

The Textile Planet

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Chapter One

Immediately following Marla Gershe's nonexistent coffee break at three in the afternoon, a policeman shot her through the mid-section with one of those newfangled xanthan guns. That simple act changed her life forever. Actually, her life had been changing slowly over the previous few months, but everything came to a head starting at 5:15 a.m. the day she was shot. Let's take a look.

5:15 a.m.

"Mama! Where's Sa..." Marla Gershe barged through the aluminum doors leading to the looming floor, stopping abruptly to stare at the far wall where ten names on the in-board lit up red confirming the obvious: Mama had only half a staff. The flimsy doors behind Gershe waffled in the silence. She looked over at the short woman wearing optical enhancers on her nose.

"Where are your weavers?" Marla called, jerking her head toward the nearly empty room. Five in the morning and she was already annoyed.

Mama, whose name nobody knew, was referred to by her position as head weaver. She stood with the lint screen from the third shift's leavings in one hand and a shop vac suction in the other. Her loom, hooked directly up to the Anthusian CIA (Central Intelligence Agent—some would describe it as a mainframe), was the largest and most complicated machine in the room. The cast iron affair, proudly as wide as a shed, held a conglomeration of wooden warp frame, plastic computer components, weft attachment, high-speed shuttle, and numerous LED readout panels. There was a little coffee cup holder next to her, set at waist height, on her right.

Mama looked over her specs at Marla. Five in the morning and she was already annoyed.

"Parker shifted 'em over to O'Halloran," she said, apparently bored with the ineptitude of upper management. "Supposed to be some big do there today. The president's over for a visit, or something." She switched on the pump ending the conversation without so much as an editorial "naturally," or "as usual," or "of course."

The day's ten weavers, by now arriving at their respective stations (which, being only the size of a cow's trough, were puny compared to Mama's), mimicked her actions down the line, turning on their vacuum pumps and cleaning out the third shift's lint leavings. The dust in the room had only recently settled from the previous shift's activities. It swirled up in the ritualized onset of the first shift, filling the air with the familiar smell of dust, must, and rust that made Marla Gershe think of an Okie panhandle — the likes of which she had never in her life experienced so how the hell would she even know.

"That's great!" Marla said, kicking Mama's unit. "God forbid they'd slack us off in comp." Then raising

her voice over the noise of the vacuuming, she said to no one in particular, “Where’s Saddle? Where’s today’s designs?”

“Here Marla,” a voice called from behind her.

Marla spun around and saw the waifish owner of the cutest black bobbed haircut any employee of BAC Enterprises ever had the nerve to sport.

Saddle rushed up breathlessly, pink plastic barrettes perched on top of her head to hold back her overgrown bangs. She wore a fluffy pink sweater — undersized—with a ribbon trimming the neckline.

“You late today?” Marla asked.

“No,” Saddle replied, handing Marla a sheaf of papers. The top one had a turquoise patch of fabric glued onto it. “I noticed you weren’t in your office so I ran out to find you. We’ve got an awful day ahead of us, I think.”

Marla grabbed the papers and began sifting through. “No shit,” she said. “There’s a full show here with only half a staff. Where’s that fucking Parker?”

“I don’t know, but they gave us a couple of zingers too.”

“Great!” Marla headed back through the aluminum double doors and out into the noiseless hallway. “Get me Parker’s access number.”

“Here, Marla, here.” Saddle scrambled after her, holding out her personal pink buzzer with its accompanying bubblegum mixed with lipstick odor.

Marla stopped abruptly and grabbed the yakker, pushing “send.” She grimaced at the yakker’s fragrance and waited as the line played its annoying double beep. Finally, the receiver clicked on.

“Parker?” Marla jumped in. “Did you know...”

“Grant Parker is unable to receive at the moment. Please buzz back or press ‘call back’ to have him return your buzz when appropriate.”

“Fuckin’ hell!” Marla blurted out in obvious exasperation, hitting the end button. “Where’s Torpid at on this thing?” She pointed with her finger at the hologram screen, randomly searching for the phone book.

“He’s in there,” Saddle answered, stepping over to see if she could help. “Press T.”

Marla fiddled with the colored lights, alternately selecting some sequence and then placing the earpiece next to her head. At one point, the object screeched so loudly, the lift down the hall summoned itself to the loom floor, thinking it had heard a call of some sort. “Floor please,” it asked after its gates opened and it had been sitting there for about ten seconds without anyone ordering a floor.

Frustrated, Marla tossed the yakker to Saddle and made her way down to the lift, thinking she might as well take advantage of it since it was already here. “You need to get that thing fixed or something. Where’s mine, by the way?”

Saddle caught the unit mid-air and hit “clear” and then punched up the point list. Two seconds later, she

was running after Marla holding the crescent box in front of her. “Here’s the line, Marla,” she called.

She handed the yakker over while Marla stuck one foot on the lift’s pad to keep it from leaving.

“Yeah, hi, Gershe here,” Marla said into the yakker. “Listen, Parker took half my staff for something over at O’Halloran and I’ve got a full show. I gotta get some weavers. I need half a dozen, or the zingers those asshole third shift designers put on my scroll gotta disappear.”

“We need the zingers, Marla,” Torpid answered like a father who’s gone over this a thousand times before but junior just isn’t getting the fact that taking out the trash is his special place in the world. When he gets his own house and pays his own taxes, then he can make up the rules, but until then, Dad’s in charge.

“The line is flagging,” Torpid continued. “You know this. Just settle down. I’ll see if I can borrow some people from Ted. He’s not going to like it; it’s the second time this month you’re asking favors.”

“I’m asking favors? Who put all this together? Those freeze heads on the night shift are strung out on Dolly pills and I’m asking favors? Parker took my — hold on.”

She placed her finger over the mouthpiece and hollered over to Saddle who had been faithfully hanging around. “Go back and tell Mama to clean out all the machines before she starts. We may be getting more people, and even if we don’t, if one of the looms craps the bed, another one will be ready immediately. The fabric is going to be late this morning anyway.”

Saddle turned to go back through the looming doors.

“And send up a double for me, black,” Marla called to her. “I’ll be in the office.”

“Okay.”

“And one for yourself and Mama, and the whole crew in there.”

“One?”

“Don’t be smart. I’m too pissed off. Put it on Parker’s tab.”

The lift had started nagging her about holding it by now so she stepped onto the platform, flicking her hand over the little window for her floor — 410.

“Well, well, you sound like you’re handling things there, Gershe,” Torpid said through the yakker. “Fine job.”

“Fine job, my ass. This is the third time this week some shit like this has happened and it’s...”

“...only Wednesday. Yeah, I know. What you gonna do? Ever since Campbell...”

“...went plastic, yeah I know, we have to quick-march to keep our prices down. It’s bullshit. Keep ‘em up high. Natural fabrics...”

“...are worth more... Yeah I know. Is there some way we can not have this conversation some morning? Listen, you’re doing your job, you’ll pull through. Get a double, take some Tums. See you...”

“...after the show. Yeah, I know.” She clicked the yakker off, stashed it in her back pocket, and ran out as the lift stopped on her floor. She was in her office by the time the elevator said, “Four hundred and ten.”

Leaning against the edge of her work organizer, she shuffled through the sheets with the day’s show designs. Papers from previous shows lay strewn about the floor, on the two high chairs, on the standing light box, on her organizer hovering in the middle of the room, on the storage units. In short, pieces of Marla Gershe’s life — a gigantic puzzle, perhaps never to be assembled — covered every horizontal surface of her office. The daily designs that made up each do, the threads and fabrics to show the designs off, the themes of the moments, the desired effects, the colors, the swirls, the sweat and tears, and most important, the money to be made by this line of BAC’s textile enterprises, were all there in a convoluted mess. If someone put the last year’s collection of bits and pieces of fiber lying here and everywhere in order, not only would Marla Gershe have a clear picture of what she had been doing for 52 weeks of her life, but she’d easily be able to find the controls to Agnes — the CIA mentioned earlier — that were installed somewhere on her hovering organizer.

Alas, that would not be happening any time soon. She stood, leaning and flipping through the current orders, searching for the zingers Saddle mentioned.

“Knobby double knit — one bolt,” she mumbled to herself. “Reversible mohair — one bolt. Japanese hand weave...what the fuck?”

Six more pages of cotton/linen type mixes and then the zingers: a pink taffeta with some sort of metallic cross-grain shellacked in, and a new stretch knit she’d never heard of. According to the sheet, the thread to work with it hadn’t even been invented yet. The sample patch wasn’t even there. Even the “freezeheads” couldn’t put it together.

She reached for the yakker and pushed “last.” The tone double beeped an interminable amount of time. Finally, it rang clear.

“I can’t do this,” she jumped in before Torpid answered. “I need...”

“Dread Torpid is not available at the moment. Please buzz...”

“God dammit!” she shrieked, throwing the crescent-shaped yakker (some people called their personal communicators bananas) at the wall in disgust. Its gelphan coating cushioned the blow when it hit the wall and simultaneously attached it there, just as it was designed to do.

“Fuck!” she said, sinking into her high seat and dropping her head into her hands.

“I’m sorry?” the walls to her office were confused as to what she wanted.

Marla sat at her desk littered with yesterday’s and last week’s and last month’s programs, sample sheets, and patch pieces. She shoved it all onto the floor and sat with her eyes crammed into the palms of her hands. She would’ve cried if she’d had the time for it. She would’ve quit if her short-circuiting brain could have thought about it. All she could do was run through options in her head and try to remember how to run a loom.

Finally, after about five seconds of respite, she lifted her head and answered the walls.

“I need the list of hand weavers brought up. Click message each one — local please, no email — and see who can come in today. Forward any replies from anybody to me immediately.”

“Even Doran?”

“Oh Christ! No, not him. Anybody but him. Don’t even call Doran.”

“How are you going to get a message if your yakker’s stuck to the wall?”

“Just call please. And that’s Saddle’s phone anyway.”

“Where’s yours?”

“I don’t know, why don’t you tell me?”

“I don’t know. Where did you leave it?”

“Oh Gad! How the hell should I know, you bleeping idiot.”

“Don’t get nasty just because I’m not ambulatory. It’s in your wastebasket at home, where you threw it last night.”

“Fine. Have them call Saddle’s phone when you send out the messages.” Marla began thumbing the invo pad installed on the upper right corner of her organizer, signing her print onto each piece of paper.

“Agnes!”

“Yes.”

“Is Saddle’s still working?” Marla asked sheepishly.

“What is a Saddles?”

“Saddle’s phone.”

“Yes.”

Just then, Saddle herself bounced through the door on a wave of company coffeearoma—raunchy, rich, and double caffeine. She set one of the steaming cups on Marla’s organizer.

“Mama’s pissed,” she said. “Said she doesn’t have time to clean two machines when she’s got a full show.”

“Is she doing it anyway?” Marla asked.

“Of course.”

“Well then, what do you care?”

“I’m just sayin’ . . . hey! What’s my banana doing on the wall?”

“I put it there so I wouldn’t lose it.”

“Oh, good idea.” Saddle moved to the far wall to grab it.

“I need that,” Marla said. “Leave it, please. Agnes is going to call with names of hand weavers that can make it in today.”

“Christ! You mean we have to hand-weave today?”

“Yeah.”

“Tell them no. We can’t do that today.”

“‘Tell them no.’ Yeah, right.”

“You can say ‘no’.”

“Just like Mama can say ‘no’?”

“This isn’t fair. This is the third time this week we’ve had more than our share.”

“Yeah, well, you do good work, keep mopping up spills, etc. and you get more of the same. That’s the way it is. Hopefully, in the end you get paid in kind. Can you process these please?” She handed the sheets to Saddle, her thumbprint signature having been added at this point.

“Yeah, right!” Saddle stood and stared at her, deliberately ignoring the papers in Marla’s outstretched hand. “They’ve been hinting at no pay raises again because of what Campbell’s doing.”

“Just take the papers and keep track of what’s happening. We can grieve later. Next week.”

“Next week, next month. We don’t have time to grieve. Besides that’s a Union thing. We’re not in the Union. Tell you what though, one day Mama or somebody down there is going to knock a hole in her head and then we’ll all be grieving for real.”

“Yeah, OK, at least we’ll have time to complain then. Please, get these fabric orders to Barge, so he can get started, so Mama can get started, so we can get started.”

“Oh don’t worry about Mama. She’s still cleaning the second machines and trying to buck up her staff.”

“Good, good.”

Saddle snatched the papers and stomped out of the room, her yellow plasto-pants swishing angrily.

Marla sat down with the two zingers and started flipping through formula buttons on the centered pad of her organizer. The computer was just about to give one of her programmed joke lines, like “Ooooooh, that tickles,” when Marla hit the “No Discourse” button just in time.

The formula for the new fabrics — the zingers — had to be found soon. That would give Barge and his boys in the basement enough time to dig through the piles of dusty spools that were dragged out once every decade, whenever a genius designer came up with a brilliant something or other they were convinced would be the “start of something grand,” but actually wound up embarrassingly outdated within

a few weeks. Something like their famous “fishweave” — nylon fishing line woven across graphite fibers complete with baby three-way hooks tacked on at intervals. Everyone from the weavers to the mannequin dressers went home with bloody body parts that day. With any luck, last night’s designers were in a conservative frame of mind, and they hadn’t mixed any alcohol with their Dolly pills. All she needed right now was to have to work with some sort of exploding-sequin coated zinc/poly alloy. That would top the whole day.

Just as she found the last thread number for the bizarre taffeta piece, Saddle burst back into the room.

“There’s a reversible mohair here, that takes twice as long.”

“Yeah, I saw that. Put that one last. I’ll do it myself if I have to.”

“You’re kidding! The Union’ll bust you.”

“Oh, I’m so scared. The Union. The Union that allows its workers to quicktime four days out of five? That Union?”

“Fuck!” Saddle spun on her heels and through the door, plasto-pants positively livid this time.

Marla whipped through the electronic pages frantically looking for a substitute for the thread on her list that hadn’t been invented yet. Nothing compatible came up. The stretch capacity of the new knit was so high, everything on hand would be tensioned to break if used with it.

“What the fuck is it made out of?” Marla asked herself. “Mucilage?”

“Rubber bands,” Agnes answered aloud, and then it started spewing out formulas as fast as Marla flipped through the pages.

“What?” Marla yelled, glancing at the toggle switches on her organizer; her arm must have bumped the “No Discourse” button to the ‘off’ position. “Shut up!” She hollered slamming the offending button ‘on’ again.

She grabbed the cup of coffee, gulping the contents without noticing the scald. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and continued scrolling through pages of formulas.

“Rubber bands, rubber bands, rubber bands,” she incanted.

Knocking the “No Discourse” button off, she asked, “How many hand weavers have you come up with?”

Just as she asked the question, Saddle’s yak box, still hanging on the wall, rang.

“There’s one now,” Agnes answered. “But to answer your question, I sent out fifteen calls.”

Marla wheeled herself back to the wall where the mellophone was buzzing and grabbed it.

“Marla Gershe here.”

“Hello? You called?”

“You do hand jobs?” Marla asked. “Who are you? I’m not clocking an ID on you.”

“Yes, of course. My line is disrupted so my ID doesn’t disseminate at the moment, but I’ve worked for you before. It’s Charlo Doran.”

Marla winced and mouthed “Christ” to herself.

“Uh, listen. Not sure if we’re going to need you after all. I’m trying to change the program. Oh, wait a second. You ever worked with latex?”

“You bet, Marlie girl. Latex, teflo-tape, pine tar, sweet gum, anything sticky or stretchy. That’s my specialty.”

“Why is that not a surprise?” Marla said. “Listen, get in here in half an hour. See Sivia on 200, she’ll have directions.”

Marla’s day continued in this vein throughout the morning. The activity intensified and the stakes gradually, almost imperceptibly, rose. By 8am Marla was on her fifth cup of scavenged coffee, one of which had been left over from the previous night’s show. It was cold and had a cigarette butt in it. Marla didn’t notice.

Periodically she was reminded through various events and conversations that Grant Parker’s show at O’Halloran was infinitely more important than hers. Nothing punctuated that more than when Al Shurm, president of BAC, and two of his lackeys, one of which was Lamont—her boss’ boss— showed up on the looming floor for a publicity inspection.

Marla was setting up a loom for herself at the time. Union rules were adamant: no management was allowed to weave, but Marla was desperate. Half her staff had been sent to Parker. At the same time, her show had not been trimmed to compensate. Somebody had to weave the patterns.

The Pres and his boys listened to her complaints about the situation as well as the assertion that she’d get grieved for stepping on Union workers’ toes. They responded by admiring her creativity under adversity. They continued on in their photo-op inspection, pestering Mama with questions and viewing out-of-date equipment stored in the room but having nothing to do with the facility’s operations.

The comedy graduated to tragedy when Agnes died. It just quit working. Saddle had only then started preparing the night’s printed program on Marla’s computer (her own was offline itself due to a local malfunction) when one final whine and crank signaled the end of activity.

By now Marla should have been pretty much off her head, but besides the fact that she had lost half her staff, this morning had been true to type. Boring almost. Things were about to warm up, though.

11:00 a.m.

“Saddle!”

“Torpid called,” Saddle replied without waiting for Marla to ask anything.

“Where’s your box?”

Saddle tossed her the yakker.

“How’s the layout coming?” Marla asked.

“I didn’t get yesterday’s program downloaded before Agnes, uh, doo dooded the bed; so I’m starting from scratch.”

“Oh Christ! When’s that copywriter getting here?”

“Half an hour. The tailor’s downstairs; says she’s got a bunch of mannequins but no specs and no bolts.”

“And Agnes isn’t a priority. Great! Torpid? Gershe here. Why is Parker’s mannequin a higher priority than Agnes here? I got...”

“Look, I don’t have time for your whining. Lamont was just in here. Said you were yapping to the president about having no loomers.”

“Nothing I never said to you before. How’m I supposed to put a show together with half a staff and now my CIA is down? You want me to walk everything through? I should be down on the floor helping Mama kick the shit out.”

“It’s not my fault you left your yakker at home. The president wants you to double the rate of your workers just for today. They get no lunch — twice pay for half an hour. Don’t loom yourself, you’ll get grieved.”

“Grieved? How about a lawsuit from the occupational hazard board for double-timing the weavers? Half the day’s already gone. We need to cut the show, we’re never going to make it. Listen, I gotta go walk the paperwork down to the tailor. Get the show backed off, I’ll do what I can with the weavers, but there is no way we can get this full show tonight.”

“You don’t get the full show and it’ll come out of your pay.”

Dead silence and then, “You’re kidding, right?”

“Dead serious.”

More silence. “And you have the nerve to tell me to stay off the loom?”

“Dead serious.”

Marla stared at the wall in front of her. No one said anything.

“What’s going on?” Saddle interrupted the silence.

“I have no idea,” Marla replied, slowly handing the box back to Saddle. “No idea.”

“What do you want to do with the tailor?”

“Oh, just work on the program. Have the copywriter sit at the machine with you. Save it to tape when you’re done, and we’ll pump it in later if we get Agnes working. I’ll be back soon.” She said it all slowly with a quiet little voice. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Ms. Gershe?” The tech working on Saddle’s machine called through the open door. “What do you want me to do?”

A rush of aromodromed damask rose air spread out into the hallway from Saddle’s office. Marla inhaled deeply, raised her left eyebrow and answered. “Um, why don’t you fix that computer in there.” She paused and then continued. “Call your boss and ask if you can fix Agnes before heading out to yet another priority assignment for the fabulous Grant Parker.”

The tech thought for a second. “Um. OK.”

Marla inhaled again. “Fine.”

The tech waited a beat. “Fine.”

“See you later,” said Marla.

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

Marla smiled and stared at the wall. Finally, she turned from where she was standing in Saddle’s office doorway, walked to the lift and waved her hand sluggishly over the ‘down’ button.

The lift lazily came to a stop and the gates softly opened as if it, too, was shocked at the extreme insensitivity of BAC’s middle and upper management. Marla stepped in and waved for the loom floor. The lift slowly descended to three and opened its gates for her. She hesitated before pushing through the double doors, rehearsing in her head what she’d tell Mama.

On the loom floor, she motioned to Mama to step outside. Mama gave the “Are you nuts” look, but obediently placed the loom on standby, braking the shuttle. Pulling herself from in front of the machine, she walked to where Marla held the doors open for her. Once outside Mama said, “Now what?”

“Listen, Mama. Management has gone overboard now. I don’t know what to say, but they’re taking away lunchtime for a half an hour of double pay. Also they’re increasing the rate for today to double.”

“You’re joking of course. Really sick, Gershe.”

“Dead serious, Mama. They’re telling me if we don’t meet the full show, it’s coming off my pay.”

“And we’ll all be docked then. Bastards!”

“No, I’m not letting it trickle down. I took this crummy job. The shit stops here.”

“Look, why’d you even tell me this? They’re already pissed. They saw you setting up. If you move one string, they’ll grieve.”

“Like I care at this point.”

“They’re pissed beyond that. There’s just so much someone can do.”

“Tell them what I said, pass the orders around. If they give up, they give up. But at least I did my job

and passed the order on, and you too. Tell them I ordered them to do it — don't mention my pay deal. Tell them if they don't do it, I'll have to loom myself. If they don't they don't. I don't know what else to do."

"If they do it, you'd better not touch that yellow loom."

"You're right. Listen, where are we at?"

"Well, we got everything late. There's half a staff and it's 11:30. We're about one-third done."

"That's not good. We should be at two-thirds by now. Yeah, they gotta double the rate. I'll send down some liquid lunch. Just do your best, Mama. And have the medro send up the patterns to Minzt so she can start figuring out her sizes before the bolts even get there."

Marla patted her on the back as she turned to the lift, not quite sure what her next move should be.

Returning to her office, she grabbed Saddle's yakker and ordered lunch for her crew and a coffee to be sent up for herself. By now, the tech had finished in Saddle's office, so Dittle, the copywriter, could start on the copy for the night's show program. With Agnes down, however, there were no sheets for Dittle to work from, so instead of grinding out the current show's copy, Dittle sat in Saddle's high chair mindlessly spinning on the seat's axis like a kindergartner on a bar stool. Marla decided it was a good time to check in on the mannequins to see how the fitting was going, since the only copier capable of handling patterns happened to be located on 72.

The mannequins, a mob of gibbering, jabbering, primping robots in the style of Rosie, the Jetsons' maid (except that they were shapely and tall, very tall — eight feet tall—and had legs) had come in earlier. They were highly programmed, updated with the latest software, but unable to take orders from anyone but Marla. Even then they misunderstood them most of the time. They didn't quite get that they needed to remain in the sizing room to get fitted. Most of the morning they spent walking around the Anthusian Unit looking for Marla to give her a cup of coffee.

Down at Sully's sizing room, she proceeded to demand answers from Minzt the tailor.

"Where's the bolts?"

"Nothing here yet."

"I just left the floor, they had a third of the work done."

"Nothing here yet."

"Where's your box?"

"Oh no you don't. You're not taking my phone."

"I'm not leaving the room. I'm just calling down to check after the bolts. You know we're losing 5,000 a minute when we're not selling."

"An hour. Yeah, yeah. Listen, where's your box?"

"An hour, a minute, might as well be a million a minute. Broke. What's it to you? Sully, can I borrow

your phone?" she asked the fitting room coordinator and then turned back to Minzt. "Let me have the patterns for a copy wouldja? I need them for the copywriter."

"Forget it. Use my box. I'll make the copies." Minzt tossed the yakker to Marla and proceeded to an adjoining room to make pattern copies.

"Thanks," Marla replied as she punched up the transit authority's button. Just as the back wall to the room — the freight elevator entrance — was opening, a characteristic whine was heard from that quarter indicating a squawker going off.

Marla heard a "Yeah?" emitted through the authority's yakker earpiece and stereophonically from the room at the same time. She clicked the box off and addressed the transit officer who was just getting off the freighter with Mama's completed one-third.

"Where were you?" she shouted across the room.

"Hello? Hello?" the transit guy kept talking into his yakker as he wheeled the bin of fabric into the room. At one point, he looked at the yakker quizzically and then stashed it in his front pocket, resuming his pushing of the bin over to the side-receiving table. He never answered Marla's question.

"Finally," Minzt said upon entering the room and seeing the fabric being unloaded. She handed Marla's copies to her without stopping her own forward progress to the bolt table. She pulled out the turquoise from the pile and carried it over to the center table, sifting through the patterns to pull up the one she needed.

"Number one," she hollered. "Height: eight foot; waist seventeen inches; thigh..."

"They supersized the show?" Marla stammered.

The tailor answered, "Looks like it. We're not going to have enough material; I can see that already."

"Can you downsize these or cut the number of outfits?"

"Not without losing my job."

"What if I order you to?"

"Sign a downsize order on each pattern and I'll do anything."

"Alright, I need them downsized two feet each. Can the mannequins do that much?"

"They're set up to reduce indefinitely. Down to a foot even."

"Fab. All I need is six feet."

"Sign on the dotted line," the tailor answered, handing the patterns over to Marla.

"Thanks," Marla replied, signing each one using her belly as a table. "Listen, I gotta go speed up the rest of your order. I hope all your cutters and seamstress are here."

She ran out not waiting to hear the answer, calling the lift for her floor. Up in her office, Saddle was still

at the computer doing layouts. Dittle was still sitting in Saddle's high chair, swiveling, waiting for something to do, and sniffing, as if the damask aromodrome air was affecting her sinuses. Marla ran into the copywriter and thrust the pages at her while hollering over to Saddle, "How's it going?"

"Torpido called. He's giving Mama to Parker."

"What?" Marla screamed. She ran over to her own office. "Are you out of your mind? Why the fuck didn't you call me? That's it! That's it! I can't work like this. Nothing but no-brains all around."

"I...I...you didn't have your buzzer. I...I'm trying to do three things at once. I thought you were on your way down there to him."

"You knew I went down to Sully's. You should have rung down there. Oh Christ! How long ago did he call?"

Saddle pulled her yakker out to hand to Marla, her face a mass of confusion, her eyes misting. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm just caught up in the layout. It's a bit over my head." She got up and ran out of the room.

"Oh fuck me!" Marla said, looking after Saddle, but punching up Torpido's number on the yakker.

"Torpido here. I'm..."

"Parker can't have Mama."

"He's already got her. She's the only one that can handle those weavers of yours. They only speak Anthusian."

"Yeah, well they're Anthusians, like all of us here at the Anthusian unit. Remember? They're supposed to be over here. I don't give a fuck. Either my show is cut by half or give me back the whole staff. We cannot do this."

"Gershe, I'm in the president's office right now. We can't talk."

"I'm on my way over."

"Gershe, don't come..."

Marla clicked Saddle's yakker off.

Out in the hallway, red-faced Saddle was just leaving the bathroom. Marla tossed her the yakker.

"Saddle, I'm sorry. I was out of line; you're the best thing I got. You know that. I just can't do this anymore. Let me get you a drink after work, what do you say?"

She was just entering the lift as the doors closed. The only thing she heard Saddle say was, "No thanks." She bashed her forehead with her balled up fists. "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" she said and then remembered what she was doing. She frantically ran her hand over the floor numbers, trying to set the code for the West Building. She knew they'd be meeting over at the big boy's house.

As the lift gates opened onto the plush West Building entrance port, the receptionist smiled in greeting —

probably the only smile Marla saw the whole day besides Lamont's condescending one, earlier on the loom floor. A barely audible Muzak track — a percussionless jazz combo rendition of Santana's Jingo-lo-ba — played in the background.

"Hello. How are you?" the receptionist beamed.

Sterilized air circulated in the lobby. Fueled by a higher concentration of oxygen than Marla was used to, her anger rose a degree.

"Bad," she answered. "Where's your boss meeting with his lackeys?"

"President Shurm is meeting with his managers today. It's a closed meeting."

"Fine," Marla uttered as she strode past the receptionist's desk. Her boots clicking rhythmically on the marble-tiled floor echoed down the hall, amplifying the effect of her indignation.

"He's not in his office and you can't go in there anyway," the receptionist called after her. She jumped up and ran after Marla. "He's in a closed conference; you'll have to wait. Ma'am. Miss! Please! You have to wait," and so on.

Marla turned down the left hall where the conference rooms were rumored to be. A blaze of sunlight bursting through the twice-daily cleaned set of windows at the end of the hallway nearly knocked her over with its indecent natural light. She blinked to avoid the onslaught and began defiantly pushing in doors, confident she'd find the president and his smarms behind one of them. The third door on the right proved her assumption correct. It opened to a round table with seven individuals whose heads bobbed up the minute the door swished open. As big as the hallway windows were, the conference room windows were larger by three, exponentially speaking. If they were two square feet in the hallway, they were eight square feet here. Marla shielded her eyes from the intense light, barely making out the president wearing a pair of ocular shades on his nose and reading from a paper.

"What the hell is going on?" Marla shouted, looking straight at the man. "What kind of an outfit are you running here?"

Eventually the others at the table came into focus. Everyone looked like they were in the kind of daze you'd be in because today Jesus was coming again and somehow your name didn't show up on The List. They simply had no clue.

"Gershe!" Torpid stood up and shouted.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Shurm. She just got past me..." The receptionist had caught up to Marla and was entering the room offering her apologies to the president.

"It's alright, Cindy," the president answered. "Not your fault, obviously."

"Gershe! Get back to the floor." Torpid came around the table and advanced on Marla.

"And what's wrong with you, you jackal?" Marla addressed the advancing Torpid. "Did you tell them what's going on? I'm sure President Shurm is not aware of what's being requested on his behalf."

Now Lamont stood up. "Ms. Gershy, if you have a problem with what Mr. Torpid is doing, you should contact me. You don't need to burst in on a meeting. Shame on you, you should know protocol."

“And now jackal number two speaks.” Marla addressed Lamont. “Give me back Mama and my workers and we’ll give you a show. We’re not even half done and it’s noon. How’m I supposed to do this? Did you even pass second grade, Lamont? Remember, that’s where you learned that one and one is two. One and zero don’t do it!”

“What are you babbling about Gershy?” Lamont asked.

“Yes, young lady,” the president interceded on his own behalf. “What are you babbling about?”

“I’m babbling that this lame jack—al, gave Parker half my weaving staff for a show for you because you’re out on the town today. Fine. No problem, but the designers gave me a full high-intense do-off. I’m not getting a break.”

“We toured your facility. Everything was smooth. Your work is adequate.”

“My work is the show tonight; you didn’t see that.”

“There’s no need to whine. I can’t see everybody’s show. Maybe next time I’ll see yours. Mr. Lamont has assured me that Mr. uh…”

“Parker,” Lamont filled in.

“Parker’s show will delight me.”

“That’s not the bloody point. You can go to the moon for all I care. My job is to put on a show. The revenues come in from the show. My job is to do a show that brings in revenue, not entertain royalty. Every year you’ve stated that in your bull-talks. Your presence today, sir, is jacking with my mandate as given to me by you! You need to have your dogs return my tools, or I’m not going to get the flat fixed.”

“Young lady, it’s a poor practitioner that blames her tools for her inadequacy.”

“I don’t have my tools to blame! That’s the point.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not in a position to assess the situation. I’ve been informed by my managers that all the floors are humming along. I personally went to your floor and things were definitely humming. You should feel flattered that I visited. Think of all the other plants I passed over. Just because I’m viewing Mr. um…”

“Parker,” Lamont filled in.

“Parker’s show, you shouldn’t feel slighted.”

“Oh God! You are so…”

“Gershe!” Torpid shouted. “Get back to your floor. You’re wasting time. You have a show to do.”

Marla looked at Torpid whose face was getting redder the longer he stood there. Lamont was pale. The president, a charmer, was smiling. If he could pat her on the head, he would. But he was seated at the far end—too far away. And it was such a lovely day. And ahhhh.

“Gentlemen,” the president said. “Shall we resume? Thanks for the report Ms. uh, Gershy is it? We’ll take it under consideration.”

“I suggest you return to work, Ms. Gershy,” Lamont finally said.

Marla just looked from one idiotic baldhead to the next.

“I’ll speak to you later,” Torpid said quietly, as if he hoped no one else would hear.

The receptionist, Cindy, pulled her back and with a wonderful, patronizing smile said, “Would you like to make an appointment, uh, Ms. uh, Gersay, is it?”

Marla shook her arm free of Cindy’s grasp and walked down the hall.

“Ms. Gersay! Ms. Gersay?” The receptionist called after her as she strode back to the people mover and to her floor and two hours of hell.

Upon returning to her office, she lost her temper again, flaring up at Dittle the copywriter, who was dragging her feet with the night’s program. She took it out on Saddle again, saying it was her fault for not pushing the copywriter enough. Saddle, in her sensitive — some say “high-strung” way — ran to the bathroom again for another eyeful of tears.

Marla then made it over to Minzt the tailor’s area to make a mess of things, and got everyone there quite angry with her as well.

After that, she checked in with the rubber suit team down in the basement, berating them soundly for finding a highly toxic fastening material that also had the charming ability to be absorbed by the skin on contact, making the whole thing unsuitable in clothing. The outfit had to be scrapped, rendering the four hours of engineers’ and weavers’ time wasted. At a million a minute... well, if one were to work out the math, one would lose one’s temper. Which Marla did, but no one could tell because she was in permanent apoplectic mode by then.

2:00 p.m.

By two o’clock, half her staff and Mama were gone and the other half was demoralized. She’d been sitting in Mama’s seat weaving for over an hour. One half hour after the afternoon break — usually the time when the day was beginning to wind down — the workers were only now starting feverishly on the second half of the day’s work.

Marla was well past mad now and had been composing her resignation letter in her head since the time she left Shurm’s office. Without even the slightest hint of a possible prospect beyond her current job, all she was thinking about was how to get the most venom down on paper.

A crackle and shriek went up from loom number three — Zennie Stapper’s. Marla’s head jerked up from a scream so intense it rose above the loom din. Instantly she jumped out of her seat and ran to Zennie Stapper, screaming, “Stop! Stop!” By the time she got there, Baylie at number four had already pushed the emergency bar to stop the machine’s 350 pound shuttle incessantly crunching against Zennie Stapper’s entangled hand — skin, bone, muscle and all. Zennie was unconscious by now, the bone-crushing pain too much for her to take.

Marla took two seconds to assess the situation and ran to the emergency flap on the far wall, slamming

her fist on the panel when she got there. All machines in the room stopped in the up position. Everyone rushed from their seats. The room lights flashed and a siren screamed on. The words “Emergency!” flashed in the air from the hologenerator somewhere overhead. The words reverberated from the floor loudspeakers, and Marla knew that throughout the building everyone heard the alert.

In a matter of seconds, the emergency response team rushed onto the floor. The team cut Zennie Stapper out of the machine’s entangling warp thread and strapped her onto a stretcher immediately. She was out of the room before her forearm stopped bleeding and she had returned to consciousness.

“It’s because we’re working too fast,” someone yelled. “She had to set the machine’s speed too high.”

“Yeah, her head numbed trying to keep up, she couldn’t even think, probably. I was getting ready to go myself. That could have been me, goddammit!” someone else added.

“It wouldn’t have been me. My hands are numb. I wouldn’t even have felt it until my whole head was in there!”

Marla looked around, too angry to answer. By now, people from other stations and floors had gathered. A crowd of about twenty stood and stared.

Her anger had been building since this morning, since a week ago, a month ago even, and had climaxed when Parker absconded with Mama. She had not been thinking too clearly herself since that point. She had been maniacally pushing Mama’s loom too fast, too hard, not safely. She had hardly been watching the movement, the building of the fabric. She’d been staring ahead composing that stupid letter. Just as the weavers in front of her had probably been doing. Until Zennie Stapper experienced what each and everyone of them would have experienced sooner or later.

“Tell you what,” she told the group, not one of whom really wanted to hear anything from her. “If I were you, I wouldn’t do a thing.”

“Wouldn’t do a thing? That’s your problem Gershe. You wouldn’t do a thing. You just keep kissing their...”

“Shut up! That’s not what I’m talking about.” She turned to Flannery, the man with the sharp retort. Her eyes blazed, piercing Flannery, forcing him to silence. “Do nothing. Stop working. Stand. And do nothing. We can’t possibly do good work anyway. We’re killing ourselves. Maiming ourselves. The deck is stacked against us, children. Why do they keep pushing? It’s getting worse every day. Today was just the worst. It was never going to get better. We’re never going to finish.”

She jumped up on Mama’s desk and kicked the in-basket over the side; the papers flew out at odd angles. Other workers from various offices and stations were filing in. The crowd had tripled by this point.

“You’re wrong,” she shouted at Flannery. “I told them, told the president, that asshole that came in here today, smiling and shit at Mama. I told him we couldn’t work this way. Know what he said?”

“What?” the group collectively scowled.

“It’s a poor technician that blames her tools.”

“What?” Three or four of them stepped forward toward the desk. “No way! That sucks!” Others

followed. They gathered in a semi-circle around Marla.

“Yeah. That’s just what he said. It’s our fault if we don’t make the rate, if we get our bodies stuck in the machines. They give us free coffee. Why can’t we keep pumping? They’ve increased the rate four times in the last two weeks. Today was not unusual. We just reached the limit, that’s all. They want to see if we can produce more with half a staff. If we make today’s show, they’re going to expect us to do this every time. Then if we complain, they’ll offer to return the staff back to full capacity, but it’ll be for half-pay. They’ll be able to give today as proof that we don’t need more people.”

A general grumble arose. Someone voiced, “I ain’t doin’ it.”

“No, of course not!” Marla screamed back. “No one is. We’re taking an action.”

“When?” someone hollered.

“Now. Right now! Zennie Stapper’s hurt. We’re hungry and dead-tired and only half done with the day. We’re taking an action right now.”

Minzt, the tailor — a non-union worker — left the room quietly and ran down the hall.

Marla jumped down from the desk. “We need some attention here. We need help here! This is an emergency!”

She strode over to the emergency flap. The previous alarm had been reset automatically as soon as the emergency crew, with their programmed rain jackets, had entered the room. Marla slammed the alarm again to get more of the building occupants, i.e., the muckety mucks over in Shurm’s office, to make it out into the cold hell of the weaving floor. The thirty occupants of the room cheered in response. She laughed and slapped those next to her on the back.

“It’s a poor boss that blames his slobs!” she said to Cheever standing next to her.

“Ha!” said Cheever. “It’s a poor boss that blames his slobs!” Cheever yelled to his neighbor who then yelled it to her neighbor. Before long, everyone was yelling it to everyone else. Marla started to chant it. She started a dance around the inside of the circle that had formed around the emergency flap. Others jumped in behind her. Cheever, Baylie, Flannery, all of them. They sang and danced and clapped to the new beat: “It’s a poor boss that blames his slobs! Ha! It’s a poor boss that blames his slobs! Ha!”

Suddenly the emergency sirens and holograms were silenced. The shouting chilled down to a whisper, the dancing stopped, and the clapping stilled. They looked at each other, and then over to the emergency flap, where they saw the president himself flanked by Lamont and Torpid and six other lackeys.

