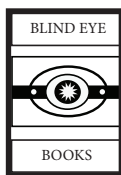


SMOKETOWN

TENA D. JOHNSON



Blind Eye Books
blindeyebooks.com

Smoketown
by Tenea D. Johnson

Published by:
Blind Eye Books
1141 Grant Street
Bellingham, WA 98225
blindeyebooks.com

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner without written permission of the publisher, except for the purpose of reviews.

Edited by Nicole Kimberling
Cover art by Sam Dawson

This book is a work of fiction and as such all characters and situations are fictitious. Any resemblances to actual people, places or events are coincidental.

First edition August 2011
Copyright 2008 by Tenea D. Johnson
Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN 978-0-9789861-5-5

1

Anna Armour had had her fair share of failed resurrections. There had been the lichen when she was three and the dragonfly at six—the sad twisted platypus that her mother took away before it ruined her tenth birthday. Since the day of her mother’s death when Anna was fourteen, she hadn’t brought anything to life.

Now, she only wanted to bring someone back to her, but this feat proved the most elusive. Sixteen years of ignoring that part of herself had paid off though: She had traded her secret gift for a well-honed endurance. So no matter how tired Anna became she always carried her determination and her regret. Even now, after working a double shift, she picked up her pace as she crossed the street in a throng of other warehouse workers. The strap of her pack, heavy with Peru’s package, dug into her shoulder. Anna hooked one thumb under the strap and lifted it momentarily to ease the strain. But she never slowed her gait. She didn’t want to miss the last train to the post office before the long holiday break.

Looking up from the crowded street, she saw the glint of the 16:37 train reflecting sunlight as it rounded the last curve before it reached the station. It was six minutes early. Anna took off running.

A shifting maze of people stood between her and the train station. She tried to pick a path, dodging people as best she could. Her pack bounced against her tailbone. Anna excused herself as she twirled around her supervisor. The entrance to

the train station glowed in front of her, the overhead giene lights brighter even than the sunlight shining on the sidewalk. She squinted against the glaring lights as she hit the stairs. Taking them two at a time, she pulled on the banister with each stride, propelling her body forward.

At the top of the stairs, she nearly collided with a young man, knocking his shoulder back so hard that for an awkward second he seemed to be dancing. Anna yelled apologies over her shoulder and focused on the approaching train. The smooth silver of its cylinder turned matte black as it entered the station. The train slid silently to a stop, the door opening as it came to rest. She slowed to a trot and hopped over the lip of the threshold. In two strides she swung the bag around to her front, lowered her weight onto the nearest seat and strapped in.

It was cold inside the train. The air conditioning chilled the sweat on her brow and she suppressed a shiver. Across from her hung a transit map. It showed the circles of Leiodare's rail system as well as the distant outlines of the other city-states that lay beyond the surrounding jungle. She chuckled quietly looking at it. The scale of the maps in Leiodare was always off—as if it were the largest city-state in the southeastern US when it clearly wasn't, perhaps the third largest at best. But inside the city that didn't matter. As the train zipped further down the line, Anna looked above the map to the time glowing blue. Seventeen minutes till close; she should just make it.

At the post office, battalion members stood sentry at a new security gate just outside the entrance. Anna joined the short line, shaking her head imperceptibly. The gate made no sense. Though Leiodaran paranoia dictated that people should be searched as they left the post office, even the city's unstable framework of beliefs couldn't make sense of examining people as they entered the post office. No one smuggled contraband to the outside world; Leiodare was the city surrounded by an

SMOKETOWN

invisible fence after all. But in the short time she'd been in Leiodare, Anna had noticed that around the outbreak's anniversary, all manner of new and exotic municipal neuroses took hold. Last year, there had been talk of elevating the all-encompassing barrier further into the city's airspace. Only the cost had quieted that particular fervor. So this year she supposed they'd decided to erect the ominous red gates outside all the post offices and ports of entry.

Anna clenched her jaw as she looked around, waiting for the woman in front of her to enter the security gate. After that woman had passed inspection, the battalion member on the right waved Anna through.

As she stepped across the red threshold, a shrill alarm sounded.

Anna froze, her hands already up to protect herself. The battalion guards pushed past her, running to the bank of post office boxes near the exit, weapons drawn. Their boots sent flowers flying as they crossed the grassy median and joined a circle of other soldiers whose attentions were trained on the ground. Anna could see a man stretched out there, with hands behind his head.

