

## Lungflower

The air was soft in the old district.

Not clean—never clean—but thick with days, layers of composted years. Every surface wore a rich, cadmium film. Rust stitched the grates between stones. The scent of damp copper, wet paper, flowering mildew. Something zoetic under it all.

The streets wound low, coiling beneath the towers above like roots under a stone ribcage. In their shade, nothing moved fast. Even the filtered air came slow through the vents—wheezing, tired. The flora here grows slowly, sanguine, capping out at about 347 feet.

She moved quietly down the alley, one hand over her midsection. Fingers curled gently around the bulge of the bloom there, hidden beneath her coat. The petals had started to flutter out of rhythm a few mornings ago—soft, uneven spasms like the wings of a sleeping moth. Not a full seizure, but close.

The district had once been full of airmen—each with their own little garden, their own tricks, their own patterns. But most had gone to the towers long ago. Up where the light and people were clean. A few remained low, mostly out of necessity, some stuck in nostalgia.

A few simply refused to betray their ordained tradition.

She continued walking, following the path as it narrowed, drawn more by instinct than memory.

The studio wasn't clean in the technical sense, or even the expected one.

It smelled like overripe things—like steam on rainwood. The soft green breath of a hothouse long untended. A vegetal sweetness laced with old sweat and chlorophyll.

The entrance was more profound than you'd expect a residence of its age to be—a brown door politely centered between various bouquets, grounded underneath a shallow display of branches. She pressed her palm to the handle before fully clasping; a groan ran through the wooden entryway, then a shuffling.

The door peeled open only slightly, and a man, more old than new, young enough to not be considered brittle, but unmistakably used, studied her from the other side. His eyes didn't rise to meet hers. They stopped at her chest.

The bloom—pale, veined faintly blue—was already peeking through the split in her windbreaker jacket. Its outer fronds hung limp. The central stamen moved irregularly.

He looked at it for a tallied moment then spoke,

“Come in, then.”

Stepping back, letting her through.

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## SHE

The room was small, like everything else down here.

Oddly high ceiling. Lovely music. No screens except for a few small windows. No light beyond the pulsing white lamps and the soft glass tanks lined up along the walls.

Each tank held a flower in bloom—some drifting gently in suspension, their petals open in slow, balletic turns. Others twisted like creatures in sleep, insufflated with thin spokes dry-needling the glass. On the adjacent shelf, root bundles curled in grey gel like tangled nerves.

I stepped carefully. The floor was damp, soft in places.

He gestured toward the reclining chair without looking at me.

I eased into the chair, unsure of the weight I brought with me, unbuttoned the remainder of my jacket, and the flower at my sternum caught the overhead light—wan, pastelling, almost translucent.

The man pulled a small stool beside me and adjusted the lenses on his face.

“Functionally it’s fine. But it’s reading you wrong, which means the division isn’t physical.”

I frowned. “Should I be worried?”

He tilted his head. “You should be honest.”

I looked down at my chest. “I’ve had three diagnostics. No contamination in the stem. No mold in the pistil. It’s just... off. Like it’s regretting me.”

He leaned in, peering through magnified glass. The refraction swept over the base of the bloom. He made a soft noise in his throat. Not surprise. Recognition.

“It’s not a disease,” he said. “It’s grief.”

I blinked.

He continued, gently now:

“They synchronize with you. Mirror your chemistry. Your moods, even. If one starts to lose rhythm, it usually means something internal shifted.”

“You mean I changed.”

He nodded. “And it’s mourning that change.”

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The earliest lungflowers were clinical things.

Pale tissue folded into synthetic roots, lab-grown on trays beside protein vials and saline bags. They were printed for manufactured breath, conveyor-seeded in sterile bloom halls, mass-grafted into willing bodies with state tags still hanging from their stems.

But the body resists what it doesn’t recognize. Without familiarity, even the most elegant graft becomes invasive. The flowers browned. Hosts blistered. Bodies suffocated beneath blooms too perfect to understand them.

It wasn’t until the work slowed down—became less about uniformity and more about unison—that the flowers began to thrive.

That's when the airsmiths arrived.

They weren't surgeons or technicians. They were gardeners. Artists, in the old sense—calloused by choice.

A lungflower is a genetically engineered respiratory symbiont, designed to integrate directly with the human pulmonary system. Its formation begins with a hybridized seed composed of selected plant genomes, host-specific DNA (via marrow draw), and a stabilized airsmith-derived respiratory stemline. The host provides immunogenic and metabolic data; the airsmith provides the scaffold material necessary for cross-species translation.

Airsmith-derived lung tissue—harvested through bronchoalveolar lavage—is essential for successful grafting. This tissue establishes the initial bioelectrical and enzymatic compatibility. The airsmiths' respiratory cells are uniquely stable, allowing for bio-interface without rejection. Normal human cells lack this adaptive calibration.

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He stood up and crossed the room. Picked something off a shelf. Let it sit in his palm like a loose coin. Not a seed—this was a scarlet filament of dried connective tissue. A pruning thread, 1/8 the thickness of yarn.