By now, the second alarm fire team was making it into the room. Marla assessed the situation, broke out from the ring and ran to the flap, engaging it again, making it a three-alarm emergency. Now the police would be responding. The workers followed Marla to the flap and surrounded the president and his men. When the alarm resumed they sent up a shout and started chanting maniacally facing the president. Torpid started screaming at Marla to stop. She merely chanted louder and spit the “Ha!” directly into his face.

“What is your problem!” he screamed red-faced.

Lamont began hollering also. He and Torpid surrounded Marla, cursing at her, spitting, bobbing their

heads back and forth like the mannequins who were by now ducking into the room and joining the fray.

Meanwhile, the mob had separated the president from his entourage. Backed up against the wall, he pleaded, white-faced, for everyone to settle down. Marla screamed back, broke away from Torpid and Lamont and ran over to Mama's top desk drawer, retrieving a foot-long mag-lite. She took the torch and squeezed in between the mob members, holding it like a beacon. She joined in the chanting and the mob backed off a little to let the mag-lite have its effect. She held it up to block any attempts by the president to disengage the emergency flap. The chanting became louder and louder as the mannequins and various other laggards entered. They seemed happy to join in, having themselves been run ragged in the past two weeks. Everybody had been waiting for the signal to do this for quite a while.

Lamont rushed out through the aluminum doors and screamed to the incoming emergency police, which included a very green corps of security officers. They ran into the room, leaving Lamont sweating on the side in the hallway. He panted like a dog with eyes wide and tail dangling between its legs.

In the middle of the room, Torpid stood shouting "Stop her!" pointing to Marla with the mag-lite raised above her head and seemingly aimed at the president. The room was mass confusion by now. The chanters had broken up and were kicking the looms and using whatever trashcan, lunch box, or other blunt object was available to damage the cast iron structures. The mannequins, by now programmed for AI mode, immediately saw what was going on and began a systematic disassembling of the looms using the handy-dandy toolbox installed in the lower abdomen of each robot.

The president screamed "Stop!" at Marla, at the robots, at Torpid, at anyone who could possibly stop. The robots of course were responding mainly to Marla, who shouted, "All work must stop," fueling their destruction of the looms. Now the president shrank from fear, his knees buckling beneath him, his eyelids fluttering as if he was trying to block out the scene and at the same time take in information; his brain quickly short-circuited to open/close mode.

A mixed smell of textile dust, oily rust, and burning computer components filled the air along with the deafening noise.

Just at that moment the greenest individual of the green corps, fresh from the Academy only a week earlier and not much more than a mannequin programmed for AI himself, pulled out his xanthan gun — a riot weapon, capable of firing long-chain organic compounds that temporarily maim the target, but not mortally. After a time, the organics dissolved in the body leaving a big gouge. The gauge of the "bullet" determines how big the gouge is. "Gouge-gauge" they call it.

The cadet was quite frightened by the clanging robots, the screaming, dancing and chanting workers, the nattily suited president down on his knees, blubbing, and Marla maniacally standing over him and threatening him with a mag-lite. All of the officers had their weapons drawn but only the greenest of the green corps guy was visibly shaking.

The head officer, unaware of the panicking newbie, busied himself with trying to figure out how to stop the mannequins. It was against the law to actually shoot his weapon (it wasn't a xanthan gun) except in self-defense, so he resorted to shouting out questions which nobody heard. "Who's in charge of the mannequins? Who's in charge here?"

The firefighters also responded as per their standing orders. Their job was first and foremost to prevent destruction of any kind to company equipment. The fire chief ran to the emergency bar and broke the glass. The sprinklers immediately came on, dousing the room, but no one skipped a beat. A scream arose when the water hit the chanters, but that was it. The increased sound level merely added a blip to

the general din. Marla turned to see the new developments as the water mixed with foul air. She stood and laughed, her hands on her hips. The robots would probably short-circuit in a minute, as would everything else. But the chanting continued — muddy rain everywhere.

With Marla's back turned Torpid saw a chance to disengage the emergency flap. He snuck around behind Marla and just as he was raising his hand, she turned to smash it with her mag-lite.

The green cadet, twitching his head back and forth from Torpid to Marla, reacted immediately upon seeing the blunt object raised in violence by the one person in the room everyone seemed to be looking to; seemed to be afraid of, seemed to be following in the charge. He took timeless aim and shot into the belly of the beast.

The emergency alarms cut off immediately as Torpid's hand connected with the emergency flap and Marla fell to the floor, dropping the mag-lite with a crash. The noise in the room continued for a few moments, until the chanters one by one saw Marla lying in a pool of blood. The robots, too, stopped clanging when they sensed their leader sinking to the floor. Only the sprinklers continued to stream, like a light spring shower. It was the only sound in the room. Everyone listened except Marla Gershe. For her, all was silent.

Chapter Two

High above the sizzly, dazzly air, a glitter ball hangs from an unknown skyhook mounted just beyond the realm of visual ken. As the ball revolves, it casts thousands of light sparkles out to the edges of its domain. Like the weak rays from a new moon, the sparkles cannot find substance on which to fall and so dissolve into nothingness.

Down below, immersed in the soft glow of a diffused spot, she wears a black taffeta cocktail dress with spaghetti straps. A thin gold chain hangs on her wrist, releasing a flight of fragrance with every movement. Her close-cropped, shining hair and a strand of rose pearls at her neck frame her dreamy face. Her stockings have seams.

A man, attracted by the fragrance and light, steps into the circle and stands, momentarily rooted by the scene. His hand reaches to his silk hat in greeting and his leather jacket falls open, revealing a French boatman's shirt. A black shadow of beard rests on his face. Dangling from his left ear, a small gold cross catches the light when he turns his cheek. He closes his eyes and inhales. For several seconds he does nothing but breathe. Then he takes her hand in his own and raises her arm with his. With his free hand, he reaches behind her, pulling her in tightly to himself. She can feel his breath on her face.

The strains of a deep and simple guitar swirls in dancehall reverb around the couple. Someone sings:

When there's horses and lions,

And monkeys upside down;

A fat and bearded lady,

A dozen rosy clowns;

You know the circus is coming,

You ought to try and go.

No reason just to hang around

When life provides a show.

The music disappears into the surrounding echo as the couple sways. Only the deepest notes can be distinguished in the swirl.

She does not know who this dark man is but she loves him. Her eyes close and slowly her head drops back. He kisses her neck and the scent of rum and clove floats up from his hair. He...

A high-pitched whine rips through the scene. Instantly blinding light envelopes the room. It evaporates the glitter ball, the taffeta, the swirl, and the stranger in a second.

#

For a split moment Marla Gershe could neither see nor breathe. A muffled clanking of chains reached her ears but didn't register. Her mind floated aimlessly until a flood of tepid water doused her body. This she felt; she jerked in reaction, sucking in her breath like a just-born baby. The deluge washed away a gelatinous goo in which she'd been suspended for who knew how long.

Who knew how long? The hospital staff knew exactly how long; they'd been watching her bodily functions and adding notes to their continuously recording charts since the day she'd been brought in with her gut ripped open. They knew all about her.

She, however, was clueless as she dangled naked in midair, her left arm attached to an overhead cable system via a thick leather wrist band and chain. The chain moved along a ceiling cable and eventually lowered her onto a conveyor belt, unhooking itself from above once she settled onto her side. In the next second a pair of mechanical arms holding a bleached linen the size of a tablecloth (if dinner meant pizza and beer for an informal group of four) released their fluttery load over her and then retracted to an unseen cranny above the assembly line.

The conveyor conveyed her semi-conscious body through an opening at the far end of the room where a gurney waited on the other side. Once she made it there, a giant overused wool felt hassock stuffed with cotton balls pushed her so roughly onto the table that her head bounced off it like a dead fish. She barely noticed the jolt.

The chain attached to her wrist band dangled over the edge, clanking against the bed frame in tick-tock fashion. All around her, thousands of other bodies were likewise being moved along the cable system, dropped onto the conveyor belt, and pushed onto waiting tables. It formed a grisly picture of human flesh being treated with all the love and sensitivity of a medieval burial. The only thing missing was the guy with the pitchfork hollering, "Bring out yer dead!"

Once Marla's table realized she'd made it safely on board, it clicked itself on and rolled through an up-door into a hallway congested with people and things: glucose carts, med machines, metallic robots scurrying along following programmed orders, flying whizgigs with important messages to and from administrators, interns tasked with tasks only humans can perform, housekeeper spiders crawling along

the ceilings to avoid the mess, and an occasional steno recorder blathering away to itself, fastforwarding as needed. Marla's table entered the fray, turned ninety degrees, and quickly outpaced all the other traffic.

The hallway resembled a long tunnel, circular in cross-section and reaching the horizon somewhere beyond the eye's capability. At intervals, a speeding contraption—gurney, stenobot, housespider-type thing—moved crosswise to traffic up ahead, revealing side passages of unknown length and purpose.

Her table turned left down one of the perpendiculars and fell in with more of the same bustling automatons and gray-clad interns it'd left behind in the previous hallway. After a few more such turns, the gurney entered a tunnel lined with damask-curtained doorways resembling a phalanx of Bedouin brothels.

The cart selected one doorway and passed through the set of murkily textured drapes to find itself in a tiny space with stainless steel walls. With little capacity for more than anything but the cart and its patient, the room was a tight cavelet. The table came to a stop along the wall of antiseptic gray, the surfaces of which were so shiny the slightest trace of a fingerprint any hand dared to leave would show.

Half awake, Marla registered little of her surroundings. She ignored whatever did register, vainly trying to hold onto the beautiful dream and the remnants of fragrance, light, and love. Her left arm, still attached to the cable, stretched over her head. She lay on her side breathing, every breath producing a knife pain in her abdomen.

Pins and needles crawled up her outstretched arm. Painfully, she pushed her shoulder up from the table with her free hand just enough to pull the sleeping arm with attached clanking chain in. She rolled to her back and lay there for several minutes (or hours), staring at the ceiling, too tired to notice how hard the bed was, how inconsequential the sheet was, and how famished her stomach was.

A tube hanging near the ceiling lowered itself into view. She watched it drop to within a foot of her face and sleepily tried to focus on its shape and purpose. Just as her stomach gurgled, she saw the word "potable" printed on the side of the tube. She reached up feebly with her free hand to pull the tube close. As soon as she exerted a slight pull on the tube, a stream of water poured out and hit her on the cheek. She moved the tube over to her mouth, allowing the water to pour in. Though slightly warm, it soothed her mouth and throat and entrails. After several moments, she released the tube. It sprang back up to a couple of feet above her head and remained there, waiting patiently for the next pull.

Exhausted but awake, she lay on her back breathing, wincing at each inhalation. Her stomach churned but she could not summon the energy to reach up for the water again. She merely closed her eyes and listened to the various contraptions speeding by on the other side of the damask curtain.

After an undetermined amount of time, she heard a rustling sound and the hum of an automaton's motile wheels entering her cavelet. When a click on her right side told her a visitor was near, she opened her eyes and turned her head. A smallish, four foot high or so, gray rubber robot reminiscent of a big upended doorstep stood by the side of the bed as if waiting for her to start a conversation. Its front upper quarter was encased in acousto-sponge material, indicating its ability to capture sound. The robot clicked and began a taped message complete with recording studio ambience.

"Are you planning to sue the hospital? Please state 'yes' or 'no'," the recording stated. The robot's rubber armor expanded outward as it talked, like a bird taking a dump. When it was done with its bit, it contracted back down.

"Uh..." Marla croaked. Despite the water she just drank, her throat was dry and her voice crackly,

incapable of speech.

The robot repeated its statement. “Are you planning to sue the hospital? Please state ‘yes’ or ‘no’.” Again it expanded outward as it spoke and contracted back down when done.

Marla cleared her throat and took a deep breath and coughed.

“I am programmed for ‘yes’ or ‘no’ retrieval only. You must choose one or the other. Are you planning to sue the hospital? Please state ‘yes’ or ‘no’.”

“What hospital?” Marla choked out.

“Are you going to sue the hospital? Please state ‘yes’ or ‘no’.”

“I don’t know. What hospital?”

“I’m sorry, I’m programmed to return after four failed attempts.”

The sponge-headed bot rolled out through the damask curtain without so much as a goodbye.

“Wait!” Marla struggled to her elbow calling after the robot. A deposit in her lungs shook itself loose from her sudden action, inciting a full coughing jag full of body gel and phlegm. She swallowed; her stomach retched. She carefully lay back down on the table and with no small effort kept it all down.

Minutes—or hours, or days, for all she knew—passed as she lay breathing through her mouth. Experiencing nausea coming and going, she concentrated on the sounds outside her doorway to keep from coughing or upchucking.

A squeal accompanied by the swoosh of the damask curtain signaled the entrance of another wheeled contraption. She didn’t bother to look, but out of the corner of her eye she saw a white-washed aluminum cube, standing next to her, calculating, clicking away inside itself. If it had eyes she would have felt it staring at her; if breath, she would feel it on her neck. As it was, it stood patiently not seeing or breathing, just clicking.

“What?” Marla finally said softly, turning her face to the cube. In the upper portion—where its eyebrows would have been if it were a mammal—there was an elliptical chrome plate, two inches in width. Embossed on the plate in red cursive were the words “Interviewon II.”

“I am here to extract information,” it stated.

Marla stared and waited.

“Name, please,” Interviewon II said.

“Uh.”

“Male or female?”

“No, wait.”

“Male or female.”

“That is, I don’t know my name.”

“Male or female?”

“Female,” without even checking, somehow she knew.

“Ms. Uh...”

The “Uh” was a direct recording of her own voice responding to the first question.

“No, that’s not my name,” she said.

Interviewon II ignored her answer and continued with its mandate. “Are you planning to sue the hospital, ‘yes’ or ‘no’?”

“Look, that’s not my name and I don’t know what you mean.”

“Are you planning to sue the hospital, ‘yes’ or ‘no’?”

Marla stared at the robot, not knowing what to say. Out in the hallway mechanicals whizzed past her curtain. Human voices, obviously in conference, echoed down the various tunnels.

Marla, by now fully awake and frustrated, pushed herself painfully up onto the elbow of the arm attached to the chain that continued clanking whenever it crashed into the metal legs of the gurney.

“What hospital? Is this a hospital?” she cried. A rush of thick heat passed over her head leaving her scalp throbbing in its wake. She waited a moment as the heat and throbbing settled, then pushed herself further up to a sitting position. Severe pain shot through her midsection, catching her off guard. She fell back down and pulled her legs in underneath herself, curling into a ball. With her head resting on the table, her hair dangled over the side and became entangled in the chain. Finally the pain in her gut passed, but she remained fetal, hopefully trying to come up with something.

“After three failed attempts to ascertain your information, my program will lock up and I will return to IT for reboot. You have one more chance. Are you planning to sue the hospital?”

“No,” Marla answered.

“Do you have insurance, ‘yes’ or ‘no’?”

Her momentary influx of energy ebbed. “I don’t know...,” she said half-heartedly. With her forehead resting on the table, her words sounded garbled and weak. “Please go away.” Then almost in a panic she summoned her energy and struggled to get up. “Wait! Don’t go, I need to change my previous answer because I don’t want you to ask this question.” She stopped momentarily to catch her breath. “We, we, we seem to be ...Or, or, I mean, I don’t remember how I got here or who I...” Her voice withered as she ran out of steam. She let her head fall forward, then sat there, breathing, staring at the white-washed box. Her head throbbed.

“Do you have insurance, ‘yes’ or ‘no’.”

A moment.

“I don’t know,” she said quietly, mostly to herself.

“After three failed attempts to ascertain your information, my program will lock up and I will return to IT for reboot. Do you have insurance, ‘yes’ or ‘no’?”

“I don’t know,” she said in a whisper, lying back down on the table.

Interviewon II rolled nonjudgmentally away through the curtain. Marla followed it with her eyes as far as her cramped position would allow. Inhaling deeply, she used her hands to push herself back up to a seated position. She moaned loudly as the pain struck again.

Something like an insect crawling in her hair tickled the top of her head. She reached up to scratch and knock whatever was there away. The chain hit her face. The insect turned out to be the water tube. She slapped it angrily out of the way and then thought better of it, grabbing it down to her mouth. The chain hit her in the face again. She took a pull from the tube, swallowed, and breathed as the nausea returned and then passed on. She released the tube, but it didn’t retract. It remained in the down position. She pulled on it and released. It remained down, stuck like an autoretract vacuum cleaner cord where the more you pull on it, the more it remains out of its housing and in your way. She slapped at it again. Again the chain struck her face.

“Agnes!” she screamed at the ceiling, eyes closed. The pain hit, but she barely noticed it in her unthinking reaction to the world around her.

“Who’s Agnes?” A smiling gray-clad male—human—whooshed through the damask curtain followed by a polished chrome infometer about the size of a softball. It levitated behind him at head height.

Startled, Marla opened her eyes and for moments said nothing. Finally: “Thank god,” she said, realizing it wasn’t another robot. Ignoring the pain, she dragged her legs out from underneath herself and over the side of the gurney. Steadying herself with her hands on the edge of the table, she stared at the newcomer.

He wore a hooded body stocking of latex-like material, loathsome in its syntheticity. Looking at the outfit made her sweat and itch.

“Doesn’t that irritate you?” she asked, not answering the question about Agnes because she didn’t have the slightest idea why she had screamed the word.

The little guy leaned in towards her, smiling broadly. “What are you talking about?”

“Your, uh, uniform.”

“Oh, no, no, no, no, no. This thing? Why no, it’s perfectly wonderful. Unless of course they have the air humanizers out of whack and then it gets a bit steamy, but really, it’s fine. Just fine.”

He never stopped smiling during his answer, shrugging his shoulders and almost laughing at the ‘Just fine.’

“But what about you, Ms. Mysterious?” he asked. “You’ve been stumping the secretaries, so I thought I’d come by and have a little chat. Uh, huh?”

Lifting his wispy eyebrows, he nodded enthusiastically as if a breakthrough in human communication

was about to unfold, and she and he alone of all the people in the world were going to bring it about, a Nobel waiting in the wings.

“Good,” Marla answered. “Because we’re really not communicating, those robots and I. We seem to need an arbitrator or something.”

“Yes, yes, they are limited, aren’t they? Well, listen, we just need to know who your carrier is. Speak into the little round gizmo here.” He swung the sphere hanging at ear level over to front and center.

“See, that’s the problem. I don’t know.” Marla said. “I...can’t seem to remember, uh, anything. Like who I am, for instance.”

“Uh oh. Problem!” The orderly’s eyebrows pointed up at the center of his forehead which creased pathetically. His head tilted to one side. He couldn’t have looked more downcast than if they had put him in white greasepaint and painted a tear on his cheek.

“You see,” he continued. “We don’t know what treatment to assign you if we don’t know who your carrier is.”

“Well, let’s just assume I don’t have a carrier. Then what happens?”

“Oh, no, no, no, no, no! Give you pauper’s therapy? That’s no good! You’re not a pauper.”

“I’m naked, there’s dried Jello all over me, and I have nothing but a piece of paper to my name. Look,” She patted the table with her hand. “My bed doesn’t even have a mattress. How can you say I’m not a pauper?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Look at your teeth.” He positioned the little ball in the air over to in front of her face. “Mirror!” He ordered. Immediately the ball opened at the equator revealing two circular reflectors embedded in each half. He turned the sphere around so Marla could look at her face. “No my friend, it’s obvious you’ve got insurance.”

Marla stared into the mirrors. A pair of unrecognizable and not very open eyes stared back. A layer of moisture creased the upper lids and a shadow formed underneath each one. It took several moments for her to realize she was staring at herself. The eyes blinked slowly, trying to find something familiar, something to answer her question. They roved over unfamiliar nose—thin and pointed, cheeks—pale and bony, mouth—a white line, barely even perceptible.

“Who is it?” Marla asked the face in the mirror. And then, to the character in the body stocking, “I don’t know who it is. Can’t you just give me some budget electroshock? Don’t they do that to people in my position? I could maybe figure it out then. I mean, how’d I get here? Didn’t I come in with an ID stamp? Doesn’t everyone have one?”

“I’m sure you did, but that’s for the archives department to keep track of. If I had all that information I wouldn’t be here, would I? And no, we can’t just give you electroshock. You’re talking, what, a hundred nugs a volt. You have to have a carrier for that kind of service. And not just any carrier, I might add.”

“Can’t you buzz down to the archives people and get some information? We seem to be stuck in a loop here. Somebody needs to jolt the needle, the record’s repeating itself.”

“Excuse me?”

“Never mind, just make a call. I’m sick here. Faint, retchy. I need some pills for the pain. Please!”

“Oh, so now I’m an office assistant. Someone to just bark orders at: call here, go there. I suppose you’ll want me to go get you your coffee at some point. I’m a Human Interface Technician, lady. Have some respect. Let me do my job. Just tell me who your carrier is and I can do my job.” The orderly seemed to be on the verge of tears, as if Marla was accusing him of malpractice.

“I...” Marla was just about to raise her voice in indignation when it occurred to her that it would do no good and even stating the simple word “I” was cause for pause, for who was “I?” Besides her stomach was killing her. She exhaled and hung her head in defeat. After several moments she lifted her head and looked at the mortified intern. “Can you maybe just send in a robot?” she asked.

The intern gasped and his eyes grew wide with added hurt. He turned to go in dramatic exit when the damask curtain moved softly aside and a waif of a girl with the cutest pink haircut this side of Yuner Mountain stepped through. She held a bouquet of aqua-tinted flandellas set off with a round of baby’s hearts in her arms.

“Marla,” she said softly, stepping forward and smiling weakly. “How are you?” Then: “My god, you look awful. How’s the tummy?” She handed the flandellas off to the Human Interface Technician.

“God am I glad to see you,” Marla and the Human Interface Technician said at the same time.

The Technician stepped back, giving room for the waif to move forward and clasp Marla by the shoulders and pull her forward for a kiss on the cheek.

“What’s that smell?” the waif asked. She turned to the intern. “She needs a shower. Where’s the shower?” She turned back to Marla. “How long have you been awake? Can’t you walk or something?” And back to the intern. “Can’t she walk or something? She needs coffee. Can’t you get her coffee?”

The Human Interface Technician glared.

“Who are you?” Marla asked the girl. “My guardian angel?”

“Of course, as always. You do look awful. Can you stand? You need a shower.”

“Uh, no I didn’t get...” The Human Interface Technician overcame his indignation and began stammering at the waif’s shoulder. “And you can’t just, um... We need to know her ...”

“Carrier.” Marla answered for him. “They need to know how this is being paid for. They need a group number from an insurance company.”

“What?” The girl spun around to the Human Interface Technician and then turned back to Marla. “Didn’t you tell him?” She respun towards the Human Interface Technician. “She’s with BAC. Call the office to get the number.”

“Oh my,” the Human Interface Technician gasped. “BAC!” he shouted into the infoball, which seemed to vibrate a little at the important news. He then quickly turned around and started slamming lower and upper panels of the tiny room’s walls with the determination of a very dedicated housecleaner. Instantly the panels spun back and 180° on their horizontals to reveal shelves of towels and a closet with dapper grey terry cloth robes and matching foot muffies. One floor-to-ceiling panel opened into a full bathroom

complete with sitz tub and hand shower for any patient with a soiled hard-to-reach area. A bubble nozzle sat on the lip of the tub in case said patient needed a get-away-from-it-all experience. Air scented with fleurs-du-Mey wafted in from the air streamers above. A third wall opened itself and shelves there contained a folding mattress, sets of starched sheets, and pillows, fully fluffed. The Human Interface Technician stomped on the floor and a side table gushed hydraulically upwards, unfolding itself at the proper height next to Marla's bed. The Technician lovingly lay the flandellas with baby hearts on the table.

Marla and the girl stared as the room transformed itself from a formless hollow gray tube to a premier antisept room complete with hot and cold running water. "Wow," they said together.

"Um, Miss," the Human Interface Technician stepped towards the girl. "Can, um, can you just tell me your name and your code so we can take care of the, uh, you know, the, so we can call you in an emergency."

"Yes, but she needs a shower."

"Someone's coming for that immediately, just speak into the round giz, er, the infosphere here." He pushed the round ball over to the waif.

"Saddle Dent, 139-42Anth. Can she walk?" Saddle turned to help Marla from the table.

"Um," Marla said, not at all sure she could walk, or how to stand for that matter. She swallowed and took a breath and looked up at the waif. "Saddle Dent," she stated it as if she'd never heard it before. But it was a good solid name from a good solid family and this was the beginning of a good solid relationship. "Do you know me?"

Saddle looked into Marla's eyes. "You're my boss," she said, smiling. "But you've had a trauma and apparently don't remember anything. They said that might happen."

"How did you find me? They had no idea who I was."

"They have all your information in the Administration Office."

"But they keep asking me about my insurance and stuff."

"You ever hear the one about the right hand and the left hand?"

"Yeah, but..."

"Same thing here. Administration keeps their information close to the vest. I had to tell them you'd be suing the hospital if they didn't tell me where you were."

"Huh."

Saddle pulled the tablecloth coverlet around Marla and gently encouraged her to try for the floor.

Just at that moment, a vision of this waif, this Saddle Dent standing before her, flashed through Marla's mind. The Saddle in her head was sitting in front of some sort of box, tears streaming from her eyes. She saw herself standing over the Saddle in her head and screaming at her. An acute pain like a jab from a crowbar ripped through Marla. She bent over double, clutching her stomach and nearly falling off the side

of the table. She tried to breathe but her lungs were like a neglected engine with seized pistons; nothing was coming in, nothing was going out. The present, real Saddle grabbed her shoulders to steady her. Marla sat still sucking vacuum until after several moments the pain subsided and her chest muscles relaxed. She inhaled and pushed herself up. Raising her head, she looked at Saddle.

“Did I mistreat you?”

“Sometimes,” Saddle answered.

“Are we lovers?”

“No, you’re my boss.”

“Am I married?”

“Only to your work.”

“What do I do?”

“You’re a textile worker.”

“A weaver?”

“No, a coordinator.”

“I’ll go get coffee,” the Human Interface Technician said, hastily turning toward the damask curtain.

#

Two weeks later Marla found herself soaking during another painful and fruitless session with Doctor Iovvna, the red-haired, sharp-featured wiz of a psychotherapist assigned to Marla’s case. Doc wore a crisp light blue gingham smock, brown ortho shoes, and matching tight-weave stockings. Her cheeks were ruddy, her eyes wide open. She was the picture of mental and physical health as she sat across the tiled floor in a palm chair—so named because it cupped the sitter somewhat like a cupped palm would if such a large hand were available for the purpose. The chair was extended ten feet to its full height so Doc could watch every aspect of Marla’s treatment in the think tank — a vat constructed of chromed iron and glass panels. It held Marla as she bobbed aimlessly in a sodium abysmalate brine. Electrodes attached to the back of Marla’s skull fed theoretically stimulating currents to her brain, inducing her memory a little at a time and rewarding her if she did good. She’d been spending every other day for two weeks in this therapy. As usual, it wasn’t working.

Naked, except for the gauze tightly wrapping her private parts, Marla shivered despite the aesthetically perfect 37°C temperature of the brine. The tank was shaped vertically like a flattened torpedo: elliptical in cross-section no matter which ninety degrees you sliced it. This configuration accommodated Marla’s arms, which were stretched horizontally and attached to wooden splints that facilitated flotation and at the same time allowed very little motion. She looked like God on the cross, yet somehow felt more like little Timmy in Sunday School who couldn’t remember his verses. Any minute Doc was going to help out with a prompting “... He gave his only begotten son,” or “... I shall not want.”

Except that Doc didn’t say that. She said instead, “What about your secondary training? Your school? According to your records, you qualified for Gitch Academy after four years at the Mill. What was that

like?”

“I don’t remember,” Marla answered. “I don’t remember a thing: not the Mill, not my job, not my name.”

“It’s Marla Gershe,” she said it with Doc. “Yes, I know that,” she continued alone. “But I don’t remember who Marla Gershe is. This overdesigned sound system is not doing anything for me and the water soak here makes my stomach itch.”

“That’s a good sign. Means you’re healing. The, uh, *memory inducer* is doing its job.” Ivovna added emphasis as a prod, like a teacher reminding a recalcitrant child that it’s “please” and “thank you” always if you’re going to get to heaven.

Indeed, Marla the Recalcitrant’s abdomen was healing. Ever since the girl named Saddle told the hospital who Marla and her carrier were, she’d been soaking an hour every other day in the vat with Doc sitting high in her palm chair, nudging Marla’s memory with inducement therapy. At first when she was lowered into the water, the pain the salt caused her wound nearly knocked her unconscious, but after a few moments the wound would numb to a slight tingle. These days, the hole was almost healed and all it did was itch. Still the tub was unbearable: boring, uncomfortable, and stinky.

In addition, when her memory lagged more than the tub thought appropriate, it dunked her under the water and held her there for at least half a minute, after which it brought her back up spluttering and gasping. It also dunked her if she got too cynical during the session. The dunking didn’t help her remember much except to not be nasty. It was more of a punishment for bad attitude than bad memory. It taught her more than anything to check her sarcasm at the front gate.

She also got dunked if she lied about remembering something. She’d tried that in the early water bath sessions after she had received tingling jolts of happy processor juice for good answers and decided she liked it. Unfortunately, faking memory resulted in a long dunk instead of a short buzz. Somehow the tank knew she was lying. So in the end, what the water bath was good for was behavior modification.

“If I’m healing, does that mean I can go home then?” Marla asked, hoping it sounded humble.

“Sure, do you know how?”

Marla said nothing, just stared at Doc, trying to figure out an angle.

Doc continued: “You have no place to go unless you can find yourself. I’m getting resistance from you, Gershe. It’s as if you don’t want to remember. It’s well past the time trauma-induced amnesia should have cleared up, and you still can’t remember the name of your mill or even why you got shot.”

Suddenly Marla heard a myriad of shouting voices. Swirling faces appeared before her. For an instant she was transported to a different place. She winced as a red beacon shot out from the wall behind her. Then all was quiet again. She looked around as much as her restrained position allowed to see who had been speaking. She saw no one except Doc sitting in the palm pumped up to Marla’s height. The brine water bubbled incessantly, providing the only sound in the room.

“Ah, we have a spike.” Doc said, cocking her head in affirmation of the breakthrough. “Very, very good, patient Gershe.” Doc sat up straight from her slumped position in the chair and pressed a button in what would have been the thumb if the chair were indeed a giant palm. “I believe we’re getting somewhere. Don’t let it go. Keep that thought. Relax and let it flow.”

Marla scrunched her eyes, desperately trying to retrieve the flash of image, but the very act of scrunching forced the thought pattern to the conscious level and away from any budding memory.

“No, no! Relax!” Doc yelled. “It won’t come if you don’t relax!”

Marla opened her eyes. Whatever it was she had remembered fled. “Sorry,” she said, taking a big gulp of air.

She remained under water for a full forty-five seconds. As she came up all gags and coughs, Doc was shaking her head. “Forget it, Gershe. Don’t worry about it.” She said it with clenched jaw. “We’ll cheat a little and show you some faces next time. Once we’re on track things will come faster to you.”

“Sure, Doc,” Marla managed to say between gasps.

#

Upon returning to her now cozily padded and nice-sized cave after the successful/failed session in the tank, Marla found a youngish, mid-height, white-haired intern preparing for her reception. He had cleared away her lunch things, dusted the cupboard knobs, swept the floor, and wiped any of the room’s surfaces that might have developed a crust. Now, feather duster in his back pocket, he was busying himself removing lint from pillow cases and stray hairs from faucet handles and other such deterrents to patient recovery.

With a huff, Marla flopped into a comfy chair just inside the room. Still damp from her soak, she wore a post-brine robe cinched at the waste and a linen towel wound into a spiral on the top of her head.

“Hey, Charney,” she said to the puttering intern. “How’s things with you? Having any memory problems?”

“Oh, no Darlin’, that’s your game,” Charney laughed. His upper lip came stiffly down over his teeth as if he’d just gulped a pocketful of BBs and was having trouble keeping them in his mouth. Maybe he was covering up embarrassing teeth that were gappy, rotten, or just plain nicotine yellow. Whatever the reason, his laugh ended up looking like a grimace.

“How’d it go?” he asked.

“No change. And I’m about to rip my belly from this incessant itching.” She viciously rubbed the wound through the robe.

“Ooh, that’s a good sign,” Charney said, swiping at the pristine mirror on the back of the bathroom door. “And light scratching’s good. Stimulates it. Just don’t open it back up.”

“Yeah, yeah. They went through all that.” She changed course. “Hey listen, I don’t suppose you could snag some bootleg? They trust you with the keys to the lockers?”

“Bootleg? You mean something from Down South?”

“From Budland? Hey, I hadn’t thought of that. I was just referring to extra-curricular pharmaceuts, pharma-suicidals, y’know. But a roll of H would be good.”

“No, no, ‘Down South.’ Off-planet. Don’t be square, Marla. I thought you meant virtual playsets or something. Drugs? Right. I’d lose my license. Besides, you’re on a pretty good regime already, what else do you want?”

“I was thinking some Burners or something.”

“Forget it. Your doctor would kill me.”

“Doc? Homicide? I doubt...” Marla stopped in mid-sentence. She stared at Charney for several seconds.

“What?” Charney asked, frozen, watching her.

“Shush!” Marla waited, listening, not moving. Suddenly she jumped up and rushed to the door. “Who is that?” She yanked the curtain to the side and stood in the hall staring at the mob of moving gurneys, scrubbing spiders, and mechanical interview bots. Charney came up from behind and looked over her shoulder into the hallway, not daring to ask who who was, but dying to know.

“I heard a voice,” Marla said, staring down the corridor. “Someone—I don’t know who—but definitely someone.”

“That’s a good sign. A really good sign.”

“Yes, but I don’t see anyone I know.”

“It was in your head, Marla. It’s your memory coming back.”

“No, I heard it out here. It was for real. Somebody talking, saying... I don’t know what, but ... something.”

She stepped into the hallway, dodging conveyances and peering into numerous faces and rooms, pulling back damask curtains when necessary. She moved slowly at first, but after viewing several faces and rooms with no success, she began tearing from one person to the next, quickly looking into his or her face and then moving on.

Charney dutifully followed along, insisting that she was going at it all wrong. “You should go back to your room, lie down, let it return,” he kept repeating.

But Marla continued on down the hall, grabbing people to look into faces. She stopped only when she reached the end of the hall where a window representing some sort of nurse’s station or office stood. The outpost looked like it either dispensed meds or sold tickets to the latest over-hyped stadium concert. No attendant stood behind the window so she banged on the plexiglass, demanding attention as if she’d been here waiting all afternoon and she’d be damned if she was going to miss the Dead. “Hello! Hello! Open up! There’s someone here!” she shouted.

Just to the right of the ticket window, a latch clicked and a door opened half a decimeter. A tentative head stuck itself out. “What is it, Miss? Do you need some water? Just ring for an intern.”

“No, I heard a voice. I heard somebody that I know. It was familiar.”

“Oh, well that’s a good sign! You should go back to your room and lie down, relax, and let it...”

Marla ignored the suggestion. “It was...who’s in there?” Marla pushed on the door trying to see over the head of the nurse, or intern, or ticket master into the room beyond, convinced she’d find a familiar face and an answer to a thousand questions. Or at least one. The nurse at the door, not expecting the movement, lost her hold on the door momentarily, giving Marla a quick view of the room. A man stood with his back to her in a brown leather jacket with a fur collar. All she could see of him was a head of shiny black hair. He was speaking to a hospital worker—an intern, or a doctor, or another keeper of some sort.

“I just need to know,” Marla shouted. The man turned and glanced at Marla and then quickly turned his head back to the hospital worker. He stood motionless, his conversation now stopped and hanging in midair. The hospital worker he was speaking to looked over his shoulder, eyed Marla, and proceeded to shuffle the man with the fur collar into an inner office area out of Marla’s sight.

Marla stood staring at the space where the man stood, trying to force her memory, going over details of the face she saw for only a second. The door swung slowly closed, inches from her face.

Behind her Charney said, “Marla, you should go back to your room. You’ll have better luck if you lie down and relax. I’ll get you some psilo tea. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re having a breakthrough. That’s such a good sign.”

Marla missed most of what Charney said, however, because she was going through what was by now a familiar routine: a pain shooting through her gut, a doubling over, a clutching of her belly. So familiar was this routine, the hospital workers had dubbed it the Marla Gershe maneuver.

Charney waited for the maneuver to pass, dutifully retrieving the towel from the floor where it landed after it unwound itself from her hair. After several moments, Marla recovered herself and he helped her to her feet. She leaned on him as they wended their way back through the rolling gurneys and bots and housekeepers and dinner carts to her own private cubby cave.

“This is not a good sign, Marla,” he said as he guided her to the bed. “They were planning on suspending the brine treatment, but I’m afraid if you keep getting this pain, you’ll have to go back.”

“I can’t,” Marla said, flopping sideways onto her bed, still clutching her midsection. “I can’t go back to that tank. It’s torture, it’s neverending, it’s lame, it’s ...”

“Working, and it’s not so bad. Like taking a big bath.”

“Fuck off,” she whispered.

She lay in the fetal position, hand holding her stomach, eyes closed, face squeezing in on itself. Charney covered her with the starched bed coverlet, made an attempt at fluffing her pillow, and finally decided she needed to relax and let the memories flow without his help. “Ta,” he said, snapping the lights off on his way out the door.

Some time after that, the pain subsided, her face relaxed, and she drifted off to sleep, still in the fetal position but now drooling as well.

Not until the moments before she awoke the following morning did she dream. Somewhere a sound, deep and round like an ancient foghorn but with crisp edges, accompanied the repetition of an alarm on a breached, for-authorized-personnel-only door. A red light flashed on with each blast of the horn. A face

with no features floated by the dreamscape. Mannish, black hair framed it. Giant letters forming unintelligible words hung in the air along with smoke interspersed with sleet. Garbled human voices shouted somewhere off in the undefined distance, and then abruptly they barked nonsensical orders directly into her ears. She looked to where the voices came from, but nothing besides the roiling smoke and rain was there.

Slowly she woke to the sounds of an actual hospital alarm signaling the breach of a for-authorized-personnel-only door. Or a fire in the tunnel, or an escaping patient, or a milk spill. She was cramped and sore, still in the fetal position from the previous night. The pillow was soaked. But her midsection felt no pain.

Out in the hallway, people were calling out and giving directions in response to the alarm. They rushed past her curtain, carrying a heightened purpose on their emergency errands. No one entered her cave to explain the alarm and she heard no announcement over a general address system. Remaining unperturbed, she rolled over to her back, wincing needlessly, for her stomach had lost all of last evening's tetchiness.

That was a good sign.