She rushed through the gate and into the post office.

Standing at the counter she wondered what the man had done. Had it been a false alarm or had he been so stupid as to try and smuggle birds through the post? Everyone knew that Leiodare had outlawed birds twenty-five years ago. The city was infamous for it. No birds could be found in the city's beautiful gardens, on its houses, or in its trees. Smugglers, and often even suspected smugglers, served no less than five years of hard labor maintaining the electric avian barrier that surrounded the city, stretching into the sky, and across Leiodare, just below the path of planes. She couldn't imagine what price could tempt someone to risk that sentence. But Anna knew, perhaps better than most, that people did crazy things

for paltry rewards.

She removed the package from her bag and placed it on the automated belt in front of her. The warm yellow light of the autoscan briefly illuminated its contents: the notched circle of an ancient viewfinder reel and chunks of unrefined crystal rock.

“Invalid addressee,” the autoscan belched back.

“Override for correction.” Anna spoke quietly. This always happened. “Peru, person, not Peru, location. Shipping location is Mail Depot 92-G. Confirm with sender shipping history.”

As she waited for the autoscan to locate the records, she inserted a receiving slip into the other side of the machine so she could pick up a package of her own. In seconds, the belt brought up a matchbox-sized parcel with a small barcode printed onto the outside. Anna grabbed it and placed it into her pack. She continued to wait for her package to Peru, her gaze traveling over it. As always, Anna had written her return address in exaggerated, long block letters, spelling it crookedly so that Peru would recognize her hand.

The autoscan finally chimed its acceptance and the belt clicked on, moving the package into the recesses of the post office, and hopefully closer to Peru. If not, perhaps the package she had received could close the gap.

Anna waited till she arrived at home to open it. There, she stood at the high kitchen counter, looking down at the package. The virtu real inside, red and small as a quarter, held her hopes. If Peru had been the virtuoso who made the real, she would be able to tell by the frequency, the feel of the real, and then because she knew where the real had come from, she'd have some clue as to where Peru was living. Every real had a neurological signature and Anna knew Peru's nearly as well as her own. She removed her virtu rig from the kitchen drawer and placed the darkened glasses over her eyes. She made sure to line the 'trodes up with the proper points on her skull and

SMOKETOWN

slipped the real inside the loading door at the temple. She pressed the load button and hit “Play.”

Instantly, a sea of sands stood in front of her, perhaps somewhere in Idaho, she supposed. Heat radiated up from the ground in visible waves. The perspective turned and looked down at a small pool of water. It inched closer to the water, and to Anna’s disbelief she saw the face of the person recording the real. The virtuoso wore the standard virtu’s darkened aviator glasses that were part of every virtu rig, but below them Anna saw a caramel-skinned woman with full lips and high cheekbones. The woman actually smiled and waved into the pool of water.

Anna jerked the rig off in disgust. Amateur! A virtuoso never showed her face in a real—perhaps if it had been ordered custom, but never on a general disc. Everyone knew that. It was the first thing Peru had taught her about recording reals and even as a formerly sheltered kid of fourteen Anna had never made that mistake. No chance it was Peru.

How would she ever find her? Anna had been two years in this city, waiting for Peru, or rather trying to bring Peru to her. Anna believed staying in Leiodare was her best chance of reuniting with Peru because Leiodare’s lucrative virtu assignments would have beckoned to her. And Anna still remembered the rapture on Peru’s face as they sat, watching the travel advertisements for Leiodare while they rode down the River Ruelle, ferrying from their last home to the next.

Peru insisted on calling every place home. She said otherwise they would be lost, and as much as Peru loved the dark, she despised the feeling of being lost in it. But with each passing month Anna’s doubts grew.

She could tell it would be a dreading night. To calm herself, she decided to draw.

Anna sat down in a corner of her apartment, sketchbook on her lap as she leaned over and tried to think of what to

draw. Tinny music from her downstairs neighbor switched on and floated up through the floorboards. The bass vibrated the tiny cymbals that he sold on holidays. Some of Anna's other drawings, half-finished faces formed in graphite, covered the floor immediately around her.

