

Cumulative Realities by Stefanie Carter Cuthbert

#

“History isn’t something you look back at and say it was inevitable. It happens because people make decisions that are sometimes very impulsive and of the moment, but those moments are

cumulative realities.”

- Marsha P. Johnson

#

The cat’s the first to notice the files are gone.

JoJo pads across the mechanical keyboard, producing a sound like gunfire, and brings the blocky monitor to life. I could ignore it, go back to dozing at the opposite desk, if there wasn’t something about her mew. Quizzical, suggestive of something amiss. I don’t need a language app or implant to tell me that much. I can feel it.

Swivelling my chair round, I wheel across to close the gap. JoJo glitches, turning her fluid movements staccato, as though the frame rate just dropped. It takes a few moments to return to normal, and she jumps down onto the floor.

I trace her with my gaze before turning my attention to the monitor. The small smile on my face fades. A textbox on screen reads: Your network has been penetrated. All files have been encrypted by a strong algorithm. Plus a load of orders, threats, and payment instructions.

Hacked. The entire archive lost.

A few attempts on the keyboard, the mouse, even the page scanner, confirms I’m well and truly shut out of the system. I still try every trick I can think of. Booting up in safe mode, disconnecting from the server,

the network, even turning it off and on again. Nothing works. Always that same message in the middle of the screen.

It doesn't hit me until after I call Navi that we could lose everything. Every book and blog post, every recovered zine, the memoirs, and novels. All of it trapped behind a ransom so steep, selling off the entire street wouldn't cover it.

I don't blame JoJo for fleeing with all the racket I make. I wish I could flee too. Anger and despair jumble up, mutating within, until one's so entrenched in the other, there isn't any meaningful difference. I'm left shredding my throat and undoing all the work I've invested in my voice. My gut hurts, my heartbeat's as scattershot as those mechanical keys, and my eyes sting like I've not slept in a week.

When Navi announces herself, bringing an eighth and a bag of peanut chikki, I can't even find a fake smile.

"That's not gonna help," I say, staring back down at my programmable nails. Pac-Man eats his way from pinkie to thumb, ghosts hot on his hide, and loops back around again.

"It was an emergency, you said. This always helps."

"It's gone, Navi," I say, dropping both hands into my lap. "The whole archive. It's gone."

"Gone, as in—"

"As in some knobhead hacked our system. Everything's trapped behind ransomware. If we don't fork out the crypto in three days, it'll be wiped."

Navi's posture shifts in micro-movements – shoulders rounding back, cocked leg straightening, mouth smoothing out – and all the starker for it. "How much?" she says, reaching for her septum ring with the

fingers of her free hand.

I can't bear to say it out loud. I just point towards the monitor and let her see for herself. The thick display glass and dirty plastic shell are ancient, worlds apart from the rest of our set-up, but it was the only tech that worked with the page scanner. Everything from the last thirty years rejects the old hardware, even with adaptors in place and all the right drivers running. The monitor we lifted from a recycling plant, the tower built piecemeal from spare parts bartered, bought, and begged for over many long months. Good as scrap again, the lot of it.

From the desk, Navi mutters under her breath, cursing in Sanskrit maybe, too quiet to catch. Next thing I know, she's sat beside me rolling a joint.

"It'll help," she says, "you know it will, really."

I don't argue with her. When she sparks up, she passes it my way and, grateful, I accept. "What're we gonna do?" I say, take a long drag, and hand it back.

"Well, the police are a big fat no-no."

"Amen," I say. "Worse than the hackers."

"And the OS on that," Navi says, pointing to the PC, "is so old, the shop's insurance won't cover it."

I glance left to look at her. Her dark shining hair hangs in two tails and the neon red around her eyes is as bright as the display screen a stone's throw outside our window. "What then?"

"A cyber investigator maybe. Someone cheap who knows their shit."

Navi hands me the joint again and I take another few soothing drags. A warm buzz spills down inside me. "How cheap?" I say. "We're barely affording food and hormones as it is."

“We’ll have a whip round then. Let’s at least get a cyber eye down here. Most of them give you free quotes first. If not, we go deeper underground.”

