

ROOM FOR RENT

Richie Narvaez

Richie Narvaez was born and raised in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. He has a master's degree from the State University of New York at Stony Brook and attended the Humber School for Writers. Narvaez has primarily published short stories in mystery venues and his story, "In the Kitchen with Johnny Albino," appeared in *Hit List: The Best of Latino Mystery*. However, a number of the stories contained in his first short story collection *Roachkiller and Other Stories* (2012) are science fiction, and the protagonists in these stories often inhabit the same sort of noir worlds as his mystery fiction. *Roachkiller and Other Stories* received the 2013 Spinetigler Award for Best Anthology/Short Story Collection and the 2013 International Latino Book Award for Best eBook/ Fiction. In "Room for Rent," Hala, a space alien of the Pava species seeks out shelter in a new part of town for the impending birth of her children.

Hala stood in the black rain outside the landlord's door. Cold, sooty water soaked her tunic, but he did not invite her in. Although cramped and filthy, the room behind the landlord radiated warmth and the smell of food.

"I would like to see the room you advertised, if that is possible," Hala said. "Can you show it to me, please?"

"It's on third floor. Do I look like I'm making it up there today?"

Indeed, it didn't.

"Then may I have the key to go see it myself?"

"I don't hand over keys without three months' rent and three months' security, paid up front."

"But I need to see if it is appropriate — a good room."

"It's a room with a door, a floor, and walls, okay? I don't have time to bargain with every Pava that comes by. You want the room or not?"

"Yes, we need it."

The landlord extended a moist gray-green flipper. Hala dropped all the money she had in the world into it.

"Oh, yeah," the landlord said, "and you gotta evict the current tenant."

"But I understood the room was vacant."

"What's vacant anymore? But don't worry, it's just vermin."

"Is it sentient vermin? An animal?"

“What’s not sentient anymore?”

Hala and her mate Zangano had been living at the terminal since their arrival. It was filthy, overcrowded. She would be giving birth soon, and she wanted a clean home for all the children. This was the cheapest unit she had found. And now she knew why.

“May I see how infested it is first?”

“Go right ahead. But I got your money in my hand, and it’s going to stay there.”

The landlord was Cangri, invertebrate, covered in slime. A large dirty crack ran down his shell. He ran a shabby building in the poorest part of the territory. But he was still Cangri. It was not her place to argue with him.

“Hey, you could always eat the vermin,” the landlord said. “I know you people eat anything, even each other.” He laughed to himself, his enormous moist belly jiggling.

“That is a lie!” she said, blurting it out.

The landlord gave her a long look. “Careful now,” he said finally. “You don’t want me to call the law.” He threw the key at her. “Third floor, in the back.” One of his eye stems turned to show the direction. “Enjoy your new home.”

She could still hear his laughter after he closed the door.

The narrow stairs creaked under her great weight. She was heavy, with the children inside her. Her belly glowed hot when they were hungry, and they were hungry now.

The hallway was filled with a vile smell — almost worse than at the terminal. She clumsily held the key and, as soon as she opened the door, she heard them. The vermin. They scurried into corners behind boxes and what seemed to be furniture and bedding. They sounded large.

The apartment itself had a low ceiling, a small area that radiated heat, and a tiny cold room with a circle of water in a container. The windows were dark with dirt, which was perfect. It would be a good place. Just then, one of the vermin crawled out from behind a box. It stood. As she had feared, it was a human.

It had a frail body, about a third of her height, and stood on just two thin appendages. It had long hair on what must have been its face. It screeched at her.

Hala clicked back but clearly it did not understand.

She opened the door and used her pincers to indicate that she wanted it to leave.

The human shook its head.

Then others came out. There were about a dozen of them, different sizes, different colors. Clearly, an infestation.

She pointed again at the open door.

The human who seemed to be their leader hopped up and down with its lower appendages and then crossed its upper appendages across its torso. She understood that.

This was not going to be easy.

Zangano would tell her to hire an exterminator, but they had no money for that. She needed a translator.



Through the rain, Hala rushed to her job at the atmosphere factory. She knew that her boss, a Pava named Gargaho, had a translation device.

