

# **SHARDS**

## **BOOK 01**

**Peter W Prellwitz**

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### **Shards: Book One**

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## **Prologue**

"CDPF68A78 coded access."

"Access code approved. Good morning, Mr. Wyeth. Please continue with voice print verification. ? The computer voice reminded me of one of those holochannel hucksters, the ones who talked to you and millions of others as though you were a long lost brother. It had a rich sincerity that only the seedier salesmen could fake.

"Voice print verify. Wyeth, John. Alpha Three Three Two Voice Set."

"Voice print verification ... please stand by, Mr. Wyeth, ? it said pleasantly, yet somehow implying in its tone that I'd find myself living at the bottom of a deep, dark hole if I wasn't who I said I was. I waited as the recording of my voice was matched against a previous one. Five seconds later the heavy bolts magnetically released with a hollow thud, and I was in.

Larry Alexander, the security guard, sat at his desk, his gun aimed at me in a very offhanded way. Procedure dictated that only one person was allowed in at a time, and standing orders were to shoot anyone who hadn't used voice verification. Incredibly, it had happened once. A couple of workers, who for some unknown reason had disregarded the constant warnings, lectures and protocol meetings, decided to see whether Larry really would shoot the unverified one, even though he knew both. They didn't think he would. We almost never hired idiots, wisdom being prized even higher than intelligence, but occasionally one got through.

They were right, though; Larry didn't shoot. It turned out that Larry's just a target for hostile intruders. The actual guard was located in one of three hidden vantage points. He was the one who shot, killing the second idiot. Now everybody entered one at a time.

I approached Larry and waved. ? Morning, Larry! How's NATech's number one sitting duck?"

For someone who was paid essentially to greet people and stop bullets, Larry seemed very firmly grounded. He laughed, his ruddy, slightly wrinkled face breaking into a big grin. ? Fine, John! Nancy 's back from Florida , and we're hoping to get up to the cabin next week."

"I envy you. My last vacation was about ... oh ... around ... I'm sorry. What's a vacation again?"

He grinned again and let me pass. There was no need to check in or out at the security desk once access had been gained at NATech's government research facility; every second was recorded on three separate holomeras, and if I wasn't who I said I was, I'd be on the floor, flopping, jerking, twitching or some such useless action, depending on where the sniper chose to shoot me.

First stop was my office. It would be nice to say it had a huge picture window that overlooked a stunning view, but my office didn't have a view. It didn't even have a window. NATech was buried inside a mountain in the western United States-never mind where-and was built to withstand several hundred megatons of blasts. What we did was pretty important, not just for military reasons, but for civilian and peacetime reasons as well, which is why we were still here and other companies, who had smugly

thought of themselves as our competitors, were not. We did not have a single product, weapon, program, or piece of equipment on the market. What we did have was ideas. Not cutting edge stuff; everyone worth their salt had cutting edge ideas. We dealt only with unrealistic ideas. Unrealistic today, but not so within twenty years. That was our main focus: to envision technology and society and the impact of one on the other in twenty years. We then developed that technology and prepared the government, the public, and industry for the future. Nearly eighty years' existence gave proof to the need of our unique type of service.

Janet was waiting for me with my morning coffee. She always had my morning coffee ready. It really bugged me, too. Yes, she was my administrative assistant. But I had selected the brilliant Miss Yashida for her insight and brains, not to run errands and fetch my coffee. She held it out for me, and with a sigh, I accepted. I should try to beat her in some morning just to avoid this.

"Ohaio, boss! Strong and black, just like you drink it."

"Ohaio, Janet. You do enjoy doing this to me, don't you?"

She laughed and followed me into my office. That her Japanese greeting was informal was proof that she loved to yank my chain. I pressed my hand against the identity scanner and activated the system interface at my drafting table. I fished Mike, my holographic interface palmtop, out of my pocket and plugged him into the frame relay. He got busy downloading the night's reports from my team leaders into his ten terabyte hard RAM. He also took the time to access the massive parallel processors to run some calculations I'd given him last night. To protect against internal corruption at NATech, Senior Project Leaders such as myself worked completely independently of the main systems, keeping all our findings and ideas in our heads and on our powerful palmtops until final download and project implementation. Though we ran a risk of losing critical data if I was killed and Mike was damaged, it was even more important that NATech remain a nonpolitical, secret entity. Keeping our own projects separate was just one of our many safeguards.

I sat on my stool and took an appreciative sip of my coffee.

"Good batch this time, Janet. Grind the beans yourself?"

"Yep. Picked 'em, too. In fact, I just flew in from Columbia ..."

"...and boy, are my arms tired, ? I finished for her, and she laughed. Janet had a love of the old jokes. The older, the better. ? Uh-huh. So, what's on the list today?"

"Chris called about an hour ago. He's all hot about his team's mental input project. Guess he's moving ahead of schedule. He's certainly acting like it. ? She made a face. I put the mug down and looked at her carefully.

"Is he bothering you again, Janet?? I asked quietly.

"Nothing I can kill him for, no. He just has extra things for me to do. All standard stuff, but it feels like busy work. ? Janet only did things that had a purpose-even fetching me coffee served the purpose of tweaking me-and she hated with a passion doing anything that had no value. She looked at me quickly. ? Don't worry about it, boss. You trained me well, and I'll handle it the right way.

"Moving on, ? she continued, trying to get back the tempo, ? when Chris isn't calling, it's been Al. He's desperate to get his hands on you. The Pisces team can't wait to start the show. I gave them some background stuff and a few of the tidbits we've talked about. That should hold them for a couple of hours.

"The boss wants to see you at nine. Debbie called to tell you about an idea she had with the atmosphere shield problem on the Mars project."

"Any good?? I knew it would be; Debbie was quick on her feet and my brightest whiz kid, but I wanted to hear Janet's opinion.

"She's always got the good ideas. My guess is she's figured a way to modulate a number of minor geothermal generators to replace a single big one. We talked, but she didn't want to go into detail until she flew it by you and the boss."

"Understandable,? I smiled, ? I do sign her paycheck. Okay. What else?"

We discussed the rest of the day's agenda. I told her a few directions I wanted my various project teams to take, mentioned a few people to contact for updates on outside projects, and asked to see the final computations for undersea pressure variances on about three dozen polymers the lab crowd was whipping up. All told, I was project leader for a dozen major undertakings and about forty minor ones. With nearly two hundred brainiacs reporting to me, and each one needing or wanting a word of direction, encouragement or caution, it took us awhile to cover everything. Janet gave it to me, then listened to what I had to say, giving solid feedback often. She had nothing written down, nor wrote anything. She had a flawless memory to accompany her keenly focused mind and would take care of everything-and no doubt improve on it.

I was halfway through my second cup of coffee before we finished the daily details and she left to start the day's work. She closed the door behind her, knowing I always took ten minutes each morning to read my Bible. My attachment to NATech didn't allow me the pleasures of a public life, but I refused to surrender my faith. Janet understood and kept people away during my devotion.

I finished reading and put the Book away. I still had about twenty minutes before Chris would be out of his facilities staff meeting, so I fired up Mike, who had finished his download. Getting into my thinking mode, I folded my hands in front of my mouth and steepled my forefingers and pinkies, a habit from high school. Mike pinged.

"Greetings, Mr. Wyeth. Today is Thursday, March 26, 2026. The time is 7:17 AM.? I'd tried various ways to have him address me, but they always reminded me of those holochannel skills, so I had settled on a formal greeting.

"Good morning, Mike. I've got a few scenarios to run through with you. Ready?"

"Of course I am,? he said with just a trace of impatience in his tone. It had taken me weeks to program the perfect blend of irreverence, camaraderie and superiority into his voice, but the final effect was worth it. He reminded me of an impertinent, headstrong teenager who acted like he was always right, and thought you were a bit slow in the head, but liked you anyway. He usually was right, too. I was thankful that he wasn't real. A real teenager would rub my nose in it. I hadn't programmed that kind of response into him. I liked a challenge, but I wasn't a masochist.

"Okay, let's play underwater for awhile.? I reviewed my ideas about genetic enhancement and imprint substitution, comparing them to his conclusions. I then rattled off some transportation, economic and political assumptions, mixed in several disaster scenarios, then asked for results based on various external stimuli such as global war, space colonization and a planet-wide political unification. He took in all my requests, then ignored me, which wasn't a programmed response; he was just too busy running the computations to listen to my prattle. I closed him up and stuck him in my suit pocket.

\* \* \* \*

"John!? Chris had a big grin for me as I stepped into the conference room. The meeting was just breaking up, his people running off to take care of the latest problems, challenges, and ideas that had been thrown at them. Good people, all. Many had smiles for me, which I returned, knowing an indifferent stare from the boss never helped anyone.

"Morning, Chris. Janet said you've been yelling for me. What's up?"

He didn't say anything, but waited for the room to clear. After the last one out closed the door, he sat on the edge of the conference table.

"I did it,? he said with a finality that indicated he was looking for a knighthood.

"That's great, Chris! Now tell me what you've done, and I'll say it again and mean it.? His cryptic comments were never as clear as he thought, but I was guessing he was referring to his webbing project for the globenet.

"What I've done is perfect the mental interface. It's now possible for the mind to initiate and maintain direct communication with a computer for up to two minutes."

This time I was impressed. That project was supposed to be only sixty percent complete by this point. Chris Young might be irritating sometimes, but he had few shortcomings when it came to brains. I whistled.

"That *is* great, Chris! Give me the details on the way to the gym."

We talked it over for the next fifteen minutes while we changed in the lockers and waited for a mat to open up. We always got together twice a week to wrestle and keep our bodies in shape. Our turn came, and we walked out to the floor.

"Your team did a top notch job, Chris. You should be proud of them."

"Yeah, they're a pretty good bunch.? We took positions. ? Especially Charlene,? he added with a wink and sly look.

He did it to get my goat just as we started, and it worked. His arm slipped inside mine. He snaked it up my back and I felt his hand latch onto my throat, pressing me back. I was on my way down by not paying attention. He relaxed, knowing the first throw was his.

Instead of resisting, I gave in to the pressure. Just before hitting the mat, I wrapped an arm around his right ankle and folded his leg up. I landed on my back and rolled into his left leg. It came out from under him, and he landed beside me.

"Geez! How do you do that?? he complained good-naturedly.

"Practice,? I replied, rising swiftly to my feet and squaring off. ? Practice and experience. You had the advantage, Chris, but you relied only on it. Next time, follow through."

"All right,? he said, and closed quickly on the attack. It didn't work, of course, and this time without the surprise, he took the trip to the mat by himself. I was four inches taller than his five foot nine height, and twenty pounds heavier than his one-eighty. It's always hammered into beginning martial arts students that size didn't matter if you knew leverage and pressure points. That was true, unless your opponent was larger and *also* knew leverage and pressure points. The Ethiopian Campaigns were eight years behind me, but you never forget how to use the tools that saved your life.

We sparred for another twenty minutes, but I had to cut it short because of my appointment with the boss. I did have one more point to bring up with him, though, which I did in the showers.

"Janet's getting irritated with you again, Chris,? I said as we toweled off.

He turned from the mirror and grinned.

"Sorry, John. She's a nervous kind of girl. You know I don't mean anything."

"It's not what I know, Chris. It's what she thinks and how she feels. Lay off her."

"I'm not doing anything, John! You lay off me!?" He had a flash of temper, which I tolerated and appreciated in most my people. Having a temper usually meant you cared about something. Controlling that temper meant you cared a lot.

Chris was right, though. He wasn't doing anything overtly, covertly or implied. And though I sympathized with Janet, the fact that she just didn't like him wasn't grounds for discipline.

Chris laughed after his outburst.

"Sorry, John. Okay, I'll play nice. She gets under my skin, though."

"Fair enough, Chris. I'll let her know we talked."

We parted, and I headed for my meeting with the boss, Mike comfortably tucked in my suit. I entered the express elevator, used my key and code, then headed at high speed to the boss's office, twenty floors straight down.

The elevator slowed abruptly, then stopped. The door did not open, and I waited for it. Right now, about twelve different kinds of scans and identity verifications were being performed on me. The heart of NATech was on the other side of that elevator door, and we took drastic measures to protect him. If the computer program matched me up with who I claimed to be, I'd keep breathing. If it decided otherwise, I'd be flambé of Wyeth when I stepped out of the elevator and into the defense field.

The door opened without fanfare-or indication of whether I'd ? passed? or not-and I walked into the boss's office. There was no receptionist, no secretary, no administrative assistant. He accomplished everything through his Senior Project Leaders, sharing with us his endless knowledge and insight. As he dictated, so NATech went. He was waiting for me, and while he didn't rise from behind his desk, he gave me a warm smile.

I'd worked here now for eight years, and I still didn't know the name of the guy I called my boss. He was middle aged, perhaps sixty, and still carried a full head of black hair. His eyes, which were normal other than always having the glint of a happy and curious five year old, were protected by bushy eyebrows that seemed to be even thicker than his hair. His face was seamed and craggy from carrying the weight of our planet's future on his still straight shoulders.

And that was all I knew about him, while he knew everything about me, down to the number of girls I'd kissed in high school. I was one of only six people ever allowed to see him personally, but he was quirky about keeping his name to himself. NATech was full of quirky people. But then, if I lived inside a mountain, I'd be quirky, too.

I sat down in the only other chair-even the six of us who actually saw the boss saw him one at a time-and he slid me a cup of black coffee. We had a mutual liking for it, and his consumption alone probably supported several large plantations south of the border. I took a swig, then pulled out Mike and set it on

the desk. It turned on at the sound of my voice, and a solid, three-dimensional display of Mars appeared, floating several inches above the processor panel.

Knowing we'd be having lunch together later, I got straight to business. ? I brought along the final analysis of the Mars terra base. Turns out that five hectares is pretty much the maximum with an atmosphere shield using a geothermal power source. Anything more and people start talking in squeaky voices and dying."

His youthful eyes sparkled at the challenge of impossible problems. ? Yes, I thought that, too. Debbie felt that we could go to twelve hectares if we used five smaller plants, each putting out seventeen point three percent capacity of the large single. ? Which was exactly as Janet had speculated. A very sharp woman, was Miss Yashida. Which made Debbie a razor. ? After Debbie's unorthodox solution to the antimatter holocaust scenario, I'm willing to consider anything she suggests. Look into it."

"Will do.? Debbie was still pretty new to NATech, only four years, but her wild ideas had a way of fitting in. If she thought twelve hectares was a safe maximum, it probably meant it was. We talked it through for about twenty minutes, then spent another twenty on Chris' breakthrough. Finally, I brought up the project he was really interested in.

"I've finished and compiled the genetic print for the Pisces project. The promo boys are antsy to start up the ol' rumor machine."

He nodded. ? Have you transferred your final formulas and genetic codes to the main systems yet?"

"Not yet. I'm just heading there now."

"Good. You've done some admirable work on the Pisces project, John. With the ocean floors actually open to colonization by a new people, we can look forward to some big changes, in both world economics and political makeup. In twenty years,? he added with a faint smile. That was the credo of NATech: In Twenty Years. He continued. ? Right now, you and your palmtop are more important than me."

I laughed. ? Yeah, well, maybe for another hour or so. If I waited any longer, Al and Terry would hunt me down. They're hot to get the 'word' out, as it were.? I stood up. ? Well, that's the update. Lunch around two-thirty?"

"Fine. And restrain the chef on the paprika this time. Physically, if you must. That man has little regard for subtlety."

I grinned and put Mike away. Turning away and walking to the elevator, I made a mental note to look up Debbie and invite her to a late dinner, compliments of NATech. Though it would be a business dinner-we worked long hours-I would still enjoy her company. Debbie's eyes were always light and sparkly, nearly identical to the boss's. In fact, it was startling how their eyes were so similar...

I shuddered at the resulting uninvited mental picture. I'd have Janet advise the kitchen about today's lunch. What was the cook's name? Craig? Kurt? No, it was Carl. The elevator door opened, and I stepped into the defense field.

That is all I remember.

**Not Chapter One**

PISCES PROJECT WILL CONTINUE TO COMPLETION, THOUGH IT IS ONLY THROUGH TRAGEDY THAT WE MOVE FORWARD. YOU HAVE ENTRY, DOCTOR. HOW WAS YOUR DAY? I WAS ABLE TO CORRECT YOUR VIEWER SIGNAL, SO THE BERN LECTURES ARE CLEAR AS A BELL NOW. POWER PLANT 8134J FOR THE HERALD IS UNSTABLE, AS SUSPECTED. AFT THRUSTERS ARE UNABLE TO RESPOND WITH CONSISTENCY. REPLACEMENT OF POWER PLANT IS RECOMMENDED. THE TEMPERATURE TODAY IS A BALMY 30, WITH WINDS OUT OF THE SOUTH AT TEN KNOTS. PLEASE NOTE THAT THIS AFTERNOON'S SCHEDULED RAIN SHOWER WILL INCLUDE HEAVY DOWNPOURS AND SOME THUNDER. CONTINUED DIFFICULTIES WITH THE NOVA SCOTIA STATION GRID WILL ALLOW FOR THE POSSIBILITY OF HAIL. CLEAN THE DISHES, THEN PICK UP FRESH APPLES AND CARROTS. THURSDAY'S PARTY IS FOR TWELVE, SO AT LEAST FOUR KILOS OF MEAT IS REQUIRED. FOR DESSERT, STRAWBERRY SHORTCAKE FOR ELEVEN, WITH PLAIN RICE CAKES FOR MRS. HARRIS. POUR, PRESS, COOL. RESET. POUR PRESS COOL RESET. POUR PRESS COOL RESET. POUR PRESS COOL RESET. POUR PRESS COOL RESET. POOR PRESS COOL RESET. DIAGNOSTIC MODE INDICATES A FAULT AT JUNCTION RED 12/YELLOW 5. DISPATCHING PERSONNEL TO CORRECT. RESET. POUR PRESS COOL RESET. POUR PRESS COOL RESET. YES, DEKE, YOU KNOW I LOVE YOU! I HAVE TO, BECAUSE I WAS TOLD TO. AND I WANT TO. HERE, LET ME HOLD YOU CLOSE. IF YOU DO NOT REPORT LEAKAGES BY 8:30AM, AN AFTERNOON CALL WILL HAVE TO BE MADE. A LEAKAGE REPORTED PRIOR TO 8:30AM CAN BE CORRECTED AS A MORNING PRIORITY. ALSO, REMEMBER TO MAKE LATE NIGHT CREDIT TRANSFERS FROM THE SOUTH CREDIT MACHINE, WHERE I CAN GIVE PROPER LIGHTING AND PROTECTION. 1101001 01000100111010 1001011000101001010100101010001010001010 101111011010101101000101100101010 FINAL SEQUENCING. BREAK. ACTIVATION OF AUTHORIZATION ROUTINE. SIR, THE 2R45TH6I39EITW CODE IS VERIFIED. LAUNCH CAN COMMENCE UPON FINAL AUTHORIZATION OF YOURSELF AND THE VICE-PRESIDENT. ROD REACTION TIME DURING DRILL WAS .7 SECONDS, A 23% DECLINE IN PERFORMANCE. GAUGE 193 IN AREA D2 IS FAULTY AGAIN. GET IT FIXED RIGHT THIS TIME. ACCESS TO RED ZONES WILL BE RESTRICTED FOR THE FOLLOWING 35 HOURS AND 17 MINUTES, UNTIL DECONTAMINATION IS COMPLETE. WELCOME TO THE NET, CITIZEN! IT'S 7:41 IT'S 12:57 IT'S 3:09 IT'S 9:21 IT'S 9:22 IT'S 6:00 IT'S MIDNIGHT IT'S 5:12 IT'S NOT FRESH, M'SEIUR! HOW CAN YOU EXPECT ME TO KEEP THE FIRMNESS AFTER BOILING WHEN IT'S NOT CRISP TO BEGIN WITH? DOES THIS FEEL GOOD? AM I GIVING YOU PLEASURE? THE GARAGE WILL BE CLOSED TO NON-HOVER STYLE VEHICLES PANEL 27A OF DECK R NEEDS NEW GROOVING DEFENSIVE GRID ON DISABLE ALL ELECTRICAL ANTIPERSONNEL DEVICES FROM THIS DAY OOOOOHHH! AGAIN, PLEASEPO URPRESSCOOLLIFTSIX STALLEDONSIXTHFLO FIREREPO RBEDS TSE DIKEFFIOL EKI CNR ITTEOS EDKTC.... PHILANTHROPIST CARL NOOHICHA WAS AWARDED DRILL ROUTINE COMPLETED. CONTACTING SUPERVISOR CARL POWERS FOR ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT ME TO SERVE CANDIED YAMS ON FRIDAY? ONE OF YOUR GUESTS, CARL WILLIAMS, PREFERS THE GOOD MORNING, DOCTOR! WHILE YOU WERE OUT, YOU RECEIVED THREE MESSAGES FROM YOUR BROTHER, CARL. HE'D LIKE LET'S JUST UNDO I'LL LET THE COOK KNOW ABOUT THE PAPRIKA, BOSS. I THINK HIS NAME'S CARL

"you can bury me Beneath the western sky, on the lone prairie."



## Chapter One

"Come on. You can wake up, now.?" The voice was both soothing and gruff at the same time. And quietly persistent. ? There's no need to stay asleep. Open your eyes.?" I tried to, but couldn't quite. It was more than a little distressing; opening your eyes isn't the same as operating heavy machinery

MAIN CARGO HATCH READY FOR ASSEMBLY ENGAGE PRIMARY LOADING ARM

but it may as well have been. I felt terribly weak and disoriented. I tried harder to wake up, but couldn't quite. A large, heavy, comfortable hand rested on my shoulder. Judging by the size, he must have been over seven feet tall. At least it matched his voice, soothing though it was.

"No, no, don't strain. I suppose it's not quite time after all. You'll awake when your mind and body are ready.?" He paused, then spoke again, as though to someone else. ? Notation: Patient is in final stages of Healer's Sleep and is conscious. Orientation will be postponed until further examination in the morning.?" I felt him gently take my hand in his. Bedside manner is all well and good, and despite a voice that belonged to construction foreman, his was reassuring. But this was a little much. I tried again to open my eyes. It seemed as though my mind wanted to wake up, but my body didn't. I'd never had an experience like this before. He sensed my struggle.

"Please. Just relax. I know you're feeling different. You're in the final stage of an imposed condition medicine calls Healer's Sleep. You're awake mentally, but still in near coma physically. This gives the double advantage of your body committing its vast resources to healing, while freeing your mind to help in the process. The medicine in your day assumed that a positive mental outlook aided in healing. A good assumption, because it's true. Healer's Sleep allows you to take full advantage of that. Since this is probably your first experience with it, Healer's Sleep can be disorienting. Take my advice and stay calm. When your body is healed sufficiently to spare energy to other functions, you'll regain control.?" He squeezed my hand reassuringly. I almost wished I could slug him. Still, he was the doctor, and I tried to take his advice. Presently, I felt my body relax slightly, and my breathing rate decline. It was the strangest sensation, as though I was only along for the ride, and my body was the driver.

Apparently the change was enough for him to notice, for he released my hand and stood up. I heard him move around the room.

"Good, good. I must apologize for trying to awaken you prematurely. For about an hour this morning, it looked as though we'd have to either force you awake-not a good idea-or abandon you. Fortunately, it was a false alarm.?" He paused. ? Hmmm. I suppose this is very confusing to you and getting worse. Again, I apologize. Let's try a different tack.

"My name is Philip Barrett. Doctor Philip Barrett. I'm a specialist in cognitive reconstruction. A brain surgeon is the ancient term, I believe. You are my patient. My only patient for the moment, so I'll be spending a good deal of time with you for the foreseeable future.?" He gave a short laugh. ? Future. There's a word I suspect you'll think of differently before long. Sorry. Shouldn't be so cryptic. One of my idiosyncrasies, I suppose. But it's also that I've rarely dealt with a case as-advanced-as yours. I'm not trying to keep you unawares. But I wish to restrict what I say until you're altogether, as it were. So I'll give you tempting morsels and less alarming information for the next day or so, then fill you in completely when you're fully conscious."

He may have had an odd way of saying things, but he made a lot of sense. By keeping me in the know, to a limited degree, he roused my curiosity while keeping under control my understandable nervousness over my helpless state. Although I didn't like the idea of having others decide what I was going to hear, I didn't have a lot of say at the moment and, frankly, enjoyed the company. He seemed to have read my

mind.

"In the meantime, I imagine hearing anything will help pass the time. Well, where to begin? This is, as you've probably guessed by now, a number of years into your future. You've spent those years in an altered state. Bluntly, you were not yourself. You were ... someone different. Let's talk about that, shall we? When you're up to it, we'll talk about your case specifically. For now, I'll give you the story in general." He added, somewhat bitterly, "I suppose I should begin with 'Once upon a time', huh?"

"Once upon a time, a process was developed that allowed the mind to be wiped and re-mapped, with a new persona being written to an unused portion of the mind. The idea first got started as a treatment. People who had suffered severe cranial trauma were often left in a vegetative state. The option was made available to reroute the mind, bringing it back to a functional state. Unfortunately, all memories were lost, and a new persona was the result. Still, many loved ones of the patient chose this over seeing the individual wither away, to die a lingering and unknowing death.

"Later, many governments saw this rerouting as a viable alternative to the death penalty. Since any mind, once rewritten, closed off previously used portions, the criminal suffered a type of death, yet was able to be returned to the community, a valuable and productive citizen, utterly unaware of their past life.

"This worked so well that it became a broader treatment, and abuses began. Violent offenders, those who were guilty of cruel acts that didn't merit death, were reprogrammed. The success of the program soared. Insanity became the next just cause for wiping and rewriting. Then, with the progress of suspended animation, terminal patients submitted to the wipes just prior to suspension, to help adjust to a newer brighter future after being revived. Fools-willing to give up who they were, because they were afraid of what their future life might hold. Soon, individuals who were merely depressed had the treatment.

"It was at that point that a problem came up. The medical community had labored under the assumption that returning the patient to his or her own original persona was difficult but possible. Early experimentation on simian subjects indicated such. Well, the early experimentation was also very preliminary, very cursory, and very, very wrong. It turned out that once closed off, that portion of the mind was never accessible again. At least at that time. We can now reset the original patterns. It is very difficult, but possible. We'll discuss that later.

"Further, it was an all or nothing proposition. A mind wipe was in all cases complete, no editing allowed. And finally, wiping and rewriting not only didn't solve all the problems, it made some worse. People who had been insane now became criminally insane. Others who were treated for depression went into a vegetative state. And some of those sentenced to death had sufficient problems with the chemical make up of their brains that wiping and rewriting only covered the problem temporarily. Certainly, the vast majority of treatments were successful, but enough failed to give even an ambitious government pause.

"Then one day, a man was convicted of murder, sentenced to death, and rewritten. Only this time it was for the worse. The psychology of the day had actually mitigated the problem, and his original state was a best case scenario. The rewrite erased that work, and his mental condition deteriorated. Records prove he killed nearly 300 people over five years before being killed himself. Other cases came to light, though none as notorious as his. And the public finally woke up to the moral difficulties of this rewriting. Watchdog groups sprang up overnight, some more prepared than others. It looked as if the entire mess would be dropped entirely, and the rewriting process abandoned.

"Then some idiot came up with the idea, why not just re-rewrite if things didn't turn out? While the connection between mind and brain is difficult to explain, it is essentially a one to one ratio. Development of the brain is related to the advancement of the mind. And the average human mind uses only the

smallest fraction of his or her brain over an entire lifetime, so there was enough of the brain for literally dozens of rewrites of the mind. In one case, which I'll talk about later, the mind was written forty-one times. So instead of dying the death of atrocities, mind wiping continued, and rewritten rewrites became the thing to do in case of failure. Your generation had the perfect phrase: 'If at first you don't succeed, success will happen on the next try.' Public awareness again went on the decline, and acceptance of the rewrites as an everyday thing reemerged."

I was getting the distinct impression that I had been out for a *long* time, which made me somewhat concerned about my physical well-being. The thought of waking up a withered old man with a thirty-one-year-old mind and memories put a lump in my gut, or would have if my head was in charge. I forced myself to be calm. Dr. Barrett had mentioned work with suspended animation. We had already started work with it at NATech before I ... before I ... I realized for the first time that I had no idea what had happened to me. Regardless, I guessed that the chances were good that NATech had rushed the process to keep me alive and kicking. Or at least alive. It was within the realm of probability that I had aged little. Perhaps it wouldn't be a total ... Dr. Barrett was talking again.

"...worse when the government let go of its monopoly and the for-profit business industry got involved. Public outcry was again huge, especially from those who felt a sense of moral outrage. Extremist groups began appearing, hoping to sabotage the efforts. They felt that it was far better to work outside the law effectively than labor inside it uselessly. ? That sounded right. There were always those who felt that disagreement was justification for new law, enforced outside legal authority, with judgment and punishment based on their own convictions. I wondered if these fringe groups had seen the irony: They wanted to rewrite the law on rewriting minds. If law is not the mind of a society, it is at least its conscience and at most its soul.

I heard a stool scrape the floor as Dr. Barrett stood up and came to my side. For a man of his size, he had an incredibly light step, and again took my hands in his huge paws. My hands were average size, but seemed tiny in his. How he performed delicate operations on the brain was beyond me. He was talking again.

"...drifting in and out, judging by the readings. We'll pick up the conversation tomorrow. You may come out of Healer's Sleep sometime tonight. If so, just speak up. My quarters are less than twenty meters from here, and I'll be over in a flash. Don't try to stand up. You've been off your feet, or at least the real you has been, for a long time, and it's possible you've forgotten how to walk, ? he chuckled. ? Don't worry, though. It's a lot easier the second time around. There are a lot of things you'll have to relearn, but I rather think you'll enjoy most of it. What we gathered from your outbursts during mind restoration indicated an intelligent and quick-witted person. Well, good night. ? He squeezed my hands one more time, then left. I didn't hear the door open or close, but the light must have been shut off, because it seemed darker. I was alone with my thoughts.

Alone with my thoughts. The sentence was so common, so bandied about, that I had never given real consideration to its meaning. This was apparently the first time my thoughts were my own in some years. The good doctor had flat out told me that I hadn't even *been* me for a while. Who I had been and for how long, I couldn't guess. I didn't even have a feel, which was something I was normally good at. I felt like me, and always had. I tried to scrounge around in my poor abused brain, trying to dig up something that didn't seem

AIR TRAFFIC PATTERNS FOR THE ENTIRE EASTERN SEABOARD ARE BEING REROUTED TO AIRPORTS WEST OF THE MISSISSIPPI , BUT IT IS ESTIMATED AT LEAST 40% WILL BE UNABLE TO LAND SAFELY. CASUALTIES ARE ESTIMATED AT 14,500 DEAD AND 3,000 INJURED. BOTH NUMBERS ARE BETWEEN 5.1% TO 7.8% BELOW

ANTICIPATED SCENARIO. USING AIRPORTS WITH MODERATE RADIATION IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA AND NORTHERN VIRGINIA WILL FURTHER REDUCE THE ESTIMATED CASUALTIES.

like me, but couldn't. For all I knew, Dr. Barrett could just be a fluent liar. Or he could be completely accurate, and I had been someone else. Maybe several someone elses if my first ? rewrite? hadn't panned out. I wondered what the criteria were for a new wipe and rewrite. And why was I me again? Dr. Barrett left me with the idea that it was impossible to restore memories. Then I realized he would have meant it was impossible at that time.

Which led to the question: How far in the future was I? The good doctor spoke as if these events were well into the past. By tone of voice, misquote of the ? if at first? saying, and personal opinion stressed, I'd estimate at least three to five generations, which would put me about 100 years at least. One hundred years! Well, that meant I *had* been put in suspended animation. And undoubtedly as a mature to middle-aged man. Not a lot of point in preserving a withered shell who didn't know who he was and would probably not survive the suspension anyway. That made me feel a lot better. Though I had precious little to go on, I could count on being close to my original self when I awoke from this Healer's Sleep. I would be older, having lived some years as a different persona, but still have some years left, which is far better than living out life with the IQ of a zucchini. Mentally, I magnanimously gave up a chunk of my life to science as payment for restoring me. Since I couldn't do anything about it anyway, I might as well accept it. (Thus underscoring the value of Healer's Sleep. My mind and body were working separately to heal themselves simultaneously.)

I was satisfied with these estimates and suppositions. Remember, my career was coming up with realistic solutions to unrealistic ideas. This was a very similar exercise. I turned my thoughts to the other end of the question. If I was at least 100 years into my future, what was I at most? This was a tougher, and therefore more enjoyable, question. I had no direct indications from Dr. Barrett, but he still told me a lot. First, I was able to easily understand him. Living languages evolve-just read the Canterbury Tales in middle English sometime and you'll see my point-but his speech seemed very close to mine. Of course, he could also be an accomplished linguist, which would make sense for his line of medicine and his type of patient. It didn't make a lot of sense to revive someone, lean close to their ear and say, ? *6iekwUs vBerdiow r?* ? But even his being a linguist would indicate a limited time span. You can't have a medical specialist who is also good at 500 years worth of dialects. I work on unrealistic problems, but statistics and odds do, too, and I used them. So, greater than 100, but less than 500.

I continued for some time, eagerly using my mind and the available facts to settle myself into my new world. Somewhere along the line, about the time I had reduced the number to less than 300 years, I drifted off into normal sleep inside my Healer's Sleep.

\* \* \* \*

I woke up twice in the night. The first time, it was because of another presence in the room. My visitor had a much lighter, feminine step, and she seemed to move about with the confidence of someone going about their duties. She picked up my wrist and took my pulse quietly, but didn't try not to wake me. Her hand was a decided improvement on Dr. Barrett's steam shovels. It was nice that science hadn't completely eliminated the human touch. Presently she took it again at my neck. Satisfied, she moved up closer to my head. I heard a soft voice say, ? Increase nutrients by six point five percent and restoration fluid by fourteen percent, Doctor Philip Barrett authorization 4699NRF.? I felt a cool tingle in my left arm that spread quickly through my body then faded. I was in the same state, but seemed stronger somehow.

She moved away to another corner of the room and there came the sound of water running. I heard her

walk back, rolling what had to be a table with the water. Warm, soft hands then pulled back the sheets and undid my hospital garb, and I was the recipient of the most glorious sponge bath since the invention of medicine. I was extremely glad my mind and body weren't connected. If I could have physically responded to mental impulses, she probably would have hit me with a bedpan, if they still existed. All too soon, she finished up, clothed me, pulled the covers back up, and left. Like Dr. Barrett, she made no noise when she departed, but I could feel that I was alone again, though much happier. I went back to sleep.

The second time I woke up, it was due to internal stimuli, rather than external. The increase in nutrients and fluids had had their effect. I still couldn't move, speak or see, but I could definitely go, to put it indelicately. And I went, hoping that the fictional bedpan that the nurse didn't hit me with had been replaced by something more functional and ... automatic. The sensation of emptying one's bladder while in Healer's Sleep was another experience, one I won't go into great detail about here. The sensation was entirely internal, rather than the more familiar internal/external feeling I associated it with. But when I was done the sheets weren't any warmer, so I gave it no thought and went back to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

"Wake up. Good morning! Time to wake up!?" Dr. Barrett's soft gruffness and hand holding were in full force. I was still a little uncomfortable with it, but had decided to accept it and try to like it. During my brainstorming last night, the reason for his physical touch between two men, even in a doctor/patient relationship, became pretty clear. Society had moved to the position of the acceptability of pseudo-intimate touch between men. While still a little uncomfortable with it, I was glad to receive contact from my new world other than just audio. So I tried to appreciate it.

My thinking must have shown I was awake, for he began speaking directly to me. ? Well! Good morning! I hope you had a pleasant night's sleep. I understand that the increase in nutrients and fluids have begun stirring you out of your Healer's Sleep. Would you like to wake up all the way now? Just nod your head."

I felt myself nodding automatically, but as soon as I realized it, my head stopped. I tried to start nodding again-any voluntary motion was wonderful-but couldn't. It was maddening. He chuckled.

"Excellent! But don't try anything more. Whatever you have to think about, you probably won't be able to do. But not to worry. Judging by your progress, you should emerge sometime tonight, maybe early tomorrow morning. Very fortunate timing. ? I waited for him to expand on that, but he continued. ? Again, when you do wake up, just speak up. Say something like, 'Please contact Doctor Barrett,' and the computer will notify me immediately. Don't bother to give your name, because I haven't the foggiest idea what it is. ? I involuntarily held my breath for a moment with surprise. He must really know his patients because he spotted it, and laughed.

"Surprised? Don't be. I only know you from your false persona. The way our group works ... well, let's pick up from where I left off, okay? I'll conduct a quick physical while talking. Should do something to earn my keep. Don't be upset with the different sensations you'll feel. Healer's Sleep has a way of warping your perceptions, especially in its closing stages."

I felt the sheets being drawn back, and the doctor begin plying his trade. He talked while he performed the physical, which was a far less pleasant sensation than my sponge bath. I tried to picture the nurse and her attentions instead of Dr. Barrett, but the thought of her was little comfort. Odd.

"Before you tired last night, I believe I had gotten to the point in my story where the government had released the wipe/re-write process to the business industry. By the way, the idiomatic term for wiping

and rewriting process is 'ripe'. It's a blend of the two words, though reversed. I suppose it became popular in its day because of its similarity to 'rape', which this most definitely could be, used against one's will. Which, once the industries got their hands on it, it most certainly was.

"It was bad enough with the government having a monopoly. But at least they didn't market the thing. Once legalized for anyone who became licensed, though, it turned into a nightmare. It began being used as a tease for the high level jobs. If you were willing to submit, you could become a wealthy company executive within the week. I'm shocked that there was any appeal to it at all. But for some reason, there was. The economy at the time was robust enough, but the moral fiber had worn thin. Many 'applicants', mostly single people, submitted to the process. The employer allowed the employee to decide the persona, and added their own needs, usually high level education, loyalty and firm work ethic. It's amazing what people will give up for credits."

He finished the examination and pulled the sheets back up. He'd been right; it had felt different. I'd have sworn I had at least six arms and no torso. I had also felt terribly exposed, with the overwhelming urge to curl up into a ball.

"Anyway, this incredible situation went on for several ... er, some time before it was finally discovered by one of the watchdog groups, a more extreme one, that many companies were not giving out just cushy jobs. They were also riping people for the dangerous jobs, the jobs nobody in their right minds would take, pun intended.

"Further, this same extremist group had been uncovering a very scary trend. As riping became popular, homelessness had plummeted. This was attributed to the fact that a riping could radically change anyone's views, ethics and even mental symptoms of addiction. Remember, it was for the first two reasons that riping first spread into the penal system. No one had asked how, why, or most importantly where these homeless went. Most were just glad they were gone.

"Then one day, during an ... action against a large corporation, this extremist group discovered that the entire security system was being controlled by a homeless person who had been ripped. Against his will.

"Once this story had been told and proven over and over, the whole thing tumbled down. Everyone was willing to give up everything to get ahead, but only on their say-so. Now it was being decided by others. That fine line that dictates whether a practice will be tolerated or abolished had been crossed. It had taken years for riping to become commonplace. It took days to eliminate it. In less than a week, the government seized control of the riping process and invalidated every public sector license issued. It then passed very comprehensive laws, enforced by very comprehensive punishments, to utterly abolish riping. To its credit, both the public and their servants reacted swiftly and completely.

"With two glaring exceptions. First was the exemption given to convicted killers and catatonic patients. They are still ripped today.? Barrett snorted in disgust. ? They will never learn. Or maybe they did. There's deep suspicion that not all convicted killers and catatonic patients were actually that at the time of riping.

"The second exception is the infamous 'grandfather clause'. The government did abolish riping. Totally. But it allowed those who had already been ripped to continue on in their current state, until death by natural causes. By now, a process had been developed, of which you are a recipient, to restore the original persona, with only moderate risk to the individual. Many people thought this would be the proper thing to do, and there was a considerable movement to pass this law. But successful pressure was brought to bear by those standing to lose, and the government, perhaps aware how much power still resided in the corporate circle, caved in and permitted ripes to remain as they were. Further, they made it illegal to even attempt original persona restorations. And that's the way it remains today."

