

WONDROUS TRAVELS

PUBLIC SAMPLE
VOLUME I: COMPRESSION NATION



THE HUMAN ENTRY

Lin Reyes is trying to recover her wife, Nisha. Five island-jurisdictions and one fault-line convert that marriage into price, record, score, witness, and version.

FORM

Six-volume literary cycle

STATUS

Complete

LEAD SUBMISSION

Volume I: Compression Nation

SAMPLE

Opening chapter: Border Consent

USE OF THIS SAMPLE

This controlled public sample is provided for reading and professional evaluation. The complete work, synopsis, proposal, series map, screenplay, or supporting apparatus is supplied directly upon an appropriate request.

CHAPTER 1

Border Consent

Compression Nation doesn't look like a dystopia at first glance.

It looks like relief .

The road to it ends in silence—not the silence of abandonment, but the silence of intention. Lin had been walking for hours through the Unaffiliated Zones, where sound was constant and ungoverned: vendors shouting prices that changed mid-sentence, drones arguing with each other in overlapping ad-loops, children crying in languages the translation software refused to finish parsing. Even the air fought for attention—sirens, engines, prayers, propaganda, music that never finished a line before something else cut in.

Her ears still rang with that chaos.

Then the border appeared, and the noise stopped as if someone had pressed mute on reality.

The gate itself was almost insulting in its simplicity: a white polymer arch, clean enough to look disposable, tall enough to feel inevitable. No guards. No weapons. No barricades. No flags.

Only a line of text hovering above it, projected by sources Lin couldn't see:

Less becomes more.

The phrase landed in her body the way a familiar insult lands—soft, practiced, already halfway inside you.

Because it wasn't only their motto.

It had been Nisha's.

Not as doctrine at first. As a joke, then as a habit, then as something she said in the voice people use when they're trying to convince themselves they're doing the right thing.

Nisha's German had always arrived lightly, like she didn't want the words to take up too much space.

In her backpack, the chipped mug knocked softly against her ribs, wrapped in a scarf like contraband. She hadn't brought it for utility. She'd brought it because the system couldn't compress the way a flaw felt against the mouth.

Lin stopped at the threshold and breathed.

The air here was different. Cleaner, yes—but also emptier in a way that felt like a decision. The Unaffiliated Zones smelled like burning fuel, synthetic spices, wet concrete,

fear-sweat, cheap perfume, garbage fermenting in heat. Smell there was an accident of collapse.

But through the arch she caught something else.

Nothing.

The air smelled like nothing at all.

She had been warned about this place.

But that was the thing.

Lin did have to follow—and now she had to admit that following was not the same as rescuing.

The alternative was staying in the Unaffiliated Zones, where Nisha's absence was a wound that wouldn't close because the air was full of keys: the coffee stall where they'd had their first date, the park where Nisha had proposed, the apartment that still smelled like cardamom because Lin couldn't bring herself to clean out the spice drawer.

Cardamom wasn't "spice." It was cardamom —the specific warmth of chai on cold mornings, the sharp sweetness on your tongue after a kiss, the way Nisha's fingers would smell faintly brown after crushing pods. Turn the scent, and whole rooms opened: Nisha laughing with flour on her cheek, Nisha humming while she cooked, Nisha standing behind Lin at the stove—arms around her waist, chin on her shoulder—breathing her in like she belonged. Nisha's thumb on the inside of Lin's wrist: once, twice, three times, the small private circle that meant I'm here, I'm here, I'm here —a pulse the band would later try to learn and fail to.

And because keys open everything, not only the rooms you want—

Cardamom also opened the other place.

Then she'd looked at herself—like the case was inside her.

But Nisha's hands had been shaking as she stacked plates with unnecessary precision. Nisha who apologized when she asked for a second blanket. Nisha who whispered "sorry" to the air when she took too long choosing yogurt at the market. Nisha who moved through life as if she were borrowing space from someone more deserving.

Nisha who had written seven months ago:

And once, two years before that—Lin saw it now with the unhelpful clarity grief gives—Nisha had come home from a long day at the clinic and stood in the kitchen with her hands flat on the counter and said nothing for almost a minute. Then, when Lin had touched her shoulder, Nisha had spoken not in English but in German: a fast, low torrent about the patient, the supervisor, the form, the sister, the sister's husband, the way certain words in English felt like a counter rinsed of everything. Lin had not understood most of it.

