

Power of the People

by Michael P Calligaro

"But--"

Teresa put a finger to her lover's lips, silencing him. Though her soul wailed in anguish, she managed to keep her expression firm. "We've been through this. You have to go. It's the right thing to do."

Walter frowned and stared deep into her eyes. It took all of Teresa's willpower to not break down right then. He pulled her close, kissed her one last time, and then drew her into a hug. Teresa wished she could hold him forever, but the final boarding call forced them to break apart.

"Will you write a song for me?"

She smiled. "I'll do anything for you."

He nodded, "Write a song about a man trapped on a colony ship. Of course, you might have to break out of Council-accepted style to do it. Oh, and write a story too. I love your stories."

Teresa nodded and, in a voice more timid than she'd intended, said, "I love you."

Walter smiled sadly. "And I will always love you." He touched her cheek. "Good bye, Teresa."

She frowned, "Good bye."

Walter walked through the gate. A few steps in, though, he stopped and looked back with what appeared to be hope in his eyes. Teresa had to look down at the ground to keep from running to him and begging him not to go. When she finally looked up, he was gone.

She didn't stay to watch the shuttle take off. There was nothing more to see. And, the longer she stayed, the more likely she was to fall apart in the public terminal. In a haze, she turned her back on the gate and trudged toward the tram stop. But, just before turning the corner, she stopped and looked back. She was the one who had convinced Walter that he couldn't pass up the opportunity to join the colony. She'd done an amazing job of putting what was best for him before her own needs, just as a lover should. But, when she looked back, she still hoped to see him rushing back to her.

Walter was nowhere to be seen.

A whoosh followed by the sharp whine of brakes announced the arrival of the tram. Its doors opened, immediately deluging a solid mass of baggage-laden people. It wouldn't stay long. Teresa looked back to the gate one last time, sighed deeply, and rushed down the hallway to catch the tram.

Oblivious to the people around her, she stumbled into one of the hard plastic seats. There she pulled out her datapad and brought up the rejection mail again. She knew each and every word by heart, but she read through it again anyway. She then brought up the copy of Walter's acceptance mail. The Council felt that the colony would need entertainers, but it seemed that they didn't want a duet.

The tram dumped her into the main tubeway terminal. Unsurprisingly, the place was packed. The atmosphere was tense from too many tired and cranky people trying to get to their respective tubes in time. Teresa, unencumbered by bags, was able to quickly push her way through the ocean and reach her tube stop. She told herself that she was leaving immediately because she had only a few hours to get to

work halfway around the world. In truth, she just wanted to be far away from this spaceport.

The tube was overbooked, of course. Teresa was glad she'd bought a return ticket in advance. But the overbooking meant that what should have been Walter's seat would be occupied by someone else. It seemed more appropriate for it to stay empty, but they'd only bought him a one-way ticket. She sat down and stared out the little window at the plain tube walls. Shortly, some businessman who seemed determined to tell his life story took the seat next to her. Teresa tuned him out so completely that she wasn't sure if he gave up after five minutes or droned on for the entire ride to San Francisco. She spent the ride in stony silence, trying not to think about anything, but failing miserably to not think about Walter.

She arrived in San Fran with time to spare before work; Maglev trains in vacuum tunnels moved frightfully fast. There was no way she was going home, so she wandered down crowded sidewalks, trying to avoid the places she and Walter used to go together. Unfortunately, they'd loved this city and used to go everywhere. With a long sigh, Teresa decided to head to work.

The nightclub was full, as it was every night. The act that always went on before Teresa and Walter was in the middle of their third set. They were playing the soulless, happy music the Council was so fond of. Walter and Teresa used to sing the same tripe. The Council didn't specifically forbid other forms of music, but they did exert a good deal of pressure to ensure that entertainers worked above all to keep the populace from thinking about their problems.

The nightclub's bartender and owner, Ross, nodded to Teresa and waved her over. He was a decent boss, though a bit young. His rich father had given him the nightclub a year ago to keep him busy after dropping out of college. Teresa wondered if he had thought running the bar would be easier than staying in school. If so, he had been wrong. Tonight, like every night, he was hustling to fill the orders his waitresses were bringing in. Teresa noticed that the waitresses were giving her sad smiles, but she ignored them. Why were they wasting their time feeling pity for her? She'd never even bothered to learn their names. All along, the only person who had ever seemed to matter was Walter.

Ross asked, "How are you holding up?"