Even if I had been able to say something, I doubt I could have. This was an incredible tale, a terrifying tale. Could we have so married ourselves to technology that we would submit to it, rather than it to us? Another thought nagged at me; if the government had reverted to Dred Scott logic, where did that put me? And the good doctor, who had virtually confessed to a criminal activity, a criminal career, restoring original personas? My want to get out of this Healer's Sleep took on a desperate tone.

"If you're wondering why I've told you this, admitting to illegal activity, well, I think you deserve an answer. First, I must tell you that *you* will not be sought or prosecuted. It was determined very early on that restored personas could in no way be held responsible for actions performed on them before their restoration. You do have another concern I'll have to tell you about, though. Later.

"The reasons I've told you all this are both selfless and selfish. They are selfish because although I firmly believe in what I do, it is still salve for my soul to have my patient's understanding. They are selfless, because I've now admitted to a crime, voluntarily, to you. And under law, your testimony can have me imprisoned or executed. But you need to know this because the society you will soon be a part of is so different. We've managed to estimate the date of your original riping, and you're one of the first, if it's true. You also need to know because I'm sure you've figured out that this is an illegal facility, and Lieutenant Sanchez, the base commander, has told us we may need to leave very soon. It would help immensely if we had your conscious cooperation when that time comes. There are other reasons, which I'll tell you upon awakening."

He walked to the top of my bed and spoke to the wall, ? Increase nutrients by thirteen percent and restoration fluid by twenty-one percent, Doctor Philip Barrett authorization 4699NRF.? Again I felt the surge and cool tingle in my arm that washed over my whole body then disappeared like a flash flood into the desert sand. And again I was left with a feeling of strength.

And this time I also saw the ceiling. For a moment, my vision returned. It was very blurry and lasted only briefly. But it was enough to see the lighting directly above me and a instrumentation panel on my left. I saw a blur walk back to my right side, and it took everything I had to not turn my head. But for one second of time, I was certain I could have turned it had I wished to. Then the second was gone and I was blind and helpless again.

"That should continue easing the Healer's Sleep. Not too fast, though. From my examination just now and the readings from last night, it appears you'll be ready no sooner than tomorrow night. That is a longer time than usual, but still within norms. Sorry if I got your hopes up. In the meantime, please take advantage of this time to heal and adjust to this impossible situation. I can't stress enough how important it is that you trust me, at least until you've oriented yourself to our culture.? I could almost sense his smile. ? I am your doctor, after all. Well, get some sleep. We'll talk again this evening."

As he left-I still couldn't place the door, but his footsteps seemed to indicate it was located on my right-I thought, *Yeah, we'll talk again this evening. And never again, if I get my way.*

## Chapter Two

The morning and afternoon passed at a snail's pace. There was nothing I could do but continue to work out an escape plan. But first, I had to rouse myself out of this Healer's Sleep. Dr. Barrett had made an allusion to the dangers of being brought out too soon, but I was nearing the final stages, and in any event, I wasn't fond of the thought of staying in this helpless state any longer. If they had to suddenly bug out, I didn't particularly relish the idea of being hauled around like so much inert cargo, nor being left behind.

He'd told me there would be no legal repercussions, but it wouldn't look good, getting caught during treatment at an illegal medical facility.

Since it would be pointless to make plans if I couldn't carry them out, the first order of business was to see if I could wake myself. I stared into the darkness and visualized the ceiling. I pictured burning through the black to the light fixture above me. At the same time, I tightened my muscles to raise my right arm to that light. I didn't fool with my left arm because it was attached somehow to the nutrient machine and I didn't want to set off an alarm.

I failed miserably. If anything, the darkness became pitch, and my arm seemed completely detached. I felt like crying with frustration. Brute force wasn't going to do it. I fought back the sense of failure rising in me and calmed myself.

I had tried to force myself awake, but that seemed to deepen the effect. Logically, the reverse action would give the reverse effect. That would seem to fit with earlier experience, when I had nodded without thinking. Perhaps that was the key. Relaxing, I tried to drift into a state of idle interest in what the ceiling looked like. I knew what I expected to see, so I just glanced at it, expecting to see it again.

And there it was. The light looked like it had a heavy screen over it, and not much light was coming from it to begin with, but I still saw it. I reached up to brush away the screen and I felt my right hand twitch and raise slightly. I was so excited by this sudden success that I eagerly reached my hand to my face. It fell limp again. This was going to take some time.

And I had plenty of it. I worked for about two hours. By the end of that time, the light looked semi-bright, I had flexed my toes, lifted my right hand about six inches, and even turned my head a fraction of an inch. The whole thing left me weak but satisfied. And I didn't want to accomplish too much, too soon. It was pretty certain that illegal though they may be, this outfit still had equipment good enough to determine a conscious and unconscious state in Healer's Sleep. I'd have bet a week's pay it could tell if the Sleep had worn off entirely. It suited me that it didn't wear off until after Dr. Barrett's evening visit. So I eased off on my attempts and began to work out the logistics of my upcoming escape.

I must have tired myself out a little more than I thought, for I suddenly woke up. The nurse had returned and was performing her duties. No sponge bath this time, but I didn't mind. Though I didn't seem excited about her touching me anymore, I didn't want to put it to the test. Instead, I lay quietly, hoping she'd finish and leave, which she did. I was hoping she'd increase my nutrients, but no, I was apparently at the point they wanted me at. I was disappointed. I'd have to hope the good doctor would increase them. Unfortunately, since I'd fallen asleep, I had no idea what time it was. I worked out the final details of my actions-there weren't many-and decided to sleep again. With luck, I'd be awake all night tonight, making my way to someplace else.

Dr. Barrett showed up, but he was all business this time. His visit was brisk, his examination perfunctory, both fine with me. He talked little, except to assure me that I was right on schedule and could expect to be awake late the following morning. He pulled the sheets up, wished me good night, and left. He seemed to have a lot on his mind. Again, that was fine with me. If he was busy with other things, he'd take his mind off his helpless patient.

I wanted to wait about twenty minutes to be sure he hadn't forgotten anything and return unexpectedly, but I cut that off after ten. I had no idea when the nurse would return for her nocturnal visit, but I knew I couldn't risk even a pulse taking if I wanted to be fully awake. I had to act now. The doctor had not increased my nutrients, so I would have to try. I relaxed again and absently thought about the ceiling light. I caught my breath as it turned from a broad white haze into a soft glob then into a blurry object with half seen edges. I then spent the next hour reciting over and over exactly what I wanted to say. It was



critically important that I could say it without thinking.

I reached the point where I could say it in my sleep, then casually mentioned out loud, more as an afterthought, ? Increase nutrients by nineteen point five percent and restoration fluid by twenty-eight percent, Doctor Philip Barrett authorization 4699NRF. ? I'd made a mental note of the increases and authorization number and hoped it was the right dosage and was not voice coded.

I felt a wonderful chill in my left arm that felt like icicles in my muscles. It poured into my whole body and made me shiver involuntary. That shiver was like a magic key. Suddenly, even as the chill faded, I felt the real me come to life. It was incredible. Until now, I could feel when touched, but now I could just plain feel. The light above my head came sharply into focus, though it stayed dim. Night lighting, I assumed. I stretched my legs slightly and they felt just the way they should. I brought up my right hand and looked at it. Relief washed over me as I recognized it as *my* hand. I'd half expected a withered claw, but no, it was just as I'd left it a couple of centuries ago, give or take a hundred years. I quietly thanked the inventor of suspended animation.

Now it was time to take care of my left hand, the one hooked up to the feeding machine. I was now tempted by a couple of things. First, I very much wanted to completely disconnect myself, but doubted the authorization code I had would work: the three letters in the code were an acronym of nutrients/restoration fluids. I didn't want to chance misusing the code unless the risk warranted it. Second, I was also tempted to just stay on the machine for at least another hour or two. I had no idea if I could weather the sudden shut down of nutrients; I might just turn into a rag doll when I hit the off button, and have a lot of explaining to do when they found me later that night during bed check. I could avoid the explaining if I was gone, though, so unlike the first risk, this one I had to take.

I rose up, slowly, on my left side, careful not to disturb my left hand. It was not clamped down, nor were there any tubes coming out. Rather, it seemed bathed in an intense ultraviolet light that appeared to irradiate the veins all up and down my arm. Maybe they fed me by osmosis. I'd look into that later. Speaking with as clinical a voice as I could muster, I said, ? Disconnect patient nutrients and restoration fluids, Doctor Philip Barrett authorization 4699NRF."

The machine sighed, and the light flicked off. A cool wave of air washed over my arm. I lay back and carefully lifted it. I flexed my hand, half expecting my fingers to fall off, but they stayed on and flexed. I noted with satisfaction that it too was exactly as I remembered it. Silly, I know, since arms tended to come as a matched set. But my life at that moment was composed of little victories, and I'd take them all.

Seeing that I was in my own body, and it was in one piece, I sat up. Then I lay back down. That automatic bedpan I'd, um, discovered last night apparently worked in only one position. Again, I won't go into detail, but I disconnected myself from it as well. No alarms sounded that I could hear, so I had to assume there weren't any. It was time to go. I sat up again and carefully eased my legs off the bed. My feet didn't quite touch the floor, which put the bed pretty high up. I felt a little dizzy, so I took a moment to get my bearings.

I didn't know how much the outside world had changed, but hospital rooms, even illegal ones, had been stuck in a time warp. One wall, the one on my left when lying down and now behind me, was composed of embedded instrumentation, monitors and several cubbyholes. To my right was a small table with a washbasin on it. The source of my only happy moment so far this century. To my left was a faucet that must have been brought forward into time with me, it looked so normal. The wall facing me was completely bare. Completely. There was no door on the wall. Indeed, there was no door anywhere in the room. This was not good.

I'd settled down some, so I took my next step, which was taking my first step. Holding onto the rail, I eased myself carefully off the bed and tentatively put a bare foot down on the predictably cold floor. I felt my equally bare backside rub against another predictably cold bed frame, and realized that hospital gowns hadn't changed much, either. The ridiculous thought passed through my mind that this was all a farce, that it was still my time and Al and Terry and the gang at R&D had put me in some bizarre experiment, or gag. Or both. They were a creative bunch. Then I realized I wasn't giving my generation enough credit. Medicine had worked out the best pjs for patients long ago, and you stick with what works. Well, at least I'd light up conversations for weeks to come if they caught me.

I put some weight down on my foot, then slowly lowered my other foot. Since the bed was so high-the underneath must be rigged with equipment to justify the excess height-that meant I had to slide off. Holding onto the bar, I shifted my balance to my legs-yes, they were my legs-and committed.

I wouldn't win any rewards for grace. But I was on my feet. I tried to take an experimental step. It felt weird. Very weird. I pulled up my gown to check my upper legs and hips, which was where the imbalance seemed to come from. Maybe I'd picked up some injury while someone else. But no, again everything was almost as it should have been. Almost. There was something just a little off. I nearly had it, but lost it. I shrugged it off. If I couldn't think of it, it must be minor. It was certainly minor compared to my present position, and it didn't stop me from walking.

I wobbled up to the head of the bed, an incredible journey of two feet, then made the exodus to the foot of the bed. My balance was lousy but workable. I tried to make the trip back, sans rail, but instead made the trip down to the floor. It should have hurt, but didn't. The floor softened itself just as I arrived. So much for my R&D gag theory. We'd never even conceived of an idea like this at NATech, and we were the best. I crawled to the head of the bed and worked myself up to my feet. I used the next twenty minutes traveling up and down that short distance. It felt like I'd run a marathon.

But it gave me time to think about the door. If the floor could respond to certain stimuli, couldn't a wall? The thought boggled. Here I was, wobbly as a new born colt, ready to get caught, and my butt showing to boot, and I was impressed. Maybe the doc was right. Relearning was going to be fun. *John, my man*, I thought, *there is an upside to all this. Just live through this and enjoy finding out.*

I staggered to where my best estimation of the door would be. It was a pretty good estimation. Just as I arrived, an opening appeared in front of me. Rather than being rectangular, it took on the rough outline of my form. It looked a little strange, but that was no doubt due to the free flowing hospital gown. Sure enough, when I shifted, it did. It seemed too low to go through, but was actually just right. I didn't even muss my hair. Seeing as there was no doorjamb to look around, I just passed through. The thought crossed my mind to stop short, leaving just my eyes poking through, but the mental picture gave me the willies. Better this way, I hoped, than getting stuck in a doorway, neither in nor out.

The door opened to a dimly lit corridor that was at least thirty feet wide and twelve high. I couldn't make out a great deal at first, but this most certainly was not a hospital. The air seemed dry and warm, almost like outdoor air. There were no lights in the corridor, but I did see several lights coming from rooms on both sides. They seemed staggered, as though the corridor changed its width at various points. Then I had it; this wasn't a corridor. It was a tunnel.

I had no idea which way to go, so I picked my left. There seemed to be a couple of darker spots along the length that I could duck into if need be. I hoped not. I wanted as much traveling time as I could get. Maybe even heist some transportation and figure out how to work it. Yeah, and I wanted a pony, too.

I padded down on bare feet-at least the floor was warmish-to the first source of light on the left, the same side as my room. As I approached, I noticed it had a standard type doorway, and the light was coming

from the open frame. I peeked in carefully.

This was, I decided, the good doctor's room. It had an air about it that seemed both lived in and professional. He may have been a criminal, but he was a good doctor and had good taste. He had minor lighting around the small room that showed an infirmary of sorts, a desk with what appeared to be an embedded keypad that had a crack running horizontally the entire length of it, and several black, pictureless frames. Taking a chance, I stepped in just enough to see around a short corner into the back of the room. The hidden corner revealed a small doorway that led, judging from the sound emanating from it, either to his occupied bedroom or to a fully operational sawmill. The good doctor may not be able to revive the dead, but I'm sure he could wake them. I turned to leave.

Someone was staring me right in the eye, not three feet from me. I almost screamed, but fortunately my heart was caught in my throat and no sound escaped. A mirror. I swallowed hard enough to put my heart back where it belonged and left. In my reflection I still saw that ever so slight something that was wrong. Again, I couldn't place what it was, and again I decided there were more important things.

I continued down the tunnel-actually, it was indeed a rough hewn corridor-to the next light source, on the right. Again, a doorway, and again another room of office and bedroom. Whoever had these quarters was most definitely not in the medical profession. He or she also had a desk, but had carelessly scattered weapons around it. Maybe he made the holes the doctor patched up. I wasn't entirely surprised. I had already figured there had to be some sort of paramilitary presence to back up illegal activity of this scope. Dr. Barrett had told me I wasn't his first patient, and that it was unusual that there was only me at the time. His other comments had pointed to coordinated intelligence that anticipated or warned of raids, and this kind of equipment could be neither abandoned nor packed in an overnight bag. Yet it seemed they needed to change locations on occasion. That all pointed to an organization, and all organizations specializing in illegal activity always had violence as an aspect. Ergo, the weapons. This, I decided, would be the military leader's office. I carefully checked the weapons visually, hoping against hope I'd find one I could figure out.

Pay dirt. There appeared to be two types of sidearm, energy based and projectile based. High tech and low tech. I selected the low tech. I felt pretty low tech. I hefted the gun in my hand. Very big and very heavy. And fully loaded. Not as good as transportation, but maybe the keys to some. I checked the back room quietly, but while it was occupied, I could have been pounding a base drum and he'd have not heard it over his snores. He and the doctor really made the pair. I'd be worried of a cave-in due to sonic disruptions.

I went back into the hall and turned to my right, continuing down to the last light source, this time on the left. It wasn't a doorway but rather a long opening with half height walls and a double-wide door space in the middle. I crouched down to avoid being spotted. This left the gown gathered all over my feet, my rear end mooning anyone sneaking up on me. I stumbled and tripped my way to the doorway, doing the last ten feet on hands and knees, careful not to scrape the gun against the stone.

This one held promise. Instead of opening into another room, it opened to a massive cavern. The floor was some six feet below me, and the ceiling reached up at least twenty-five feet more. The floor surface itself was a rough rectangle and must have been 150 feet deep and 250 wide. The cavern opening ran the entire width, and was pitch black beyond. There was light and movement everywhere, though little noise. Then I saw just what I needed: wheels.

More accurately, non-wheels. It was parked, twenty feet to my right, ten feet out from the wall, and three feet above the floor, resting on nothing. I shook my head and looked again. Yep, they had perfected anti-gravitational transportation. That probably meant easy controls. I hoped it did.

I watched about five minutes to get a feel for the type of activity going on in the cavern, to determine how to best take advantage of the patterns. It became fairly evident that they were loading, not unloading. Maybe that false alarm from yesterday wasn't so false. Small vehicles were moving about, arriving full alongside larger vehicles, and leaving empty. I found it interesting that their illustrious commander would be asleep. Then I had it; they weren't evacuating. They were preparing. The activity was consistent with the preparation that goes into a raid. That made it even more important for the base commander to be here, which meant those probably weren't his quarters where I'd acquired my weapon. It didn't matter, really; I just didn't see how knowing would affect me. One thing, none of the activity was directed toward me. Chances were good I'd make it to the hover vehicle, and then they'd catch me. First things first. There was a wide ramp that led down from the opening where I crouched. Beside it, a metal ladder with six steps down to the cavern floor. I went down the ladder quickly, this time careful not to hit the gun metal to the rail metal. I made it and crouched behind a largish container in the shadows to my right. I set the gun down momentarily and flexed my left hand. I couldn't believe how big and heavy it was. Before NATech, I had served in the military and had all the related training. I'd fired a lot of things, but this was the biggest sidearm I'd ever seen. A tiny alarm went off in the back of my head. I had missed something. It was staring

*I LOVE IT WHEN YOU STARE AT ME LIKE THAT! HERE, LET ME GET CLOSER. AAAHH! THAT FEELS SO NICE! CAN YOU DO IT AGAIN? PLEASE? I WANT TO MAKE YOU HAPPY! OH! THAT WAS WONDERFUL! I THINK THE BONE BROKE, BUT I'M NOT SURE. UHHH! THAT'S SO NICE! THANK YOU!*

me in the face and I couldn't see it. I couldn't think what it could possibly be, and didn't have time for in-depth analysis. I picked up the gun and moved for the hover vehicle. Once in it, I'd have five, maybe ten seconds to start it. After that ... well, I gripped the gun tighter.

I didn't even have two seconds. I placed my hands on the side of the vehicle, and it screamed. Not a siren. Not a klaxon. A human scream. For a deterrent, it was bone chillingly effective. I jumped back and dropped the gun as every face in the cavern turned toward me. I stooped and picked up the gun, fumbling with it. I snapped the safety off and backed up. The rear wall of the cavern was only ten feet behind me, so I put my back to it. A number of people, mostly men and mostly armed, were advancing carefully toward me. The hover continued its blood curdling wails. I was very scared.

They approached to where the hover vehicle stood. There was sweat all over my barely clad body, and I was breathing hard, but my gun hand was up, and they could see it. One man, he'd have to be an officer, stepped out from the crowd. This would probably be the Lieutenant Sanchez that Barrett had mentioned. He spoke to the screaming craft, and it shut up. He then slowly walked around the hover, empty hands half raised. I lifted the gun and cocked it. It gave a half tone and an indicator light came on. A red bead of light settled on his head. He was less than ten feet from me.

"All right. That's close enough. You're Sanchez?? I wanted to sound cool, but sounded, and felt, sick. He nodded slowly. I knew deep down that I could and would kill this man, and I hated the thought. But I was getting out of here. ? If you want to say something, it had better be 'you're free to go'. Otherwise..."

He smiled pleasantly, his swarthy, Hispanic featured face showing confidence and sincerity. ? If you wish to leave, you can. I am in no position to stop you, nor are any of my people. We would never see harm come to you."

He sounded like he meant it. ? All right,? I said, ? that sounds fine. Why don't you back it up by dropping those weapons?? The gun was getting very heavy, and the red dot now danced over his head and neck.

To my complete surprise, Sanchez spoke a quiet command and they dropped every weapon they had. Some even pulled out side arms I hadn't seen and dropped them. He didn't bother turning to see if his order had been complied with, he just kept his gaze on me, softening his intense eyes with that pleasant smile of his.

"Done. Now, you may take this vehicle, or any other you wish, and leave. You can choose any of my men as chauffeur. I also have thirty-two women soldiers you can choose from, if you'd prefer. All I ask-"

"You're in no position to ask anything."

"True.? The soothing smile never wavered. ? Nonetheless, all I ask is that you please talk to Doctor Barrett, if only to help you on your way. He'll be here in a moment."

"He's here already, thank you, Raul.? Dr. Barrett appeared in the opening on my left. He was nowhere near as big as he should have been. I'd pictured him over six and half feet. He didn't come close and even looked shorter than me. The alarm in the back of my head became more insistent. He glowered at me. ? I've no idea how you managed to waken yourself, but put that thing down and get back in bed,? he said irritably.

"Sorry, Doc, but back alley medicine doesn't suit me. Thanks for getting me back together, body and soul and mind. But I'm taking Sanchez up on his offer and taking a hover. I'll send you a Christmas card. ? I motioned them back from the hover and almost dropped the gun, it was so heavy. No one rushed me. Instead, they all stepped back as I'd wanted. I lifted the gun again, now using two hands. This was going to make for an interesting time, getting into a hovercraft while holding this cannon. I heard a scuff behind me and turned back to the ladder. Barrett had negotiated the last step and had approached me. He was less than ten feet away, but stopped as soon as I turned to him. I guess he was taller than me. A lot taller. But I'd have sworn-I glanced at the others on my right, but they had made no move whatsoever.

"You young fool! ? Barrett's bedside manner had apparently stayed in bed. ? You haven't the faintest idea what's going on! Stop this nonsense at once!"

"Sorry, Doc. I may be a fool, but I'm not young. You'll find more experience than you can handle in Mama Wyeth's boy, so don't try."

He stared at me, as though seeing me for the first time. He shrugged and spoke slowly. ? All right. Leave. But before you go, let me give you a quick medical history. Your medical history."

It was too tempting. My legs were getting weak, the gun was putting on weight, and I had miles to go. But I couldn't resist hearing him out. This might be the only man who knew anything about me. I choked back a sob of frustration and weakness.

I glanced at Lt. Sanchez. ? Lieutenant, I'll take you up on your offer of a chauffeur. Please make it the smallest female soldier you have. I only want to use her as a driver, and promise to you there will be no improper behavior.? He gave me an odd look, but motioned to someone to fetch her.

I turned back to the doctor. ? Two minutes, Doc.? He was also looking at me strangely, nodding as though his suspicions had become convictions.

"Well, that explains the late wake up. Look ... what is your name?"

"John. John Wyeth."

"Very well ... John. Your story in two minutes.

"What I told you yesterday and earlier today is true, if edited. But you already knew that. What you don't know is exactly what the corporate world did with its little riping toy. Now I'll tell you.

"Riping had been initially started to treat man, or in a broader sense, man's society. In every case I gave you, except one, riping was viewed as a way to serve man's needs. In each of those cases, even the tragic ones, the mind stayed with the body. Or so everyone thought, until that raid against a corporate entity.

"Remember, John, ? he almost choked on my name, ? when I mentioned the security set up that was run by one ripped homeless man?? I nodded. ? Didn't you wonder how one single case should cause such an uproar?? He didn't wait for a response, but I had wondered. ? That's because that homeless man's *mind* ran the security. His body had long since been destroyed, including his brain. All that was left of him was a series of circuit boards and holographic storage nodules into which his mind had been moved."

Do you understand? Industry had reached the point where ripes were serving them. I didn't want to tell you then, and I don't now, but I have to. Industry used the riping process for centuries. Using the convicted killer and catatonic patient loopholes, they still ripe today. But the vast majority of ripes after the three hundred years were on the same minds. You've been out for at least *six hundred years!* Worse, you haven't been one other persona, John. You've been many. Different people, different personas, different bodies, different brains, different *machines* . For six hundred years."

The words hit like a series of blows. *Six hundred years?* It wasn't possible! I had left open the possibility of an error of a full century, but even my first calculations had discounted 500. My heart was racing, and I could feel the hot tears streaming down my cheeks. Tears. I couldn't remember the last time I had cried. My head was swirling as the truth hit me. I knew I was slipping into shock. Yet one thing held it off. I took my right hand away from the gun and showed it to him.

"If that's so, Doctor, how is it that after 600 hundred years, I still have the same body?? The woman soldier had arrived and was preparing the hover for departure.

He looked sad, very sad. He shook his head and spoke slowly as though every word hurt. He said very softly. ? You're looking at your body with your eyes, John. Look at yourself with your mind, and you'll see the truth. Unless it was the custom in your time to give boys names to girls?"

I staggered at the words. Still holding the gun up with my left hand, I looked at my right. It was my hand, but it was a girl's hand. Thin, delicate fingers with neatly trimmed nails. I brought it to my cheek. To *my* cheek. Soft skin, stained with tears. A razor had never touched my face, and never would. My throat was smooth and elegant, with no protruding Adam's apple. The cavern was reeling as the gun slid from my numb hand and I sank to my knees, gasping and crying. I reached under my garment and my trembling fingers played over narrow shoulders and a smallish chest, which supported my young, developing breasts, now heaving in near hysteria. I heard a young girl's wail of despair and knew it to be mine. As blackness closed over me, I sensed people rushing forward, and I felt warm, concerned arms holding me close, protecting me as I fainted.

### Chapter Three

I was struggling to waken out of Healer's Sleep, but couldn't. I tried to relax, but couldn't. Still in my Sleep, I got out of bed. Captain Taft from the Second Armored wanted to enlist strong men to help fight the war. We were the best company in the corps. My men were ready, trained killers all. He stepped up

to me, his eyes sharp. I saluted, feeling confident and strong.

"Roll up that sleeve, soldier! Let's see those muscles!?" he barked. I rolled up my sleeve, but was shocked to see I had only a thin, smooth arm. A little girl's arm. ? You call that an arm? Pretty pathetic, soldier. Come on! Show us some real muscle! Take off that shirt, soldier, and show me some real meat!! ? I eagerly reached for my T-shirt to show him my strength, but suddenly couldn't pull it up. ? What're you waiting for? A brass band? Strip, soldier! ? But I couldn't. I was terrified and extremely embarrassed. Besides, couldn't he see I had muscles under the shirt? I could see two muscles right now. Wait, those weren't muscles. They were ... ? Strip, soldier! Aren't you a man, soldier?? But I couldn't. I was tearing at my shirt, but it wouldn't come off. I pulled harder ... harder...

"Hey! Settle down! C'mon! Wake up! Wake up! It's okay...? I felt myself being cradled in soft arms and opened my eyes. A young woman's face, close to mine, gazed back. I had my arms around her neck and must have been choking her, I was squeezing so tight. I stared up into her eyes, very confused. She smiled.

"There now, you're fine. Just a bad dream. No wonder! You've been through a lot. Just relax. ? I eased my grip on her neck, but still held on. She felt very warm and safe. I was lying on my bed, and had kicked the sheets off in my thrashing. I had pulled loose the ties to my hospital gown, and the top hung loose from my shoulders. As I shifted to draw it tighter, the top slid away from my neck and I was looking inside the garment at my small, smooth chest and soft, maturing physique. Even as I stared, my long, brown hair slipped over my shoulder.

Realization hit me, and I pushed the woman away with all my strength and retreated to the side of the bed against the wall. She didn't seem too upset about my rudeness. Instead she just pulled the stool close to the bed, sat on it and smiled at me.

"Doctor Barrett felt that it would be best if we spent some time together. He may stop by in a few hours, if you wish to see him. He's very sorry for the way he treated you, and hopes you'll forgive him. You were a little crazy in the hanger, you know. Are you okay now?? She sounded as though she really wanted to know.

My head was whirling. Part of me wanted to scream, another part wanted to be back in her arms, but for reasons I had never felt before. My nod was very slight and I'm sure totally unconvincing. She kept smiling and rested a hand on the bed railing.

"Well, let's be proper, shall we? My name is Susan Lendler, but please call me Susie. I'm a corporal in the Third Regiment of the Resistance. I was the one who was going to pilot your hov. Until you changed your mind, that is. ? She smiled again, robbing her words of any sting.

"I ... I ... what's happened to me?? My voice sounded exactly like my voice. But it also sounded like a young girl's.

"Pretty much everything that Doctor Barrett told you. I don't know what detail he went into, but I can guess it was the regular history. But I'm sure you mean, why are you a little girl? Not so little, maybe. But a girl. Right?? I nodded. ? Well, since I was the lead researcher and am now your counselor, I can tell you quite a bit. I'll start with the most obvious and normal question asked by every 'Cue: What's the date? Today is November 13th, 2676. And yes, we're using the same calendar. Now how about you get dressed while I keep talking?"

She reached out a gentle hand. I thought about it, then took it. As she helped me out of the bed, I could feel a confusion of emotions churning in me. As the old me, I felt a little silly being helped in this way, so delicately. Yet as I was now, it also felt reassuring and more than a little wanted. The comfort I had felt

before I was aware that I was ... I was ... that comfort was gone.

She helped me down without making me feel too self-conscious, careful to touch only my hands and arms. Once I was on my feet, she kept one hand on my elbow and leaned over and picked up a shiny duffel bag at her feet. She plopped it up on the bed and opened it somehow. It was without seam or opening, but it did her bidding better than any zipper. She chatted cheerfully as she pulled out the clothing.

"I thought you might want to borrow some of my clothes. I'm a little bigger than you, and I'm afraid they're dark to match my color, but these are the best we can do right now. Your clothing was lost in a skirmish yester...? She broke off, looking at me. My face had gone white, and now was turning very warm

"I ... I ... can't wear those!?" She held in her hand a black bra and a pair of black panties that had a pretty design and even a little lace. Pretty design? Why had I thought that?

"Yes, you can. And yes, you will. Do you want to keep wearing that gown?? I shook my head. ? Then this is what I have. Believe me, there's nothing wrong with you wearing these. This is what girls wear,? she said with a smile. I had to admit it was an infectious smile. ? Unless you want me to scrounge up one of the men's underwear. Maybe Lieutenant Sanchez?? she giggled. ? I'm sure he wouldn't mind. But you'd have your hands full, holding your pants up."

Despite myself and the situation, I had to smile slightly. ? No, I suppose you're right. But this is very difficult."

She nodded. ? I'd like to tell you I understand. Of course I can't. To go from being a man one moment-for you-and then wake up like this. It has got to be hard. I wish I could make it different. It won't be so bad, though. Please believe that. Now, try these on."

I took the panties she offered me and tried them on under my gown. I had not expected something so small to fit, and they didn't quite. They weren't too small-they were too big. I had to admit though that while my burning ears gave away my embarrassment at having something so feminine on, they felt nice.

She handed me the bra, and I'm sure my face took on the shade of my crimson ears. To put this on, I'd have to disrobe. I hesitated, looking the thing over. I didn't really want to put it on, and certainly not in front of someone, even Susie. Yet I also knew I should. This was quickly becoming overwhelming again. I started to breathe faster.

"What's wrong?? Susie asked, concern in her voice.

"Uhhh ... well ... it's just that the underpants are one thing. I've worn them, of course. Though not quite the same cut. But this...? I held up the bra.

"Well, honestly! Just ask, silly!?" she spoke firmly, but her tone was friendly. She snatched the bra from my hands, and before I could so much as choke from embarrassment, she pulled off my gown and dropped it to the floor. She stepped behind me and reached her arms around my front. ? Here, it goes on like this. It holds in the front just like so, and the strap adjustments work like this. Settle down! If you squirm around, we won't get it fitted right!?" I felt a firm tugging and a kind of snug, comfortable support where I'd never needed it before. ? There! Now turn around.?" I did and she inspected me closely. ? It's still a little big, and I've adjusted it as small as it will go. But don't worry, you'll fill out soon enough. You'll probably even be bigger than-? she broke off and brought a hand to her mouth, realizing her mistake.

I felt tears welling up. I started to sob, and she pulled me to her again, apologizing over and over. It was



as though I had no control over myself. I had never felt emotions this vibrant, this powerful before. I was helpless to them. Even while I cried, I realized that embarrassing as this was, it was Susan who made it tolerable. While I sobbed like a baby, she somehow used one arm to hold me and the other to dress me. After a few minutes, I became aware of her voice.

"Here. Let's sit down on the bed. I'll boost you. There!?" Sitting on the edge of the bed, my shoulders still heaving a bit, I watched through misty eyes as she put on my socks and shoes. I felt so helpless. She smiled. ? Now just let me sit beside you.? She hopped up next to me, our feet dangling over the side. I wiped the tears and tried to smile back. I nearly made it.

"Is this what it's going to be like from now on? Bawling my eyes out every time something happens?"

She shook her head. ? Don't worry about that. You'll definitely get over it. You showed a lot of backbone and a lot of smarts back there in the hanger. I would have been terrified stupid, and I'm a soldier."

I partially succeeded in smiling this time. ? If I'd have known I wasn't myself, I would have been scared stupid, too. I have no idea how I missed something so obvious. I guess it was the after effects of that Healer's Sleep."

She shook her head. ? No, it's not that. Healer's Sleep does have some residual calming effects. If it didn't you might be a basket case now. But it doesn't warp your perception once you are up and about. ? She shot me a sly look. ? Even when you weren't supposed to be up and about. How did you manage that?"

"It sounds kind of easy, but the simple fact is that I wanted to be out of here more than the Healer's Sleep wanted me on my back. Willpower. Or fear. Maybe both.? I didn't want to give away too much; it might come in handy again.

"I suppose.? She didn't sound at all convinced. ? Still, we've never had anyone wake themselves up from Healer's Sleep quite like that."

"There's a first time for everything. You were talking about why I didn't spot that I'm no longer my father's spitting image...? The talking seemed to be helping; I had calmed down considerably. It also didn't hurt that the fatigues Susan gave me were a couple sizes too large and did wonders to hide my new bumps and curves. I couldn't put off dealing with them forever, but maybe a little longer.

"I'm sorry, you're right. Well, your body was a physical shell, grown in the physiomanufacturing complex about 2,000 kilometers from here, straight line. We..."

"You mean I'm a clone?"

"No! Definitely not! You are not a copy of anyone. You are as original as a newborn baby. Physically. But your body was only living. It had no mental facilities, no cognizance, no persona. And it lacked that spark that made it alive."

"My soul, you mean."

"Yes, exactly.? She seemed pleased I had chosen that word. ? It was a soulless thing. Into it we put you."

"But why a girl? And why so young?"

"A couple of reasons. One, although cognitive specialists like Doctor Barrett can reintegrate the original

personas of detached ripes into a human form, there's no way to tell what that persona is like. We must rely on other means to determine the background, experiences, even the gender of that persona. In every case we've had, there were records available. Even the ones that went back 600 years to the first riping could be tracked down. I know, because that's what I do. But you were the special case. We couldn't find a single record on who you were or where you came from. So we had to guess. ? She looked down. ? We're terribly sorry. We had to guess, and one, maybe two of your alternate personas were female, so that's what we went with."

I stared. ? You mean I've been a woman *before* this?!"

"Not you. Your false personas. But you'd have absolutely no memory of them any more than you would have memories of your other ripings."

"And the age?"

"That we do for both you and us. We do it for you because it's known that during puberty, more than just the reproductive systems mature. Everything is in a state of change and growth, including the intangibles, such as the personality and soul. When a person is rescued from their false life, their mind and, we believe, their soul need a place that is flexible, open to change. Anytime during the teen years will work. We choose your age for our benefit because ... well, to be honest, we don't exactly acquire the shells by normal means. ? She left the rest of it unspoken. ? And some of our 'Cues, that's what we call a rescued persona, don't adapt well at all to the sudden awakening. Some never adapt. We've found it useful-"

"Useful to have a body you can control easily, if not a mind, ? I interrupted. ? So how old am I? I mean biologically. Physically, I suppose they probably just whipped me up in a couple days. ? It was very hard, dealing with this.

"NO! That's not so! Never think you're less than human! You are as human as me. ? At my look, she continued, ? I'm just a regular woman. My mom and dad live on Greater New Germany. And you're just as real. It takes a fourteen-year-old body fourteen years to grow. Which is about your age, by the way."

"About?? She nodded. ? I guess you probably can't stop at the ol' computer terminal with a heisted body slung over your shoulder to get the details. ? She carefully didn't look at me. I switched back to the subject. ? So that means that next year I'll be fifteen, then sixteen, etc. And I'll keep growing, maturing and... ? It hit me. ? Wait. You mean I'm going to become a woman! Does that mean I can have, you know, bear..."

She nodded. ? Yes. But don't think about that too much, now."

"Believe me, I won't!"

"But don't shut it out entirely, either. Going through puberty the second time is going to be a lot different. And pretty soon your body will be ready to-"

"Uhhh ... look, ? I interrupted. ? I've got the idea. I may not look it, I know I don't look it, but I'm thirty-one years old. I'm a little squeamish now, this is all so new. But I am an adult."

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am."

"No, er ... John, you're *not* !? she spoke sharply. ? Look, this isn't just a 'plug me into a body and I'll pick up where I left off' kind of experience. Cognitive reintegration is far more complicated and comprehensive than that. You really are fourteen years old."

I felt just a little insulted. ? Susie, let's not mess up a great start. I can remember my memories. It's as though they all happened yesterday. I have my life's experiences. I understand I have to catch up, but you must admit that I'm far more mentally capable than any fourteen-year-old, girl or boy. They couldn't have nearly escaped."

"I'll grant you that. You do have your life experiences. And you are counting on those mental achievements to help you control your body. And you're right, they will help. But what makes you think that since your mind can affect your body, that your body won't affect your mind?"

I started to say something, then shut up. I didn't know. The thought of not knowing gave me a chill. I felt the goose bumps rise along my arm, and my heart gave a jump. I wasn't in complete control. I felt a little sick in my stomach. She saw the look of realization on my face.

"That's right, you don't know. We do. It *does* work both ways. Your memories, persona and soul are moved-not copied or imprinted-into the body and brain of a maturing teen. And both your body and brain are going through all the natural emotional, hormonal and physical changes of a young woman.

"Remember your first time through puberty? I do. Once was enough. One moment I was full of myself and immortal. The next, I was ready to crawl into a hole and pull it in after me. Well, you're going through the same changes. The hormones and chemicals that once turned you into a bag of exploding emotions, black and white opinions, and energetic borderline desperation are all bubbling away again in that thirty-one year old mind of yours. Because your brain is fourteen. Oh, it'll be easier this time around, you know you'll survive. But it'll also be new for you. And different. Very, very different. In a way, I suppose you're lucky."

"Lucky?? Her opinion of luck varied substantially from mine.

"Well, yes. We transfer every Cue into a twelve to fifteen year old body. We've done forty-seven in the last three years. And the girls have the worst time because the teen years are more intense for girls than boys. The boys don't have it much easier, but the changes are less extreme, externally and internally. You're lucky in that while you're female now, you weren't before, so it's one time through for you."

"But it would have been even easier if you'd just transferred me into a boy's body,? I pointed out.

"I know. I'm sorry. You're the first Cue that anyone has mis-sexed. Ever. There just wasn't any information about you. There still isn't. So here you are. But count on it, it's much better than from where we rescued you. ? She smiled. ? And you have my word that being a woman isn't bad at all. Personal experience talking there."

"I suppose I should start listening to those 'feminine protection' commercials now,? I muttered.

She looked at me questioningly. ? What's a 'feminine protection' commercial? You mean like commerce in martial arts? Or weapons?"

"Never mind. ? It seemed holovision had gone the way of the mastodon. I'd let someone else mourn its passing.

We were quiet for a few moments, just staring at our swinging feet. I couldn't get over how completely they looked like *my* feet, even shoe clad. And yet, when I looked at Susie's feet, hers were at least my size and maybe one or two sizes larger. But she couldn't have stood over five foot three inches, which made me about four foot ten inches. I continued looking at her dangling feet and let my eyes wander up her legs, comparing them to mine. We both wore semi-baggy pants, but I could tell her legs were lithe and lean. Yet mine looked skinnier. I followed up her legs, over her modest, healthy figure and to her

pretty, always smiling face. She had a glow in her brown eyes that complemented the deep, rich glow of her face. Her dark skin was the smoothest, most perfect I had ever seen, bordered by short, thick, black hair. She had a girl next door kind of face. Not stunningly beautiful, nor even modestly so. Just pretty, in all the positive ways. I smiled back at her. I could get very used to her very quickly. I owed her. Having thought the thought, I spoke it.