“Please tell me you’re dying,” Gargaho yelled when she saw her, “so I can hire someone who will show up to work on time.” Gargaho had been badly mistreated by the Cangi — she was missing both antennules and wore three eye patches.

“I had to find a room,” said Hala, dripping wet. “I told you.”

“And that took you all morning?”

Hala bowed her head. “I need a translator. I know you have an old one, and I was hoping to borrow it.”

“What do you need a translator for?”

Hala kept her head low. “I have vermin. Humans.”

Gargaho sat down abruptly and crossed a broken pincer over her mouth. The stumps of her missing antennules fluttered. “Oh, that is truly awful. I had them in my first room. It took them forever to die off. I had to help them a little.” She

opened his desk and gave Hala the translator. “Good luck, Hala,” she said. “With the birth, as well.”

“I will return this,” Hala said, looking up.

“Keep it. I have a better one.”

Hala saluted her boss and traveled quickly back to the room, barely aware of the cold, sooty rain.

When she entered the room, the vermin came out again, scurrying from their corners. Hala spoke, trying the language that was set as the former dominant language of the planet: “가셔야 합니다.”

The human leader shook its head.

She tried several more — <“Nyt jätät,”> <“اناج ے لچ ے س ے قالع“> <“وک پ ے یہاچ“> ... — before she found one that the vermin responded to.

<“You must leave,”> the translator said for her.

The human threw its appendages in the air. <“Finally!”> it said. <“No. We’re not leaving. This is our home. We’ve been here for years, long before you people, and the slugs.”>

<“The slugs?”>

<“The other aliens. The ones with the eyes that go like this.”>

The human approximated the eye stems of the Cangri, and Hala found that she was amused.

<“Those are the cangri. I am not one of ... it does not matter. You must find new shelter.”>

<“That slimy slug from downstairs sent you.”>

<“I have paid for this room.”>

<“That’s not the way it works. We were here first.”>

<“You can no longer stay here.”>

<“Where will we go? There is nowhere to go. There is nowhere on the planet good for us anymore. You think we have a spaceship stashed around here? Where, under the radiator? Do you see one? Because I do not.”>

<“But you must go.”>

<“Yeah. And what about the children?”>

Children? She had not recognized the smaller ones as immature vermin before. Of course. Their limbs were smoother and their eyes were still full of light. Children.



Hala waited for Zangano outside of his job at the soil processing plant. She watched the other workers leave at the end of the shift but did not see him.

Suddenly, she felt a pincer tap her shoulder. He was behind her.

“You frightened me,” Hala said.

“I did! Here, I got you a bag of miyeok.”

“Zangano,” she said, grabbing the bag. “We have no money —.”

“I stole it from a cart!”

She was too hungry to scold him. She sucked in the fluorescent green leaves that smelled of the sea and let her stomach chew the food. Zangano was half her size and looked up at her as she ate.

“Not long ago,” she said, swaying, “these were dancing in the sea. Then there was a storm, a frightening storm.”

“Do you love it?”

“It is delicious.”

“It is more delicious because it is free.”

“Zangano! Did you leave work early to get this?”

“Yes. So what?”

“Zangano, you cannot risk losing another job.”

“You do not have to worry. Mr. Moco likes me. Tell me you love the miyeok again.”

“I do, yes. It is the only good thing about this planet.”

Then Zangano asked her if they were going back to the terminal, and Hala told him about the room and then about the vermin.

“Why not just throw them out?” he said.

“There are too many of them. I did not want to get into a struggle in my condition. Besides, they have children. They are a family.”

“That does not mean we have to live with them.”

“You should be happy they have agreed to remain in the small room behind the door.”

“I will smell them. They will stink.”

“You will get used to it.”

“When the time comes, they must leave.”

“When the time comes,” Hala said, “they will have left.”

At the apartment, Zangano screeched at the vermin to make them scatter. Hala made him stop.

“To be reduced to this,” he said, “when we once had a home with green all around us.”

“You must learn to understand our role in the universe. There will always be the ones who feed on the weak. But in time the weak will become powerful. And then become weak again. The cycle continues forever.”