Teresa shrugged. "I'll live."

"You okay for tonight?"

"I guess so."

"I would have given you the night off, but Walter told me to keep you busy. He figured it would be easier on you if you stayed in the saddle."

Teresa just nodded. Walter was wrong. But, then again, Walter was always wrong. Well, almost always. He'd wanted to defy the Council and turn down the colonization orders. As bad an idea as that had seemed at the time, Teresa hadn't understood just how much his leaving would affect her. She knew it would be hard, but she didn't know that she'd be feeling *likethis* .

When it came time for her to go on, she went to the members of the backup band and said, "Why don't you guys go home early tonight? I think I'll do this one solo."

They blinked. "You sure, Teresa?"

She nodded and smiled sadly. "Seems appropriate."

Teresa waited for them to leave, then pulled a microphone over to the keyboard and sat down. She looked out over the crowd--a full room of happy people who were talking amongst themselves and

largely ignoring her. Her job was background music, nothing distracting. Not tonight.

She cleared her throat and said, "I need to say a couple of things before I start." The room quieted a good deal and some of the patrons turned to look at her. "I'm supposed to play for you this light, happy music that you hear every day. I'll bet most of you have forgotten that other forms of music even exist. That's okay, you live busy lives on a crowded planet, and deserve entertainment that takes you away from all that. But, you know, I'm just not feeling light or happy tonight. So I'm going to play an old style of music, one my single mother used to play when I was a little girl. This is called, 'The Blues.'"

* * *

Teresa had done the whole set with her eyes closed. She'd tuned out everything and had poured her feelings into her voice, letting her fingers play the keyboard on their own. She felt drained--spent. But she didn't feel any better. As the last tones of the keyboard died away, she timidly opened her eyes, half expecting to see an empty room.

Instead, the room was full. It was beyond full. People were sitting in the aisles and standing in the doorways. And everyone was staring at her in rapt attention. Teresa self-consciously looked down at herself. Was she on fire or something? Was the stage light shining through her clothes and revealing more than her bared soul?

When she hadn't played anything for a few seconds, every last person in the nightclub started to clap. They didn't jump up and down or cheer--they just stared at her with dazed expressions and applauded. Tears ran down the cheeks of some of them.

No one ever applauded for background music. These people had appreciated her. That felt good. It didn't make her feel any better, but it did feel good. She smiled sadly and said, "Thank you. Good night." Then, tuning out their pleas for more, she got up and walked off the stage. It took a considerable force of will to keep from running. Ross called out to her as she passed the bar, but she ignored him and continued on into the back room.

He rushed in and said, "Teresa, wait."

She turned and looked at him.

"That was ... incredible. There's not a person in that club you didn't touch."

She nodded slightly and said "Thanks" in a quiet voice.

"For your entire set, they did nothing but sit and listen to you. I've never seen anything like it."

You're young, she thought, you don't know anything but the Council's way of life.

Ross's face turned to a frown. "The trouble is, while they were listening to you, they weren't talking to each other. And while they weren't talking to each other, they weren't getting thirsty. And while they weren't getting thirsty, they weren't ordering drinks. I haven't made a dime in the last hour."

She frowned. "I'm sorry, Ross."

He became angry. "Sorry? Do you know how thin my margins are? If you *ever* do anything like that to me again I'll fire you on the spot. There are over ten billion people on this planet. I can replace you in a second."

For the first time since Walter left, Teresa felt something other than emptiness. Perturbed, she replied,

"Yeah, and it's really easy to replace me now that the better half of the duet is gone."

Ross's angry expression turned into confusion. After a pause, he responded, "What are you talking about? Don't you read the customer feedback logs? Everyone liked Walter, but they like you better."

That couldn't be the truth. If she were the better entertainer, then the Council would have chosen her over Walter. Not that she would have gone without him. She'd convinced Walter that going was best for him, and it was. But she never would have bought the argument herself.

After an uncomfortable minute of silence, Ross said, "Look, take the next few days off. Pull yourself together and then come back to work. Sing like you used to and I'm happy to keep employing you. Okay?"

Teresa nodded once and walked away.

It was late, she'd had possibly the worst day of her life, and now there wasn't much to do but head to the last place on earth where she wanted to be. As she got off the minitube, Teresa found herself irrationally hoping she'd find Walter waiting for her in the apartment. And, no matter what she did to convince herself she was being silly, each step closer to home made the hope grow stronger. By the time she arrived at her door, her hands were trembling. She managed to steady one long enough for the door to do a palm authentication, then she pushed it open and rushed in.