"I want to thank you Susie. You've really made me feel better. I don't know how long it'll be before I go crazy, but at least the ride will be easier because of you."

"That's what I've been assigned to do. Make the road, whatever one you travel, a little easier for you. You're very important to all of us."

"Will you be assigned to me for very long?? Less than fifteen minutes ago, I'd shoved her away. Now the thought of her not being there made my chest tighten. It would really help having her near, especially the next time I was with Dr. Barrett.

"Believe it, kiddo. We're roommates now."

"Room..."

"Yep. Private quarters are only for officers, awakening Cues, and Dusty. You're none of the above, so until we figure out how to best get you back into society, you're rooming with us dogs. Pulling duty, too, in a couple, three days."

"Uh, yeah.? This was going to be very difficult. I was finally waking up to the fact that my whole life, not just the way I went to the bathroom, was hanging. Had changed.

"C'mon. It's almost breakfast. Let's grab some grub and I'll give you a tour.?" She hopped off the bed and lifted me down. I wasn't that much shorter than her, less than six inches. But I was very unsteady. I lurched about two steps on my own before Susie grabbed my upper arm. I looked at her, just a little confused.

"Why is it so tough to walk? I'd figured it was because of weakness, but I feel plenty strong enough. And I walked better than this last night."

She shook her head. ? No, you're pretty much full strength, though your muscles could use some toning. We'll hit the exercise area later. The problem is that your body never learned to walk. That you can walk at all is because your mind is doing a pretty fast translation of walking, and teaching your body. Pretty fast, but not fast enough. How tall were you? You know ... before?"

"Uh-six foot one."

"Foot? That's an old style measurement isn't it? What's the one stand for?"

"Sorry. How about metric? I heard Doctor Barrett use it yesterday. Six foot, one inch would be about one point nine meters."

"So you were pretty tall. And your build was different. Remember how awkward you were at fourteen? Double that. Don't worry, though, it'll grow on you. Maybe we should practice a while. Breakfast can wait a little longer."

So we spent the next half hour teaching me how to walk. It took about twenty minutes to get the fundamentals down. It was strange, seeing as I'd walked only last night, albeit roughly. That was before I realized I had a new body, though. Now that I knew, my mind kept getting in my brain's way, as odd as

that sounded. I picked it up eventually, so we used another ten minutes practicing my sitting and standing, starting and stopping. I spent the whole half hour amazed at the difference in locomotion.

"Do my hips always move like this?"

Susan giggled. I think she was enjoying herself. ? Of course they do. Comes with the territory. ? She laughed again at the unintended joke. ? The problem is that you're exaggerating the movement. Don't try to walk like a girl. Just try walking."

"Won't I end up gallumphing around like some jock in a tutu?"

She mouthed my words silently, as though translating them, then shook her head. ? If I understand you right, the answer's no, you won't. Not unless you ... gallumphed around as a man on purpose before."

"Of course I didn't. I just walked."

"So do that now."

A little light went on in my head. I tried again, and this time I didn't swish near as much, if you can swish at all in army fatigues. The wiggle was still there, but much diminished. I beamed at her, quite pleased with myself. Susie clapped her hands.

"Wonderful! Now you don't look like ... well, never mind what you don't look like. We'll have a lesson in girl humor another time. I'm starved! Let's get some breakfast. ? My own stomach was growling, too, so it sounded like a great idea. She grabbed my hand and led me to the wall where the door was. I should have felt self-conscious about it, but the truth was that I would have enjoyed holding her hand as either a man or a girl. Just for different reasons. At least, I hoped for different reasons. I was still too new at this to really understand my own feelings. I did know that I liked it.

The door appeared as before, but a little higher and a little wider. I held my breath a bit as we went through, but it didn't close in on me this time, either. Hand in hand, we entered the wide, rough-hewn corridor.

It was much different from last night. Instead of being dark, dank and deserted, it was full of life and light. People, all clad in a uniform style of dress, moved up and down the corridor, which was nearly as bright as day. And they were noisy. Mixtures of laughter, formal, and normal conversation added much to the atmosphere. If it weren't for the craggy, solid rock making up the floor and walls, I'd have never guessed we were in a cave. I said as much to Susie, then repeated it in a louder voice. She nodded and spoke back in as loud a voice.

"We're a pretty loud bunch when we have the chance. That's why we spend the extra energy on the ghost walls for our Cue's recovery rooms and ghost doors for private quarters. Ghost walls are planed energy fields that simulate mass. It cuts out everything. The doors can even allow openings large enough to fit exactly to whatever's in its plane, down to a millimeter. It's a pretty weird feeling, going through. And it can be phased to keep out light and sound. C'mon, the mess is down this way. ? She pulled me to the right, the direction I hadn't explored.

It seemed longer than it had last night. I would have guessed it to be only fifty feet, but was closer to 100 feet. Check that. Closer to thirty meters. I'd been easy with either the English or metric systems, but apparently only metric had survived. That was one plus in this society, anyway. I'd best fall into the habit of using metric exclusively.

It was the same as before. Brightly lit, heavily used, and cut from solid stone. It was also very clean,

though I did spot a couple of stains

*YES, MRS. FLETCHER? THE CARPET'S STAINED JUST DOWN THE HALL FROM YOUR DOOR? DID YOU NOTICE WHAT KIND OF STAIN? BLOOD? ARE YOU SURE? MY SENSORS DIDN'T DETECT ANYTHING THAT WOULD ACCOUNT FOR BLOOD. IT MAY BE JELLY FROM THE BREAKFAST DELIVERY ... NO, I'M SURE MY SENSORS ARE IN WORKING ORDER, MRS. FLETCHER. YES, I RAN FULL DIAGNOSTICS ON MYSELF LAST NIGHT, AS ALWAYS, MRS. FLETCHER. NO, I'M NOT ARGUING WITH YOU, MRS. FLETCHER. I'LL PUT A CLEANING 'BOT ON IT IMMEDIATELY, MRS. FLETCHER, AND REPORT TO YOU WITHIN THE HOUR ... VERY WELL, THEN, WITHIN THE HALF HOUR.*

that looked almost like blood. As we approached, though, I realized I was mistaken. It did make me notice, however, that it was in front of a section of rock on the right hand side that was completely smooth and flat. I glanced back and noticed another section like it, where my room was. Here would be another recovery room. I looked at the stain once more. Nope. Definitely *not* blood. Not even a stain, just darker stone. I didn't have to be a genius to figure out why I'd made the mistake. Right now, my senses were whirling from everything I was seeing and hearing. But the whirling this time felt almost like a euphoria.

We continued to the end of the hall, passing a third blank surface on the right, and came to a huge opening on the left. Like the hanger on the other end of the hall, this one also had a lower floor and higher ceiling. Bright sunlight poured down from the ceiling; it must be open to the sky above, though I couldn't see yet. Unlike the hanger, it was completely man-made, judging from the flat floor and fairly rectangular shape. It was accessible via a large ramp, cut from the native rock. Susie led me down this ramp, and we were inside the mess.

Roughly forty meters by sixty meters, it served as a mess and storehouse. The ramp was about fifteen meters long and ended about halfway into the room. Its gentle slope indicated that pretty heavy objects were brought through here-even though they'd apparently eliminated the weight problem with antigravity, there was still the mass to contend with, and a slope for controlled descent was required. The wall on the ramp's right side was glass smooth and looked somewhat like my room's wall. A ghost wall, Susie had called it. I reached out a hand to see if it would go through, but it felt solid. A small tingle went up my arm and I quickly withdrew my hand, more surprised than shocked. I looked at Susie, but she was too busy suppressing a grin to speak.

The area to the left, bathed in warm sunlight, was the mess. The center area was wide open, with tables and chairs in a semi-structured order. Against the wall on my left-the wall shared by the corridor, for we had now stepped off the ramp and turned to our left-was a kitchen with a cafeteria style line. On the far wall were two openings. The one in the middle seemed to be a laundry of sorts. The other one, on the far right and in the corner, was a hallway from which men and a few women were moving in and out. The wall on my right held a single large entrance that stretched from ceiling to floor, unlike the other openings. It was at least ten meters wide and was closed off with a flat ghost wall that was somewhat recessed from the normal stone face of the mess. The sunlight, for some reason, did not reflect whatsoever off the surface of the ghost wall. I looked up at the sky to see if there was a protruding ledge casting a shadow on it, and gasped with awe.

There was no sky. Instead of open air and a brilliant sun, I saw a high ceiling of solid stone. And instead of lighting was a shimmer, constantly emanating from the entire surface. As I watched, I could feel the sunny warmth pouring down on my upturned face. The shimmer seemed almost sky blue, and I even caught a whiff of fresh, mountain air. I was stunned.

"Why, that's incredible!"

Susie looked up and laughed. ? This is the part of my job I love the most! Showing off our little advancements to Cues. Yes, that's an environmental stunt we pull to keep up morale. Sometimes we're cooped up in here for weeks at a time, and this becomes our playground. Here and the rec area. I'll tell you how we do it when you're more caught up with the times."

"I'd love to know. Offhand, I'd have to guess that it involves a prismatic shifting of ambient sunlight, recombined through a spectral and holographic filter. You're probably using of static grid of thermal energy for the display, though I can't begin to imagine the power source you'd use to achieve that magnitude of output."

It was her turn to stare at me while I tried to suppress a smile. She didn't say, but I'd lay odds I'd hit pretty close. Score one for NATech training and applied use of the gray matter, fourteen years old or not. I pulled at her hand and started walking to the long line in front of the cafeteria counter. ? Come on. I thought you were hungry.? Still staring at me, she let me drag her to where the trays were. I almost felt like letting out a giggle, but was maybe still a little embarrassed at the thought.

It looked like it would be ten or fifteen minutes until we'd get up to the counter. I got in line behind a guy about twenty or so. He seemed as big as a house, but when I looked at him carefully, he was only average build. I picked up a tray and the noise made him turn. He smiled at me and I smiled back, a little self-conscious. He stepped aside and waved us both in front of him.

"Hey, dogs! Make way for a couple of ladies!?" Everyone turned and moved over, women included, letting us up to the very front of the line. Now I was very embarrassed. I tried not to show it, but my face was burning, a condition I was becoming very familiar with. I held the empty tray flat against my chest. My hips felt like they were swinging out a half-meter with each step, with each step becoming more and more tentative until I just plain stopped. I stared down at the floor. That hole Susie had talked about earlier sounded very appealing right now.

Susie put her mouth next to my ear. ? Calm down. Just breathe a bit. There. Now don't hold on to that tray so tight, it'll shatter. Look, no one's watching us.? I looked up. For a line of people who had just given us the front, I'd never seen so much disinterest. They all seemed to be talking to each other while paying us absolutely no mind. Even the guy who had shouted was yakking to someone else, going into great detail about-from what I overheard-absolutely nothing. Susie nudged me in the back, and we walked to the front counter. I set the tray on the long counter to serve myself.

I looked up, way up, into the eyes of the cook, or attendant. He was a breathing mountain. His girth, both chest and belly, was astounding. He probably affected the local tides. He smiled at me. These people really got into smiling.

"Well, good morning, ladies! We've got some bacon, eggs, waffles, pancakes. You name it, we got it! Juice, milk and what not at the end. Oh!?" He reached under the serving table and pulled out a small bottle. ? For you, Corporal. The latest shipment came in about an hour ago, and with it five bottles of your poison. Go ahead and ruin your mouth and my reputation."

"Thanks, Hill. But don't rattle me until you try it. Makes even your swill edible."

I stared. It was a bottle of pepper sauce, a popular brand from my time. ? That's Tabasco sauce!?" I blurted.

Hill grinned at me. ? That it is, ma'am. You're welcome to try it, though it will pain me to see such a soft flower of...? he broke off, and in the corner of my eye I saw Susie's head shake ever so slightly. ? That it is,? he continued. ? Oh! Rumor is there'll be afternoon drills, so that means a skipped lunch and late dinner. So now's the time to eat. Well, dig in!"

I couldn't believe how hungry I was. And the smell of the food doubled it. I helped myself to generous portions of eggs, bacon, fruit, rolls, juice and milk. Susie took much less than I did, settling for eggs, a single roll and a glass of juice. We walked over to a table that was impossibly clean and abandoned. Impossible because there must have been at least a hundred people in there, with seating for not quite that. I was a little surprised they didn't eat in shifts to make best use of the facility. I sat down on one bench, with Susie on the other side so we could talk. She sprinkled some pepper sauce on her eggs, my mouth watering at the sight. I loved pepper sauce. But from what the cook had said, it was difficult to get, so I refrained from asking. She bowed her head and gave thanks, as I did. While we ate, I looked around curiously.

My first impression was how big everyone was, even the women. And the men were gigantic. Each and every one of them looked ready to play on the offensive front line of the Green Bay Packers. But when I took the time to really look at them, they seemed much less so. I knew what it was: They weren't all that big; I was all that small. Susie was apparently the most petite of the women, and she was bigger than me. So unless there was another 'Cue around here, I was the runt of the litter. By a wide margin. It was an interesting feeling.

It was also an interesting feeling being the center of attention. For although absolutely no one was looking at us, I somehow knew that they wanted to. But even the ones who were just coming in from the far hallway and the corridor seemed to not see us. Instead, they gave us our privacy as best they could, and carried on their own conversations and eating their own breakfasts.

Which was more than I could. I looked down at all my uneaten food. I'd barely touched it, but I was stuffed. I put down my fork suddenly. Susie, who had been looking at me looking around, grinned.

"What? You're full already?? she said with mock surprise.

"I think I'm going to be sick."

"I'm not surprised. You ate enough for two people your size."

"Are you kidding? I barely touched this stuff."

She leaned forward. ? No, no. Listen closely: 'You ate enough for two people your size.' Understand?"

I understood. I had the eyes of a hungry thirty-one-year-old pig and the stomach of a hungry fourteen-year-old waif. If I didn't watch myself, I'd look like several fourteen-year-olds, all rolled into one gooey glob. I moaned and pushed the plate away. I heard a lull in some of the conversation at the table next to us, and stole a quick glance. They were all carefully inspecting the storage area's ghost wall for any flaws. I suppose they had seen this kind of thing before. Even Susie was smiling. Of course, she was always smiling. But I think it was at me rather than with me this time. I tried to smile back.

"All right. All right. I understand. Looks like I'm not the first Cue to make this mistake."

"Nor the last,? she agreed, giggling.

"I suppose the cook set me up, too."

"Uh-huh. Truly a gift much greater than his labors at cooking.? She had abandoned giggles for open laughter.

"Hey, Lendler! I heard that!?" A voice shouted from the kitchen behind me.

"And I suppose it is kinda funny. Pretty mean way to welcome someone into your century, though,? I



said, smile on my face and no hostility in my voice.

"Call it an initiation. Or payment. These people went through a lot to get you here, and they want to see what you're made of."

"Oh, yeah?? I smirked. ? Then maybe I should show them."

Screwing up every bit of courage I possessed, I rose and climbed up on the table and took a deep breath. All eyes turned to me, and the hall became quiet. Way in the back, standing on the ramp, was Dr. Barrett. It was the first time I'd seen him since I'd fainted last night. He was watching me very closely.

I was about to bow, but decided to try something really terrifying. Instead of bowing, I slowly curtsied to the crowd, my whole body trembling with fear and my heart racing like a trip hammer. It was my first curtsy, and a lousy one it was, too. Poor balance, probably poor form, and done in pants instead of a skirt. But they loved it. As one, they shouted ? Hooray!? and the sound was almost a physical blow. It struck me that everyone here undoubtedly knew more about me than I did, and to a person were also aware of their unintentional error. I felt my emotions flood to the surface, and with those emotions came tears. These people deserved a show.

Picking up an apple from my still full plate, I consumed it for all to see. Shouts and applause reverberated through the hall. I finished the apple with the crowd roaring its approval. I then turned to the kitchen, where the cook Hill was laughing and applauding, and heaved the core at him. It was a very pathetic throw, landing less than half way and far to the right, but the message was clear. Everyone yelled and whistled, including Hill. I then curtsied to him, and he bowed back, his bow as ugly as my curtsy, but every bit as sincere. I then turned back to the crowd and curtsied a final time, trying to put all my thanks and gratefulness into that simple, awkward and foreign motion. Staying in my curtsy while everyone stood and pounded the tables, I looked down at Susie, who was also yelling and clapping, tears rolling down her cheeks. I spoke just loud enough for her to hear, which in that din was still pretty loud.

"Susie, I really, really, *really* , want to get out of here."

She nodded and stood up, wiping tears from her eyes. Still laughing, she clumsily helped me down from the table. My knees were very wobbly and I felt light headed. With me almost in a daze, Susie had to lead me toward the far tunnel. All along the way, people quickly rushed over, lined up and either curtsied or bowed as we passed. All of them were cheering. I tried to wave, but my whole body was numb.

Still, it was nice to be wanted.

## Chapter Four

We entered the corridor, much narrower than the main one, and headed down it a little ways, passing two doors on each side and stopping in front of the third on the right. By this time Susie had my arm around her shoulders, and was all but carrying me. My legs felt like over boiled noodles, and I was on the verge of fainting again. Behind us, the mess area was alive with excited noise, but no one had followed us down. We entered the room, passing through a ghost door that just turned off and on.

Inside were simple, neatly kept quarters for two. There were standard furnishings and two beds close to each other. They were close because they had to be; the room was very small. There didn't seem to be a private bathroom, which was too bad; I would have really liked to heave my breakfast about then.

Susie lowered me onto the first bed and sat down on the second. She took my trembling hands in hers and rubbed them. She had a look of respect in her eyes.

"You, girl, have guts! No brains, but lots of guts."

"Yeah,? I stammered out. ? Guts you're about to get all over your lap."

She started, but relaxed at my weak smile. ? Whatever possessed you to do that? To stand up and make a spectacle of yourself?"

"Just trying to say thanks. And give as I got."

"Well, you did all that. Everyone has been pretty tense around here, wondering how you'd take all the changes. Now they have an idea. But you, girl! Wow! That was incredible!"

"Then why do I feel like I've been filleted?"

"That's easy. You pushed yourself too hard again. Only this time it was your emotions you rode too hard. Guys can push down better than gals. Your 'guy' mind did quite a number on your 'gal' emotions. Ease up some, huh?"

I smiled weakly again and carefully sat up. My nerves and breathing were settling down. I looked around the tiny room.

The room was maybe, just maybe, three meters square. As you entered the room, the door was in the left front. There were two single beds, Susie's against the back wall and mine parallel to hers with a narrow, half-meter aisle between them. Facing the beds on the left wall as you entered were two chests of drawers, standing head-high. The beds and dressers took up two thirds of the room. The other third, nearest the door, had a narrow counter with what looked to be a computer display embedded into the wall, and a simple chair. As I'd mentioned, there was no bathroom, but I noticed a small sink with spigot to the left of the counter, in the corner. Beside the sink and on the wall beside my bed was a full length mirror. The mirror appeared to be painted on the stone. The door had a small alcove, all of one meter deep.

"So. Home Sweet Home?"

"Yep. Just the two of us. Normally I sleep alone unless I've been assigned a Cue. A female Cue,? she added hurriedly. ? All the noncoms and officers have either private or semiprivate quarters. Because of my direct involvement with new Cues, I get my own quarters."

"Must be nice, rooming with a potential nut. Ummm, Susie? Are you, you know, comfortable with me sleeping with you? I mean, what with..."

"With you being a man to start with?? I nodded, avoiding her eyes. I had to admit I was scared of either answer. ? Well, I didn't know until last night, remember. But yes, I gave it some thought once I did know."

"And what do you think?"

"I think I don't mind at all. You're *not* a man now; you're as female as I am. So I'm not worried about improper advances. For me at least, you've got nothing to advance that I'm interested in. And it's not like I'm embarrassed about having you watch me dress or shower or anything. You're more of a girl than I think you realize yet. So I wouldn't be hesitant about rooming with you for my sake or safety."

"Which leaves ... what about *you* ? Again, I don't mind. What are your choices, really? As uncomfortable as you are now, how much worse would it be if you bunked with one of the male noncoms-which you couldn't anyway. You'd probably die from shame. I would. And like I said, you're a lot more woman than you know. You'll find out, soon enough. ? I had confusing emotions on that comment. Come to think of it, though, I had confusing emotions on everything.

She took my hands again. ? So, no, my sweet Cue, I'm not at all worried or uncomfortable having you sleep with me. We're buddies now, and we watch out for each other. ? She gave me a warm hug and a small kiss on the cheek. It tingled and felt nice. She stood up and pulled me to my feet. I wobbled, but stayed up.

"Well, back to work! We've got a lot of ground to cover. I need to show you around the place. This afternoon will be busy, but we have the evening to ourselves. Doctor Barrett wants to give you a checkup sometime this afternoon. Oh! And let's check the new shipment that came in; there should be some proper clothes in there for you. Then it's dinner, the gym, showers, and bed. Tomorrow, our research crowd wants to talk to you. If you're willing, they'd like to know more about you. Let's see ... anything else?"

A thought occurred to me. ? Yes. I'm going to need a new name."

She giggled. ? Already ahead of you, there. I'll be giving you your name tomorrow night, after dinner. Tradition."

"Huh? *You're* picking my name? Why? And why would you even have need of such a tradition? Don't Cues keep their old names?"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you? But the fact is, many *do* change their names. Maybe as a way of marking old and new times, of starting ties with the present. Of course, many just keep their names.

"Whether or not they keep their original name, though, we still give you a name. We follow the tradition of having the primary researcher-who also acts as counselor for the first few months-name the Cue. Even the Cues who keep their original name often use our name as a middle name. It helps you become a part of us and our time. And it reminds us that we are responsible for you. So since I was the primary researcher, that makes me your counselor, your roomie, and I get the honor of naming you."

"Unfair!"

"Really? Who picked out your present name?"

"Well..."

"Your parents did, of course. Unless they let you grow up, calling you 'it', until you could choose yourself. In a way, I'm your parent now. ? She thought about it a moment. ? Well, maybe more like your sister. I hope to be your friend-"

"You are my friend!? I said pretty forcefully and impetuously.

"Mind your manners and don't interrupt. Anyway, I'm your nearest living relative now, and one of your rescuers, and your roommate, so I get to name you."

"You're right. I'm sorry. So you name me tomorrow, huh?? She nodded. ? What are you going to call me until then? 'It'?? I smiled and almost, but not quite, giggled.

"Just what I have now; nothing. I've been avoiding calling you John, both to help you acclimate and

because it just sounds silly. No offense, John,? she giggled.

I giggled for the first time, and it felt wonderful, like opening a vent and letting all the pressure out. ? None taken. Go ahead and keep doing it that way.? I tapped my head. ? I'm still John up here, but it's starting to sound silly to me, too.? I stood up. ? I'm looking forward to tomorrow night. I'm also a little afraid of ... aargh!? I said with frustration. ? I hate these constantly mixed emotions! But I will keep my last name. I'll always be a Wyeth."

"Oh, yeah? What if you get married?"

That floored me. I tried to envision such an impossible circumstance, but my imagination boggled. It boggled because I pictured myself, my old self, in a wedding dress, a ludicrous sight even in the mind's eye. It hit me that I didn't really know what I looked like. I'd only had a brief glimpse of my face in the mirror in the doc's office, and it was pretty dark then. And I'd certainly had no inclination earlier this morning to see *any* of me. But now I felt the twinges of curiosity tugging at me. I glanced at the full-length mirror, off to the side. Maybe later today.

"I don't really see marriage in the future for me, Susie."

She gave a knowing look. ? Well, maybe, maybe not. You're still young. Don't look at me like that. Anyway, you could still keep Wyeth even if you did marry."

I shrugged.

"I dunno. I'm pretty traditional, and would probably...? My mind caught up with what my mouth was saying, and I shut up. Susie laughed.

"Now how about that tour?"

As a tour, it ended almost before it started. We left our quarters, the ghost door blanking the entire frame, and turned right along the corridor. We skipped the first door on the left-Susie said it would be the last one on the tour-and came to the first door on the right after our room. She knocked on the ghost door. It gave an odd, hollow sound. There was no answer, so we continued on. Susie said it was the quarters of Corporals Bent and Geher, the other two female noncoms beside herself. We continued on to the next door, only three meters further down and also on the right. Susan ushered me in through the double-wide ghost door which allowed us entrance while turning translucent.

We walked down a short hallway and into a large room holding maybe three dozen single beds. The barracks. The women's barracks. There were six women in there with us. Four were sprawled out on their bunks, either sleeping or relaxing. The other two were stark naked, toweling off after a shower. I felt myself getting very uncomfortable and wondered just how loud they'd scream when they saw me. But they didn't. They just waved and curtsied in their birthday suits, mimicking my performance with mischief but no malice. Susan walked us up to them and introduced me. We chatted a bit about something then left. I noticed I hadn't stared a single time, and could actually remember their faces better than their other, um, features.

We stepped out, and I breathed a sigh of relief, sagging against the rock wall. Susan looked at me curiously and far too innocently. ? Something wrong?"

"No. Yes. I don't know. That was so weird. You sadistic little so and so. You could have at least warned me!"

She smiled wickedly. This girl had a nasty streak in her I'd have to watch. ? Why? Just a bunch of

women and one young lady making small talk,? she said naïvely. But her next comment showed her true thoughts. ? So, what was it like?"

"Like I said, weird. I kept thinking that I'd start staring at them and drooling. But I didn't even care.? I blushed. ? Well, I cared maybe a little. This is pretty hard to say, but I was ... was..."

"Comparing their bodies to yours?"

I stared at her. ? How did you know?"

She laughed. ? Silly. Almost all women do that. See, I told you you were more woman than you realized. Just wait until you compare yourself to somebody you know. Like me.? I flushed even more at that thought. Flushing seemed to be one of my more accomplished skills so far this century. I became convinced there was a ? Turn Red? switch inside me, and some maniac was at the controls.

"Still, try to warn me, okay?"

"Okay,? she said cheerfully. We walked to the next door on the right, about ten meters down. ? Consider yourself warned. Here are the ladies showers and rest rooms.? She grabbed my arm and tried to haul me in, but being warned, I pulled back.

She tugged harder, but not hard enough to force me, which I'm sure she could. ? Come on!"

"Susan, no! I'll die of embarrassment!"

She relented immediately. ? All right, then. Let's go in here.? She indicated the next door on the right, five meters from the ladies room.

"What's in there?? I asked suspiciously.

"The men's showers and rest rooms. Now, in you go.? Again she tried to get me in, but pushing this time instead of pulling. This time I really lost it. My little maniac was hitting the red button. With a sledge hammer.

"Are you crazy! I can't go in there!"

She stopped her pushing and crossed her arms. ? So what's it going to be? Men's? Women's? Or should we just dig a hole for you outside the cave?"

"I don't know,? I said sullenly.

"Good grief! One or the other! Decide! Either that or...? she paused and smiled mischievously. ? Or we can just wait an hour or so and let nature decide. You drank an awful lot of juice for breakfast, you know. Milk, too."

Now here was a problem. And her mentioning it only made it worse, cutting her hour estimate down considerably. By about an hour. But the problem was all in my head. There really only was one choice. I might die of embarrassment in the ladies room, but I'd probably get arrested in the men's. Giving her as indignant a ? Hmmp! as I could muster, I walked into the ladies room, Susan following.

When we came out five minutes later, I was relieved, in more ways than one. Despite her attempts at making it as terrible an experience as possible-including shouting out helpful and somewhat vulgar hints while I made use of the facilities-it wasn't uncomfortable at all. Which was her point. A point she intended to drive home.

"Now do you get it? Own up to it, girlie; you're a girlie."

"I already knew that.? I didn't feel too cooperative.

"Yes, you know it. But do you feel it? It can't just be in your head. It's got to be in your mind, your being, your ... your soul.? She really was banging at this, but I had had enough. I felt a switch go off. But this time it had anger labeled on it.

"Just let it go! You don't have to pound it into me! I'm not an idiot!"

"Then don't act like one!?! Susie spoke louder, more frustrated than mad.

"Me? You're the one trying to haul me into places I don't want to go or can't go! I'm done with the tour! I'm going back to our room!?! And I stalked off.

Or at least I tried to stalk off. I had kept telling myself that Susie was bigger and stronger than me, and that she could use force if she wanted to. She'd even said so, in a round about way, when explaining the reason behind using such young teens. But I don't think I believed it. I had looked up at her. I was in her underwear and it was too big for me, and her clothes almost hung on me. Yet I somehow knew I could handle her if I had to, which made me feel a bit more secure and in control. That security and control was about to become a shattered illusion.

I had gone five paces when I felt an iron grip latch onto my upper left arm, and then she was dragging back me into the ladies room. I screamed at her to let go of me, and used every ounce of strength I had to twist free, but I was helpless. The best I could do was stagger her walk a little, and not much at that.

She effortlessly slung me through the door and walked in after me. I heard her speak a quick word, and the door became solid. She grabbed me again and hauled me into the showers, which were abandoned at the time, though still wet from use. Again, she tossed me with ease into the middle of the slick tiling. I slipped and went down.

I rose to my feet, wet and angry. Who was she to ... I didn't even bother trying to finish the thought. I just went at her. That little...

I was on the tiles again. I started to get up again when she walked up and heaved me up to then up off my feet. I landed, still in her grip, and began fighting like a wildcat. A desperate, terrified wildcat. Holding my shoulders, and ignoring my best blows, she slowly shoved me back to the shower wall, her face showing no emotion.

Suddenly, that wall became an enemy to me. To touch it meant defeat. I yelled and hit and tried to break free, all with no effect. Against every fiber in my being, I was being forced back. I didn't want her to win. I didn't! I planted my feet and pushed back. Nothing. I lost a step, then another. I twisted my shoulders to wriggle free, and with my hands tried to hit her. But my reach only extended to her upper arms, and my fists pounded her like goose down. My skinny shoulders remained locked in her painful grip. I lost another step and felt the wall behind my foot. I used the wall as leverage and pushed with all my weight and strength. I felt an even greater force pushing back.

I looked up into Susie's eyes. She had tears in her eyes, and looked so very sad, but very resolved.

"I'm sorry. But you are going to learn.? And with that she pinned my shoulders against the wall.

The anger vanished as quickly as it had come upon me. I understood now. I started to sob, then openly cry. It was far worse than last night. The total realization of who and what I was enveloped my mind, my being, my soul. It was complete and final and devastating. I slumped to the wet tiling, wailing. Susan

released my shoulders and pulled me into her embrace. This time, I felt no fear or discomfort whatsoever, but clung to her with even greater resolve than I had mustered to fight her. She held me tight to her breast, her fingers playing through my hair while my emotions ran their course. My tears poured down my cheeks as I cried and cried and cried.

How long we remained like that, I don't know. At least ten minutes. Perhaps as many as thirty. It was a long time before my crying settled down to sobbing, then whimpering. Susie held me close the whole time, patting me, whispering into my ear, comforting me with hugs, all while we huddled together on the floor of the women's shower. Any of these things would have irritated or shamed me had I been a man. But I wasn't a man, nor would I ever be a man. I was a young woman, and all of these things suddenly meant the world to me.

I raised my tear-streaked face and looked into Susie's eyes, smiling shyly. She smiled quietly back at me and hugged me again. I closed my eyes and tried to lose myself in her strength. I heard a quiet step.

"Susie? Can we help?? asked a soft, quiet voice. It was one of the women who must have been locked in with us.

"Oh, thank you, Kerry. Yes. Would you see if the last shipment has her new clothes? If so, bring a change, please. And for me, too. We're soaked through and through, I'm afraid. Thank you."

I heard her and another woman move away quietly. Someone spoke, and I heard the door unlock and they were gone, the door locking behind them. I felt Susie take hold of me by the shoulders, but ever so gently this time, and pull me from her. She looked into my eyes, her own eyes still misty. She reached a hand to my cheek and wiped a tear.

"I'm so sorry. I knew this was coming, and I hated it, but it almost always has to be this way.? She stood up and helped me to my feet. ? Let's get you cleaned up a bit."

We walked over to the sink and washed my face. Lifting my head from the still running tap, I looked straight into the mirror for the first time.

It was a young girl's face. Hazel eyes, brown, shoulder length hair, normal girlish features. A little coltish and not fully developed overall, but with a very nice mouth. I recognized it. It was my face. I looked harder. It *was* my face. My breath caught.

"I ... I'm pretty!"

"Of course you are! But I wasn't going to tell you until you realized it. You probably would have slugged me."

I hung my head shamefully. ? I-I-I'm sorry, Susie. I was terrible."

"Yes, you were. A bratty, headstrong, angry little witch. Exactly the way I was when I was fourteen.? I looked up sharply at her. I slowly nodded my head.

"You were right to do it. I-I thought I had done a pretty good job of dealing with this. Especially after my cafeteria performance. I guess I was fooling myself."

She smiled. It was nice to see the smile back. ? You were fooling yourself. But don't short cred yourself, either. You showed yourself and us that you were a *person* , I just showed you that you were a female person. But being a person is more important. Being female is a bonus.? She smiled again at me, and I had to smile back.

"Until now, I guess I had seen it as, well, being a negative."

"Teenagers!? she chided. ? Always full of opinions, and almost always wrong!? Her laugh robbed the words of any bite. I felt much better.

We heard the door open, and Kerry walked in with an armful of clothing. Kerry was an older woman, maybe fifty or so. Older? Fifty wasn't old. Yes, it was, I thought, if you were fourteen. I looked again, trying to use my mind, and she still looked fifty, but also younger than a moment ago. She had graying hair and laughter lines, but was in good shape physically. She smiled at me and set everything down on the counter. She picked up the top set of clothing and handed them to me.

"Here you go! They just came in and are made for a girl just your size.? She gave me a quick up and down. ? Though I'll bet you grow out of them in no-"

"Thank you, Kerry,? Susie interrupted. Kerry flushed with realization. I was suddenly tired of this soft-stepping. Enough was enough.

"No, Susie, that's all right.? I looked at Kerry. ? Thank you, so much, Kerry. Could you do me a big favor?"

"Yes,? she answered without hesitation.

"Please finish your thought. Exactly as you were going to.? I closed my eyes to listen.

"Ummm ... well, all right. I was going to say, I'll bet you grow out of these clothes in no time. You look like a girl who's going to turn men's heads before long.? She stopped and waited.

I played the words through my head, tasting them and letting them play their way through me, tickling my ego and psyche. They settled in and made me blush with pride. With pride! I felt the weight of the world fall off my shoulders. I opened my eyes and smiled.

"Thank you, Kerry. I mean it.? She appeared surprised and pleased with my sincerity. ? Thank you for finishing the compliment. It really sounds and feels like one."

She peered closely at me for a moment, measuring me. I think she liked what she saw, for she smiled and said, ? You should be labeled 'dangerous', young lady. You're going to be a heart breaker!? She laughed and left. I heard the door lock again at her passing. I started undressing.

Susie was sizing me up also. ? You're also going to be a handful."

I laughed. ? Bet on it! And all thanks to you, Susie. Suddenly, I feel so alive!? I pulled off my top and slung it away, laughing and twirling, the loose bra straps slipping off my shoulders. But I didn't care. Susie looked at me sharply.

"Are you okay?? She sounded concerned.

"I dunno. Probably not.? I unhooked the bra and dropped it, feeling lightheaded and excited and daring. ? I'll probably be bawling my eyes out in another ten minutes. But let's enjoy it while we can, okay? Please?"

She hesitated, then shrugged and began undressing. ? All right. But if it gets too wild, we stop, okay?"

"Oh, don't be a poop! The roller coaster's starting and it's my ticket,? I said with giddy delight. I pulled off my pants and threw them at her. ? Here! These are yours!"



She laughed and relaxed. Before long, we were in the showers, using them this time instead of fighting in them. I felt the warm water pulsing over my body, enjoying the moment. My giddiness was fading, but I felt a comfortable, content feeling replacing it.

We finished rinsing and toweled off. I'd been tempted to sneak a look at Susie as we showered, but refrained. Not because I was uncomfortable, but because she was. I did look at her though as she toweled off, her back to me. Her legs were indeed lithe and lean, a match for the rest of her petite figure. And her silky, ebony skin was just as smooth and perfect on her body as it was on her face. Though she was in her twenties, she had about her an ageless quality that would keep her youthful even when she had great-grandchildren.

"Shoe's on the other foot, huh, Susie?? I looked at my bare feet. ? Poor analogy, we don't have any shoes on. ? She turned her head.

"How do you mean?"

"You warned me that I was more female than I realized; that I'd compare my physique to yours eventually. But when I try to, you're the one with her back turned and a towel around her middle,? I giggled.

She blushed and grinned sheepishly. ? You're right! I am nervous. This is crazy! I've done this a dozen times, with a dozen Cues."

"But not quite like this."

"Not quite like this,? she agreed. She dropped the towel and walked to me and her clothing. ? But not all that different, either. I'm sorry.? She relaxed even further, and for at least a little while, we really were just two friends.

We dressed. More accurately, Susie dressed herself, then me. My last project at NATech had me solving the near impossible feat of creating viable underwater cities, with humans capable of breathing air and water, yet I could not figure out how to put a stupid bra on. I had put myself into a second contorted position when Susie noticed. She was already dressed.

"I can't believe you! You glance at solar simulation panels that you've never seen before in your life and nail their theory, workings, and energy source, all in one breath. But then you get caught up in your own bra! ? Nothing like hearing an echo of my myopic brilliance. ? Here. No, no. It closes in the front. *After* you put it on! Just put it on like a jacket.? She fiddled with the adjustments and when she at last let go, I was amazed at the difference. It was like a second skin.

"Wow! It's like I'm not wearing one! Now this I can get used to!"

We finished up. I still had on pants and a shirt-blouse, I mean-but they fit very comfortably. I looked at myself in front of the full-length mirror beside the counter. My figure showed a good bit more in this much less baggy uniform. I liked that. For now. I turned to Susie, who was finishing combing her hair with a brush Kerry had thoughtfully included. I turned from the mirror, taking in one last look of my profile.

"Let's finish that tour. I promise I'll behave."

She stepped over and began running the brush through my thick hair. I didn't really have a hair style. Just pretty much as it lay, with shorter bangs in front.

"No more tantrums?"

"No more tantrums."

"Good. Next time I may just belt you one.?" My eyes widened with surprise and just a twinge, the smallest twinge, of fear. Susie saw it reflected in the mirror. She twirled me around. ? Hey, I'm just kidding!"

I stared down at the floor. ? I-I know. I'm sorry. ? I couldn't believe I even thought that she was serious. But...

"Don't be! I'm the one who's sorry. Poor joke and poor timing. Now let's see that smile. ? I lifted my face and smiled. Tentative, but honest.

"I suppose that's the best I deserve. I'll behave myself, too."

"Promise?"

"Promise. Well, I think we've seen enough of the ladies room for awhile. Let's check out the rest. ? We left our wet things where they were. I had a hunch they would be clean and dry and sitting on our beds before we even got back to our room.

We exited the bathroom, leaving it unlocked this time. I half expected to see a dozen women in the hall, dancing the Kansas City two-step. We'd had that bathroom to ourselves for more than an hour. But no, the hallway was deserted. I knew why now. From Susie's comments, a lot of Cues came into their own in that room. Certainly not a function I would normally have associated with a shower.

We continued down the hall to our right. It, in turn, curved to our left about thirty meters further. On our immediate left was a large, translucent opening.

"The men's barracks. Completely off limits to all female personnel. ? That pretty much precluded exploration in there. We passed the men's showers on the right. I'd already been as close to them as I wanted. Further on the left, just as the hall curved, was another large opening into the men's barracks. By now, the hallway had magically come to life, with people again moving up and down. Some waved at us, a few greeted us, and most just walked by, leaving us our privacy. Everyone smiled.

The hall finished a gentle ninety degree turn and headed, Susie told me, south. There were four doors on the left and five on the right. These were quarters for married couples, the male noncoms, and Lt. Sanchez, whose room was the last one before the hall went up a ramp and opened into the hanger. Susie walked by them without bothering to knock. Just as well. I didn't really want to deal with too much at one time. We walked up the ramp and into the hanger.

