Hello, my name is Julie Czerneda, and I'll be reading to you from my latest release from DAW Books, MIRAGE. MIRAGE continues the adventures of my favorite character, Esen the semi-immortal shapeshifting blob of good intentions. With her Human friend Paul, she's set up a library where aliens can bring their problems to be resolved. As long as no one guesses what Esen really is, they'll be fine.

I entered the Library for this day's spot of work using the nearest gate from the Garden. It wasn't a pretty gate, being a field portal fitted with biosensors, but in winter I appreciated how the grate in the floor whisked away any deplorable melting snow. I was somewhat disheveled and damp, but on time. For some "on time" might be in place and ready to help Henri at the Assessment Desk, or Ally Orman in the Response Room; for me, it had evolved more into "Esen's said hello to someone in the building, so she is here, but no one knows where, exactly."

Skalet would. We'd negotiated—there'd been raised voices and drool—which of the snoops she'd hidden in every nook and cranny during the Library's construction must be deactivated. Paul remained unconvinced we'd any privacy.

Fortunately, my web-kin considered it beneath her to inform mere ephemerals where I was.

At the moment, damp and disheveled me was in The Chow for a bracing hot drink before being "on time." Once Lambo cooperated.

Soon didn't appear likely. The back of a shiny black carapace remained presented to me, marred by permanently embedded footprints. Evan Gooseberry's, as it happened, not that any of us had the nerve to tell the Carasian his last moult hadn't been perfect.

"I know you can do it. You made Esolesy hot fudge tea."

"You stink."

*My damp fur might have a slight musty tang.* "Once I've the drink, I'll leave and take the stink with me."

"No." A stalked eye appeared over the carapace to glower at me. "You are not Esolesy."

I kept my ears lifted in a pleasant expression. Though sorely tempted to remind the creature I was in charge here, along with Paul, pulling rank wouldn't budge Lambo. "She
told me you made the very best she’d ever had.”

If the only. While my Lishcynself found fudge irresistible however it was consumed, Lambo’s version of fudge tea was a first.

A second eyestalk joined the first. “Esolesy has good taste. When she’s back, you can try hers.” A third. “She is coming back, isn’t she?”

Lambo was rude to everyone—except Paul—so it was possible I’d missed the development of a fondness for my otherself.

More likely this Carasian didn’t like change. “She’ll return in spring.”

“Lambo. Please. I’ve been outside and I’m chilled. I’ll take any hot beverage you’ll make for me.”

The Carasian rattled around to face me, great claws down, handling claws up. In one was a cup full of steaming liquid. The clever scoundrel had known what I’d order the instant I walked into The Chow. “Here.”

I took the cup. “Thank you.” At last. But— it wasn’t fudge tea. It couldn’t be.

It was green!

I looked up in dismay. “What’s this?”

“Your hot beverage,” with an unsettlingly coy tilt to every eyestalk.

“You can’t poison me before I’ve started work,” I objected, refusing to be intimidated. “Paul won’t be happy.”

A claw snapped. “Fudge.”

I curled a disdainful lip and lifted the cup. “This isn’t fudge.”

“Then you aren’t being poisoned, are you.”

Oh.

I’d possibly spent too much time as a Lishcyn. I looked down at the cup again and lapped up a little of the froth with my long tongue, which wasn’t done by proper modern Lanivarians. Being the only one around had its advantages.

Mint. Creamy, hot, mint. While my preference would have been to roll in it, which was in fact proper behavior if done with friends, this would definitely do.

Locks are serious business in Rattisila, as they are across Sacriss VII, and throughout the worlds of Sacriss System.
Locks and hinges. Bars too and anything to keep the OUT where it can be observed with caution and care, where reasoned judgment can consider consequences. For what isn't of the IN poses the greatest danger to the whole. So says instinct. So says law.

Thus it is after caution, care, and gravely reasoned judgment the breeding group IN this humble Sacrissee home agree the one lingering OUT for the past three solars, snuffling at doors and vents, is indeed their offspring, she who had been taken for treatment.

Agree joyfully that this lock could open, this bar lift, and this door ease open sufficient to permit the half-grown pup to enter, then close, lock snapping shut just shy of her tail. The bar goes down behind the pup's supine, panting form as those already IN retreat to individual secure cubbies, there to observe from safety before offering more.

The offspring should be grateful. Should remain prone and submissive until the will of those already IN is revealed, understanding acceptance is not to be done in haste. Any Sacrissee would.

This one is different. This one rises to stare into peepholes meant to protect those IN.

And when those IN see her wrong yellow eyes, they agree, in sorrow, what they must do. What Sacrissee had always done.

Cull the different.

Oola is thrust OUT, locks and bars thumping in place behind her.

She staggers away, across the cobblestones. Stops to stare at the blood streaked blue over her hands and throat. Knows it's wrong to fight the will of the IN.

As she'd fought. There are those in pain behind the locks and bars. The authorities will be called.

There is one dead. The authorities will hunt her.

She stands, OUT and desperately alone. Unfair. Unjust. She belongs IN! She is not WRONG, to be culled.

Her nasal bulb swells, ready to voice her agony. But when she does, as she does, what comes from her isn't an anguished, eloquent “Ssssupppt!”

What comes is a deep, shuddering HOWL!

Oola cringes. The sound is wrong.

Witnesses retreat and close their peepholes, the tiny pops as each are locked like rain hitting sand.

All abandon her. Her kin. Their neighbors. All. How could IN—the most basic right—be forbidden?
Defiantly, Oola *howls* again. She whips her tail, leaving the scar of her outrage on the wall of what had been home. *HOWLS!*

A distant echo. Another *HOWL*.

She leaps from shadow to shadow, to find what answers her grief.