too fast."

She pulls away. "I won't get caught—I can't! I have everything else. The dealer said he'd stay open late, and I have until midnight to make the payment and—"

"And if you get arrested, none of it matters."

She has no response. The darkness suddenly feels oppressive. "How long do we have to wait?"

Kai shakes his head. "Once the patrol's been called, they normally do three wide passes around the block. Sometimes more. It can take a while. Three or four hours."

She moans softly, dropping her head into her hands.

"Hey." She feels an awkward pat on her shoulder, but she has no response.

“Hey.”

This time she shakes off his hand, and it’s a long time before he says, “That’s pretty.”

“What?” She looks up, frowning.

“That. Your necklace.”

“Oh...” She touches a hand to the wide collar of stones. “It used to be my mom’s.”

“Diamond?”

She nods. “Worthless, I know. But it has...sentimental value.”

He gives a soft laugh. “That’s the only kind of value we’ll ever have, isn’t it?”

She thinks on that. “My mom used to say we had umbrella luck, the whole family.”

“What’s that?”

Her fingers play along the jewels at her throat. “The worst kind of luck. Like when it always rains when you don’t

have your umbrella. Or when you invest everything you have in diamonds, just before they become worthless.”

“Your family had money to invest,” he says, and she can hear the laugh in his voice.

“Not any time I can remember,” she says, and she refuses to be embarrassed about it. “The diamond crash was long before either of us was born.”

“Yes,” he agrees. “But some of us didn’t have money even before that.”

She doesn’t know what to say to that, and the silence descends again. It lasts this time, stretching between them like a living thing growing larger with every second. She watches as the light outside their small cave grows dimmer, and imagines the sun setting on her hopes.

“It should be safe now.”

“Hm?” She hadn’t realized she’d dozed off until he speaks.

“To go. It should be safe to go. But you’ll have to go fast—that thing got a look at you, and they’ll still be on the alert.”

She nods. He isn't offering to accompany her, and she's not surprised.

He still has his own carbon collecting to do.

"Will it be okay to take the highlines home?"

He pauses. "It should be. They're normally so busy the monitors can't cover everything. In twenty-four hours, you'll drop off their radar and it will be safe to come back."

Twenty-four hours was too long, and they both knew it. Her heart squeezes in her chest. Next year. She'd just have to try again next year. Hopefully they would hold the scholarship for her.

"Well," she says, and pauses. "I guess I'll see you around."

He nods. She stands, turns—

"Wait." He catches at her hand. There's a rustle, and then he's pressing something into her palm.

"Take these."

She can feel the carbon gems, dozens of them, filling the little pouch. It's not just the other half of what she needs, it's far more.

"I can't!"

He shakes his head. "You can. Your use for them is better than mine. And besides, someday this much will be nothing to you. You can pay me back then."

They both know they'll probably never see each other again.

"This much," she starts, but she doesn't know how to finish.

"Umbrella luck," he says, and gives her a lopsided grin. "So you don't pass it to me."

That surprises a laugh from her, loud and startling in the darkness.

"Go!" he hisses. "Before they come back."

She hesitates one last moment, and he stands and shoves her at the door.

"Go!"

The leaves part as she stumbles through them, and she is out in the cooling evening, surrounded by gleaming spires and breathing trees, the future in her pocket. She turns one last time, but the small hideaway is already invisible, and Kai is gone.



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Credit: Umbrella Luck artwork by Erin Colson.

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