She stared at the ceiling. With no windows in either this room or the tunnel outside her door, there was no way to tell what time of day or year it was, or even where the building was geographically located on the Textile Planet. She could be cooped up in a mountain enclave or buried deep under the Canvas Sea for all she knew. Her inability to determine her bearings incited a slow claustrophobic creep into her consciousness. Memory or no, she had to leave.

That idea and the fact that there was no way in God's domain she was crawling back into that tank of battery acid occupied her thoughts all morning. No matter what, she was not going back to the tub.

Later, suspended vertically in the brine with Doc Iovvna perched in her palm chair and passing judgment, Marla despaired.

"I can't do this anymore, Doc," she said, hanging her head. Her voice barely rose above the noise of the tank's aeration.

"Well," Doc began. "Only you can get you out of here. You know that. Nothing we do—stimulation, increased abysmalate concentration, memory upcharges at the drop of a hat, negative reinforcement—seems to be enough. It's not coming together for some reason. I'm guessing there's unwillingness on your part. If I didn't know better, I'd say you don't want to remember."

"Well, I'm sorry I'm the stubborn brat that just won't follow your program, but isn't that what psychosis is? Random untoward thinking, incapable of being controlled by those that know better?"

"Look, don't be a baby. You're well past that mental anguish stage. You're hiding from yourself at this point, not your, uh, accident."

"Accident?" Marla muttered. "That wasn't an accident."

"Excuse me?"

"It wasn't an accident!" Marla shrieked, lifting her head to glare at Doc.

“Nobody shot you on purpose, Marla.”

A split-second vision flashed through Marla’s brain—a snapshot of an unknown face with black hair and familiar but unrecognized features. Around the face a mist swirled and voices shouted. The ritual scene was there and gone in a breath.

Marla tensed in the tank, clenching her whole body against the arm bands holding her upright. Her dangling legs stiffened, pointing down into arrows. Panic hit with an uncontrollable urge to run. Suddenly her legs loosened and began to pump as if she were riding a bicycle. Her knees scraped against the glass walls of the unit.

“I have to get outta here. I have to get outta here,” she chanted.

“Only you can get you out,” the doctor answered. “Who are you, Gershe?”

“I can’t do this. I can’t do this anymore.” Her voice raised and her body shook with the leg pumping, causing the water to slosh out of the tank onto the red and black checkerboard tile floor.

“Who are you, Gershe?”

“I can’t do this. I can’t do this anymore.” The volume of her voice increased further, not yet shouting, but on the verge. She breathed in and out in spasms. Huffing, puffing, tears streamed. Face reddened from exertion and mania. She breathed and pumped, breathed and pumped.

“Who are you, Gershe?”

Marla opened her mouth wide and screamed: “Saaaaaaadddle!” Tears rolled down her cheeks and added their salt to that in the tub. She stopped pumping, inhaled deeply and screamed. “Where’s my coooooooooooooffffeeeeeeeeee!”“

Instantly the tank drained, as though flushed from an unseen lever. The electrodes in her neck disengaged themselves. The arm bands hydraulically lifted Marla up and over to the shower unit in the corner of the room where jets installed in the walls activated tiny spraylets of ambient temp water. Doctor Ivovna’s chair lowered with a whoosh, and as soon as it hit the floor, she pulled her left leg out from underneath her where she kept it tucked during interviews with the patient. She walked over to where Marla stood hunched and bawling in the water spray. She pulled a table cloth towel from a wall slot, and as soon as the jets cut out, she wrapped Marla in it and unhooked her arm bands.

“Congratulations, Lover,” she said. “It’s not so much the knowledge of events as it is the attitude. It’s important for you to be who you are or we can’t progress. No more tank, Darling.”

With that she turned and walked out.

Marla stood with the towel draped limply around her, her left hand holding it in place at her shoulder where the doctor had placed it. All around her the shower jets were incessantly blowing hot air across her scalp. Her right arm hung impotently at her side. Both shoulders slumped, knees threatened to buckle. Only her eyes moved as she stared at Doc exiting the room. Finally she fell to the floor panting, but no one saw it. She was alone, remembering herself.

#

Several days later, Doc and Marla sat facing each other in a small circular room — a cylinder, rather — painted a psychiatrically perfect shade of blue. The only furniture in the room consisted of a pair of wirefangled chairs in which the two of them sat. The chairs matched the wall (a cylinder having only one wall) in color. Their canvas cushy seats had been dyed blue as well. Doc's smock and Marla's gown were likewise the same soothing shade of Pantone 278, a color scientifically proven hundreds of years previously to be the ultimate patient-soothing hue. Once the power of this blue had been discovered, every psychiatrists' manual, paint mixer guide, and dye manufacturing standard included a patch sample of the color. Announcements were made at conferences, PDRs updated, trade associations advised, and revised catalogs forwarded to purchasers of materials at facilities such as this one. Everyone knew that Pantone 278 becalmed the savage suffering from bipolar, hypersensitivity, Kuiper's Neurosis, or any other mind malfunction on the books. Including trauma-induced amnesia.

Marla answered Doc's question: "I recall chaos. Clacking looms and buzzing yakkers. Robots everywhere, each one with a dopey question. Mama yelling at me and me yelling at Saddle. Too much tension from sun up to sun down."

"What about your boss. Where's he?"

"On the yakker."

"What do you mean? He's with you, but speaking to someone else?"

"No, he's never around. He's just on the yakker, barking orders or weaseling out of commitments. Putting me through the wringer one way or another."

"I'm talking about the last day."

"I'm talking about every day."

"That's of no interest. We need you to go through the last day."

"I told you, I can't remember all of that. Isn't it enough that I know who I am?"

"That was enough to get you out of the tub, but we're trying to heal you completely now."

"Doc," Marla opened her eyes and leaned forward in her seat. She lowered her voice as if letting the doctor in on a secret. "It's not coming."

Doc stiffened her jaw. "It always comes. You're not relaxing enough. What about your flashes?"

"My flashes?"

"You said a man's face flashes into your mind every once in a while. Perhaps it's your boss or one of the vice presidents, or the president himself. Certainly you don't know them well and might not be able to recognize them in a quick look."

Marla sat back, laughing. "Torpido, Lamont? No, it's not them. I know them, believe me. This man of my waking dreams walks upright. Those two have no spines; they can't lift their heads past their knees. They haven't evolved beyond the mollusca phylum."

"Why do you hate them so much?"

“They cause it all.”

“Caused what all?”

“Not caused. Cause!”

“Okay, cause what all?”

“The tension and confusion and acid reflux.”

“How?”

“By not respecting the work, the workers, or even the product. They ‘yes!’ their way in to work each day and never consider their promises. They pledge the world to the big man and never think of what it will take. They never roll up their sleeves and they never get off the phone.”

“That’s their job.”

“Their job is to know what time it is.”

“Time?”

“Yeah, what’s going on. Listen, this is getting us nowhere. I’m not giving you what you want and vice versa.”

“What is it that you want, Marla?”

“I want to get out of here.”

“Why?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“You want your life back. Return to the outside. Work.”

“No!” Marla stood up. “I’m not going back to work.”

“Marla, relax, please. No wonder you’re having trouble. You’re wound up tighter than a big hair band. You’ve got to relax. This will never work otherwise. Please. Sit down.”

“No, I won’t sit down, and I won’t go back.” She began pacing the tiny cylindrical room, following the wall and subsequently walking in circles.

“Fine, have it your way, but you can’t leave until you remember.”

“I did remember. Remember? In the tub.”

“You remembered who you are, that’s all. Now you must remember the incident that brought you here.”

“Okay, I started a riot and got shot in the tum-tum.” She leaned over from behind the doctor and spat

into Doc's ear. "You happy?"

Doc winced and backed her head away. "You've been told that. You're not really remembering."

"No, I'm not remembering, but I've been told so many times, how am I going to know when and if I actually do remember? I'll probably make up something that I think is true; I've been told everything from start to finish."

"You'll get details wrong until you actually remember." Doc turned in her seat to face Marla who stood behind her. "That is, until you see the details—facial expressions, the course of events, the paraphernalia, the, the gun!"

"Ahhhh!" Marla fell to her knees clutching her stomach. In her mind she saw robot mannekins banging iron tools against looms under a fine spray, and chanting people who danced around the room, and a man's face superimposed on the scene for an instant. Her knees weakened further as the pain characteristically shot back and forth through her midsection as if a murderer was seeking her heart with a knife. Doc jumped to her feet and ran to Marla, placing a hand on Marla's back.

"What's happening?" she asked. "Do you need a medic?"

Marla, doubled up on the floor, managed a weak "No, I'm good."

"What happened?"

"That face," she gasped for breath.

"The man's face?"

"Yes, and the robots and the workers and it was raining."

"Now there's a detail." Doc stood up and pushed a memo button on the back of her seat. "You see. You will remember."

"I gotta get outta here," Marla remained on the floor, knees buckled beneath her. Her upper body rocked back and forth.

"You will, Pet. It won't be long now." Doc continued punching codes into the seat back pad. An opening appeared in the wall indicating the exit from the cylinder had been activated. Doc turned to leave the room, calling over her shoulder, "I'm going to get someone to help you to your room. Good job, Gershe. Really good job. Just a little longer now."

"Uh," Marla groaned to the by now empty exit slot. "I can't wait longer," she whispered to herself.

Several minutes—a half an hour maybe—later, the humming of a bot's wheels signaled the entrance of the motile ordered by Doc to assist Marla. By that time the pain had subsided somewhat and she was capable of finding her own way back. She'd remained resting on the floor, however, trying to come up with an escape plan. Before the orderlybot could activate a preprogrammed message, she blurted out: "No, I'm not planning on suing the hospital."

The bot ignored her. "Do you need tranquilization?"

Not sure if the bot meant sleeperols or terminols, Marla said “no,” but then remembered the old saying: What doesn’t kill you, makes you sleep better. She recast her answer. “You got any cyanatals?” she asked.

The robot answered, “I am not a dispensary, merely a recorder. If you wish to commit suicide you must request an omega form. Would you like an omega form?”

“Does it come with a dose of cyanatals?”

“I am not a dispensary...”

Marla sighed and shook her head. “Never mind.” She stood up slowly and followed the tin contraption out of the cylinder and into the labyrinthine hospital tunnels, wending this way and that until she reached her own little cubby cave where Charney was fluffing the head rests and airing out linens.

“Dinner’s ready, Marla,” he called out as she passed through the curtain. “And it’s not bad, no spinach tonight. God I hate that stuff.”

She reached over to the food cart standing at the end of her gurney and grabbed the stainless steel bowl, popping the lid off. Inside, the viscous beige protein soup hospitals are fond of serving their guests steamed away, teasing her, challenging her to enjoy it. She picked up a straw and flopped into the comfy chair by the doorway with one leg grumpily dangling over the steel arm of the chair and began sucking up her dinner.

“Big deal,” she said after a swallow.

“What’s your problem tonight, child?”

“Same ol’, same ol’. Gored, floored, and bored.”

“Better’n stewed, lewd, and rude. “

“Absolutely not true. Which, by the way, reminds me. What kind of privileges they give somebody like you in this toe joint? All access, by any chance?”

“Forget it, Marly girl, stop asking. But I tell you what. You wanna know how to get outta here?”

“Me? No way. It’s too much fun here. And the food, totally French high five. Who’d wanna leave?”

“I’ll say it again: You wanna know how to get outta here?”

“You’re not gonna preach, are you?”

“Na, just trying to entertain ya.”

“You wanna entertain me, get me a ladder and a window.”

“Yeah. Listen, how about some left-handed hearts? I got a break coming up in a few and I’m a little bored myself.” He pulled a pack of cards out of his pants pockets and dragged the dinner cart over in front of Marla for a makeshift card table. “If you let your head chomp on some new lettuce, your subconscious will make a fresh salad.”

“Oh Gad! What are you, an intern or a writer?” Marla asked.

“Intern all the way, and I’m studying.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re an intern. Good for you Charney, maybe when you grow up you can be a patient torturer like Doc. Better than becoming a coordinator.”

Charney dragged a spare visitor’s chair over from the other side of the room. “Aw, it wasn’t so bad, I’m sure. You’re just feeling sorry for yourself.”

“Nope, I hated that job.”

“Why’d you do it then?” He shuffled the deck as he talked.

“I hated being a weaver even more.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because on breaks you have to play cards to pass the time.”

Charney laughed, displaying his characteristic teeth covering grimace. “You’re a joker,” he said.

“And you’re an ace.”

“No, I’m a king.”

“Well I ain’t no damn queen. And you’re more like a knave, actually.”

“Stop it, I can’t stand it anymore.” He grimaced/laughed again.

Marla finished the repast and pushed the cart away to the side.”Right. Listen, I hate games and it’s time for my nappipoo, anyway. Let’s take a raincheck on the hearts, yes? You got any inducements on your person? I feel like taking a trip down memory lane.”

She crawled into bed and languidly held her wrist in the air, hinting for Charney to get on with the evening med ritual.

Charney’s shoulders slumped in disappointment. He held one card in the air, having stopped the deal before he even got started. He stared at her empty chair for a few seconds and slowly placed the card back into the deck and the deck back into his pocket, making a big show of how put out he was because Marla refused to have fun. He huffed through his nose and pouted his lips.

“Memory lane, huh? Gonna make progress?” he said. “Whoopee, Marla. Aunt Sal’s gonna be dancing tonight.” He stood and pushed the table back to its designated spot by the bed.

“Aunt Sal?”

“Yeah, you know—the single payer. Your, uh, host.” From a side pouch hanging on his hip, Charney retrieved a baby pink plastic drug tape and installed it on Marla’s limp wrist which had remained hanging in the air expectantly. He slapped it to make the contact goo start osmosis. “Your host has been

exceedingly interested in seeing a full recovery. I hear they're getting impatient, thinking of shutting off the tap, but they want that full recov. Apparently you're such a 'good worker,' they want you back full capacity."

"My host?" Marla asked.

On his way out of the room, he paused at the curtain, turned and said, "Yeah, your benefactor, y'know. The little lady eating the bills. She needs your ass back in the saddle, cuz you're such a good cow poke. They sure would like to shut the tap." He sneered along with his grimace, just before flinging the curtain aside to exit. Out in the hallway, he called to one of Marla's neighbors, "Hey McGruff, ever play left-handed hearts?"

"My benefactor?" Marla lay down on the bed on her back with her arm on her forehead, as if the inducerides in the plastic tape would work fastest that way, like they could enter her bloodstream through her head and then be right where they needed to be.

While willing the drugs to take effect, she contemplated Charney's hint about some big thing with the insurance company. Sure they'd be happy when she left. What was a hospital stay—a zillion queeks a day now? But why would they be dancing at her success? It was a mindless business deal; every month they serviced thousands of faceless head jobs, each one without a memory. "Aunt Sal" was most assuredly not watching this particular waste case. Why would they care if she was good at her job, and why did Charney say that about her being good at her job, anyway. Sure she was good at her job. Hadn't she been promoted? But how does Charney know these things? Why does he care?

As interesting as Charney's comment was, it was secondary in importance to the real question of the day: "What was Marla doing the day she got shot?" Doc had promised to spring her in an attasecond if she could answer that question, so now it overshadowed all other concerns. Without the capacity to worry about the bigger picture, she'd have to let the extraneous mysteries unravel themselves. Who can figure out what the deal with the insurance folks could be, or what's going to happen when the universe expands to infinity? You have to let some stuff go.

She fell into an uneasy sleep. Her belly tingled, but when she went to half-consciously scratch the little section where the xanthan bullet had done damage, she found she could not feel anything and the itch remained unsatisfied. The electrosutures they used to keep her intestines inside her while the hole had healed had done a great job of concealing the area of damage. There was no visible trace of destruction, yet a hard nug-sized patch of congealed flesh a couple of centimeters above her navel indicated something vicious had happened there. The scar tissue was hard and totally numb. She suspected the itch on the edge of it would never go away.

She drifted off, sleeping lightly and waking every hour in the manner of one who has left something undone before he or she retired. And like that delinquent sleeper, she dreamt of barely begun work assignments with impending deadlines, overdue bills arriving in the same mail as a zeroed bank account statement, or the black and yellow tail fins of a school jet retreating forever upwards while you are left with the task of going home and telling Mom you missed the bus.

When she awoke the next morning, a question formed in her mind and remained there throughout the day. Not that she could tell it was day. In her stainless steel windowless room, no time of day registered. Seasons passed unmarked. Life was timeless and dimensionless.

There were stimuli of course, piped in at intervals and jarring in effect. With no forewarning, some smell or sound from her past would invade the room. During lunch the clanking and whirring of looms suddenly

burst from the walls. Or the burning smell of vat dying chemicals assaulted Marla's nose while she read a newspaper in what she guessed was the afternoon. One day, they got creative and piped in the odor of Saddle's pink yakker. And yakker buzzers themselves incessantly rang out day or night. The time and duration of the incidents were scientifically calculated to induce her memory.

It may or may not have worked. Marla didn't care. It served to reinforce her assertion that she must get out of there. The constant trespassing on her solitude reminded her that she had no privacy here, even when no one visited her for hours.

Not even a robot.

The question that bugged her for most of this day was: Is the insurance company paying for all the therapy and high class accommodation, or had Charney implied some sort of problem with her bill? You never know about an insurance company. They're not above a scam. And likewise, you never knew about Charney; he grimaced when he laughed. Likable? Oh sure, but he always seemed to be hiding something, a secret he shared with others, like Doc. Whenever he was in her room, she felt an extension of Doc's therapy working. He was trying new angles, watching her to catch her off guard so he could scream her hiccups off. Only she didn't have hiccups. It was her memory. It was constipated, impacted, stuck, not moving, ignoring Charney's efforts and hints at how important she was to BAC.

She changed into her today's clothes, which were just the same as yesterday's clothes only clean: wooly pullons for her feet, drawstring jammy bottoms, no button t-shirt. If she was in a sassy mood, or had dirty hair, she could add the triangular do-rag and tie it up under her hair at the back of her neck, gulag style. She stepped into her Chinese-girl sandals and walked out into the traffic of the corridor. Gurneys whizzed by, some with patients, some without. They raced along with the interviewbots late for appointments and food carts delivering digestibles. Dodging the assorted contraptions and people, she made her way to the end of the tunnel where the localator bank stood.

"What room, please?" the bank asked, pulsing a red on-light with each word of its question. The text of the question itself blinked up in the space on the wall above the bank. If you were both deaf and blind, you'd have a little trouble with the communication, but if either of those senses were intact, not only would you know what was being asked of you, the shrill request and gaudy red light would embarrass you in the bargain. Everyone in the hallway could tell where you wanted to go. Fortunately, they were all so busy in their life-saving work, they never paid any attention to wandering patients.

"Administration building," Marla answered.

"I'm sorry, you are not authorized for the..." (pause while the automatic message inserted the appropriate title) "Administration Room."

Marla had dealt with stubborn processors in the past. "OK, Administration Secretary."

"Do you have an appointment?"

"How about Administration Receptionist?"

"I'm sorry, patient 9301 is not authorized for the ... (same pause as before) Administration Room."

"How do you know what I'm authorized for? How do you know who I am?" Marla raised her voice, trying to be righteously annoyed. As if that would work with a transistor. The whizzing carts and rushing interview objects in the hallway barely registered her snippy tone. They continued rushing and whizzing

madly about her.

“What room, please?” The elevator bank flashed and simultaneously asked.

Marla’s shoulders slumped forward. Thwarted, repelled, deflected, and blocked, she reconsidered her strategy. Turning from the localator panel, she joined the messy hall traffic and plodded to the nursing station located at the T-section where she’d been given little to no help a few days before.

She considered pounding on the door but instead headed for the thick lead glass window with the centimeter-in-radius holes drilled through the glass at forehead height.

“Hello,” she spoke up to the sound holes.

Receiving no answer she looked over the sill for a bell or buzzer or some sort.

Nothing.

Rising to her tiptoes, she spoke louder into the voice holes. “Hello.”

Again no answer.

She rapped her knuckles on the window pane, but seeing no sound enhancing capabilities in the window, she knew no one would hear the rapping on the other side, even if someone were in the room somewhere. She watched for a sign of movement.

Nothing.

“Hello, is anybody in there?” She yelled into the window. She turned her ear to listen for a sound through the holes, but the noisy hallway prevented any possibility of success.

“Hello, hello, I need some help out here.” She pounded fruitlessly on the leaded glass window. “Can somebody please tell me? Who’s paying for my room?” she hollered.

The whirring behind her hesitated a moment only. Or maybe she merely thought it did. The gurneys and lunch trays and bots and interns scurried on their way ceaselessly.

“Hello! Hello!” Marla screamed. “I’m gonna sue this hospital.”

Instantly all traffic in the hallway stopped. Not a click or a whiz could be heard. Marla turned to look and saw the hallway filled with unmoving, silent apparati. She returned her face to the window with the holes behind which a woman in a white uniform and nurse’s cap had materialized.

“May I help you, please?” she inquired sweetly.

“Uh...” Marla was too surprised to remember what she’d been needing. “Uh...yes, I need...Can I come in?”

“No, patients aren’t allowed back here, but I can come out if you’d like,” The nurse answered.

“Uh, no. I just need...I just need to speak to Administration. You see there’s some sort of problem with my bill.”

“Oh, you don’t need to see Administration about that. Your doctor is handling your case.”

“She’s my doctor. I need help with my bill. I need information.”

“Yes, yes, of course. Your doctor is handling all aspects of your case, including your expense scheme. Is there anything else? Do you need pain pills, sleeping pills? Are you pregnant?”

“Preg...? No, I just got up.”

“Well then, if you don’t need anything there’s probably nothing we can do for you. Thanks for stopping by.”

“Yes, but...”

“Your doctor will take care of it.”

“But I’m not seeing her until tomorrow.”

“As long as you’re not in pain, it can wait.”

“Yes, but one more day; that’s a lot of thistle. I don’t know who’s paying for this.”

“Your doctor knows.”

“Yes, but I don’t know. Just give me a referral to the Administration Office and I’ll clear it up myself.”

“Only a doctor can give you referrals.”

“But I’m not seeing my doctor until tomorrow.”

“Well, then you can ask him at that time.”

“Her.”

“Excuse me?”

“I can ask her at that time.”

“Exactly. I guess we’re all set then. Thanks for stopping by. If you need anything else, just ask. We’re here to help.” The nurse was backing away during her speech and gave a little nod just before turning her back on Marla and disappearing behind a door at the back of the booth.

By now the gurneys and interviewers in the hallway had resumed their activities. Marla retreated through the crowd, defeated. She returned to her room and spent the rest of the day bored one minute and angry the next.

The following day, at the appointed time to see Doc, she found her way to the psychiatrically perfect blue therapy room, the localator happy to comply with her request since, although patient 9301 wasn’t allowed to visit the Administration Room, she was certainly welcome to the therapy room.

“C’mon in,” Doc sang to her from her one-leg-underneath-herself-the-other-sticking-out-in-front roost. Marla could never figure out how the foot underneath Doc’s rump never fell asleep; she sat on it the whole time, and most of the sessions lasted upwards of an hour.

As soon as she sat in her interviewee seat directly facing Doc and only a couple of feet away, Marla blurted out, “What’s the problem with my bill?”

Doc’s eyes widened slightly but immediately she smiled to show she was unruffled. “Why, Marla, you haven’t been wasting your time worrying about that, have you?”

“What waste? I have nothing but time.”

“Yes, but you should be relaxing, allowing the sense therapy to work on your memory.”

“Relaxing is not doing any good.” She stood up to punctuate the fact. “I need to have something to do. I need to get out in the world, smell the Mill air and hear the rumblings myself. This piped in sensation bullshit is too stale. It’s like hearing the same song every hour on the hour. After a while you don’t even hear it anymore.”

“The sense therapy is necessary. You’ve got your self-image back, sure, but you’ve got to remember everything else. You’ll never get over your accident otherwise.”

“My accident? How is a gun accidentally in a Mill?” Marla had been pacing the room since the idea about getting out in the world entered her head, left her mouth, and shot over to the ears of all-powerful Doc. She stopped now and strode to Doc sitting casually on her own foot. “Who’s paying the bill?” she demanded.

“Sit down and we’ll talk about it.” Doc looked up at her with her head tilted back. “We can’t have a good conversation with you standing over me, threatening like that.”

“Threatening?” Marla cried and thought better. She eased into the chair opposite Doc, trying to pull it in closer, but finding it bolted to the floor a psychiatrically perfect distance from the doctor’s seat. She gave up and sat back in what she thought was the least threatening posture. “I just need to know if the insurance company is squared away.”

“The insurance company...?” Doc squinted her eyes. “What are you worried about them for? They do the right thing.”

“I just want to make sure. I’m in here a long time now, and this stuff catches up to you long after the fact. I don’t want to find a big fat surprise in my message box two years from now. Charney said...”

“Charney? That little... Your bills are being paid as they come up. I’m coordinating that.”

“You? I thought you were my therapist.”

“Of course I am. I’m an account-therapist. Psych major, business minor. I’m a full-service advocate. Once I take on a case, I take care of your personal day-to-day needs as well as your psychotherapy. If you have any problems or questions, you need to come to me.”

“Okay, how do I get outta here? That’s my first need.”

“You’re a broken record,” Doc said, shaking her head eyes downward looking for help from her lap. She inhaled sharply and held it in for a few seconds before speaking, as if she needed to rephrase something she’d been saying all along because Marla was just not getting it. She looked up at Marla. “It’s important to complete your therapy before returning to work.”

“I’m not going back to work. I’m quitting. The Mill put me in here; why would I go back?”

“You put yourself in here. You must get that straight in your mind. If you remembered everything, you’d understand that. And one of the conditions of your hospital stay being paid is that you return to work.”

“What? I knew it!” Marla sat forward in her seat. “You’re kidding, right? Seems like the insurance company could care less what I do. It seems like they’d want me out of here as fast as possible. They wouldn’t put in some ridiculous condition like that. And it sounds illegal to me, anyway.”

“You’re wrong about that. They want a full recovery and they want you back at work.”

“Why?”

“Well,” Doc paused to clear her breath. “Why? Because that way you’ll be back on their roll call. You’ll be a client again. They’ll wring more money out of the Mill that way.”

“This makes no sense and it still sounds illegal. If you’re really my advocate, you need to check on that and get me out of here, cured or no.”

“I would never sign you out unless you were recovered. I’d be violating my oath otherwise.”

“What if I never remember?”

“You’ll remember.”

“How do you know?”

“I know, I’m the doctor.”

“The accountant.”

“And doctor, you’ll see. You must trust me. Don’t worry and don’t concern yourself about the cost. Just get well. Now,” Doc moved an invisible errant hair out of her eyes and back into the mass on top of her head. “What do you remember today?”

“How the Mill put me here.”

“You’re being belligerent.”

“No, I’m being combative. You have no clue. You haven’t been listening all these weeks and you’re trying to make me remember something that probably didn’t happen. Next thing you know you’ll have me bringing up memories of sexual abuse perpetrated on me by my grandparents when I was a child, the incidents heretofore forgotten by me, but miraculously dredged up by you and your canned sense cure.”

“You’re ridiculous, Gershe, we don’t do those kinds of things anymore. And you’re blocking yourself with denial. You must accept the truth in order for the memory to work.”

“What a surprise. I have to accept what you say in order for me to get out of here. I think I’m done for today. Can I go back to my room now? This isn’t working.”

“No, you can’t go back until you’ve settled down. I don’t like your hostile tone.”

“Oh, and now you’re my mother. Do I have to go to my room without supper as well? Listen, I’m hostile because what you’re telling me doesn’t make any sense.”

“If you keep this up, I’ll order tub therapy for you again.”

“You’re numb!”

The doctor’s eyes flew wide open. Marla leaned forward into where Doc was seated. She clenched the arms of Doc’s chair and held her face inches away from Doc’s.

“And I want to get out of here!” she shouted.

The doctor’s lips pursed into a hermetically sealed package. Her eyes pinched into slits. Slowly she pushed Marla back out of her personal space and reached over to the little panel of buttons on the side arm, never once taking her eyes from Marla’s. Pushing a button, she leaned over slightly, eyes still locked onto Marla’s, and spoke into the chair mike with a tight, slow voice. “Anvie, I need a daily bath scheduled for my patient.”

“You wouldn’t!” Marla hollared, standing up, fists clenched.

Doc leaned over and added, “hypothermic this time.”

Marla stepped forward and grabbed Doc’s wrist, pulling her forward out of the chair, and swung her onto the floor, where she landed in a heap. She then pushed the button on the arm of Doc’s chair and spoke into the mike, “Cancel that. I’ve changed my mind.”

“You’re the doctor,” Anvie answered on the other end of the communication link.

Marla wheeled on the doctor, fists clenched. “You try and change it back and I’ll strangle you.”

Just then a pain shot through her midsection. She keeled over to the floor in pain, clutching her stomach. She lay there not registering her surroundings, but seeing visions of mannekins carrying cups of coffee, Mama meeting with her at Barge’s, phone calls to Torpid, Lamont’s angry red face and a visit to President Shurm’s office to rudely interrupt a high impact meeting with his pit crew. The sprinklers came on and the mannekins beat on the looms around her. Fellow workers marched and chanted about her and the face of the young man that haunted her appeared in the crowd. She remembered the entire fateful day.

#

“Well, well, Marlie, you look like you’re quite trussed up here. They told me you’ve been behaving like a rascal.”

Marla opened her eyes. She was lying on her back on her gurney in her little cave, her arms fastened tightly to her sides by cloth restraining straps attached to the seams of her body wrap. A hulk stood out

of focus in the doorway just this side of the damask curtain.

“Where’s Charney?” she whispered.

“What do you need him for?” asked the hulk. It stepped into the room and stood over her bed.

“Charney ...” she struggled to sit up, but the straps held her down, restraining her like a victim of Scab Pullers Disease that had to be protected from herself.

“Don’t try to move, dear. They’ve got you pinned down.”

The hulk eased into focus. A shock of slicked down hair and slumping shoulders materialized before her. Slowly Marla realized that as bad as it was being imprisoned in this hospital, as bad as it was being tyrannized by an accountant with a minor in psychiatry, as bad as it was lying bandaged from head to toe and strapped onto a bed, the worst was having Grant Parker visit her, exacerbating all the bads. And how did he know Charney was a he?

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Well, I’m just visiting my new employee,” Parker said. He wore an ill-fitting navy suit with a polyester tie. Cheap bastard didn’t even bother buying the company product.

“Just shut up.” She closed her eyes, letting his answer sink in and discovering that as bad as everything was, they just kept getting badder by the minute. “I don’t even want to know how that happened.”

“Oh. Well, I’ll tell you. Lamont moved up and over to Fustia, Torpid moved up to Lamont’s spot, and they moved me up to Torpid’s.”

“Great. Can you please roll me over so I can pretend that you’re not here.”

“You’re so funny, I’m gonna love working with you.”

“How’s Saddle?”

“Oh, she’s great. They, uh, offered her your position.”

“Good Gad!” She struggled to sit up again. “Saddle’ll last ten minutes.” Losing her battle against the restraint, she relaxed back down. “Does that mean I’m back on a loom? I hope so.”

“Of course not. You’ve got my old spot. It’s not a promotion, more like a lateral move. Sort of a gravy assignment, though, since I got my group in such great order. It’ll be much easier than at Anthusia.”

“Especially since we lost ten Anthusian weavers, eh?” Marla exaggerated a smile. She knew the score.

“Oh no, no. Everything’s back to normal. Everybody has a full set of weavers and a parent. Daddy Jack is great to work with, you’ll love him.”

“I’m sure I will. Look, Parker, I’m really, really tired. Could you see if Charney will come in to feed me something—milkshake, tomato puree, baby food—anything that will work with a straw? I’m quite sure I’ll be, uh, bandaged here for a while considering I perpetrated violence on the doc. To be honest I’m surprised BAC is taking me back at all after what I did. Twice now. And I’m imagining I’ve got months

of tub dates in front of me. It's all making me very tired. So if you'll just go find the chap named Charney and buzz off."

"On the contrary, Dear." The damask room curtain flung aside and Doc Iovna herself entered like a diva at Sardi's after a big opening night. She was smiling and, despite a rubber brace contraption on her wrist, seemed to be in a sunny mood. She practically swooped like a swan *pointe* into the room and over to Marla's bedside. "You're to be released tomorrow."

"Hi, Doc," Parker said, moving over to give space to the arabesquing accountant/doctor.

Doc ignored him, keeping her eyes on Marla who was silent and trying to digest the situation.

Ignoring the insanity of strapping a person down for their violent behavior one moment and then releasing them the next, she looked from Doc to Parker and said, "Can you believe it, Doc? Now I don't want to go."

"That is to be expected," Doc bubbled with sickening enthusiasm as if everything was going according to plan. Even if Marla confessed fantasies of serial murdering half of Harper's Mills' children, Doc wouldn't be disappointed in the least. "That happens in cases of violent breakthrough," she said. "That's exactly why you must go. HA is going to set in now that you've had your episode."

"HA?"

"Hospitular Addiction." Parker and Doc said it at the same time. Doc turned and glared at Parker. He slunk back to a chair by the wall.

"I don't understand how I can be released after having done violence, which, yes, I'm sorry for, but I did nonetheless. I really am not ready to go back to work."

"Not to worry," Doc answered. "You'll have a couple of days off. Let me explain your situation this way. Because the original incident occurred when you were in the throes of your—'revolution' shall we call it?—you needed to be in an angry, defiant mood in order to set off a breakthrough and crack your memory open. I knew once you hit it, you'd be all right."

"Then why am I in this shroud here?"

"Well, we're never, uh, quite sure how long the attitude will last. You might have, you know, woken up angry still and exhibiting more, uh, misbehavior. But once we saw you were back to normal—I was listening in just now, I hope you don't mind—I signed your release. You'll be leaving tomorrow."

"Uh huh." Marla paused, considering. She really didn't want to go now. "And, uh, I still have that face haunting me. I dreamt it again."

"Face?"

"Yeah, the man's face, or hair, or whatever it is. No clue. I don't know who it is. What about that?"

"I'm sure it's nobody. Or rather, a composite of any number of people. In cases of retrograde amnesia like yours, people and events can sometimes glom together, even after memory retrieval. Look, Grant has black hair, maybe it was him."

“Can’t be. I mentioned the man has a spine, right?”

“A composite, then. Think no more of it.”

“Are you just making this up as you go along?”

“Of course not, I am degreed...”

“ ‘In psychountery’, yes, I know. Listen, I’m not ready. I’m quite sure you know this, but you do what you want. Somebody’s making decisions, maybe you, I don’t know. This whole tyranny, er uh, treatment, here is way beyond me, and I’m tired of thinking about it. I just want to be left alone. Can you get Charney to come in here and unwrap me? I’m sweating like a dog.”

“Dogs don’t sweat,” Parker interjected.

“I’m sweating like a dog and starting to shrink and the razor stubble in my armpits stings.”

“Um,” Doc said. “Charney, uh, left. He’s in a new position now. I’ll send in another intern.”

“Charney left?” Marla again struggled in her wraps, attempting to get up to a listening position. “We had such big plans. Why just yesterday we scheduled a game of dirty harry, or hearts, or something. That’s a drag. A real drag.” Marla looked over at Parker as if he personally talked Charney into leaving. “Sounds like everybody’s doing a lot of moving around lately. Why did he leave?”

“New position,” both Doc and Parker said it at the same time. Doc turned to Parker. Marla guessed she was glaring again at the silly Parker, giving away secrets that Marla wasn’t supposed to know about.

Doc turned back to Marla, huge smile on her face. “Playing cards, how wonderful. You sound like you’re doing fine.”

“I am, and thanks, Doc. You’ve really been great. And Grant. What good news for me, eh? I guess I’ll see you on, well, I can’t say what day I’ll see you on, because I have no clue, now do I?”

“You’ll see me on Monday, Marla.” Parker patted her on the shoulder and turned to leave the room.

“I’ll be in tomorrow to discharge you, dear,” Doc said, joining Parker to exit the room. Together they turned back at the damask curtain to wave goodbye. Both were smiling broadly. Marla wouldn’t have been surprised if they were surreptitiously holding each other’s hands out of her view.

Marla returned the big, fat smiles with one of her own. And it wasn’t just for their benefit. In spite of the obvious dismal state of her life—a job she hated, a new boss she hated worse, a new work group she was unfamiliar with, and no promise of a change in BAC’s plantation business practices on the horizon—she was happy. Doc’s treatment abilities fell somewhat short of those of a barber, true, but there was no doubt Marla had her full memory back. And with that return came her old attitude—her anger and her determination. There was no way in hell she was going back to the Mill or any other corner they assigned her to. But they didn’t need to know that.

A new intern came in wearing the same gray outfit Charney would have worn. She had longish, curly hair, though, where Charney was slightly balding.

“Ma’am, I’m going to cut you out of your bandages, if you don’t mind.”

“Me mind? Why no. I’m a lamb and totally complacent. Do with me what you will.”

“Yup. That’s what your chart says. ‘Complacent.’ “

“Does it now? And just yesterday I was flinging my doctor around the room. What is in the water, I wonder, to effect such a change in me? Say, what else is on my chart?”

“That you need to get out of your wraps because you’re sweating like a dog, starting to shrink, and your armpits are stinging.”

“Uh huh. So Doc’s not the only one utilizing the audio monitor in this room, eh?”

“Of course not. How else can we watch our patients? We can’t be in all the rooms all the time now, can we?”

“Of course not. So tell me, is Doc very, uh, conscientious in her work? Does she pay a lot of attention to her patients?”

“Oh yes. She’s been monitoring you since you came here.”

“I’ll bet she has. She’s very professional.”

“I guess. She’s not on staff here, so I don’t know her very well. You’re the only case she has here, in fact. But she seems very, what did you call it?”

“Conscientious, thorough, caring, observant, on the job, creepy.”

“Uh...”

“Listen, that guy that was here before you. Charney? I wanted to thank him for his help before I leave tomorrow. Do you know where he transferred to?”

“Charney, the guy that got sacked?”

“No, he moved. Transferred.”

“No, no. He got sacked; he was discussing payment plans with some patient. He wasn’t supposed to do that.”

“Huh. That sounds like Charney. He’s got such a big mouth. I liked the kid, but he was a pain in the ass sometimes. I suppose he deserved it. Still, I’d like to send him a thank you buzz. Maybe I can get his address of exchange from somebody. Who should I ask, do you suppose?”

“Oh, I have no idea. Ask at the desk when you check out tomorrow why don’t you?”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. Thanks. Thanks a lot, uh, what’s your name?”

“Tami,” she answered, cutting through the last bandage on Marla’s leg. “There, if you could just sit up now, I can pull them out from underneath you.”

“Tami, of course.” Marla sat up creakily, her muscles sore from being restrained for probably close to 18 hours. She had wrinkles in her skin, impressions from the seams of her hospital garb stamped in from the bandages. She had not, contrary to the latest scientific theory, shrunk. “Thanks, Tami.”