“I hate it when you get religious. I don’t want to stay weak in my lifetime.”

“Then join the rebels, Zangano. Although then it will not be likely that you will see your children grow.”

He turned sullen and curled into a ball by the window, cuffing any human that came near him.



Zangano stayed out of the room as much as he could, and he would return late at night, surly and silent. So Hala was often left alone with the vermin. The adult ones avoided her, but the immature ones would often gather around her. So much so that she began to differentiate them, and to name them. She realized how sickly the children looked, even for humans.

She began to regurgitate the worm mash she ate at mid-day. She let it pool on the floor, and then she gestured to the humans to consume it. At first, they ran away, but soon they understood, and they ate, and they came to expect the food.

<“I’m so hungry!”> said the one she called Blin Blin, as it scooped the food into its face.

<“Hi! Hi! Hi! Hi!”> said the tallest one. Hala called it “Mimil.”

<“Can I hold the translator for you?”> asked the small one, “Confley,” as it did every day.

<“No. That is very kind of you. but no.”>

<“What do you eat where you come from?”> asked Chot.

<“We heard the pava eat each other,”> said Yerba.

<“That is a lie! It is a cruel lie the Cangri always say about Pava. But it is a story used to frighten Cangri children, the baby slugs.”>

The children laughed when she used their word.

<“It is an excuse,”> she said, <“used by Cangri to subjugate an entire civilization. It is untrue, could never be true.

The Pava are empathic, inside. When we ingest another life form, even a dead one, we feel its consciousness, its feelings, its heart. If we ate animal flesh, we would feel it screaming in pain, desperate to continue life. But plants are wiser, are different. Plants understand their place in the universe. They surrender willingly, sometimes with joy.”>

<“Wowwww,”> said Mimir.

<“What is subjugate?”> asked Confley.

Eventually, the adult humans also began to eat her food. But none of them conversed with her. Except for Fo, their leader.

<“I need to talk to you,”> Fo said. <“I am not happy with this situation.”>

<“The children seem to be happy.”>

<“That’s because they’re stupid.”>

<“Very well. Tell me what is upsetting you.”>

<“Where do I start? First we have to all squeeze together in the damned closet,”> it said. <“And then you defecate in the corner. It’s disgusting.”>

<“I am building a nest for my children. I will give birth soon.”>

Fo would stomp its appendages and sulk in a corner or stomp into the closet. But then it would come back out and want to talk about the Cangri.

<“It’s them, you know,”> it said. <“They’re the problem. I never liked them. Everyone else was excited. *Ooh aliens have*

landed! Aliens have landed! Hurray! Aliens! But I knew they were trouble. They came in three little ships and said they just wanted a place to live. Hah! Soon a few more ships arrived, and then dozens, and then hundreds. We saw what was happening and tried to fight back. But we had nothing, no defense. They just moved in and took over.”>

The story was much like that of her own people’s. Except that while the humans had proved too frail to exploit, Pava had been forced to become laborers.

<“We are a noble, peaceful species,”> said Fo, waving its arms about in a way that always amused Hala. <“We lived in peace with each other. We were peace loving and intelligent and creative and inventive. We made no war. And we were willing to share our planet. But those slugs—those slugs wanted it all.”>

She tried to make Fo understand about the universe, about its place in it. But it only seemed to want to sulk and to complain.



Hala stood in a circle with the human children, all of them facing inward. She held the translator but saw little use in it as the human child Confley kept saying the same word as he moved behind them: <“Button.”>

The purpose of the game was to determine who held this “button,” in this case, a short, sharp stick one of them had made.

Before the game could end, there was a knock on the door. Hala told the humans to hide.

<“But why? Why? Why?”> asked Mihil.

<“Do not ask. Go into your room.”>

Hala opened the door, and there stood a tired-looking Pava holding a light pad and wearing a vest usually worn by Cangri clerks.

“Good day. I am here from the Pava Registry and Social Welfare Agency,” he said, reading from the pad. “The government sends us out to make sure that all Pava are receiving good care and shelter. Are you receiving good care and shelter?”

“Yes, yes, I am,” Hala said.