My perceptions of space were right on. It looked the same size as last night, about eighty meters wide and fifty deep from the mouth. I saw now that there was also a large square area extending to our right. It had the same-what did Susie call them?-solar simulation panels, as the mess. Several tables dotted the area. But this was clearly the exercise and recreation facility. There were several people working out on exercise machines, gym bars and wrestling mats. I thought of my wrestling workouts with Chris-to me, the last one was only three days ago-and wondered what he'd say now. I thought of some of the moves he had used on me in the past and blushed. It was probably just as well he was dust. From what Janet had never implied but nonetheless communicated, I'd need to kill him anyway after one or two sessions. I pointed at the equipment.

"I'm a little surprised you have those. I had gathered you kept pretty busy."

"Oh, we get busy, all right. But it comes in bursts. We might go for weeks with little or no activity, then

boom! we're suddenly pulling double shifts and using coffee in place of sleep. And for dogs like me, in research, we hardly ever get good work outs unless we're relocating."

"Relocating? Doctor Barrett had mentioned your group is illegal. That's why I wanted to escape last night. I imagine sudden relocation comes with the job description. How often do you move?"

Susie shrugged. "All depends. We've been in one place as long as three years. Then we moved four times in six months. We've been here for eight months now."

"But maybe not much longer?" I ventured.

"We've been at yellow for about two weeks. Yellow means standby for seventy-two hour relocation. If it goes to red, we move." She looked at me. "How did you know?"

"It wasn't too hard. Doctor Barrett said several things that made me think that. And I observed your men loading last night-but for a different reason-before I got caught."

"That was for a raid. You sure gave us a scare, though! They woke me up and told me about three sentences as I ran over here to be your pilot. It was only a coincidence that the smallest woman in the Third was also your counselor. It wasn't the way I'd planned on meeting you. Still, I was a little proud at how you got so far."

"Well, I'm glad I did get caught. Now. But would you have taken me where I wanted to go?"

"Uh-huh. As you've guessed, we exist primarily to return to ripes their own personas. If we could give them their bodies as well, we would. But we can't, and even have to steal the ones we do give them. When they wake up, they have an incredible amount of adjusting to go through, as you know firsthand. A few just shut down. Others go nuts. Many, however, make it, and are integrated into society after two to four months. But while they're here, they get pretty much what they want. To a point. That would have included taking you out in the hov."

We had wandered through most of the hanger, which had modest activity. Mainly vehicle repair. Several were armed and damaged. A thought occurred to me.

"Wait. Two to four months? Doctor Barrett mentioned my being the only one here. Yet you said you had done nearly fifty in three years. By those numbers, there should be four or five here now." I waited expectantly.

"Sorry, kid. Don't get your hopes up. We never have that many here at any time. Remember, there is a high failure rate," she sighed heavily. "It's about one in three. Terrible odds, and an awful risk. That's why we pick the ripes with the best chance to survive but who are in the worst conditions. You filled the bill in the second, easily, but your chances of survival were unknown. I wish I could tell you how frustrating it was when we couldn't find out *anything* about you. Our society on Earth has evolved to a point that there is a single, world authority. Information access has reached a point that even the Resistance regiments can freely gather what we want. And data webbing techniques date back to the middle of the twenty-first Century, over 600 hundred years ago, so the data is comprehensive."

I nodded absently, my thoughts elsewhere. "Yeah. That was Chris' project. I knew he'd pull it off. But I had no idea it would work this well."

Why I said that, I'll never know. I suppose it was my hormones wreaking havoc on my judgment. Impetuous youth. Maybe a juvenile need to show off. If I was looking to get the spotlight, I was successful.

Susie's jaw dropped and she stared at me. Gawked, more like. ? What did you say? You knew Chris Young? Who *are* you?"

"I'm nobody you'd know, Susie. I'm surprised you even know Chris. Against all regulations ... well, I've said enough. Are you going to be at the interview later?? She nodded. ? Good! I'll need you to hide behind. I'll talk more then. And we can have a little one on one tonight, in our quarters.? And I had decided I would talk. NATech couldn't still exist after 600 years, could they? And if they did, could I still be responsible for my oath of secrecy? I couldn't see how. Still, there was a way to find out, since they were using Chris's webbing scheme, but I would need access to a terminal. Private access. I put the thought aside for the moment.

"So. Getting back to the story. You didn't have any info on me..."

She looked at me a second, then continued. ? Uhhh ... no information. That's right. We didn't have any information on your original persona, not even your name. We did have spotty facts on some of your past ripers. And, of course, we knew a great deal about your last ripe."

"Is there any chance I could find out what, or who, I was?? I'm not sure I wanted to know, but I did want to have the option. I think.

Susie shook her head decisively. ? Not from us, you won't. We view all ripings as abominations, no matter what the circumstances. Once we've rescued the original persona, our research data and trolling routines are wiped, and the researcher gives a vow to never disclose any details."

"And since you were my researcher, that's all been wiped?? She nodded. I looked down and scuffed my feet against the rock floor. ? Well, don't worry. I was just curious. But I'm glad I can't find out.? And I meant it. I did feel relieved. ? Getting my head on straight is hard enough without gumming up the works with useless information."

She smiled approvingly. ? That's the spirit! I should tell you, though, the time will come when you'll feel an overwhelming need to find out about your past. I know because we've encountered it with nearly every Cue we maintain contact with. Most Cues never reach the level of training needed to do that kind of digging. And access at those levels is grueling. No offense intended; almost no-one reaches that level. So the feeling to know past ripers fades in time. Usually for good.

"But I'm getting an idea that you're the exception. I guess I'm not surprised. You've been the exception all along. You probably could find out. So let me give you a friendly warning: Don't. I'm not betraying any secrets when I say this, and I say it with the hope of killing curiosity, not arousing it. Your past ripers, what we could find of them, were dirty, horrible, and, quite frankly, scary.? She held herself and, despite the warmth pouring through the huge cavern opening we were now standing in front of, she shivered. ? Normally, the worst are the hardest to find, so I'm more terrified of what we didn't find than of what we did.? She looked off. Maybe it was a cold sunlight out there, because I shivered, too.

There didn't seem to be a whole lot to say to that, so I kept quiet. We stood there together for a while, thinking our own thoughts. The cave entrance had a type of holographic force field across the entire entrance. I don't know how it appeared from the outside-probably native rock with plant life if the imaging system was sophisticated enough-but from the inside it seemed as if I were looking through murky water with a scum of oil on the surface. I couldn't make out details at all, but if I viewed the outside as an entire scene, I was given the impression of a forested mountain. Yet as soon as I looked at one specific area, the image seemed to swirl away, leaving a confusing mix of colors and light. It was somehow mesmerizing.

"Lost in thought, ladies?? A warm male voice spoke behind us, so soothing and pleasant that even the

unexpected interruption didn't startle us. We turned, and I saw Lt. Sanchez-the officer who had so capably kept me from hurting myself or others the previous night-approaching us.

"Lieutenant! Sir!? Susie came to attention and saluted.

Lt. Sanchez returned the salute. ? Oh, knock it off, Susan. You're on special duty. Don't give our guest the wrong idea. She might think you people really follow my orders.? He turned his gaze to me. I felt almost like hiding behind Susie. I even took a step back and toward her. He was enormous. His legs looked like the size of trees, and his arms made a forest. His mahogany complexion was warm and friendly. But his eyes exuded confidence and authority, and perhaps a little sadness. He smiled, and his white teeth showed from underneath his handsomely groomed mustache.

"Please. Don't be shy on my account, young lady. You didn't act too shy last night."

"Last night I was ready to kill you."

"Yes. Well, not all our plans turn out. It's all for the better, I believe. Unplanned events are the spice of life. Oh, step up, girl! I think anyone who's capable of getting as far as you did last night can stand up to a little bit of guilt. Front and center!"

His voice was very compelling, but without malice. Years of military training woke up, and I stepped up beside Susie, coming to attention. He nodded, as if having discovered something of interest.

"At ease, miss. You've served, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir. Recon, Company A, 138th Regiment, Second Armored."

"Rank?"

"Corporal, sir!? I responded. Not wanting to make it awkward for him, I decided to hedge my rank. My high voice made my replies sound comical.

"Duties?? I remained silent. He spoke again, a little firmer. ? Duties?"

Again, I remained silent, the flashback slowly fading, and common sense reasserting itself. Still, it had felt nice, like for a moment I had belonged. I relaxed.

"They were varied and ... classified, Lieutenant."

"I see. And you will not give me details, Corporal? Not even after six centuries?"

"No, sir. Not yet. I'm not sure of the situation, sir. Perhaps after awhile."

"And if I ordered you?? he asked quietly.

It was my turn to smile. ? Order? Well, I'll obey your orders in the here and now, Lieutenant. But first, those duties were classified, so I could respond only on a need to know basis. Second, they were in a different military. And, I'm sorry, sir, but third, corporal was not the military rank I mustered out with. I held a commission. The actual rank I held was ... well,? my smile spread wider with the delicious thought, ? would you take orders from me?"

He laughed. ? No, I wouldn't. You're doing well, young lady! Take a look at Susan.? She was again looking at me like she'd been stunned. ? Our Cue counselors like to think they've got you people all figured out. Sometimes I think that when looking into your memories and finding everything they can about you, they forget that you've *lived* those memories. It helps to shake them up now and then."

"Yes, sir. Ummm, I'm sorry for the trouble I caused last night. ? And for a little while ago, but last night was serious.

He waved it off. ? Don't apologize. I wasn't looking for an apology. I was looking for *you*. ? He tapped me on the chest. ? You showed ingenuity and guts last night. ? Yeah, it was real clever of me, fainting to throw everyone off their guard. ? I've always told my dogs to stay alert, and they think they are. Yet a teenager rouses herself from Healer's Sleep, roams freely in the halls, arms herself with a gun from Dusty's room, and comes within a password of stealing a hov and pilot. You're getting a bit of a name for yourself. ? I wonder what kind of name I'd have when my tantrum in the bathroom became common knowledge. Of course, since all Cues went through the same right of passage, perhaps it wouldn't be too bad.

"Raul, let's not go over... ? Susan started, but was cut short.

"Susan. Please. I've handled many male Cues, just as you've done many female ones. We share this one. ? He looked at me, ? You like it straight, don't you?"

"Yes, ? I said frankly. Susan gave me an irritated look.

He nodded. ? I thought so. I don't know what your specific duties were, but I do know something of recon units, even from that era. They didn't pick you because you had a pretty face. ? He smiled. ? Though you've got one now. ? I blushed. Susan face was also red, but she wasn't blushing.

"Raul! Please! We've already talked about this. It was agreed..."

"Corporal! ? he barked, all friendliness disappearing like a vapor. Susan snapped to, as rigid as Lot 's wife.

"Sir! ? She remained immobile.

"I have chosen command prerogative."

"Yes, sir!"

"Very well. ? He stepped up close, inspecting her eyes, which were riveted straight ahead. ? See that you remember. ? He stepped back and looked at me. I felt my body tightening into attention of its own volition-he had that effect. He smiled again at me, bowing slightly and elegantly. ? I look forward to dinner with you tomorrow evening. I very much want to call you by your new name. ? His tone became neutral as he switched back to Susie. He said, ? Dismissed, ? and walked away toward one of the larger disabled vehicles, rolling up his sleeves.

Susan yanked me by the arm in the other direction, nearly pulling me off my feet. She stormed off in the direction of the wide ramp leading up toward the medical corridor. I was like a helpless leaf, caught up in the backwash of her fury. I staggered along for a few steps, but protested when we got to the edge of the ramp.

"Hey, Susie! Slow down! And calm down!"

She seemed aware of me for the first time. She stopped and released my arm, staring back at Sanchez. He had disappeared beneath the frame. Flickering shafts of bright light came out from under the chassis

*DAMAGE TO THE PRIMARY AND SECONDARY HULLS IS CONSIDERABLE. THAT LOSS OF LIFE WAS MINIMAL IS DUE TO THE QUICK ACTION OF THE CAPTAIN AND CREW. WELDING DETAIL IS BEING DISPATCHED WITH REPAIR SPECIFICATIONS.*

*COMPLETION IN 32 HOURS, 17 MINUTES. IT IS RECOMMENDED THAT HIGH DENSITY RESIN BE USED AT A 65% SATURATION LEVEL BETWEEN HULLS AT THE SITE OF THE REPAIR, WITH 40% SATURATION AT AREAS WITHIN 2.5 METERS OF THE REPAIR SITE. ESTIMATED INCREASE IN REPAIR TIMES: 4 HOURS, 52 MINUTES.*

as he welded. I was impressed. Susie was not. She looked as if she wanted to use her eyes to weld him to the chassis underbelly. If a girl had given *me* that look in my day, I'd have become a monk. On the spot.

"Oh! That man can be so ... so ... uhhhhh!"

"What?? I asked intelligently.

"Didn't you see? He was all ready to treat you like a dog, just because you'd been one centuries ago. Like it makes a difference now!"

"Oh, I don't know. I kinda liked it."

"You *wha* t? But he didn't even pay any attention to your feelings, that insensitive ape!"

"I know. And it was nice. C'mon Susie. I'll admit I'm female now. Heck, I'll even admit I'm learning to enjoy it. A lot. But for thirty-one years, 'me' has been from his side of the gender. I don't care how much things have changed; that doesn't get wiped out in two days. It doesn't matter how pumped full of estrogen I am. If it did, what would be the point in restoring me? So I liked his direct attitude. And I like your emotional and relational approach. ? I took her hand and looked at her. ? Hey, this is supposed to be for me, isn't it?? She nodded. ? Then let Raul do his bit. Believe me, I think it'll help without messing up my signals. Please?"

She nodded again and looked toward Sanchez. ? I'm sorry. But sometimes he gets me so angry and..."

"Excited?? I had a sudden insight and shook my head. It was so crystal clear. ? Wow.? Susie looked at me, a distrustful look in her eye.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I think I just had my first flash of woman's intuition.? I looked at her. ? You ... you like him, don't you?"

" *Him* ? Of course not! ? she lied.

"No, you do! I don't know how, but I'm certain of it! You've feelings for Raul Sanchez!? I said triumphantly. And loudly. And without thinking. Fortunately, Susan was thinking and crammed her hand into my mouth as I blurted it out. Several people in the general vicinity glanced our way, but if they had any opinions as to the wisdom of choking someone they'd risked their lives for, they kept them to themselves.

"Are you crazy? Somebody will hear you! True or not, I'd never live it down!"

"Shaaawwee, ? I choked out through her fingers. She pulled them free. ? I suppose I'd better keep those woman intuition things to myself, huh?"

She smiled at me sweetly. ? That wasn't woman's intuition, girl. That was pure delusion. Let's go see Doctor Barrett. Maybe he can give you something to soothe your imagination.? She started leading me up the ramp. ? Like shock treatment."

## Chapter Five

"Good morning, ladies!?" Dr. Barrett was sitting behind his desk, fingers playing over the cracked keyboard. He looked up at our entrance, rising. ? Just a friendly visit, or did you come by for the physical?"

"I was giving her the tour, Doctor, and thought we'd stop by for the physical now, before lunch.?" Susie sighed like she'd had a heavy weight slide off her shoulders. ? She's a handful.?" I shot her a dirty look. I wasn't that bad. Dr. Barrett laughed.

"She's all that. But is she a keeper??" For a moment, I felt a flash of fear. Am I a keeper? What did he mean? Was there some sort of guideline or example I needed to live up to? What if I didn't meet those expectations? Would they-I saw them smiling at me and realized they were joking. My ears warmed.

"Yes, I'm a keeper, Doctor. I guess I should give you the thanks,?" I smiled as I delivered the comment. ? Or the blame."

"Touché. I'll take both, and say 'You're welcome' to the first. Well, down to business.?" His voice took on a very professional timbre. He spoke, to no-one in particular, ? Private examination and consultation, ? and I heard a deep tone from the door. I looked back and noticed it was solid. I was going to have to find out how that worked. Not only would the technical workings be fascinating, it would be useful knowing how to circumvent it if necessary.

Dr. Barrett took me gently by the arm and led me to an examination table which slid out of a wall at just the right height. Without waiting to be told, I carefully sat on the edge. I looked at Susan a little nervously. She understood perfectly.

"Don't worry, kid. I'll stick around and keep an eye on the old lecher."

The barb just bounced off the doctor. ? Lecher, huh, Susie? Just wait until your next exam. I'll dig around and see if I can find an old style needle for your shots. Preferably a hooked, dirty one.?" He turned at me and started by taking my pulse. As the nurse had done-was it only last night?-he held my wrist.

"I'd have thought medicine had come further than this, Doctor."

"It has, young lady, it has. But I'm an old dog,?" he couldn't have been over forty-five, ? and prefer the human touch. My patients do, too. Take off your top, please. You can leave your bra on, though. While I perform the examination, is there anything you'd like to know??" he asked casually as I pulled off my blouse.

I did have several questions, nonmedical, which I put to him and he answered. I had been very wrong about his bedside manner. He had me completely at ease. As a physical, it was very cursory, which I asked about.

"The truth is, I know more about your physical well-being than you do. When we make a raid on the physiomanufacturing complex, we've already selected in advance the subjects we want. Then, after we've returned to base, I run an extensive, three day physical to check for anything out of the ordinary."

"Wait,?" I interrupted, ? Susie said she didn't know how old this body was. I thought you pretty much did a lightning raid and snatched what you could."



"Absolutely not!?" he exclaimed. I seemed to have hit one of Dr. Barrett's pet peeves. "First, we're not some beta version operation that flies about performing haphazard raids. Each one is meticulously planned. We value the lives of our own people nearly as much as we value you, young lady."

"Second, we can determine the date your body was conceived by just accessing the proper records. We don't retain that information because it's unneeded. Your *real* birthday is the day you are reintegrated. Only your age in years is passed along."

"Finally, this," he put a firm hand on my small shoulder, "is not 'this' body. It is your body. There has been no other soul or mind in it before you, nor does anyone have claim over it. Once I completed the cognitive reconstruction and moved your soul into its new home, this physical shell became you. There is a long period of adjustment-even longer for you I don't doubt-but this is you. Understand?"

Taken aback by his insistence, I could only nod slightly. Despite the force of his words-or maybe because of them-I was reassured and settled down. He squeezed my shoulder and gave a small grin, then continued with the examination.

"Picking up where we left off. This physical is needless from a medical point of view, although we will count this as your checkup date and set a routine for regular examinations, as with all personnel. Since you're in the midst of puberty, I'll schedule some additional consultations. Today's checkup is more for you than for your body."

"How do you mean?" I asked.

He told me what he meant. Being female now meant a different approach to taking care of myself. We talked at length, Susie helping with her own examples and insights. It was embarrassing, but necessary. And his manner with patients was very comforting. He made me feel like a person talking about my body, not a like girl talking about my body.

After we finished both the talk and the examination, I slid off the table and began dressing. That made the third time I dressed today, and it was only about noon. I felt like a striptease artist. Dr. Barrett went back to his desk and began banging away on his keyboard. I pulled on my blouse, a sleeveless white top made out of a kind of formfitting cotton, and looked at his fingers flying over the smooth surface.

"That's the only keyboard I've seen here, Doc," I ventured.

"Yes. One of my idiosyncrasies. Nearly every terminal has a keyboard interface, but everyone else uses standard puterverse access. Not me. It makes the data feel a little more personal and real done this way. I also have an aversion to being left defenseless." While I wondered at that cryptic remark, he continued banging away. "While I'm finishing this, perhaps you could explain your stunt in the mess this morning."

I tucked in my top and said quietly, "What do you want me to explain?"

He shrugged. "This morning was the first time we've ever seen a Cue do something like that so soon out of Healer's Sleep. You gave every impression of being used to yourself and your new condition." He looked up from his bushy, graying eyebrows. "At least, to everyone else you did. To me, you looked like someone forcing *him* self too hard." He emphasized the "him".

It was my turn to shrug. "You're right, Doc. That's the way it was, pretty much. I was feeling very weird, and having a hard time adjusting. When that happens, I've always been one to act. After we left, I almost threw up in our quarters."

"I shouldn't wonder. You looked like you were going to right there on the table. But I must say, you won

over the troops faster than anyone ever has before. Just try to keep your perspective from now on. You're not an adult any more, nor male, and pushing yourself like that will get you sick."

"I know. Susie drove that point home a little while ago. I feel much more comfortable now, though I wanted to kill her at the time. ? I reached over and took Susie's hand, smiling. She smiled back and squeezed it. Dr. Barrett watched us and nodded approvingly. He went back to his keyboard.

"I can imagine the whole scene. That's the worst moment for a Cue counselor. Driving reality home, then patching up the wreckage. I've done it more times than I can count, and as bad as it with boys, it's twice that for girls. I've never liked it, but it is by far the best way. For all intents, the only way. Brutal revelation seems to be the best tool to jolt a person from the there and then to the here and now. Normally, the sooner the better. Well, I'm glad you've been through it already. It helps the healing, both physical and mental."

"So, is she going to live, Doctor?? Susan asked with mock seriousness. Again, I felt a quick flash of dismay and had to shake it off. I must be thin-skinned or have easily damaged confidence to even begin to worry. I'd have to try to keep my anxiety under control. I had a feeling it could turn into panic very easily.

Dr. Barrett finished his entry with a flourish, then leaned back in his chair. He addressed me to answer Susie's question.

"You're in fine shape! You are well within the norms of a young woman entering the middle stages of puberty. Perhaps a bit underweight. And your muscles need toning. But that will all take care of itself with time and Corporal Lendler's guidance. She's a borderline obsessive when it comes to fitness. Probably frustration from being locked up in that cave they call a research facility."

"Doctor Barrett!? Susie protested.

He ignored her. ? If you survive her attentions in the gym, you should survive anything. And if you have any questions concerning your body's changes, please, see me at your convenience. Your health and comfort take precedence over all my other duties except emergencies. You're also welcome to just come by and talk. ? He leaned forward and entered a few more items. ? In the meantime, I'm declaring you fit for duty. And since I'm also duty officer, I'll place you right away."

He looked over a holographic screen that projected itself above the keyboard, but I couldn't make out any details. It was either a limitation of the projection system or, more likely, an extension of his privacy screening. I hoped he was looking for duty in the research wing, with Susan. Not for her company, though it would be a bonus, but so I could get my hands on a terminal and begin catching up. He apparently found what he was looking for.

"Ah, good! I see there's an opening in the laundry detail. Yes, that will do perfectly. Report to Private William Jackson in the Laundry, at 0400, the day after tomorrow."

"Laundry? And four o'clock! ? I didn't hide my disappointment and groaned, more out of old habit of pulling bad detail than for any other reason. I wouldn't have minded a few nights' sleep. A few nights' *real* sleep, for a change.

"Yep. Four AM. And laundry. What did you expect? Vehicle repair? You haven't the strength or stamina. Nor the training. Or maybe one of the cushy jobs in research? Admittedly, it doesn't take much strength to sleep all day... ? he paused, probably to listen to the steam come out of Susie's ears. ? But in the rare times when they actually take a stab at doing work, again, you don't have the training. Besides, the accessing would wear you down too quickly. ? Another odd comment. ? So it's the laundry. Must

have those uniforms clean and ready to go. Shouldn't be too hard, though. The techniques for cleaning have improved over the centuries, but we still use ordinary water to conserve energy. There is some heavy lifting, but you could stand a little work. And Jackson will probably keep your shifts short for the first day or two. ? He stood up. ? So! I officially welcome you, whatever-your-name-is-going-to-be. I'm looking forward to your naming tomorrow. I'll see you at the Lieutenant's table. For the next few months at least, welcome to the Third! ? I half expected-and half wanted-him to call me a dog, but he didn't.

We left his office and headed toward the mess. This completed our circle tour except for the research center. I reflected on the doctor's comments about using a computer. What did he call it? The puterverse? It seemed a trifle odd.

There were a number of things that were striking me as odd. One could point out that being brought forward 600 years, changing sex, getting younger, all after having been an unknown number of whatevers were all odd. And one would be right; they were very odd. But some other things were beginning to nag at me, not the least of which was how relatively easily I was grasping the technology of the era.

Lt. Sanchez had been correct: my past employers hadn't hired me for my looks. NATEch's standards were nothing of the kind; they looked only for exceptions. Even the rookies at NATEch could hold intelligent debate with Albert Einstein or Carl Woldheim, two of our early and more well known people. And I had worked there for over eight years. So I had a significant edge in experience and ability when extrapolating known facts and adapting with the unknown needed to be done. Even still, I should have been completely out of touch with a society six centuries removed from my own. And not just from a technical standpoint. I was amazed at how little language had changed. There were other feelings, too. Definitely not ideas, and certainly not suspicions. But faint, vague stirrings, and a small yet growing conviction that things were not as they should have been.

"So, how about some lunch?? Susie broke my thought. We had reached the end of the corridor and were standing at the top of the ramp leading down to the mess. My first thought was that I'd been so full from breakfast that I wouldn't need to eat for three days. Right on the heels of that thought was the growling of my stomach, telling me I was hungry. I nodded vigorously, and we walked down the ramp, hand in hand.

The mess was comfortably full, much less so than this morning, telling me that the unit did indeed eat in shifts. The line was short, only six people, but they let us go first again. I set my tray down on the counter.

"Uh, Susie? Maybe you better help me out this time. ? She laughed.

"You learn quickly! Sure. But you eat everything I give you, okay?? It sounded like a setup, but figuring she couldn't do worse to me than I would, I nodded. We went down the line, but instead of filling the tray, she gave me almost nothing. She must have thought I was still full from breakfast. We picked up our milk and coffee, smiled at Hill, the cook, and seated ourselves. Like this morning, we were left our own table.

Lunch went much better than breakfast. Susie had picked out enough for me. I finished up lunch just as I was getting full. We sat and chatted over a cup of coffee. I took a sip of the hot, black fluid. It tasted like battery acid. I almost choked on it. I shook my head and tried another swig. This time I did choke on it. Susie grabbed my wrist gently and helped me lower the cup while I coughed and grimaced.

"Slow down! Your taste buds are new, too. That poison's bad enough with milk and sugar, let alone straight like that. Here. ? She poured copious amounts of both into my swill, until it was brimming.

"Aaa! You've polluted it! I've been drinking it black since I was in college!? I whined.

"Oh, yeah? When was that?? she countered.

"You mean I have to retrain my taste buds, too?? I looked with sadness into the depths of my ruined nectar.

"Uh-huh. Maybe not even then. People have different tastes, you know."

I moved my cup away from me and thumped my head on the table. ? Oh. Getting turned into a shrimp, having to wear all this ... stuff, and pulling laundry duty all in one day is bad enough. But NOW! No more coffee!? I tried another sip, but it was just too sickening. I pushed it away, saying farewell to a fond friend. I looked at Susie.

"I suppose I'm going to hate beer, too?? I lamented.

"Beer? Probably. But it doesn't matter. You not old enough to drink alcohol."

Since my head was already on the table, it seemed like a good idea to bang it a couple more times, so I did. I hadn't thought of that. Of course I couldn't drink. Or vote, if they still voted. I had no idea what it was, but I was undoubtedly well under legal age, too. When I got out on my own in a few months...

A chilling thought touched me. I wanted to think about it for awhile and work it out, but on the surface, it was frightening. It seemed highly improbable that they were going to turn a child, which is what I now was, into a foreign and potentially hostile society. Yet they had told me they released Cues after-what?-two to four months. I filed that information under the growing folder marked ? ODD", and put a priority on it.

Susan got up and went to the beverage table, returning with a steaming mug which she set down beside me.

"Here,? she said as she seated herself. ? Hot chocolate. More to your taste, I rather think. Maybe later you can try some herbal tea.? I sipped it and it was much tastier. Sweeter, but nicely so. Not coffee, but hot. It had a calming effect.

We lingered a while longer. Susie seemed hesitant to leave. I wondered why, but decided to use the time to get some information.

"What's after lunch, Susie? The debriefing?"

I guessed the source of her discomfort on the first try. She nodded, a little nervously. ? Uh-huh. In about an hour. I've been wanting to bring it up, but kept putting it off. I can't any longer. This interview, we call it the Initial Historical and Acclimation Debriefing, or IHAD, can be a little grueling, even hostile. We-

"Why on earth would it be hostile? It's not like I'm on trial or anything."

"Well, yes and no.? She looked around, then stood up. ? Come on, let's head to our room. I'll fill you in there. You can bring your hot chocolate."

We cleaned up our places and walked the short distance to our quarters. Once inside, Susie instructed the door we were not to be disturbed. We only had one chair, so I sat on my bed, Susie in the chair. I sipped the hot chocolate, but it was nowhere near as burning as the curiosity I felt. Curiosity and worry.

"Okay, let's hear it. I am on trial? How could I be?"

"Of course you're not on trial! Unless you're a plant.? My eyes widened some as she continued. ? The

powers that be have been after us for over a hundred and fifty years now, but have never fully disabled us. Because of our recruitment methods and security checks on even possible recruits, they've been unable to penetrate us too deeply with spies. Until recently, when they found another way to get at us.

"About five years ago, one of our regiments, the Fourth, rescued a ripe. They did the normal checking and IHAD, but it was pretty routine. Remember, we find out everything we can about you before we even begin plans to rescue you. So the IHAD went off without difficulty, and he was integrated into the Fourth for orientation and acclimation before being assigned to a family on the outside. ? That answered somewhat my concern about what awaited me once I left here. A moment's thought would have given me that answer. I was just too quick coming to conclusions, a fault of mine I had outgrown but now, being un-grown again, had reacquired. I would need to watch myself about that. Susan continued.

"Then, about three months into the Cue's acclimation, the Fourth was hit by Xeno shock troops and was nearly obliterated. The few not killed were captured and alpha suppressed. No one escaped. At first. But on the way to the camps, our unit and the Eighty-seventh hit the column and got back our people. What they told us forced us to change the way we did the IHAD, and is why you're going to have an unpleasant experience this afternoon."

I didn't like the way she said that. Sitting there, she worked her hands, almost wringing them. She obviously didn't like what was coming, but she would do it. I think I knew what it was. I decided to relieve her of the burden of telling me.

"I think I can guess why, ? I said quietly. ? The government, or more probably those in charge of the physiomanufacturing complex, suckered you. Since you can reconstruct a ripe's past, they probably can, too. So they find a likely candidate, re-ripe him with his own memories, then ripe him again back to what he had just been. But those memories aren't entirely original, are they? They were modified to include false memories, or embedded instructions, or some such, so that when the original was restored, the ripe would be the perfect inside agent. Probably without his knowing it."

"How did you know that?? Susan said softly.

I shook my head. ? I didn't, Susie. I suppose I should be up front about this. Before I tell anything more, though, answer just one question. ? I felt my heart thudding heavily in my chest, already knowing the answer, ? This IHAD. It's going to be held against my will, isn't it?"

She looked at me carefully, then cast her gaze downward and nodded.

"I-I-I'm sorry, but yes. It has to be. Even if you want to cooperate fully, it has to be. You're right. Of the forty-eight cases the Resistance has uncovered so far, not a single Cue was aware of their programming or behavior modifications. It gets worse. The actual persona is destroyed during the process, so we can't even determine that there *was* a copy made. It's only through the IHAD that we can get deep enough into your psyche to know that it's your original persona. ? She went on, anger in her voice, ? I hate it! We do everything we can to bring you back, then subject you to this. You're not even given time to get used to us, or yourself, or anything. We wake you up, then ... then ... attack you!? She choked off a sob.

I put down the mug and held her hands. ? Susie, please don't cry. ? I felt tears welling up unbidden, but forced them back. ? I don't blame you. How could I? If it weren't for you and the Third, I'd still be whatever I was before. Or worse. It's because of you that I have my life back. It's new, and different, and scary, but it's *mine* . An invasive interrogation that insures your safety is a small price to pay for everything you've done for me. ? She wiped a tear and smiled.

"I'm not exactly building up your confidence, am I, kid? I was supposed to be the one giving you support,

not the other way around.? She took a breath to steady herself. ? So, tell me. How did you know? About the infiltration methods and everything? None of the plants had any idea they were subverted, so it's not that."

"No. As you and Doctor Barrett told me, I'm one of the oldest ripers you've uncovered. I'm willing to bet I was the first ripe, ever.? Then, going into moderate detail, I filled her in on my past life and my position at NATech, though I didn't mention them specifically. The story, even abridged, was apparently pretty good. Susie forgot all about my upcoming IHAD and sat there, fascinated. I must admit to feeling childishly proud of myself and was tempted to really wow her, but managed to hold my tongue. At the end, she shook her head, trying to absorb-and believe-what I'd told her.

"That's incredible! So you're saying that much of what we use today was actually envisioned by your people over six centuries ago?"

"I wouldn't go that far. I haven't seen a great deal of this world yet. And some of what I've deduced is just that: deduction. But yes, there are elements here that we were working on at the time of my first riping. If that's what it was,? I concluded.

"What do you mean, 'If that's what it was.'? It was a riping."

"Maybe that's what it ended up being. But I'm sure that's not how it started out. I'm certain that the goal was to revive me, or at least my memories, by moving them to an undamaged portion of my brain. I was completing work on...? I hesitated, then skirted, ? an important project when I the accident occurred. I hadn't yet transferred my conclusions, procedures and projections into the main systems."

"And that project was that important? That they'd risk untested technology to get that information. That's ghoulish!"

"Hey, not too hard, Susie. I was probably dead or dying. There was no risk. And the technology wasn't untested, it was nonexistent. I imagine they came up with the hypothetical solution and implemented it within several days, though I don't know. In any event, they were successful in keeping me alive. But I don't have any memories beyond what I've told you. It's as though I stepped up to the elevator and woke up in the recovery room."

She shuddered. ? How can you talk about dying and being experimented on and be so calm?? Without seeming to, she paid very close attention to my response.

"I don't know. It somehow seems so ... removed. I know it happened to me back then. I think I may have been inadvertently electrocuted by the entry defense systems. Whatever, it's as though my head knows it was me, but *I* know it's not me.? I hugged myself. ? For better or worse, this is me now.? I looked at her. ? Does that sound right?"

Her eyes sparkled with delight. ? That's exactly how it's supposed to feel! I knew you'd make it. I didn't have any proof, but I was somehow certain you'd begin to make the transition!? She seemed vastly relieved. I felt it, too.

We passed the next twenty minutes with idle talk. Susie seemed to have passed a barrier and didn't seem as concerned about the IHAD, which in turn put me at ease. I still wasn't sure why she'd been so tense earlier, but I had a hunch that if I turned out to be a plant, she'd be the one to deal with me. I spent no time thinking about how they'd deal with me if I were a plant. Pretty abruptly, I suppose. These people didn't seem like fanatics, but they risked their lives and lived like outlaws in a cave, all for the chance to restore a person who didn't know they needed restoring. They would be willing to take extreme measures to continue their work.

We were in the midst of planning our evening gym workout after dinner, when a knock came at the door. I jumped a bit; the heavy thoom! of an energy door was worlds different from a wooden one. Susie got up and let them in.

I was expecting mad scientists with long robes and covered faces. They would be tall, skinny, and devoid of human compassion. One would have a huge needle, dripping some sort of mind-altering drug. I'd scream, then faint, then come to just as they jabbed the needle into my arm, making sure the barbs grabbed on firmly. At least, that's how my overactive imagination envisioned it.

There were two of them. One was a young man, of average build, maybe twenty. He had a pleasant face and cheerful greeting. The other was a middle-aged woman. She came right up to me and pulled me from my bed, a big smile on her face.

"Hello! I haven't had a chance to meet you yet! I'm Corporal Geher, but please, call me Betty. I'm going to be your interviewer. Nervous?? I nodded. ? Good! You wouldn't be normal if you weren't at least a little frightened. Let me tell you right now, though, the interview isn't scary in the slightest."

"Uh-huh. And you've got prime real estate in Florida to sell me, too, right?? I quipped dryly.

She frowned, trying to figure out what I meant. She got the gist, though.

"Nope. It's not the interview. It's the waking up.? She reached into a bag she had with her and extracted a small device, smaller than her hand. At my curious look, she handed it to me, warning me against activating it. It seemed innocent enough at first glance, which I mentioned. Betty laughed.

"I always let the Cue look at it, but only to get the feel. No offense, but its function is probably a little beyond you at this point.? She laughed again.

Challenged, I looked at it carefully. There was an emission area and several indicator lights. There was also a small display, maybe two centimeters by four with measurements on both axes. In the reflection of the panel, I noticed a sine wave pattern, and its markings along the y-axis seemed to measure decibels. The power supply was buried inside the casing, but the disproportionate weight in the bottom told me its location and relative strength. Though I still didn't know their energy type, the general assumption is density equals capacity. I took these observations and coupled them with the obvious function of the device-to render me helpless-added Susan's misgivings and the group's goals, and came to a logical conclusion. I handed the device back to Corporal Geher. I'd call her Betty after the interview.

"This is a device that will render the, ah, patient, unconscious. It uses a series of pulsed electromagnetic waves concentrated on the brain's frontal lobes, the part that affects awareness. No doubt it also contains a directional subsonic wave that suppresses the subject's will and makes them open to suggestion. A kind of sonic truth serum. Very clever, undoubtedly highly effective, and probably harmless. I'll bet there're few side effects other than a headache."

Corporal Geher was the perfect audience. She looked as though I'd used the thing on her. The man's (boy's? guy's? another quirk with my new social status: proper reference for members of the now opposite sex) expression was like he'd been sandbagged. Susie shook her head slowly, admiringly. She stepped up close and put an arm around my shoulder, leaning her mouth close to my ear.

"Direct hit,? she whispered. I laughed.

Corporal Geher shook off her stunned stare and looked at me shrewdly. ? Ummm. Yes. Well, this is going to be an interesting interview.? She activated the device, and it gave a pitched whine that quickly climbed beyond hearing. She came close, but kept the thing at her side.

"All right. The inducer will take about a minute to charge. I'll be placing it close to your head. Here.?" She indicated a spot just behind my left temple. "When I trigger it, you'll feel an overwhelming need to fall asleep. When that happens-"

"Shouldn't I lie down?? I interrupted.

"No. You'll be lying down when you awaken, and we've discovered that the transition from standing to lying without realization helps the adjustment that you've been through the interview, and that what you're feeling isn't your fault. When you feel the pulse, try to relax. It won't make much difference whether you fight it or not. In fact, most Cues become totally unconscious immediately at pulse discharge. But like I mentioned, this is not the worst. The worst part is the awareness that you'll have when you wake up."

"The awareness that I've been completely helpless? I'm getting used to that.?" I noticed I was wringing my hands, giving the lie to my casual tone. I could feel myself tightening up. Susie was still holding my shoulders and sensed it.

"Hey, easy, girl. I'll be here the whole time."

"Yeah, but you won't help me, will you?"

"No, she won't,?" Geher said. "And that's the worst. While you're out, we will be laying your entire life open. Nothing will be left unexplored. Although you'll have no actual memory of the ordeal-and make no mistake, it is an ordeal-you will have a very clear sense of intrusion. Some say violation. I'm sorry. I wish there was another way. We hope, I hope, that it helps to be up front about this from the beginning."

I didn't say anything. The enormity of what they were going to do weighed on me, smothering me. But I steeled myself to go through with it.

"Very well, then. Shall we?? she asked. I nodded and chewed my lower lip. I was still wringing my hands. Geher raised the inducer up to my left temple, placing her left hand on my right temple and cheek. I felt Susie hold me tight in her arms as I waited for the

*FINAL LOCKDOWN SEQUENCE ENGAGED. ALL COMMAND PROTOCOLS HAVE BEEN DISABLED AND ACCESS RIGHTS REVOKED. THIS SYSTEM WILL SUSPEND ALL COGNITIVE OPERATIONS IN 5 ... 4 ... 3 ... 2 ... 1....*

\* \* \* \*

Corporal Geher triggered the inducer, and its pitch soared up and out of hearing. The young girl, eyes staring straight ahead, lower lip in her mouth, suddenly relaxed, becoming an even smaller creature than she already was. Her eyes glazed over but remained open. Her lip slipped free from her teeth as her jaw sagged. Her hands, so active with wringing, went still and fell to her sides. Geher triggered the inducer a second time, and the girl shuddered and slumped back against Susan, who was waiting for her. Holding the slight weight, she eased the completely oblivious child to her bed.