“Fine,” I say, exhaling the smoke I’d held in my lungs the whole time she’d been talking. “But if some cishet white boy comes down here telling me I should’ve updated the firewall or something, I’ll get JoJo to mess him up.”

“You and me both, girl,” Navi says and plucks what’s left of the joint from my fingers.

“What kind of place did you say this was?”

“We didn’t,” I say, glancing over at Navi in her iridescent sari. Two days remain until our files are wiped.

“Oh yeah, this is Tash. She her. Tash,” she says waving my way, “this is Derry. They them.”

First, I thought we’d got a customer, so I slapped on my friendliest expression despite the chaos behind my eyes and slinked over to the checkout. Then with those two chatting away, I assumed she’d picked someone up. On with my sexy face, but turns out it’s a cyber investigator. I wasn’t expecting trench coat and trilby like the monochrome movies Navi puts on for our communal film nights, but come on. Their hair was buzzed short, save for a blue forelock, pinned in place with UV goggles. Dungarees and combat boots wasn’t a combo I guessed would work until I saw them. One strap hung loose revealing a sports bra beneath.

“It’s a queer book shop,” Navi says. “We’re queer.”

“I got that,” the cyber eye says. “I’m just kicking myself for never hearing of you. I don’t get over this way much anymore.”

“It’s kind of a word-of-mouth deal,” I say. “And that’s only half of it. Quarter really. We’re archivists, me and Navi. We find queer books, zines, anything anyone ever printed before the blackout, scan them in page by page, and upload it to our server.”

“The books we sell out front,” Navi says, “the server’s public access, so anyone can read whatever they want. Anything they need.”

“And some piece of shit hacked us,” I say. “I remember when people used to firebomb places like this, throw bricks in the window. Now they just hack us.”

“There’s a lot of copyright infringement going on here,” Derry says in an offhand voice.

“Pfft,” I say. “Copyright just speeds books along to an early grave,” I say. “It’s about erasure, not preservation.”

Derry, grinning, claps their hands together like we’ve just passed some test. “Oki doki, let’s take a look then.”

Navi comes and rests a hand on my shoulder. “I’ll mind the shop, you take Derry to see the PC.”

I lean forward and kiss her and she draws her head back. “I know, I know,” I say. “I need more laser. I swear I’m growing stress stubble right now.”

“I was going to say I love you. And there’s no stubble, you look fine.”

I catch Derry’s attention and lead them through to the stuffy corridor, past the kitchen and toilet and

into the erstwhile storage room me and Navi jury-rigged into an archivist's office.

"Did a bomb go off in here?" Derry says three steps in.

I think it has character, a topography like I'm looking at the London skyline when I squint. Clearly all Derry sees are tower units, glowing screens, power ports, trailing cables, and monitors. In one corner, JoJo dozes on a bundle of old towels stained with camo patterns of bleach from so many dye jobs.

"The electricity costs on this place must be through the roof," they say.

"Between leccy and backstreet hormones, we're constantly on the cusp of going broke," I say, rolling a hand their way. Pac-Man has just nommed a ghost on my nails. "Hence the not being able to afford the ransom."

"Nine times out of ten, they don't back off when you do pay."

"Speaking of, how much are you costing us?"

Derry bends to inspect the monitor, tapered fingers tracing the mechanical keyboard. "Nothing."

"Nothing yet, you mean?"

"No, I mean nothing. Zilch, zero, nada. Other synonyms are available."

I cock my head like JoJo whenever a fly buzzes nearby (which, in this hole, is often). "Sorry, what?"

"All of this," Derry says, circling a finger above their head, "is pro-bono. My family made a packet mining tantalum. When the shortages reached critical, they sold up and we've been living easy for years. That's as boring as it sounds, so I find places like you that are trying to do something good and kick against the pricks, and give them a helping hand."

“An ethical cyber eye? Didn’t think you existed.”