“Have you missed any work days in the past month?”

“No,” she said.

“Have you had any contact with the rebellion or any non-conformist factions?”

“No, not at all.”

The clerk was about to leave when he finally looked at Hala. He said, “I see that you will have children soon. This is excellent. So few Pava are being born these days.”

“They say it is because we are so far from home that —”

At that moment Mimil and Broki tumbled from the closet and began to wrestle on the floor. The clerk's limp antennules flew up.

"Are those humans?"

"There are just a few," Hala said. "They are no bother."

The other humans emerged and gathered around Hala, since it was near feeding time.

"It's disgusting," the clerk said. "This place is infested. I can't allow you to have children in such squalor. This is no place to raise a family."

"If you . . . if you like, we can call an exterminator?"

"There will be no need. We've been investigating this area and found many groups of vermin like this. But I've never seen so many in one place. Tomorrow, we will come to collect them all. And you will be fined for their removal."

"But we can't afford ... Wait, will they be relocated, placed in a zoo?"

"A zoo? Oh no, my, no," he said. "The Cangri have finally found a better use for them: They make excellent fertilizer."



“I told you,” Zangano said when he heard about the clerk that night. “Now we will have to find a new place. And how will we find one in time? I will not go back to the terminal.”

“We will hide them.”

Zangano rubbed his antennules with his pincers, as if he had not heard her correctly. “Hide them? The vermin? You want to protect the vermin when the children are so close?”

“But they are living beings. We cannot allow them to be killed. The universe —”

“Hala, please, no more about the universe. I will kill them myself if you will not, and then discard the remains. If we are very lucky when the clerk returns and finds them gone, we may not have to pay the fine.”

“No, Zangano, there must be a kinder solution.”

“Hala, really, I have had enough of your —.”

That was when Fo attacked. The human appeared behind Zangano with the lid from the room with the circle of water. It began striking Hala’s mate with the heavy lid.

“Please! Stop!” she said. She looked around for the translator and saw that Confley had it and was struggling to hold it above his head to show to her.

<“We heard everything,”> Fo said. <“We know what’s happening. You want to kill us. You’re just like the slugs.”>

Fo again hit at Zangano, continuing even after it had cracked her mate’s carapace. The other humans moved in,

even the children. One of them — Mihil? — held the sharp stick from the game.

What choice did Hala have? She had to save her mate. She moved quickly.

With her left pincer she speared the human Fo through its torso. It flailed and screeched and to quiet it, she put its head in her mouth and twisted.

In an instant, its feelings flooded her mind.

Fear. Anger. So much anger. Loneliness. And then, it had lied: The humans had not been peaceful after all. Soon after the slugs — the Cangri — arrived, the humans had had tried to destroy them, using weapons that had harmed their own lands, killed their own kind. And seeing farther back, Hala realized that this species had always made war. They had always been selfish and cruel and complaining. And they had been powerful. But the Cangri had been more powerful.

It was all part of the cycle, and Fo had never been able to see that.

She flung its corpse off her pincer and left it on the floor. The other humans scurried into the closet. Only Confley stood for a moment, looking at her, then it dove in after the others.

Hala excreted a paste to cover Zangano's wounds. His colorless blood turned blue as it seeped from his body. This filthy, worthless planet. This unholy world. She hated it, she hated it. She rocked her mate gently, and she hated.

Then, at this, the worst time, heat began to grow like fire in her belly. It was too early, she thought. But children must be born.

They began arriving, dozens of them. They hobbled around, finding their balance, examining their new home. She wanted to show Zangano, but he was dead.

Hala clicked maternally at her children, reassuring them. Limbs smooth and eyes full of light. But still she felt anger, that human anger. It was irresistible. It was delicious.

Her children would be hungry. They needed to eat. They circled around Fo's body and then she knew what she must do.

There would be screams. But it would be for the best. The humans will be remembered, their feelings and memories carried by her babies. Her children will never forget these children, these humans, the species who did not, could not understand its place in the universe. And her children will learn from those memories and they will understand.

She broke the knob on the closet door and pulled it open. Following her gaze, her children climbed in.