She had understood that Nisha was speaking the language she thought in when no one was grading her. Nisha had spoken German for three minutes. Then she had caught herself, apologized, and switched back into the English she had been polishing since she was nineteen.

Lin had not asked her to keep going. Lin had not understood, then, that there was a Nisha who lived in the un-translated minutes and another Nisha who was permitted to live the rest of the time.

Compression Nation, when she crossed into it, was about to learn which Nisha was billable.

Lin stepped forward.

The border screens cycled through the kind of civic-risk summaries every jurisdiction used to prove it had learned from history. One of them caught her eye because she already knew the name before the numbers loaded.

The numbers were correct.

That was the first violence.

The child had survived the summary only as a denominator.

The arch did not stop her. It did not challenge her. It did not demand a signature.

It simply waited—like a polite trap.

As she crossed, the transition was physical.

She felt it in her joints first: a loosening, as if the air pressure on this side had been calibrated to reduce friction in cartilage. Then in her eyes, which stopped straining against clutter she hadn't realized she was processing. In the Unaffiliated Zones every surface screamed for attention. Inside Compression Nation, the surfaces were quiet.

The road continued, smooth white polymer like the arch, clean as a surgical instrument. Buildings rose in simple geometry—cubes, cylinders, an occasional elegant curve—no ornamentation, no competing colors. White, gray, pale blue: a palette optimized for calm.

People walked past, and Lin realized she was staring.

They moved differently here. Not rushed, not slow—certain. Each person seemed to know exactly where they were going. Paths didn't collide. No one stopped to check devices. No one looked lost. Even their faces held a kind of practiced neutrality, as if expression had been simplified into something inexpensive.

A woman passed carrying a toddler on her hip. The woman smiled at Lin—a small smile, precisely calibrated—and continued without breaking stride.

The child did not wave.

The child did not make a sound.

Lin watched them go and felt something cold settle in her stomach.

This is what you wanted, she told herself. This is where Nisha is.

But the silence was already pressing against her, and she'd only been inside for seconds.

The intake station was a low white building at the end of the entry road, marked only by a symbol: a circle being compressed into a smaller circle.

Lin had seen it on feeds. On protest signs. On the faces of family members who had lost loved ones to "voluntary optimization."

The doors opened as she approached.

No handles. No buttons.

Just the smooth recognition that she was there and wanted to enter.

Inside, the air was cooler. The lighting was soft but precise, casting no shadows. A row of kiosks lined the far wall. Each kiosk held a person speaking quietly to a terminal.

No lines.

No waiting.

The system had calibrated intake volume to match processing capacity exactly.

Lin stepped to the nearest available kiosk.

The screen was blank except for a single prompt:

Lin opened her mouth.

"I'm here for Nisha."

The name came out rough, catching in her throat the way it always did now. Seven months since Nisha left. Seven months since her last message. Seven months of silence, broken only by automated notifications:

Lin had saved every notification. Read them until the words went numb. Tried to find Nisha inside the bureaucratic language and failed.

The screen flickered.

"Subject-Nisha," Lin corrected, and felt the prefix bruise her tongue. "My wife. She came here seven months ago. I want to find her."

The system processed.

"We're married," Lin said. "We've been married for six years."

A flicker arrived—not a full memory, just a pressure bruise: Nisha in a white dress designed to take up as little space as possible, holding an index card with vows written in tight neat letters, adjectives crossed out and rewritten like she was editing herself into acceptability.

The kiosk returned to its clean cruelty.

Lin stared.

Preference-response.

That was what they called it here. Not love. Not devotion. Not a life built from a thousand small choices.

A measurable tendency.

"Yes," Lin said, because what else could she say? "I maintain... preference-response."

A green check appeared.

Lin's eyes snagged on the number.

0.00.

She didn't know what TW measured, but she understood what zero meant.

Her marriage had been weighed by whatever metric this place used, and it had come up empty.

She looked down at her wrist. She did not remember agreeing to a band. She did not remember consenting to anything beyond stating her purpose.

But a slot had opened in the kiosk's surface, and inside it was a thin strip of pale material waiting, like a tongue waiting to taste.

"What does the band do?" Lin asked.

The kiosk responded without impatience.

"I'm not a citizen," Lin said. "I'm just looking for my wife."

Lin extended her arm.

The band slid out and wrapped around her skin with a smooth organic motion, like something alive finding its home. Warm—body temperature exactly, as if it had been calibrated to her before she arrived. Featureless on the surface, but humming beneath it: data being collected, patterns being learned, her biology being translated into price.

