

The Library

by Hannah Wilson-Black

Everything was light for Toria. Her screens, her world, hummed around her, their soothing glow comfortable and familiar. Each rectangle of pixels had its place. To her right educational games were pulsing before her wide, dark eyes— her classroom. Directly in front of her was a screen displaying her interactive family— her brother, Wiggy, and her mother, Morae.

Since they all had their own VivaPods (after all, it was the twenty-third century) and the VivaPods remained separate and closed at all times to protect self-respecting people from the horrors of the modern world, Toria had never seen her mother and brother in real life. Not to mention her maternal grandparents, Million and Dorothy, who were in a VivaCare facility for old folks.

Toria could see what she had always assumed was her brother's pod through the wire-covered surface of the clear, thick plastic pod. Wiggy's pod — like her own — looked like a see-through egg covered almost entirely in energy-filled white string. The three pods were sitting in her grandfather's house, an unexplored peaceful location where Toria would spend almost all of her life if she chose to. All she knew from what she could see and what Morae told her was that the house was old, empty, and made largely of brick and dark wood akin to the color of her skin, which her interactive mother (who was of course controlled by her real mother) often praised as beautiful. And it was true. Toria was aware of two facts for absolutely sure: the world was ugly, and she was beautiful.

On this particular day in the VivaPod, Toria was learning to graph, an appropriate subject for an eleven year-old. And all was well and known and safe.

Until, for the first time in Toria's memory, the power went out.

And so it was that this girl found herself in darkness, something she had never known. Sudden, all-consuming darkness that felt to her like her veins were being sliced open and her life blood was pooling around her, soiling the perfection of her VivaPod.

Toria's screens went black and her pod stopped glowing and her throat made a sound she had never heard herself make before. A frightened, girlish scream. This scared her further and the maladjustment of her eyes caused her to flail in confusion.

Toria felt her small, bare foot hit a button nestled in the encircling wall of her pod towards the front of the capsule. The button, now unhelpfully, read "Do not press unless for some completely inordinate reason you wish to open your VivaPod."

Much to Toria's further shock, her Pod hatched, splitting neatly down the middle as it was engineered to. She screamed again, because inside the VivaPod the air was room-temperature and smelled like blankets and electricity and now the air was cool and smelled like something she could not name (dust and old wood floors).

Toria was so busy trying to stand up and failing and being confused that she didn't see a head emerge from the VivaPod beginning to open a few meters away from her. A boy whom, if she took a second to examine his face, she would recognize as her twin brother, Wiggins Emerald, Wiggy for short. The boy had thin eyebrows and a small wide nose. He was her height and had her dark skin and outward self-possessedness, though internally he felt quite insecure.

He was slightly less prone to screaming — instead he was shaking and trying to look like he was holding it together.

It's not like the siblings didn't know each other. They had interacted using screens from a very young age. They had seen each other's avatars and helped each other with VivaEdu program assignments. However, seeing another person in the flesh was something foreign— Toria and Wiggy locked eyes and slowly took in the fact that they were seeing another thing that moved and took up space like themselves. They both felt the need to move towards each other, but walking around had never been a necessity inside the VivaPods. So, like infants, they stumbled and flailed. A half-hour passed before they both had the basic walking motions down and could successfully approach one another.

“What happened?” Toria asked Wiggy shakily when they were finally within a meter of each other.

“Power cut,” said Wiggy, who had been paying attention to local news. “There was a raid on the city. You're taller than I thought you'd be.”

“You're scrawnier than your avatar,” Toria observed, not meaning it unkindly. Wiggy shrugged this off.

“Where's mom?” Toria asked. She knew Morae's VivaPod was somewhere in the house, but it did not appear to be in the foyer like Wiggy's and her own.

“I don't know, but we shouldn't go looking. We should stay here,” Wiggy said. “I don't know what we'll find if we look around and if the power comes back on we'll want to be here.”

He was lying. Of course he wanted to look around.

“We’ll only be out here once for who knows how long. Don’t you want to know what the house is like so you never get curious again?” Toria said, also lying. She wanted nothing more than to curl up in her fractured VivaPod and go to sleep. But she wanted to make up for her earlier cowardice and she knew that she wouldn’t get the chance to wander around Million’s mansion again, at least not until she became an adult and she could make her own decisions about how she wanted to live. Toria’s mother, like most mothers, chose to raise her and Wiggy in VivaPods, and Toria respected that. Toria was also aware that her mother would disapprove of her and Wiggy even stepping out of their pods. Seeing as Toria’s mother, Morae, was the only older role model whom Toria could prove existed, Toria valued her mother’s opinion very much.

“A little looking around won’t hurt I guess,” Wiggy said, trying not to betray how eager he was to have a peek at the upstairs portion of the house. Already Wiggy was taking in every single detail of the dusty darkness he was seeing so he could relive it mentally when he returned to his pod once the power came back on.

“Come on,” said Toria, grabbing Wiggy’s small, soft hands. How she knew to grab another human being’s *hands* of all things when leading them somewhere she did not know but suspected she had picked it up from her learning games or television shows.

The twins quickly realized they were standing in a broad hallway which was formed by a wall on one side and a large, long staircase on the other. Toria started to move towards a partially open door on the right but Wiggy pulled on her hands and pointed to the staircase.

“Don’t you wanna go as far as we can first and then work backwards?” Wiggy suggested. Toria hesitated. She could sense the excitement in Wiggy’s voice that he was trying so hard to hide. She had wanted to keep their expedition small. *Oh well*, she thought, turning to follow him,

if we get killed by Open-runners at least this wasn't my idea. Despite never having interacted with a living human being, Toria knew she hated being wrong and if she died she would rather do so having had the right idea.

Toria and Wiggy ascended the stairs and gravitated towards a room directly in front of them on the broad landing. There was white light hitting the wood of the landing floor— it hailed from small high windows to either side of them. Moving forward, they opened the two heavy wooden doors to the room one at a time, both pulling on each. There before them was a vast space with a completely empty floor (any useful furniture had probably been stolen by Open-runner vandals) and walls made of the most unfamiliar material and interspersed with wooden panels. The siblings both audibly gasped and Wiggy's small eyes grew large at this unfamiliar sight while a thin layer of dust blew up from the floor. Toria moved around to see the wall to her right head-on and touched it. There were rectangular blocks of leather and cloth and fiber making up the walls, with gold and silver and black writing on their sides. Tori had not encountered such things before. *Great Expectations* read one of the many small parts of the wall. Another smaller fiber block said *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Toria touched a piece labeled *Persuasion* and was astonished when she dislodged it. She thought she might have broken the room itself until she realized the object was clearly meant to be split in two, to be opened. The leather was filled with pieces of what felt like dry, thin wood to Toria. These leafs, filled with words piled on each other in huge blocks, felt immeasurably good between Toria's fingers.

Wiggy and Toria agreed in an unspoken manner to pull the most beautiful word boxes out from the walls and sit in the middle of the room and touch and see them together. Toria was filled

with awe. *What useless and wonderful things were these? What useless and wonderful beasts had been here before her?*