“We’re not so rare, except most don’t come from the sort of money my family are rolling in.” The monitor screen reflects in Derry’s eyes, making it look like they’ve had them lensed. “Don’t get me wrong, I wish I could hand the whole fortune over to people who need it, but my entire family would need to snuff it before I got more than my monthly allowance. It’s better this way, at least for now, and I’m not sat bored at home all day. I’ve mostly made peace with people thinking I’m a tourist slumming it in queer town.”

“So,” I say, sidling up alongside them, “about our predicament. You couldn’t just pay the ransom for us?”

“We’re not giving these guys a penny. Trust me, I’ll get your files back.”

I guess I have no other choice.

#

While Derry’s busy working their magic, I help serve customers out front with Navi. A bi boy comes in requesting polyamorous romance novels; the spicier the better. Hope he likes them way up on the Scoville scale. A little while later, a fire bright woman of middle years brings us flowers – real, honest to god carnations – thanking us for cracking her egg. Then there’s a mean trade on graphic novels when a group of teens sporting roller blades and modded fox ears come in and almost clear out the whole shelf.

By then, the day’s wearing thin and Derry hasn’t made themself known.

“What if they can’t fix it?” I say. “What if we really do lose the archive? That’s our whole history, Naav. It’s everything. On the off chance anyone has heard of Stonewall anymore, they all assume it was a bunch of white cis folks giving the police the middle finger, all civil and nice like. I mention Marsha P.

Johnson and even people who come in here don't know who the fuck I'm talking about. That's barely the tip of the iceberg."

"Tash, you're preaching to the choir," Navi says, filling the gap in the graphic novel shelf with what stock we have left.

"Most of the time, no one gives a fuck, but we need to preserve all this, keep our voices alive, because once it's gone, it's just so much easier to... to—"

"To wipe us out?"

The closeness of her voice startles me. Last I saw her, she was still knelt by the bookshelves, not up with me behind the checkout counter. She reaches up and places her hands on my cheeks. Her fingers smell like ink and weed, dependable and comforting as ever.

"We're not going to lose the archive," she says. The dark of her eyes contains multitudes if you're close enough to notice. And there I am, reflected along with them, and right now I don't doubt her.

I bend to kiss her and we share a moment of calm at the counter until a cough announces another presence.

"I've made some progress," Derry says.

Navi, giggling like she's got away with shoplifting, says, "Would you like to join us Mx Cyber Investigator?"

"Another time, maybe. You'll want to see this."

I glance again at Navi's eyes and leave her arms to follow Derry into the archive room. The smell of silicon, hot plastic, and sticky old wires hangs heavy in the air. JoJo's still tucked up in the same position,

snoozing for all intents.

“What have you got?” I say, standing by the PC.

“Bad news, I couldn’t break through the ransomware,” Derry says. They pull what looks like a boiled sweet from their dungaree pocket, crinkle the wrapper away, and pop it in their mouth. “It’s watertight. I’d need to access the same device – or at least the same network – the hack originated from.”

“O-kay that’s a lot of bad news,” I say, glancing down at my nails. Inky, Blinky, Pinky, and Clyde are hemming Pac-Man into a corner. “There is good news, right?”

“It’s a step in the right direction. I managed to backtrack their encryption and trace the hack.”

“So where are they?” Navi says, beside me. “What?” she adds, catching my eye. “We haven’t got any customers and I locked up first.”

She fidgets with her septum piercing when her anxiety’s up. Oh, she’s great at pretending she’s all Hindu about everything, but she always gives herself away. I keep telling her she’ll need her nose re-doing the way she yanks on that thing.

“Some dive in Twickenham,” Derry says. “I did some digging and found it’s the HQ of the Corsairs, a small fry right wing collective.”

“GDP has tanked, food banks on every corner, backstreet’s the only way to access affordable healthcare after the NHS imploded,” I say, counting on my fingers, “and we’ve had seven PMs one after the other nobody fucking voted for. And these dickweeds focus on making life worse for queers.”

“No arguments here,” Derry says, clacking the sweet around their mouth. “The trouble is, these dickweeds know their tech.”

“That sounds like you’ve got a plan,” Navi says. She’s left her septum alone. That’s something.

