

Futures

Terraforming the heart

How to build a better world. By M. E. Garber



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

Jinnan leant away from her microscope, willing the miniature biomes to grow. *Grow dammit!* Her mother's voice echoed in her ear: "You could have done better!" She thrust away exhaustion and worked.

If this one collapses, I'll botch the plant round, and might lose the whole competition.

No. Her parents had given up too much to get her here. She *had* to win the contest. As terraforming artists, winners and their families moved out of the Deadends.

Failure was not an option.

She clenched her jaw and checked the mixer's readouts.

In the near silence of the sterile room, the door's snap made her jump. Across the room, Michel reflexively clicked off his noter. Jinnan covered the readouts on her protein mixer.

Demarest Kinney, the contest administrator, strode into the room like she didn't care that trespass was forbidden. There was a wildness in her eyes, and tension pulled her lips too tight.

"Michel, come with me. Carmella Ramirez is in the hospital. Jinnan, cover Carmella's timed chores."

"But —" Jinnan began. Last night, Carmella had whispered to her about "sharing resources". She'd ignored the little cheat, but it still stung. And now Demarest wanted Jinnan to cover her duties? "This is a contest. Michel's her partner. I'm solo."

"The contest is momentarily suspended! You've been granted access to Carmella's noter. Don't let her experiments fail until Michel can take them over, and your cooperation will be duly noted. As will your refusal."

Ms Kinney swept the stunned-looking Michel out of the room.

Jinnan spluttered and fumed. This was ridiculous. How could she oversee her competitors' work along with her own?

But Demarest's threat was obvious.

She stomped to Carmella's locker, where Jinnan's fingerprint overrode the lock. She withdrew the noter and swatted it on. For the

next hour, Jinnan caught up on her competitors' timed experiments. She added oxygen to their lichen dome, and sulfur to the sea-vent aspect. Her eyebrows raised at the elegance of their plans. Although they were Deadends like her, their work was thorough. They were behind in points, though, and falling into third place behind Jinnan and DeNalya Kim, a rich Trust-funder in for glory.

She shook off her admiration. Jinnan had to lead her family out of their Deadend, that great swathe of high mortality, low education and high unemployment. Without these contests, there was no hope of exiting, short of death. This was her only chance.

She followed her competitors' well-organized instructions to the letter. If their work failed, it wouldn't be *her* fault. Only theirs.

Near the end of the carefully labelled electronic documents, Jinnan found an untitled file. A quick glance showed it to be a personal journal. She returned to her experiments, but thoughts teased her. Could Carmella have

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hidden some clue to their next-stage plans in it?

Michel didn't return by the evening, and no one told Jinnan what was happening. Accentuating a yawn, Jinnan locked the shared workshop and went back to her room, carrying Carmella's noter in her bag. She shrugged away an itch of guilt. If it was cheating, they shouldn't have given her access, right?

She crawled into bed, pulled the blanket over her head, and opened a long, rambling account of Carmella's personal life, with bits detailing their experiments dotted through it.

"I need to win so much, but Jinnan *hates* me and I'll lose my nerve alone. So I'm teaming with Michel. I hope he's as good as everyone else thinks. My family depends on it."

A jolt ran down Jinnan's arms, raising goosebumps. Carmella's thoughts sounded remarkably like her own.

But seeing herself cast as a villain? It just wasn't true.

She shook her head and kept reading. Carmella came from an even worse Deadend than Jinnan. And her family expected her to win so she could support the 20 of them. Better schools, better jobs, medical care – the normal list.

Jinnan's eyes blurred. She needed to win, but

Jinnan only had her parents to lift. And sure, her parents nagged, but she'd long since learnt to browbeat herself better than they could. She was self-motivated.

Carmella was just whining, she decided. Eyes narrowed, she skimmed ahead to the last entries.

"Jinnan's beating us. Can't see around it, and we're all falling behind that rich girl. Abuela says we Deadends should work together, but I don't know. Michel says it's too late to change plans now, but he's scared too. His father's hospice care is on the line.

"Haven't slept in two days, but when I talked to Jinnan today, she thought I was trying to cheat and ignored me. I want to cry, but there's no time. Just have to keep going.

"I'm sorry I'm not good enough. Fifteen sleeping pills tonight and my family gets hush money from the contest. Sorry, Abuela – it's the only way I see to 'work together'."

Jinnan went cold. *She's dead, and I could have prevented it.*

The knowledge gnawed at her. She could lie awake all night, staring at the ceiling. Or she could do something.

"I'm self-motivated," she reminded herself. So she rose and went to work.

The next morning, the contest resumed.

Michel entered the workshop, and Jinnan greeted him with a hesitant smile.

"Heya," she said. "I, uh, know what happened." She tapped Carmella's noter. "And, I hope you don't mind. But I combined our experiments."

Michel stared at her. "You what?"

"I made us partners. See, your flora results were better than mine, but my atmosphere is AUs better than yours. And I combined bits of your soil with mine ..." She trailed off at his stare.

"You're ... working with me?" His voice squeaked.

She nodded. "And Carmella."

He paled, flinched and stared at the floor. "She's ... dead."

"Yeah, I guessed. But her family. They'll need help. When we win –"

"When?" He sounded unsure.

She offered him a vicious smile. "If we stick together, who's going to beat us?"

Itinerant speculative fiction writer **M. E. Garber** has never been a terraforming artist. She occasionally blogs at <http://megarber.net> and tweets pics of her ridiculously photogenic dog @m_e_garber13.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

M. E. Garber reveals the inspiration behind *Terraforming the heart*

Contests to the death are a big SFF trope. There's only one winner, only one person or family saved. But in real life, better things happen faster when smart, dedicated humans collaborate on a common cause.

The key breakthrough writing this story came when I wrote to myself: "She recognizes herself in the other's girl's pain and anguish," which led to Jinnan seeing herself as a villain.

Every villain thinks of themselves as a hero.

And when the pressure and stakes are high, it's all too easy to consider winning is worth anything. That the ends justify any means. But your opponent – who isn't necessarily your enemy, after all – has an entirely different interpretation of your actions.

When Jinnan realizes too late that she made a deadly mistake, she takes the only step she can to make reparations to Carmella's ghost.