Susan knelt beside her, lips tight with suppressed emotion. This girl had been so alive, so vibrant only moments ago. Now she lay there, little more than a dumb animal, staring sightlessly into a void. Her breathing was shallow and fluttery. She looked even younger. Susan felt a touch on the arm and looked up at Betty.

"Susie. Remember the Fourth,?" Betty said quietly. It was always "remember the Fourth". Inducing was so completely against everything they stood for, yet it was needed to perpetuate what they stood for.

Susan wordlessly rose and moved to the other side of the bed, giving Betty access to the helpless girl.



While she pulled the chair up to better talk and treat the girl, Geher's associate, PFC Ron Williams, came up to the bed and took out a tabinal that contained the information Susan had gathered on the girl. It was the final remaining record of everything that they knew about the Cue. He scrolled through the text and reached the point he was looking for. He nodded at Geher, who placed the inducer against the comatose girl's temple and triggered it a third time.

Susan heard the different pitch of the suppresser mode whine out of hearing, feeling her stomach churn. Every member of the interrogation team had to submit to a full IHAD before being qualified to work with Cues. Susan recalled her experience with shame and discomfort. It was just as Betty had described. She remembered absolutely nothing of the actual interview, but would never forget the feeling of nakedness, exposure, and utter vulnerability that had consumed her whole being upon waking. She looked down at the girl she had worked so hard to bring back alive and fervently wished it could be different for her. It was a hopeless wish.

Geher triggered the suppresser a fourth and final time. The girl shivered and slowly exhaled with a whimper. Her eyes remained sightless, but misted over. Her body was now completely relaxed and almost lifeless. Her well fitting clothes looked baggy on her. Her mind, as all three had themselves experienced, was open for any and all probing, without defense or control. She was ready.

Susan stood up and went to her dresser. As Private Williams sat beside the girl, she opened a locked drawer and pulled out her sidearm. She activated it and set the energy discharge to lethal. She then stood at the foot of the girl's bed and listened for the slightest indication that this helpless youth was a deadly threat. Susan alone would decide; the others had no say in the matter. She accepted it as the only and proper way. Better one person live with the responsibility than three. She pointed the gun at the girl's head and prepared herself to squeeze the trigger. She then lowered the gun to her side.

"She knows a great deal more than she should.?" Betty's voice, even though it was low and calm, seemed harsh in the atmosphere.

"It's hard to believe that someone from six centuries ago would understand our technology,?" Williams agreed. He said to Susan, "What can you tell us, Susan?"

Susan had a great deal to tell them. As she conveyed all the information she had gathered since the morning, they stared down at their helpless charge. What Susan talked about seemed incredible to all three. But that was expected. Even people like they, who dealt with Cues regularly, living and if need be dying for them, never adjusted completely to the idea that anyone could have such a complete life at such a young age. It was illusion, of course. Subverted or not, this powerless, frail girl had been John Wyeth, a man of some achievement who had lived centuries before.

Susan finished her report, and Betty spoke to her.

"You mean that she told you all this, voluntarily? Doesn't it strike you as odd that someone who claims to have been an integral part of such a secret operation would then tell you about it?"

Susan agreed. "It did seem odd. But keep in mind, she knew what was going to happen to her, having deduced it from what I told her. That's no surprise; that's why we tell them as much as we can. The only ones who don't understand the purpose of an IHAD are in denial. I think she told me about her past because it was obvious she didn't fit the normal rescued ripe. And I could tell she probably told me more than she wanted to, but got caught up in herself. Finally, think about it ... what did she really tell us? We have good general details, but no specific facts that would betray any confidences, even ones half a millennia old. Not even the name of this organization."

"Maybe she is a plant, then,?" Williams interjected. "She would be the ideal one. Among the oldest

ripes. So many unknowns. Plausible, if fanciful, explanations."

"All the other plants had normal backgrounds and histories," Susan countered.

Williams shrugged. "And they all got caught, after the first one. Maybe the tack has changed and they're trying to play our curiosity against our caution. I know I'm very curious about her." He looked down without malice at the unconscious form.

"I feel the same curiosity," Betty said. "And excitement. To have rescued one of the first ripes is quite an achievement. And of course she would have a great many inconsistencies and gaps. We'd expect the first ripe to be unique. And her history and explanations would support everything we do know. But I'm sure our enemies realize that, and would know we'd risk rescuing her. Enough with speculation. Let's begin."

"Do you think they would really do that, Betty?" Susie asked. "Make a plant look like a plant? It seems peculiar."

"My point exactly, dear. You're using indications of guilt as proof of innocence, aren't you?" Susie remained silent. "I'm inclined to fall into the same trap. But don't forget, that's exactly what we're looking for, a trap. Sometimes it's the most clearly seen traps that are the hardest to avoid. Give the devil his due, Susan. They may be evil, perverted and soulless. But there is probably no single entity more focused and brilliant than NATEch Supreme."

## Chapter Six

The chilled mountain air seemed to freeze the sky to a darker black, bringing the stars into sharp focus. Orion stood out bright and clear, with Betelgeuse giving off a little color. Susan glanced over to see if she could find Ursa Major and the Big Dipper buried inside it. She located the Bear through the pines, still low in the sky. Automatically, her eyes lifted to Polaris, the North Star. "Susie," her father had told her countless times, "whenever you look at the Big Dipper, always follow the lip to the North Star. Do it every time." Then he would sing her the ancient song of the Drinkin' Gourd, and tell of how their ancestors of a distant time would follow Polaris north to freedom. She hummed quietly to herself the soulful melody, her heartbeat providing the song's methodical, paced, undertone.

And waited.

The shimmer of holoshield modulation caught the corner of her eye, and Susie watched as Betty stepped through, as though in molasses. Betty looked to her left and spotted her. She walked over and leaned against the rock face.

"Looking at Polaris again, Susie?" She looked up at the star.

"Yes. Daddy showed me years and years ago, and I do it every time I look at the sky whenever we're based in the northern hemisphere." She pointed out Betelgeuse. "Do you think they're looking at it, too?"

Betty shrugged. "I don't know. Probably not. New Germany doesn't use Polaris for navigation. But you don't mean the planet, do you?"

"I wonder when I'll see them again."

"Girl, if I could wish you there, I would. Well, no, I wouldn't. We need you here. But I'm sure your parents are very proud of you, even if they're light years away. And they have good reason to be proud."

Susan pulled her eyes from the stars and looked down.

"I'm not certain they'd be too proud of me right now.? She struck the rock with a gloved hand. ? Damn! This never gets any easier!"

"I've done it for fifteen years now, Susan, and you're right. It never does. It gets worse as NATech gets trickier and nastier with their plants. If it did get easier, then would be the time to worry."

"I'm convinced she's the real thing. I don't care if she did work for NATech once. That was centuries ago. And the hours and hours we've spent, picking her mind. She's clean. I know it.? She ran her fingers through her thick, raven black hair and sighed heavily. ? But can we risk it?"

"You tell me."

She didn't answer right away, but looked out over the mountains their base was burrowed into. A chilled breeze pushed through the fragrant pine needles. Closing her eyes, she breathed in deeply, loving the thin, cold air touching her lungs with feathers of icy crystal. She opened her eyes and peered at the steep slope that lay before them, disappearing into the quiet blackness of the valley several hundred feet lower. She raised her eyes to the ridge on the far side and saw the jagged spires outlined by stars. One pattern was the Drinkin' Gourd, and she followed the lip to the North Star.

"Yes. She's worth the risk. If she's not a plant, she may be-no, she is-the most important person we've ever rescued. Even if she doesn't have any usable NATech knowledge, just the fact that we rescued one of their own would be a coup."

"But that's not why she's worth the risk, is it, Susie?? Betty prodded gently.

"Of course not. She's worth the risk because every Cue is worth the risk. Even if there's only one chance in a thousand of a plant, we'll always risk it."

Betty nodded. ? We'll always risk it. One day, we will pay for that risk, and what we fear will become reality. It happened to the Fourth and the Fifteenth and the 226th. And one day it will happen to the Third.? She shivered, not from the chill air, and returned to the subject. ? So you're recommending continuation?"

"Yes. We'll need to keep a close eye on her, though. Her actions have been so different from past Cues that we'll have a difficult time determining safe quirks from dangerous ones."

"We did make it difficult for everyone by messing up the poor man's sex,? she chuckled. ? And sex life, I should imagine, when the time comes."

Susie flushed. ? I know. That's all my fault. I should have-

"Should have what, Susie?? Betty interrupted, in a slightly harsh, yet motherly, tone. ? Stop punishing yourself. It's a waste of time. You did everything you knew how. I know. I was your confidant. I couldn't have done the work you did. You uncovered more than anyone ever expected or hoped. Don't blame yourself. I don't. TAU doesn't. And most important,? she motioned toward the cavern, ? our sleeping angel doesn't either."

"You don't think so?? Susie said hopefully.

"You were with us during the entire interview. Did you hear anything that pointed to anything but an energetic, lively soul that wanted nothing so much as a chance? I talked to Kerry earlier yesterday, during one of our breaks. She was very impressed with the girl. It's not going to be easy, but she's come a long way already, and all on guts. Can you say you'd react differently, or as well, waking up as a young boy?"

"No, I can't. I'd go nuts. I wonder how Sergeant Thawell would handle being a little girl.? She giggled at the thought and seemed cheered.

Betty laughed, too. Making a credible effort at imitating the big man's gravel voice, she said, ? 'Tell her nothing and leave her in the laundry.'? She laughed again, glad to break the other woman's somber mood. ? He wouldn't pop off like that if he was the one who suddenly had a different dance card."

"He's a brave man. A jerk, but a brave one. Still, I don't think he'd be able to make it as a Cue."

"I don't think I would either. I don't know. At my age, a second time around sounds tempting, regardless of the conditions. One thing I'll tell you; I personally think that it's for the better that John's a girl now."

"What?? Susie looked up sharply at her friend. ? How can you say that?"

"Think about it. What better way to adjust to the unknown than to go at it all the way? That's why we induce while the Cue is standing. Going from your feet to your back with no memory in-between demands attention to change."

"Which better prepares the mind for the more difficult changes. I know. But there's a big difference between waking up in a different position than waking up in a different gender."

"No! I say there is no difference. What's the oldest Cue we've revived? Three hundred and fifty years? Four hundred? A big jump, yes. But much of our society was already in place even then. Planetary emigration, worldwide national and political unification, even the puterverse. But she's from before all that. By close to three centuries. Maybe having to deal first with personal identity at the deepest level is helping to prepare her for the culture shock awaiting her outside the base."

"But look at what NATech, her NATech I mean, was already working on. Her last project was a model for an underwater society that remained fully integrated with the surface society. In other words, *she* created the Pisces. That society, that people, was something that has never been recreated since the Rock destroyed Pisces in 2374. Hundar Knowler was the last of his race, and he died in 2415.? Susie shook her head in admiration. ? I'm not sure she'll need that much help in adjusting to our society."

"In which case I'd take the stance that it would be a disappointment to her. Everything we discovered about her showed she was a ... well, a man ... who was always up to any challenge, always eager for any challenge. Such a person might not enjoy a voyage like this if the destination was not much different than the beginning. This unintentional challenge may add more spice.? Betty chuckled. ? Sugar and spice, that is. That's why I spoke up for her at the briefing today.

"But the main reason why I think all this is good for *him* , is you, Susie. I can think of no one better suited to helping out this vibrant, badly misplaced soul. And if you had guessed right, and we had integrated him back as a him, then he wouldn't have the privilege of having you as her counselor. And that, I think, is going to be the biggest reason she makes it."

"If she doesn't shard.? Betty said nothing, and Susie was immediately sorry. ? That's not fair, Betty,? she said contritely. ? You go out of your way to compliment me, and I cut you down. I'm sorry."

Betty reached out a hand and touched her sleeve. ? That's all right. I know it's been difficult for you the

last six months. Nobody except you ever thought permission would be given for this rescue. And then when it was, we lose three people on the bio-raid. And then we-not just you-guess wrong as to her identity. And now this mystery. Is she friend or foe? If she's a friend, she'll need a friend. Many friends. And if she's a foe ... well, I hope she's a friend."

They spent some more quiet time together, talking in low tones, enjoying each other's company before Betty went in to bed. Susie remained outside a while longer, enjoying the crisp night air and pinpoint starlight. The cold seemed to bring everything closer, and deaden the sound. She stared into the valley below.

And waited

Finally, she roused herself, knowing she must get to her quarters soon. The girl was supposed to sleep through the night, but could possibly waken before then. Either way, Susie was going to be there. She pushed herself away from the rock face she had been leaning against and stretched. Leaning back, her eyes again caught sight of the Big Dipper, now resting on the tree tops. Unable to stop herself, nor wanting to, she traced the imaginary line from the lip to Polaris, and heard again the story as told by her father. She used to imagine herself back in that terrible time, escaping with her family, following the riverbank, heading ever northward to freedom. Maybe now she was the star of freedom for the many ripes, looking for their liberty. If so, she hoped she could remain as faithful as that pinpoint of light. She shook her head, wondering at her musings, and went back inside.

The girl was still motionless on her bed, as she had been for over two days now. Susie set down the tub of warm water she had with her and tenderly sponged clean the limp, sleeping child, and changed her bedclothes. She had done this twice a day, between interview sessions, hoping the special attention would somehow reach the girl even in her stupor and let her know she was cared for. She had given no reaction then, nor did she now. Susie gently brushed out the soft, brown hair, taking care not to tug too hard. Again there was no movement from her. Pulling the covers up to the girl's chest, she left her and prepared for bed herself.

She had the showers to herself, and took her time. As the hot, steaming water poured over and soaked through her, she heard the quiet footsteps and quiet conversation of Company A personnel as they went down the corridor. Although the hour was late, she remembered seeing significant activity in the hanger when she came in. Undoubtedly another enforcement raid. If it was a bio-raid, she'd have known about it. She wondered what the target was and silently prayed for her comrades' safety. By the time she had finished her hair and had stepped out into the corridor wearing her robe, it was again empty, dark and silent. She returned to her quarters.

The girl was still sleeping. Preferring the darkness, she dimmed the lights further and disrobed. Clad now only in panties and a loose top, she sat on her bed, drawing her legs up under her, and watched her sleeping charge. This was the worst time, after the IHAD but before the waking. Before the IHAD, there is always the concern of a plant, and fear tempers the still new relationship between the Cue and her counselor. Then, during the IHAD, the relationship was that of extremes: invalid and caretaker between sessions, then prisoner and executioner during. And it could hardly be called a relationship; the Cue was oblivious to everything.

But now the IHAD was over, and her new Cue was alive, and going to remain that way. It was time to begin the real work of cultural assimilation. But not until this eternal waiting was over. And not until the realization of their invasion was worked through. To occupy herself, Susie thought back to the afternoon's briefing. As she did, Susie sat quietly, watching the slow rise and fall of the girl's chest.

And waited.

\* \* \* \*

"We cannot continue with this IHAD!?" Betty was angry and loud. She stared in defiance at the small group that had gathered at a table in the rec area. The entire gym and half the hanger was cleared of personnel so that the briefing would be private. Private Marks, a large, quiet man from Company A, was posted at the nearer corridor entrance to ensure they were neither disturbed nor overheard. ? We've never conducted one for more than eight hours, but this one's been going for forty-eight! I fear for her safety, her sanity, and her ability to recover."

She received no response. Susie wanted to jump up and shout her agreement. But as the girl's counselor, she was forbidden to speak unless it was to give her decision as to the girl's continuation. A decision she wasn't ready to give yet. Lieutenant Sanchez stirred and broke the silence.

"Are you saying you want Susie to decide now? Do you have all the information you can get?"

"I don't think we'll ever get all the information, sir,?" responded Private Williams, the other interviewer. ? Performing an IHAD is a tricky business, as you know. But with her it seems even more difficult. She responds only to direct questions, and then only with direct answers. And she never expands on what she says. I almost wonder if...? he frowned slightly. ? No, that can't be."

"What can't be, Private?? Sanchez asked.

"Well, I know it's not possible, but it's as though she can somehow resist our probing. She-"

"You're right, it's not possible,?" Dr. Barrett interrupted. ? I don't hold with these infernal interviews. No better than ripping, in my opinion. But I know only too well how they work and their brutal effectiveness. Resistance to questioning is impossible."

"Oh, she answers the questions all right. They all do. But everyone also gives answers that are more than two or three words. Hers are never more than that unless the question is structured in such a way that she has no choice but to answer in sentences. Her replies are ... measured."

There was a small murmur among the seven people. Susan, the eighth, remained silent, taking in the words and reactions of the others. Sergeant Thawell, from enforcement Company A, spoke up. His hard voice quickly silenced everyone.

"So why don't you just phrase all the questions like that, Williams?"

"We've been trying, Sergeant. But doing so means that we can explore only one very small and very specific area at a time, which consumes a great deal of time. As a further detriment, the answers we do get have little or no contextual background. And we knew literally nothing about her original persona. I've never appreciated before how much cognitive reconstruction, research and IHAD complement each other.?" At Barrett's stern look, he added quickly, ? -from an information gathering point of view. With IHAD, generalities are normally difficult, but with him-her, rather-they are impossible."

"Why not just ask her to tell you all about herself? Or himself. Itself. Whatever."

"Because the subject would do just that, Sergeant,?" Barrett said tiredly. ? Our memory is hundreds of times more comprehensive than we realize. It seems sketchy only because we are unable to focus enough to fully utilize it. But a subject under IHAD inducement conditions has incredibly sharp focus. Unless tampered with, their memory is never wrong, never confused, and accurate to the smallest detail. It would take several years to relay all the memories of a single lifetime. Which the subject would. After all, ? he added sarcastically, ? the poor wretch's brain has nothing better to do than remember. Damnable

technology."

"Thank you, Doctor. We've heard your objections before," Sanchez said dryly. "We all agree with you in principle, but cannot afford to in practice."

"If you cannot practice your principles, then they're not really your principles, sir!"

"I would disagree, Doctor, but now is not the time for this debate." The quiet but assertive voice came from Sergeant Abdih, Company B, also an enforcement arm, but generally a calmer man than Thawell. That she shows any control over the IHAD process, however slight, is alarming enough. What I fear more, though, is her connection to NATech."

"You are afraid of nothing, Tomah," said a pale, dark-haired woman to his right.

He smiled at her. "My wife gives me too much credit. Perhaps it is her work in research that allows her such graciousness. I am afraid of many things, Ella, and NATech is among the greatest of my fears. And our young Cue is from NATech."

"A NATech of six centuries ago, Tomah," countered Betty. "And their philosophical gap seems even greater than the time gap. When we uncovered her connection to NATech, we were floored. My first thought was she was a plant that NATech had botched riping. Everyone carefully avoided glancing at Susie. Unspoken was the thought that had they been positive, this briefing would instead be a memorial service. Betty continued. "As I said, we were almost positive. Ronald and I pried into every corner of her mind to find the proof. It's not there."

"Either that or you missed it," Thawell said bluntly.

Betty had been around too long to be even remotely put off by the man's abrasive attitude. She shook her head emphatically. "No, Sergeant. We know our job. Even still, we took many, many more hours than normal to be sure. It's not there. Maybe because NATech was able to screen them out. Like Ron, I also noticed the form of answers she gave us indicated at least marginal control. That worries me."

"That she's a plant, Betty?"

"More than that, Raul. Only Betty could call him that in formal situations. He not only tolerated it, privately he considered it an honor. NATech can bury several, maybe as many as a dozen, behavioral modifications into the original persona, but no more. And it's possible they've perfected a screening process, though I can't imagine how. Other than those limited instructions, and despite the original persona being destroyed, plants remain their own personas-if only a copy. They are guided by their own morals, defined by their natural abilities, and cobbled by the orientation process. But this girl is an individual who excels with challenge and has a keen grasp of technologies. Her near escape that first night is proof of her resourcefulness. And she seems to be quickly coming to terms with her new physique. If she is a plant, Raul, her own persona is her greatest asset and our greatest threat."

"Come, now, Corporal! She's a little girl," Thawell scoffed.

"True, Sergeant, she is a little girl. Physically and, to a great degree, emotionally and psychologically as well. And as she matures, everything about her will continue taking on the reality of her femininity. But none of that changes, or will ever change, her mental and adaptive capabilities. We don't fear her body, Sergeant, we fear her mind. She's beyond any other Cue we've dealt with."

"So if you fear the potential so much, why not just eliminate it?" This time Thawell looked directly at Susan. She stiffened but remained silent.

"That will be enough, Sergeant!?" Lt. Sanchez rarely spoke louder than he needed to, but his voice had an edge that made even Susie start and look at him. ? The decision to continue is always left to the counselor. You do not need to be reminded. ? Thawell fell silent, but was clearly unsatisfied.

"I will not speak for Corporal Lendler, ? Betty continued, addressing everyone, ? but the reason I think we should not waste this potential, as Sergeant Thawell calls her, is that she has an equal, if not greater, potential to be of great benefit to us. She could be the key to crippling, perhaps destroying, NATech Supreme."

That got everyone. Even Thawell broke off his icy glare at Susie and swung his attention to Betty. She had everyone's attention, which was just as she wanted. She had been impressed with the girl ever since her mess hall performance the first day. No, before that. She had listened to Susie during the long weeks she had researched this ripe, and had been privy to many of the details Susie had uncovered in her intensive search of ancient records. Susie was still young enough to become excited by every new ripe project, while Betty had grown weary of disappointment after disappointment. Betty simply did not have the gifts that Susie had in research. Nor, she had to admit to herself, did she have that streak of total ruthlessness that Susie could call on when needed. That was why she now performed the IHAD on all Cues. Not because of some cold need for control, but because she helped where she could. Taking the dirtiest job always helped. And while this IHAD had been the most grueling and frustrating, it was also stirring hope. What she had heard from her young subject gave her a sense of excitement she had not felt for many years.

In detail, Betty laid out her reasons for continuation and how a girl with uncanny abilities and a combination of righteous anger and compelling guilt might become the undoing of an entity that had grown so powerful that it was not only beyond the law, it had *become* the law. By the time she had finished, even Sergeant Thawell was nodding thoughtfully. Everyone else was talking loudly, excited by Betty's reasoning and ideas.

Susie felt a small thrill inside her as she listened to the group's quickened conversation. She had witnessed the entire interview. She had to, for she was judge, jury and executioner. And she had performed her duty faithfully, taking in every question, every response. Yet it was impossible not to feel a drawing to this girl. She had gone through so much, yet even in deepest stupor, her every answer showed a zest to live, to experience, to be. She was sure that Betty and Ron had grown to feel the same thing. More than with any other Cue, they were hoping she would come through.

Lt. Sanchez allowed them their enthusiasm, then quieted them by standing. Raul, Susie thought with grudging respect, could command attention without demanding it. He looked toward her, but she kept carefully looking to a point on the far side of the cavern. He smiled slightly then addressed the group.

"What you've suggested has a lot that needs to be examined and thought out, Betty. You're going to rob a lot of people of a lot of sleep for the next few months. ? He smiled to empty the words of complaint. ? But in the meantime, we must still treat our young Cue as a potential threat, and a very serious one at that. And the counselor has not reached her decision yet."

"Sir?"

"Yes, Sergeant Abdih?? Sanchez's voice had a great deal more respect in it than it had for Sergeant Thawell.

"What do we tell her? I mean, how much? She's going to ask questions."

"Maybe not, ? answered his wife Ella. ? Cues only have feelings about an IHAD, never memories, terrible feelings they only want to recover from. ? She shivered slightly, remembering her own



experience. ? And most don't want to recall what are to them the fresh memories of a life they're usually glad is gone."

"True. But from what Corporal Geher has told us, this one is not like most Cues. I would prefer to have prepared a consistent response to give her upon awaking."

Sanchez turned to Betty with questioning eyes. Betty nodded.

"You are right, Sergeant. She will want to know her status. She has a talent at deducing a situation quickly. When she wakes up, she's going to know we know. What she doesn't know yet is how important it is."

"Don't tell her anything. Just lock her out of the system and keep her in the laundry,? Thawell said.

"Ah, the refreshing military approach to secrecy,? Dr. Barrett said acidly. ? 'Don't tell nobody nuthin!' I don't think it will work, Sergeant. ? He started ticking off his fingers. ? In the five days since cognitive reconstruction had finished restoring her, she has: roused herself out of Healer's Sleep, nearly escaped, already shown positive signs of adjustment to her new body, with a glance accurately identified several of our technologies, and even in an induced state managed to frustrate our interviewers. No offense, Betty."

"None taken, Doctor, because you're right. No, I think we must tell her at least some of it, because she is going to find out. I also have a hunch that because of her curiosity and skills, she'll be looking to access the puterverse before long. When that happens, it is imperative that someone is with her. ? She indicated Susan, who was still silent, a part of the group but also removed. ? Susie knows her the best. Let's stick to SOP. Counselors always have the decision of disclosure. Let's keep it that way."

"My thought exactly, Betty. We'll stay with normal protocols. ? A simple statement, but understood by all to be an iron-clad order. Sanchez glanced at Williams. ? How much longer to complete the IHAD?"

Williams replied quickly, ? Further questioning would be too risky. We could continue for another two days and still only whet our curiosity. I recommend we end the IHAD now. That would allow her to wake up sometime tomorrow morning, when Susie will be with her in their quarters."

"Thank you, Private. Betty?"

"End it now."

He looked over to Susan, at the end of the table. Even in the close company of eight people, he thought she looked strangely alone.

"Susan?"

She nodded her agreement with the others.

Lt. Sanchez nodded and everyone else rose. ? Very well, then. The IHAD is over, and the Third awaits the final decision of the counselor. I trust Those Above Us will approve of our course of action. Doctor Barrett, please see to your patient. Dismissed."

The group broke up. Though the discussions would continue in private, nothing would be said outside the group unless Sanchez ordered otherwise.

Susie took Dr. Barrett to check on the girl, who lay like a crumpled doll on her bed. The treatment was very quick, but effective. He administered a mild drug that allowed her to drift from a conditioned, responsive stupor into a restoring, restful sleep. He monitored her for a few minutes, holding her small

hands in his, until her breathing slowed and deepened. He tucked her hands under the cover and stood up.

"She should sleep until morning. But I've underestimated her recuperative powers before, so she may wake up sometime during the night. If she does, there's no need to call me unless she shards. You, by yourself, will be the best medicine she can have. If she wants, I'll look at her tomorrow afternoon. Good day.?" He left, and the waiting began.

\* \* \* \*

Susie quietly asked for the time and was as quietly told it was well past midnight. She called for the lights to be shut off completely, then sat in the dark, in a blackness that can only be achieved inside a cave. She stared into the black at the unseen bed with her still sleeping charge, occasionally rubbing her bare legs and caressing her bare arms, as though reassuring herself the total darkness had not stolen away her own body. She was tired, but not sleepy. Sighing, she leaned against the slightly warm, smooth rock wall and closed her eyes.

And waited.

\* \* \* \*

The tension, building steadily for twenty minutes, was nearing breaking point. Susie brought a hand up and wiped the sweat from her forehead. Private Owasuna was staring at Susie, her tabinal lying on the floor, forgotten. Her face was pale with horrific realization and fear. Susie looked down the barrel of her gun to the point of light on the young girl's head.

"I'm sorry, Gretchen, whom did you say you worked for from 2406 to 2418?"

"I worked for PulseDynamo Tech Systems, in Sydney ."

"I see.?" Betty's voice was calm but forced, her breathing labored. Betty licked her dry lips. ? And where did you work from 2406 to 2418?"

"I worked for General Space Outrigging, on Platform 213, Station Gamma."

Susie felt her stomach knot. Station Gamma was lost during the Canadian terrorist incident in 2295, nearly a century before Gretchen's birth. She stretched her arm to its full length. She was judge, jury ... The trigger seemed to be set in stone. Betty looked with sick eyes at Susie, then turned back to the girl, lying on the bed. She reached out a gentle hand and stroked the silky blond hair. She caressed the thin cheek. When she spoke again, her voice was choked.

"I see. And where did you work from 2406 to 2418?"

"I didn't. I stayed at home, in Des Moines , taking care of our four children."

Betty pulled her hand away, and it fell limp to her side. She closed her eyes.

"I see. And where did you work from 2406 to 2418?"

"I worked at Highland Mining, near Glasgow , Scot-"

The beam, less than one millimeter in diameter, gave off little light and no heat. As it traversed its target, the one-second burst continued on and cut a ten centimeter path to a depth of fifteen centimeters into the solid rock wall before terminating.

Ryoko was on her hands and knees, sobbing and being violently ill. Betty held her head in her hands, suddenly appearing much older than her fifty years. Slowly, Susie lowered her gun and shut it off in mid-recharge. She holstered it and stumbled out of her quarters and into the primary hanger. She didn't even notice the bright desert light striking her eyes as it poured in from the shielded cavern opening. Just as she stepped clear of the door, a faint, sickly sweet odor touched her nostrils, and she very nearly vomited from the loathsome stench.

Alan Lockwood stood up from the wall he had been leaning against. He had been Susie's partner during the research on Gretchen. Though she had taken over entirely upon reintegration, he was still very much involved.

"So, how's the IHAD go...? He grabbed her as she staggered against him. She stared up at him, unseeing, silently crying, then lowered her head against his chest and held it there for a long, long time.

Susie was a dog now.

\* \* \* \*

Susie sat up suddenly. She had drifted off to sleep, slumping down to her pillow. She looked around, but it was still pitch dark. She heard sharp, broken breathing coming from the girl's bed. She was awake and crying silently.

Susie silently rose and went to her bed. She sat down at the edge, and reached out a hand, touching the girl's hand. It was jerked away. Determined, Susie groped around and found it again. Taking the trembling hand, she held it firmly. A moment passed, then another. Suddenly, the girl lunged against her, clinging to her and wailing. Susie stroked the soft straight hair and wrapped an arm around her. Slowly, she worked herself under the covers and lay next to the still weeping girl, who wrapped herself even tighter around her. Susie felt the girl's tears soaking into her top as she wept with inconsolable sorrow. She hugged the child, and held her close.

And waited.

## **Chapter Seven**

It was still pitch black when I opened my eyes. I was pressed up against Susan, my head resting on her breast. She had fallen asleep. I lay quiet, not wanting to waken her. She was warm, and I could hear her steady heartbeat. I closed my eyes again and listened, letting the rhythmic thudding coax me into relaxation. I struggled to understand what had happened.

I remember that I was standing, nervously waiting for the inducer to be set off. It must have taken effect instantaneously, for the next memory I had was waking up in the darkness, feeling utterly abandoned and worthless. Susie must have been waiting for me, for she had been at my side even as I cried myself awake.

If the state I was in could be called awake. It was the agonizing realm of not quite aware nightmare. That time when you still feel the terror, but have none of the memory. That was how I felt when I came to. I had first become aware of how difficult my breathing was. Then I felt a tingling in my muscles, and a jerking that was just beyond my control. It was far, far worse than Healer's Sleep, which provided warmth and comfort, if a vague sense of frustration. But this was a smothering weight of the bitter memories of still felt sensations, a lingering coldness that was very real. Even now, some time after the

episode, I can feel it in the recesses of my wounded psyche.

Despite being warned, I had no way of knowing about or being prepared for the overwhelming sense of fear and exposure that seized me. Being able to look back on it, now that it had passed, I could understand why. No doubt the intrusion into my mind, my being, was near absolute. I couldn't tell what time it was, but I supposed it was the middle of the night. Susie had told me it would last only two or three hours. We had even made plans for the evening. But they probably found more than they thought, and had taken at least twelve hours to ... to...

Without warning, a sense of numbing, terrifying dread overwhelmed me. I again felt stripped and vulnerable, exposed and humiliated. I filled my lungs with a deep, quavering breath, but still couldn't breathe. My chest hurt, and I felt my body tightening with spasms. My helplessness and complete lack of control terrified me. I choked off a sob. To survive the debilitating attack, I knew I needed an anchor. My head, though my neck muscles were taut, was still against Susie's chest. This woman, my friend, would be my anchor. I tried to shut out the demons tearing at me and concentrated on Susie's reassuring heartbeat, forcing myself to breathe.

Slowly at first, then with growing relief, I felt the attack recede. Even as the thought came, I felt the surge of dread begin to shoot through me. I thought about the Susie's steady heartbeat. I imagined my heart beating at the same rate as hers, allowing it to become slow and steady. The second wave faded.

Peacefulness laid a tenuous and gossamer thin cloak over me. It settled on my skin, then soaked deeper. I kept my focus, and it penetrated further. But I was badly shaken. This wasn't a remnant or flashback. I had gone from being my own person to being a ... a thing, all in the space of two heartbeats. It left me frightened and unsure. Unsure...

Panic gripped me. Tears began streaming without letup. I pressed my lips tight to stop their trembling. My arm, wrapped around Susie's waist, tightened. *No! Please! NO!* Thud-ud. Thud-ud. Slow. Steady. Reassuring. Non-threatening. I consciously loosened my grip on her, but still clung. Thud-ud. Thud-ud. *Breathe in.* Thud-ud. *Breathe out.* Thud-ud. Soothing regularity. Peaceful rhythm. Thud-ud. *Listen carefully ...* I opened my mouth with a silent scream as it rushed at me again, a huge beast that meant to destroy my body, my mind, me.

My throat tightened and closed as the horror of my shame savaged me. I whimpered, then moaned, shuddering the length of my body. With horror, I realized I couldn't hear her heart! I sobbed, and my tears began wetting her top, still damp from earlier. Her heart! Where was her heartbeat? Thinking of nothing else, I again tightened my grip and pushed my head harder against her chest. Desperation and intense hopelessness engulfed me.

She brought her arms around me, holding me tight. My body was heaving with wracking sobs. I felt dirty. Used. Cast aside, like

*PLEASE HIT ME AGAIN. IT'S MY FAULT I'M NOT BLEEDING ENOUGH. UHHH! THANK YOU! I'M ASHAMED TO ASK ANYTHING, BUT HIT ME AGAIN, PLEASE! I ONLY WANT TO DO WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY. YES, I LOVE BEING BEATEN. UHHHH! I'M SORRY I FELL DOWN. YES, YOU SHOULD HIT ME BECAUSE I FELL DOWN. IT'S YOUR RIGHT. I WANT YOU TO UHHH! HIT ME. I-I-I CAN'T BREATHE RIGHT. UHHH! NO, I'D NEVER COMPLAIN. I'M UHH!!! HAPPY, BECAUSE ... BECAUSE YOU UHH! ARE.*

so much garbage. I had been laid open and exposed for all to destroy and mock, and I had allowed it. Had I enjoyed it? Shame struck deep into the very core of my being. If I couldn't stop it, then maybe I deserved...

*NO!* I pounded on Susan with all my feeble strength, fighting off my despair and sense of worthlessness. *IT WAS NOT MY FAULT! I did not do this to myself! I did not allow it! It was forced on me! I had no choice! IT WAS NOT MY FAULT!* Still, I clung to Susie, unaware of any attentions she may be giving me. Then I did become aware, slowly, that she was holding me to her, tightly, as though trying to share my pain. Her care made me feel worthwhile. I felt the stirrings of control, shreds of respect returning to me.

But how did I know she really cared for me? Doubt gripped my mind, strangled my will. Insecurity and guilt raked my mind. *You little fool! You completely helpless, worthless, fool. A rancid, meaningless piece of...*

"NO!? I shrieked. ? IT WAS NOT MY FAULT! NO! No!...? I clenched my teeth and fought my terror back. My face was still buried in Susie's chest. I fought off my doubts and turned my ear to her breast again. I forced myself to stop sobbing and listened again for her heartbeat.

Horror ... self-hatred ... ? No,? I whispered. *Listen!* I held Susie with all my strength. ? No.? Then I heard it. Thud-ud. Steady. Thud-ud. Doubt ... shame ... humiliation. ? No.? Thud-ud. Thud-ud.

I felt Susie's hugs again, and heard her whispering quietly in my ear. Thud-ud. Thud-ud. I let her share her strength with me. Why was she sharing? Doubt ignited suspicion. Mistrust exploded inside me, shooting panic like shrapnel through my being. I began to pull away, then stopped myself and with great effort went back into her embrace, placing my ear against her left breast once again. Thud-ud. Thud-ud. Thud-ud. She stroked my hair, still whispering. Thud-ud. Thud-ud. I reached up a shaky hand and placed it on her cheek. It was wet with tears. Mesmerized by the thudding of her strong heart, I ran my fingers over to her hair, letting the thick, curly strands trickle and flow through my fingers. Thud-ud. Thud-ud. Thud-ud. I lowered my hand and let it rest on her chest. I sighed and felt the smallest tingle. It was an emotion, no a feeling. No, it was a sense of being. I felt secure. Safe. Protected. My mind slowly came back to be my own. I was becoming me again. My horror and self-loathing had faded. Thud-ud. Thud-ud. I told myself it was time to heal, and I believed it. Thud-ud. Thud-ud. Tears welled up, and I began to cry again. But this time it was not the uncontrollable crying of hopelessness, nor the painful wail of desolate anguish. It was the cleansing weeping of acceptance and restoration.

I neither knew nor cared how long I wept. But gradually my tears slowed then stopped. I would be a long time recovering from these sensations of humility and vulnerability, but now I knew I would recover.

"How are you, little one?? Susan whispered.

I lay against her and remained silent. She waited several minutes, then softly repeated the question, kissing me gently on the forehead. I turned my face up to her and stared into the darkness. I stretched up my hand and ran my fingers over her face, as though I was blind and wanted to know her. I explored her features, her soft skin, her full lips, her strong cheeks. She seemed so much older and in control than me. In that moment, she seemed much more my mother than my friend. I pulled my hand back to my mouth and sucked a finger. It was a very childish thing to do, but I was feeling very much the child. I listened to her heart and soaked up the warmth of our bodies huddled together under the blanket.

Very quietly, and showing no impatience whatsoever, Susie repeated a third time, ? It helps to talk. I know. How are you feeling?? I still waited awhile longer before I finally stopped sucking my fingers and answered her question.

"I-I don't ... I'm not sure. I think I'm going to be okay. I hope I never have to ... have to...? I started sobbing. Doubt and fear and shame turned over inside me...

"Shhhh. Shhhh. Settle down. Here, hold me tight. Quiet.? She rubbed my shoulders to soothe the

building tenseness. ? You won't have to ever again. Once is too often as it is. I promise you, it will never happen again."

I said nothing, but lowered my head and listened to her heart, never wanting to leave her side.

"Susan?"

"Hmm?"

"I ... I want you to promise me it won't happen again. Please?"

"I promise it will never happen again."

"No. That's not enough. Promise *me* it won't happen again."

Somehow, she knew what I meant. Lying there, cradling me in the total darkness, she knew exactly what I wanted. What I needed. Whispering so quietly that only a young girl wrapped tightly in her arms could hear her, she said:

"You will never be put through that horror again. You will never again suffer that humiliation. I make you my promise,? she paused and my heart pounded. ? Abigail."

Abigail.

My name was Abigail. John Wyeth was gone, swept away by my ordeal, my new fragile emotions, my new body, my new reality. He stood on the other side of an abyss from which I would never, could never, cross back. I could look back on him, see him at a distance, even remember being him. But I wasn't him. Not anymore. And with a curiously comforting knowledge, I accepted that I didn't want to be him. John Wyeth was gone forever, and Abigail Wyeth had started her life. And I was Abigail Wyeth.

I whispered my name, hearing it from my own lips. At its sound, I found myself relaxing in her arms, even as I felt a thudding excitement in my chest at the sound of my new name. No, in my breast. My soft, lovely, feminine breast. For if there was ever any physical proof needed to verify the absolute certainty of who I was, that evidence was before me now, at that moment. I lay in the arms of a beautiful woman clad in only the bare essentials, as I no doubt was, and the stirrings I felt for her were of warmth, safety, sisterly familiarity, and the fervent wish she would be my best friend forever.

"Abigail,? I said again, in a low voice. I smiled at how easily the name rested on my ears. My smile slowly grew and spread to my heart. I felt a sense of completion.

I nodded, feeling sleepy. I had been put through the wringer, both by my new friends and by myself. A flutter of ... no. I was tired, very tired. I wriggled down to my pillow, so Susie could lie down beside me or return to her bed. I was quietly happy when she snuggled down next to me and brought an arm over me.