“I do, as it happens,” Derry says. “It won’t be easy, but I think we can pull it off. I’ll just need one thing from you first.”

“I thought this was all free?” I say.

“Oh, it is. Ethical cyber eye, remember? But I wasn’t talking about money. I’ll need your cat.”

From the corner of my eye, I see JoJo’s ears prick up.

#

Between financial fraud scandals, sex trafficking gangs, and self-driving cars’ habit of killing people, public transport is a nightmare. In the end, Navi and I decide to take a train. She packs mace in her handbag and I make sure I tuck a knife up my sleeve.

After an hour riding the train from Camden Town, we follow the directions to Derry’s pinged location and find them with a laptop on the ruin of a public bench. A pile of plastic wrappers lies beside them.

“Can I bum one of your edibles?” I say, pointing to the pile.

“Oh,” Derry says, smirking, “they’re just cough drops. I got hooked when I had covid way back when. They help me concentrate.”

Probably for the best with the price of weed these days. I lower my backpack and sit down beside Derry. Unfastening the buckles and inside zip encourages JoJo to jump out and inspect her strange new surroundings.

“I’ll need the cat’s password and any encryption codes she’s got,” they say.

I give the codes over and that's it. Derry's inside the ones and zeroes of JoJo's brain.

We get plenty of hackers come by the shop, sometimes to browse or buy, other times for a safe place to be themselves without getting hate-crimed. This one woman, Imani, she came out pre-millennial and has hacked everyone. You name it, she's had a pop. When she's not at her computer, she's hounding us for obscure eighties manga. But I'm about as good at hacking as I am writing my own stories. So watching Derry makes my eyes glaze in about thirty seconds.

It must be fifteen minutes before they speak again. "And the cat's good to go."

I glance down at JoJo, still as a taxidermy. Only the flickering code in her eyes gives her away. "What did you do to her?"

"Smuggled her onto the Corsair's network and turned her into a walking storage device. And there's this."

Derry presses an arrow key on the laptop and JoJo moves forward. A thumb on the spacebar and she jumps. The shift key doubles her pace.

"Same controls as Quake," they said. "Neat, huh?"

"You hacked my cat!"

"It's only temporarily."

I glance disparagingly at Navi but say no more. Instead, I lean back on the barely-holding-it-together bench to watch Derry's screen. The feed from JoJo's eyes displays with crystal clarity.

"Does she have any guns?" I say.

“It’s your cat,” Derry says.

“We found her actually,” Navi says. “She was a mess, just lying there in the gutter. It must have taken eighteen months, but we’ve got some amazing customers. Everyone pitched in. They all knew how much we wanted a cat. But who can afford to look after a flesh and blood pet anymore?”

Derry helps themselves to another cough drop. Pretty sure too many of those will give you the runs. “I like budgies myself.”

Me and Navi both watch rapt as Derry controls our cat, taking her right around the housing block. They find the place, use the laptop’s touchpad to manoeuvre the eyes, and locate an open window. A few taps of the spacebar gets JoJo inside. Barely four steps in and we see the first swastika on scene.

I’d expected bomb making equipment, stolen riot gear, but it’s tech everywhere. Wherever JoJo looks, there’s a tablet or computer set up, cables trailing like leeches all over the place. Some people sleep on bare mattresses on the floor, others sit around a cramped dining table staring into tablets and scoffing Mein Kampf-Os or whatever these turds eat.

None of them notice JoJo though. Derry manoeuvres her past the kitchen, up the stairs, and hides in the airing cupboard.

“That’ll do,” they say. “Now comes the hard part.”

“That wasn’t the hard part?” I say.

“Now I’ve got the cat inside, I need to hack them to get your files back and wait for the transfer to finish. All without alerting any of them I’m doing it. May as well get comfy, we could be here a while.”

Say this for the Corsairs, they've turned paranoia into a superpower. When they aren't banging on about replacement theory or keeping transes away from kids, they're running rings around cyber security specialists. But then, spending all day in your bedroom really only leaves tech and masturbation. There's only so much you can spend on the latter before you need a breather.