The once-cramped, now seemingly cavernous studio apartment was empty. Teresa sighed and closed the door. Her spirits at an all time low, she undressed and climbed into the cold, hard bed than had been so comfortable when Walter had been there.

* * *

Fate had been merciful to Teresa and had allowed her to fall asleep quickly. When she awoke, she had a blissful few moments of disorientation in which she didn't remember the situation. Then it came back to her like a cement truck rolling through a window shop. With a deep sigh, Teresa sat up and contemplated what to do with the rest of her life. She'd known about Walter's leaving for over a year now, but she hadn't been able to bear thinking that far ahead. Now she had no choice.

To procrastinate, she reached over to the bedside table and grabbed her datapad. She wasn't expecting any mail--the Council had decreed that the colonists needed a clean break and would not be allowed to communicate with the Earth. But she thought perhaps reading the news would take her mind off things.

Surprisingly, though, she did have mail. When she saw that it had been sent through an anonymous remailer, she grew hopeful that Walter had defied the Council's order and had sent her a message. She'd have liked to hear from him one last time. If it weren't for the fact that she had no address for him, she would already have tried to send something his way.

But her hopes fell as soon as she opened the message. It wasn't from Walter. It wasn't even much of a message. It just said, "I found this list interesting. What do you think?" and had a long list of names with short sentences after them. Thinking it was junk mail, Teresa almost deleted the message. Then she noticed that Walter's name was fourth on the list.

The rest of Walter's line read, "Organized a benefit concert for a group disliked by the Council." Teresa read a few more lines. It appeared that each of the people listed had done something to anger the Council. But why bring this up now? Walter was gone. She scanned down the list of unfamiliar names, trying to make sense of the message. Then her eyes stopped on Penelope Rosenthorp. That was the hussy who had been in Walter's colonization classes. Just thinking about the looks Penelope used to give

Teresa when Walter's back was turned caused Teresa's face to flush in anger. Penelope had never wasted an opportunity to remind Teresa that soon she, not Teresa, would be the one on the colony ship with Walter. And now she was....

Teresa's eyes got large in realization. She hit the "listen" button on the side of the pad and said, "sort this list by that field," while touching Penelope's last name. The list resorted. Then she jumped to the Council's site and followed a few links until she found the list of people on the colony ship. She grabbed that list and sorted it by last name as well. It only took a few seconds of looking at both lists to confirm her suspicion. According to her anonymous correspondent, the majority of the people on the colony ship were not there because they were the most qualified for the job. They were there because they had angered one or more members of the Council. If true, this did not bode well for the colony's future.

Teresa's spirits sank below their already low level. She'd been partially consoling herself with the knowledge that, even though Walter had left her, he was doing what was best for him. This message threatened to steal even that from her. Then, the depression turned to doubt. Sure, Walter had organized the benefit concert, but that didn't mean the Council had disapproved of it. And all the rest of the information could have been made up as well. Perhaps this anonymous writer was just trying to make her feel even more miserable than she already was.

Remembering what Ross had said at the club the night before, Teresa went to the club's site and checked the customer feedback logs. She didn't like what she found. Ross had been telling the truth. The patrons did like her better than Walter. The council would have definitely checked those logs in trying to determine who was the best candidate for the ship. Teresa's doubt started to turn into anger.

Then again, what if it was Ross who had sent the list? What twisted game was he playing? She noted that the remailer supported blind replies. Teresa hit reply and set the entry mode to text. She pressed the "listen" button and said, "Who are you?" The text appeared on the screen. She could have sent the message as audio, but most people preferred text. Easier to skim that way.

She sent the message and got out of bed. It was a Saturday, so her water rations only allowed a two-minute shower. She wondered if they'd updated their records yet or if she could use Walter's two minutes too. Deciding not to risk it, she showered quickly, towed off, and pulled on some lycra clothing. She found herself pacing. What did the list mean? And, if it was true, what could she do about it? She was just a background singer in a nightclub and a third-rate storyteller with less than fifty thousand readers.

She checked her datapad and saw a response. "Meet me at the café next to your nightclub in half an hour."