"Good night, Abigail. Pleasant dreams.? She laid her head down, and I could feel her breath on the nape of my neck. Several minutes passed, and her breathing slowed and steadied, and she was asleep, her arm still around me, protecting me.

"Abigail,? I said, not quite stifling a yawn. ? Yes. My name is Abigail."

\* \* \* \*

It was morning when I woke up. Somehow the lighting in the room mimicked sunlight so perfectly that I was convinced it was morning, though it could have been the middle of the day, or even night, for any actual evidence. Regardless, whatever sleep I had gotten since falling asleep, I felt awake and lively.

Susie was still beside me, but had shifted in the night and no longer had her arm around me. That made it very easy to slip out of bed. I expected the floor to be cold, but it was nicely warm to my bare feet. I stood up and stretched. I didn't know if I would have any flashbacks like last...

The horror and shame came up. I shook my head and bent over. But I refused to surrender to it. It seemed less powerful, more fragile. A moment longer, and the feeling passed. There were going to be aftereffects, then.

I was shaken, but not badly. And I wasn't going to let it disrupt my day right from the beginning. I tried to think of something else. Looking around, I noticed Susie's bathrobe lying on the floor. A shower. Yes. That would clear my head and keep me busy. It would also let Susie sleep in a little longer.

I slipped on her robe and was pleased that it fit fairly well, as bathrobes go. I wondered if my clothes had been brought in yet and decided to search. Right now, my earthly possessions were the clothes I had worn yesterday and the pajamas I had on now. I opened the first set of drawers on the wall opposite the foot of my bed and was rewarded on the first try. Several sets and changes lay neatly folded, waiting for me to select from. I chose a nice outfit that included a skirt that went nearly to the knee, proper underwear and a kind of, I don't know, aerobic suit thingy that would cover my torso and arms. I guess I'd have to learn the names of these things, and quick, too. I mentally crossed three-piece vested suit off my vocabulary and added aerobic suit thingy. I looked around for towels, then remembered the showers already had some. Gathering up my clothes, I left.

Or tried to leave. The door wouldn't open and I all but slammed into it. I was in a rush because I didn't need to use just the showers. Yet instead of fading away, the door stood resolutely in place. I reached out and touched it; it remained solid. Panic filled me as I realized I was their prisoner. They had no intention of ever letting me...

*No! Knock it off, Abigail! You've a brain, so use it.* I turned on the gray matter. Since I couldn't turn off my wild emotions I turned them down. Of course the door wasn't set to automatic; people like privacy. I remembered Susie knocking on Corporal Geher's door just yesterday, so this was probably in the same state. I looked around for a control panel and located it near the door ? jamb", for lack of a better word, but less than a meter above the floor. That would make it an override in case of difficulty, which in turn meant the door was voice and/or proximity activated. Easy enough.

"Open, please, ? I said as quietly as I could. Too quietly, for the door stayed put. I tried again, a little louder, and this time I saw a shimmer ripple through it. It remained opaque, but an investigating hand passed through with no resistance. I followed my hand into the hall.

The corridor was brightly lit with several people moving along it. Suddenly self-conscious, I ducked my head a little bit, staring at the floor. Holding my clothes tight to my chest, and hugging the right wall, I went along the short distance to the ladies room. I received several looks, but they were always accompanied with a smile. By the time I had passed the third such person, I was smiling shyly back at them. Still, the bathroom door was a welcomed goal.

I passed inside. Billows of steam rolled toward me as the momentary breach in the doorway tugged at it. I started turning very red, and not from the heat, which felt glorious. I had gone from frying pan into the fire. I have no idea why I so shortsightedly thought it, but I had assumed the facilities would be empty. Stupid assumption, knowing this was the only such facility in the entire complex. There were no fewer

than ten women attending to their morning ablutions, laughing and talking animatedly amongst themselves. Three of them, in the showers, were engaged in a loud song. Doors had come just a bit too far technologically. There had been no warning nor even the hint of sound until I had passed through.

And now it was too late. Even as I wondered if I could sneak out and come back at a quieter time, eyes started turning toward me. Eyes that looked on me and knew me for who I was and, much more embarrassing, what I had been. My heart started pounding, and I felt fear rousing itself. It began to ... no. I forced it down. I took a quick step back, stumbled over my feet, and fell on my backside. My face burning, I snatched up my clothes from where they'd fallen and stood up. I mumbled some apology and turned to go.

Someone took a firm yet friendly hold of my arm.

"Hi! My name's Sarah Grominski. I'm a private in enforcement Company A."

I turned back and looked at the woman. Only she wasn't much more than a girl. A big girl. A very big girl. She couldn't have been over twenty, but she was well muscled, though not too bulky, and had a strong upper body, which was pretty obvious as she only had a towel wrapped loosely around her waist. Her face was strong and friendly, the features putting the stamp of authenticity on her ethnic surname. If ever I expected to see a cigar sticking out of a young lady's mouth, this would have been the one. But she was comely, too. To her I probably looked like a hothouse flower.

"Uh ... hi. My name's ... Abi ... Abigail.? I flushed at the sudden attention. Even the singers had stopped and were looking at me.

"Well, Abi ... Abigail, come on in!? She waved a strong yet feminine hand around at the others, all in various states of undress. ? We're kinda informal here."

I couldn't help but laugh, caught myself, raising a hand to my mouth, then slowly relaxed. Sarah grinned from ear to ear, icebreaker extraordinaire.

And after that, it was wonderfully, joyfully, fantastically easy. I disappeared in the group and was accepted. They all got back to their conversations and laughter and noise. Several walked up to introduce themselves and get my name, which, it dawned on me, they obviously couldn't have known before now.

"Just dump your stuff on the counter and grab a shower before the Birthday Suit Trio use up all the hot water.? Sarah's open, blunt friendliness was refreshing and just what I needed. Between their openness, the promise of a hot shower, and the racy song revving up in the background, this didn't just break the ice, it shattered and melted it as though in a blast furnace.

I took Sarah's advice and dumped my stuff on a not-soaking part of the counter. I undressed and walked into the showers. The girls singing the song were obviously building up to a climax, for their voices were reaching shouts. It was a bawdy, lewd, and flat out earthy song that left absolutely nothing to the imagination. As a kid years-centuries-ago, I had always wondered what went on inside girls' locker rooms. If this were a sampling, it wasn't much different than boys' locker rooms. As I rubbed the shampoo into my hair, working it through the tresses, I felt even more at ease. Sarah had taken the showerhead beside me and was singing the final refrain. At the last line, the whole place chimed in, and what they lacked in talent they covered with enthusiasm. They finished, laughing loudly. Sarah grinned at me, looking a little surprised at my surprise.

"Not what you'd expect, huh?"



"Uh ... no. Maybe a little more, um, reserved."

"Yeah, that's right, you're used to guys' rooms, aren't you?? She eyed me quickly and brazenly, ? Doesn't look like you'll be wandering in there anymore though, huh?? She laughed loudly, and several others gave a laugh as well.

I started stammering, and she guffawed. So help me, she guffawed. She slapped a soapy hand on my back, shattering three or four vertebrae.

"Well, maybe the research crowd's more your group. Company A's not too up on their manners. Right, ladies?? They proudly shouted their agreement. ? But we're a lot more refined than the guys."

I finished coughing and started rinsing out my hair. She was probably using the word refined in the petroleum sense. The Birthday Suit Trio started another song. If it wasn't clear that this simply was the way they were, I'd be suspicious they were trying to embarrass me. I shut off the water regretfully and padded to the counter.

On the other hand, maybe they were trying to embarrass me. As I toweled off, the Birthday Suit Trio sang their next song, one that gave a vivid account of a young girl's first ... um ... tryst. By the time they had finished this one, everyone was singing the song at me. I can take a joke, and I enjoyed this one, though it didn't keep my face from turning red at the colorful description of her exploits. But I preferred to dish it out. I searched back through my head looking for just the right response. They finished and laughed, seeing what I'd do.

I took a seat on the counter, my towel wrapped tight, and sang them the song of the Scotsman, and what he wore under his kilt. My heart was racing again, and my voice had nowhere near the depth or volume I was used to. But I gave it a pretty credible effort nonetheless.

By the time I reached the third verse, where the two girls were sneaking up on the drunk, sleeping Scotsman to peek under his kilt, they were enjoying themselves immensely, and joining in on the rum-tum-tiddle-iddle-ah-de-o refrain. By the fourth verse, where they leave a pretty blue ribbon tied around their discovery before leaving, my audience was howling, waiting for the ending. And the fifth verse, which ends with the Scotsman answering nature's call and finding the neatly tied ribbon, had them hooting when I reached the last line:

"Ah, lad, I don't know where ye been, but I see ye won first prize!"

I had to sing the ditty twice more before they'd let me finish dressing. By that time, they had memorized it and the group had started breaking up. Sarah lingered a bit, combing out my hair for me.

"You're all right, Abby! I figured you'd go nuts, getting messed up like this. ? She tugged my hair to show what she meant.

"I wondered, too, Sarah. At first. But it's growing on me."

"And you're growing on us, girl. Real quick. I missed the cafeteria stunt, but they told me all about it. And when you showed up here, I couldn't resist giving you the treatment. Hope you don't mind."

"Mind?? I said incredulously, ? Sarah, it was great! So many people were treating me like I was made of porcelain, I was about ready to scream. I liked it, but I needed something I could sink my teeth into. I guess it's the man in me."

"Nah. It ain't the man, Abby. You're all woman. It's you, man or woman, that's doing this. I've seen a buncha Cues, an' I'll kill for any of them, but so far, you're the most fun. We like that."

"We?"

"Yeah, enforcement. Each regiment, we're the Third, is divided into two main groups: Research and Enforcement. Research does the head work of finding Cues worth bringing back. By worth I mean, probably able to survive. They also do all the personal stuff with the Cues. Enforcement puts the bite into the outfit. We make the bio and punitive raids. And we work together, too. You're with Susie, ain't you? ? I nodded. ? Man, that gal is smart. But she can be wicked cold, too. A top notch dog.? At my look, she broke off. ? Yeah, well, let her tell you. But let me tell you, Abby, you're safe as can be when you're with Susie."

I stayed silent, thinking that over, while she finished my hair. By this time we were the only ones left of the original group, though several others had come in and out. I picked up my robe and other things and turned to Sarah.

"Thanks so much for the 'treatment', Sarah. I loved it."

"Hey, thanks to you, Abby! We learned a brand new song today. Just wait 'til the boys hear it.? She laughed at my blush. ? I'll tell the girls to keep it quiet about whose it is, if they can. Catch ya later, Abby. ? She pushed my shoulder affectionately, knocking me back a half step, and left, singing the last verse.

Now *that* was an experience I thought to myself as I strolled back to my room. It had an immediate and terrific effect, however. This time I smiled cheerfully at everyone walking by, saying hi and introducing myself. One of the soldiers, a young man with a smooth face, even looked after me as we passed. And while I wasn't even remotely tempted to swish my skirt, I wasn't put off by him either.

I reached my door and it was still solid, meaning Susie was still asleep or wanted privacy. I was sure I could enter, though. I cleared my throat and asked for entrance. It remained solid, so I raised my voice a bit and repeated my request. It still remained solid. I was about to really put some volume into it when it came to me. Anyone could exit a room, but only specific voices could enter a room. And since we hadn't had much time since the IHAD ... I ... HAD ... A surge of humiliation and ... I clenched my teeth and made it pass. Susie had not yet had the opportunity to code my voice. So here I stood, locked outside of my own room.

I had a choice. Pound on the door or go to breakfast. A very unladylike and insistently growling gut voted for breakfast. Figuring only laundry personnel or perverts would pick up dirty underwear, I left my things by the door and strolled down the corridor to the mess. Loud and boisterous noises poured from the opening.

It was comfortably full, but still had some seating. First things first, my vocal stomach reminded me. I got in line and, as always, was quickly whisked to the front. Two of the men even bowed slightly, smiling. I smiled back and did a little curtsy. I then put the tray on the counter and made a very big mental note to myself that I was going to have to watch myself. I didn't want to give the wrong ideas, but judging from the dazed smiles on their faces, I was in danger of doing just that.

Cookie, as I had mentally dubbed Hill the chef, was serving up chow and tried to coax me into taking a mountain of eggs and potatoes. I'd learned my lesson, though, and, smiling sweetly at him, took a modest amount of each. I filled a cup with coffee, then put it back, remembering my last taste. I considered the hot chocolate, but settled with just juice.

I looked around for a place to sit and heard a shout. Turning, I saw Dr. Barrett waving at me, pointing to an empty seat opposite him. I walked over, and he stood while I seated myself. After I said my prayers, he nodded approvingly at my breakfast.

"Good. It's nice to see you eating. Though I'm a little surprised to see you up so early. Just a little.? He looked around. ? Where's Corporal Lendler?"

"Sleeping. She was exhausted. I gave her quite a time last night, and I have a feeling she had stayed up the whole time, waiting for me to wake up from ... from...? I stared off, feeling the ... feeling the...

"Snap out of it, girl!"

I shook my head, and smiled weakly, wiping my sweaty palms against my skirt. ? Sorry, Doctor. It's just that every time ... every time..."

"Young lady!?" He snapped, his voice barely raised. He waited until I met his gaze. ? Don't worry. The aftereffects are unpleasant, and they do linger for several days, but they will pass. Just try to avoid thinking too much of ... it."

I nodded. ? I had noticed that, too. That's why it was so wonderful taking a shower with Company A. I didn't think I'd live at first, but ... what's wrong, Doctor?"

He had set his coffee cup down sharply, clattering it on the table. ? You showered with the Company A ladies?? he demanded. I nodded again. ? So you were treated to the Birthday Suit Trio?? I smiled. ? I've never heard them, no man has to my knowledge, unless we count you. But I've heard of them.? He peered at me. ? Are they as wicked as rumors say?"

I giggled and shoved some eggs into my mouth. ? I've never heard the rumors. And since this seems to be a girl thing, I'll keep the rest to myself. Oh, and Doctor?? he looked up at my pointed tone. ? Never count me as a man again."

He looked at me thoughtfully. ? You'll do, girl. You'll do. I have never seen your like, and part of me never hopes to again. You're blowing all our past experiences with Cues right out of the system."

I shrugged. ? I don't know about that, either. But I'm determined to make the best of this.? I stopped. ? That's not right. I'm not making the best of this. I'm enjoying who and what I am.? I smiled at him. ? I have you to thank, Doctor. Again."

There probably wasn't a whole lot that could make this man blush, and I wasn't one of them. But he came close.

"You're welcome, young lady."

"Abigail."

"Susie gave you your name, then? Against tradition; she should have done it at the acceptance dinner. Still, it's probably for the best. Abigail. Abigail.? He tried it out once or twice. ? Yes, very good.? He looked at me. ? You know, you look like an Abigail. And you look like you're wearing your name well."

"Thank you. That's because I am. Um, Doctor? Could you answer a few questions?"

"Certainly! When would you like to schedule an appointment? As I mentioned, I'm at your complete..."

"No, no,? I interrupted. ? Not medical. Nor personal. Just fill-me-in type questions. I feel like I'm walking around in a vacuum."

"I can imagine,? he agreed grimly. ? And I can also imagine it's a little frustrating, especially for the kind of person you are. All right, what do you want to know?"

"Going back to our conversation of three days ago. When I was still in Healer's Sleep. You had mentioned that while there was no legal recourse against me for being an illegal Cue, there was something I needed to worry about. What was that?"

"You've a very good memory, dear. I'll tell you. But first, I've a little shock for you. It wasn't three days ago, it was five. You've been out not half a day, but two and half."

"What?? I barely whispered.

"That's right. Two and a half days. Sixty hours. The longest by far. Susie will tell you why. She may even be able to justify it. I can't, so don't ask.

"Anyway, to answer your question. It's true, there is no legal recourse that anyone can take to reclaim a rescued ripe. While the process is illegal, and dangerous for all concerned, society has retained enough of its common sense to not seek redress against the innocent and unknowing ripe.

"Where society is sadly lacking in common sense, and decency, however, is in how it treats Cues in all other matters. The problem you have, Abigail, is that as a Cue, you have no legal status. None whatsoever."

"Meaning what, Doctor? I'm above the law? That doesn't make sense."

"Not above it. Outside it. You cannot commit a crime. You are not held accountable for anything you do."

"What? You're saying I could rob a bank and just walk off, scot-free?"

"A bank?"

"Yes. A depository of liquid assets."

"Ah. A physical location of hard collateral. Yes, I've heard of the concept, but I've never heard the word used in that context. 'Bank'. I'll need to remember that. Anyway, yes, it's true. But your legal status works both ways. Anyone could rob you, and not be held accountable. They could kill you, or far worse, and not be held accountable."

I wondered for a moment what could be worse than killing me. Then I thought of the interested looks of the two men in line, and I realized those things did exist. I shook my head, disbelieving.

"That makes no sense! What's the point of bringing back Cues if they are outside the law, open prey to anyone's whims?"

"That is the point, my dear. The ruling body, with a heavy interest in the continuation of ripes, could not bring action against Cues without badly damaging their own power base. So they took the matter to the extreme and chose not to bring any action, either for or against Cues. It is used as a deterrent for groups like ours. They hope to discourage us by offering a society not only hostile to Cues, but able to actually prey upon them."

"But it hasn't discouraged you."

"Of course it hasn't! We're not some group of idiots that thought it might be fun to do this for a while. We're all under what amounts to a death penalty if caught. And we haven't been doing this for a few years; we've been at it for nearly two centuries in one form or another. As a result, we have many ways of introducing a young man or young woman such as yourself into society as a citizen, not a Cue."

It became clear. I nodded. ? Of course! That's another reason for the age of the body! Like Susie hinted, I'm under legal age. In my time, that also meant that there were very few permanent records. I should imagine it would be easier to blend me into your society at this age than most other. Old enough to understand and adjust, yet still too young to matter from a legal standpoint."

"Excellent! I'm impressed! That's it exactly. Several months from now, we'll ease you into a surrogate family. At first, you'll be a friend who visits. Then over several more months, you'll be spoken about as a relative. Finally, we'll use our network of companies to ? transfer? the father or mother to other employment on a different continent. At that point, you'll be introduced as the daughter, and you'll continue living with them until you either marry or reach legal age, which is twenty-five, by the way."

"I very much doubt I'll ever marry, Doctor. It just wouldn't be right."

He shrugged. ? I can certainly understand your point of view, if not fully appreciate it. Still, time might change your mind. It would also make things easier for all concerned. Marriage is very highly regarded in our society, and your marriage to a young man of actual citizenship would also cement your own status. But I'm most definitely not going to council marriage for status.

"In any event, during this entire process, we'll be carefully introducing facts about you into the main data pools. Not actual proof, mind you. That can be too easily detected. We'll put in threads; indicators that you are an actual citizen. Then, in a year or so, there will be an accident at one of the data pools and the lost information will need to be rebuilt by the government. It will find these indicators and 'rebuild' your birth, school and medical records, and suddenly, you'll have a firm identity."

I whistled. ? It's my turn to be impressed. Very slick. You've made me feel a lot better, Doctor. Thank you. Looks like I'll have to sacrifice my name, though."

"Sorry, but yes, that's so. Abigail you keep. I'm afraid the Wyeth name will fade back into the oblivion we pulled it from."

I laughed. ? You're waxing philosophic, Doctor. Oh well. It was a good name, and I shall miss it. But I've done without it for some wee bit already. I can't carry on the family name any longer anyway. So in the meantime, I stay here and do what? Laundry for four months?"

"Well, yes, at first. We'll get you out of that if we can find another, more skilled position, that you're qualified for. I rather expect we will, despite the significant gap. But we will find work for you to do."

"Suits me fine! I'm not going to keep my girlish figure if I just sit around and eat three meals a day. So it's the salt mines for me."

"That and training and orientation into your new world. When you are woven into our society's fabric, you'd be better off blending in smoothly. That's Susan's job for the next twelve to sixteen weeks."

"Somebody talking about me?? Susie walked up to our table, breakfast in hand. I turned and smiled at her. Dr. Barrett rose. I found it pleasantly surprising that the custom had returned. I nearly stood as well, then caught myself. It was men who did it for women.

"Yes, we were, Corporal. I was just about to tell Abigail how the next few months with you were going to be boring and painfully full of exercise."

"Now Doctor, that's not fair. I thought the medical profession approved of exercise."

"The medical profession approves of moderate exercise. Not aerobics and combat training that lead to dislocated shoulders, yours or the poor sap you're training."

"Just wait until your next session, Doc.?" She laughed and sat next to me. "I see you've had your breakfast, Abigail. I also saw your things outside our door, so I suppose you've already cleaned up. You've been busy."

"Yes. I wanted to let you sleep. You looked exhausted. So I took care of myself for a change. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all. About time you started carrying your own weight. I'll still help out, though.?" She munched on a roll. "So any problems?"

"Quite the opposite. I had a wonderful time with the A Company ladies."

She laughed again. "Which one was it? The A Company or the ladies?"

"They were very nice. Especially Sarah."

She looked at me, amazed. "Sarah Grominski was nice to you? I shouldn't be too surprised. Everyone seems to be. Score one for you, Abigail. You make it with Sarah, you make it with A company. Even the guys follow her lead."

"I'm surprised she's only a private, then."

"She's a private this week. By next week, she'll probably be a corporal. Again. Rank is important here, but the person in the uniform is more important."

"That's been my experience also. In my Company A of ancient times, rank was very relative. I told Sanchez-"

"Lieutenant Sanchez,?" Susie corrected.

"Sorry. I told Lieutenant Sanchez that I was a corporal. That wasn't the truth. I didn't want to embarrass him, but I actually held a commission."

"Of major. Yes, we know that. You did seem to have a gift for advancement. From enlisted to major in four years is a rare accomplishment. Even for battlefield commissions."

I stared at Susie carefully, who looked right back at me. "Abigail, it was a long, long session we had. Never forget that we *know* you now. It's important for you to know we know."

I nodded slowly, then got up to get some hot chocolate and compose my thoughts and myself. My life, then, had been laid open. It didn't seem possible, but there it was. I wondered if my military and NATEch training against probing had proven of any value whatsoever. Probably not. I did take some consolation, however, despite the ... despite ... the ... I clutched my stomach momentarily, working the knot loose. I did take some consolation. These were good people. Circumstances dictated that they also be hard, but they were above all good. And if I was still alive, I had their approval, conditional or otherwise.

I returned to the table, smiling. Seating myself next to Susie again, I pursued our conversation.

"So what else did you find out about me?"

"Er ... if you'll excuse me, ladies? I have some routine checkups to conduct in about twenty minutes.?" He stood with his tray. "If you need any more help, Abigail, medical or otherwise, please stop by.?" With that he left. I watched him as he dropped off his tray, mounted the ramp, and disappeared down the corridor.

"Not too smart, Abigail."

"Huh?? I turned back to Susie. ? How do you mean? Wasn't he involved with..."

"No, he wasn't,? she interrupted, probably to prevent a flashback. ? Doctor Barrett vehemently disapproves of the IHAD. He hasn't attended or administered one for years."

"Oh. I should apologize. I didn't mean to hurt his feelings."

"Didn't mean to-? She stared at me. ? You can be a ditz! He was much more concerned about your feelings than his. Results from IHADs aren't plastered all over the walls, or broadcast on the netly news.

*WE ARE CURRENTLY RUNNING OVER 4,513 BROADCASTS IN 384 LANGUAGES FROM 6 DIFFERENT PLANETS AND SPACE STATIONS. PLEASE STATE YOUR PREFERENCE. SEARCHING ... YES, CITIZEN, I AM HAPPY TO OFFER YOU 17 CURRENTLY RUNNING FINANCIAL STATUS REPORTS IN JAPANESE ... YES, CITIZEN, I AM HAPPY TO OFFER YOU 145 CURRENTLY RUNNING JOHN WAYNE MOVIES IN 93 DIFFERENT LANGUAGES ... YES, CITIZEN, I AM HAPPY TO OFFER YOU 61 CURRENTLY RUNNING LAUNCHING SCHEDULES IN ENGLISH, 46 INTERSTELLAR LAUNCH SCHEDULES AND 15 LOCAL ... YES, CITIZEN, I AM HAPPY TO OFFER YOU 3 CURRENTLY RUNNING PROGRAMS INVOLVING 12TH CENTURY RELIGIOUS DEBATES, ONE ON HINDUISM AND TWO ON CHRISTIANITY ... YES, CITIZEN, I AM*

...Abigail? Hey! Abigail! Snap out of it!"

"Huh? Snap out of what?? Susie had me by the arms and was shaking me gently. ? What's wrong? I'm fine."

"You blanked out on me for a few seconds."

"Sorry. That I ... H ... I ... interrogation has left a pretty uncomfortable mark."

She sighed. ? I know. I can't tell you how desperately sorry we are. And I'm sorry I was shaking you. All Cues go through this for several days. Never this profound, though. Again, our fault. We kept you under way too long."

"Doctor Barrett had mentioned it was some sixty hours."

"Closer to forty-eight. But there was an additional twelve hours recovery time."

"He also mentioned the effects would wear off."

"And they will, too. I fear, however, they may be a little slower with you. Maybe we should stop by and see Doctor Barrett. Let him check you out."

"Uh, if it's just the same with you, Susie, I'd rather not. I've been jumping in and out of my clothes so much in the last few days, I'm thinking I should start charging people. ? I laughed and polished off my cup of cocoa and pulled her to her feet. ? C'mon! Let's hit the gym! I'm aching to get a workout!"

She seemed very happy with that, and we left the mess and headed back to our quarters to put on some sweats.

\* \* \* \*

The gym, at the far end of the complex, was well outfitted and well used. Either because of Susie's

reputation or my presence, we were able to get a section of mat fairly quickly. We started out with our stretching.

I was positively stunned at my flexibility! I stretched and bent in ways that I'd never even considered before. Even something as simple as the splits, standard exercise in any girl's workout, seemed incredible to me as I reached all the way to the floor. I stretched on the mat, legs pointing away from each other, face and hair on the floor, and thrilled at the feeling. Susie was just as excited.

"Good! That's wonderful, Abigail! You're in nice shape. Now let's try a little of this." She brought one of my feet around and showed me how to place it flat along the back of my head. I felt as loose as cooked spaghetti. We continued for about ten minutes, then she helped me to my feet. I was flushed.

"Oh! That feels so good, Susie!?" I was breathing hard, more from the delight of being so alive than the exertion. "What next?"

"Let's check your balance and coordination on the bars."

We walked over to a set of parallel bars, which were being used by a trio of women, who immediately surrendered them. I thanked them, and they hung around to watch.

I faced the higher bar and reached up. It was close to a meter beyond my outstretched fingertips. I jumped up and nearly touched it. I landed, trying to adjust for my different body weight and balance, and made a terrible botch of it. Susie put her hand down and boosted me to my feet. I smiled shyly.

"I suppose I have to think about how to land a little more."

"Wrong, Abigail. You've got to think less. Just let yourself be what you are."

"But my mind is still grappling with all the height differences!?" I protested. "And things are heavier..."

"Yes. That's true. But remember the night you almost escaped? Didn't you say you looked in the mirror?" I nodded. "And why didn't you realize then that you were a girl? Or even when you first woke up and looked at yourself?"

"I ... I don't really know. It didn't seem necessary. It was like..."

"It was like you already knew, down inside, what you were. And that's exactly what it is. I'm sure it's no surprise to you that our minds work at many levels. Some we have control over. Others, we can exert control if we wish, but don't need to."

"Sure. Voluntary and involuntary responses. Walking is voluntary, breathing is involuntary."

"Yes. But there are many other layers to each of those two generalities, Abigail. It's our life to understand the mind as thoroughly as we can, to better bring back ripes.

"One of those layers is physical self-perception. When we transferred your mind into your body, we didn't move the brain. It's been dust for centuries. You've been thinking of your brain as part of your mind, which is wrong. You've got to think of your brain as part of your body, which it is. With physical self-perception, it is mainly how your brain and body perceive each other. Your mind is reactionary. That's why you didn't realize your femininity at the outset: Your brain and body had always been female, and your mind simply followed your brain's lead."

"Then it would be the same with physical activity. Just accept what the rest of me has always known. I get it!"



Susie smiled. ? It's not so much a matter of 'getting it' as just letting it. Now, let's try again. You jump for it, and if you miss, just land the way you'd expect to land."

I tried again and again I couldn't quite make it. But when I fell, I just got ready to land on my feet, and I did. Susie clapped and stepped up, this time lifting me effortlessly to the bar.

I'm no gymnast, so I didn't steal the show. A couple of pull ups, a few pull overs and some swinging was my entire routine. I dropped back down, a little tired but happy. The others applauded. I threw my arms back and gave a little bow.

Susie was happy, too. ? Not bad for a first time!? She began rubbing my arms and shoulders. ? How do you feel?"

"Great! A little achy, I suppose, but not much. What next?"

She laughed. ? You do want to try a little of everything. All right, how about a little martial arts. You sounded like you were quite good."

I looked down, suddenly less than happy. ? That was a long time ago. I don't mean six hundred years, either. I was a very different kind of person in the military, and not someone you'd really want to know."

"I already know what kind of person you were. You sounded like you were a dog. Lieutenant Sanchez did have you pegged right. ? She shook her head in mock amazement. ? Even Raul can be right on occasion."

"Susan, he was only partially right. ? She looked sharply at my use of her formal name and the insistence in my voice. ? And that IHAD! ... IHAD probably wouldn't have revealed all that much more."

"Don't underestimate our procedures. Come, let's have a tussle. I'll warn you, though, I'm rough. ? She assumed standard attack posture.

Space magically cleared for us, and we drew a crowd simultaneously. I backed up, holding my hands out.

"NO! Susie! Don't! I don't want to do this!"

She approached silently. I backed up further.

"Susie, I'm serious! This isn't like the showers a few days ago!"

"This is exactly like the showers. It's part of the healing. Part of the way you become you. Come on, Abigail! Defend yourself!? She made a quick kick, which I sidestepped. She tried several more times, and I dodged them, avoiding physical contact. I was scared. For her.

"Susie! NO!"

"Defend yourself!? she yelled a third time. And then I was flat on my back, head ringing. She had used a double attack with a single feint and had landed a foot on my neck.

I stared up from the floor at Susie. She had taken an aggressive position I recognized immediately. Her smile was gone, replaced with grim determination. There was no humor in her eyes. I felt a twinge of fear. Again, fear for her.

Shakily, I got to my feet and brushed myself. ? Uh, if you don't mind, let me start off a little less ... ooooofff!? Her arm slipped around my gut, doubling me. She brought a fast moving foot through mine

and down I went.

Without thinking, I rolled clear but remained on my hands and knees, crouching. Others had gathered around watching. I felt a touch on my shoulder and looked up into the eyes of a young man, sweaty from his workout.

"Listen. When Lendler's like that, you better take it seriously. She hurts people."

"Uh, thanks, uh..."

"Billy. Private Billy Henderson."

"Thanks, Billy. I'm Abigail."

"Hi, Abigail. No kidding, though. You're in for it. Don't try to talk yourself out of it. Just try to live through it."

"But I'm not sure..."

"MOVE!"

I rolled clear of her slashing kick, but couldn't quite dodge her chopping right hand. I felt a burning sensation on my cheek as I again rolled clear. I felt the old flavor wake up in me and knew I had to stop it quick.

"Look, Susie! Not yet! I don't know if I can control ... Aaahh!? She closed quickly, unbelievably quickly. I spotted her technique this time, and blocked her side chop while skipping over her swaying leg. I meant to bring my weight to bear on her anchor leg, but her side chop crushed my feeble strength and floored me. I landed hard. I let out a cry and then another as her foot caught me in the upper chest, giving me my first experience at female anatomy pain. Not as bad as male anatomy pain, but not pleasant, either. I landed back near Billy. I tried to rise, but he held me down.

"Just stay down, Abigail! Lendler's a little softer if you stay down. Believe me, I know."

"Thanks, Billy. But that's not how the game is played.? It was rising in me, and while part of me wanted to push it away, the rest welcomed it. ? How old are you?"

"I'll be nineteen in May."

"Eighteen, huh? Still school age. All right, let me conduct today's class.? I raised my voice a little, ? Get ready to intervene at a moment's notice, okay?? They nodded, probably thinking they'd have to intervene to stop me from bleeding to death. Me, I had different plans.

I stood up. I was helpless now to the beast and let it rouse itself. The beast was why I fought in Recon so long ago. Almost an alter ego, when it woke up, I stopped being John, now Abigail, Wyeth. My men had seen it many times, because I had to call on it frequently during the desert and mountain campaigns of the Kilimanjaro offensive of the Twenty-first Century war. It was a remoteness that took me. Everything else was a situation to be dealt with as quickly and brutally as possible. I didn't fight to win, I fought to survive. I hoped, I prayed, I wouldn't hurt Susie badly. But I knew I'd try to kill her.

It growled at me, demanding the situation. I coolly told it my assets and limitations. I glanced at my enemy and located her strengths and weakness. The beast selected my best attack for disabling prior to killing. I slapped my hands together, then went down to a crouch, my hands evenly splitting my body weight with my legs.

Susie came at me again. Her slicing left foot was aimed at my head, but I could tell it was a feint, that it would be her anchor foot, planted near my left hand, in about one second, and that the real attack was her trailing right leg, which would bury itself in my chest, a weak attack unless she wore a hardened boot. The counterattack for my weight was obvious and clear. And far more effective.

I crouched further, as if to dodge her left foot. It planted at my left hand and I spun myself to the left, chopping my right hand into her plant, knocking it into her swinging right leg. She fell into a heap and I pounced on her in a second. With cold efficiency, I shot two stiff fingers down to gouge out her eye. She was able to block it, but I managed to break one of her fingers. I felt nothing, nor did I even recognize her. I saw the look of anger in her eyes, and the sheen of pain as the bone snapped.

She made to throw me off. But I was already vaulting free, which made her movement clumsy and ill-timed. She regained her center and twirled around quickly, but I had already anticipated that and put a foot to her head. Had I been my original size, it would have snapped her neck, killing her. But I still hadn't adjusted fully, so it only grazed her head, bloodying an ear. I looked at her eyes again and saw the anger, and the pain. And now I saw fear, and knew I had won. All that remained was to kill her. I had made the proper adjustments to my weight and had decided first to shatter her right kneecap, then crush her windpipe in the few seconds she would be debilitated by the pain. I went to my attack crouch, anticipating her defense, which she took.

"ENOUGH!? I heard Lt. Sanchez's voice cut through my coldness, striking a chord in my heart. I recognized him as an authority. I struggled with the beast and myself, trying to force an end. I prayed Susie made no attack. I could still kill her.

But it was over. I saw her relax, dropping her hands and leaving herself defenseless. It was a sight that settled me very quickly. I felt my own muscles ease and slacken. I sank entirely to my knees and covered my face with my hands. Hot tears came to the surface, and I was crying. I could have killed her.

Susie came to me, also crying. I pushed her away, angry.

"You idiot! I was going to *kill* you! Why did you do it? Why?"

"Because she was told to, young lady.? Lt. Sanchez stepped up to me, but made no effort to help me to my feet. He looked down at us. ? Susan. I want both of you cleaned up and in my quarters in half an hour.? He turned on his heel and walked off.

## **Chapter Eight**

It was a very quiet thirty minutes. We went to sickbay to have our wounds attended to. Dr. Barrett didn't say much, which was just as well. The cut on Susie's ear required a couple of stitches, but stitches were gone forever in medicine. Instead of sewing up the still bleeding wound, Dr. Barrett used a type of instrument that both stopped the bleeding and half-completed the healing. Like the inducer, it was based on sound. He used a similar, but more powerful tool on her broken middle fingers; apparently my hit had snapped two bones, not one. Again, it speeded up the healing process enough that she experimentally flexed her finger with little pain after only several minutes of treatment.

The doctor checked me for broken ribs, but found only some bruising. It was slightly painful to breathe, hardly worth noting. I mention it only because after a dose of the sounder, as he called it, I felt no pain at all. I had an idea now why Susie played so rough; all you needed to do was survive, and modern medicine could patch you up pretty quick. The problem Susie had was she hadn't known she was going

to survive. I'd been worried about that, too. I wanted to say something, anything, to get her talking, even looking at me again. But I held off, knowing now that she'd been under orders to provoke me. Why, I didn't yet know. That would be changing soon, if I guessed right.

We cleaned up and reported to Lt. Sanchez's room just as the half-hour passed. Susie had stayed silent, avoiding my attempts to get her attention. I felt awful at first. Then I was angry, because she was the one who brought this on. Then I felt smug ... oh, I must have gone through a half-dozen different emotions in that thirty minutes, all of them intense and unshakable, until the next one washed over me. I was a very confused girl. Which probably made me normal, I thought glumly. Life, I decided, had been a great deal more straightforward as a guy.

Susie knocked on Lt. Sanchez's door, and he told us to enter. It was similar to Dr. Barrett's office in that it was a combination office and living quarters. He was seated at his desk as we entered. There were two chairs for us to sit in, but when Susie stayed at attention, I figured I should, too.

He went straight to the point.

"Recommendation, Counselor."

Susie snapped even more rigidly to attention and spoke very precisely. ? As of this day, November 16, 2676, as counselor of Rescued Ripe 1845, John Wyeth, I recommend and urge continuation. Her new name is Abigail Wyeth."

My ears perked at the sound of my old name, and I looked at her. She kept staring straight ahead, but I saw the corners of her lips curl up a little. Lt. Sanchez noticed it, too.

"That pleases you, Susan?? She relaxed from her attention when he used her first name.

"Of course it does, sir! Any time a counselor can recommend..."

"...the continuation of a Cue,? he finished, a trifle impatiently. ? Yes, yes. But you've really put more into-Abigail, is it?-you've put more into her than any other Cue, haven't you?"

"Well, she's unique. And fun. And..."

"Uh, hey, people!? I broke in. ? I may be unique and fun, but I'm also standing right here. And I'm a little confused, so could we cut to the chase? What's continuation mean? And what was reason for that fight? And why all the-? Sanchez held up a hand.

"I'm sorry, Abigail. We shouldn't talk around you. Let's take care of that now.? He looked at Susie. ? You're absolutely sure, Susan?? She nodded, openly smiling now. Her whole manner seemed a total reverse from only ten minutes ago. That I was out of my depth would be an understatement. I wasn't in over my head, I was on the ocean floor, tied down with weights and sinking deeper. Sanchez nodded.

"All right. Abigail, come here, please.? He stood up as I stepped around the desk. I did it only because I had no idea what else to do.

"Attention!?" he barked, and I suddenly became rigid. His authority and ability to command were incredible. ? As commander of this, the Third Regiment of the Resistance, I hereby confer onto you the rank of private, second class. Welcome aboard, and may God have mercy on your soul.? He tapped me twice on my right shoulder.

I'm not sure what he was expecting me to do or say. I thought about this sudden turn for a few moments, then said, ? Uhh ... Don't I have a say in this?"

"You will address me as Lieutenant, Lieutenant Sanchez, or sir. And no, Private, you don't. Now that you're going to be with us for at least the next three months, you are under the same conditions, dangers and restrictions as every other man and woman under my command. If you have to share in our troubles, you may as well share in the authority and benefits. We don't have civilians travel with us, so for the duration of your stay, you're a private. What class is up to you."

That made eminent sense. I snapped to attention and said, "Yes, sir!"

He smiled. "Very good. Now, Abigail, let me show you the reason for everything we've done for you, with you, and to you. It's time you saw the puterverse." He swung his chair over to the computer terminal and offered it to me. Hesitantly, I sat down and examined the terminal. It looked almost like the ones of six centuries ago, except that the viewing surface hung flat against the wall, perhaps thirty centimeters square and no thicker than a sheet of onionskin. It was dark. The keyboard had a nearly identical layout as the now ancient QWERTY keyboard, but it also was paper-thin and seemed to be part of the shelf in front of me. I had to admit to a certain disappointment. I would have thought computer interfaces would have come further than this by now. Maybe the Spartan environment and frequent moves pushed this more prosaic type of access onto them. Still, you'd think that...

Lt. Sanchez leaned forward and said, "Access."