"And..." Derry says, drawing it out, "I've got your files."

"No shit," I say, "you did it?"

"All seven hundred and fifteen gigs. Now I just need to get your cat out of there and we're good to go. I'll also be updating your machine's security, just so you know."

Navi throws her arms around me and all but sticks her tongue in my mouth, right there on the bench. We can barely hold hands outside. PDAs aren't for people like us. But here and now, I don't care. I kiss her back and hang the consequences. The archive's safe, we deserve to celebrate.

"Oh. Oh shit," Derry says beside me.

For a moment, I think some thug has clocked us holding each other, but it isn't me and Navi who's been noticed. It's JoJo.

A crack like broken glass as Derry bites down on their cough drop. "Okay, okay, I can do this. It's just like Quake. You were good at Quake. Masterful, in fact. Made it an art form. Be like Quake."

I glance at Navi but she's too focused on the screen to notice. I turn back to see the frantic first-person feed as JoJo escapes out the same window Derry snuck her in.

"I just need to—"

The gunshot tears through the sky, a sound like a hardback dropped to a bare floor. The screen displays static, a snowstorm you can only catch obscure shapes through.

“What the fuck happened?” I say, like I don’t already know.

“Mobility’s gone,” Derry says. “Memory’s still intact for now.”

“What are we supposed to do?”

“There’s nothing else we can do. Once they hack the memory encryption, they’ll see what files we were trying to take. They’ll lock them down even tighter. Maybe they’ll just delete them out of spite. I can try another route but...”

I sit with that for a few moments, staring at the static. There’s movement. Someone picks JoJo up to take back to the house. No, not if I stop them first.

“Tash, where are you going?” Navi calls as I break into a run.

“If we want to save the archive, we have like no time to waste.”

Her sandals slap against the pavement behind me as I leg it around the corner to the front of the house. I fold two fingers up my sleeve, grazing the handle of my knife. Slowing, I approach the lanky guy carrying JoJo by the tail towards the front door.

“Hey, what have you got there?” I say as Navi joins me.

The guy turns, JoJo a pendulum hanging from his fist, and sets his flinty gaze on us. “Fuck off, dykes,” he says. He still has the gun in his other hand, from some dark web site or his Nazi cronies. Not that there’s a shortage of guns in London.

“Aww, poor kitty,” I say, stepping closer and gripping the knife handle tight. “Is she hurt bad?”

Okay, it’s just like Derry said. Like Quake. Get your enemy in sight, aim weapon, attack. It’s as easy as that. A metre between us, I pull out the knife and slash out at his gun hand.

But he pulls back, dodging the attack, and raises his gun level with the bridge of my nose. I suck a sudden broken breath in as I realise just how fucked we are.

“Hey, bell end,” Navi says, snatching the guy’s attention.

His eyes widen but he’s got no time to react as Navi lets her mace loose in the little twerp’s eyes. He screams, drops JoJo and the gun, and clamps his tattooed hands to his face.

I grab our cat and me and Navi make a break for it.

#

We’re on the train back to Camden before the adrenaline wears off. Fatigue and anxiety do their dreadful work on me and I slump in my seat. The whole carriage reeks of cheap skunk and piss and someone’s playing buzzsaw music way too loud. At least we’d snagged JoJo and avoided getting curb-stomped by the Corsairs. Poor thing is in a right state, wearing a mangled fur coat and leaking clear fluid all over the place.

Navi sits beside me, knuckles grazing mine in place of actually holding hands, but I’m staring at Derry’s screen.

“You’re quiet,” I say.

They minimise one window and bring up another – a map, tracking the train to our shop. “It’s too far,” they say, just above a whisper. When I prod, they add, “The cat’s haemorrhaging power. She’s already

pretty scorched up inside and a sudden power cut could corrupt her memory beyond saving. Once she goes, a recovery will be fifty-fifty at best. The only server she's backed up on is yours, which is still locked down with ransomware."

"Do we have any other options?"

"We either hope we can recover the files, or find somewhere else that's secure to store them. Another device on the same network," they say, before I can ask about using their laptop.