“Do you need something to eat?”

“Sure, whatever’s for dinner is fine.”

“Wow, your chart was right, you’re a lamb.”

“Yeah, a lamb.” Marla smiled as Tami tossed the pile of gray wraps down the cinerchute and then left through the curtains, leaving Marla alone in the room to stare at the wall and take in the day’s events. Regardless of what dismal picture of her new life Parker painted, one thing was for sure: she was getting out of this torture dump. “Lamb to the slaughter,” she muttered out of earshot of the audio monitor.

Dinner was uneventful. Afterwards she slept peacefully through the night.

#

At eight-thirty the next morning Doc bounced into the room in the same whirl of enthusiasm she’d had the day before, as if she was fresh into residency and Marla was her first success. She brought in a pile of white liners—the discharge clothing every patient everywhere wears like a badge of honor when he or she is expected to go out and face the world. Tradition demanded the wearer not remove them before sundown.

After donning the drawstring pants, U-neck shirt and canvas boat shoes, Marla was so impressed with her new look, she considered not changing out of them for at least an hour.

“Who’s your tailor?” she asked.

“Don’t be cynical, Dear,” Doc grunted. “It’s hospital issue, just be glad it’s not gray. Are you ready? I’d like to get you out of here.”

“Wow, Doc. When you decide someone is cured, you’re behind schedule already.”

“Well, it’s just that you’ve been in here a long time. The sooner you get out, the better you’ll feel.”

“And the sooner I’ll get back to work.”

Doc spun around. “What’s that?” she said.

“It’s just that I’m already good,” Marla answered.

“So now you want to stay?”

“No, not really. Just can’t imagine myself feeling better than what I already do. You said, ‘the sooner you get out, the better you’ll feel.’”

“Oh.” Doc’s lips went up into smile position but her cheeks remained tense. She took Marla by the elbow and led her through the damask curtain into the hallway where gurneys whizzed and bots sped on their way to extract promises from dazed patients not to sue the hospital.

The two walked uneasily through the traffic and directly to the nurses' station at the end of the hall. Doc marched up to the window and exclaimed "exiting patient" through the holes in the lead glass. Immediately the side door opened and they were admitted inside the office where Marla had previously not been authorized to go.

"So that's how you do it," she said.

"Do what?" Doc said, ushering Marla through the door.

"Nothing, nothing. Just remembering a temper tantrum I had," Marla said.

They sat down in two green cardboard upholstered straight-backs lined up along the wall inside the little reception area of the office. The nurse brought out a clipboard and an unabridged dictionary-sized pad of exit forms for Marla to "read" and sign. Form after form was placed in front of her with yellow translucent stickies in the shape of arrows and the words "sign here," pointing to the appropriate line. She used a memory pen so that after the first one, all she had to do was click the pen to the page and it signed for her.

Finally, after an hour or so, she was given a card with instructions to follow in case she felt faint, nauseous, diahbreic, phlegmatic, wheezy, light-headed, flatulent, or green. On the back, in small, faint letters, it stated: "In case of litigation as per Form 39A-/L, which you have previously signed, you must contact our arbitration unit at Juncoe 9000. Remember: Lawsuits are illegal."

Marla neither read the box, nor listened to the nurse reciting the instructions with the same speed and histrionic emotion of a stewardess giving the ritual life-saving instructions before the plane takes off. The nurse had obviously done this before, two, three thousand times.

"Thanks," Marla said. "I understand."

"Good, sign here. It says you understand everything you've signed. Then Doctor, uh..."

"Ivovna," Doc said.

"Doctor Ivovna must sign that the patient is of sound mind and body."

"Fine," Doc and Marla said it together.

"Good," the nurse said.

"Fine," Doc and Marla said together.

The nurse glared. "Do you need anything else?"

"Well..."

"No, she's all set," Doc interrupted, and then turned to Marla, hastily adding, "I mean, well, aren't you?"

"Um, actually no." Marla startled the other two by impudently putting a stick in the spokes of the checkout process. She looked from the nurse to Doc, both glared at her. "I mean, I ... wanted to say, uh, goodbye to Charney. I feel I should give him a gift or something. He did a bangup job."

“No tipping is allowed, Ma’am,” the nurse said.

“Oh, okay, well, I’ll just say goodbye then.”

“Goodbye,” the nurse and Doc said it together.

“To Charney,” Marla said. “I just need to know what hallway he’s on and I’ll pop in real quick. Just take a minute. It’s a little unfeeling if I don’t.” She scrunched her lips and nose together in the “You know what I mean” face that people use to imply the listener knows exactly what the speaker knows, and that they both know the unspoken social rules and how painful it is when those rules are broken.

“Uh, well!” The nurse looked at Doc. “He’s, uh, let me look it up. I can, uh, call, maybe. Yes, I’ll call.”

She pushed a button on the wall next to the speaker unit of a recessed yakker.

Presently a voice answered. “Admin.”

Marla’s eyes widened. “So they do exist.”

“What?” Doc asked. Marla just shook her head, indicating it was a private joke between herself and herself.

“Pearl,” the nurse spoke into the wall unit. “This is Tump on five. Our patient...” she shuffled through the papers in her hands until finding one with the answer. “Marla Gershe, is here in the office. She’s just leaving today and would like to say goodbye to an intern. Charney Gowither. Do you know what hallway he’s on? This is Doctor Iovvna’s patient.”

“The one with the, uh...”

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

“Uh huh. Well, uh, Charney Gowither, let me see.”

A clicking of a computer terminal could be heard through the yakker. Somewhere in the distant reaches of Pearl’s office, a group of people laughed at a comment unheard by those in Tump’s, leaving each one there to separately assume the joke was on her. Finally Pearl expelled a breath into the speaker of her yakker which translated on the other end as a burst of crackly white noise, letting everyone in Tump’s office know she’d returned to the line.

“Yes, uh, apparently Charney Gowither is no longer with us.”

“He died?” Marla asked.

“He died?” the nurse asked into the yakker.

“No, he quit.”

“Can I get a forwarding address?” Marla called over to the line, trying to bypass Tump who was about to say, “Okay, goodbye.”

“Who’s that?” Pearl asked.

“Marla Gershe. The one with the, uh...” Marla answered, moving over to Tump’s side and easing her out of in front of the yakker’s speaker holes. “I’d like to send him a note thanking him for his great service. I had hoped to say goodbye, but I’ll just send him a card.”

“I’m sorry, we can’t give you his address, but if you fill out a complimentary card available for just that service, we’ll forward it to him.”

“Oh, well, that would be wonderful,” Marla answered weakly. She turned to Doc. “These people are great, aren’t they?”

“Uh,” Doc said.

Marla turned to the frowning Nurse Tump. Everyone stood in silence for a few moments waiting for something to happen. Finally, Marla said, “Nurse Tump?”

Nurse Tump raised her eyebrows and nodded knowingly, finally understanding that everyone was waiting for her. She reached over and pushed a second button on the wall near the yakker unit. A slot in the wall next to the button emitted a small, white card which Tump handed to Marla.

Marla grabbed it and nodded a thanks to Tump. She retrieved the memory pen from the top of the clipboard, shook it down to erase her signature, and wrote on the card, “Charney, sorry I couldn’t say goodbye. You did an excellent job. I’m glad to hear you’re moving up with your career. Give me a yak sometime: 7BA-QX....MG. Hugs, Marla Gershe, patient 9301.”

She looked up at Tump. “Is there an envelope? It’s private.”

“We’ll wrap it for you,” Tump answered, grabbing it out of Marla’s hand. She turned it over, read it immediately, and looked up at Marla, daring her to be indignant. “Goodbye, Ms. Gershe. Wonderful having you here. Be good.”

For a few seconds Marla stood blinking at Tump and then jumped to answer. “Thanks for your, uh, respectful care; I had a great time.”

“You’re so very welcome,” Nurse Tump smiled graciously, proud of the respectful care she’d personally provided.

Marla looked at Doc whose face was a blank, then she returned to Tump and held her hand out for a parting shake. Tump eyed the hand for a few seconds before taking it and limply holding it a moment in her own cold yet sweaty palm. When she let go, she reached up to Marla’s shoulder and led her to the door of the little office, taking no chances that Marla would come up with another stalling tactic.

Everyone finally said “goodbye” for real. Marla and Doc moved to the elevator across the hall, stated “Exit,” and within seconds, were transported to the outer portal and the best clear, fresh air the Textile Planet offered.

For several minutes Marla stood just outside the exit portal, inhaling and exhaling the smells of the pajama sheep installation to the west of the hospital. Pajama sheep, being upland mammals, require an elevation several thousand feet higher than that of the valleys where the mills and plantations exist. Devoid of the stifling summer pollen produced by the cotton, flax, and hemp monocultures, the atmosphere up

here was truly rarified—pure and perfect for the pajama sheep and others of their ilk.

Marla crinkled her nose, breathing in hints of animal musk riding on the cool air. “I wonder if I could transfer,” she said it almost like a question, as if she was asking Doc for permission.

“Oh, I don’t see why not, but where would you go?” Doc hustled her along to the transfer tube across the street on the corner. She had no patience for the beauty of the mountains. The air to her was breathable, nothing more. The bare hills dotted with white sheep and their tinkling locators were uninteresting. Rushing from the bustling hospital, Doc never noticed how quiet it was in the little retirement village outside, where no children on holiday rushed about tormenting their parents with screeching and teasing. Only those slow movers who chose to live their days with clean, dry air congregated at such an outpost, this eerily quiet and sane town.

Doc Ivovna was not a slow mover. She didn’t bother taking it in, but Marla noticed everything: the sleepy action on the surrounding hills, the quietude of the park benches, the bizarre sense of solitude in the middle of the work day. “Back to the ranch,” she said, answering Doc’s question of where she would go.

“A person of your talent and experience in the Mill? Don’t be ridiculous. I’m sure you don’t remember a thing about wool.”

“I can sure weave it, though, can’t I?”

“The company needs you in the Mill. You need to be in the Mill. You’re just a little soft from your vacation. You ran from the ranch, remember?”

“How’d you know?”

“It’s in your record,” Doc said, a slight tightening in her throat, as if walking and talking were a little too much exercise for her. “Ran straight to the Mill and apprenticed yourself to the first weaver that came along. I imagine your parents were hurt.”

“Not really. They encouraged me. They always said, ‘Don’t work with hooves. Hooves belong to the devil.’ “

“So now you’re nostalgic and missing the lost times of your romantic youth? Don’t leave out all that manual labor. Think about it again after you’ve been back in the game for a couple of weeks.”

“Back in the harness. Yes, you’re right. Still, I love that smell.”

Doc ignored the remark as if a perennial stuffed nose prevented her from enjoying anything as delicate as sheep dung so why bother sampling it.

Standing in front of the tube entrance, Marla turned to Ivovna. “Doc, in spite of our . . . difficulties, I really do appreciate all you’ve done for me. I don’t know how you did it, but I am very grateful. I feel like I owe you something. I don’t know what, just something, I guess.”

“Oh, never mind.” Doc urged Marla forward. “You’ve been a good patient.” She followed Marla up the winding stairs and out onto the platform where the Lightray promised to arrive soon.

Running out of leave-taking conversation and unsure of why the doctor continued to hang around, Marla

said nothing, eagerly anticipating the final goodbye and her launch into freedom. Finally a whining sound, intensifying in volume and pitch as it traveled up the tube, indicated the approach of the Lightray. The racket of gear-shifts, steam brakes, and double warning whistles signaled the arrival and simultaneous stopping of the train as it wound itself down. Marla turned to shake Doc's hand in an emphatic pushoff, but found Doc bumping into her, apparently on her way into the car.

"Uh, sorry," Marla expelled an uncomfortable laugh. "Actually, I'm fine now, Doc. I can get home from here. There's no need for you to..., uh, I have my debit card, my ID tags, my memory. I'm good."

"I have a mandate to see you home, Marla, and help you back into your life if necessary. I'm planning on spending as much time with you as it takes. I know you're fine, but I must ensure you settle in. I can be with you all weekend if that's what it takes."

Marla's heart sank. How long was this bat going to hang around? Then she realized Iovna was going to be around all weekend. Iovna was making sure Marla made it into work on Monday. That was her mandate. Whatever gobbledygook she spouted about her license, her job, her morals, it was all about Marla making it back to work, sane or otherwise. And Doc had to make sure Marla believed everything was her own fault. That's what this thing was about. All this talk about suing the hospital was just a hint of the worries every principal in this game seemed to carry. They were all convinced Marla was going to take action against them: BAC, the hospital, Iovna, Parker. You bet the insurance company doesn't give a rat's ass. They definitely wanted her up and out, but BAC? They want her back on the line on Monday morning. That's what Charney had been saying. He made a mistake and tipped her off. Iovna had him fired because of it. And now this, this leech with a psychiatrist's hat was latched onto her. With this setup there was no way she could skip work on Monday morning. Either her weekend plans for a skip had to change immediately, or Doc had to go, had to be convinced that Marla was okay. Not just okay, but okay and rarin' to get back to the cows. Why had she opened her big mouth about a transfer?

They entered the box and found seats just before the Lightray's doors hummed shut and the train lurched to overcome inertia. There would only be a few moments before being deposited in Harper's Mills. Not enough time to convince Doc of anything.

"What about your other patients?"

"Other patients?"

"Yeah, I feel guilty. Don't you have to get back to the hospital and your other patients?"

"I don't have other patients."

"What?"

"You are a very big case, young lady. Takes a lot of time."

Takes as in present tense. Not took as it's all in the past. Present as in "as long as it takes." In other words, until you're satisfactorily brainwashed back into your special saddle in society.

"I'm...sorry," Marla said. "The hospital..."

"No, no, no, no, no." Doc patted her on the knee. "Don't worry about them. I don't even work for them. Just rented the space for the treatment."

“What?”

“I mean, I’m a freelancer. I work on a case-by-case basis. Come and go as I please.”

“Oh,” Marla said weakly. Everything fell into place. The plot had stewed long enough and was now as thick as the proverbial pea soup. Plot point 1: Out of the greatness of their heart, the insurance company approved a specialist. An accountant/therapist—Doc. Like an insurance company is going to approve a fancy freelance specialist. Right. Plot point 2: A mysterious Aunt Sal is paying the bills. The insurance company? Obviously not. BAC all the way. Plot point 3: Aunt Sal wants her back at work. Why? To prove they did no damage to her. Plot point 4: They don’t want her having contact with Charney because he’ll spill the stew. So they fire him. Too late, Aunt Sal. Plot point 5: Big-Ass Aunt Sal.

Marla sat back and thought about the mess for a while. She came to the conclusion that she had no conclusions besides the fact that she had to shake Doc. Big-Ass Aunt Sal would never let her quit, they cared not a whit for her sanity, they themselves would sue anything with two legs and they assumed that no matter what Marla said, she would too. They’d never let her quit. Doc had to go.

Without looking up, she said, “Does that mean you’re going to help me clean my place and get myself squared away for Monday morning? Because, I mean, that would be so great. I was months behind in my filing even before I had my, uh, accident. And I’m just thinking of all those bills! I’ll have to sit right down as soon as I get home and go through everything. I can’t tell you how great it is that you’re going to help me with that. I feel like I should tip you or something.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Doc said. “But really it’s best if you go through things like that yourself. It’ll help you reacclimatize. I’m just along for the ride.”

“Oh, yeah, sure. I know that. I’m not saying you sit down and actually key in the payments or anything. I mean just stay there and watch, of course. Now that I’m putting it all together, I’m seeing how this is going to be fun. I’ll order in for both of us. There’s a great Guanese place on the courtyard. I could eat Guanese every day. In fact, I do. I know most people can’t stand it, what with the anchovies and all, but I love it. You like it? Don’t say no till you’ve tried it.” Marla laughed at herself. “Anyway, I should be done with the paperwork by tonight some time. That gives us all day tomorrow and Sunday to clean. I can’t imagine what a mess the place is. I’m going to do windows, floor, waste bowls, everything. No vids, no rads, no pills, nothing but scrub-a-dub-dub. Don’t you just love all that? And no, you don’t have to lift a finger. You can just sit on the fluffy chair and keep the conversation going.”

“Okay,” Doc said, drawing it out like she was thinking about whether to approve or not. “Actually, I’m only here to make sure you can get back into your place. Once you’re there, how you settle yourself in should really be a private affair.”

“Oh.” Marla’s face dropped the smile. Disappointed, she said, “I thought you’d be staying with me until, whenever, I guess. Um, but that’s great that you’ll at least be seeing me to my door. I’m not sure if I’ll be able to get in actually. I’ll have to go around and see the director, Mr. Lundgren. He’s a great guy. Got three kids. Marcy, Shirl, and Litsy. Marcy’s five, Shirl’s eight, and Litsy’s ten, no eleven. No ten, she hasn’t had her birthday yet. Last year for her tenth birthday, I got her one of those puzzler packs. You know the ones that have the siren go off whenever you win. I gave her that and we played all that day. The thing was going off constantly. The neighbors hit the ceiling. Course it wasn’t fair because I was a grownup, so I helped her. She’s such a cute kid and so bright. Wait till you meet her. And talented. You’ll just love her. I hope she’s home when we drop by. Hey, maybe we can take her out. Take all the girls out for ice cream. You’ll love that little Marcy. She’s an absolute pip. Do you think we can do that? I mean before I get started on the bills. I’d sure love to. You’d love it too. They’re so cute. And bright!

Wow. I love those kids like they're my own. They are practically. They almost live in my apartment. They'll be up the whole time I'm home. So you think we can? You'll love it. We can even do the puzzler pack thing. You know, the one with the siren."

Marla spoke rapidly as if the blurred landscape images flying past the Lightray's viewports egged her on.

"Um, actually, you've reminded me that I have to get back," Doc said. "I have a potential child case I should bid for. I had forgotten about that."

"I thought I was your only patient. You said..."

"Yes, for now. But as of this weekend, I'm out of work." Doc smiled tightly. "I've got to go and make some calls, try to rustle up my next victim." She patted Marla on the knee again.

"Why sure, Doc. Go get 'em. But you know, you could call from my place. I don't mind. I'll just be in the kitchen, pounding out payments. It's a one-roomer, but you can have privacy over in the bed area. Or we'll go for ice cream right away and then you could meet my girls before you go."

"I'd love to, really, but I probably shouldn't."

"Okay, I understand." Marla, duly disappointed, finally gave in. The Lightray slowed to visual speed for the last mile before the stop at Harper's Mills. Outside, the passing scenery changed from an in between town blur to the buildings and spires of Marla's city. The low-rise district of marble and bronze buildings represented the shi-shi area where designers and procurers lived. The designers of name-brand fabrics were the highest level of Mill society. The procurers, or purchasers, who cohabitated with them here in the fritsy sector, were independently wealthy patrons of the industry. They shipped the goods to slave planets for assembly and distribution to wealthier pockets of the galaxy where those who could afford natural fibers lived and bought. These magnates hung with the artists in this expensive area, snorting hash and drinking 140 proof Snock. They were Marla's clientele. BAC's clientele, rather. She never met any of them. They sat in the dark during the shows while she coordinated behind stage, watching, barely breathing. Afterwards, during the Veuve Cliquot and Gouda, the Lamont and Shurm types mingled, joked, entertained, and closed deals. During the champagne and cheese hour, Marla went home to bed, exhausted after a twelve-hour day.

Past the high rent area, they pulled closer to the station and the neighborhood eased to casual. Here the buildings rose, blocking out the sun and the view. Marble gave way to sandstone with granite detail. Dust in the sills and last year's leaf litter waiting for the rake indicated light housekeeping resolve. No matter. It was home, gray as it was.

"Well, this is my stop," Marla said as the twitching train lurched to its stop. "Shall we go?"

"Yeah, uh, let me just check the monitor for a return trip."

"Really? Oh, okay. There's one over there by the ticket booth."

"Yes, and while I'm at it, I should get my..."

"If you must, but I think you'll be sorry."

"Marla, you have to let go. You're getting too dependent on me."

“I know, Doc. Don’t worry about me. I’m fine. It’s just that, well, I think you’ve become a very close friend and I’ll miss you and our little talks. I’ve been seeing you, what, three, four times a week for the past, what, seven weeks? We’re practically family now. You don’t just cut a closed loop like that overnight. I don’t suppose I could call you tonight? I mean, once I’ve got my bills done and my hellos to my neighbors—and the girls. I’ve got to go see Saddle and...”

“Uh, I think you should try to...How’s this thing work?” She was punching buttons and pulling on levers on the ticket dispenser with no success.

“You punch in your destination,” Marla scrolled through the list of stops. “What’s your port point? You live where?”

“Oh, I’ll do it. I understand now.” Doc scrolled through and found her place and punched the TELL button and dropped her debit marble into the receptacle. The box hummed and clicked until the marble returned out the bottom into Doc’s waiting palm. A paper ticket floated to the ground at Doc’s feet.

“Tenelope Last, huh?” Marla said, picking up the ticket and reading it. “Fancy!”

“Yes,” Doc answered hastily, grabbing the slip and then finishing her previous thought. “You need to be alone on this, Marla. You’ll be back to work on Monday. You have to get mentally prepared for that. How about I call you next week to see how you’re doing?”

“Next week? Why so long? How about I call you tomorrow?”

“Marla. You don’t need to be calling me when you’ve got all that work to do. Right?”

They’d reached the bus stand by now and embarked on a waiting airbus. In two minutes they found themselves at the cubicular high rise Marla called home. Constructed of poly cement with silica crystals embedded at jaunty angles in a mosaic pattern on the front depicting the outline of Anthusia Mill—the village patron—the building towered to fifty-nine floors. Somewhere in the middle stood Marla’s floor and her room, which was soon to be reprogrammed by Lundgren, the super, so she could get in.

They entered the building through the first floor pocket entrance, the glass doors sliding horizontally into the building walls to let them pass. Guests standing in the lobby stared at Marla’s hospital garb. She knew they knew who she was, where she’d been, and what she’d done. Everyone in the building was connected to either the Mill or the outlying cotton plantations. Everyone worked in one way or another for BAC. And news of her insurrection would have been on everyone’s minds since the incident. Somehow Marla didn’t care even though she knew they probably hated her for upsetting the apple cart and maybe even costing somebody a job here or there. She heard whispers echoing through the vast chamber. Somewhere in a corner chair, somebody stifled a snicker.

Under normal circumstances Marla would have felt uncomfortable, angry even, at the invasion of her privacy. But Marla was a new person. Her therapy, the weeks of self study and thoughts of who she might be, gave her a lot of insight into the nature of the human as animal. Especially herself. Having a lost identity builds a certain strength of character. Nothing, not loss of parents, money, status, home, or job, can disorient you more than loss of self. Once you’ve lost yourself, you’ve lost everything. It’s as close to being a non-entity anyone can ever become. The closest anyone can ever get to being dead without actually dying. The experience allows you to see yourself as you really are, without the accoutrements of your station and identity. You can’t constantly compare yourself to those around you. You can’t make judgments on them or weigh their words against your own. You can’t fall back into old patterns of motivation. You can only go from here and weigh everything against the evidence of the present. In other

words, nothing matters anymore.

The people staring at Marla Gershe saw a cold, work-besotted shell, who slavishly turned herself into a rabid animal for the sake of the BAC work ethic. One day the rabid animal turned and bit and was reportedly destroyed. But now here she was again, back to resume her old, maniacal lifestyle. But they were wrong. In reality what walked before them was a new Marla Gershe, unknown, untested, and strong of character. And she'd be gone before they ever saw it.

"Mr. Lundgren," she called to a man crossing the lobby to the elevator bank.

The man swung around. He had a metallic badge sewn onto the upper right sleeve of his uniform waistcoat. "Why Marla Gershe. You're early," he said.

"Early?"

"Yes, you must have taken the ten-fifteen."

"I guess. I didn't know I had an appointment." She smiled and turned to Doc. "Doc, you made arrangements?"

"I called and left a message you'd be here around noon."

"You're the greatest. I really owe you a lunch. How long you going to be around?"

"Marla, we'll do something next week, remember?"

"Yeah, all right." Marla tried to not sound disappointed. Doc was obviously concerned about separation anxiety and Marla wanted to make sure Doc knew she was trying real hard not to be dependent.

Lundgren interrupted the lunch plans. "I imagine you'll want your room reprogrammed, yes?" He was tapping a code into a lock box on a side door by the elevators. The door swung open and he stepped into the little super's closet containing the paraphernalia of his trade: spy monitors, security terminal, key card makers, and faucet wrenches for malfunctioning plumbing.

"Yes," Marla answered, standing at the door. "By the way, how's the girls?"

"Girls?"

"Marcy, Shirl. Your daughters. I was trying to get Doc to come and have ice cream. I thought I'd take the girls out."

"Oh, yeah. The girls. Well, they're fine, Ms. Gershe. They're visiting their cousins over at Backum this weekend. Before school starts up y'know. They always spend summers there."

"Oh really? Oh yeah, I forgot about that. That's too bad. I'll have to surprise them some other time."

"Well, that's very nice of you, but it's not really necessary." Lundgren beckoned her to step inside. He nodded his head at a molded plastic box sitting on a table in front of him. "Just put your hand in the print capture there." Marla inserted her hand in the opening on the side. A flash of light emanated from the box accompanied by a "click" after which Lundgren said, "That's it, got it," meaning the box had captured her hand imprint and stored it in its data file. Lundgren's fingers danced a jig on a keyboard attached to

the box, presumably storing her room number alongside her handprint inside the box's memory.

"You're all set," he said. "You can go up anytime."

"Thanks, Mr. Lundgren."

She turned to the doorway where Doc was standing watching.

"Doc, right this way," she said.

"Oh, Marla, this is as far as I go," Doc answered as Marla passed out into the lobby. "My mandate was to make sure you got yourself back into your environment. You can certainly go the rest of the way yourself."

"What? Not even any coffee?"

"Coffee?" Doc looked at Marla, alarmed. "I don't dare coffee."

"Tea then? Ice cream?" Marla said it teasingly, as if no one could possibly resist ice cream.

"No, I've got to get going."

Marla tried not to look disappointed, putting up a valiant effort, shaking off an obvious codependency. "Yeah, I know. You've got calls to make. I understand and I know you're right. I have to get used to being on my own again. I'll be fine. Can I at least walk you to the bus? We could stop..."

"No, Marla. Has to be a clean break. You go upstairs. Here, let me get the elevator." They'd been standing next to the elevators, battling Marla's abandonment. Doc reached up and waved over "UP" as Marla stood bravely smiling and slowly nodding her head in apparent agreement.

"All right," Marla said as the elevator came to a stop. She turned to Doc and held open her arms for a big, sloppy hug.

"Goodbye, Marla. Good luck," Doc said, not flinching, standing in firm psychiatric resolve to cut the umbilical cord.

"Bye, Doc," Marla said, nodding and smiling. She turned into the elevator and ordered "twenty-eight." As the doors closed, she waved tearfully to the doc who was staunchly holding her this-hurts-me-more-than-it-hurts-you demeanor.

When the elevator stopped on twenty-eight, Marla exited and looked up and down at the hallway she hadn't seen in months. It was strange yet familiar at the same time. The walls on her floor had been painted in an angular red and gray pattern, an attempt at hipness in a building so mundane in design it was incapable of inciting true human creative passion. Six broad stripes ran up a 45° angle from the elevator along the walls. They turned abruptly at the corners to horizontal where they ran parallel to each other, turning again—downward this time—at the end of the hallway and converging at a point on the far wall. It would have been an interesting look had it not been repeated on all fifty-nine floors of the building, each in a different color scheme. Colors were named after food or flowers or animals: chartreuse with butter, teal with port, peach brandy with Jack Black, nasturtium with rose, barnacle with limpet, granite with sandstone. Floor ten was orange and green, but they called it a catchy "OJ and grass." Twenty-eight, Marla's floor, was a tantalizing combination of chianti and licorice which she herself

referred to as blood and death. If you had a lot of friends living in the building, you'd no doubt see the different permutations. Marla Gershe had seen only two color versions, hers and that of floor fifteen where she had once had a one-night stand with what's his name—the guy who lived on the floor with the salmon and trout paint scheme.

Marla moved through the chianti and licorice hallway pathetically quivering her lips. Doc was most likely in the security booth with Lundgren, watching monitor 28 and making sure Marla made it back to her room. Doc was thorough; she'd try to cut the cord all right, but she had a mandate from Big-Ass Aunt Sal. Luckily Marla successfully convinced Doc she didn't need to baby-sit all weekend. That was a break.

Continuing her theatrical efforts, she visibly fought the urge to cry as she reached her door and flashed the newly programmed ID pad with her hand. The door swished up, she entered, the door swished down, and she let out an audible bawl. Just once, just enough for the minimike out in the hallway to register the sound. Then, silently, she hastened to the kitchen unit and the cookie jar, thrusting her hand inside. Where else would you stash a thousand quads of actual notes? Cash notes. In a cashless society, cash is king, and everybody kept a pile hidden somewhere for a rainy day.

Although not certain as to what she should do next, Marla was quite clear on what she wasn't going to do next, and that was show up at the Mill on Monday morning. There was no way she'd be answering to that Parker asshole or work with his Daddy Jack. So the best thing to do with a hospital bill of unknown dimension looming over her head was to split the scene in conventional powder-taking fashion: take a leave of absence, go AWOL, get out of town, book, scam, skedaddle, bust the joint, blow the proverbial hot dog stand. Depart.

Packing would be dangerous. If she sauntered down the hallway, suitcase announcing upcoming travel, Doc, or Lundgren, or some hired monkey'd jump up and start asking a lot of questions as to where she thought she was going. No, she couldn't be seen leaving, but it would be considered normal if she hiked over to Saddle's for a minute to say hi, and what's up for Monday. Especially since she was feeling a little lonely right now, what with the separation anxiety and all.

Marla rummaged through her little room closet where she found a pair of Sleazos with side pockets and a long-sleeved T. Flouting the hospital tradition of wearing the whites for one day, she ripped off the outpatient garb and donned the real people clothing. She glanced out the window for the weather forecast and decided on a canvas jacket and a pair of non-descript sluice boots—good for anything that might be coming at her.

She turned to the sink mirror and pinched up some red in her cheeks for effect, splashed some water into her eyes, blew her nose noisily by the door, and walked out of the room into the world of peeping doctor/accountants and other BAC stooges.

Riding down to the lobby, she imagined Lundgren to be waiting at the bottom when the lift doors opened. He'd be waiting casually as if he had some errand upstairs and wasn't it a coincidence? Here she was again. The two could go months without seeing each other and now, twice in one day!

The lift doors opened and there was Lundgren, wrench in hand. "Off for some ice cream?" he asked as she stepped off the lift.

"Uh, yeah. No, actually. I've got to see a friend of mine. Got to get up to speed at the Mill. I've missed a lot."

“Uh huh.”

Someone in a chair in the lobby stifled a snicker again.

“Bye, nice seeing you.”

“Goodbye, Ms. Gershe.”

She marched through the door to the outside. Once on the airbus she called up the itinerary on her seatback searching for the stops at Saddle’s houseblock. And surreptitiously, so no one guessed what she was doing, she perused the schedule for the tube transport to Gatown, the Textile Planet’s launchport. She was perhaps a wee bit paranoid. By law the buses didn’t have minicams and mikes. But then, did anybody keep track of the civil rights flame?

She discovered the tube for Gatown left at one. Once a day. That was it. She had an hour to get there.

Marla disembarked at the Tintype stop, Saddle’s neighborhood. The caustic smell of sodium hypochlorite drifted up as soon as she stepped off the air bus. If there was an edge of town to Harper’s Mills this was it. The cotton loads came to the long warehouse just across the street from Saddle’s building to be processed: fibers aligned, sterilized, bleached, spun, and colored, and then sent over to the main BAC attraction—the fabric production facility, Marla’s world, the Mill.

Here in Saddle’s neighborhood, the thump and hiss of cotton processing filled the ear. The conveyors clanked their bales from truck to loft, rippers cut ropes, vats steamed chemical soup, and workers barked orders and warnings as giant mechanical arms flailed in cotton pushing duties.

Just behind this circus of activity and surrounding the entire ring of Harper’s Mills was the conglomeration of huts belonging to the hemp growers. Independent of the whole BAC operation, these autonomous cottagers grew and sold their product according to personal schedule. Some were members of the grange and so enjoyed a slight stability, but most chose to go it alone, eschewing even that mild stricture. The last bastion of free enterprise, hemp production was a small percentage of the total textile pile. It just didn’t make enough thistle for the big boys to be interested. The cavalier hemp souls grew what they wanted, when they wanted, and how they wanted. They took their chances with the market. They produced exceptionally fine fiber, as is often the case when business professionals are not involved in production, and were paid not so much in money but in a lifestyle devoid of contract, bondage, promise, debt, windfall, or deadline. They were not wealthy but managed to host great parties at harvest time. And everybody came.

As she listened to the familiar hum of activity, Marla thought of the freedom the hemp farmers enjoyed. The phrase “just say no” repeated in her head.

The air of Harper’s Mills was as thick as batting. The pollination season was on and the crocus bees and day moths, and any other creature participating in the pre-autumn orgy, buzzed in full force in the fields beyond. Humidity frizzled Marla’s hair and the sun beat down like a hammer, reminding her of her heavy obligations. She struggled against the thickness, plodding to Saddle’s building where she rang up the door intercom.

“Yeah,” came the answer down the line.

“Saddle, it’s me, Marla.”

“Marla! I knew you were coming home today. C’mon up!”

Stay on target, Marla told herself, proceeding through the maze of spaghetti-and-sauce halls that represented Saddle’s avant-garde complex. Only a building on the edge of town would have the nerve to be so over the top. It had been an experiment in spatial living—no sense to the organization, no central anything—based on some psychologist’s theory that humans are like worms. People like to move about in random directions, the theory stated, not necessarily making 90° angles only. Curves, blind tunnels, and illogical switchbacks make life more interesting, he or she had said. The psychologist failed to realize that any sameness dulled the senses and resulted in boredom. The same twisty turn up and back everyday was just as dull as three rights and a left off the elevator.

Up at Saddle’s bulging, oval door, apparently representative of the terminus of an annelid casting, Marla’s stomach began to churn. She didn’t know if Saddle would still be angry. In the hospital, Marla had hardly recognized Saddle and even now could barely remember the exchange they’d had then. As far as Marla knew, the last meaningful conversation they shared had resulted in her insulting Saddle.

The door flew open and Saddle rushed out.

“Marla!” Saddle enclosed her old boss in a warm, rocking bear hug. “You look awful. C’mon in. Want some coffee?”

Marla stood and looked at Saddle for several moments. Her hair, newly pink-tinged, was cropped and dangling from the top. Her signature knight’s brace clanked at her waist and at least fifty Afriques encircled her arms wrist to shoulder. The scent of mauve emanated from the room behind her. As if mauve was an odor instead of a color. Saddle was Saddle and then some.

“You know it,” Marla said following the fragrance into the worm hole. Once inside she changed her mind. “Actually, I think I’d rather just have a glass of water. What’ve you got?”

Saddle turned. “Oh no, have some coffee,” she said. “It’s not the Company mix, you know. I have contraband growing in the closet on dwarfing stock. Grind it myself.”

“Is it any good?”

“Not as good as what you get from Down South, but the stock I got was top heavy. It’s good.”

“In that case, sure. S’long as I’m not getting a Company rush.”

“You know it. I never drink Benny and Dex. I’m high energy to begin with.”

“Good for you, Saddle. Don’t drink the coffee.”

While Saddle worked the electrogrist in the food area, Marla settled herself into an easy pouf over on the side of the globular room, and perused Saddle’s joint decorations—tissue paper collages, mail art from places like Petrolius and Orelan on the far side of the galaxy, ribbons and souvenirs collected from the events of Saddle’s life, and a full blown daguerreotype of a naked baby—presumably Saddle at a younger age if that was possible—lying on her tummy on a water bed duvet. Crinkly pink tinsel wrap had been rolled and crunched into a frame surrounding the photo.

“That new?” Marla asked as Saddle entered the room carrying two cups of steaming chunk cups.

“Yeah, it’s me when I was a baby.” She handed a chunk to Marla and stepped back to the sofa for a seat.

“Clever,” Marla said. “Your whole room is so cozy. You are such a gatherer.”

“Yup, I love it. Never throw anything away. It’s all so beautiful in some way. I can find a use for anything.”

“I guess that explains the lamps made out of chicken bones.”

“Yeah, I’m a vegetarian myself, but Bob gave me those.”

“Bob of Bob’s BBQ?”

“Yeah.”

“Saddle, how’d you ever wind up in the Mill? You should be doing something—I don’t know what—else.”

“Yeah, well, there’s no market for chicken lamps.” Saddle laughed and then took a sniff of the coffee before sipping. “To be honest, I wouldn’t have lasted as long if it wasn’t for you.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. You really insulate me from the insanity. I’m not good at group think, but we have a little enclave, a sort of nest with Mama and everybody. I couldn’t deal with Torpid and them if it was any other way.”

Marla felt a twinge of guilt. Her heart seemed to drop in her rib cage. It was the last thing she needed to hear.

“Yeah, suppose so.” Marla sipped her drink as well and looked for a way to change the subject. She noted the oddments here and there around Saddle’s abode, the bathroom rug in the conversation corner, the homemade talk table made out of discarded PVC pallets. Marla fingered its legs, examining the joints. “You got a plastic welder?”

“Yeah, thousand J. You wanna see it?”

“Yeah, sometime. Not right now.” She sat back and looked at Saddle. “Right now I just want to apologize, I guess.”

“For what?”

“Well, I don’t know how to say it. For how I acted on that day. That week. That month. I just got so...caught up. I lost it.”

“What are you talking about? It’s not your fault. We were working under impossible conditions.”

“I should have made them stop sooner. I let it get out of hand.”

“What were you going to do, Marla? I saw you every day yelling at Torpid. He never listened.”

“I should have made him listen. There’s protocol. I could’ve made a formal complaint.”

“You did, Marla. Believe me. They didn’t listen. They were manipulating you.”

“My god, Saddle, how are you going to make it working for Parker? You are so sweet and naive. They’ll work you to death, just like they did me.”

“No, they won’t. I don’t have the capacity. They work you to death because they can. You’re a machine yourself. You only have two speeds: full on and full off. You can’t take it slow, but I can. I’ll be alright.”

“You’re wrong, Saddle. I’m not that way. I wasn’t that way before the Mill. All that available thistle made me greedy, bloodthirsty. I’m not gonna be that way from now on.”

“Marla, I love you, but you have to face the fact that you can’t help it. You’re what they call a go-getter. There’s a reason you were in that position. It’s right for you. Don’t fight it. I’ll be alright with Parker. I need to grow up anyway and as long as I know I can go to you with problems... As long as I know you’re there somewhere, he’s not going to get out of hand. You’ll help me call him on his stupid moves. Tell me what to do and say.”