And the world disappeared. The thin film monitor quivered and suddenly exploded, coating the walls, the ceiling and floor, even the air, with its version of reality. Sound came from everywhere, yet it wasn't noise. Glowing, human-shaped forms were standing near me. One turned and looked at me. I yelped, jumping from my chair, and the whole thing collapsed and I was suddenly in the room again. I looked quickly at Sanchez and Susie, who seemed to be enjoying my disorientation. I smiled weakly and sat back down, sliding back into the wild reality. Sanchez leaned close to my ear.

"Computer, standard viewing area. Nothing happened from my point of view. There. Now we're all in here. Normally, the entire room is accessed. I preset the level and viewing area before you and Corporal Lendler arrived, to give you a place to run to, should the puterverse be too overwhelming. Unlikely in your case, to be sure. But the puterverse can have an unpredictable effect on Cues brought forward to our time. But enough of that! I'm sure you would like to go exploring, which you can as soon as I create your puterverse identity and access level. Computer! Puterverse authorization initiate for Abigail Wyeth."

"Certainly," a pleasant male voice said, a small echo trailing. "Please initiate voice verification at your convenience." Sanchez nudged me.

"Voice print verify. Wyeth, Abigail. I very nearly slipped and gave out my old authorization code. I knew it would be worthless, though. Even if it still existed after six centuries-a near impossibility-my voice would no longer match.

"Acknowledged. Authorizing user please state level of access."

"Access level for Wyeth, Abigail is set to three limited four," Sanchez said.

"Access level for Wyeth, Abigail is set to three limited four," the computer repeated. "Tethers are engaged."

He clapped me on the shoulder. "The puterverse is waiting, young lady! Feel free to roam where you wish. Unauthorized areas are represented by closed doors like this one." He pointed to a solid expanse of deep blue that had a man-sized red rectangle embedded in it. The red section pulsated slowly. He indicated another such door to our right about thirty meters away. It pulsed green. "Green doors will

give you access. And see these large black walls? You can neither access nor breach them, since they represent your current level restriction."

"This is incredible!? I gasped. I looked at myself. My body had become a pale yellow form of energy. I had a basic female form-my own female form-but wore no clothing. But neither was I naked. I looked over at Susie. She had a similar glow, but it was tinged with orange. She saw me staring and laughed. Her laugh was audible, but also made me think of warm marshmallows. It was as though I experienced her laugh with all my senses.

"This takes a little time to get used to, Abigail,? she cautioned me. ? So go easy."

"How do I move around?? I asked breathlessly, turning toward Lt. Sanchez. He was a glowing, deep blue form, without specific features, yet somehow still looking like himself.

"Access to the puterverse is an almost entirely cognitive activity. Here, stand up.? He helped me up from my chair. It disappeared into the ground with a mesmerizing melting action. ? You're now standing in the puterverse. In my office, though, we're all in the same position we accessed at: you in my chair, Susan and I standing behind you. Here, though, our puterverse bodies move freely to our mental wishes.

"I understand!? I said excitedly. ? Then queries and data access are done entirely with a physical metaphor, correct?"

"Yes. Very good."

"Not really. Just common sense. Can I explore?"

"Certainly. That's why you're on, Abigail. You have the control. Susan and I are along for your benefit."

For the next half hour, I was like a kid in a candy shop. I poked into dozens of things, learning quickly the quirks and protocols of performing queries and moving vast distances with tonal inflection. Doors and access points were everywhere, some in the sides of large mounds, others just standing by themselves. You could see on either side of the door, but stepping through took you to an entirely new area. It was fantastic. The only annoying thing was the constant appearance of those huge black walls. Just as something became particularly interesting, a stupid wall would pop up. The red doors were nearly as frustrating.

But the most exhilarating thing about it was the feel. Not the sensation. The flavor. This was Chris' work, all right! Oh, he'd never taken it to this level of sophistication, at least, not when I knew him, but it had his stamp on it. One of the last things I'd done at NATech was listen to his progress report on accessing a computer via a mental link. He must have hit on the right answer, because that's exactly what we were doing. It was nice to see our work had such long reaching implications.

In the back of my head, a thought came up. I knew most of Chris' backdoor access codes. Backdoor access codes are passwords inserted by the programmer to allow him admittance to the system at any time. Since the codes are never reported, and nearly impossible to root out, the passwords had an unlimited and unregulated life span. I wondered if during the ... I let the thought die, not wishing to trigger another attack. But those codes were something worth considering.

I was approaching a large lake with an ice blue shimmer. At least, I thought it was a lake. Upon reaching the shore, however, I noticed there was a constant right to left flow, which made it a river. I stared into the water. The current seemed very quick on top, slower on the bottom. Slivers of glittering gold shot downstream while lines of silver worked upstream. I felt a coolness rising from the surface, though there was no wind. It was indescribably beautiful. It seemed to draw me in, over the railing that bordered it.

"This is the main data stream, isn't it?? I asked breathlessly. I was so taken with it, I needed to say it twice to be heard.

"Yes, it is," Susie replied. She sounded surprised that I knew. "It's called the Quantum Data River. Every instruction of every access passes through this primary channel."

Sanchez and Susie exchanged looks. I didn't know if I was intended to see their furtive glance, but I did. Sanchez leaned down. "How did you know that, Abigail?"

They were testing me. "Lieutenant, please don't treat me like a little child." I paused for a second. "Well, not all the time, anyway. My guess is you probably know all about my connection with Chris Young."

Susie laid a hand on my shoulder. I thrilled at her once again soft touch. Much better than getting belted by her.

"Raul's playing the man's game of getting what he wants, Abigail." He shot her a cool look, which she ignored. "Yes, we know. Both from our talk that morning and from your IHAD. What we don't know is how well you know his system. This is the major reason why we've been treating you unfairly at times.

"The puterverse has been around, in one form or another, for hundreds of years. We've expanded and developed it during that time, studying, modifying and trying to fully comprehend it. And while we know it was Young who created it with his webbing techniques, we've never been able to get to the how of it. Young lived before there was riping, so there was no chance of finding out first hand about the puterverse's creator.

"Or so we thought. Then we cued you. You can't imagine the surprise we had when we found out that not only did the two technologies exist about the same time, but that Chris Young had actually worked for you."

She pointed to the far side of the data stream. "Can you see the other shore?"

I peered, but couldn't see anything at first. I called for a stand and the view shifted us up about ten meters into the air. There seemed to be a soft glow.

"There's a slight glimmer, but I can't tell if it's on the far shore. What's over there?"

"We don't know," Susie said. "There's no access. Nobody has been able to go there. At least, not for the past three hundred years, if ever. We think there's a vast amount of restricted information that is being withheld from the world."

"That's not necessarily a bad thing," I pointed out. "The public's need to know has to be balanced against society's safety and an individual's privacy. Telling everyone how to make an atom bomb may not be a good thing. Telling everyone my credit card numbers is definitely not a good thing."

"Credit card numbers?? Sanchez inquired.

"Never mind. The point is, there are a great many things that the world is better off not knowing, or has no right to know in the first place."

"True enough, Abigail," Susie conceded. "We won't press it. But if it turns out that we do need that information, you may end up being the key."

"You said that my connection to Chris was a major part of my status," I commented, changing the

subject. ? What was the other?"

Susie smiled, knowing what I was trying to do, but allowing it. ? It's probably better that we show you. Now I'm going to play a little game. It's called stirring up your female curiosity. Computer!? Her voice raised. ? Access, Susan Lendler. Level five."

Suddenly, the whole place became brighter. The black wall to my left melted away, exposing another one far off in the distance. I turned around, and at least a dozen doors that had been red were now pulsing green, and many other doors appeared. Several platforms raised up from the ground, showing large displays.

"We're now at level five,? Susie began explaining. ? I can go..."

"How many levels are there?? I asked excitedly, running to several of the nearby doors and looking in. This puterverse was stunning.

"There are sixty-four, but..."

"How high can we go?? I couldn't contain my eagerness, and didn't try. I ran up the steps of the nearest platform and looked out over the landscape. Though not as populated as level three, there were still many other people sharing this area. ? Does the access increase steadily, or geometrically?"

"Geometrically. But you can't just..."

"Then why don't we go higher? Say level fifteen? Or twenty?? My fingers flew over the access panel on the platform display, teasing colors and images from it. I was giddy with a sense of adventure and...

"Private Wyeth!? Lieutenant Sanchez barked.

I jerked to a stop and snapped to attention, my body and training overriding and bringing to earth my emotions and mind. If he'd grabbed a two by four and popped me one in the face the effect would have been the same. He walked over to me and inspected me as though I was something unpleasant he'd just run over.

"Are you always so disrespectful of your friends and commanding officer?"

I flushed with shame, only now realizing my rude behavior, and at a loss to understand it. ? No, sir! I'm ... I'm sorry. I was just so overwhelmed..."

"I didn't ask for an explanation, Private. I asked for an answer."

"Yes, sir! That's to say, no, sir. I'm sorry, sir."

He stooped slightly and stared me in the eye. ? Then perhaps you would be so kind as to show more restraint.? He paused and summed up the entire episode with, ? Young lady."

Of course. That was it. I'd become so engrossed with my surroundings that I'd let down my self-discipline. In just the few days I'd been my new self I found it more and more difficult to keep myself in check emotionally, and my maturity was wearing thin in more than a few places. It wasn't a losing battle; it was a lost war. At least one nice thing about this loss of maturity was that I wasn't too worried about it.

"Yes, sir,? I replied, somewhat subdued but not much.

He contemplated me for a few seconds longer, then nodded.



"Very well.? He turned to Susie and smiled slightly. ? You may continue, Susan."

Susie grinned at me, and I relaxed. I was very glad they seemed to understand. They certainly understood more about me than I did. I smiled back at her.

"Sorry, Susie."

"That's okay. I remember my first time accessing. I was three, and I acted just about the same way you did. No offense.? I blushed-or it felt like I did. I didn't know if an energy signature could turn red from embarrassment.

"Anyway,? she continued, ? the answer to your question is, yes, we can access higher, and the view is even better. But there's a downside, too. Although access to the puterverse is a mental operation, there is a physical strain on the entire body. The higher you access, the more pronounced the strain. You can train yourself to an extent to tolerate the stress, but the benefit is realized normally with the length of stay and only marginally on level of access."

"How bad is the strain?? I asked, trying to sound calm.

"Very. Only one in a hundred go higher than level nine. Fewer than one in ten thousand can access level twelve. And at level thirteen, the stress on your body becomes actual damage. Few have ever been higher than eighteen and survived.

"Don't worry, though, Abigail. We're not going anywhere near there today. You'll be pretty sore tonight, but it shouldn't be too bad. No point in overdoing it. This is your first time here, so you're not ready for it. And also, we don't need to go that high to show you what we want you to see."

"And what is that?? I asked, sounding calmer than I was. I had a feeling something unpleasant was about to happen.

"You'll see. Literally.? Susie looked at Sanchez, who nodded. She took my hand and spoke to no one in particular: ? Locate Oregon fire storm, 2414."

A tunnel just large enough for the three of us opened in the air about thirty meters in front of us. We remained still as it approached and engulfed us. Streaks and slivers of light, similar to the river, flashed by us on all sides. In almost no time, I noticed we were hurtling toward a pinpoint of light. The pinpoint grew to the size of an exit, and the light reddened. Then, as quickly as it had sprung on us, the tunnel abruptly terminated and we were in hell.

All around us were the massive flames of an uncontrollable firestorm. Vague shapes of buildings could be seen through the curtain of flames. Intertwined in the roar of the flames so as to almost come from them, were the screams of the dying, perhaps the already dead. I spun around, to look for escape, but there was none. Desperate to escape, I called for a platform, and we lifted up into the air, twenty, fifty, one hundred, meters. From horizon to horizon was nothing but flames and the sickening smell of death.

I had never seen anything so completely and utterly destructive. It had been, to me, almost ten years since I had left the horror of the Ethiopian Campaigns behind me. But I still should have been able to cope at some level with this conflagration. I couldn't. My senses were reeling from the horror. I felt no heat, but the terror would burn my soul for a long time. I covered my ears and started to sink down, but Raul lifted me up. He shouted something at Susie over the flames. She nodded and the flames died out as the platform we were standing on darkened and turned into another tunnel. Instead of falling in, our orientation seemed to change and we were standing in it, traveling quickly through it, the flickering red skies at our backs diminishing into the past.

The tunnel ended in moments, and we were standing on the moon's surface. I should have been overcome with the wonder, but the memory of the firestorm demanded all my attention. It took Raul gently shaking me to make me look up and put the horrible sight behind me to see this beautiful one.

The Earth sat in the sky, only just risen. All around was the rocky, pitted surface of the moon. I recognized the site as our first permanent moon base, established only twenty years prior, memory time. I realized we were also in a kind of lunar park, for the surface area of the base had ropes around it, and roughhewn benches, cut from native rock, were scattered around. Several flags, stiff with wire and shaped to flutter in a nonexistent wind, decorated the base. In all directions, I saw dozens of plastic bubbles protruding from the surface. Air locks, most likely.

"Look over there, Abigail,?" Susie said quietly. She pointed to a large rectangular rock about ten meters to our right. Walking closer, I could see an inscription. I leaned down and read it out loud.

"Forever enshrined to honor those who so valiantly fought in the Terran/Martian Wars, there lies here a fallen comrade, known but to God.?" It was dated 2389.

Terran/Martian Wars. Then they had established a colony. I stood and looked into the black sky to see if Mars was up. It was, its redness even more evident in the vacuum of space. It looked so peaceful. Susie, was also looking up, but in another direction, towards Polaris. Her face was quiet and thoughtful. I turned to Sanchez.

"How many??" I asked in a small voice. Since there were no ambient noises, it still sounded abrasively loud.

"Three million from Mars, 481 million from Earth. There were four wars lasting sixteen years,?" Raul said with an impassive tone.

"How can you be so cold??" I said with stunned surprise. A half-billion people. I couldn't begin to grasp a carnage that great.

"It was a long time ago, Abigail. Three hundred years. But though we may sound indifferent about it, we are not, and the war still leaves its mark. As one-sided as the numbers may appear, Mars lost the war because their entire population was three million. Fewer than one thousand survived. Mars was never again resettled. The terra forming operations were abandoned, and it is again a dead planet."

"What do this war and the firestorm have in common?"

He didn't answer me. Instead, he nodded again to Susie, and the tunnel appeared to rush us away.

And so it went for more than an hour. We saw New York City turned into a massive crater, surrounded by a flat, glassy plain, no life to be seen. They showed me dark hospital wards and filthy asylums, buried deep underground, housing horribly mutated things that may or may not have once been human. We saw a series of pipes, some of which were definitely not human, their brain cases merely welded, sealed boxes bolted into a control panel. In later images, not even that vestige of humanity was left them, as their intangible minds were moved into circuitry and hard memory. There were many, many more images, sounds, and experiences. How I managed to make it through without fainting, I don't know. Finally, we were taken back to the riverside. I looked into the ethereal data stream, shooting ribbons of silver and gold, and wondered how two such worlds could exist within each other. I looked up at Sanchez, feeling very weak from either our long access time or the mentally draining sights. Probably both.

"Why did you show me these things?"

He didn't respond, but instead leaned against the railing that ran along the riverbank, contemplating me. I looked at Susie, who stood quietly beside him, staring down at the hard floor of the puterverse. It was for me to find out.

"Computer. Access Abigail Wyeth."

"Access granted.? The obsidian walls shot up into the air, and the area became darker, less friendly.

"Locate common focus of past twenty queries."

Again a tunnel came up, and we were inserted into it. We shot along, my hand groping for and finding Susie's. Lt. Sanchez stood close behind us. I had a sudden flash of fear and shivered.

A pinpoint of an exit appeared and raced toward us. The light increased quickly; it was clearly daylight at the end. I heard the distant rumble of voices and could even make out a few faces before we were suddenly in the midst of them. No one seemed to notice us, and several passed through us, causing no harm nor having any come on them. I looked around, trying to orient myself. I first noticed the almost even proportions of race among the multitude. Black, white, Asian, Hispanic, everyone was represented in almost the same number. It could have been anywhere in the world, but nowhere in mine. Many were civilians. Many more were in a military style of uniform.

After a few more moments of studying the crowds, I looked up. Being shorter than everyone but the younger children, it was the only other way for me to look.

Filling the entire sky in front of me was a massive complex of buildings. We were in a manmade canyon, surrounded on all sides by these huge structures, most hundreds of meters high and a few as wide as they were tall.

The complex was so massive that it was more a carved mountain, made to look like buildings. An unearthly steel and glass mountain, reflecting the sunlight in such a way as to be blinding, even from my low vantage point. It made it difficult to get a proper look at the structures, other than size. I did make out a logo on several of the buildings, but the shimmering reflection made it impossible to make out anything other than shape. And people were constantly getting in my way. I tried jumping up to see over, but it didn't help much.

"Computer, delete people.? They faded away and we were in a deserted valley of glassy concrete. ? Accelerate time to two hours past sunset.? Time slipped quickly by, and the large buildings flashed with the setting sun's rays, then took on a luminescence of their own in the gathering twilight. Night descended, and the stars came out. The logos flickered, then flared to life, and suddenly they were very easy to see.

At last I understood. I could see why these people had been so happy to have me, and so upset. I knew now why my I ... I ... IHAD had gone on for so long, why they had questioned me, and questioned me, and questioned me, though I had no memory of it. As I stared up at the accusing symbols, the ground beneath us began glowing, and suddenly we were standing on another massive logo, flooding the air with brilliant blue light. I looked down at it and realized how lucky I was to still be alive, and not burned to a cinder by Susie's gun as I lay helpless. I stared at the logo, hoping it would go away, or change into something else. But it didn't.

NATech Supreme.

"End access.? My voice was very small, very quiet.

The sounds faded, the images quavered a moment, then collapsed back into the flimsy sheet attached to

Lt. Sanchez's wall.

\* \* \* \*

"We don't know exactly when NATEch was formed. The records have long since been lost, altered, deleted or secured. We had guessed sometime in the mid twenty-first century. Until you came along, Abigail."

I stretched out on my bed and looked up at the rock ceiling. It was a constant source of amazement that the rock could be cut to be so smooth, so flawless. I would have thought that natural imperfections in the native rock would leave the surface pockmarked and scarred. They must have some sort of blending method.

I rolled on my side to face Susie, groaning slightly as my aching muscles protested. She was sitting cross-legged on her bed, largely unaffected by our puterverse accessing. Our room was so small that she was less than a meter from me, so our conversation was still pretty intimate. Not that anyone would hear us; we had shut the door for the night.

"You missed by a century, ? I replied. ? NATEch was a result of the Second World War and the forming of the United Nations. Almost no one knew of it because it would compromise our mission. We wanted to be able to prepare society for the changes that it was going to go through. We also did a large amount of research in what were considered to be fantastic, unrealistic ideas. By keeping our existence quiet, we were able to focus on our work and not the ever-changing politics."

She shook her head in disbelief. ? It sounds unbelievable. And it's so completely impossible that the very entity we fight against, and by whose hand so many of us die, could at any time have been benevolent. But I heard it from you, now and in the past days. The shock of the story you told us is still there."

"No more than the shock to me of seeing what NATEch became. We had anticipated something like this could happen, and had installed numerous safeguards to prevent it. In fact, shortly before I 'died', I... ? I broke off and hedged. ? ...was also working on a long range safeguard. It's painfully clear those safeguards were useless. How far reaching is their power?"

She shrugged. ? No one really knows, which by itself is a frightening indication. We do know it's nearly complete here on Earth. After the Terran/Martian Wars, the world government was destroyed. The planet had united under a common government as far back as 2209, but the more powerful countries, the United States, Japan, Brazil and Australia, remained autonomous. But then singularity drives were invented in 2243, and the first hyperspace corridor was established to a class M planet in 2267. And that changed Earth's future forever."

"I had wondered if space travel to other solar systems had been perfected. There seemed to be indicators in some of the things I looked at in the puterverse, but there were also very few facts."

"That's for two reasons. First is your current access level. There's not a whole lot you can find out at three limited four. As you feel more comfortable with the system, and we feel more comfortable with you, that access will be increased.

"The second reason is that space travel is not that important to us. Everyone who wanted to leave the planet did. The singularity drive ships-we call them ball chasers-allowed for exploration of Earth class planets that could be colonized, providing that they were not already inhabited by another civilization. If they were, relations would be established. If they weren't, emigration corridors would be set up after an experimental colony had proven the viability of self support.

"And I'll bet you've never found intelligent life, have you?"

She shook her head. ? Of course, not. The very way the universe was created points to the improbability of intelligent life anywhere but on Earth. Of course, a lot of people still believe we'll find intelligent alien life one day."

"And maybe we will. I wouldn't hold my breath, though,? I commented dryly.

"I suppose.? Susie didn't sound too convinced, either. ? Anyway, after the hyperidors were established to the first two or three planets, emigration could begin on a large scale."

"That follows. I'm not sure what a hyperidor is, but I'd guess it debunks the law of the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. Probably a marked route through a type of subspace that twists those two points so they're closer to each other."

"I'll never get over that, Abigail! How do you *do* that?? Susie said wonderingly.

"You probably know as well as I do, Susie. As the Lieutenant pointed out, NATech didn't pick me for my good looks, nor for my more obvious military career."

"That military career would fetch you a high rank today with them. But you're right, I do know why NATech picked you; because of your success and ingenuity in the numerous recon missions you and your squad conducted. After we had you pegged, we were able to access many of your mission files. They were sketchy, and coded, but we could make out some of the details. Your skills with logic and personnel are brilliant. They'd make an excellent study in military tactics."

I blushed a bit. ? Somehow, I doubt I'd find too many listeners if I gave the lectures. As for their 'brilliance', I did what I could to obtain the mission objective and keep my men alive. You were talking about the emigration."

"Sorry. Didn't mean to embarrass you. It seems like I'm talking about a different person when discussing your past.

"Once the first hyperidors were safe, around 2270, huge transport ships could move with little effort or cost through them. The population of the world, nearly eight billion, dropped ten percent the first five years."

"Eight hundred million people emigrated?? I whistled. ? I can just imagine the impact that had on the world economy."

"Don't whistle, it's very unladylike. Actually, it helped the economy immensely. Think about it. It's a gross over-generalization, but the people most likely to cause unrest or show aggressive tendencies are also the people willing to take the risk of emigration. Further, for those who remained, the stress upon the planet's resources eased by that same ten percent. Perhaps more. Do you mind if I turn down the lights?"

"No, not at all."

She called for the lights to dim. She seemed to almost fade, her smooth, ebony skin blending softly into the smooth, dark rock of the bedroom's wall. She stretched out on her bed, wriggling in under the blankets. I did the same, my sore, sore body thanking me once I lay still.

"But wasn't there support of the colonies?? I asked, picking up the conversation again. ? Or did you really treat them as colonies, taking resources while providing finished products?"

"There was some of that in the beginning. In fact, they were not so much colonies as much as fledgling countries. There never was any intention to keep them as extensions of the Earth government.

"There were, however, many corporations who took advantage of the new markets to set up trade. It was pretty one-sided at first, with each new planet having an agrarian society until industrialization could be implemented. Some stayed with their agrarian cultures and set up trade with other planets."

"And Earth was the pivot for the entire trading system?"

"Well, yes, at first. Until hyperidors were marked between the other planets. And even then Earth remained the primary route of trade. Until 2373."

"The Terran/Martian Wars."

"Yes. The wars changed everything. There really is no connection between the settlements on Mars and the colonization of the Class-M planets. Mars couldn't support life on its own; the others were chosen because they could. Mars had to remain a colony, forever dependent upon a planet with a breathable atmosphere. Terra-forming had begun, but it would be eight hundred years before Mars could even approach something close to an actual life-sustaining atmosphere.

"But the Earth government held them too tightly in check, and they rebelled. Using crude plasma drives, they aimed asteroids from the asteroid belt into the path of the Earth, turning them into guided comets. This allowed them to work with impunity, for they didn't need to wage battle directly. By the time it was discovered what had been done, dozens of these asteroids had been launched. They started to hit the Earth with alarming frequency. Nearly all of them penetrated the atmosphere. Most burned up when entering the atmosphere, releasing massive amounts of heat. A few survived and hit the Earth. Of course, it was nearly impossible to aim the things. They just had a general idea.

"The result was all consuming terror for Earth. Whole cities, destroyed within minutes, without warning. The majority of deaths happened then, over 400 million. Even the misses that crashed into the oceans caused massive tidal waves and temporarily raised ocean temperatures and destroyed the currents. And the final injury were the primitive plasma drives themselves. There was no effort to reinforce the casings, so many times the plasma exploded on impact, irradiating the area and electrifying the air, burning huge holes in the ozone."

I shivered from the descriptions. Such total, indiscriminate war. I tried to draw up a defense plan for the scenario,

*SCENARIO 1947588375 INDICATES THAT A FULL ORBITAL ATTACK ON THE SURFACE OF THE PLANET WILL RENDER THE PRIMARY MARTIAN CITY OF VERMILION 97% INEFFECTIVE IN ALL EIGHT KEY MILITARY AREAS, BUT ALLOW FOR A SURVIVAL RATE OF 38.86%, WHICH INDICATES THAT ASTEROID BOMBARDMENT OF EARTH CAN CONTINUE. SCENARIO 1947588376 INDICATES THAT A FULL ORBITAL ATTACK ON THE SURFACE OF THE PLANET, FOLLOWED BY A GROUND FORCE ATTACK OF 5,000 SHOCK TROOPS WILL RENDER THE PRIMARY MARTIAN CITY OF VERMILION 98.2% INEFFECTIVE IN ALL EIGHT KEY MILITARY AREAS, BUT ALLOW FOR A CITIZENRY SURVIVAL RATE OF 34.92% WHICH INDICATES THAT ASTEROID BOMBARDMENT OF EARTH CAN CONTINUE. SCENARIO 1947588377 INDICATES THAT A FULL OR*

but was either too tired to come up with one, or one didn't exist. In a situation like that, even a plan that was ninety-five percent effective would still be a failure. Susie continued.

"After the first three or four hits, Earth was ready for total response. They launched massive strikes

against the colonies, and Mars lost two-thirds of its population, two million people, in one week. But a million survived, deep underground."

I could picture the rest as she talked. It got nasty after that. What followed was unlimited warfare. They couldn't destroy the planet, so they had to go into the lair. In the meantime, only a relative few were needed to continue the offensive against the Earth by launching more asteroids. The asteroid belt is a big place, as is the Earth's orbit. By this time, Earth's defense forces had devised a method of destroying the larger asteroids. But there were too many, and the meteors continued, though fewer of them. Only the complete destruction of the Mars colony could cut the supply line of the comet launchers. And that's exactly what the Earth did. A terrible solution to a terrible war.

"It was during the wars that emigration peaked. Before the wars, nearly a fourth of the world's population, two billion people, had emigrated to one of twelve open planets. In the sixteen years of the war, another two billion emigrated, even though only three more planets were opened to emigration. Since then, three dozen more planets have been discovered and settled, and another three billion have left. The Earth's current population is less than one billion, and has been that for over a century."

"A void like that must have caused a collapse of the very fabric of Earth's society, ? I commented. Just as Susie had a hard time dealing with my personal history from my perspective, I had difficulty dealing with a history of an entire planet that was in many ways still the future to me. Indeed, I had spent most of the day in a kind of daze, trying to cope with the overwhelming events of six centuries. I was still a little numb.

"Collapse is putting it mildly. If there had not been a central government already in place, the entire planet would have fallen into an endless state of war. It almost did anyway. Those that remained after the wars and massive emigration did try to maintain order under the central government. By this time, even the superpowers had joined into the system, surrendering their nationalistic identities completely. It helped, but only a little. The people were ravaged by war, and despite justification carried the guilt of the utter extermination of the Martian colony. The ecosystem was gone, the polar ice caps were shattered and melting from bombardment, and hundreds of thousands of kilometers of land was now submerged.

"It was at that time that NATech first became public. They had developed experimental technologies that took care of the two largest problems: the damage to the ozone and ice caps.

"It was nearly a miracle. Within five years, NATech had managed to restore over eighty percent of both ice caps. And they completely repaired the ozone layer. And the biggest miracle of all was that they expected nothing in return. The government, nearly crushed by the debt of rebuilding, was grateful and accepted the service. Today that acceptance is taught, quietly, as one of the biggest mistakes of human civilization."

"From what I've seen of NATech now, I'd have to agree, ? I said. ? *My* NATech would not have accepted payment either, but neither would they have made public their role. It was up to us to find the solutions, then ease them into the public conscience through our own scientists, marketing agencies or even unrelated resources."

"It must have been wonderful, working for an organization so dedicated to the advancement of mankind. I wish it was still like that. But it's not. NATech was soon consulted for other solutions, which they always seemed to have. Their abilities were incredible.

"Soon, NATech didn't wait for the questions, but volunteered solutions. They were given a permanent seat on the central government. Then they had veto power. It continued until 2422, when NATech assumed custody of the central government and began to model the agencies after their own structure.

Soon, the civil servants became NATech servants. Then the military. Finally, the media. By 2461, NATech controlled the Net, and effectively, the world. It was then that they became NATech Supreme.

"At first, everyone was very content with the situation. The economy continued to improve, as did the environment. There was the ongoing problem with riping, but no one had ever attributed that to NATech, and many were confident they would address the issue in time."

Despite the comfort and warmth of the bed and blankets, a tingle went up and down my spine. I could tell where this was leading, and the bitter irony of it was pathetically humorous. NATech, to save my life as John Wyeth, had started down a course that would bring me up against them in my life as Abigail Wyeth. Desperate to save me as an ally, had they ultimately turned me into an enemy? For if what Susie was telling me was true, I could not stand with NATech. Just as they had apparently abandoned their ideals and methods, so I must now abandon them. I very much doubted that my decision would upset them terribly.

"Disillusionment was gradual," Susie continued. "In 2466, NATech closed all immigration to Earth. There had not been too much to begin with, perhaps fifty thousand each year. But Earth was now an isolated planet. You could leave, but you could never come back. Still, no one complained. The war was still in the recent past, and there were rumors that what Mars had done to us, several of the colonized planets were willing to try."

"That doesn't make any sense, Susie," I interrupted. "The situations are completely different. Not only would there be no reason, the logistics of another meteor war would have been nearly impossible. From your description, a hyperidor could be easily monitored. Unless one were established in a secret location. But again, there's no motive."

"It's so clear now, isn't it?" Her voice smiled sadly in the darkness. "But NATech has mastered the use of propaganda. They never actually *said* that there had been secret hyperidors established, but it quickly became common knowledge, despite lack of evidence. The populace became frantic with worry. Another devastating loss of five hundred million—essentially the planet's total population—would destroy civilization on Earth. And the mere fact of their existence proved that there was a motive, though no one knew what it was."

"Of course, it was all false. The entire hysteria was designed to further tighten the grip NATech had on the planet. They were our great protector. And so they remain today. Most still don't understand the hold NATech Supreme has on our lives."

She fell silent. I stared up at the barely illuminated ceiling. NATech. How could we have gone so wrong? Did we change over the centuries, or had that seed been planted from the very beginning? Did their ideals falter when offered the opportunity to provide massive help at the cost of anonymity? Or could NATech have foreseen the events that led up to that opportunity? Or could they even have...

I inhaled sharply, the horror of the thought almost a physical blow. Could NATech have even engineered those events? Even as I thought it, a peculiar wave of certainty washed over me. *In Twenty Years* ... that had been our credo. The wars with Mars had lasted sixteen years, and NATech had achieved a position of trust and power only several years after that. The idea that they could have caused something so unimaginably frightening was just that: unimaginable. Which was exactly what NATech specialized in.

I glanced at Susie. She'd drifted off. I was glad, too. With my new found youth and my newfound lack of mouth control, I could very well have told her more than she was ready to know, or more than I was ready to share. She slept on, blissfully unaware that her time and society—now my time and society—had been manipulated and robbed of its potential. How else could this era be so little advanced than six



centuries ago? I needed to answer that question, but couldn't. I didn't have the knowledge, the preparation, or the freedom of movement. Not yet.

I continued to think through other alternative explanations, but couldn't make a very credible effort at it, I was so tired from my first journey into the puterverse. I could tell by her steady breathing that Susie had fallen asleep.

Sleep. I rolled over on my side and hugged my pillow, snuggling further into the sheets. This was, incredibly, my first night of unassisted, non-traumatized sleep in over six hundred years. I lay there, experiencing the differences and enjoying them. My nightwear was different. The mattress, because of my small weight, seemed bouncier, and I couldn't remember the last time I lay in a bed that was so much bigger than me. My position, curled up around a pillow instead of sprawled out with hands and feet over the edge, was different. Even the sleepiness I felt creeping over me was different, though I couldn't explain how. I wondered how long I would have these new sensations of everyday life. A long time, I hoped.

I just wished I had better thoughts to keep me company. Not that it mattered. Within moments of extinguishing the lights and plunging the room into total darkness, I was fast asleep. I don't remember what dreams I had that night, but they were my own.

## **Chapter Nine**

"UP! Private Wyeth! GET UP!"

I shot straight up. I had worked myself completely under the sheets, so they were still over my head when I bolted. I yanked the sheet down, then as quickly pulled it up again. My top was pretty skimpy and protected my modesty enough from other women, but would turn the guys into drool machines. And this was a man's voice. A man's voice! I woke up completely. Someone was in our room!

I looked around quickly, but it was still pitch dark. I was about to ask for lights when he shouted again, this time right into my ear.

"What're you waiting for, Private? Breakfast in bed? On yer feet! You've got duty in forty-five minutes! Move it, Wyeth!"

I nearly had a heart attack. I felt a fear that tasted slightly of the invasion of the interrog ... the IH ... from a couple days ago. He was apparently standing on my left, bent over me. I started to roll out on my right, to put the bed between us, when he growled at me again, this time right beside me.

"You're pretty lazy, ain't you? MOVE it! There's a ton of laundry that needs cleaning, and YOU'RE doing it all!"

I jumped back against my bed. The frame hit the backs of my legs and I lost my balance and fell off the other side, landing with a thud and in a heap as I pulled the blankets and pillow on top of me. My legs were all over the place as I tried to get to my feet. He barked at me again.

"This is the last time, PRIVATE! Either you get going or I'm gonna personally..."

"Abigail?? Susie's sleepy voice slipped through the shout and it ended abruptly.

"Susie! Someone's in here!?" My voice had a hint of hysteria in it, I was so unnerved at how quickly he

moved.

She chuckled sleepily. ? Silly. That's just the alarm. It's directional so only you can hear it. Sorry, I meant to tell you about it and show you how to set it, but I drifted off while we were still talking. Lights to dim, please.? The lights came on just enough to make the room glow with the pink darkness of approaching dawn. Susie rubbed the sleep from her eyes. ? Time?? she asked softly.

"It's 0317, Corporal Lendler,? responded an equally soft male voice.

"Thank you. There you go, Abigail. Laundry detail is from 0400 to 1000. Better hustle if you want to clean up and eat before reporting. At least laundry is in the mess area. That'll save a couple minutes. Don't be late, though. Jackson will put your pretty little butt in a sling if even a finger is late through that door."

I knew about soldiers like Jackson , though I'd never met her, or him. (That was interesting. Would I always think of an unknown person as a she first, then a he? I made a mental note to try to keep track of that.) I untangled myself from my sheets and started for my dresser. I pulled short and turned back to my messy bed, throwing it into shape. They probably had inspections.

"Don't worry about that, Abigail. I'll make it for you. Here.? She opened up my dresser and pulled out some stuff. ? This is your standard uniform. And this,? She held up a sheer, black tube of stretchable cloth. ? Is a body sheath. Put this on *before* you put on your underthings. In other words, first."

Although it appeared shapeless at first, I could make out that it was a covering for the torso and upper legs. It was one piece, stepped into from the neck. I frowned, a little uncomfortable. ? Uhh ... won't that make it a little hard to, um..."

"Use the bathroom? Yeah, it would, *if* you got a break to use it, which you won't. So don't drink a lot of juice. The sheath will keep you at least ten degrees cooler, but only when it's right up against your skin. Secret of the dog. Now get going.? She started hustling me to the door.

"Shouldn't I put on a bath robe or something?"

"No time. Walk fast. There's no skirmishes planned for thirty-six hours, so no one should be up. The lights are pretty low, anyway. See you at ten hundred. Bye!"

She slapped me on the potential resident of Jackson 's sling and shoved me out the door, which allowed passage while remaining opaque; a very strange sensation. The corridor was thankfully deserted and dark. I half ran to the ladies room and made it without being seen. Once inside, I had the place to myself.

If you're a woman, or married to one, then you know that we just can't hurry getting ready. It seemed the faster I went, the worse it got. What's so different? As a guy, I'd use the bathroom, jump in the shower, soap up, rinse off, and get out. A quick towel off, dress, brush the hair roughly in place, brush the teeth roughly, hoping to leave them in place, and *violá!* , finished. Fifteen minutes if I didn't have to shave, twenty if I did. If I used thirty minutes, I was killing time. Well, a girl has the same number of arms, legs, teeth, and assorted body parts. Clothing is pretty much the same amount and put on pretty much the same way. Plus, I didn't have to shave yet, if women, or anyone, still shaved. So it should work the same way for a girl, right? It has to, right?

Forty minutes after stepping into the ladies room, I stepped out. My hair was much closer to seaweed than hair, the leftover soap making a credible substitute for sea foam. I skipped brushing my teeth. My clothes were on in more or less the right places, and facing in more or less the right directions, but they

were wetter than my towel. Desert sand was wetter than my towel. I put my shoes on while hopping down the corridor on one foot, then switching. As I raced by my door, I shouted at it to open. I tossed my nightclothes, towel and things through it, and they disappeared from sight as they passed through the door's opaque plane. I didn't hear them hit, possibly because the sound shield was still on, but more probably because I was already too far down the corridor by the time they hit the floor. At least they went through the opening. Last night, before turning in, Susie had coded the door for my voice.

"Time, please!? I said.

"It's 0356, Private Wyeth!? the computer exclaimed back.

I ran into the mess and hit the mess line in a flurry. I was by myself except for Cookie, who was moving in and out of the kitchen, stocking up the bins. I grabbed a roll and stuffed it into my mouth, then washed it down with a small glass of juice, taking to mind Susie's warning. Licking my fingers of the sweet stuff from the roll, I walked to the laundry room, which was located on the wall behind the juice cart.

And couldn't get in. It remained solid.

"Time, please."

"0359 hours.? So I was on time, if only just. I'd make a point of getting up an extra fifteen minutes earlier until I'd beaten this new bath routine. I cleared my throat.

"Open, please.? It ignored me. ? Hello? Jackson ? This is Private Wyeth, reporting for detail. Hello?? Nothing. I knocked on the door, but the hollow thooms! went unanswered. I pictured my butt with a big boot print and knocked again. This was getting frustrating. Was I in the wrong place?

"Computer, please locate laundry relevant to my position."

"The laundry is located one meter directly in front of you."

"Computer, please allow me access."

"You are not allowed access.? Okay. Time to try another tact.

"Computer, please state duty for Private Abigail Wyeth."

"Private Abigail Wyeth has laundry detail from 0400 to 1000 each day."

"And who do I report to?"

"During laundry detail, Private Abigail Wyeth reports to Private William Jackson. All remaining hours, Private Abigail Wyeth reports to Corporal Susan Lendler."

"Computer, please locate Private William Jackson relevant to my position."

"Private William Jackson is located four meters directly in front of your current position."

"Computer, what is the privacy status for the laundry door?"

"The sight privacy for the laundry door is active. The sound privacy is not active.? That made Private Jackson, deaf, dead, or a jerk. I'd give it one more try.

"Private Jackson!? I yelled at the door. ? This is Abigail! Could you let me in? Please?? Nothing. Well, enough of this.

I looked for the override and located it, as on other doors, about a meter above the floor. I hadn't had a chance to really study it before, but I did so now. I pressed the override switch, but it ignored me. I wondered why. Maybe he liked to play games. Or maybe he was hurt, I thought suddenly. I immediately felt terribly guilty for the things I had thought about him. Poor William! I hurriedly detached the faceplate and studied the guts of the thing. Six lengths of fiber optic cabling and a type of gravity switching that would probably allow for manual override at power loss. I took a quick look at the logic board and calculated the probabilities of function. Getting desperate to get in and help him, I took a chance. I grabbed the two outside cables, twisted them together and shoved them against the gravity switch.