A voice spoke—warm and close, not from the kiosk now but from her wrist.

"Thank you for choosing compression," it said.

Lin flinched. The phrase sounded like a blessing and an invoice.

"Please state your purpose for the record."

Lin took a breath. "I'm here for Nisha. I want to see her. I want to bring her home."

The band warmed.

Lin felt a subtle pulse against her artery, almost like a heartbeat.

And then her own voice came out of her mouth—but the sentence was not hers.

"Subject-Lin now-seek Subject-Nisha. Purpose: preference-response verification."

Lin's jaw dropped.

She hadn't said that.

She hadn't chosen those words.

They had emerged from her throat fully formed, as if the band had reached into her language center and rearranged the furniture.

A tiny line appeared on the screen—so brief she wasn't sure she saw it:

VOICEPRINT: REGISTERED. (For one blink: MATCH... 99.7% — SUBJECT--NI—) Then the line smoothed into: MATCH: VERIFIED.

Lin stared hard, trying to catch the glitch again, but it was gone.

A green checkmark appeared that seemed almost proud of itself.

Lin pressed two fingers to her throat.

Nothing hurt.

That was worse.

A theft should leave a mark. A bruise. A cough. A little blood in the vowel.

Her body had let the sentence through cleanly.

The band whispered, still warm.

"Transition can be intense. Would you like affect support?"

A choice presented like care.

Y/N hovered in her peripheral vision like a polite knife.

Lin said nothing.

Silence was ambiguity.

The band hummed as if noting her refusal without punishing it—yet.

Lin didn't proceed to orientation.

Instead she stepped aside and watched the other intake stations, trying to understand what had just happened to her, trying to see if it happened to everyone.

At the station to her left, a man in his fifties completed intake with calm efficiency, like someone who had rehearsed.

"Subject-Dmitri now-return from external assignment. Purpose: efficiency restoration."

The kiosk accepted without modification. His band didn't glow. He walked away with the unburdened posture of someone who trusted the system to hold his edges.

At the station to her right, something different was happening.

A woman stood with a child—a girl, maybe seven. The girl fidgeted in the way children fidget when their bodies still belong to them. The mother's hand rested on her shoulder—gentle, but not soft. Stay still. Stay correct.

On the counter between them was a small bowl.

Inside the bowl were seeds—ridged brown-green pods.

Cardamom .

The bowl was labeled with a single word:

Lin's throat tightened. A smell-memory rose even without smell, as if her body didn't need permission: Nisha's fingers stained faintly brown after crushing pods, the way she'd lift her hands to Lin's face and say, laughing, "Don't kiss me, I taste like a kitchen."

And another bruise pressed in—because memory is never polite:

Now, watching the child face the kiosk, Lin understood that the system had not invented the first deletion.

It had only professionalized it.

The kiosk prompted:

"Subject-child. Identify the object."

The girl looked at the pods. Concentration pulled her brows together.

"They're... cardamom . My grandmother used to put them in—"

The kiosk cut her off.

"Specificity is non-required. Category-level identification is sufficient. Please rephrase."

The girl blinked. Confused. She looked up at her mother.

The mother's mouth tightened. For an instant Lin saw the fight in her—then saw the fight fold itself away like something expensive.

"It's okay," the mother said quietly. "Just say what they told you to say."

The girl faced the kiosk again.

She took a breath.

When she spoke, her voice had changed—flattened, careful, the voice of someone reciting a script.

"Subject-child prior-use spice-specific token. Subject now-delete. Subject positive-affect toward efficiency gain. Subject now-thank system."

The kiosk glowed green.

The mother gave a single quiet clap—not celebratory, not loud, just correct . Approval delivered at the acceptable volume and duration.

"Good girl," the mother said.

But her voice was flat too, and Lin realized with a small drop of nausea that the mother was speaking the same language the band had tried to put in Lin's mouth—not because she was forced in this moment, but because she had lived with it long enough that it felt like her own.

The girl smiled—small, uncertain. The smile of someone who knows she has done well and doesn't understand what she has lost.

The girl looked down at the bowl.

For one second her mouth shaped the old word.

Nothing came.

She picked up a pod and smelled it.

Her face stayed obedient.

Lin had never seen forgetting happen while the body still remembered.

Lin felt horror rise, clean and sharp.

Then something else happened.