“How is that going to work?”

“You’ll back me up when I disagree with him. I’ll have you to keep him honest. Once he sees he can’t get to me because you’re around to coach me, he’ll back off.”

Marla stopped sipping her coffee.

Saddle continued. “I’d prefer to quit, but they’d never let me go. They’d bring up some horrendous bill that I owe—ten hundred free lunches I’ve been helping myself to. ‘Don’t you know lunch was on the house as long as you were in the house, but now that you’re quitting, that’s a different story and here’s your bill for a million and a half. If you leave, you owe!’ Danter went through that two years ago when he left. Everybody goes through it. I’d love to pack up and leave this dump tomorrow. They never let people quit.”

A shiver went through Marla. “Some dump,” she said with half a voice. “You’ve got it downright homey.”

Saddle looked up and around at her place. “It’s all just junk.”

“Really? Doesn’t look like junk to me. It looks like the work of someone who thinks a lot. About things.”

“It’s nothing anybody else couldn’t do.”

“I couldn’t.”

“You could, you just never take the...”

“Time. Yeah, I know. Saddle, I got a lot of stuff I have to do, I’ve been gone so long. I hate to go, but...” Marla placed her half-empty cup on a little leather table nearby, stood up and stuck her hand in the pocket of her Sleazos. “I just wanted to stop by and say hi and make sure we’re square.”

“Aw, we’re square. We were always square.” Saddle jumped up and followed Marla to the door where they stood for several moments, smiling, eyes glistening.

The crash of a lamp from the next-door neighbors preceded a “You sunnavabitch!” The other neighbor responded: “I’ll kill you!”

Marla looked at Saddle. Saddle shrugged.

“Anyway,” Marla said, bringing them back to the present. “They’re watching me to make sure I don’t bolt. They pretend like I’m cured or whatever, but they’re still not sure I’m all here.” She pointed to her own temple in way of explanation. “By the way, there may be keepers on the camera spying on you. Just thought you might want to know.”

“Thanks. You’re probably right.”

“When I’m out in the hallway, I’ll turn back to you and ask a question. Answer ‘chocolate,’ or something. She opened the door and turned and pecked Saddle on the cheek.

Saddle’s eyebrows knit in a question. Marla lifted her fingers to her lips in the shush gesture and started down the hallway, turned and asked, “What flavor?”

“Strawberry,” Saddle answered.

“I shoulda known,” Marla laughed.

In the elevator Marla turned her back from the eyeball lens secretly mounted in the open lamp socket and wiped a gathering tear. She flagged the “B” selection on the bank.

Saddle’s complex was the perfect place to get lost. Lots of underground tunnels leading to different parts of the city with vendors and services along the way all lay underneath the blob of a building. No one would wonder what she was doing down there. There were plenty of reasons for Marla to trek down to join the Saturday crowds, searching for snacks. And escape hatches.

Down on basement level she pretended to look for the ice cream man, but secretly kept her eye on the yellow lines that led to the long distance transport station. She purposely turned away from any side tunnels that followed the blue lines going to the local depots—bus stops, taxi stands, skate board rentals—up top. She walked along like a tourist, eyeing toy stores, chapeaux stands, and the natural fiber exhibit. Exercisers maniacally achieving their daily constitutionals strode past at syncopated clips. Not fitting in with the browser gait everyone else had adopted, they actually upset the rhythm of the day-gawkers.

Finally a big bubble of people passed by a yellow-walled side passage that was located out of security camera range. She shoved her way through the shoppers until she got to the edge, then she made a break for the yellow hall. Except the shoppers wanted to go down that hall without the camera as well. The entire swarm of humanity wanted to get down that hall at just that moment. She didn’t surreptitiously sneak out of the pack and slip away so much as lift her feet and get carried along with the crowd.

Was everybody breaking away today? Did everyone have a big bill to shirk? No, actually, it was just that this was the tunnel without the camera, which meant this was the hallway where the good stuff from “Down South” was sold.

Along the sides of the tunnel on unlicensed, unrented, unpaid-for floor mats lay the most desirable of all goods for purchase—the contraband, the stolen. Here you could buy a programmable yakker for a buck three eighty; cosmetics bags made out of materials tanned, not woven, and shipped here straightaway after they fell off the back of the transport from the leather planet; fragrances from exotic spice planets and usually costing more than a spice gatherer’s yearly salary; dilithium crystal watches; fried gargoyle eggs on a stick; zoner-free coffee like the kind Saddle nurtured only better because it thrived under the open skies and perpendicular sun of Brazziland, the hottest planet in the solar system.

Marla was carried along anonymously until the globule of people stopped. She squirmed and shoved and pried herself to the edge of the crowd, bursting free into space beyond the throng. She fell to the floor from inertia and lay sprawled a few seconds before turning to look and see just what the crowd had stopped for. High above the heads of the crowd hung a banner displaying a characteristic five-lobed leaf in the center, indicating the stand for everyone’s favorite commodity—cannabis. No wonder the crowd had stopped.

She smiled to herself knowing that no matter what control BAC had over everybody’s lives in this town, there was always that one last vestige of autonomy: the imbibing of a non-company provided, licensed, manufactured, or approved drug—marijuana.

She pulled herself to her knees and then to her feet, slapping the dust from her Sleazos into the hallway air mix. And then she was off down the empty hallway, devoid of bright lights, cheap thrills, Gucci handbags, and Rolex watches. Somewhere along the way, she snagged a pair of Vuarnets. They nestled in her top front pocket, waiting for her call in case she wound up someplace like Brazziland with an annoyingly bright sun.

For now she scooted down the darkened and forgotten passageway, a mile long and unused for the most part, because why would anyone walk to the tube when a cab upstairs was easier, faster, and nattier?

Why indeed.

She reached the tube entrance fifteen minutes later: 12:55pm. The big sign hanging in the middle of the nave lit up red with the various destinations available: Cinchton, Brownsville, Cottontown, Linent, Centersville, Silk City, and so on. Every so often the panels would blink out for a second and then rearrange themselves as an exiting train dropped off the list and the remaining stations moved up a notch. Now Brownsville flashed first on the list because Cinchton had departed.

Marla searched the entire board three times but couldn’t find the one she needed. Finally, in tiny letters way at the bottom, looking more like the signmaker’s label than one of the available routes, she saw it: “Gatown.” Not flashing red or changing with the other destinations, Gatown was a permanent fixture on the marquee. Every day, the same departure at the same gate at the same time: Gatown—Gate X, 1pm.

She scanned the cavernous room, searching for a “Gate X” or just an “X” or a hand with the first finger pointing down a back staircase that said, “This way to out of town.” Nothing. Squinting her eyes, she looked across the room and found a door that looked like the entrance to a janitor’s closet. It had to be her gate. She ran across the floor and flew through the door, noting as she passed through a sign rendered in ineffectual 12 point Humanist, stating “This way to Gatown.”

The platform on the other side of the swinging door was silent, devoid of ticket taker, passenger, engineer, conductor, or baggage handler. Everybody who was anybody was already inside the train,

primly fastening their seat belts, stowing their luggage, and digging in their pockets for their preacquired tickets to Gatown. The departure signal blasted. The closest entrance, fifteen feet from the rushing Marla Gershe, was just now closing. She breathlessly hollered “Wait!” and watched as the door continued on its track.

With a mere 2 cm of space remaining between the two panels of closing doors, a white-gloved hand positioned itself in that tiny space, effecting an immediate swing-back of the doors. A recorded voice stated, “Please stand clear of the closing doors.”

Marla would have loved to stand clear of the closing doors but her momentum, borne of a five-minute high-speed dash, propelled her through and into the car wall just on the far side. Her face smashed hard against the Plexiglas window serving the upper portion of said wall.

Fortunately, the individual connected to the gloved hand had seen such a maneuver following a panicking “wait” hollered out on the platform at just such moments every day of his life for the past twenty years, and so he knew enough to stand back. He was the conductor on the Gatown line after all. And when has a departure for Gatown ever left without at least one breathless, tardy, sneaky powder-taker blustering through the closing doors at the last possible second?

Chapter Three

Marla Gershe flattened to a pancake and slid down into a puddle on the floor, cartoon-fashion. The white-gloved conductor on the train to Gatown bent down to see if she was conscious and to help her back to three dimensions.

“Miss?” he said.

She pulled herself up and out, brushed off her Sleazos, straightened her jacket, adjusted her hair to behind her ears, and smiled at the conductor. He was a tallish man in a forest green uniform, white-gloved as previously noted.

“Hi,” she said, expelling a laugh of embarrassment and apology. He stood there looking at her, not saying anything. She hastily filled the silence: “I’m going to Gatown.”

“Why, isn’t that amazing,” the conductor gushed. “We’re all going there too.” He indicated the car full of unsmiling patrons watching them.

Marla glanced at the grim faces and then back at the conductor.

“How much is it?” she asked, reaching into the pocket holding the loosely wadded stash.

“Why don’t you just get buckled in so we can all get going?” the conductor suggested, with an exaggeratedly patronizing air.

“Oh. Oh, yeah.” Marla laughed again, nodding towards the seated passengers. She entered the car, bowing a silent “sorry” to all the people glaring at her and found an empty seat next to a young fellow with a knapsack resting on his knees.

“Is anyone sitting here?” she asked.

He opened his mouth to answer but five or ten fellow passengers shouted “No!” before he could say anything. He gestured with an open palm for her to be his guest. She slid into the seat, nodding a thanks to him, and buckled herself in. The air train lurched forward with a puff and whine and within minutes was a mere memory in Harper’s Mills.

The conductor on the train to Gatown strolled down the aisle, collecting passenger tickets. When he reached Marla’s seat, she handed him a 50 q note from which she received a twenty in return. She stuffed it in her pocket along with the rest of the former contents of the cookie jar.

“Any luggage?” the conductor asked. He held his hand over his stomach as if holding back a bellyful of laughter, knowing full well she didn’t have any luggage because she’d had to get away as quickly as possible. He knew all about her type—always rushing because they were late, always owing money, always carrying around overdue library books, always living on a thread that threatened to break. No, this one didn’t have any luggage. And why should she? She, no doubt, has nothing of value to take with her. Even the skin of her behind is worthless.

“Uh, no, actually I don’t,” Marla answered. “No luggage.”

“Fine,” the conductor bowed and smiled, pretending her choice to carry no luggage was a good one, borne of tremendous back and forth discussion in her mind, like Scarlett O’Hara deciding between the blue ball gown with the stain, or the white one completely intact yet a year out of fashion. He was pleased to be of service to the fine example of personal management before him. If there was anything else he could do for Madam...

She watched him coldly as he moved on to the next, more serious, more prepared, more worthy patron on the train to Gatown.

“Stand by,” he announced after he’d made his way to the front of the car. Sitting down on the conductor’s stool, he braced himself and pressed the “Go” lever across the portal there. The train hit Mach 1 and immediately the world fell silent.

A few minutes into the trip, after everyone’s body adjusted to the high speed—their shoulders relaxed, their faces drained, their necks pulled away from the seat back—the knapsack guy sitting next to Marla ventured conversation.

“So, why don’t you have any luggage?” he asked.

“Well...” Marla began, trying to figure out why she didn’t have any luggage. “I always travel light.”

“Yeah, but where are you going?”

“To Gatown.”

“We’re all going to Gatown.” He pushed his faux-tortoise frame glasses further up on the bridge of his nose, fathoming Marla’s answers.

“Yeah, but that’s only where I’m going,” Marla said. “Just... Gatown.”

"I see," the knapsack guy said. He turned his face forward and thought about it for a while. Suddenly he turned to her. "Oh, you're meeting somebody."

"Right," Marla said. The conversation ended there. Not so much because everything that could be said was said, but because they'd reached Gatown and it was now time to disembark.

The train slowed to ramming speed and as soon as it passed the perimeter of town, a discordant bell, more clank than clang, rang out, alerting the townspeople and any other living thing within a kilometer of the tracks that the train from Harper's Mills was here.

From ramming speed the train decelerated to a crawl and moved toward the cavernous opening of the yard like a parade of sinners heading for Hellmouth. Inside, a mess of guide tracks led to concrete platforms, one of which held a lone yardman waiting for this train. The walls of the cavern were thick with oil-gray grime. Huge pillars holding the weight of the magnificent vaulted ceiling had once been painted sky blue but now matched the walls' dirty color. Very little of the original paint showed through the grease. For the most part, the room had a simple three-hue color scheme: brown, browner and gray brown. A flock of chitterlings pecking amongst the refuse on the ground scattered up to a ceiling beam as the train entered the station. They screeched and complained about the bully down below who had rudely upset them. The bully for its part did not acknowledge them.

Inside the train, the conductor stood up front to give parting instructions to the passengers retrieving parcels from overhead bins. "Please have your papers ready in advance of ticket purchase," he called. "Get your papers out now to save time."

Marla turned to the knapsack guy. "What papers?"

"You don't need papers; you're not leaving, remember?" he answered.

"Oh yeah. What if I was? What are papers?"

"Papers. You know. Permission to leave the planet papers. You've never traveled have you?"

"No," Marla said.

"Obviously. Listen, uh, do you mind if we at least move into the aisle so I have a chance to make my flight?"

"Huh?" Marla looked at him, at his tortoise shell glasses, then she turned and saw the other passengers exiting past the conductor. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "Yes, of course."

She moved into the aisle and allowed the knapsack guy to proceed in front of her. He stepped out and reached up to grab a red faux leather suitcase and then hurried to the exit, papers in his hand.

Marla followed. When she reached the conductor up front, she stopped and asked, "Where do you get papers?"

The knapsack guy, by now stepping onto the platform, turned his head slightly, rolled his eyes, and resumed his forward movement.

"Are you leaving?" the conductor asked.

“Well, I’m just wondering where do papers come from?”

“You have to apply to your township for permission to leave. Why didn’t you make arrangements? There’s a lengthy waiting period.”

“Well, a friend of mine is... I just, ah, found out... Well, I had to rush and uh, actually I don’t know the procedure. I guess I don’t know what I’m doing.” Marla looked up at the conductor with what she hoped was a goofball, childlike, apologetic smile.

“Uh huh,” the conductor said. He pulled off his conductor’s cap and scratched at his head. His hair was cut very short, but you could see that if he allowed it to grow he’d have tight little rust red curls of the type that girls a long time ago used to sleep on bobby pins to get.

“Well, I guess you’re in quite a mess, aren’t you?” he said. “I’m thinking you don’t even know the name of the planet you’re going to, do you?”

“No, no, I know that. I just don’t know about the papers. Can you help me at all?”

“No, Ma’am. I’m just a day conductor on the train to Gatown. I conduct, that’s what I do. You need a lot more than me. A sponsor to begin with, but that’s just a technicality, the least of what you need. I’d say you need a guide, a lawyer, a boss, a witness, a scheduler, someone who cares, maybe someone to change your diapers, even. How about someone to wipe your mouth when you dribble? How about a burper, or a...?”

Marla was half-way down the platform as the conductor’s voice drifted off, swallowed by the huge empty space. His heavy sarcasm dripped off the sides of the walkway and pooled somewhere near the undercarriage of the train where no one but the rats would appreciate it.

“Yeah, yeah,” Marla said to herself. “I may need a lot of things, but I sure as hell don’t need...”

The five foot high sign hanging near the ceiling above the doors that led from the platform to the ticket room prompted you to read it as soon as you stepped off the train. Its purpose was to remind passengers of the most important piece of information concerning their travel plans: “Those wishing to travel off-planet must have papers.” In smaller almost apologetic letters it also stated: “Please purchase tickets before 15:15.”

Through the door that remained open after the knapsack guy had passed through, she saw a throng of people—baggage carriers, conductors, travelers, meeters and greeters, facilitators of all types holding placards with names of incoming parties above their heads. In the middle of the room stood the ticket booth—a huge glass-walled room with one window and one line of hopeful ticket purchasers (all carrying papers) spiraling out and winding around the booth eight to ten arms thick. In the fourth winding away from the booth, the knapsack guy stood impatiently. Whenever the line moved, he pushed his red faux leather suitcase along with his foot a couple of steps. As he did so, he fussed with his knapsack, trying to put it on his back while keeping a firm grip on his folio of papers. Marla hated him. She, a coordinator in the biggest game in town, had worked her way up from a loom. She was talented and worth a lot of money. And this, this nobody sporting fake textile had the audacity to be smug. Yes, she hated him.

She stood at the exit and watched him and the crowd jostling on the line. Not a single person was without papers. She waited there contemplating how progress had completely stalled at this exit. She saw life without papers and it was bleak.

As she hesitated, she felt the eyes of the conductor on the train to Gatown on her back. “You need a mother!” he called. His words echoed in the vast empty train room, dislodging a single screeching chitterling that flew up to a higher roost and eventually settled.

Marla took a breath through clenched teeth and was just about to make a plunge for the door to the ticket line with or without papers, when a rasping voice coming from nowhere stopped her. “Where you going without any baggage, Girlie?” The voice sounded rough and decrepit, as though it were suffering from a lung disease.

She jumped at the unexpected sound, swirling to her left. She saw nothing but the cylindrical pillars tacked with posters advising those without papers to not attempt to purchase tickets.

The slowly closing exit door stopped at the last second as if stuck, leaving a small gap between door and frame. All the air in the train room seemed bent on escaping through the crack. It whistled like a wind on the tundra with miles of sweep to give it momentum. Marla shivered.

She stared at the pillars with their warnings to vagrants without papers for a few moments and then turned back to the exit. A map of the solar system hanging on the wall just to the left of the door caught her eye. It included each planet serviced by a jet route from the hub planet, Walloon. A big arrow with the words “U R Here” pointed to the Textile Planet which was located in the center of the map, as if the solar system did indeed revolve around it. Each planet had a tag with its name.

“You can’t get a ticket without papers,” the tuberculine voice said from somewhere over Marla’s left shoulder. It sounded male and had a lisp, so “papers” came out “paperzs,” as if the speaker had undergone harelip surgery as a youngster.

The wind in the door rose to a scream and then finally the door slammed shut. Marla jumped from the sound and then moved to open it just as the voice said, “I can get you paperzs.”

She spun and saw a half-height man in a lunch-stained longcoat with rain hat—also lunch-stained—step from behind the nearest pillar. He wore a jeweler’s magnifying glass over one eye, enlarging it by a factor of ten. A black patch covered the other one.

“Thatzs if you need it, Girlie,” he added. If he had eyebrows they would have been raised provocatively, but he didn’t so his face had a Lil’ Orphan Annie look to it: an expression somewhere between surprise and genuine naïvete. He held a finger, chewed well past the quick, up to the side of his chapped lips, creating a pose of exaggerated possibility while pretending to try and read Marla. Would she, or would she not? Hm. Maybe she actually does have luggage, and papers, and a real destination.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“The quesztion is, Girlie, who are you?”

“Nobody,” Marla answered. “No one.”

“Good. Good,” the little man cooed. “That makesz it easy. May I szuggest you throw your ID into the czinerator just to make it official.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Why wouldn’t you, if you were nobody?”

She turned away in haste and ran directly into the wall map.

“Anzsonia.”

“Mmph?” Marla pushed away from the wall and turned. The man was standing next to her, pointing to the top of the map where a lone dot without any identifying information stood almost out of eye reach.

“Anzsonia is where you zould go, Girlie. Although you don’t look like you can afford even that. Even with thoze dezigner SZleazos. My guezss iz you uzed your weaver’zs dizscout and zhopped at the outlet. You obviouzsly didn’t have a tailor look at thoze. You’re in dreadful need of a tuck up the zseamzs, Girlie. Honezstly, Anzsonia is the only plazse that will take zsomeone like you.

“Who are you?” Marla asked.

“Nobody,” he answered, “juzst like you.

She returned to the map and looked at the myriad names of planets she’d heard about somewhere but knew very little of.

“How much money you got?” The voice at her elbow asked.

“Leave me...”

“What are you doing there?” The voice of the conductor boomed up the platform and echoed again. Marla turned to look at him. He stood next to his booth. He’d removed his coat and hat and rolled up his sleeves as if he’d been washing his hands.

“Just looking,” she said, and turned back around. The man with the weird eye had disappeared.

“No point if you don’t have papers,” the conductor called up to her.

“I guess I need to hear that a couple more times,” she muttered.

“What?” he hollered.

“I understand,” she called over her shoulder while continuing to look at possibilities.

“How much money you got?” The bronchitic voice in the coat was at her side again.

“How much do you want?”

“How much do you got?”

“A thousand.”

“Too bad, I need fifteen hundred.”

“What?” Marla jumped back and stared at him.

“That includez your ticket.”

“To where?”

“To wherever, but you should go to Anzsonia,” he pointed a bony, nailless finger up toward the top where the planet without a tag stood.

“I’m not going to that, that place. That place doesn’t even have a name tag. I’m going to Buxton. That’s where I’m going.”

“Buggzton? You’ll last five minutez there. You wizeh you had a friend on Buggzton. If you had a friend on Buggzton, guarantee you wouldn’t be ztanding here without your papersz. Meet me outside in the flatz at 1500.”

“The liftoff is 1530. What if I don’t make it.”

“You’ll have wazted fifteen hundred dry thizzle. Girlie, I only provide the waysz if you got the meansz. What you do with it afterwardsz isz up to you.”

“I’ll think about it. Thanks for the offer.”

“Zee you in a bit.” The little man rounded a pillar and was out of sight. His footsteps echoed in the cavern but she could not see him as he walked away.

She pushed through the door into the ticket room and entered the throng, wondering where the flats were and how much an actual ticket to Buxton cost. Up front on the board it said “Buxton, 15p.”

“He’s out of his mind,” she said out loud. No one answered. No one was listening. They merely jostled past. Up on the line, the knapsack guy had moved up to third place.

“I’ll just bet he’s going to Buxton,” she said aloud again. “That’s just my luck.”

This time someone answered. “Excuse me?” A woman standing next to her viewing the boards thought Marla had been talking to her.

“Oh, I’m sorry, nothing,” Marla answered. “Just talking to myself. But actually I am wondering, do you know where the ‘flats’ are?”

“Flats? Like shoes? I believe there’s a shoe and hat place in the north corridor. Try there.”

“No, it’s outside I think.”

“Oh, there are no stores outside. There’s nothing outside besides dust. You shouldn’t go outside.”

“Oh, okay.”

The woman moved onto the ticket line.

The clock in the middle of the room ticked off 14:45. An announcement bawled out: “Liftoff is in 0.75 hours. Please board as soon as your ticket is purchased. There will be no ticket sales without papers.”

On the walls of the ticket room, in between the giant posters stating “No papers, no ticket,” huge

billboards advertised BAC products: the silk line, the woolens, the exotic skins, the cotton weaves. Everywhere she looked, evidence of who ran the planet reminded her of why she had to catch the 15:30 liftoff: BAC had a rule, a roster, and a method.

Saddle suddenly came to mind. Saddle under the great protective BAC code. Their big, fat arms, opening wide to swallow Saddle. And stifle her, as they tried to stifle Marla.

Considering the fact that she had no papers and was unlikely to get a ticket, Marla could easily turn around at this point and head home to save Saddle. So many problems would be solved. The conductor and the knapsack guy would both surely be happy. Saddle would be better off. The smug eyeless weasel with the dirty coat and lung cancer would certainly be annoyed she'd changed her mind about Buggzton. That was a plus. All the signs directed her home. What would she do on a planet she knew nothing about; where she knew no one? There was no question the only sane choice she had was to turn around and catch a ride back to Harper's Mills with her new best friend, the conductor. For some reason, though, Grant Parker entered her brain.

"Excuse me," she called to a tall thin man in a forest green uniform of the same make and model as that of the conductor on the train to Gatown. He was pushing a broom underneath a BAC sign for fall wicker coats that showed models draped in stiff furniture-like jackets that could just as easily stand for coffee tables. The sign made everybody's neck itch.

"Yes?" the broom pusher asked, stopping to scratch at the back of his head.

"Where are the Flats?"

"Shoes?"

"No, it's someplace outside."

"Oh, the Flats. Of course, no luggage. Yeah, north door, cross the alley, abandoned building, use the window, watch out for strangers and dark flying things." He resumed his sweeping.

"Dark flying things? You're kidding, right?"

"No."

"Shouldn't I wear garlic or carry a cross or something?"

He stopped sweeping and looked up. "Huh?"

"Never mind, thanks," she called, moving confidently toward the south entrance.

"North door!" he yelled after her "Other way, *north* door."

She waved a quick thank you of acknowledgement before changing tack. He scratched his neck again and resumed his work with the broom.

Pushing through the crowd, she traveled across the room to an exit arch with a "NORTH DOOR" sign above it. Next to it hung a slightly larger sign stating "If you don't have papers, you can't purchase a ticket."

Marla pushed through the door into the calm of an empty alley between the terminal and a building directly opposite with a padlocked door and broken second story window. The din of the train station muffled down to nothing as the door closed behind her. She stood in silence for a moment looking at the building across the way. An attached fire escape, frozen by rust in the activated position, invited those of an adventurous nature to climb up and tempt the boogie man inside. A faded sign on the side of the building stated "Gatown Flats, Inc."

She scanned the faded and broken building, more rust than mortar, and considered the options. Without doing so much as a quick walk around, she knew the place was abandoned and the only possible entrance was that second story window—the only one not boarded up. Gingerly she approached the steps, hoping a raspy voice would materialize from nowhere and tell her "Thiz way please," but the only sound she heard was her own boots treading the steps as she ascended to the window. She reached the second floor and still no voice directed her to a more comely entrance. She waited in front of the window momentarily before halfheartedly pushing on it, assuming it was painted shut. Oddly though, it easily opened with a slight touch, as if it had been greased just the other day.

She crawled through the window into a pitch black room and stood for a moment, trying to see. She alternately blinked and forced her eyes wide open to find an object in the room to focus on. The place smelled faintly of heated mink oil, suggesting a shoe factory or tack shop. Just as she was losing the bit of resolve she'd mustered to crawl through the window, the lights came up, revealing a naked room with cracked wallboards and a broken down piano in the corner. Half its keys were gone, and it was no doubt out of tune.

"There you are." A man in a white shirt, black tie, tidy crew cut, and unstylishly short black pants—reaching to just above his knees—rushed in from the doorway. "You're going to be late if you don't hurry."

Marla stepped backward. "Excuse me?"

"We have your ticket right here." The short-pantsed man ceremoniously handed her a paper the size of a #10 envelope, as if he was presenting her the deed to the property—leather works, beat piano, and second floor window entrance included. "Now let's get a move on," he added hastily. "Did you want a blanket? You'll need one if you don't want to freeze to death."

"A bl..., Who are you?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm Sheldon, Mr. Ricketts' chief of staff. I ran your papers through personally because Mr. Ricketts advised us it was a rush job." He glanced at a clock on the wall that Marla hadn't noticed before. A cord dangled down to a plateless wall socket. "Goodness, we're running out of time. We've got to stop by Shirley's to get your papers. You do have the money, correct?"

He reached over to take Marla's arm and guide her to the room door.

"What?" Marla asked, following along slowly.

Sheldon stopped at the door, ready to abandon her in a heartbeat if there was so much as a sputter in the payment process.

"The money," he said. "Mr. Ricketts felt sure you were good for it."

"Uh, I think..."

“Good, good.” He resumed his movement to the door. “Sometimes we get people that think just because we’re an illegal operation, we won’t call the police in. They try to scam us, if you can believe that.” He let out a quick little laugh that sounded like the snort of a person in a hurry with only so much time scheduled for pleasure. One snort, that was it. He pushed her through the door into a brightly lit hall bustling with typists, computer operators, order takers, ticket dispensers, coffee pot stands, water coolers, and many, many people in side offices, feet up on desks and yakkers hooked onto their ears.

Sheldon shuffled Marla past the doors of these offices from which unconnected conversations muddled together over the general office din.

“Yeah, I can get you on the Tuesday shuttle to Westmount for 20 grand... Well, there’s a lot of overhead for a shuttle and you committed a double...

“Okay then, wheredid you wanna go?”

“We haven’t had a run to Xanadu in, God it’s been a century now. Where did you get that information?”

“Gambling debts, huh? Well, let’s see...”

And so on.

“Shirley!” Sheldon spoke out above the various conversations and background noise, beckoning to a woman with a massive amount of hair piled onto her head and held there by a wire basket. She stood in a cubicle enclosed on three sides by waist-height walls. Sheldon guided Marla around to an entranceway and stood before Shirley. “Ms., uh...” He looked at Marla’s ticket. “Jones needs her papers.”

“They’re coming out right now,” Shirley sang out just as a slot on the wall emitted a small plastic see-through card. It dropped into her hand. She looked up at Marla and smiled broadly. “Clip-on or pierced?”

Marla said nothing.

“Your ears, Honey,” Shirley said. “What kind of earrings do you wear?” She lifted the hair back from Marla’s head to peek. “Pierced, wonderful!” she cried. She pressed a couple of cutouts from the card and attached them to metal clips she had stashed in a BAC coffee mug sitting on her desk. She handed the finished product to Marla who merely stood and stared at the open hand with the plastic earrings.

“Ms. uh, Jones, you need to hurry,” Sheldon grabbed the earrings from Shirley’s hand and then Marla’s arm, rushing beyond Shirley’s step in the procedure.

“Bye, Sheldon,” Shirley said, in a manner that suggested some sort of ongoing flirt.

Sheldon blushed and stifled a retort. He merely answered “Bye” while propelling Marla around a corner to a glassed-in office where a man sat with his back to them in a leather swivel chair. The man’s feet rested on a burlled whitewood desk. A sterling pen and ink desk set stood next to a gilt frame picture of a wife and two one-eyed kids.

Sheldon shuffled Marla into the office.

“Mr. Ricketts,” he whispered.

The chair swiveled around and Mr. Ricketts, yakker to his ear, acknowledged the visitors with a wave of his hand. The room light shot off his monocle.

“Uh huh, zsure. ZSure. Of courzse we’re dizscreet, Al. Thizs could happen to anybody’z kid. Why should you zsuffer becauze of it? You can count on me. Bye, bye now.”

He clicked his yakker off, chuckling to himself.

“Al Shurm. Hiz kid killed a teenager with hiz blazer at a party over at Harper’z Millz couple a’ weekz ago. ZSome sort of weaver’z daughter waz with him at the time. Shurm doezn’t want it out who the brat waz hangin’ around with, zo we’re moving the girl off to Dubuque. Why should Shurm zsuffer from the indiszcretion of his kid, right? Ezspecially zsince the old man’z zsittin’ on a pile, right?”

Mr. Ricketts broke into a rollicking laugh, more wheeze than guffaw, that sent his shoulders shaking and his monocle threatening to break out of his eye socket. He giggled himself down and regarded Marla and Sheldon. “Uh, now where were we? Oh yeah, Mz. Jonez. We’ll need your ID card and fifteen hundred and you’re good to go.”

“My ID card? Are you nuts? Nobody’d give you their...”

“You won’t need it. In fact, you need to get rid of it. It’ll only lead them to you.”

“Them who?”

“Whoever it is you’re running from, although we all know who. There’s only one represzive regime around here. Doesn’t make szensze for szomebody in your zhape to take a powder unlesz the regime’s represzzing you.”

“My zhape? What makes you think I’m in any kind of shape? I don’t even have any legitimate papers or enough money for a ticket to Buxton.”

“Oh, you’re in zhape, juzt look at your teeth. Anyway if you’re not in any zhape you don’t need your worthleszsz ID card.”

“If you have my ID card what do you need fifteen hundred for? And where am I supposed to get that, anyway?”

“If you have my ID card what do you need fifteen hundred for? Where am I supposed to get that?”

“From your pocket, Dearie, and we’ll only be using half of your bank account.” Mr. Ricketts had a stingy way of speaking that was slow and thoughtful as if each word was precious and he didn’t want to let it go unless absolutely forced into it by the requirements of profitable communication. “The other half will be zset up in a truzst fund for you over on Suiba. You’ll be able to aczcezs it in a year. We’ll put a time out on the zstop. I can’t give you particularz right now. Here’z a brochure deszcribing the zset up; it’z got your PIN and a little information on the company in cazse you make good in your new home and are thinking about inveztmentz onzce you come into your money. You’ll have to zsurvive on what you’ve got left until a year’z up, but we have faith in you. You’re rezsourzceful. You have to hurry now. Lift off iz in fifteen minutez. Sheldon, does she have her paperz?”

Sheldon reached up and pulled Marla’s hair back to reveal the card earrings.

“Good, good. We’ll jzst need your card and your fifteen hundred then, Mizs, uh, Jonez.”

“My card? I’ll be left with nothing. I can’t just lose ...”

“Everything? You already have, Dearie. We looked at your records. Aunt Zsal is going to be very diszappointed. You have nothing elzse. “

“How do you know all this?”

“It’z all in the brozhure, everything’z legit. Legal, no, legitimate, yezs. There’z a number to call with any complaintzs. We can’t steal your identity, they’re your fingerprints after all. And if you’re interested, we’re on the Gemensch exchange, #FLTZ. Why don’t you get a move on now, hm?”

Marla unbuttoned the Sleazo flap holding her money. She pulled the bills out and counted out the fifteen hundred.

“And the card,” Sheldon and Mr. Ricketts said together.

Marla looked from one to the other. Mr. Ricketts’ exaggerated eye stared unblinking at her. “C’mon, young lady,” he said. “You haven’t got all day.”

She reached into her stash and shuffled through it for the card—her lifeline, her status, her identity—fingering it for a few seconds before handing it over. In one graceful, almost choreographed movement, Mr. Ricketts took the bundle as Sheldon pulled her out the door. He ran her down a long corridor and through another door into a throng of people entering a fifty-story bubble jet. She made it to the end of the line chugging for air. Sheldon gave her a pat on the arm, said a quick “good luck” and then turned to the man checking tickets. “Hey, Markey,” he said.

“Why Sheldon, good to see you,” Markey answered as he took Marla’s ticket. Sheldon then scooted off and Markey returned to Marla, saying, “Straight to the back, you’re in smoking. Where’s your blanket?”

“My blanket?”

“And your luggage? Hm. No luggage, no blanket. You’re going to have a rough time. But I shouldn’t be surprised since Sheldon brought you.” He flashed the scanner at her papers and stepped aside to let her pass into the bubble jet. A sign at the entrance way stated “Smoking ahead, business, coach and first class to the left.”

She walked past the entranceway to business, coach, and first class where crowds of people were being handed drinks, pillows, and board games by nattily-dressed hosts. The band was just tuning up next to the buffet table filled with cracked red shells on ice, chafing dishes holding gravied meats, and urns of juices and hot drinks.

“Smoking is straight ahead, Ma’am,” Markey said over her shoulder. “Just park yourself anywhere. You’re welcome to sit on luggage.”

“Thanks,” she said, pursing her lips in resignation. She gave one last glance at the business, coach, and first classmates who all seemed to be mingling indiscriminately, oblivious to social prejudice and miscegenation taboos. She looked at the happy passengers there, rosy-cheeked travelers going to distant

relations or business connections.

Her gaze alighted on one young gentleman seated alone and staring out a round Lucite window. His black hair was combed back revealing a swarthy complexion. She froze. He turned his face forward, caught her stare and likewise stopped short, his lips parting slightly as if he wanted to say something. Marla swallowed and fled down to the smoking section in the very pit of the ship.

#

In another lifetime, the smoking section was very likely a garbage barge, traveling to the stink holes of numerous planets, saving the populations there from wallowing in waste. Today, filled with luggage tossed haphazardly into the hold with no thought as to order or contents, the place continued on a tradition of freeform organization. It was rank from years serving as the local smoking retreat, not to mention the stench infused in the walls from its garbage days. The air was barely breathable. The room was barely survivable.

I-beams standing at different points in the room provided structural support, preventing an implosion, a bubble jet being so named not because it resembled a giant diaphanous sphere of saponified fatty acids, but because it was encased in several layers of air-inflated plastic padding—bubble wrap—for insulation. Changing external pressure could cause expansion and contraction, hence the need for internal support in wide open rooms such as the smoking section.

Dimly lit, the room provided little in the way of security. Its ancient sputtering fluorescent tubes had no doubt been handed down from the tonier sections of the ship once they'd passed their expiration dates there. Here they were now in their final commissions—the last hurrahs before the junkyard. Some of them were merely glowing pale pink and others had given up the fight completely and gone opaque. In the pale light, you could just make out the people huddling in small groups: couples, mothers with a few kids, a loner here and there leaning against a beam. With everyone's face shadowed, no one knew who anyone else was. The smokers from the upper class sections coming and going as the addiction required, stood as close to the entryway as possible, keeping an eye on the escape route.

Liftoff came and went and nobody in the smoking section knew it. There were no windows there. You couldn't feel a jolt or hear an obvious sound barrier breaking in the immense ship, and there was certainly no PA giving directions on how to survive a calamity over open water. The occupants here relied on the badly baffled engines somewhere beneath them to signal changes in velocity that may or may not indicate a possible liftoff. The ship varied little in orientation, having been lying prone in its vacuum vector before taking off. No one cheered when they cleared the stratosphere of the Textile Planet as they didn't realize it had happened.

Cold crept slowly into the hold of the smoking section. The inhabitants all unfolded their blankets. All except one.

Marla sat in a corner in a small space between mounds of luggage. The baggage surrounding her little territory created the illusion of a wind break and psychologically kept her warm and her spirits, if not up, at least not down so far as to be described as despair. She sat on the floor next to a canvas trunk and pretended it was warmer there than up above. She squeezed her hands between her knees and wondered how long it would be before they got to the hub planet, Walloon.

After what seemed like days to Marla Gershe, but was in reality only half an hour, a man—the steward—in a mustard custodial jumpsuit entered, opening the entranceway swish doors and allowing a momentary shaft of light to enter the gloom of the room. He stepped over the immediate trunks and hat

boxes to get into hearing range of most of the occupants.

“Welcome to the Fastliner en route to Walloon, the hub of our line,” he began. “We’ll be docking there in two weeks’ time give or take a day depending on astral currents.” (General murmuring at this news) “We’ll be bringing in the meal cart twice a day for you. Water is available at the spigots in the washroom. If any of the lines freeze up, please push the appropriate call button. My name is Gregory and I, or one of my staff, will assist you if we can. Additional provisions can be purchased when the meal carts are rolled in; you will be required to pay in advance. Vendors will have lists of what is available prior to each mealtime. This compartment (!) does not have a thermostat, the temperature is controlled by computer so we can’t heat it further, and as you’ve no doubt ascertained, the smoking section is not heated at night in order to save fuel. Please don’t push the call button to request a turn up.

“The door to this compartment (!) is locked from the outside. You will be unable to gain access to the other sections. Smokers in other classes, however, have keys to regain access after they complete their visit here. Do not ask for assistance in gaining access to business, coach, or first class. If you are caught cheating you will be placed on the first return jet to the Textile Planet. You purchased smoking section passage and were apprised of the rules at the time so this should come as no surprise to you. Those of you traveling via Ricketts Travel Excursion, please view the information brochures distributed to you at the time of your purchase for answers to all of your questions, such as how you wound up here. Good day, ladies and gentlemen.”