Two corners of the apartment were lit; the rest dim as always, awash only in the faint amber lighting from the distant Spires. A single drawing lamp dangled down from the ceiling. Opposite the lamp, a bay window dominated the short west wall. Light poured in from it and melded with the bright yellow light emanating from the giene spa.

Tonight the graphite didn't satisfy her. The lines were too fine—not just for the dark, but for her mood. She grabbed a pack of charcoals she'd found in a damaged shipment at the warehouse. The charcoal had looked promising when she'd discovered it. Each piece was wrapped in soft red paper, and as she opened the top and tore the paper halfway down, the charcoal itself was revealed. It looked to be drop black—a soft, expensive, dense black—of a quality rarely seen by picker/packer girls like her, living on blue grains and memory. The charcoal felt warm and right in her hands, an unspoken desire satisfied.

Angling the pad closer, she began to draw. With the first motion of her wrist, the char marked so deeply it seemed to create a space in the paper. She drew her next-door neighbor with deep shades of drop black. Anna sketched the hollows of her face, the ferocity of her eyes, the wrinkles that spoke of years she would never share. She drew the morning callers. Though the charcoal muted their colorful robes, it kept the beauty of her favorite caller's jawline, the strength of her chin, the richness of her face.

When she'd finished the drawings, Anna straightened and stretched slowly, grunting past the aches and pains the warehouse had left in her. She walked over to the other bright

SMOKETOWN

corner of the loft and hung the portraits inside the small giene spa where light poured down in cleansing ultraviolet. The light was a luxury she could never afford, but one required by law. Days before she moved in, workmen had hurriedly affixed the bank of UV lights and installed the wash stall—thus converting the old bathroom into a proper giene spa. Feeling the beginnings of exhaustion creep up, Anna crossed the room to her bed and lay down.

The birds were an afterthought: a last late-night flash as she was already sinking into dreams. The vision of the swans came to her there, in the in-between. Two tiny cygnets, downy and light grey in their youth, glided across the river where she and Peru had spent a spring harvesting butterflies for traveling money. While Peru picked up their pay, Anna sat on the bank of the river, watching as the two orphan cygnets floated on the current. Despite her fatigue, Anna wanted to draw this last image before going to sleep. She rolled over and reached for the sketchbook. She leaned against the wall, her legs still under the covers, the pad stretched out before her, a clean new page shining and the drop black already staining her fingers. The image of two birds came quickly, not drawn so much as surfaced from the black she'd surrounded them with. Charcoal covered nearly the whole page.

The birds' bills were black; their eyes were of it, but the rest of them, their sweet soft bodies, were the only white left on the page. They radiated off of it. They seemed soft enough to touch. Her fingers hovered above the birds, wanting to feel them without smudging the image. As she held her hand there, something tickled the center of her palm. Tingling spread across her hand. When she moved it back, her finger touched something hard—the tip of a black bill.

Anna stared down at a small cygnet. It perched on the paper in her lap, watching the space to its left. The second swan rose from the sketchpad as smoothly as if an elevator

had brought it to where it and its companion stood, staring up at her.

“Shit,” Anna cursed quietly.

At moments like this, turning moments she called them, thoughts didn’t work. They got stuck somewhere in the back of her mind, and a feeling, usually something between wonder and nausea took over. If she was lucky that was all. Cursing was her attempt to begin to think again. Sometimes it worked. This time it didn’t, but it felt good to say. She stared down at her steady hands, felt a slow, quiet warmth spill into her chest and tried to recognize the feeling—not wonder, not nausea, not—. One of the cygnets took a step closer; its down brushed her hand.

Anna’s brain lurched back into motion, shot out a few more choice expletives, then stopped, stalled by her realization.

“Shouldn’t be possible,” she whispered. As she watched the birds in her lap, it was relief, still and steady that spread through her. Of all things, relief.

“Shit. Shitting. Shit it,” she said. She looked away, trying to think. Her gaze traveled up the wall of window across from her. Her reflection was bright and clear against the black glass. It sat in a circle of light, the covers around her dappled with charcoal dust. She’d left a streak of it on her jaw without noticing. It stood out on her skin, part of it obscured by the black spirals of hair that radiated out from her head and brushed her shoulders. Beyond her reflection, the brightness of the distant Spires lit up its section of Leiodare. Anna focused past the image of herself and onto the city. Already the night looked lighter, as if dawn were a short nap away and here she sat, a crime on her lap and unleashed power in her hands.