Well, that struck Ross from the list of possible writers. If Ross were trying to mess with her, he wouldn't reveal his identity. That irrational part of her that had been running things recently jumped on the hope that it was Walter. It hoped that he'd snuck off the shuttle and was now in hiding. But her irrational part's wild hopes had dragged Teresa's emotions so low that she was finally able to ignore it. If it had been Walter, he would have made sure to let her know it. So, who? The writer knew where she worked. Should she be worried? The café would be crowded, so he couldn't try anything there. He'd have been better off grabbing her as she left the club the previous night. What if it was a male equivalent to Penelope Rosenthorp? Maybe a fan had been just waiting for Walter to get out of the way? Didn't seem likely. There were far better ways to garner her romantic attention than to make her worry about her previous lover. Try as she might, Teresa couldn't think of any reason not to go.

Still, she looked down at herself in the tight clothes and decided to pull on a long T-shirt. She then threw on some shoes, grabbed the datapad, and headed down to the café. As she was walking, she wondered

if the writer knew where she lived. Did he assume she lived within half an hour of where she worked, or did he know it for sure?

As she had expected, the café was packed. Not that she was in any way prescient. With ten billion people on the planet, every place was packed, all the time. This was most of the reason she'd convinced Walter to go. The colony ship gave him a chance to escape from the Hellhole that Earth had become. Of course, she was now learning that a Hellhole with him there was far more pleasant than one without him.

A waiter walked right up to her and said, "There is a man waiting for you in the back room."

Teresa frowned, "I'm sorry. Do I know you?"

He smiled meekly. "He asked for you by name, and I heard you sing last night. Please, follow me."

The waiter led her into a small room with at least twenty tables, in which the sounds of silverware clanking against plates and people talking mixed together in a dull roar. A lone man at a two-person table stood up and smiled at her. While older than Ross, he appeared younger than Teresa. He had sandy blonde hair, an unremarkable face, and a medium build. He wore jeans, a comfortable shirt, and sneakers. He held himself as any of a million other people would. He was the kind of person who would not stand out in any crowd anywhere on the planet. She stared carefully at his face. He was smiling, and she didn't see any maliciousness in his eyes. But he looked vaguely familiar.

He held out a hand, "Ms. Utan. Thank you for coming."

She shook his hand, squeezing more tightly than most people would, and sat down. "Please, it's Teresa. And you are?"

"Gregory Rausfifer. I'm a--"

She cut him off by finishing his statement. "Columnist for the Chronicle. I read you regularly." He looked familiar because she'd seen the little picture of him next to his articles.

Gregory smiled. "Thank you."

"Where did you get that list, Mr. Rausfifer?"

"Please, it's Greg." Teresa nodded. "I put the list together myself by looking into the backgrounds of the people on the ship."

"What made you decide to do that?"

"To confirm a suspicion and, hopefully, to dig up the evidence I need for my story."

Teresa asked, "Did you find your evidence?"

He shook his head. "Not enough. That's why I'm talking to you."

Teresa blinked. "Whoa there. Back up."

Greg nodded. "Why don't you order something? It's a somewhat long story."

Teresa ordered some fruit and a blueberry scone. She'd been eyeing the sweet rolls when she came in, but held herself back.

"A couple months back, the execs decided that we needed many, many more articles about the colony

ship. I decided to step a little outside my normal realm and do one on the technology involved. So I traveled up to Seattle to talk with the Boeing engineers who designed the ship's engines. It was supposed to be a routine fact-finding mission, but I sensed an unnatural unease in one of the engineers. Interested, I took him out to dinner that night and loosened his tongue with a few drinks." He paused.

Teresa wondered where all this was going. "And?"

"Teresa, he told me something you're not going to want to hear."

Rolling her eyes, she replied, "Look, my sole source of happiness is speeding away from the planet as we speak. You've given me reason to believe the colonists weren't chosen for the best of all reasons, making me worried about him. What could you tell me that would make it worse?"

Greg took a deep breath. "There's a flaw in the main engines. Once they start up, they will never shut down. The ship is going to rocket right past its destination."

Teresa gasped. "Walter told me that they've got to have food-bearing crops within one year of arrival. They can't grow crops on the ship. They'll starve!"

Greg nodded solemnly.

"Why doesn't anyone know?"

"The engineer discovered the flaw while doing simulations long after the ship had been built and tested. He told his superiors, who told the Council. The Council decided that they didn't have the funds to redesign the engines, nor the political clout to survive the backlash a sizeable delay would incur."