"They're meant to live with us," he said. "And die with us. But sometimes, they lose the tether. Forget how to cherish a taut connection."

I brushed the hair from my face.

He held up the filament. The barbs shimmered faintly, fine as pollen needles.

"It's not rescue," he said. "It's recalibration."

Holding little breath I had:

"And if it doesn't take?"

He glanced away from the thread:

"Then it means it wanted to forget you more than it wanted to breathe."

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Over the following days, she returned.

She'd sit beside the tank wall and watch the older blooms spiral slowly in their artificial gravity. Their filaments trailed like threads in water—some still faintly pulsing, others grey and translucent. She asked about their structure. Their loose roots. Whether any had been grafted, what kept them alive without a chest to cling to.

He told her they were experiments—unfinished attempts at growing a bloom without a host. An idea that might, someday, allow for the first viable transfer.

"But it was slow," he said. "Incomplete. The limbs had nothing to cling to. Without sentience, a flower has nothing to learn from."

A faint flutter passed beneath her ribs.

On other afternoons, when the sun filtered colors through the high glass and the gutters ran quieter, he would tell her stories—not of treatment, but of before.

Of the summers before the towers rose, when streets were wet with thunder and rain and whole neighborhoods bloomed from the runoff. Of his mother's cabin with its ornaments, how she kept cherry juice on the windowsill to make the room smell happy. Of the days they'd boil water on the stove just to fog the air, to soften it enough for her lungs to hold.

He spoke of old street markets, where the hawkers sold handmade watches and jewelry, bright with gemstones, shells, and stained wood. Of a night he danced, faceless and dizzy, to a radio he heard faintly playing across town.

"It didn't matter what we were doing," he said once, laughing dryly. "We just wanted to be seen. To keep the air clear long enough to see the colors in our iris."

She'd lean forward then, elbows on her knees, chin in her hand, the wilting bloom in her chest muted beneath her collar.

"You speak like someone who's lived twice."

"By design," he replied. "Some tales are so sweet they deserve to be said as if the teller has."

Sometimes she brought him tea—weak and herbal, steeped in clean water—and left it untouched on the counter. Sometimes she stayed until the lights dimmed and the outer vents began their routine purge.

One evening, she sat unmoving in the corner chair. Her hands pressed over her heart.

"I can feel it," she said softly.

"It's tired of me."

He stood a moment.

Then turned toward the counter.

The sterilizer clicked on.

And behind him, the thread uncoiled—glistening, sharp, and ready to teach her lungs how to love her again.

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## SHE

It didn't happen right away.

The filament, coiled on its dish like an unraveling tie, remained untouched for nearly nine days. It stayed between us, small and waiting—like a word we weren't ready to say.

Meanwhile, I kept returning—once in the morning, then again in the late afternoons, when the 4:00 showers made the room smell like iron and orange rinds. My flower didn't improve, but it didn't worsen either. An agreed limbo.

He wasn't avoiding the work. I could see that. He was letting it be. Like sheets still too wet to bring inside, or ink bleeding on the tongue of a brush before the first stroke. Once or twice, I asked if it had to be soon. He always said "soon enough."

I started bringing books. Ones I'd read before. Horror stories or short epics, mostly. I'd give him my copy and I'd recite what I remembered. He'd look up sometimes when I spoke. If the writing pleased him, he'd tap it once against the table, like sealing it shut. If it didn't, he'd lift an eyebrow and tilt the page my way, like offering a second chance to say it better.

One such morning, the bloom in my chest flinched. Just once. A single petal spasmed, tight as a nerve twitch. He looked up from his bench and studied me quietly.

"I once left a bloom near a paint studio. It picked up the fumes—started opening only when certain hues were used. By the end, it mirrored the painting, like the piece had painted it back."

The days in that studio had a way of blurring. Time thinned. Evenings made everything feel more suspended. Sometimes we'd talk about the strange creatures that had adapted to the lower districts. Finned toads. Algae mice. Birds that nested in pipe vents. Once, we saw a warm-colored snake slipping across the roof beams. It carried a dead wasp between its teeth like a tiny golden offering.

He asked about my past. I found myself saying how I used to buy two of everything—just in case. These days, I still do. Out of habit more than need.

"I don't think it was grief," I said, still watching the snake. "Just a shape I got used to moving around." I shifted in the chair. "It's strange how your body keeps making room for something long after it's stopped arriving."

A soft bubbling from the nutrient vat punctuated the quiet.

The light in the tank beside us shifted—pale green rippling into violet.

"I think my lungs learned the shape of something I never let go of. And now it doesn't know how to stand up straight."

He didn't reply. Just adjusted a desk lamp and dropped a bundle of root into a basin to soak.

Later, I heard the soft clatter of instruments being set out—each placed like a step in a familiar walk.

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## **REPAIR PROCEDURE – LEVEL IV INTERVENTION**

*(Excerpted from Post-Synthetic Pulmonology, Vol. 2)*

A lungflower repair—especially one involving a rhythmic lapse—requires precise metabolic re-tempering of the original bloom. Unlike the initial graft, which is symbiotic from seedling to bloom, the repair must overwrite damaged cadence without disturbing vascular memory and function.