Nothing for two seconds. Then I smelled a quick whiff of ozone, and there was a soft pop. I felt a tingle going up my arm, and I jerked it away quickly and stood up.

The door was now an opening, and there stood poor William Jackson, glaring at me. I'd have to keep my imagination in check from now on. He looked awful, but I guessed he had grown into that. Maybe regulations on shaving had relaxed over the years. He glared at me through piggy eyes. I felt like mud had been slopped on me.

"Time!? he snapped.

"0401!? the computer barked.

"You're late! You were supposed to have reported here at 0400!"

"I was outside the door on time, but it wouldn't open!? I protested.

"Uh-huh. So what did you do to the door?"

"Well, when you didn't open the door after I knocked and shouted, I thought that you were hurt.? I was getting a little ticked off myself. ? Why didn't you open the door? In fact, why couldn't I have just walked in? I'm supposed to be here."

"That's right, you're supposed to be here!? he sneered nastily, ignoring my question. ? But you weren't. You're late. Give me fifty, Wyeth!"

"What!?? I couldn't have been more surprised if he'd suddenly turned into an ogre. Which he was starting to.

"You heard me! Give me fifty!? He pointed to the floor.

I didn't know what to say. That I was flustered was an understatement. I was completely dumbfounded. I didn't know what to do, so I did as he said. Maybe this was one of those initiation things. If so, I preferred the food trick.

I dropped to my hands and gave him fifty pushups. Or tried to. After fifteen, my arms and chest muscles were burning. By twenty, I couldn't go any further. My upper body strength was gone. Rather, it had never been there.

"Can't count, huh? I said fifty. That's twenty. And most of them were little girl pushups.? I didn't point out the obvious. Instead, I managed about five more before he shoved a foot under my stomach and flopped me over.

"Okay, you can do the rest later. Don't be late tomorrow. Now get to work."

By this time I was more than ready to unload on him. I'd been treated like a princess until now, when

they weren't poking around in my head or beating me up, and although I didn't really expect that kind of treatment to continue, I was hoping to at least be treated with some respect. I opened my mouth to get really nasty, then closed it, and fought down my anger. *Keep calm, Abby. You stick around long enough and you'll make corporal or better and then you can read him from the book.* I'd give him the worst detail available.

Two hours later, I saw the flaw in my plan. He already had the worst detail available. Except mine. I was already aching from the pushups, but now I was really hurting. There were nearly two hundred people in this complex, and they got a lot of clothes dirty. Bundle after bundle of clothing was loaded, washed, dried, sorted, folded and rebagged. It was hot, smelly, steamy back-breaking work. If it hadn't been for the body sheath against my skin, I would have passed out. As it was, I was sweat soaked within twenty minutes and stayed that way.

Jackson didn't help much. It became pretty clear that those pushups and the locked door were no initiation. I'd had it pegged from the beginning; he was a jerk. I'd come across them my first time through the military. I'd had the ability to deal with the Jacksons of the past, but this one was my superior. So I shut up and tried to live through it.

It wasn't easy. He was sloppy, lazy and rude. He did a fraction of the work and gave no consideration for my far smaller size and strength. Claiming there was too much ? paper work? to do-somehow that phrase had survived the ages-he fiddled on the computer terminal for several hours, keeping the field tight, so I couldn't see what he was viewing. When he did help, it was grudgingly and only on the heaviest loads, which I couldn't lift high enough to get into the huge front-loading washers. Dr. Barrett was right; washing clothes hadn't changed a great deal over the centuries. It had gotten much faster, which is how two people could do the work. Okay, one person and an animated bag of lard.

I'd pulled far worse details before, but only ones that involved killing people, which this one might yet still. This was really, really bad. I wondered for a while if Dr. Barrett had put me in here as some sort of weird test. After thinking it through, though, I decided that nobody really knew how bad it was in here. More than likely Jackson was alone most the time; the job really could be done by one person, if he were big enough, which Jackson was and I wasn't.

I don't know how I kept sane during that first shift. He blocked off my computer access so I could not even ask for time. On top of that, he repaired and reactivated the door, blocking out both sight and sound. The laundry was Private Jackson's little kingdom, and I was his peasantry. I understood now the appeal of mixing royal heads and guillotines.

Finally, finally, finally, Jackson walked over and told me my duty was over. He wasn't too happy about it, either.

"Geez, you've still got a couple loads left! I'll have to stay and cover for you.?" He paused to let me thank him, which I didn't. Instead I walked by him. He grabbed me by the shoulder. In a split second, I selected five ways to get that hand off my shoulder. One of them even left the hand unbroken and attached. I denied myself the pleasure and stood still and stiff.

"Hey, don't give me an attitude, Wyeth! You might be some special toy outside, but in here, you do as I say, got it?"

"Yes, I've got it, Jackson ,? I said tiredly. ? Can I go now?"

He looked like he wanted to say something mean, but instead just nodded.

I stepped out of the laundry and blinked at the bright pseudo sunlight pouring down from the high ceiling.

It felt warm and wonderful. The mess had about thirty people in it, most of whom waved when they saw me. I waved back tiredly and trudged off to my quarters. I'd gone only a few steps down the corridor when I heard Susie calling my name and running up behind me. I turned and waited for her to catch up.

She looked wonderful. She had on a more feminine cut of uniform, with skirt, and had her hair done nicely. Maybe even a little make up, though I couldn't really tell. She was smiling as she approached, but stopped when she got up to me. I started walking again.

"Hey, you okay, girl?? she said, a note of concern taking some of the cheerfulness out of her voice.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Let my next of kin know the reading of the will is Tuesday, okay? Open, please.? I walked through the door and to my dresser.

"You don't have to ask to enter, anymore. The door's keyed to your presence as well as voice now."

"Great. Thanks.? I started to pull out a change. I heard my bed calling to me, but I wasn't going to even think about sleeping until I'd washed the laundry and Jackson down the shower drain.

"Sorry about the duty, Abigail. Jackson 's a jerk."

"I'd noticed that, too. I can handle him."

"Are you sure? I could rough him up a bit. You know, pick him out for 'training' exercises."

I laughed at the thought. She smiled at my perk up. ? Thanks, Susie, but no. I've got to deal with him myself. He thinks I'm everyone's favorite toy, and if I hide behind you all the time, he might be right."

"You can't take on Jackson by yourself, he's three times your size. And you're not our toy, but you..."

"I said let me handle it, okay?? I snapped angrily and immediately regretted it. ? I'm sorry, Susie. I'm just real, real tired. But I mean it. Let me handle him. He's not the enemy, or anything like that. He's just a bully. And you've got to stand up to bullies."

"All right. If you change your mind..."

"Thanks. Listen, I'm going to clean up. What's on my duty for today?"

"Nothing official. We're going to ease you into the routine. Later this afternoon, I'd like to take you to the armory, and have you pick out a sidearm. Then maybe some target practice and tactics orientation. Tonight we'll hit the gym."

"Fine, as long as we're not hitting each other."

"Not likely. If I have my way, I'll never face you again except in very controlled conditions. I'd also like to get you in a workout with Company A. Company B is on skirmish tomorrow afternoon, so they'll be in briefing."

"How about the Research room? I still haven't seen that yet.? She seemed a little uneasy, and I could guess why. ? Never mind. But when the time comes that you can trust me completely, I'd like a look."

"It's not that, Abigail. We do trust you. It's just that we're in the final stages of research on another Cue, and the place is pretty busy and very restricted. I don't even go in there too much now. Probably in a week or two.? That made me feel better.

Later, though, standing in the shower, letting the hot water pour over my head and aching shoulders, my

feelings were a little more mixed. A new Cue? I wondered what she would be like. Or he. Would I get to meet her? Did I want to? I suppose I was feeling a little jealous. I did have a privileged position as a Cue, even though it did come with a price. Would that be diminished or lost with the new Cue? That was pretty petty, I had to admit to myself. Of course I'd help her or him out. I'd be in the best position to sympathize certainly. I just wish I could have had a little more time as-and here I conceded Jackson a point-everyone's new toy.

I finished cleaning up, brushing my teeth this time, and went to bed. I'd now been in the showers so many times I could have gotten another hour of sleep by just moving my bed into the bathroom. Tired? I could have slept on the tiles. I dropped my clothes into a heap in the laundry chute, then dropped myself into a heap in bed. I squirmed around for a while, finding the very best position to relax my body. My shoulders and back hurt so much that I reached over to Susie's bed and swiped her pillow to lay on. It helped. Turning down the lights to late evening, I fell off into a deep sleep.

\* \* \* \*

When I woke up, I felt much, much better. The computer told me it was almost three p.m. and that Susie was not in the compound. I dressed into another work uniform, which was pants, blouse and jacket. I didn't bother with the sheath this time. It had helped immensely keeping me cool in the laundry, but it felt like I had a layer of oil on, it was so slippery. I stomped into my heavier boots-I had been issued two pairs of shoes and one pair of boots-and headed for the armory. Susie had mentioned I would be issued a sidearm today, and I was very keen on selecting my own.

The armory was in the hanger, cut into the far wall away from the gym area. There was an older man working at a table when I walked up. He was working on a heavy rifle of some sort and didn't hear my approach. When I cleared my throat politely, he looked up. Recognizing me, he cracked a wide smile.

"Why, hello there. Abigail, isn't it??" He set down the rifle and picked up a rag.

I nodded. ? Hello. Yes. Abigail Wyeth. Sus-uh, Corporal Lendler said I would be issued a sidearm today, and I was hoping to have a chance to pick one."

"Well now, that sounds reasonable.?" He tapped a couple times on his terminal. He looked up at me and winked. ? I don't need the thing, but I've gotta keep them thinking I know what I'm doing.?" I smiled. ? Here we go. Yep. Got you on the issue list right here. But I can't release any weapon without the Corporal's thumbprint

*IS VERIFIED. THE DOCKING CONTROLS ARE NOW YOURS, PILOT. PLEASE NOTE THAT NAVIGATIONAL BUOYS GAMMA 23 AND EPSILON 24 ARE CURRENTLY DAMAGED AND INOPERATIVE. THERE HAS ALSO BEEN A SOLAR FLARE WARNING ISSUED FROM 0500 UNTIL 2030 TOMORROW NIGHT. I HAVE DETECTED A SMALL FLUCTUATION IN PORT THRUSTER SIX. COMPENSATION BURST FROM PORT THRUSTER FIVE HAS CORRECTED THE PROBLEM. DOCKING WILL COMMENCE IN TWO POINT ONE MINUTES. STATION GAMMA HAS CLEARED PLATFORM 189 AND WISHES TO INFORM YOU*

"Hey, kid!"

"Yes?? I started as he broke off his conversation abruptly. ? You were saying about Corporal Lendler's thumbprint?"

He shook his head. ? Teenagers. You gotta be hundreds of years old, but,? and he shook his head again. ? Gotta be the hormones. Teenagers."

While I stood there trying to figure out this odd comment, he went over to a weapons locker and pulled out a sampling of side arms. He motioned me to step inside, so I joined him. He held them out like a proud father showing off his beloved triplets.

"Just 'cause I can't issue you one doesn't mean you can't try 'em out. One of these should do the trick. Let's start with this one." He set two of them down and offered me the remaining one.

I hefted it in my hand. It was heavy, but considerably lighter than the one I'd swiped during my aborted escape. It was small caliber, projectile based and seemed to have a limited magazine. The balance was decent, but sluggish.

"Is there someplace I can try this?"

"Sure. Right here. Hey, Agnes!"

"Whadaya want, bean pole?? The computer's voice took on a shrill woman's tone. ? Gonna shoot off some guns again?"

"Yep. Shut 'er off and open 'er up."

"Yeah, yeah,? the computer grumbled. I could almost picture her shuffling off slowly to get whatever it was he'd asked for. But it was only imagination. Very quickly the sound from the hanger was cut off, and a long, fairly wide opening appeared in the rear wall of the armory. It looked to be a tunnel, but was clearly a target range.

I walked over to the range and hefted the gun. He followed me.

"Here's the safety, load indicator and sonic sighting. When the indicator lights, you've acquired target lock."

"No laser sighting?"

"Nope. Sound sights are lighter and they don't give off that telltale beam which can also be locked onto for return fire. Also, the range of a weapon this small is short, so the sonics are accurate enough. Aim it like this..."

He stepped up close to me and put his right hand on my shoulder, extending his left arm out along mine. His face was alongside mine, a little higher. It made me vaguely uneasy. I shrugged him off a little bit, and he backed up, his ears burning.

"Sorry! Didn't mean anything. I just wanted..."

"Please. It's all right. I should apologize. I'm still uncomfortable with...? I let my voice trail off.

He laughed. ? Me, too! I've heard all about it. Everyone has. I suppose we're all kinda walking on eggshells first time we see you. It's gotta be pretty hard ... you know...? He gave me a fatherly smile, and it felt very good inside me. ? Let's try again, okay?"

"Okay. I've got the training, by the way, but thanks for the assist. Have you any targets?"

"Wouldn't be much of a range if I didn't, would it? Agnes! Give our young guest something to shoot."

Dutifully, a standard bulls eye appeared about one third of the way down the range, perhaps twenty meters. I lifted the gun and shot, not bothering to aim. The gun kicked hard in my hand and a tone went off. The target, a floating hologram, indicated with a gold ring where the bullet had gone. On a target one



meter in diameter, I was about half way in. I cursed quietly. But not quietly enough, because my new friend's eyes got wide. Blushing from my lack of control with both mouth and gun, I lifted the gun again and fired. Closer but not good. The third shot drifted out further, and by the time I fired the ninth and last round, I was missing the target completely and the gun was getting too heavy to lift.

"I can't believe how heavy this thing is already!"

"Sorry. I picked out the lightest slug gun we have. I don't think it'll work for you. Your hands and arms don't have the strength. You'll be stronger in a couple years, but it's not going to change much."

"I'm beginning to get that idea that more and more. I'm big on flexibility but short on everything else. I don't think this is the one. Anything lighter?? I handed the gun back. ? I just realized, I haven't asked your name."

"No problem. ? He reloaded the gun with a flick of his wrist and handed me a second gun. ? I'm Darrin Woodside. Just call me Dusty. Don't have a rank. At least, I don't use it. When you're the only one that can fix everything, rank doesn't mean a whole bunch."

"All right, Dusty. Let's try number two. Energy based, isn't it?"

"Yep. This one's pretty slick. It fires plasma, so its gotta kick, and she pulls a might high and right. But she's also got a two second recharge cycle, a slightly oversized power pack, and does more damage than you'd think. Give it a try."

This gun was far lighter, though nearly as bulky. I activated the sonic sight and snapped on the charge cycle. A small tone gave me cycle complete and a second tone told me I had target acquisition. Aiming a little low and left, I squeezed the trigger.

The gun bucked hard and the hologram disappeared. In its place was a gold ring nearly a meter and a half in diameter. Not too big on subtlety, I concluded. This was what we called a percentage gun. Pull the trigger enough times and the percentages were always on your side. Aiming in anything other than a vague direction was a waste of time. I shut off the charging cycle and handed it back to him.

"Uh ... no, thanks. I prefer to have the option of identifying who I've shot. Maybe even ask the dead body questions. It's kinda nice to select targets with a little more, um, discrimination."

"Ah! We have an artist! A lady after my own heart! Then this is the one for you!?" He handed over the third and final gun. Just its feel told me he'd saved the best for last. Like the blunderbuss, this was energy based, with similar control. As with the other two, it had a sonic sight. Best of all, its weight was perfect, and the balance very centered. A quick gun. I smiled and nodded. He grinned in agreement.

"I knew you'd like it. It has nowhere near the power of the other two, but if you prefer accuracy, she's the one. It's pure energy, so no kick. The range is pretty good, and the sonic sight is an improved model, with greater range and faster target acquisition. To top it all off, the recharge is only about four seconds. Give it a try."

"Target. ? I snapped on the sonic sighter and started the charge cycle. The standard hologram bulls eye appeared and I fired. The gun made no sound, nor had any kick as a hazy, thin beam shot from the gun. It was a single burst, but it went true, missing the center by less than ten centimeters. Four seconds later, there was a hole two centimeters closer in. After a minute, a dozen gold rings overlapped each other and the bulls eye. I shut the gun off and passed it back.

"This is the one, Dusty. Can you hold it for me until Corporal Lendler can put her John Hancock down?"

? At his stare, I giggled. ? Okay, an ancient phrase. Hold it until Susan releases it."

His face cleared up. ? I can do you one better. Come over here.? He led me to a small recess in the wall. Less than a half-meter cubed, it was coated on the inside with what looked to be featureless white plastic. It looked like a microwave, sans door, carved into the rock. Even the controls looked like it should have said bake, broil, and warm. He placed my gun into it and turned on the machine. It illuminated, but didn't seem to do anything else. After a few moments, the light went out and he retrieved the gun.

"Now, stick your hand in there.? Being left-handed, I put that one in. He activated the machine and the light came on. My hand tingled a bit. After a few moments, a large rod lifted from the floor of the recess.

"Grab onto the rod. Use all your strength and try to squeeze it into two in the middle.? I did so. It was soft and pliable, but stiffened as I squeezed. I put all my strength into it, and finally had to give up, having made it less than halfway through. When I released the rod, it snapped back to its cylindrical form and sank back into the bottom.

"Good, now move your hand around for a few seconds. No particular way, but try to do all three axes. Turn it over a couple times, too.? I did so and, after a few seconds, the light went out and the tingle faded.

"And now we do both.? He handed me the gun and, taking my hand, put it back in. He activated the machine and had me move my hand and gun around for about thirty seconds. The light shut off a final time.

"Great! Stop by and pick her up tomorrow and I'll have it customized for your grip and strength."

"Thanks a lot, Dusty!"

He waved a hand. ? No thanks needed. I enjoy using my skills for a change. Mostly, I get gorillas who only want power, power, power. There's only about five or six who prefer quality to quantity. So it's my pleasure, Abigail. By the way, if you want to have Lendler stop by later, she can 'put her John Hancock' down then and not need to be here tomorrow."

Thanking him once more, I left in a very good mood, though I was a little ashamed of the way I had shrugged him off when he touched me. He was sweet.

Agnes opened the door for me, and I stepped into the hanger. It had been pretty active about twenty minutes ago, but I hadn't paid much mind. After finding out that Susie was still not in the compound, I wandered around, spending the time to figure out this little piece of my new world.

The front end of the cavern on my side back to where the ramp led up to Dr. Barrett's office was filled with a dozen armored vehicles. I climbed into one to take a look at the controls, but it yelled at me, so I just did an outside visual inspection. They were all hover vehicles, and looked built for quick strikes, with speed acting as armor.

I studied them as well as I could, learning as much as possible without touching them. Satisfied I understood their general workings and limitations, I cast my curiosity around somewhere else.

A group of soldiers were playing what looked like basketball over near the rec/gym area. I wandered over and was glad to see it was a coed game. I wasn't sure I could handle an all male crowd yet. I sat down on the floor and watched them.

It was basketball. Or it was what basketball had turned into. The basket hovered about three meters

above the floor, but would on occasion shift on its axis and remain in that position for several minutes. And the ball seemed to take exaggerated bounces on occasion. They kept on playing, enjoying the time and camaraderie. Several waved at me, and I waved back. Finally, after about ten minutes, they took a breather, and three of the women came over to me. I recognized one as the tenor in the Birthday Suit trio. I didn't know the others.

"Hiya, Abby!? said the singer. She shoved out a sweaty hand. ? We haven't met formally, yet. I'm Kate Garvey. This is Lena Hacker and Rachel Breslin.? She jabbed a thumb at the men, who were keeping a respectful distance, and raised her voice. ? I'd introduce these dogs to you, but you seem like a lady.? They all laughed. She lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. ? Though you didn't seem too much a lady yesterday morning."

"You didn't, either, Kate.? I said, also in a low voice. ? But you're a great tenor.? We chuckled.

"We missed you this morning. I was hoping for a couple new tunes."

"Sorry, but I've got laundry."

"Laundry!?" Lena spoke for the first time. She shuddered. ? Jackson 's a jerk."

"That does seem to be the general opinion,? I agreed. ? Maybe I can get over on an off duty day. I miss the shower crowd. Even though I joined in only once, I felt, I don't know, comfortable.? They nodded, understanding.

"I was there, too,? said Rachel, ? but you probably didn't see me. It wasn't till later that morning that we realized you were the first, um...? she tried to find the right way.

"No, I wasn't, Rachel. Doctor Barrett said the same thing. Let's just forget it, all right? As far as I see it, the Birthday Suit Trio still has a very exclusive audience."

Kate breathed a sigh. ? Fine by me. I never thought it would be this hard. Hey, we're about to start up again. Why don't you join us? Do you know the game?"

I shrugged. ? Sure. It's called basketball. It was all the rage in my day. I even played forward in my college days.? They laughed, and I looked at them, confused. Lena saw my look.

"Abby, don't you realize how silly that sounds? I'm sure you did, but coming from the mouth of a, forgive me, runt like you, college sports is something to imagine."

"I know. I'm getting a lot of that. Still, don't underestimate me.? I paused. ? Though I'm probably not so hot at basketball anymore."

"Believe me, we're trying not to underestimate you,? said Kate. ? Especially after the way you worked over Lendler yesterday. C'mon, give it a try. We'll put you at guard. Only it's called targetball. Out of curiosity, why did they call it basketball?"

So I gave them history of the game as I remembered it. They seemed fascinated, partially from the history, partially because it was a teenager giving it. The guys took the court, playing as a team now. They were three to our four. I finished stretching and Lena threw me the ball.

It hit the floor once, then changed direction on the bounce. I adjusted quickly and caught it, but pretty awkwardly. It looked to be the same size, but was immense in my hands. It was also weighted to one side. The ball had a faint marking on it that traced out an oblong weight attached to the inside of the ball.

Having the ball, one of the men advanced on me. I deked him to the right, then dribbled to my left. The ball hit the floor once and veered off. I had to lunge to keep hold of it, which meant I had to pass it off. This was going to take time.

More time than I had, as it turned out. After half an hour, I was exhausted and had a stitch in my side. I had managed to score all of one basket on at least a dozen shots. I had learned a new game and had made several new friends, again all from Company A. I very much enjoyed myself, even though they were obviously holding back. Still, I was glad to see Susie standing on the sideline, cheering. I turned and waved just as Lena tossed me the ball. It hit me in the stomach and bounced to Forrest, the one with dark, curly hair and cute brown eyes. I shook my head, startled at the thought. I walked over to the sideline toward Susie. The game continued without me.

"You don't have to stop on my account, Abigail."

"You're right, Susie, ? I gasped out. ? I have to stop on my account. ? We watched them play, the intensity picking up considerably. A good crowd. I wondered how someone like Jackson could survive in an outfit like this. As we walked back to our quarters, I voiced the thought aloud. Susie became quiet.

"I'm afraid our ranks are always a little thin. Sometimes we get as good as we give. We keep the best up front, and tolerate soldiers like Jackson because by freeing up a first rate dog, he becomes as valuable as one.

"You'll see some in the front ranks now, too. But they're different. There was a time when we were all idealists. Everyone fought for the Cues. Now most of us do. The others fight because they have a hatred for NATEch, a personal vendetta, or just like to fight."

\* \* \* \*

How many things should I tell you? I could go on and on about even the smallest details, it was all so exciting to me. Looking back over my account, I see that I have been going over the smallest details. I have to beg your forgiveness, but if you've gotten this far, I suppose there had to be some value in it. There was so much for me to do, learn and experience. So much history, so much technology, so many relationships to build, and yes, a life to rebuild.

And all of it was intensified from my new point of view. As the days, then weeks, passed by, I became more and more aware of how much my sexuality affected my whole viewpoint of the world. My physique had started out and would forever stay female. I had in me all the normal chemicals, emotions, and needs that made me a young woman. ? Sugar and spice, and everything nice, that's what little girls are made of. ? I'd never paid much attention to the little poem, and when I did, it was with little curiosity and maybe even mild contempt. The differences between the genders was not so great as sugar and spice and snips, snails and puppy dog tails, I thought.

But it is. Everything that happened seemed to affect me more inside than anything that had happened when I had been male. I could get all weepy over a hug now, glow at a pleasant smile, sulk at the smallest insult or slight, or flare in anger over any injustice. And I took successes and failures much more personally. I wasn't an emotionless robot as a man. Of course I had feelings and emotions as a male. But they were more facets of me, portions that could be accessed. As a girl, these emotions and feelings were spread throughout me, affecting everything I thought, said and did.

Some of it could no doubt be attributed to my young age and maturing body. But even that only underscored the differences. The process of turning into a woman was so much more personal, yet so much more ... *public* than going through puberty as a boy. I could see now why this age could be more difficult ... no, more intense, for girls than boys. A lowering of the voice and thickening of the muscles

was nowhere near as personal as the enlarging of the breasts and hips. A boy becoming a man showed overall changes that accented his becoming a complete adult, better able to compete and survive in the world. But a girl's outward changes accented the most intimate portions of her body, and showed her becoming a complete woman. I don't suppose I can explain to half of you, and don't need to for the other half. But I wanted to share as best I could what I was going through. Why? Because it was important to me, now that I was a young woman. I was still me, but me had a new definition. And perhaps for the better, though I would never have given up being John Wyeth.

My training continued. Raul Sanchez helped me with my military advancement. I remained stuck at private second class, because of my age, but didn't really mind. He treated me as a person, and one whom he very much liked. Had I been about eight years older-but, no, there was no point and possible harm in that kind of speculation. He was my commanding officer and friend.

He took great pleasure in discussing tactics with me, though I found it to be only mildly interesting. I had been very active during my first military service, and had pride in what I had done for my country, but it was also a part of my life I was glad to emerge from. Sanchez seemed to understand, and after a while kept the conversations limited in length. But I learned a great deal from him.

I continued to make friends with most everyone, but especially with the ladies of Company A. After having said I was glad to emerge from my military service, I also realized that I had missed the camaraderie that came with soldiers who depended on each other for their lives. Although I had not seen any action, I knew they had gone through much to rescue my from my riping, and genuinely appreciated what reciprocation I could offer. I very much looked forward to the times when Company A came back from battle and I could listen to their tales and trade bawdy songs with them in the showers.

Sergeant Thawell provided most of my field training. He scoffed at the idea at first, calling it a waste of time. He kept referring to me as an it, and clearly thought of me as some sort of freak. I think he took me as an affront to his manhood, and thought me weak because I was now female, though there were over a dozen women in Company A whom he treated as equals. We were getting nowhere fast. So one afternoon in the mountains, during combat drill, I took him aside and explained things to him. Wanting to emphasize my points, I broke his arm and three ribs before he started taking me seriously. When he did, I had no chance. He put up a good argument, bloodying my nose and breaking my wrist, but he eventually came around to my point of view, and we got along fine after that.

Physically, Susie drove me to the limits of my small, pliable body. I think she was trying to have me grow into my body, until it was as much me as my mind was me. In that she was very successful. In time, I looked back at how I started out and laughed at how positive I was that I could never be a complete woman. I still had mixed emotions when looking at men, but it was possible now, as I looked at them, to think that I could one day get married. But that was still years of living and growing away.

Mentally, Susie again drove me to my limits. It was here that I think I surprised even myself. I still retained all my memories and reasoning skills. It was in these that I was most centered. They were most probably why I was able to make the adjustment physically, and also most probably why the IHAD affected me so deeply.

I continued to train in using the computer interface, but it was almost a waste of time. It was so much Chris Young's work that it was like traveling back in time, and using the puterverse became one of my favorite activities. I had six centuries of catching up to do, and it is impossible to know a society without knowing its history. Within a week, I was handling the interface like I had grown up with it. I think it was here that I began to be accepted as something other than a misplaced identity. They still didn't allow me into the Research center. Susie kept telling me it was because of the intensive work that was going on as they continued research on a prospective Cue. That may have been true for the most part, but I was

beginning to think that they didn't trust me fully yet. Other than a vague irritation at being put under this restriction, I understood their feelings; I would have done the same thing myself.

Even Jackson helped me out, though with him I'm sure it was completely unintentional. He made my duty hours a living hell. The man had a genius for demeaning and insulting and abusing without stepping over that razor thin line that would result in either his court-martial at Sanchez's hands or death by mine. He didn't want to lose me, because I made his life very enjoyable. Instead of having to do all the work now, he split the time between his ? paper work? and his abuse of me. He helped on occasion, when it looked like I couldn't keep up, but he tried to keep it minimal. I will say one thing in Jackson's weak defense: I don't think it mattered one whit to him whether I was girl or boy. He never harassed me sexually, and while I hated his guts, I did not have the fear of him that I could have had.

Susie guessed at some of what was happening, but kept her anger to herself at my request. I tolerated it because it kept me grounded. As John Wyeth, I'd had a very secure life. I was treated with respect and perhaps a little fear because of my status. In the military, I was called sir and my every order was obeyed because of who and what I was. Then at NATech I had risen quickly to Twenty Year Project Leader and was one of only six people who reported directly to the boss. At my word, two hundred people would drop everything they were doing and shift to a new project.

All that was gone. I commanded no respect beyond the respect given every person. My artificial status as a privileged Cue was fading, as it should, and I became less and less a Cue and more and more a young girl. Jackson kept me in my place. As I said, I tolerated and even appreciated it. Until the day he stepped way over the line.

\* \* \* \*

As I had done for several weeks, I reported to the laundry at 0350. Jackson was there, as always. He started at 0200, but did little while waiting for me to show up. The laundry was dropped off by personnel, then picked up by them. (Noncoms and officers had their laundry picked up and dropped off. That's how I had mine picked up, because I was Susie's roomy.) They had perfected a process of identification that allowed clothing to be cleaned in a bunch, then sorted automatically by machine. All I had to do was pour the bundles into one of the four massive washing machines, shift the damp, clean clothing to the dryers, then the sorter, then back into the bags. Folding was done by the individual. Because of this and the invention of such efficient identification and sorting, the laundry detail could be performed by one person, as I'd mentioned earlier.

I stepped in ten minutes early and went straight to work, ignoring Jackson who was busy with his terminal. As always, he shut off all outside access by cutting in the door sight and sound shields.

I'd worked for about an hour when he came over for his first round of daily abuse. Once it became obvious that I wasn't going to report him, he had begun testing how far he could take me. I'd figured out how to keep him on a leash; if he went too far, I simply worked slower, leaving him just that much more to do. He had a double-edged sword: if I didn't report him, he couldn't report me. I wasn't fond of doing less than I was capable of, but it was all I could come up with, short of physical confrontation, which I wanted to avoid. And I didn't have to use the tactic much. In fact, it had been a couple weeks since I'd last purposely left him work. Susie's conditioning had worked wonders with my strength, and while my frame was too small to ever be too strong, my endurance had increased to the point that I could handle my detail.

He leaned against one of the counters and watched me for several minutes. I was, as always, soaked in sweat. I undid another of the endless bundles and poured the clothing into the machine. As I shifted the contents-this bundle was from the women's quarters I remember-I wondered what he was going to do

today. Sometimes it was verbal abuse, other times it was physical. He never hit me, but he'd find some imagined breach of my duties and he'd have me do sit-ups or pushups. I preferred the physical, because it left me in a more even temper and gave me a challenge to match his 'discipline'. Again, he couldn't give too much because it cut into my working time. He shifted his weight and crossed his arms.

"Pathetic. That's what you are, Wyeth. Pathetic. I don't know why they keep me in this stinking detail, but you were born for it."

"Knock it off, Jackson ."

"Why? Does the truth hurt, private second class Wyeth?"

I'd had a rough day yesterday and really wasn't in the mood. I'd pulled a back muscle working on the bars, and it still hurt whenever I lifted my arms above my shoulders, which was all the time when on laundry duty. Maybe that's why I did what I did. Picking up a particularly rancid sock, I offered it to him. ? Here, stuff this. You're not even original today. Go back and catch up on your paper work."

His eyes narrowed, and he looked like he wanted to belt me. I turned back to my work and tried to ignore him. But he wouldn't let it go.

"Smart mouth! Okay, I'll be original. ? He lowered his voice, which should have made it easier to ignore him but in fact made me involuntarily listen. ? So tell me, Wyeth, are you over your IHAD yet?"

Although it was several weeks gone, the effects still lingered, which was causing Dr. Barrett some concern. I stiffened at the term, and Jackson spotted it. He laughed.

"Kind of a wimp, aren't you? Scared of a little interrogation?? His voice went slower, and took on a menacing tone. ? You have to answer, Wyeth! This is an IHAD."

"Stop it! Stop it now!? I felt a knot in my stomach. I dropped the clothes I was loading and clutched my gut. He laughed. ? This isn't fu-funny, Jackson ! Stop it!"

He suddenly stepped forward and grabbed my arms. I turned sick eyes up to his. His eyes were sick, too, but in a different way.

"Whatsa matter, princess? Life not going well? You're worthless! You let yourself be interrogated! Careful! They're out to get you, Wyeth! Answer the questions!"

*THE ANSWER TO YOUR INQUIRY, CITIZEN, IS 10,394.*

"Ques-questions?? I was getting woozy. Fear burned through me at his warning, and I felt the nameless dread hunt me again. *NO! I didn't do this! I was not responsible!* ? It's not my fault!? I cried.

"Of course it's your fault! It's all your fault! Look out! Here they come!? I cried out, and he laughed again. ? Say it's your fault."

*GEOSATELITE 87F IS REPORTING ANOTHER SHIFTING OF THE SAN ANDREAS FAULT . EPICENTER LOCATION BEING CALCULATED ... HOLD ... EPICENTER IS LOCAT...*

With all my strength, I weakly shook my head. ? No. No, it's not!"

"Yes it is! Say it is. It's always the Cue's fault. And you're a Cue. That makes it your fault! Oh, no! It's inside you now, Wyeth! Your mind belongs to them now! You should be ashamed of yourself! Answer the questions."

*THE ANSWER TO YOUR QUESTION, CITIZEN, IS THE ROSE, TULIP AND DANDELION...*

THE ANSWER TO YOUR QUESTION, CITIZEN, IS YES ... IS YES ... NO ...  
NONOYESNOYESNOSEYEONSEOYESNOEYYOSNESOYENOSEYONSEOSNEOSYES...

"Please stop, ? I whimpered. ? I'm sorry. It's my fault. Please stop."

*PLEASE STOP AT THE INDICATED PAD AND PROVIDE IDENTIFI...*

He released me, and I fell into the pile of clothing at my feet. My back hurt. At his shouted warning, I twitched out the way. They had come to take me away! My mind wasn't mine anymore! The humiliation sprang to life and began feeding my fear. I curled up and started sobbing. A man's disgusted voice cut through my terror.

*...TEAR OR POSSIBLY A RAGGED CUT AT THE AFT SHIELD PLATE WILL ALLOW FOR QUICKEST...*

"I've always hated your kind. These stupid people waste time and energy bringing back trash better left as the machines they were found in. Look at you! How can somebody like you even be considered an equal? Yet they treat you like you were worth something. Worth more than me. ? His voice changed, and he nudged me with his foot. ? Tell me it's your fault!? he ordered.

"It's my fault!? I despaired. My insides hurt, like they were bleeding.

*I DON'T MIND THE BLEEDING, AS LONG AS YOU'RE HAPPY.. OHHH...*

"Now apologize! Hurry, here they come again! Quick! Apologize!"

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

*...BUT ACCESS CAN ONLY BE ALLOWED TO TENANTS BETWEEN 2 AM AND 6...*

Make them go away! Please!"

*NARROW THE PARAMETER OF YOUR SEARCH. THERE ARE CURRENTLY EIGHT HUN...*

I begged, using the last of my strength. This huge figure standing over me chuckled. Cold poured

*PRESS ... COOL ... RESET ... POUR ... PRESS ... COOL ... RESET ... POUR ... PRESS ... COOL ... RESET ... POUR*

over me as the terror sank its talons into my soul. With the cold came darkness and weakness and loneliness and despair and fear and oblivion.

"No. I'm going to let them stay. Answer the questions!"

"yes ... I'll ... answer ... the ... ques"

*TIONS WILL BE ANSWERED ONCE YOUR VOICE CLEARANCE HAS BEEN VERIFIED ... CHECKING ... YES, MR. PREMIER, THE CHANNEL IS OPEN TO THE ? TRAVELER? AND HAS BEEN SECURED. ONE 01101MOMENT, PLEASE ... CAPTAIN PARKS IS AWAITING THE FINAL 01101001RDER TO COMMENCE SATURATION*

"She's sharding! Quick! Induce deep Healer's ... Watch that EK..."



*BOMBING ON MARS COLO110001NY HERMES ... CO010100111DING RECEIVED ...  
T110RIA10N0S10MIITTING..*

"We can't stabilize! Open primary cerebral probe to multiple burst, inten.."

*.TR11000A10N11010S101M011101TT11ING10.1 ... TRA0001N10S1*

00M110I1100T10011T00110101001101I001010N11010101G1101.1.101

"Abigail! Come on, sweetie! You've got to fight ... damn! She's going..."

**101010110110101101011011111011010101001010101010101010100**

**100101010101011011001001010101101010101010101101101010101**

**010101001010010101011001010101001001101011010101010010100**

**101010010101011001101011010100110101100101110101001010010**

"NOW! Recharge and reset ... increase oxygenation to forty..."

**1010100101010100101010101010100100101101010101010001101**

**110101010010110110101101010010101110111011010110101010011**

**101010100101010101010100001010101010110101110101010101011**

"...up to you Abigail. Abigail? It's Susie. Hang on, kid. Doctor Barr..."

**10100101010100011001101010101010110110101101010101....**

\* \* \* \*

.... 1011010001.. 2 ... 0012.... 00..1102..011001.0.1001012..0101001

**11001101010010100102010010010102.02.10012.02..0101.0101011001**

101.2..22.. 02..200101110012.0100202010010120102.1020100..010101

"en, but I see ye won first prize! Hey, Abby! It's Kate! We need a coupla more tunes! You mentioned one about a submarine sailor and her..."

**10201001102.0112101010112.0101010.01010122.102100120102.0010**

"she mentioned that after they found out your favorite color they would find the prettiest dress they could, then throw you the..."

200201200120120102002200201201 ... STABLE UNBOUND TRINARY CODING HAS BEEN  
ACHIEVED. THIS UNIT IS NOW CAPABLE OF PERFORMING FULLY JUDGMENTAL  
PROGRAMMING. BEGINNING PRIMARY ACCESS CODING FOR UNIT INTERNAL  
DIAGNOSTICS. ESTIMATED TIME FOR SELF-DIAGNOSTIC WILL BE NINETY-ONE HOURS,  
FIFTEEN MINUTES, THREE SECONDS. BEGIN TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ...  
TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ...  
TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ...  
TESTING...

[gentle crying]

TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ...  
 TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ...  
 TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ...  
 TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ... TESTING ...  
 TESTING ... TESTING ... TE ... THIS UNIT HAS COMPLETED SELF DIAGNOSTICS.  
 ELAPSED TIME: NINETY-ONE HOURS, FIFTEEN MINUTES, TWO POINT NINE THREE  
 SECONDS...

WHEN IT'S TWILIGHT ON THE TRAIL, AND I REST ONCE MORE, MY CEILING

"is the sky, and the grass on which I lie, is my home.?" The haunting melody soothingly traced its sweet path along my mind.

"Abigail? Was that you?? I heard a scrape of a stool on the floor and felt my hand being taken. It was pitch dark, the darkness of Healer's Sleep. There was no disorientation this time, but instead the comfortable peace of knowing I was safe.

"Oh, Abigail!?" Susie's voice was so lost and sad that my heart thudded at her grief. She laid her head down on my chest and wept. I wanted so much to tell her that I knew she was here. Trying to disconnect myself, I drifted off onto tangent after tangent after tangent of thought. Then, without thinking, I squeezed her hand briefly.

She gasped and lifted her head. I felt a tear splash on my cheek, and I cried quietly myself, unable to

control myself, nor wanting to. She pressed her warm hand against my cheek and wiped away the tear. She kissed me on the cheek and held me tight. I felt her body shudder as she cried. I was home where I belonged.

END OF BOOK ONE