Marla leaped at the man. “Excuse me, sir, Mr. Gregory, sir, I’d like to purchase a blanket.”

“I’m sorry, Miss, there are no blankets for sale. We only supply edibles.”

“So where can I get a blanket?”

“You might try asking one of your neighbors.” Mr. Gregory abruptly turned, unlocked the swish doors and left the compartment (!).

Marla surveyed her neighbors, seeking someone with a heart. As soon as she turned around to look, they all averted their faces. Where heretofore they’d been watching her drama with Mr. Gregory with voyeurish enthusiasm, now they busied themselves with fixing belts, children’s hair, and bits of clothing sticking out of luggage. They clutched their blankets to their breasts or hid them behind their backs.

“But, they...” Marla turned back to Mr. Gregory whose quick exit from the smoking section was marked by the slowly closing doors behind him.

“But, Mr. Gregory!” She yelled running to the closing doors which completed their duty by shutting with a bang in front of Marla Gershe, leaving behind an echo that reverberated off the walls of the smoking section. “There aren’t any extras here,” she said quietly to the closed doors in front of her.

The lights dimmed, signaling the end of the day and time for sleep. One frail emergency bulb remained on in the far corner of the compartment (!). Its purpose seemed to be to cast shadows more than illuminate the contents of the room.

Marla could barely see her fellow travelers hunkering down amidst luggage and boxes. She heard them flapping blankets as they unfurled and spread them over mats or other sleeping accommodations. Bags rustled from here to there. Someone coughed in preparation for sleep. Marla turned to the little area between two mountains of canvas bags she considered her domain.

The door over to the side of the room swung open. She looked up to see if perhaps Mr. Gregory had taken pity on her and brought her a blanket from the tidy side of the ship. The light from the outside foyer showed only a smallish woman, cigarette dangling from her lips. Disappointed, Marla returned her attention to her own area. Surveying the pile of vinyl bags, she considered opening one to cover herself with whatever she found there. Perhaps someone with a large build had brought a housecoat. As soon as everyone was asleep, she'd start digging into any unlocked personals in her vicinity.

"There are warmer places to stay on this ship," a voice behind her said. She turned and saw only a tall form, its face in shadows as the room door closed and the emergency light on the far wall resumed its meager duty. Without even seeing the hidden face, she guessed it had a day's growth of beard, and his hair was no doubt longish—down to his neck and certainly black.

She stared at the form open-mouthed and breathing shallowly. Cold as she was, a shiver somehow made its way through her body. For several moments, she stood frozen.

A momentary shaft of light entered the room as the door opened and the lady smoker left the room, her cold but necessary smoke completed. The little bit of extra illumination shone on the man's outstretched hand. He was holding something out toward her.

"Take this," he said, stepping forward.

She stared at the object, a square coin-shaped thing, in his hand.

"What is it?" she asked looking into the now slightly visible face.

The man reached for her wrist, and firmly placed her hand on the object. Shocked at the movement and not knowing what else to do, she obediently grasped the thing there.

He let his hand fall to his side. "It's a key to my room," he said. "It's yours if you want it. It's warm there and no one will bother you."

Marla Gershe didn't hesitate for a second. "God bless you," she said, staring at the key, unable to see it, but feeling its weight.

"It's cabin 31A on the third deck. Go now if you want; it's too cold in here."

"But, who are you?" she asked.

"Nobody."

Another nobody.

"Why are you here?"

"I hurt someone once, by mistake, and now I have to leave this place. Have to, alone."

"What?"

"You don't remember me, do you?"

"Of course not, I've never seen you before."

“It’s better that you don’t. I’m a thoughtless type of person, prone to violence. I was a policeman once. I shot a woman during an insurrection at a textile plant. Not on purpose, but I did it nevertheless.”

Marla stared at the darkened face. She licked her lips, swallowed dry spit, breathed, and suddenly whispered. “Go away.”

He turned to go.

She threw the key at his back and repeated herself: “Go away. Go away.” She backed into the stack of suitcases. Reaching over to grab the closest bag, she placed it between her and the hideous dark-haired man.

He turned around. “Don’t be foolish. I won’t be in there. You can’t stay here. It’s too cold; by morning you’ll be breathing frozen air.” He reached for the token, searching on the ground where he heard it fall after it had deflected off his back.

“Go away, get away from me,” Marla hissed.

He found the token and held it out for her. “Take it. Please,” he seemed to choke on the word.

“Go away!”

“I’ll go,” he whispered back. “But come anyway when you get too cold. The door will be unlocked.”

“Get away from me!”

He turned and walked to the door. He opened it and stopped and turned one last time. “And make sure you go to Ansonia; they’ll never find you there,” he said out loud and then left through the door. The shaft of light from the door disappeared slowly as the door swung shut.

Marla leaned back, dizzy. She closed her eyes and rested, mouth agape, against the stack of boxes and suitcases constituting the wall of her enclave. In the various groups of travelers, people talked amongst themselves, laughing or whispering maybe.

Marla remembered the man’s face even if she could barely see it just now. The man she’d been seeing and not seeing for months in dreams during sleep and awake was the man who shot her. He was her enemy. He was the one. He had changed everything in a moment. Why was he following her here? Wasn’t it enough that her life, as ridiculous as it was, was changed in an instant? Was she now expected to help this despicable man, this thing, this mindless, heartless human, heal?

Who would heal her?

She slowly fell to her knees. The area behind her eyes throbbed. She rubbed her eyes and eyebrows and temples with her hands. In her mind she saw Saddle and Mama and Torpid and Grant Parker. She saw that day and many days before it. Days of fever and high energy, sleepless days, endless days. Everything tightening like a rubber band, more and more energy concentrating into a smaller and smaller space—her head—until the day the rubber band snapped and all that energy expelled onto the world around her. She was like a tornado then, until that bullet stopped her. Maybe the man with the dark face was really her savior.

She didn't believe that for a minute, not with her hands starting to numb up. They felt cold against her forehead. She leaned forward and placed her hands on the floor. The cold drew whatever warmth was left away. She began to cry. At least she had her anger to get her through the cold night.

Several hours passed. Her sobs died down and now it was time to find something to keep her warm and alive. The groups of fellow travelers had quieted down and were snoring around the room. Marla moved her hands over the various bags, searching for unlocked buckles. Everything close at hand was secured. She searched farther and farther, climbing over mounds. Nothing had been left open. She came across an awake body on the other side of her mound. The emergency light showed the wide open eyes of a grizzled old man.

"You won't find nothing," he said. "Everybody knows the bags will be in the smoking section with the vagrants. Nobody leaves them open. Don't bother looking."

Marla nodded silently, angry more at the belief that the old man was right than at the fact that she'd been caught trying to steal.

She sank back over to her spot between the column and the mountain of bags, and curled into a ball next to the stack. She was exhausted from the travel, the disappointments, the shocks, the instantaneous decision making. She tried to take stock of her life and come up with a plan. She tried singing to herself in her head to get her mind off the slow creeping chill. Nothing worked. All she could think about was that she wasn't going to get through the night. Finally she drifted off, the cold waking her every half hour or so.

Morning found her stretched out flat on the floor. The lights hadn't come up yet but the groups were bustling awake. She lay with her left hand outstretched above her head. She moved a little and felt pain in her left hip. She groaned, opened her eyes, and remembered with great disappointment exactly where she was. Blinking several times, she finally focused. Lying on the floor directly in front of her line of sight and shining from the sparse light, was a small, flat piece of metal, possibly shaped like a square. Without touching it, she knew it was a key. The key. She stared at it, scenarios replaying in her mind.

I was a policeman once. I shot a woman during an insurrection at a textile plant.

She stared at the key, trying to picture the man's face. She couldn't remember his eyes or nose or lips. Just his beard always threatening to grow beyond seemliness. And his black hair.

She saw his back to her. He spoke with a hospital worker—a doctor, maybe. She said something loud and he turned and saw her and then quickly looked back at the doctor. What had that face looked like in that moment? That terrible dirty face. Was it filled with remorse, or fright? Was it sulky or proud? Was it angry? Did it wonder why that selfish woman did what she did? Did that face think she deserved it?

Cruel man.

She could not remember the face. Just the back of the head staring straight ahead and not saying anything before the doctor pulled him out of sight. An unremarked gesture at the time, but coming back in full meaning now in the light of day, or rather, meager emergency light on the far wall of the smoking section.

Marla Gershe pulled her hand out from under the blanket.

(!)

A blanket had been placed on top of her. Sometime during the night someone had taken pity on her pathetic shivering, sobbing, slobbering body and covered her with a blanket, just like Mom would have done during that one night when summer turns unexpectedly to fall and you, unprepared for the seasonal shift, lay only under a sheet.

She snuggled under the blanket, luxuriating in the thin pile warmth, an artifact of thousands of years of experimental weave rendering modern-day blankets warm as 20th century down but thin as flannel shirts. She reached over and picked up the key to look at it. Her bones and muscles, stiff from the night on the floor, creaked as she rolled onto her back. She held the key in front of her eyes. It was a flat two-centimeter square piece of black iron. 31A was stamped on each side.

There was no way that one of her bunkmates had, sometime during the night, bestowed a spare blanket on her. Mr. 31A may have been trigger happy, but his eyes held remorse that day in the nurses' station. She knew it, recalled the torture now, in fact. Maybe he'd been there for psychiatric treatment, the same as she. Maybe the bullet to her belly changed his life in an instant, too. Maybe he was her savior. Maybe she ruined him.

Maybe it was an accident.

She sat up, still looking at the key.

No way was Doc right. It wasn't an accident, but maybe this guy was a stooge, the same as she. She didn't know what he was, but she didn't care this morning. He'd tucked her in just like Mom. You don't overlook something like that. Those are the things that tie you to Mom for the rest of your life. Everything Mom ever did that was unfair, wrong, unfeeling, or just a little embarrassing was forgiven in the moment she eased your rest with a blanket the first frosty night of fall. The umbilical cord? Nothing compared to that. And the horrible man with the five o'clock shadow had brought her a blanket. Losers have to look out for themselves.

She stood up, pocketed the key, and at the first opportunity, when the morning's first smoker entered the section, snuck out through the door of the smoking section, blanket tucked under her arm like a leather briefcase, like she had business to take care of and a rendezvous. Besides, she didn't smoke. What was she doing in the smoking section?

Out in the skinny passageway just outside the doors of the smoking section, Marla clutched her blanket and held the key before her, ready to prove to anybody with a raised eyebrow that she was a better class of people than those stuck back there.

No one was out there in the passageway, though. She walked along past the steward station where two women rattled carts and utensils and pre-packaged food containers. Apparently breakfast was on the way.

Marla's stomach growled but she was in no way hungry.

Turning a corner to enter the coach cabin, she spied a drawing on the wall. A touristy type of prop that the service industry placed here and there in compliance with some point of law. Just as she hoped, it turned out to be a diagram of the ship's layout, complete with a "you are here" arrow. She mapped out a route to the third level and quickly found the lift on the far side of the cabin. She moved through the area looking for a familiar dark face in the midst of the sleepy cheap seats. The only person she recognized was the guy with the knapsack, snoozing and drooling onto his lap in a center seat. He probably never

touched a weft thread in his life.

She moved on to the lift and found her way to the third floor and room 31A. Inserting the token into the slot, she rehearsed in her mind what she would say to the dark man once inside.

The door opened. She took a breath, entered the room, and looked around. The overhead lights were out, but there was enough illumination from the hallway to show a perfectly made up bed and empty luggage racks. The sink towels on the ledge by the door were brand new with nary a finger smudge. A baby blue stripe interwoven with the famed crane stitch bespoke a sanitary operation. No personal effects sat on the portable night stand by the bed. No hat rested on the hook behind the door. No slippers at the foot of the bed, no robe or yesterday's clothes slung across the chair. Nobody was here.

The door swished shut and the room lights came up automatically. A buzzing came from behind her. She turned and saw warning lights blinking on the door, "Key engaged. Key engaged," sang out from a voice chip embedded somewhere in the lockset. She pressed the escape button and the key fell from the slot into her waiting hand. Pocketing the token, she returned her attention to the room. On the little night shelf by the bed, a pen lay on top of a note. She lifted the pen and read, "Go to Ansonia."

A chill crept up her back side as she remembered Ricketts giving her the same advice. Regardless of the newfound feelings she felt towards Mr. Black Guy, she didn't trust him anymore than she trusted Ricketts. Their advice reaffirmed her decision to go to Buxton. Ansonia was the last place she'd be going.

She sat on the bed and removed her sluice boots, shoving them underneath in an effort to clean up after herself. After dragging her legs up and over, she lay back against the fabroform pillow and ran her tongue across the back sides of her teeth, feeling the slime built up there from days of neglected hygiene. She considered the delights of showering and shaving, brushing, combing, tweezing, soaping, deodorizing, powdering, doing her nails, perfuming, coiffing. In minutes she was asleep, waking only an hour later when the door buzzed and announced with flashing light "food tray engaged, food tray engaged."

Not stopping to wonder from where breakfast had materialized, she yawned, rubbed her eyes, pushed her knotted hair away from her face, and got up to remove the food tray from its rack on the door.

She gulped the strips of dry packed beef reconstituted with brown sauce, the glass of sayo juice, and all four mini drop muffins with globee fruit pieces inside. While not exactly exquisite, to a starving, half-mad and thoroughly chilled smoking section reject, this breakfast might have been considered in another era as "right on time." She tried saving half of everything in case the dark man showed up, but after a few minutes the entire tray was devoid of everything except for one small globee bit. She replaced the empty tray in its rack on the door and went back to bed. Minutes later she was up in the water closet, regurgitating the food because her stomach was too wild to accept it. Later, after she slept a few more hours, it was in much better shape to accept lunch. After that she continued to wait for the dark man.

Two weeks later he still had not shown up.

Rest assured that Marla Gershe did not spend the entire two weeks in the cabin. Any normal person would have availed him or herself of room service three or four times a day, leaving the safety of the bed only for trips to the courtesy bar. Not Marla. She regularly went out amongst the other coach, business, and first classes, seeking a man with dark hair. She ate his meals in the cabin and stalked the nine serviceable floors of the bubble jet, searching for him as well as items she thought she might need in her new life, whatever it turned out to be.

She found vending machines tucked into out of the way niches on levels three, four, eight, and nine. There she purchased a couple of souvenir t-shirts for clothing changes, a tin tube of Colgate with matching travel toothbrush—small and packable, yet quite capable of dealing a rigorous brushing—a comb, disposable slippers, a hair rag, and a knapsack just like the one the guy with the knapsack had. The latter was to be used to pack everything else into on the great day of disembarkation. With plenty of room left over for the much-loved blanket that saved her life all those cold days ago, her whole life fit inside the bag.

She visited the smoking section regularly expecting to find the dark man skulking around the mounds of luggage and blanket-toting families. She never saw him there and each time she went, she kept her key tightly clutched in her hand to ensure safe passage back to the land of the living. No one questioned her. It was as if the smoking section had its own set of rules apart from what the steward had stated. It really didn't matter so much who came and went from where to where. The inhabitants, cowed by their inbred inferiority complexes, couldn't think of leaving the place they were told was theirs and the best they could ever aspire to have. They were pleased that no one was making them ride on the outside of the jet, clinging to whatever hook they could find and breathing a barely sustainable mix of N2-O2 with a cracked regulator. No matter where you are in life, "it can always get worse." So goes the predominant philosophy of the smoking section denizen.

Marla came and went with her key and no one suspected a thing. Perhaps just carrying the key around changed her appearance. She had the confidence of the born into it—the cheerful demeanor, the spring in the step, the unlimited love for people of all degree. Someone assigned to the smoking section could never hide their hatred for anyone with a temperature.

Whatever, Marla Gershe was thoroughly first class once she got her key. And she never found a clue to the whereabouts of the dark man.

She did skim the Ricketts brochure that explained why it had cost so much to purchase a ticket in the smoking section (the passenger was a criminal, or in some way in trouble with Aunt Sal—the BAC consortium). It had a checklist of items advised to have on hand, a blanket being the first one on the list. How her money was being handled, why she wasn't going to have access to it for a year (the statute of limitations on most crimes ran out after a year, so the evildoer could come out of hiding after that time), and how much of a handler's fee the service of keeping her account secretly active was going to be, was all spelled out in the brochure. Marla looked at the information, barely interested in a legitimate-yes, legal-no company's procedures. She'd be out of pocket for real money in no time. That was all the information she needed.

Unfortunately, skimming the brochure ensured she missed the section on the investment opportunity in Ricketts Travel Inc. Apparently it was a sound idea because the return on human paranoia was so very lucrative. Didn't matter. Ricketts' hints of the repressive regime were nothing new to Marla Gershe. Everyone knew the score: BAC had power over everything and everyone. And what they wanted they got. You cannot go against the grain. It is bred into every living soul on the Textile Planet that if you have an original idea, you have to leave. On the Textile Planet you live your whole life knowing that at any point in time, you have to pick up and go with nothing but a bit of thistle and pocket lint. Ricketts was cashing in on that, sure, but did it matter? If Marla had read about all that, she wouldn't have figured anything out; it wouldn't have changed her mind. She wasn't going back to work, end of story.

After two weeks the giant bubble jet touched down on Walloon. Marla exited with the blanket and wardrobe items stowed neatly in the knapsack. As fate would have it, she fell in behind the guy with the knapsack during the exit. He eyed her pack at one point, recognized her, but didn't say a word, as if he was in on her secret and approved of everything now that she had chosen the appropriate accessory.

As she moved through the holding turnstiles, instead of depositing her cabin key in the collection box as everyone else was doing, she dropped a half-piece from her cookie jar stash—one of the few coins in her side pocket. Never again would she be caught without a cabin key. She held it in her hand as the knapsack traveled through the spot check conveyor system that checked the contents for alcohol, firearms, tools for criminal intent, counterfeit materials, pathological plants, and name brand knockoffs.

Once on the safe-for-humanity side of the jet port terminal, she consulted the travelers' map for potential destinations. The important ports were lit up in heavy all-cap typefaces. The lesser knowns enjoyed initial caps only. The truly bedraggled planets were content with yellow sticky notes with their names scrawled by hand with a Sharpie as if any day now it would be renamed and so let's not bother getting an official electronic tag for that nowhere place. The stickies were held in place by a piece of masking tape because the tag had fallen off so often the lightly gummed adhesive strip was full of floor hair and shoe dust by now. Planets like EOL, sott, Bedragia, Pottsland were in this group. Ansonia didn't even have a label.

Buxton, on the other hand, was lit up in large all-cap Geobold. It blinked on and off, grabbing the attention of passersby who never intended on giving the board a look in the first place. Stopped them dead in their tracks. Everyone could see that the potential for excitement on Buxton was off the scale. A place with such a successfully lit name should not be missed. Everyone should go there. Everyone would go there. Marla headed for the validation line, hair pulled back behind her head with a vending machine tie and ID papers dangling from each ear.

After receiving her boarding pass—a vaccination scar like stamp impressed on the back of her left hand—she scanned the information above the sales booths to determine the next flight for the grand and blinking Buxton. Turned out to be the next day; she'd have to find a place to hang overnight. With most of her money now gone, she'd wing it somewhere free, conserving the little bit of cash she still carried to stand as a stake in the new world. Having spent a night in the Smoking Section, she was not too concerned: she could withstand anything.

Turning from the validation window, she surveyed the terminal room. Over to the extreme left and almost around the back of the far wall stood the gate to the liftoff pad, a mile down the line. The upper limit of the room allowed for huge fifty-foot floor-to-ceiling pictures hung by suspended wires. The glazed photos depicted desert scenes and the view of the liftoff from various angles. From the look of the scenery, the area outside the terminal seemed fairly nondescript and flat, not a moraine in sight.

On the rear side of the room and diametrically opposed to the exit gate, a hallway filled with souvenir shops enticed the incoming passengers to an afternoon of casual browsing before their departures. A flood of shoppers filling the corridor attested to the effectiveness of the displays. Marla headed over, hoping for twenty hours of distraction before lift off.

The walkway before her was decked with red and orange and yellow blinking signs suggesting numerous ways to spend her thrift. Thousands of passengers, excited by their upcoming journeys, talked, laughed, yelled, coordinated their groups, and admonished their children. The human noise mixing with the bells and sound effects of the arcades and souvenir stalls created a background cacophony much like that of a road show. Barkers on stands in front of sandwich board marquees hollered out invitations to medicine shows, freak zoos, shoot-a-ducks, pinball games. Perfume merchants seductively attracted casual gawkers by speaking in hushed tones and spritzing the air playfully if anyone walked a little too closely. The sweet sticky smells mixed with that of numerous slow spits up and down the line cooking gams of alien animals in heavy butter. Every once in a while a flame shot up past a roasting carcass. Hundreds of small mirrors placed at intervals along the strip reflected the leaping flames, transmuting them into hundreds of tiny fires in hundreds of tiny shops cooking hundreds of dead animals. Tricky spices used in

the cooking sickened yet enthralled Marla. She didn't know whether to puke or order.

In one section of the corridor a woman passed out paper teasers. Marla accepted one and read about the specials of the day. Not needing a 90% discount on pharmaceuticals, views of wide open college coeds, Viagra, or mortgage refinancing, she moved on.

A window displayed a new woolen line from BAC, something they'd been working on before she left half a year ago. It looked strange and new now. The mannequin waved at her as if it knew her, but she didn't recognize the model. Maybe a collective consciousness existed amongst them. She waved back just in case. She didn't want to be rude, but at the same time she hoped the gesture wouldn't signal the mannequin to bring her a cup of coffee.

Just as she realized she'd done a stupid thing, a juggler bumped into her from behind. He skillfully allowed his props to drop into his hands and then just as skillfully threw one to Marla as she looked up in surprise, barely able to catch the neon green ball in time. The juggler, without missing a beat, grabbed a replacement from his back pocket, bowed to Marla, and moved on through the crowd. A couple gawking like Marla applauded him. Or her. Hard to tell with the whiteface what the gender was.

She glanced down at the ball and realized it was actually a ripened gran. It had the words "Eat at Joe's" stamped on its rind. She smiled and stuffed the fruit into her knapsack.

Down the line she passed an outfitters shop with a huge 50% off placard. Non-motile male mannequins wearing zebra thongs and nothing else posed in various submissive stances. Their uplifted forearms appeared to be fending off blows to the face. Their knees were bent in definitive crouches, their eyes spread wide with exaggerated panic. Interspersed between the frightened and well-hung males were fully clothed female mannequins sporting the designs of the day and carrying water pistols to keep their charges in line. They were posed face forward, looking at the customer, challenging him or her to effect an entrance. With no angles to their arms and legs, they stood straight up and down in robotic perfection.

Marla got the message and became a little confused when she found a particularly tight-buttocked plastic male attracting her attention more than the rest. The muscley, crisp-white blonde carried a slight look of defiance in his cringe, as if there was more to him than this ridiculous charade. He came from the planet of the apes, sure, but he'd be up straight and talking one day. She found herself creaming a little at the thought of carrying him off on a horse. It's only a doll, she said to herself sternly, about as sapient as that mute Charlton Heston picked up. Nevertheless, she started a shopping list in her head that included a change of underwear.

Inside the store, she splurged on a second pair of trousers so she wouldn't have to do her laundry naked if the chance to wash her clothing ever came along. Along with the aforementioned undies, the purchase added up to 40 quods. That left her with enough cash for who knew what, since she hadn't a clue as to the exchange rate on Buxton.

She paid her bill and returned to the corridor where a plastic marquee for a sandwich shop held an embedded analog clock that indicated she'd spent a mere two hours since the landing. With another eighteen to go, she pondered where to go and how to not spend any money. She decided on a self-guided tour of the grounds outside the terminal. Everyone needs to acclimate themselves in a new place. Maybe she'd find a nice warm park bench in the middle of an oasis of trees and fountains. Somewhere to sit and think and clear her brain and plan her life ahead.

Outside she discovered that not only were there no park benches in the immediate vicinity, but if there ever had been any trees or grass or picturesque fountains here, they had been blown away long ago by

the worst sand storm in the planet's history. Roiling around in it was the dirt and handbills and other mall flotsam that somehow found itself between the exit of the terminal complex and a high rise hotel complete with glitzy outside elevator and a deck at the top of its twenty stories for watching liftoffs lifting off down the desert. Some insane person had built the hotel without an extension tube to the terminal. A tube would have allowed guests to avoid the biting sand riding in on winds that had traveled over miles of flat land just to funnel into this 50 yard breezeway. Now as it was, anyone exiting either the hotel or the terminal would be glad if the least that happened was a loss of hat and blowing askew of hair. What usually happened was every newspaper and sale circular within five miles flew into the person's face, their clothes whipped immodestly about themselves, dust and sand scoured their skin, their eyes reddened and teared, their breath caught in their throat, and anything not tacked down—hat, rug, clip-on tie, velcro appliqué—was lost to the swirl. Those unfortunates obliged to make the trip between terminal and hotel ran the entire fifty yards with one hand on their head and the other holding their coat so they'd arrive with some garment that, while maybe not intact, would at least cover the naughty parts long enough to get upstairs to the room.

Marla stood on the edge of the Venturi effect and watched for a while before returning towards the land behind her. It was devoid of anything save a few outer buildings—electrical sheds and the like. The sun was low on the horizon and the air was quite chilly. She could see nothing to walk to or around or for.

Twenty minutes later she turned to go back inside. Holding her hair down, she reached for the door button just as the door itself flew open and two men, one short with albino white hair, the other fairly tall with a heavy tanned hand clasp a windbreaker around his head and neck rendering him featureless, came out. The wind caught the unprotected albino immediately, and he looked up in surprise as it sucked away his breath.

Astounded, Marla called out to him. "Charney!" she yelled as he and the windbreaker rushed past her.

Despite the vicious wind, Charney heard her and stopped. He opened his eyes as wide as he dared. The wind blew bits of towhead hair at odd angles so his scalp showed through, pink and vulnerable like a baby's. He recognized her after a few moments.

"Marla!" he cried, taking a few steps forward and staring blankly. "What are you doing here?"

"Me?" she answered, spitting a parcel of hair out of her mouth. "What about you? I can't believe you're here."

"Yeah," he shouted, considering things. "Incredible. Hey! Let's go get a drink. Just a sec." He turned back to his friend in the wind tunnel who had been waiting patiently for something—an introduction, or a blow off at least. Charney handed him an object and said something that Marla couldn't hear, then he turned back to her. "You want to?"

"What about him?" Marla asked, pointing to the man who by now showed no interest in introductions and was fighting his way to the other side.

"Stan?" Charney said to Marla. "He's not interested. Let's go get something." He turned Marla around and led her out of the wind into the terminal.

"Yes," Marla said, thankful for having something to do for a few hours out of the wind. And for not being totally alone in her grand adventure.

They walked back into the crowded terminal with its teeming lights, buzzers, barkers, and spritzers.

Charney led the way to a darkened alcove off the main drag. Little tables with flickering light bobs and canned jazzlet music—soothing soprano sax and mushy-edged flugelhorns arranged over diminutive drum and barely there bass—provided the backdrop. The place was empty except for a few regular types at the bar and the bartender, who looked relieved to see some new faces.

They sat at a table by the far wall.

“There is a two drink minimum to sit at this table. Please make your selection,” the table announced as soon as their rumps made contact with the seats. A drink menu featuring sweet and sticky as its theme levitated just above the center of the table. On the back side a small ruled box at the bottom listed the basics. Marla selected a bourbon, Charney picked one of the trendy ones from the front. Something that came with a straw.

The two settled down to reunion business.

“What are you doing here?” Marla asked. “I mean, don’t get me wrong; I’m glad to see a familiar face, but this is so strange.”

“Yeah, kind of, but not really,” he answered. “You just got discharged, I just got fired. Neither one of us is gonna exactly be comfortable back there. You said yourself you hated your job. I’m a marked man, I had to leave.”

“What?”

“A marked man. Nobody’s going to hire me back there. I’m heading to Sherpen now. My family’s got a bread business there so that’s what I’m going to be doing now, making bread.”

“But you were studying health maintenance. I thought you were doing great. I figured you’d be getting your colors next year.”

“Yeah, well. Let’s just say I got disillusioned.”

“So you’re just kidding when you say you’re marked.”

“Kinda. I mean, maybe. I mean, I just ain’t going to be held in high regard on the home planet anymore.”

“I don’t get it. What’d you do? They told me you quit, by the way. Did you get my note?”

“They would say that, wouldn’t they? No.”

“No?”

“No, I didn’t get your note. I left for here before you were discharged.”

“You left that long ago? What have you been doing, just hanging around? When’s your boat leave?”

“Yesterday. I missed it.”

“So you’re stuck here now?”

“You could say that.”

“So what’s the deal?”

“Deal? I don’t wanna go, that’s the deal.”

“Ah. So don’t go. Go back. There’s places on the dark side of the Textile Planet. You’ve put time in; you’re valuable. What’s the big deal?”

“I don’t wanna go, but I have to. I can’t go back.” He looked at her through pinched lips and wide open eyes, as if Marla just wasn’t getting the obvious.

The bartender brought two glasses on a round tray. One was tall and shaped like a cornucopia. It was filled with pink liquid and a sprout of fresh vegetable. The bartender placed it on a stand before Charney. Marla’s drink came in a chunk of square glass with tinkling ice cubes. Charney handed a paper note to the man and said “Keep the change,” smiling broadly with just a trace of grimace.

“Gladly, and thank you,” the bartender said, bowing and returning to his corner.

“Okay, Charney,” Marla took a swallow, shook her head a little, and continued. “You have to go. Why?”

“Never mind why. I don’t want to; I changed my mind, so I’ve been using up my cash here for three days.”

“Uh huh, stalling.”

“Yeah, but it’s getting a little boring here.”

“Hey I’d say I’d keep you company until I leave tomorrow, but I think Stan can take care of that.”

“Yeah, Stan.” Charney looked at his timepiece hanging on his chest and then looked up at Marla and sighed. “That’s getting a little boring too. Stan’s not the most passionate of pickups.”

“Hey, I’m not a therapist, I can’t really help you, but I say you don’t wanna go forward? Go back then, take your chances.”

Charney slammed his fist on the table. The drinks jumped and Marla lost a cube out of hers. It went rolling onto the floor and would be a little puddle in about a half an hour.

“I can’t go back!” Charney hissed, trying to yell and keep his voice down at the same time. “They’ll kill me.”

“What?”

“Yeah, that’s right. They’ll kill me.”

“What?”

“They’ll kill me.”

“For blabbing to a patient?”

“Oh Marla. Everything is so simple for you, isn’t it? Ignorance is bliss. Don’t you have any idea what’s going on? What they did? To you?”

Marla sat back and looked towards the melting ice cube on the floor as if Charney’s drift was clearer there. “They, uh, shot me in the gut?”

“That’s nothing. Nothing compared to the real deal.”

“Yeah? So what’s the ‘real deal’?” Marla’s palms started to sweat. The cube on the floor glistened.

“They fucked with you. You were in a program. It was inevitable that you got bagged or hung up or something.”

“Yeah? Big real deal. I said as much to that quack Iovvna. She wasn’t the slightest bit interested. ‘What matters now is that you get well, not what happened before.’ That’s what she kept saying whenever I started complaining about BAC.”

“Iovvna? Quack? Hardly. She designed the whole experiment.”

“Yeah, I know, she told me.”

Charney slammed his fist on the table again. Another cube to the floor. “She told you nothing!” He yelled, no restraint, no hissing this time.

The barman looked up for a second and then back to the newspaper he had laid in front of himself on the bar.

“No, Baby,” Charney continued in a lower voice. “You don’t know anything. Not just your therapy. The whole BAC experiment. Iovvna and them were doing illegal human experimentation—psychological pattern analysis, worker limitation studies, manipulation of output, insane input. You were one of a pool of guinea pigs. They just pushed you too far. That’s what they were trying to find out: what’s ‘too far’?”

“Yeah, well...”

“No ‘well.’ You don’t understand. They fucked you up and then you got shot. Raw would have been okay, yeah, but getting shot, no. That wasn’t supposed to happen. There’s a reason why human mind experimentation is illegal. Any other form of human fuckation is cool, but the brain is very uncool. The last uncharted territory is supposed to remain uncharted. It’s become an argument of ethics, something for college professors to argue about. Nevertheless, it’s illegal. BAC and friends go one way on the issue: the wrong way. But now they publicly fucked up two individuals for life. Not to mention little ol’ me.”

“Yeah, so. I didn’t know all the legal details, but I said as much to Iovvna. She was bored with it, like it was so yesterday to her. Like it’s news that big ass companies exploit their workers and fuck up people’s lives. Like they never go out and break the law. Charney, it’s not that big of a deal, you’re overreacting. You’re paranoid. You need a session with her yourself.” Marla grabbed her drink, sat back in her chair, and watched Charney’s reaction.

“Yeah, so why’d they pay me off to never show my fat face on the Textile Planet again?”

“They paid you off?”

“Yeah, so I couldn’t tell you what I’m telling you now. I can’t believe I even got the chance. I wasn’t going to when I first saw you outside, but your bleeding ignorance makes me boil. Here’s the real deal: I was hired by Ivovna to be your orderly. I knew the score, was expected to be discreet. Ordered to be discreet. But that one night I blabbed a little bit. Just a little bit. Hardly a thing at all.” Charney gestured with his thumb and finger just how little the little bit was that he blabbed. His eyebrows pinched down and his eyes focused on his hand trying to see that tiny little blabbed bit. He looked up at Marla, angry.

“After that I wasn’t to be trusted anymore. Like a child, I was. Couldn’t keep a secret. I didn’t ask to keep a secret. I was working toward my whites. They approached me. I guess they thought I was too dumb to figure out what was going on. Yeah, well, they overestimated me, didn’t they. Here I am now, blabbing again. Only this time I’ve got a big, big mouth.” He emphasized, “big, big,” Ralph Kramden style, with a loud, wide-open-armed yell.

The bartender looked up again for a second, then back to the racing form lying on the bar in front of him.

Charney slapped his hand down and stood halfway up, moving his upper body over the table so he could be closer to Marla, ensuring she understood every word he was about to blab.

“They didn’t trust me anymore, so they told me to check out. They didn’t say it, but I know they’d just as soon dot my eye. I’m lucky they offered to pay me off. I’m just a little fish in the medical sea. My grades weren’t stellar, I wasn’t anybody’s pet. Everybody’d forget me if I just disappeared. They could have done that, but they paid me off. I’m lucky.”

He sat back, staring at the table top and the mess of spilled drinks there. “There’s going to be hell to pay, now that you’ve escaped.”

“Escaped? Well, seems like they’d be glad to be rid of me if what you’re saying is true.”

Charney guffawed and looked up at Marla. “You are so tame, Marla. You have a head full of million dollar data that hasn’t been analyzed yet. Do you know how much that research contract is worth? BAC’s spent millions already. Ivovna is a rich woman, but only if she gives them the results.”

“What is it I know?”

“Nothing, the study’s not complete.”

“What are they studying?”

“Human potential, man. What I been saying.”

“I’m only one person.”

“That got shot. You reached the breaking point. They’ve been trying for years to get that to happen. They need more tests on you to refine the process. They’ll have a formula for success—how to turn a staff of basically sapient workers into moronic robots, brains still functioning for the human-only tasks, but bodies working like mannequins. It’s like the car overtaking the horse. You have to feed a horse even if it’s not working anymore, but not a car. Cars are better economically.”

“Really bad analogy. Cars turned out to be more expensive, but nobody was paying attention until way

after the interstate system wrecked the place. And another thing, if Iovvna needed me back at the plant, why did she drag out of the therapy? I was fine but she kept insisting I needed more work.”

“Who knows? Probably the data would have been lost if you didn’t regain full memory. Or something. And you’re right about the cars, but the point is, management has been trying since the beginning of time to produce humans that are like machines. It’s the reason for their existence today. Anything they can do to turn a human into a machine is what they’re good at. Machines are ten times more economical than any living thing as far as producing work: they have less down time, no morals, no complaints, no pride. They do as they are told.”

“Like humans don’t do that.”

“Oh, Marla. Sure people are sheep, but not like mannequins. You must admit that. A mannequin would never burst into a meeting uninvited and start shouting orders.”

“No, they just get their programs cross threaded and start bringing hundreds of cups of coffee on one single order.”

“Exactly, the machines are still less than perfect. They never are perfect. There are some things that AI will never be better at than a human brain. For hundreds of years, industry has been trying to build better and better AI. They’ve come as far as they can with it. That was the big surprise about the Singularity. It was impossible to reach; they got real close but just never touched, and they discovered as per Carp’s equation it was, in fact, impossible. So now it’s time to build a better human.”

“That stinks.”

“Yeah and it’s illegal and you could sue.”

“I could sue?”

“You could.”

“Are you my lawyer?”

“No, Baby, your informer. Come find me after you win your suit and a pile gets mailed to your front door. I’ll be at Sherpen-193-T. Don’t forget that address. Don’t leave me there to die.”

“You’re a little overly dramatic.”

“And you need to go to Ansonia to regroup.”

“Why does everyone want me to go to Ansonia? It doesn’t even have a hand written sticky label on the system map.”

“Because it doesn’t have a hand written sticky label. You can get lost there. You need to get lost there to regroup. Come back with a plan. And an armed guard, of course.”

“You and that sleazy cop that shot me.”

Charney’s jaw dropped. He sat on the edge of his chair.

“What about that sleazy cop that shot you?”

“He told me to go to Ansonia too. I saw him on the shuttle over here.”

“He’s the other one.”

“I just said that.”

“No, that got fucked up. He’s a mess. He really is. He’ll never get over it. Shouldn’t have been a cop in the first place. Real sensitive soul.”

“He shot me.”

“He was programmed.”

“To shoot me?”

“No, of course not. To go beyond his capabilities. Yeah, he can’t sue though, he didn’t get physically hurt. There’s no laws about mental infliction. Other than it’s illegal to experiment. But he can’t sue over that. The laws fucked up about it and now he is too.”

“I can’t seem to feel sorry for him.”

“Marly, girl. Don’t be hard.”

“What do you expect me to say? My life is changed forever and not necessarily for the better. I’ve messed up other people’s lives, too. Left innocent people behind. People that are less able to fend for themselves. I got shot, sure, but at least my head’s okay now. But I’ve left a hole in other people’s lives. Other people that can’t fill it themselves, that will get chewed up by the system regardless if they’re manipulated, cranked, pillled, analyzed, programmed, guinea pigged, watched, or robotted. You don’t come across people like that too often in life and when you do, you need to tread lightly. They round the edges of the world but at their own expense. They don’t get hard, like me. They shrink down a little, lose a little of their collagen. Donate it trying to firm up the melting lard asses of upper management.”