This necessitates a full biosignature withdrawal from the original airsmith.

Marrow is drawn, re-encoded, and introduced as a route to "remind" the flower of its original shape—biologically, emotionally, and temporally. The risk incurred in the repair procedure is higher for the airsmith in comparison to the initial graft as re-entry causes cellular confusion.

His system must feign the timeline of a previous self.

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He began at dawn.

What followed wasn't new—only a continuation. Just the familiar clink of tools being arranged in a bowl of warming gel, the slow preparation of the scarlet thread. The faint smell of starch and flowering mint.

She was already there, crouched quietly by the rear window, sketchpad folded in her lap. He didn't look at her when he moved. He was already somewhere else—deeper into his craft.

The light from the overhead panel bloomed against the table. A strip of glass flickered. Instruments aligned themselves in a sequence only his hands remembered: thread comb, tissue tong, marrow syringe, chest-splay key. No part of it was rushed. No part hesitant.

It wasn't surgery. It was ritual.

He cleaned the thread twice. Set it aside. Then, carefully, he withdrew the stem cells.

She didn't watch the needle go in. But she saw what left him. Not just blood or data, but something denser. Something that pulled at his shoulders, hollowed the color from his face.

Marrow withdrawal is done in segments—pulse by pulse, to preserve the signal. He kept time against the sink—each drip a breath he would not recover.

Then came the tuning.

He suspended the marrow in a chamber above the tanks. Fed it light, heat, the faintest trace of citrus vapor. A wash of peptides followed. It began to shimmer—browns and blacks and dusk-colored red braiding in the vile.

When he finally turned toward her, he looked not older, but further. As if the line between who he'd been and who he was had cleared to near-transparency.

He opened his mouth as if to address her, but said something else. A name she didn't recognize. Yet it still felt like hers.

She stirred to a standing position and moved toward the chair where she lay reclined and opened her coat slowly, like unveiling something close but unfinished.

He stepped forward: *Vireo*—a line so light it seemed spun from sand—glinted against her bosom.

His fingers, too unsteady for fine writing, found precision only here. He touched the bloom like velour touches skin.

And when the barbs of the filament kissed the outer fronds, she felt the stutter.

Not rebirth, a remembering.

His eyes traced the flower, as though retracing an atlas of places he no longer went.

She closed hers.

There was a hum—thin and wrong at first. Then steady. Then steady.  
The flower arched, not upward, but inward—toward her.

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It was four days before she returned.

Not out of fear or reluctance. She simply needed time. To breathe. To sleep without listening for irregular beats. To relearn the difference between the room being quiet and the quiet not being a threat.

When she stepped back into the studio, the lights were dimmer than she remembered, but the air still had that same repetitiveness, like a railing worn down by children, or a sleeve stretched at the elbow.

He wasn't at the bench.

Equipment was still laid out—clean, arranged with deliberation—but untouched. A cup of something, cold now, sat on the windowsill beside a stack of looseleaf.

She found him in the back alcove, where the floor dipped slightly and the tanks held older blooms, most with their stems clipped or colors muted.

He was seated on the lower step, jacket pulled loosely over his frame, spine slightly bent like a fruitful branch.

His breathing was shallower than she remembered.

He looked up as she approached, eyes still alert but edged with something dulled. Not fatigue. Not quite.

"Sometimes I think spoons know they'll never be the knife, so they stay soft at the edges. Like being held is reason enough."

She smiled faintly and sat down beside him. Not too close. Just near enough to let her sleeve brush the edge of his.

"I checked it myself this morning," she said. "Seven full breaths before it pulled. I even held my breath to be sure."

He gave a small sound that wasn't quite a laugh.

"That's well," he said. "It'll get easier now. You'll forget to notice."

"I don't think I want to forget."

He didn't answer. Just nodded a little, and kept looking ahead—past the tanks, through the window.

A long quiet passed.

"I thought you'd say something more poetic," she said eventually. "About growth. Renewal. Air."

He shook his head. "There's nothing poetic about marrow exhaustion. Just pacing."

She glanced sideways at him.

"You didn't tell me it'd take that much out of you."

“You didn’t ask.”

Another pause.

Finally, she exhaled and leaned forward, elbows on her knees, chin balanced in her hand.

“I forgot how many things are just... fine,” she said. “Back then, I never noticed fine.”

She rubbed her thumb against her knuckle.

“Now it feels like a luxury.”

Another silence—this one more encompassing.

Outside, something quick and winged got smaller as the proximity of it and the studio window grew.

Dun-colored, parts jerking like it couldn’t quite agree with its own direction—then gone again, swallowed by the stack of rooftops.

She reached out, only lightly, and held the hem of his sleeve with two fingers. He leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes.

“Bring me something new next time,” he said. “Nothing with ghosts. Or revolutions. Just something quiet with a good line or two.”

She nodded, already thinking of which book.