"So they damned the colonists to death?" She covered her mouth. That's why all the colonists were people the Council disliked. It wasn't for political revenge. It was to ease their collective political conscience. Breathlessly, Teresa said, "You're a journalist. Why are you telling this to me instead of the entire world?"

Greg frowned. "I can't tell the world. The engineer refused to go on record. Everything else I have is circumstantial. No one would believe me. And that's why I'm talking with you."

Teresa stared at him for a moment before saying, "I like reading you better than talking with you. You don't write in riddles."

"While compiling my list, I paid attention to people leaving loved ones behind. I then searched for storytellers. I've been to your site. You're quite good."

Teresa shrugged. "I have enough readers to make it worth my time. But all I've ever really cared about was singing with Walter."

"Do you want to be famous?"

Teresa considered the question for a second. At one time, yes. Now..."No, I don't want to be famous. I just want my Walter back."

"What if becoming famous brought Walter back?"

Teresa arched her eyebrows and tried hard not to get her hopes up once again. "I'm listening."

"I want to invoke the power of the people. The Council is too powerful to take on with facts and evidence. If we're going to beat them, we need to do it with the weight of millions of ignorant citizens."

Teresa frowned. "You're still speaking in riddles."

Greg nodded. "Sorry. Do you know how many people, to this day, still believe in aliens and government conspiracies to cover them up?"

Teresa uncomfortably didn't answer. She wasn't willing to rule out the possibility herself.

Greg continued. "What if you wrote a compelling, 'fictional' story about a faulty colony ship and a government conspiracy to cover it up? What if you also wrote a song in the style you played last night? Make it the dirge of a lone entertainer stuck on that ship. Put them both on your site and I'll refer to them in my column. You'll pick up a million readers overnight and your song will haunt them the way last night's music is haunting each of us who heard to it. Then, some people will start to ask questions. Some will start digging and finding the information I found. If they don't, I'll leak some of it myself. Then, more people will start wondering."

"You think that'll make the Council turn around?"

Greg nodded. "When the tragedy happened, they would have declared a day of mourning and went on, politically unscathed. If, on the other hand, they realize now that a sizeable portion of their voters will believe it was their fault, they'll instead call the ship back and make themselves out to be heroes for saving the crew."

Suspiciously, she asked, "What's in this for you?"

He smiled. "Don't worry. I'll get *a lot* of mileage out of this."

Teresa leaned back and considered. Was there any possible way that she *wouldn't* do this? What if everything Greg had told her was a lie? So what? All she would have done is write a song and a story. On the other hand, if what he was saying was true and she could have some part in not only saving Walter's life, but also bringing him back.... She nodded. "I'm in."

"They're using auxiliary engines to pull slowly away from the Earth right now. We've got less than a month before they get far enough away and engage the main engines. How fast can you work?"

Teresa immediately stood up. "You pay the bill. I'll have the story and song on my site by tonight."

Greg smiled. "Then I'll write about them in Monday's column. Good luck, Teresa."

Teresa barely heard him. She was busy plotting out the story as a twelve bar blues riff ran through her head.

* * *

This time, Teresa was glad to be at the spaceport. She paced around in front of the gate and tried to keep from driving herself crazy. The shuttle had arrived over ten minutes ago. What were they waiting for? Open the damn gate. Ten more excruciating minutes passed before the gate finally opened.

The colonists who got off the shuttle all looked bewildered. Apparently, no one had told them why they were coming home. And, of course, the official reason was quite a bit different from the truth. But Teresa didn't care. All that mattered to her was that Walter was on the shuttle.

Finally, after what seemed like an endless stream of unimportant people, she saw Walter. Unable to contain herself, Teresa rushed forward and threw her arms around him, burying her face in his shoulder. After scooting them out of the stream of people, he held her. He bent his head down and whispered in

her hear, "I missed you, sweetie."

She pulled her face off his shoulder, leaving it wet, and said, "I can't believe how much I missed you. I don't care what opportunity presents itself to you in the future, you're never leaving me again."

Walter smiled. "That's for damn sure."

Teresa squeezed him tighter. She looked back and saw Penelope Rosenthorp getting off the shuttle. She felt like sneering, but realized that it was impossible to feel such anger while in Walter's arms. So she just smiled pleasantly and then turned her attention back to Walter. She released him partially, then slid her arm across his back and led him toward the tram. "You're going to have to brush up on your alternate singing styles. I've started a minor revival in the music scene."

The End

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