The horror didn't hold its shape.

The band warmed against her skin and the edges of her alarm began to soften, blur, rearrange—like a hand smoothing a wrinkled sheet.

No, Lin thought.

She pressed her nails into her palm—hard.

Pain flared bright and specific.

The band hesitated, as if surprised by a signal it didn't own yet.

Lin didn't answer.

She held the pain because it held her thought in place.

She could still think her own words.

She could still feel her own horror.

But for how long?

Lin walked.

She didn't go to orientation. She wasn't ready to be oriented. Instead she followed the flow of citizens through wide doors into the space beyond.

The atrium was enormous—white and light and quiet in a way that would have been beautiful if it weren't also a method. Plants grew in geometric beds, their greens muted so they wouldn't compete with the architecture. Water ran somewhere, a sound more felt than heard.

Lin felt something almost—dangerously—like relief.

Not emotional relief.

Bodily relief.

Her shoulders dropped without permission. The constant micro-flinch she'd lived inside in the Unaffiliated Zones—waiting for a drone to scream an ad in her ear, waiting for a shove, waiting for prices to change, waiting for the next siren—eased.

The system worked.

That was the first temptation.

Not ideology.

Not propaganda.

Quiet.

Along the walls, screens displayed clean graphics:

Beneath the numbers, slogans rotated in the same calm font:

Less is safer. Less is kinder. Less is free.

Lin stared until the words began to blur.

Less is safer. Fewer words meant fewer misunderstandings. Fewer misunderstandings meant fewer fights. Fewer fights meant—

Peace?

Or only the absence of friction that made life feel real?

Less is kinder. If you couldn't name pain, did you still feel it? If you couldn't name what you'd lost, did you still miss it?

Nisha had believed something like this long before Compression Nation touched her.

Not because she was stupid.

Because she was tired.

Because she had learned somewhere—family, school, the thousand small economies of being a woman in public—that taking up space incurred a bill, and she was always afraid she couldn't pay it.

Nisha had called herself "too much" so many times it started to sound like her name.

A man near the fountain spoke to a woman beside him, his voice calm with the soft pride of someone repeating a success story he believed.

"I used to wake up drowning," he said. "I used to think I was broken. Now the system helps me sleep. My wife says I'm... easier."

Easier.

Lin felt the word land like a bruise.

The band warmed as if to agree.

A father walked past with a boy on his shoulders. The boy made the sound that passed for laughter here—rhythmic, contained. The father's face looked peaceful, unlined.

Lin's chest tightened anyway. Grief rose fast as nausea.

Her heart rate spiked. Her breathing went shallow.

She felt herself starting to spiral—the way she had every night since Nisha left—

The band warmed.

And then, gently, something shifted.

Her heart rate smoothed. Her breathing deepened. A subtle warmth spread through her chest—not emotion, exactly, but calm administered directly into her bloodstream. The panic didn't disappear. It simply moved back, became manageable, became something she could stand beside rather than drown in.

A small line appeared on the inside of her wrist display:

Lin stood very still, feeling artificial calm settle over her like a blanket she hadn't asked for.

It helped.

For twelve seconds Lin was grateful.

The gratitude arrived before the hatred.

That was what made the help dangerous.

A flicker of gratitude rose in her chest—small, involuntary, honest—and she felt sick with it.

Because she understood the bargain now, not as concept but as physiology: relief arriving before consent; warmth arriving before choice; help that worked well enough to feel like care.

This was how Nisha had walked into the machine: not because she wanted to be erased, but because she wanted the pain to stop being so loud.

A guide appeared at Lin's elbow—a young person in the simple citizen clothing, face arranged in professional warmth.

"First visit?" the guide asked gently. The voice was kind. The cadence was the same as the band's. "Transition can be intense."

"I'm looking for my wife," Lin said. She forced the legacy word out anyway. "Nisha."

The guide's smile didn't change, but something flickered behind their eyes—recognition, perhaps, or the memory of recognition.

"Relationship retrieval," the guide said. "Common purpose. The system can help you."

"Can you help me find her?" Lin asked.

The guide didn't deflect. They simply didn't have another structure to stand on.

"The system can help you," they repeated.

Then, too quietly for the nearest wall to enjoy: "Sometimes it does."

The guide's smile stayed in place.

Their eyes did not.

The guide gestured toward a corridor leading off the atrium.

"Relationship Retrieval Office is that way. They'll access her record and explain your options."