“How can you be so thoughtful of Saddle Dent, but not the cop who shot you? They’re made of the same soft stuff.”

“Spare me.”

“You can always go back, you know. You don’t have to escape, like me. They want you back, in whatever condition, under whatever terms you give them. Your eyes are open now, gives you power. Maybe that security guard did you a favor.”

“Spare me, please!”

“Just suggesting you get a little gratitude.”

“Forget what I said about seeing Iovvna. You don’t need therapy, you’ve got the platitudes down already. For your info, I’m working past my denial, Doc. I’m in the anger stage now.”

Charney watched Marla with a little half smile. As if he was satisfied with her progress. Marla picked up

her glass and tossed back the rest of the bourbon with a little cough at the end, her face unchanged as if challenging Charney to defy her drinking prowess. Finally she spoke. “So who’s this Stan, guy? He gonna get restless?”

“Don’t rush me off, Marla. He’s not going anywhere.”

“Who is he? Old friend? New acquaintance, domestic help?”

“Hey, gettin’ kinda nosy, ain’t ya?”

“Just making conversation. Say no more. Wink, wink.”

“He’s just a guy I met in the gambling den.”

“The...? They got those here?”

“Yeah, you oughtta try it out, build your stake maybe; course you could lose your shirt. Literally, everything’s fair game here at the Hub.”

“What’s the game?”

“Desert hare races. Couple hundred kiloms from here. Apparently it’s the only other industry on the planet.”

“Desert hare? What the hell does a rabbit do in the desert?”

“Eat desert bugs, I guess.”

“Ah, carnivorous. Listen, just in case I don’t win enough for a room in the fancy hotel across the gentle breezeway, is there a flop house in this joint?”

“Yeah, sure. Down by the depot. But you can have my room after midnight. Another flight leaves for Sherpen then. I gotta be on it. I’ll let Stan know you’re coming. He’ll probably clear out, but if not, you can use the spare room. He’s a lamb.”

“Picked up a soldier at the off-track betting booth, huh?” Marla smirked.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Thanks, I’ll think about it.”

“Well, listen, I should get going. Stan’s patient, but, well, you know.”

“Actually, I don’t. My libido was removed in the hospital.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Yes, I think.”

“You should find out.”

“You are paranoid.”

“I have to be and you should be too.”

Charney dropped a bill into the tip box, zipped up his jacket for the walk outside. He stood and stared at Marla. “Unbelievably good to see you.”

Marla stood up. “Hey, I’ll walk you. I still can’t believe you’re here. I’m afraid once you’re gone, I’m gonna think I made it all up in my head.”

They commenced walking to the terminal exit.

“I know what you mean,” Charney said. “It’s a bit of a coincidence, but not really. It’s inevitable that two outcasts are gonna meet up at the Hub. Listen, why don’t you meet me at the gate tonight. I’ll be there around 11:45 for the board. I’ll give you the room key then and you can give me a kiss goodbye.”

“What about Stan?”

“He’s not that sentimental.”

“I see.”

They’d reached the exit door by this time. Marla hung back, avoiding the outside gale force.

Just before Charney pushed through the door, he turned and said, “You really should try your luck at the den. It’s down hall E at the far end, just beyond the kiddie porn booth. Remember to quit at 200. They suck people in by letting them win a little bit at first. Around 200 you start to lose, but by then you’ll be hooked. Nine out of ten poor bastards keep going until they’ve spent their entire inheritance. They start looking for mortgage brokers about then. Keep that in mind.

“I don’t own a house.”

“Quit around 200.” And he pushed through the door with a back wave of his hand.

Marla stood and watched his white hair swirl up and around his head. His jacket ballooned out until he’d cleared the yard and entered the hotel. She watched for a few seconds more in case he changed his mind, and then hoisted her knapsack onto her back to start her search for hall E. It was 17:30.

By 18:30, after she’d wandered around, found a restroom, peed, combed her hair, changed into her new duds, washed her face and hands, rinsed out some underwear and dried them via diaper drawer, she felt ready to face the ensuing sixteen hours until her own shuttle lifted off.

Hall E stood at the extreme opposite end of the terminal from Charney’s hotel. On the left side stood the depot, the meeting place for all ground transportation units: trains, hacks, helicopters for the well funded, and open sided buses for the rest. Rows of flop cots lined up along the wall for the truly destitute—people like Marla Gershe, hoping to save any pitiful amount of money they’d been able to hoard as a stake in some new to them world.

The hundred or so cots were all empty save for a set in the middle that had been taken up by a family of four. Like gypsies, they had their entire household wealth stacked up around themselves—pans, dishtowels, cookstoves, Sunday outfits, and an assortment of workties for the chance employment

opportunity that came along for Dad, Mom, or Sis. These folks were settled. They could have lived here forever. All they needed to complete the picture of self-sufficiency was a slab of bacon frying on a sterno contraption. Surprisingly, they had no potted tomatoes ready for a pluck and a chop. Of course, Marla couldn't see under the big pile of rugs. Perhaps there was a hydroponic setup there hidden from her view.

She took a quick sweep of the room, remarked to herself that she'd have a place to stay if Stan turned out to be less than gracious, and then turned down hall E. Following the cloud of smoke into the gambling den at the far end, she made a deal with herself to leave after one trick, win or no. She'd snatch a nap with the cot gypsies and come back afterwards to win a quick 200 as per Charney's directive.

She rifled through her Sleazo coins, searching for the lowest denomination, found a twenty piece and dropped it into the first box she came across. The room was hazy with the greenish smoke of hundreds of foul cigarettes, compliments of the house. They were stored in bins near the front door. Smokers never passed up the free jays, grabbing two or three for later. Most of the nonsmokers availed themselves as well. Just for luck.

Vellum monitors taped up along the walls were transmitting the day's news; the races were apparently over for the time being. Two of the five screens suffered from a hideous flop-over problem where the top half of the newscasters head emanated from the bottom of the screen while the bottom half floated somewhere above. Few people paid any attention to the broadcast; most of the room's occupants were transfixed by the quick-fix boxes (a bean a play) in front of them.

Some vacationing co-workers wearing T-shirts advertising Bays Falls, TD, stood around one ringing, glowing box, shouting or groaning depending on the outcome of the latest deposited coin. With the power of five college graduates' disposable incomes funneled into one gamebox, they were insured a good time and a lot of laughs for at least a couple of hours, after which they'd pool their debit chips for the return home fare. Monday morning they'd be hanging around the copy machine all talking at once, telling friends that were absent tonight about the near miss on the Hub. They high-fived on every win.

Those were the lucky people. Lucky in that they had an infrastructure of checks and balances built into their social circle. Someone of the group could always be counted on to put the brakes on the folly, averting a disastrous outcome, even as the rest kibitzed themselves onward toward it. These lucky souls would definitely make it home. Others were not so fortunate. Any one of them could easily turn into that fellow across the way just now staring into his box with desperation, slowly frittering his rent check away. Soon he'd be hoping to win back just enough to buy an airline-sized bottle of Bombay.

Marla stood at one of the available boxes and slipped her zinc into the slot with the arrows and fingers pointing at it. She listened as it clinked down the Rube Goldberg mechanism of chutes and springs. Finally it hit the bottom and a couple of canned clangs rang out. "A winner," sang a voice with recorded enthusiasm. The box spat out a ticket in the middle of the front side. Marla retrieved it and read, "You have two free draws. Redeem at the ticket booth. Good until midnight, 3 72 10." Today happened to be the ninth of ThirdMonth as determined by Universal Time where one day was equal to two half-lives of iodine 123. Therefore, she had one day before expiration. Plenty of time later to win that two hundred. For now, a nap.

Retreating back into the breathable air of hall E, she stopped to catch her breath before heading to the depot room. By now a few stragglers had wandered in and claimed a spot. Wearied from travel and without money for a hotel room, they had no interest in seeing the sites of the terminal that required the spending of cash for proper appreciation.

Finding herself the least stained cot on the far side of the gypsies, Marla lay down and turned her face to the wall. Using her knapsack as a pillow, she slept. At 23:15 I123 on the lighted clock on the wall above the lockers, she awoke.

The gypsies had commenced preparing the evening meal of purloined vendor snacks, unbaked traveling bread, and a leg of mutton left over from the good days when the men worked or the women kept a flock. (Or maybe the neighbors did.)

Marla lay on her back for a moment and listened to the head gypsy mom sing as she fixed dinner by passing out paper plates, opening pre-packaged Vienna sausages, and stoking the sterno to boil water for instant coffee. The family's designated cots formed a circle in which everyone sat patiently waiting for the vittles, poking at each other, yelling out curse names, and slapping family members whose insults were deemed over the top. Off to the side, Uncle fiddled with a weirdly shaped wooden contraption, tightening and loosening strings that ran the length of it. At intervals, he held it up to his ear and plucked at a string to ensure he liked the sound. Marla sensed she should get up and out soon; she'd never leave once the dancing started.

She sat up on her cot.

"Hey Chikka!" The head mom, wearing a paisley visor that held back a voluminous silver mane of hair, called to her. "You hongry? You needa eat. 'ave a bite, eh?" She gestured with a paper plate in Marla's direction.

Marla turned. "Thank you, no. I have to go meet somebody. Maybe later, huh?"

"Well you bring 'em back and we feed you both," Mom said.

Marla's stomach did flip flops. "Hongry" as she was, she wasn't interested in sterno stew. She stood up. "Okay," she said, smiling at Mom and grabbing her pack and heading for the door. "Sounds good."

She walked to the big terminal room to wait for Charney. Fifteen minutes later, 23:45, he still hadn't shown up. A ball of nauseating uncertainty developed in her midsection—the same ball she used to catch towards the end of the day at the Mill when everything was due but nothing had been completed.

Charney's tardiness made her feel as if she herself was going to miss the flight. By midnight the room was mostly empty, the prime time crowds having decayed into a few lonely stragglers populating the place in the wee hours. She left not knowing if she should be sad that Charney had missed his flight again or happy that she'd probably see him at breakfast somewhere. Missing out on an evening at Stan's place was a bit of a drag. Maybe she'd take her own room depending on how things went in the gambling den. She'd miss out on all that gypsy stew though.

Back in the casino the bells and whistles were in full swing. The haze had grown thicker, rendering the wall-to-wall display of monitors at the back of the room barely visible. The place, crowded with indigents and swells alike, was as restless as a grocery full of teenagers gathering in the egg section on Halloween night. In and out, in and out, in and out they came and went. The fast win-a-little-lose-a-pile action was so heavy she had to wait on line half an hour for a betting box to open up. Finally a drunk in front of her lost his last spare change and had to go begging some coins. Later she saw him throwing up in the corner, aiming for a waste receptacle but missing completely and soaking his naked feet. Apparently he'd sold his shoes for some quick cash, now gone as well.

The mingling of green smoke haze, putrefying vomit, and sweat emanating from panicked losers created

an unbearable stench in the packed room. Marla disregarded the belly-wrenching smell as best she could and quickly won her 200% profit, after which she began to think of where to find a little celebratory smack and snack. On her way out the door, the monitor up above caught her ear with the words, "...bizarre murder tonight at the terminal hotel in downtown Hub City." She jerked her head rubberneck fashion to catch the shot of a hotel room presumably housing the corpse. The cameras zoomed in tantalizingly slow as the story continued: "This unidentified man was found naked in bed in room 918 and strangled with a shower cord."

They showed a scene of the local death squad wrapping the dead man for his trip to the morgue. An inset showed the face of a youngish albino man with a frozen-in-death smile much like a grimace.

Marla stopped. The blood slowly drained from her face.

A few, but not many, people around her reacted with depth and clarity.

"Oh my god," someone said.

"Poor slob," someone else said.

Behind her the bells rang out, the lights flashed. In front of her the newsreel continued. "Local authorities are asking for anyone with information on a man registered as Stan Dyde to come forward. No property or money was stolen, but a strange note was found on the deceased's body containing the following lines:

'Loose lips sink ships

Rats that leave the sinking ship

Shall one day also lose their lips.' "

Unable to overcome inertia, Marla stood in her spot, glued by the gravity of the situation. With both forces working on her at once, one line kept repeating in her head: the one about Charney being paranoid.

It's not that big of a deal, she'd said.

Finally the drunk in the corner, trying to locate the restroom, stumbled into her. He shocked her back into reality with its clanging bells, shouting winners, and suffocating green haze. She shoved the drunk off to the side and hurried out of the room. But to where? She had two hundred odd bills in her pocket but nowhere to flee. Certainly not back to the hotel where she'd run into Stan Dyde. She'd have to hide out until tomorrow. How do you do that in a one industry town surrounded by an incessant cyclone? The gambling den was full of people but it was too small and, even as hazy as it was, there was too much shrill and glaring light to actually hide here. And the newsreel would keep repeating its horror story, continuously, all night, over and over, again and again, and once completed, it would restart. Nothing sells like blood, except sex maybe. Around two in the morning, they'd start making hints about Charney's love life. She couldn't stay in the casino. On the other hand, the terminal was deserted and would be worse. Safety is in numbers. Maybe the corridor was still up and running.

She bolted down hall E, unable to keep to a slow and unnoticeable pace. Just as she was rounding the corner back into the main terminal a loud and raucous cheer went up from the depot. A "Hey!" punctuating the end of a song. Clapping followed and a trill of "yip, yip, yip, yip, yip, ai, yai, yai, yai, yai" and a loud "Huzzah!" An uncoordinated general yelling signaled the beginning of the next song. Uncle

was playing a vicious intro to the Devil went down to Georgia reminiscent of the Flight of the Bumblebee or maybe the typewriter song. The voices joining the clanging of a huge floor bell egged the fiddler on. Before even seeing the action, Marla knew that every single penny pinching passenger from all 350 flights out of here tomorrow was stomping his or her feet in the middle of the fray. Sterno fires blazed, throwing shadows to the darkened corners of the depot. Could there be a better place to hide?

She entered the room and pushed her way into the safety of the crowd, searching out head mom to whom she could drop a twenty for the pleasure of protection. Sometimes Gypsies can play the surrogate mafia. All that garlic was almost as effective and a tenth of the cost.

Head mom was most welcoming. She wiped the perspiration gathering under her visor and dropped the bill into her safety apron, and then turned to her son standing next to her, slapping him on the back of the head to get him to give up his whiskey bottle. He begrudgingly handed it over to Marla who was grateful for anything to ease the fear. After a swig she noticed how festive the depot had become. The cots had been pushed back into a big jumble away from where Uncle was playing. A huge red-faced young man with streaming red and blue ribbons gartering his long sleeved shirt stood and sang out to the crowd. The force of his appearance and voice seemed to command everyone to join in. He sang firmly, forcefully, in a full tenor, with the earnestness of a youth dedicated to a cause. The crowd would follow him anywhere. In contrast to the robust young man, a little girl—a slip with a garlanded tambourine—danced in the circle around him, bringing nostalgic tears to the eyes of the onlookers. They joined in on the chorus, laughing and raising their fists three times on the hey, hey, heys and twirling themselves in place to follow the girl's movements. Everyone drank.

Marla stood still in the jumble of people, watching, letting the belt sink in. Those around her jostled and cajoled her to join in the swirl, but she remained still until the bottle passed her way again. She guzzled twice and would have again if someone hadn't grabbed it out of her hands.

The whiskey hit her like a fistful of bliss. She burped and then smiled and looked around. Grotesque, rosy faces laughed. Their eyes bulged. Someone grabbed her hand, and started swinging her around. It was a woman in a blue bandanna. She wore a nose ring, polished lips and eyelids, and a checkered apron. Her short legs were gnarled with age, but full of the energy and love the life in the ring brings. The woman laughed, pulling Marla into the circle with other swinging couples. Marla gave in to it and danced, laughing along with her partner.

The bottle eventually made it back to her, and she drank twice again before surrendering it. By the end of the song, she knew the words even if she didn't know the meaning. Another song, another bottle. The music got louder, the crowd bigger—more unruly and exponentially safer.

She danced with her knapsack bobbing against her back. The room grew warm and more secure with every swallow of mash until the moment she spotted a tallish man with a darkened face across the room. He pushed himself through the crowd, keeping his maniacal eyes fixed on her the whole time. Over in the casino the winning bells of a landslide windfall rang out over and above the songs of the gypsies which faded to black around her. Even in an alcoholic daze she knew the safety was gone. She recognized that fact the moment she realized that this person had worked for BAC. He was one of their goons and had tried to kill her way back when. Could he have killed Charney?

She stepped away from the gnarled woman and steadied the knapsack on her back as it fell off to the side. Trying to make his way to Marla, the dark man—Stan Dyde, for sure—squeezed between two buffalo men. The big men turned on him and insisted he drink from their bottle. He tried to push them away but they were bigger than him. They bear-hugged him, and begged him to take a pull, holding the bottle to his lips like a determined parent with a naughty baby. As he fought and eventually gave in, Marla

found an opening to the side of the crowd and continued on through, slipping into whatever hole presented itself. She slunk down low and made her way around the crowd. The blood pulsed in her ears, threatening to burst her drums which hurt desperately from the pressure.

Finally she made it to the edge nearest the door and pushed through. Without looking back to see if the dark man spotted her, she ran out into the hallway and into the terminal room where the loudspeaker was announcing last call. She had no idea where last call was going. She didn't care; it was her only chance. She had no time to wait around and hide out for the next trip to Buxton. Stan Dyde, the dark man whose face was tied up in a windbreaker hood when she passed him in the wind tunnel, the man of her waking dreams, the man who shot her, the man who strangled Charney with a shower cord, was on her heels. He'd saved her why? To bring her back, of course. But why hadn't he just shown up at the end of her trip from the Textile Planet; forced her to return then? Why had he gotten involved with Charney? Charney was innocent and could really care less about Marla. He had his own eggs to fry. Marla suddenly realized that Charney had been right to be paranoid; this was so much bigger than Marla and Charney and maybe even Iovvna.

Up the ramp to the loading dock Marla flew, unanswered questions left behind with the gypsies who were hopefully keeping Stan Dyde occupied. Two workers, ticket takers she presumed, stood at the top of the ramp. They smiled knowingly and nodded. Just as she rushed up to them, they shoved her on board a huge cage carrying a pile of late crates down the track to a departing jet. They jumped on board themselves after her and then the cage took off. They showed no surprise that Marla was boarding their carrier in this manner.

"Where's this jet headed?" she looked from one official to the next, not noticing their rag tag uniforms.

"Don't you know?"

"No, but I gotta get on it, wherever it's going."

"You got a pass?"

"Pass, you mean a ticket?"

"This ain't no passenger flight, Dearie," the first one, who had a missing lower lip, said.

"Well, I don't care, I gotta get on it. You can have my ticket and redeem it for the face value. It's for..."

The man with no lip looked at his partner and laughed.

"I don't need no ticket, and neither do you. You need a pass."

"But I gotta get outta here! Somebody's after me."

"Why don't you just give 'Somebody' your ticket to pay your debt. That way 'Somebody' won't be after you no more."

"It's not a debt, it's a..."

"Yeah, sure. You got any cash at all?"

"Uh, just two hundred, it's yours, and whatever else I owe you for a pass."

“We’ll take the cash in lieu of a pass, and Dealy’ll conscript you for the rest.”

“Dealy?” She looked to the other man, scrawny with mutton chop eyebrows.

“Not me, Loser,” mutton-chop answered. “Dealy’s the cook. She always needs help.”

“I can’t cook.”

“Neither can Dealy.” The two burst into laughter and slapped each other’s back.

“You can do her for whatever it is she does,” Mutton-chop said, gasping for breath. “She’ll be happy for the ‘help.’” More laughter. Marla looked on, knowing she was the butt of some joke, but also knowing it was the least of her problems.

The cage stopped by the load in door of a large and dirty ship. The men pushed her inside past a sign that read “Galley this way.” An arrow pointed down a set of what had once been stainless steel stairs but were now paint splotched, blood matted, scratched, scuffed, gummed, dirtied, fouled, tarred, and shat upon. They had been used in a most unappealing way and never cleaned up from it.

She fell forward down the steps and through the galley doors into a room reeking of boiled tripe. A woman, who was not so much rotund as an actual rotunda, sat on a barstool in the middle of the room. Gallons of her fat flesh ran over the edges of the stool like a tub overflowing with grease. She sat on the stool cutting up a Gorgo onion and eating the chunks raw using her cutting knife as a conveyance tool. She looked up lazily at the newcomers and burped.

“Dealy, look what we found under a cardboard box in the men’s room,” one of her escorts said.

“Mmm?” Dealy nodded in what might have been approval. Her lips moved in such a way that it appeared she was extracting something out of her teeth with her tongue. After a while she gave up the niceties and just dug at whatever was lodged there with the cutting knife, all the while staring Marla up and down.

“Got any meat on you?” she finally said once she was through with her teeth and had swallowed whatever bit she’d found.

“Uh,” Marla looked back at the two scrawny men, her only available saviors.

“Sure, Dealy, just look.” The mutton man stood forward and grabbed Marla’s upper arm, squeezing it. “She’s a fine piece of marble.”

Marla turned and pushed him savagely away.

“Look, forget it,” she said squeezing between the two to escape back up the steps.

“Too late now, Dearie,” Dealy called. “All’s aboard that’s going aboard. Didn’t you hear las’ call? You gotta think about getting strapped in. Listen, forget these two jokers. I can always use a han’ down here, even a skinny little one like you is. Kieter and Trapp don’ mean nothin.’ You two git on now. Just let the little girl alone and go back up to your nes’.”

She beckoned to Marla with an arm as thick as Kieter’s waist. “Come here, you. Let’s take a look. I

can feel in my bones you got a talent for a potato peelah. We gotta find you a spot to tie down.”

Marla doubted the woman even had any bones let alone feeling in them. She was all lipid with no apparent structural support anywhere. But she had a nice smile. Marla looked at her and realized she didn’t look so much like the eater of children as the cookie baking grandma we all read about in children’s fairy tales. Only not quite as ambulatory. Being called a “little girl” bugged her a bit. She had an urge to reel off her accomplishments at the Mill along with her wage history, but then took stock of her situation instead.

“Okay,” Marla said. “I mean, I can learn just about anything.”

“Sure you can, Dearie. Let’s fin’ you a tiedown.” And then Marla witnessed what perhaps may be the most frightening thing she’d ever seen in her life—Dealy removing herself from the stool. It took several attempts, oaths involving the scullery gods, and a couple rounds of Lamaze birthing inhale/exhale exercises. Every muscle in Dealy’s legs and arms strained in tandem to push up from the floor and lift the ass from around the edges of the stool. The procedure was a model of impeccable timing, a show of tightly honed muscles functioning at the top of their form, worthy of the standing ovation a flawless Olympic double back flip dive elicits. Once on the floor, Dealy had to rest half an hour before even thinking of moving on.

“Just exactly where is this ship going?” Marla asked. She still entertained hopes of making it to Buxton at some point.

Dealy looked up, glad for a reason to take a break, as if walking and talking at the same time were not in her repertoire. “Skinny Lass, let me give you a hint,” she said, panting and wiping the sweat from her face with an absurdly out of proportion little hand which she then placed on a nearby counter to sustain her during discourse.

“To start with,” she said. “We are carrying rare pharmaceuticals of distinguished character. Distinguished—yes, legal—no.” Inhale. “Next to them in pedigree, you’ll find foodstuffs exotic to most planets and impossible to come by using the usual means, that is, debit chip or tagged barter. You can’t buy or trade these things. They have their own, ah, specialized distribution systems.” Inhale and wipe face. “We’re also proud to have on board a number of electronic weapons assembled from spare parts of hundreds of missiles, hand grenades, flame throwers, Kalashnikovs, and cap guns left over from previous and far off wars. None of it constructed to spec.” Inhale. “Last but most important, we’re hosting a pack of malcontented convicts to be dumped at the end of our line as just so much decaying refuse. They’ll be hired immediately upon touchdown. A crowd will be waiting for them, in fact. You just can’t get good help where we’re going.”

Dealy might have wanted to continue her colorful description of the ship’s contents, but at this point she was exhausted and considering a nap. She hefted herself up and looked around, trying to remember what errand had gotten her out of her seat.

Marla listened to the explanation, nodding in resignation. Far from being surprised, frightened, or disappointed, she was somehow encouraged by the fact that she was finally hurtling toward her destiny. As much as she fought it before, she now accepted with grace the inevitability of winding up in the place everyone insisted she needed to go. Everyone being a ticket shark, a murderer, and the murderer’s victim—a crew somehow assembled to give Marla the perfect advice to sink her even deeper into the shit pile that was building around her starting with a gunshot to the gut way back when. Where else should she possibly go but the worst place in the system: Ansonia, the planet without a sticky note on the chart of the solar system.

She signed on. Literally; she had to sign a document stating she was not conscripted. She was there of her own free will. In exchange she received one drawer in a cabinet back by the grease sump that she could store all she had in the world—her knapsack with blanket, two changes of underwear, a pair of backup trousers, two souvenir t-shirts, and her personal hygiene effects.

Her berth hung on the wall nearby and was unfurled once a day for a four-hour nap. The rest of the time she assisted Dealy, who indeed did not know how to cook, but then it doesn't take a whole lot of skill to add water to freeze-dried pot roast, yogurt, or spaghetti. Most of Marla's duties consisted of up and down arm movements. In order to restock the vending machines with food packets, she moved boxes, opened boxes, filled boxes, shifted boxes, sorted the contents of boxes. To help her in her duties they gave her a handy utility knife. For a break from her box duties she was allowed to sweep the mess hall, so named because the place was plastered with food wrappers, plastic utensils, crumpled tin foil, chunks of chipped beef, reconstituted cracker crumbs, whole pieces of cold and dried out toast with bits of egg-beaters still clinging. On Sundays she placed little baskets of fresh fruit on the tables, so Monday's mess included peels, seeds, and piles of fermenting pomace.

Marla dispatched herself twice a day—every thirteen hours—for mess duty. Regardless, the place remained incorrigible. It was as if as soon as she completed one sweep and was stowing the broom back in the wall panel, a pack of highly capable rats crept out from every crack of every ill lit corner of the room and spent the next twelve hours in a rodential orgy, ripping open and half-eating the contents of food packets.

The flight to Ansonia took three months, during which time Marla Gershe changed. She hadn't done so much physical labor since the time she was a day weaver at the Mill. Every night at midnight she fell into her hammock exhausted with her muscles in knots. Although her feet ached, she fell asleep immediately. At four the kitchen alarm woke her. She rolled up her bed to its hook and set about making Dealy's coffee—an illegal brew concocted from real beans scored from a trade with another ship that had an excess. Dealy had given them a hundred pounds of powdered milk in return. Toward the end of the trip, Dealy would be short flin-flan—a type of dehydrated ice cream that was a favorite with the crew and required the material she'd traded—but she'd deal with that later. Her name wasn't Dealy for nothing.

Marla ground the beans and then percolated the coffee. It was one of the things that made the three months tolerable. The smell infiltrated every corner of the ship. The apparently insensitive ship workers and convicts never noticed that every morning they awoke to the smell of brewing coffee, but all they ever got was instant. The idea that they were smelling it but not drinking it never seemed to hit anyone. At any rate, nobody complained. And every morning, through the ritual of coffee making for Dealy, Marla's humanity returned. She, herself, had no stomach for it. The taste reminded her of the Mill. And she didn't trust it either. In addition she had no desire to get het up on caffeine. The smell, however, remained sublime.

Every day around six Dealy gimped in, wheezing, perspiring, and resting at any point where a flat surface gave her purchase between the door and her stool in the middle of the galley. The process took half an hour, but once settled on her seat, she was all energy. Nothing stopped her in her daily work, organizing the day's meals, scheduling Marla's duties, negotiating with visitors that popped in for favors or presents. It takes a big woman to be cook on a convict ship to Ansonia, and Dealy fit the shoes. And stretch pants. She drank a lot of coffee fortified with cigarettes to keep her strength up.

Marla, working as Dealy's right hand gal; that is, her gopher, lackey, servant, and slave, lost weight and hardened both mentally and physically. She vowed to kill Dealy the minute the ship landed. It wouldn't be hard, she thought, to use the big butcher knife to the chest. But what a chest! Long way to the center

where there was undoubtedly no heart. Marla went through her routine duties plotting new ways to do Dealy, ways that were sure of success.

Meanwhile Dealy instructed her in life on Ansonia.

“Get a job on the docks,” Dealy said. “You’ll get all the latest news, hear about the best shipments coming in, find the juiciest opportunities, and get the best pick of the newbies.”

“Newbies?”

“Yeah, the fresh meat.”

“Like me?”

“Ah, kid, you ain’t new meat no more. Your cherry was popped a long time ago, the day you resolved to stab me in the back with a butcher knife.”

Marla stared at the cook, hating her more than ever. “Yeah, so what do I want with fresh meat?”

“If you don’t know, what good is it me telling you? You’re lucky you’re comin’ off a ship’s crew; everybody’s gonna say you know what time it is.”

“Time?”

“Forget it, just get a job on the docks.”

“Moving boxes around?”

“Yeah.”

“Cuz I know a lot about that, huh?”

“Aw, shut yer trap. You don’t know nothin’. Sonia’s gonna eat you alive.”

Dealy kept a permanent cigarette stub in the corner of mouth, her prehensile lips clinging to it day in and day out. After her morning smoke, she never lit up again, just carried the doob around all day as an accoutrement. Just now, she pulled it out to guffaw at the thought of Marla offloading crap on the docks and getting swallowed up in the hungry throat of Ansonia, never to be seen again. Another loser failing in the last hope.

Marla smiled, recalling the box of rat powder in the back of the rusty broom cabinet shelf, right next to the sugar canister. She’d start experimenting with concentrations tomorrow, give Dealy just enough to weaken her. As if anyone could detect a weakening in Dealy. Okay, just enough to give her indigestion, or nausea, or an actual faint. If that didn’t work, there was the oven. She’d wait until her WC duty up top would require that she spend a few hours out of the kitchen. Just before she left, she’d...

The long hours of packing and sweeping and cleaning, although depressing, allowed Marla to think. Something she hadn’t done in years. Initially she spent most of the time looking over her shoulder for the dark man, but after he didn’t show up her mind’s picture of him slowly dissolved. She then thought of Saddle, vainly convincing herself the waif would be fine. At such times, Marla would dip into the cooking sherry, replacing what she drank with water, promising after each dip it was the last one. Burdened with

her guilt, it was her only recourse.

Slowly Saddle's image dissolved as well and an emptiness took its place. Then Marla felt guilty for that. Angry as well. Angry that she was letting herself off the hook. Angry that it was so seemingly easy to let go. Without forgiveness even. She didn't seem to need any. Had she no soul? Was she so wrapped up in herself she could feel no compassion? Yes, she answered. She had no soul. And no one should know. From now on, she promised, she would not get involved with another human. Those with no soul need to remove themselves from polite society. They stink. They're embarrassing. They steal heat.

And so Marla's days passed in working, staring at the dried soup stains on the wall opposite her bunk, making dreary assassination plots, and eavesdropping on conversations of workers like herself. Sometimes her duties required she travel through other regions of the ship. She never talked to anybody, keeping her vow of solitude intact, but she often picked up bits of talk here and there. Every section of the ship had its wiry convict handlers who did all the dirty work while their fat overlords sat around cleaning bits of freeze-dry from his or her teeth with a matchstick while gambling, drinking, and cussing loudly for effect. The overworked lackeys were fond of boasting and bragging and passing on advice about the subtleties of Ansonian life. Most of the advice contradicted other advice. One person would suggest getting a job in the warehouse to get the pick of the shipments. Another said to find employment in food service so you'd never go hungry. Others were less delicate: be a whore and get rich; Ampicillin shipments arrived regularly and if you get in with the big guys, markup wouldn't be so bad.

Nothing sounded particularly appealing, but she wasn't worried about finding a place. She'd grown accustomed to long days of physical labor and discovered that she didn't mind the work so much. The aching back, while annoying, served to remind her that she was capable of something. She endured it like a battle injury. The constant need for sleep was overcome early on. She found she didn't need as much. Her mind didn't play on and on and on like it did during the maelstrom days of the Mill, where no matter how much work you got done, there was always something of the utmost importance unfinished to keep you tossing in the wee of the night. She had needed a lot of sleep then, because none of it was ever hard enough; she never got deep enough into it. Now her four hours of sleep were that and nothing more. Just hard, deep sleep without dreams. The work itself—the ripping, the sweeping, the lifting, the avoidance of Dealy's breath after she made a joke at Marla's expense—was not all that bad. She was confident she'd find a place on the planet.

Once in a while Marla mused over her predicament. She wondered why the dark man had saved her from the smoking section only to lose her on Walloon. Why didn't he take her back right away? Wasn't that his mandate? That would be the assumption anyway, according to what Charney was saying. But Charney had also insisted the man was a sensitive soul, hurt like Marla. But he killed Charney, didn't he? So how sensitive could he be? Poor Charney. And that of course would lead to poor Saddle. Once Marla got on Saddle, she'd be lost until Dealy called her for an errand. At that point, all sad thoughts fled, replaced by...nothing.

Finally the landing came along with orders for Marla to offload the compacted kitchen trash. It was to be her last duty. In spite of that, Marla was first in line at the ship's exit. With promises to return in an hour for the task, she left the ship and the terminal and hopped the first free shuttle into town, never again to see the ship she rode in on. Her only regret was the shiny butcher knife left gleaming in its rack, unplunged, unbloodied, unloved.

Chapter Four

The air of Ansonia had a pregnant orange tinge to it. Thick and warm it was, and like any pregnancy, full of romantic hope. It stank slightly of sulfur as if it was the birthing place of the underworld. A permanent drizzle created small pools in the road that reflected a rusty glow.

Marla and the other riders of the rickety conveyance calling itself a bus had departed from the Ansonian landing tarmac and were now presumably on their way to Promise, the only town on the planet. From the windows of the bus, they surveyed the landscape. Actually there were no real windows as the bus was only a platform on wheels propelled by some unseen mechanism. A set of iron uprights and rails nailed to the edges of the plywood floor provided a flimsy frame, but there was no fear of falling off as the thing moved too slowly. Bumps and pits in the road provided a bit of a challenge now and then, jarring people and baggage out of their spots.

The riders surveyed the hilly landscape that hosted stick and tarpaper hovels amongst which hundreds of men and women workers shoveled, dug, picked, cut, cracked, or smashed ledges of gray rock. The place was wretched but energetic.

At intervals the bus stopped, or merely slowed a little more, to pick up groups of four or five stone workers who had had enough for the day. There was no fee to ride the bus. As Marla soon learned, Ansonian industry was beset by a never ending need for labor, so as much as possible it facilitated movement of workers from one place to another free of charge.

“Jake!” Someone called to a gaunt-framed man as he stepped aboard. Though dirty from the day’s work, Jake seemed fresh and alive, and even with charcoal-colored hair he looked young. When he heard his name he looked up, laughed in recognition, and then pushed his way through the crowd to the buddy calling his name. The two engaged in a raucous conversation with back slapping and out loud laughing. Marla understood none of it, but others from the hillworker gangs did and guffawed appropriately at the jokes. Those just off the boat, like Marla, stood silently watching the dreary landscape, wondering why, oh why, they had come.

Marla wondered at her inability to follow the conversation. Supposedly everyone spoke the same tongue throughout the system, so what was going on here? “Same language,” she mused.

“Say shi, seca da,” Jake shouted. The workers roared.

“Ah,” thought Marla. “I get it. Same shit, second day. It’s just lazy.”

In spite of the fact that she caught on to the dialect, little of the ensuing conversation meant anything. Office politics, the boss sucks, no one has a clue—the sort of thing that makes for boring eavesdropping. She went back to watching the landscape and wondering why, oh why, she had come.

Electronic billboards rose up along the road. At first there was one and after a hundred yards or so another, and then maybe another, but then they started popping up thick and fast like sparse stands of trees turning into a proper forest. Eventually they were so numerous the view was entirely shielded by wall-to-wall bulletin boards four and five thick. At this point the bus stopped. A curb attached to a twenty-five-foot-wide strip of hastily poured (i.e., unleveled) cement comprised the end of the line: the Promise depot.

Marla stepped off the platform momentarily and stared at the blinking boards while her fellow

passengers piled up behind her.

“Shuboff!” came the gracious request by a man in the back.

She glanced over her shoulder, woke up to the situation, and apologetically stepped forward and out of the way. A woman in overalls and Sophia Loren hair spoke to a friend in passing. “Duh shi,” she said.

The depot bulletin boards advertised one thing and one thing only: employment. Continuously scrolling want ads offered outrageous remuneration for aspiring cooks, bookkeepers, rakers, clerks, stevedores, diggers, hunters, gatherers, choppers, growers, babysitters, record keepers, rate makers, moonshiners, salesmen, housekeepers, analysts, garbage haulers, processors, dishwashers, truck drivers, bookies, cattle drovers, builders, menders, and whores of any age and gender. Jobs that required old-fashioned skills but not much formal education were advertised thousands of times over on the depot boards. The overpowering need for living, breathing humans capable of holding a shovel, pencil, or ladle (and we’re not too fussy about how well they do it) shouted out the fact that this was a worker’s world.

Job seekers perused the ads, some audibly entering contact information into recording cards. Others pulled mini yakkers out of their back pockets and punched in numbers on the spot. Still others shook their heads and moved to the next board with a been-there, done that, Next! air. In the very center, in the very front, stood an imposing panel which no one seemed to be reading or in any way interested in. At the top of this board’s listings, in bold letters, were the words “Data Input Situations.” Beneath that the lines scrolled non-stop, pointlessly advertising themselves.

Marla pondered the boards. Where were the loading docks, warehouses, and brothels that Dealy and her shipmates had suggested she seek employment? Why she would even look for such places when there were so many other lucrative careers to choose from she couldn’t guess.

“You handa kiz?” a gruff voice came to her from behind.

Marla, jostled from a passing job hunter, was thrown off guard momentarily. She grappled with her pack as it nearly bounced off her back. A hand attached to a bronzed Popeye arm—forearm larger than biceps and a tattoo of a starship’s landing gear—thrust itself forward to catch her. She looked up into a red face, lined from smiling in the sun. The man held a brimless hat in his hand.

“My na is Chose,” his mouth closed slowly and silently on the last consonant forcing Marla to guess what it was. “P,” she thought. “Or M.”

“Okay,” she answered backing away.

“You nee a ja?” Chosem or Chosep said.

“I’m sorry,” Marla stopped. “What did you say?”

“You-need-a-job?” Chosem(p) repeated, enunciating each word with space between so the newcomer could take a rest during the intervals and save her strength for understanding the question.

“Yes, I think so. Mar...Eppie Jones is my name.”

“You han a kiz?”

“Uh. Do I have a kiss?”

“No. Do-you-han-dul-kids?”

“Oh. Oh. No, I don’t think so. Why do you need a babysitter?”

“My boz is a bi wo’ ma’, she go fie. An she nee a ha.”