It only takes a second before I answer. "Use me."

"Babe, no," Navi says. "Not a good idea."

"Good or not, it's seriously our last resort."

"I'm sorry, what do you mean?" Derry says, looking up at us. Their lips are stained cherry red from cough drops, their eyes stitched with tiny blood vessels.

I flash my fingernails. "Each one's a screen, they're wired to an implant in my arm, with the files stored in a micro-server in my abdomen." I lower my hand as Derry makes a WTF face. "The idea was to make myself open access, or offer extra storage whenever anyone needed it. Until people kept filling me up with Rick Rolls and porn."

Derry shakes their head. "Remember the cloud? I used to love the cloud. Everything was so much easier."

"Yeah, before tech bros ruined it for everyone," I say. "Yay for local servers."

"Whoever thought internet cafés and LAN parties would make a comeback?" Navi says.

“Welcome to the future.” To Derry, I add, “I’ve got a terabyte, more than enough for the archive.”

“Is your implant hooked up to your brain?” they say.

“Too expensive,” I say, shaking my head. “Me and Navi decided to stick to dumb phones to keep in touch with our crowd.”

“Okay, good. No chance of frying your mind. Well, what are we waiting for?”

The implant’s touch operated. I use my thumb against the fingernails to input the access code and then Derry does the rest. When all’s said and done, it’s only moving files from one storage device to another. Things are finished before we reach our stop.

“How do you feel?” Derry says.

“Like I don’t have tens of thousands of books inside me. Sadly,” I say, turning to Navi, “you know I’m a size queen.”

Snorting, she slaps me on the shoulder.

A smirk makes its way onto Derry’s face too. “Have a look at your nails,” they say, slipping their laptop into the bag.

I glance down. On one hand, Pac-Man continues his Sisyphean motions around the maze. The nails on the other are black, as if I was flirting with goth all over again.

“Wait for it,” Derry says before I can ask what I’m looking at.

And there it is. A black and white cat walks across my nails, passing from one onto the other. Stopping to lick its paw here, breaking into a run there.

“No way, JoJo?”

“I ported her personality and behavioural files across. It wasn’t much extra. She’s safe there while I repair her body.”

“You what now?” I say as Derry stuffs said body into the backpack and the train slows to a stop.

“Consider it compensation for me getting her messed up in the first place.” Derry stands, slings their bag over their shoulder, and picks up the other one with JoJo inside. “I’ve got another train to catch.” They pull their goggles down, tap at the air, and head out almost the same moment the doors slide open.

Realising it’s our stop too, Navi and I leap up and throw ourselves out onto the platform.

#

Film night with the queers. Johnny Guitar projects onto a dust sheet pinned from corner to corner on the shop’s far wall. Plumes of weed smoke and vape clouds hang overhead, obscuring the projector now and then. No one seems to mind. Bags of snacks are being shared around and some folks prefer to sit and read anyway.

Navi and I pass a joint back and forth as we lean behind the checkout, minding the projector if anything bugs out.

“How is it?” Navi says, tapping my bandaged wrist.

“Still sore,” I say. “But not as much as before. At least it’s stopped bleeding through.”

Once the port heals and my body stops trying to reject the implant, we’ll be back in business. The modder wanted cash up front, of course, but after a quick fundraiser, asking around for donations, and

selling one or two of our rarer volumes, I was able to pay for the implant in full. Plus extra for the antibiotics so it won't kill me.

Give it another week, two tops, and I'll be able to plug the page scanner directly into my body where everything we find will be safe inside my own private server. Once a month, I'll port the files over to another maintained by Derry, so if anything ever happens to me – and barring an EMP – they'll be preserved for the ages.

No one is taking our history away from us, our stories, our pain, grief and joy, our love and dreams. They're ours by rights and we'll do whatever it takes to save and share them.

Judging by the mew JoJo gives me, she thinks so too. I bend down, scratch her freshly repaired head, and straighten up to focus back on the film. Navi puts her arm around me and hands me the last few tokes left of the joint.

END