“Your boss is a big woman; she’s got five. And she needs a hand. Okay. She can’t get around? She’s going to have another? What does that have to do with needing a babysitter? I’m not trying to be negative or anything, I just don’t get it.”

Chosem/p snickered a little and pulled his hand up to swipe at his lip as if summoning more energy for the task.

“No. She’s a bi wo’ ma’ becau’ she so very, very wealthy.” Emphasis on the last three words. “She nee a ha.”

“Ah. There’s no aunts or uncles around. No father or other kin. The older kids ain’t old enough. She’s wealthy but can’t find anybody. Why? Could it possibly be you need someone just off the boat to offer an apparently lucrative deal to? Someone special because everyone around here is just not talented?”

Chosemp expelled an impatient breath and tilted his head at Marla’s ignorance. “Look!” he said, pointing up to the boards. “Man, man peopa’ wan’ nanniz. But if you don han a kiz, ju say so. I moo aw.”

“Uh, well, I never have actually “han a kiz,” but that doesn’t mean I can’t. I’m fairly adaptable. I’m not a wet nurse of course.” Marla smiled at her own joke. “So whyn’t you explain the particulars and I’ll see what I think. I mean, how hard can it be to be a nanny?”

Chosemp took her backpack from her shoulders and grabbed her arm with his free hand and led her to a waiting contraption that looked like a donkey cart without the donkey.

“Well, I te ya,” Chosemp said. “Fi kiz ca be a ha’ fu.”

“A handful. Five only. Can’t be worse than eight mannekins running around with impaired AI units and bringing coffee every five minutes.”

Chosemp chuckled as if he knew what she was referring to. He hoisted her pack aboard and gestured for her to jump up after it. He then stepped into the cart himself.

Up front, in place of the donkey, stood a ball-shaped device as large as the cart itself. Using the strength of a sailor, Chosemp pulled a rip cord on the top of the globe, which then began turning and the cart lurched forward. To keep the thing going Chosemp had to yank the cord every ten minutes or so, but the contraption was quite efficient and covered quite a bit of ground between yanks.

During the ride, Chosemp detailed the lives of the children Marla would be nannying: their personalities and problems, their ages, their responsibilities, their playtimes. He explained what the missus expected and what type of clothing—all provided—Marla would wear.

Marla found it hard to listen as they traveled. Her surroundings drew her attention away from Chosemp’s briefing. Once beyond the obscuring want ads, a town opened up before her. “Town” is a

generous term in this case. There were buildings of course, but nothing looked sturdy. Cardboard and chicken wire seemed to be the construction materials of choice. Here and there an aluminum frame in the process of being covered by an outer layer of whatever was at hand—plastic tarp, soiled blanket, or a lucky 4 by 8 pegboard—provided a glimpse of infrastructure. The place seemed half-built; even the completed structures appeared merely temporary. Aluminum sided offices on wheels were the most solid, permanent-looking anything. Most buildings stood with a single story. One or two rose to a towering second. The word “transient” came to Marla’s mind.

The smell in the air evolved from a slightly sulfurous tang to a greasy, musky, heavy, industrial, pre-indoor plumbing stench, as if the open sewers were handling waste streams from rubber factories, Jiffy-Lubes, or a local dairy.

To save pedestrians from slipping and sliding into the black clay-like muck of the unfinished streets, wooden sidewalks had been hastily thrown together by rather untalented carpenters. Their thin slats of rotting wood would hardly make it through even a half-assed winter.

Crowding the streets with purpose, people rushed to and from destinations without stopping to gossip or even say hi. They seemed oblivious to the precariousness of the walkways. Marla wondered where they lived because nothing looked homey enough for a home. Before she could ask Chosemp about it, he answered her unasked question, stating she’d find a room for herself on the estate.

“Estate.” Now there was an interesting word. A vision of an ancient stone manor house situated a few miles from town just on the edge of a small wood played in Marla’s mind. It had perhaps a hectare of perfectly manicured lawn for a front yard. She pictured flannel sheets on the beds, vaulted ceilings, a fireplace in every room, and croquet on Sundays. *How wonderful*, she thought.

The “estate” turned out to be a 1/12th acre lot dead center of town. It consisted of a huge bamboo hut with about ten rooms. The one in the back next to the john was hers. With room and board generously provided for, she’d make herself available all day and evening and even during the night if one of the children took sick. Her duties included fixing the children’s meals, assisting them with homework, overseeing their chores, transporting them to play dates and doctors’ appointments, and putting them to bed at night.

“Easy,” Marla said.

She lasted a week before she was fired. She never even had time to get the kids’ names straight. Her problem seemed to be that she related to them as if they were upper management at the Mill. She threw their schedule in their faces constantly. They could never do the right thing, they were always slow. They never understood the consequences of their actions; they made really stupid decisions, and got everything wrong. She considered them lazy and accused them of attaining their position through schmoozing rather than hard work. She insisted their inept behavior prevented her from doing her job. She cursed often, not caring that the older ones actually understood what she said. The end came when she told the missus to bug off after she had the audacity to ask to see the eldest during the homework hour. The missus suggested Marla was being a bit of a tyrant and let her go on the spot. Apparently Marla took the job a little too seriously.

Since Marla had no desire to spend the rest of her life in a room next to the toilet in a house full of people that reminded her of Torpid and Parker, she wasn’t upset at the sack. Chosemp handed her a week’s wages and off she went to explore the world outside the estate, find a place to sleep at night, and eventually get another job. Considering the scarcity of Ansonian labor, she may be the only person in recent history to get fired there. Nobody in Promise ever let anyone go.

Halfway through the next day she accepted an offer to sweep floors in a bakery. Halfway through the following day the boss made a pass at her. She decided her pay was too low to be giving out special favors. The boss couldn't understand how she could resist him. With such irreconcilable differences she quit.

A couple of days later she found a position as an Arranger—the person who organizes deals. Not quite a salesperson, an Arranger coordinates a product from point of sale to point of delivery. Although the title made the job sound glamorous or maybe even dangerous, it was just a paper pushing deal, involving nothing more than filing and scheduling and reminding, and poorly paid at that. If you wanted real money on Ansonia you'd be a salesperson, selling merchandise. Ansonia might have had little in the way of permanence, but it made up for that in merchandise. Merchandise it had by the dozens, and an expert Ansonian salesperson knew all the sinks—who wanted what, and more important, how to get them to buy it even if they said they didn't.

Being the very last planet in the charted sky, Ansonia held a unique position in the inner system. Ships stopped here carrying loads of raw goods from the beyond. Or they flew out to that unknown, bringing goods to explorers, pioneers, and misanthropes who held insane dreams of finding a new place, prospecting it, or simply dying there alone. People on either side of Ansonia always needed things from somewhere else, so the business of the planet dealt mostly with brokering. The ultimate in middleman, the Ansonian salesman spent much of his or her time convincing captains of trade to take on vast amounts of surplus as a venture, assuming some asshole somewhere would want 150 tons of coal tar, crates of out-of-date valium, or a load of fat children's diet books. And in general the pushers were right. Business was brisk; ships landed and took off every hour. And each landing and takeoff meant millions to somebody somewhere.

Marla had no desire for pushing commodities. She'd never been much at buying and selling. Even the shows at the Mill—her whole reason for getting up in the morning—were anticlimactic. The challenge was in the design of the product, not the closing of the deal. So she was content to be an Arranger, merely answering the phone and filling in the blanks to get paid in kind. Someone else would make their million. Sadly the Arrangement didn't last too long either.

For several weeks after that she sampled the work waters, finding and losing gigs at the rate of three a week. Either a job was too boring or low paying, or she was somehow inadequate and got fired. Marla rather enjoyed the process—finding herself in a new place every other day. She soon grew used to the people and their truncated dialect. After a while she didn't even notice it, and conversation was just talk.

One time when she was in between assignments, she explored the town and its surrounding area. It took about a half a day for her to get the gist of the place. It wasn't exactly a tourist destination with a list of must sees to check out. In fact it was rather bleak. Despite the existence of the quarries with their gray-colored sedimentary rock easily cut and strong enough for building materials, the structures of Promise were not built of stone. Like every other valuable commodity touching Ansonia in one way or another, the sandstone was shipped off-site. Lots of needy planets wanted cheap stone buildings and Ansonia supplied the raw materials from her own stores, not even considering them for herself.

The only hint at serious construction on Ansonia was the presence of groups of huge black stones at various locations on the hills surrounding Promise. Apparently once in a while a newly billionaire broker would wake up in a cold sweat, harboring an unshakable desire for a palace, or at least a solid house to sleep in at night. He or she would immediately order a shipment of black marble from off-planet. Basaltia to be specific. Upon arrival, the stone would be trucked from the loading docks to Promise with whatever conveyances could be found on hand; perhaps a hauler with a flat bed in transit to a more

retail-minded planet would be rented for the job. Beautiful even in its natural state, the black marble amazed the inhabitants who stopped for half a second to watch the boulders passing through the muddy and pot-holed lanes of town. The haulers would optimistically off-load their cargo to a safe and relatively flat area of a hill with a sunny exposure that overlooked the town's huts of cardboard and cane. Champagne corks would be popped, grounds dedicated, and ribbons cut. Everyone would be poised to move forward. But then the builder hired for the job would inexplicably drift away for another, better opportunity. No new stone-cutter, foundation pourer, or even handy man could be found to shape the marble into a humble abode. By that time, the broker had lost interest in the project as well. He or she simply had too many hot deals taking priority to find the time to scout a replacement engineer. A number of black marble Stonehenges, endlessly waiting for sunrise and the druids who would worship there to pray for an end to the drizzle, rose from the hills surrounding Promise.

As far as Marla could tell, the black marble stones were it for architectural points of interest here. Ansonians didn't concern themselves with their surroundings. What was going on off-planet was always more important. The need to explore and chart and exploit the outer side took precedence, its sheer vastness ensuring thousands of years of overflights before one could truly say the place was known. So far, very few planets out there had even received so much as a second fly by. Experienced daredevils by the hundreds traveled unknown routes and updated their charts, generally adding to the bank of knowledge of the outer side, but that bank was never more than the top side of an iceberg. Groups of people left for the outer side every day and were never heard from again.

Not that anyone concerned themselves with those tragedies, but sometimes a lucky explorer returned with stories of a planet loaded with untold amounts of a valuable something. Like the historical shout of "Gold!" at Sutter's Fort, the incident would thrill the inhabitants of Promise. If the explorer was a good story teller and brought back enough of a sample to set someone with money to salivating, they'd be set up in a booming business intent on gathering, mining, growing, harvesting, shipping, or selling whatever it was they'd found. They'd be a millionaire within a year.

The stories of these few lucky explorers coming back to shameless wealth fueled the dreams of the working population of Ansonia. It was the thing that every dishwasher and load hauler pinned their hopes on while marking time by endlessly switching jobs. Jobs that were for the most part well paid but hard, because with such a shortage of labor, the work load in any situation increased as time went on. As a particular boss's needs changed, he simply tacked on more responsibilities to a current employee. You may have started as a latrinist, but you're going to wind up filing, babysitting, running errands, and making coffee in addition to digging ditches.

Carpentering, plumbing, engineering? Sure there was a need for that sort of thing, but making money up front was where it was at. As a result Promise built itself up by whatever means it could and with little regard for proven technology or taste. You could just as easily find the front office of a shipping magnate made out of cardboard refrigerator boxes as one carefully laid out with Ansonian sandstone. If you can't find a licensed mason or even somebody that's handled a bag of Quickrete once in their life, you'll get a passing Marla Gershe type to cobble together a structure based on materials at hand.

As a matter of fact Marla did lay bricks at one point—for a bank that needed to evolve beyond wattle and daub to something a bit more solid. Bigger and bigger patrons demanded a façade more in line with that of a secure institution.

Marla liked the bricklaying job. After a quick training lesson, she found the steady pace of slap and set gratifying. Sadly, an actual mason was eventually found amongst the new arrivals swarming around the billboards at the depot. Apparently back on his home planet he'd been in a bar fight and bashed somebody's brains in with a beer stein. He ran to Ansonia to escape punishment and now here he was,

masonry license in hand. The bank was ecstatic, of course, but his presence ensured Marla's demotion. All the bricklayers-in-training of Ansonia First Planetal Bank & Trust were likewise shabbily treated. They became mere apprentices with their pay cut by half. (On a side note: a year later this professional mason had become so wealthy, he'd purchased his own shipping business and hung up his hawk and trowel forever. Too late for Marla, though.)

Despite the fact that she liked the bricklaying work, she felt insulted by the demotion and so quit the job. After weeks now of career changing, she wearied of the process and took stock of herself, deciding that what she disliked about most jobs was not the work but the people. It was a basic fact about her: she simply could not abide others. She remembered shearing sheep with her parents. The drudgery work was okay, but Dad pushed too much. Then at the Mill, weaving was fine, but her factory mates lacked vision and upper management gave out cockeyed mandates. They all usurped her solitude; she was never alone enough.

On the other hand, being Dealy's assistant wasn't so bad; after the first day, she was left alone to fend for herself. Turned out she spent only a few hours a day in the company of others. The work was hard, but solitary. When she thought about it, Dealy's gig was perhaps one of the best she'd ever stumbled onto. Likewise, Ansonia's best jobs were mindless, tedious tasks that took an hour or less to be fully trained on and then after that she'd find herself on her own. Oh for a tedious and lonely job.

It was with this mindset that she stood staring up at the Data Input board. She overheard passersby, ones that stooped to that area of the want ad yard, saying things like "God awful work," or "you could lose your mind doing that sort of thing," as they quickly moved past.

Realizing now that in reality no job was worse than any other, she happily took the number of the highest paid listing (Gough Information Services) on the board. She then set up an interview via the comset button attached to the billboard.

Interviews on Ansonia usually lasted no more than five minutes. Names and contact information (if there was any) were exchanged; hours, location, and pay information given; start date (usually the next day) agreed upon.

Marla's interview went thusly:

"31A North Lane. 8. Speak to Meko, she'll get you started," said the terse voice on the end of the line that presumably belonged to Gough Information Services.

"Fine," Marla answered.

"You claustrophobic?"

"Uh, I don't think so, why?"

"The office is small."

"Oh. I'll be okay."

"Fine."

She rang off and left for the hotel down by the river where she'd been staying since she got sacked from the Missus. It had been a short day. At noon she'd quit the bank job, then ate a leisurely lunch of tea and

salt biscuits, and by midafternoon had secured the new position at Gough's. In her room she lay down for an afternoon nap. Early evening she woke up, ambled to the Bar & Grill across the lane for a bite and bit, and afterwards walked along the edge of the river until the pink-tinged stars came out to pervade the gloom and drizzle of Ansonia's atmosphere.

Their optimism in the face of difficult odds seemed a waste. The temporariness of the place oppressed everything. Nothing solid existed here. All people moved. All buildings fell. All prices and wages were negotiable. No one took absolute charge. Nobody paid taxes. No schools or churches existed. Money was easily made, easily dispersed, but not really spent well. Gambling was everywhere. Shops were small, cheap, and untrustworthy; the stock changed daily. If you saw something you needed, better pick it up on the spot because tomorrow it would be gone.

The people. Scarred and scared, loud and ugly, quiet and slippery. Everyone had a story, but no one spoke it.

Love? Maybe, but who had time or inclination? We're all just passing through. Even the big marble stones on the hills seemed too severe to ever house anything but a dysfunctional group held together by money rather than love. Better those homes were left unbuilt.

But she could be wrong. Her views were maybe just a reflection of her own state of mind. Maybe Ansonia did hold promise after all. Maybe someone could look out for someone else here. Perhaps once a year there was a big parade with lights and giant balloons and musical bands and purposeful drinking to celebrate rather than to forget or ease pain.

The never-ending Ansonia drizzle had incongruously stopped sometime earlier in the day and now a breeze tousled Marla's hair as she stood on the bank, staring up at the optimistic stars. For miles along the river, camper outers cooked suppers before oil drum fires. Their lights flickered cheerily as far down the line as she could see. The smell of fatlinks cooking on sticks filled the air. A laugh went up here and there with shouts of recognition as someone from one group met another a few fires away. She imagined back slapping as old friends were introduced to new ones with a warming mug of rum passed between.

Love? Maybe. But not for the crippled, the lonely and alone, the diseased, the mistaken, the unenlightened, the stiff, and the stupid.

The wind whipped up and carried the laughing and hurrahs and smells away down river. She turned for home and her little one-room room.

In her abode she had a light box, a hot plate for coffee or tea, a chest with broken leather hinges, and a cot for said worker to sleep on. Covers were provided by the tenant. Marla had her favored jet blanket and so far that's all she'd needed.

A spigot on the wall provided water so you wouldn't have to go to the communal bathroom down the hall if you wanted a drink. If you had a covering over the window for modesty, you could also sponge bathe in the small tin-lined basin. Marla's window covering consisted of her only towel so she always showered in the restroom.

The floor of her room was a well worn tiled affair with a pink and green marble pattern. You could see the original brightly colored sections over in the corner where traffic had not marred their original luster. By the bed, however, thousands of dirty feet had eroded both colors of the tile to a dull gray.

A baby room smell—of warm diaper pails and soured milk—hung in the air throughout the building. It

invaded Marla's room and she never got used to it. Even in the mornings, after having breathed it all night, she could still detect the thick odor of flame resistant sleepwear in desperate need of a change.

The walls were thin as rice paper and without having spoken to her neighbors once, she knew all their troubles: the alcoholism of the bald man, the overproduction of the redhead, the anger of the short one, the autism of Mr. Lot, and the sexual dysfunction of the brawny guy and his asymmetric little head. Reluctantly she eavesdropped on their lives, forced into it because of the hall phone. As much as she tried, she couldn't shut out the incessant babble there. Incoming calls were disallowed, but outgoing calls were fine. Her neighbors availed themselves of the amenity often, their echoey conversations long and detailed, and displayed for all to hear.

Marla had no one to call and so never exposed herself the way her sloppy neighbors did. And what's more, she had no intention of ever getting so comfortable here that it became her home and she could share her inner sicknesses with the others. She preferred to nurse herself like a cat behind a couch. She wouldn't be here long; why get friendly?

Marla crawled into bed and slept hard, waking up halfway through the night to close the window. Ansonia had turned cold. She thought about buying curtains for her sad little window, but talked herself out of it. What was wrong with the towel? She snuggled in for warmth but her restlessness kept her from drifting off.

She gazed at the orange moonlight sneaking around the edges of the window towel and falling on the far wall. It fell on a framed photograph of some sort of ancient animal galloping across a beach. With no rider, or even a bridle, the horse appeared to be a wild stallion seeking a pack of mares, but there were no other horses in the picture. One got the feeling the artist should have inserted a horn on the animal's head to complete the idea, but there wasn't one of those either. Just an odd friendless horse in a place suggesting freedom.

She fell off finally and, about an hour or so before morning, dreamt of a discussion with her mother regarding the severe codependency of her father.

"He's just a baby," her mother said. "And he gets worse every year. I don't know what would happen to him if I were gone."

Then her mother dissolved away and Marla hid herself on the edge of a sea of ten-foot-high feather grass. She lay back and watched the sky through the waving seed heads. A small rodent of the semi-domesticated variety crawled onto her outstretched hand. She didn't know if she should fling it away in disgust or gently push it off. The children drew her attention as they came with their guardians from the day school on the other side of the field. They floated by the edge of Marla's hiding place, singing and wearing pinafores over long pastel-colored dresses. With their hair tied neatly back, they looked like flowers in a field of green. She stood up and fell in line to escape with them to the other side past Jean and Joan as they argued about how many Exorcist episodes Bear had written. Joan said all of them. Jean argued only the first two. They became angry with each other and Marla too, because she gave no opinion.

As she turned around the corner a pale-skinned giant with no hair grabbed her and held her down, laughing and seeking out her genitals with his clumsy hand. Her clothing was too loose, though, and he fumbled, giving her time to reach into his pantaloons which were billowy and easily breached. She furtively felt for his scrotal sack and enveloping his entire package—penis and testicles—with her hand, she squeezed with all her might. But his balls were dead, as though made of silly putty. The huge man registered no reaction and continued laughing and fumbling.

Finally she broke free, and jumping up she cursed, “I’m going to fucking kill you!”

The lights came up in the amphitheater and the crowd roared at her indignation. The man laughed more than ever and unbuttoned his fly while pulling on a parachute cord hanging off his shoulder. His penis—a different one, not the gray silly putty one, but one of flesh and blood red, including pulsing veins—shot out three feet in front of him directly towards Marla. The crowd roared again as he threw back his bald head and laughed. He was a giant of a man.

Marla turned her back to him, frantically searching for a weapon. Her friends had gathered there and set up their lawn chairs of the cheap aluminum and plastic laminated variety, more glue than substance. They pleaded with her to get back in the ring and take it more seriously. She could do it, they insisted. She could kill the beast. But when she begged them for their chairs to be used as a weapon, they were reluctant. She pushed them one by one out of the way, grabbing the flimsy seats and projecting them at the giant. Most missed their mark, but the ones that hit bounced off and got the crowd roaring and the giant laughing even more.

He advanced and grabbed her again, pulling the cord and drooling. The crowd faded away and the two of them were locked together in battle on a grassy bank above a lake. The giant’s brother, half his size but just as bald and paleskinned and wearing only a loin cloth, intercepted, saving her. At first Marla thought he had come to join his brother, but instead he thrust paper money at her—a five and three singles—saying “Take it and go.”

“I’m not taking it!” she shouted. “I’ll never let him win!”

“You have to take it or it won’t stop,” the little giant said. “And Mother won’t come and get him.”

Marla repeated, “I’m not taking it.” And the dream faded. She woke up, refusing all bribes.

Despite the too early hour, she rose and showered and then dressed in her worker’s jumpsuit, tucking the chain that held her cabin key from the flight to Walloon inside the inner shirt. She wore the key always, just as she always kept the location of her blanket in her thoughts as if these two items alone could keep her alive under any extreme circumstances.

She continued through her routine slowly but steadily, neither frantic nor overcome with first day dread. Scraping the bottom of the work barrel provided her with a sense of stability. She knew where she’d be by the end of the day. For that reason she’d invest the effort to memorize the faces and places of her coworkers; she would not write off the humanity around her as so much fodder in Marla Gershe’s movie of life. She would define and then become Eppie Jones.

But no office parties. She was drawing the line there. She’d go just so far in this touchy feely game.

At seven she was out the door and on her way to Gough’s Information Services.

The streets around 31A North Lane were busy with early day traffic. Pedestrians jostled her as they hurried to appointed times and places. Their shiny morning faces were resolute as if the day was set and there was nothing to do but carry through. No optimism or pessimism. Just resolution. She wondered if any would be new acquaintances or maybe her boss. Did they know what she knew—that today was no longer temporary? Next year, along with a whole new parade of blank-faced hopeful and at the same time despairing jostlers, Marla would be here.

“Pardon me,” she said as a delivery man with a platter of morning meeting meats whisked past her. As he did so he raised the platter above the crowd like an umbrella in a crowd of umbrellas.

The front of Gough’s had a slightly substantial-looking pale yellow and knobby façade which all buildings on the block seemed to have. The place looked as if a creamed corn factory had exploded there, leaving everything with a covering of undigested mess. Like most neighborhoods in Promise, the area had grown up faster than the inhabitants could acquire discriminating style. It was not pretty by anyone’s standards.

She entered the building and, after her eyes adjusted to the dim light, discerned a crowd of workers like herself. Over to the left was an area demarcated by a pair of lawn chairs. The webbing of one had been ripped out and tied to serve as a cordon between the two. Behind this somewhat penetrable barricade, an oval-shaped woman carrying a clipboard spoke to the people forming a line opposite her. Once in a while, when the noise in the room rose to an intolerable level, she blew a whistle that dangled on a shoestring around her neck, after which silence ensued. For a while, anyway; until chatter slowly rose to a point where she could no longer converse comfortably and had to blow the whistle again.

Most of the individuals on line seemed to be rag pickers by trade. They wore coarse, brightly colored clothing patched together from mismatched bits as if fashioned from the very rags they collected for reprocessing. Rag pickers looked simple, but in reality had a lucrative situation. They were free agents and could sell to whomever they chose. Of course everyone on Ansonia was a free agent to a degree, finding and deserting jobs a week at a time, but the rag pickers were paid on a piecemeal basis—by the ton—and the heavier you were, the more you could haul. And a ton of rags was worth a month’s salary of most other jobs. If you could move a ton a week, your time in Ansonia would be a tenth what everyone else’s was. Rags, more than any other product in the galaxy, were universally respected, needed, and desired. They went for a high price and collecting them was a good job. Still, the rag pickers dressed badly and were not at all in fashion.

A sign on the wall (if you want to call a couple of studs with particle board attached to them a wall) behind the oval woman read “Human Resources.” Another sign just below that stated “If you are a new employee please see the agent for instruction. The agent is the one with the clipboard and the whistle.”

The agent blew her whistle, the milling people in the room quieted. She returned to the next employee on line to gather personal information such as name and how long they intended to work at a particular place. No address, social security number or emergency contact information was extracted, all that being unnecessary. There was no tax system, no relatives to call if a worker fell ill, and certainly no hospital to take her there if she did. Home address or buzz number? Who carried a buzzer? Why would you? You show up for work, you get paid. That’s it. There were too many absentees every day to ever do follow-up. The businesses kept permanent want ads up on the boards; you never knew who would show up for work in the morning. And you certainly didn’t care who it was as long as a pair of hands, a strong back, and half a brain showed up as well. Recruitment was the busiest office every morning.

The rag pickers on line weren’t actually being recruited. They were simply there to be assigned dock locations. The transaction with the whistle woman—the recruiter—required the merest exchange of information. After completing their transaction with her, they left immediately to drop their load at the assigned paymaster’s station. Each paymaster had a set of scales and a sack of cash—large bills mostly—and were flanked by five or so large men with clubs. Marla had seen the activity at the loading docks—those crudely poured cement pads at the edge of town by the billboards. Once paid for, the loads were conveyed on belts to a tented warehouse where the piles were assigned a lot and traded off and on during the day. In the evening, after the bell sounded, movers came to transport the loads to the off planet space port under the directive of the final winning trader. Every day fortunes were made and lost over such piles. Marla had once worked as a compiler at the exchange for a couple of weeks.

For her company's part in each transaction, the recruiter with the clipboard registered a 10% brokerage fee of the final sale. Do that five to ten times an hour and this business skimmed enough off the top of the trade to pay the salary of this oval woman, the CEO's large family, the paymaster, his goons, and the entire staff of various startups that hadn't made any money yet but were part of Gough's business. What exactly that business was, Marla could not tell. It seemed to be a front office for other businesses, and which little company her employer would turn out to be didn't really matter to Marla—Eppie Jones—who just now got to the front of the line.

"Yeah?" the oval woman said. She had small diamond-shaped eyes with no whites, just brown quadrangles demanding information.

"Eppie Jones," Marla answered, trying to avert her eyes but finding herself unable to do anything but stare at the woman's face.

"And what kind of position is a eppiejonz?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, that's my name. Eppie Jones."

"Yeah, well, I don't care who you are. I need to know what you are."

She said it loudly for all to hear and laugh at her supreme sense of humor. Nobody appreciated it, though. "So what are ya?"

"Uh, data input, I guess."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, you would be. You're working for the Library. Back wall and up the ladder, report to Meko."

Marla turned to where the woman bobbed her head. "Thanks," she said.

"Yeah," the oval-shaped woman with the diamond eyes answered, and then she turned to the next person on line. "Yeah?"

Marla had not noticed the sign stating "Library" when she first stepped into the building. And no wonder, it stood on the back wall and was quite small: a mere half a meter in length and a quarter meter in height. It contained a hand with a pointing finger, tilted at a 45° angle and suggesting the Library was located somewhere above.

The wall holding the sign served as the backbone of the entire row of businesses along this corridor. Nothing else but its purpose as the spine of the block could explain the extravagance that had gone into this wall. It was a solid piece of construction made of mortar and cinder block.

The stairs to which the hand pointed consisted of a cast iron ladder attached to the side wall which itself was almost as solid as the back wall. Being perfectly parallel to the wall, the ladder stood straight up and down. If you questioned your ability to climb it at all, you would never get the nerve up. You simply had to dive in, no questions asked. As it was, once Marla stepped onto the bottom rung she had the unnerving feeling that the ladder was actually tilting backwards. It wasn't, but it felt like it was—a perceptual illusion. Nevertheless, she had trouble believing this was the method of getting to a Library. But then, nothing in Ansonia was logical or even thought out well.

“Hey, data girl. Wanna step lively? We’ll all be late if you don’t get a move on.” Marla looked down to where an impatient face looked up at her. Behind the face, a file of women and girls, hands on hips, appeared anxious to climb up to the next level.

“I’m looking for the Library?” Marla asked more than explained.

The woman had flaming red hair and matching lipstick. She was thin but obviously good looking. Not angry, she seemed more amused and willing to tease Marla than reprimand her. “Well you ain’t gonna find it down here. Hop up, Girlie, we’re all going there.”

“Oh, okay. Sorry,” Marla climbed up and stepped onto the platform at the top, moving out of the way to let the red-haired woman and the others pass. It was a strange procession of tall, short, wide, multicolored, oddly dressed individuals that smiled or nodded at Marla and then moved beyond to a passageway around the corner from where she stood. She followed behind the last one, a large woman, more circular than angular with a loose and flowing overwrap, somewhat like a long dashiki or nun’s habit only more comfortable. It was clay colored and so long and light that as the fat woman walked she seemed to float rather than perambulate.

Around the corner the group led her down a dimly lit hallway lined with wide slots holding sheets of plastic film. Each slot was labeled by some unknown identifier: last name, planet, job, goods, or penitentiary served, for all Marla knew. In short there was no clue as to what this firm, this Library, did.

The dark hallway emptied through a doorway with a short five-and-a-half-foot frame. Everyone ducked as they entered the next room.

“Tell Data Girl that this is the break room,” the red-haired one at the head of the line called back.

Each woman in turn hollered, “Break room, Data Girl,” loud enough for all—especially Marla—to hear. “Break room, Data Girl!” “Break room, Data Girl!”

When it was the last woman’s turn, she stopped and respectfully turned to Marla. “We take our breaks and our lunch here.” She then moved forward to catch up to the others.

“Thanks,” Marla said to her back.

“Data Girl got a sense of humor?” someone called.

Someone else answered. “She had better.” The group laughed.

They passed through the break room, so named because everything in it was fractured, faded, or in some way broken. The mismatching vinyl seats were cracked, disgorging their orange foam stuffings like whales slit from stem to stern. The table in the middle, designed to handle dinner for twelve, had a huge hole in the far end and was now good for only nine. It was missing an end leg and propped up by a duct taped broom handle which itself had lost its brush end. The light fixture above the table held four bulbs, two of which had been blistered and now leaked raw laser light so you couldn’t look at them full on.

Everywhere underfoot, the linoleum had a crusty stubble embedded in it, creating a grating sound under the boot. The refrigerator had no handle, and thousands of grimy hands prying it open had left years of a newsprint-like stain at the front edge. A wall basketball setup had a wad of paper stuck in its net which itself clung to the hoop by only half its loops, the others hanging free. The can below was tipped on its side and yesterday’s lunch remains spilled out like a cornucopia of garbage.

A door leading off to a restroom had a small, perfectly round hole where the knob presumably had once been attached. Amazingly all three sets of its hinges remained intact. The uneven floor wedged against its bottom edge forced it to remain stuck half open. The sink beyond was rusted through and a red stain dribbled down the wall all the way to a floor drain clogged with varmint hair.

The room smelled like rotten eggs and boiled cabbage.

“Lovely,” Marla muttered, and the woman in front of her snorted.

The group trailed over a calf-high retaining wall into the next room—the change room, a more civilized affair. The benches had all their legs. Lockers along the wall were closed tightly with none swinging on broken hinges or clasps.

Each team member took up a position in front of a locker and pressed the open button after which a rack emerged with full paper white suit and matching gloves. They then proceeded to exchange street clothes for the hanging whites.

Marla wondered what to do.

“I’m supposed to report to Meko,” she said looking from one to the other, hoping Meko was one of them.

“And so you have,” said a large, very dark, wiry haired woman at the far locker. She wore perfectly round horn-rimmed glasses, a cotton plaid jumper dress in a rust/forest/sunset color scheme, and a wooden leg. “Just pick any locker and have at it.” She then turned to the woman next to her and indicated she needed help with her back zipper.

“Have at what, exactly?” Marla asked. “I don’t really know what I’m doing.”

The women let out a collective “Hmph!”

“You don’t need to,” said a little pixie haired someone, donning the paper whites over a complete body understocking. “It’s not rocket science.”

“Or cooking 101,” added another down the line.

“Or having a baby.”

“Or tying your frickin’ shoes.”

They all laughed.

“Just pick a locker, get sterile, and follow us. There’s instructions inside,” the wiry-haired woman, Meko, said.

“What will I be doing?” Marla asked.

“You’ll be doing data, girl,” the extremely red-haired one said.

“Yeah Data Girl. You’ll be doing data,” another unknown added.

“And what exactly is doing data?” Marla asked.

Again they all laughed.

Meko, now fully dressed and pulling her hood over her crinkly hair, said, “You’ll see. Just pick a locker, change your clothes, and follow us inside. It doesn’t hurt, I promise you that.”

“But I don’t get it,” Marla insisted.

For a moment they all stopped dressing. In unison they turned to her and hollered: “Pick-a-lock-er!”

She acquiesced. Choosing the cabinet directly in front of her, she proceeded to pull off her jumpsuit in exchange for the set of paper whites. Dark glasses hung from a button above the left breast pocket, jauntily added by the stylist to prove he or she was not 100% square. The pathetic attempt had Marla missing the Mill’s third shift and their sense of humor. At least a suit made out of fishhooks was good for a laugh.

The lockers slammed shut simultaneously and the workers waited for Marla to finish her dressing before parading through yet another doorway into the next room.

If the break room was totally broken, this room was totally fixed. Sterile in fact. And white. The walls were painted in a high-gloss white enamel showing nary a finger smudge or foot scuff. The input pads at each of the many work stations gleamed with a disposable covering, the night sanitizers having replaced yesterday’s used items sometime before the technicians came in. The air vents were dust-free, the lights sparkled without a single flicker, the stainless steel input screens gleamed. The air had a slight sick-sweet odor of disinfectant, but was a perfect 21° as registered by the thermometer next to the wall clock which read 8:15 next to the hygrometer which read 20%. All three consisted of big 12-inch dials with oversized red letters, implying important information there.

“Pick a station and consider it yours until you leave,” the woman named Meko said, moving with a slow step-and-pick-the-other-leg-up limp to the station at the head of the room. She carried a cane and hooked it over the back of her chair before easing herself down.

The remaining seven workers moved to their own stations, leaving five vacancies, all exactly the same in look and none exhibiting an obvious advantage over any other. Marla picked the one on the left nearest the door. As soon as she sat in the seat, the walls—shellacked and with a beveled pane of leaded glass in the center of each one—emerged from the floor and moved to the ceiling, encasing her in a small booth, private and claustrophobic.

Marla jumped at the movement and watched the walls of her coworkers’ booths likewise all emerging from the floor and traveling to the ceiling. Alarmed, she searched for a knob or a window latch. There were none; she was trapped.

Meko’s voice, somewhat garbled and thick, as if she was speaking underwater, came to Marla’s booth from somewhere. “Relax, Data Girl. You’ll get instructions in a minute.”

Marla looked towards Meko’s booth, but it was out of her eye range, around a corner or beyond the red-haired worker’s booth.

Meko spoke again. “There’s a panic button, but you won’t find out where it is until you’ve calmed

down. Don't knock on the glass or the release mechanism will never work. Once you sit back down, and relax into it, your instructions will begin."

Marla looked around the room; no one paid attention to her. They were all facing their screens and presumably starting the day. This was all normal to them. They weren't even interested in watching her panic.

"Please be seated number eleven," a recorded voice, clearer and more audible than Meko's, said. "If this is your first day at the Library, please select 1 on your input pad. Otherwise select 2."

With a clammy uneasiness, she sat down and looked the screen and pad over, trying to keep calm and listen to instructions without rushing ahead to the bit about the panic release. Two buttons at the top of the pad and not part of the QWERTY section stood apart. The "1" was an old-fashioned raised button, green in color. The "2", in red, was also raised but, unlike the green, it had been rubbed raw from thousands of trained inputters selecting it and was now barely readable. She paused, wondering if there might be a trick involved. She was supposed to pick "1" but everyone else had obviously picked "2". There was not much else in the room, but she was quite sure anything could pop up from anywhere. She pushed "1."

A training presentation showed up on her screen. The five-minute piece explained the intricacies of data input work, where the hard data was coming from (a pneumatic in-box just underneath the screen unit would be replenished with sheets carrying data throughout the work day), and how to find the digital files in which to put the data from the sheets. For her first hour, she would be working with test files only. If she passed, she'd be given seven hours of real work. At the end of the day, she would receive a printed receipt for the hours worked to be taken to the paymaster and redeemed for cash.

Breaks were at ten thirty and 1400; lunch at noon. The panels of her booth would lower automatically for those breaks. In case of fire, flood, tornado, or riot, she could press the panic button located in the center of the daisy picture hanging on the back wall. The panic button would work only once a day. If more than one emergency a day happened, she would not be able to leave for the second one. Workers were advised to not come to work on days they had a bladder infection. If the worker was not prepared to wait until break time to relieve herself, she could hit the panic button now, but there would be no more panic hits for the rest of the day, so be advised and act accordingly. Word to the wise: if you can't hold it, go home.

Having quieted to a degree, Marla chose to not use up her panic button and vowed to make it until break time. The test data sheets arrived clear and crisp in the pneumatic in-box just as the training session had said they would. She followed their simple instruction to "Push the #2 button" to call up the correct digital program for the inputting of numbers from the pages. Upon pushing the #2 button, the screen brightened into a table of infinite length and comprised words and blank spaces thusly:

Order No. __ Vendor __ Wt __ vol __ paid __ sold __

The papers in front of her contained the numbers with which she should fill in the blanks. She dutifully did the test files and after an hour, the box bestowed a passing mark on her efforts. After that, actual manifests—crinkly, dirty, and barely legible—pneumatically entered her in-box, and she was on the payroll. The orders had been hand written in the field—the offices, loading docks, hauler cockpits, and back rooms of Ansonia—by the workers of Ansonia. Half were illiterate and the other half irresponsible, so the sheets were difficult to read. Unable to decipher some of the text, she did her best and guessed the rest.

Upon completing the first page she placed the paper in the out-box, triggering a monotone voice that stated: "Please dispose of your gloves in the cinerator opening in the floor and retrieve a new pair from the glove box on the right wall." She followed these instructions and retrieved the next manifest. Each time she placed a completed sheet in the out-box, the glove disposal instructions repeated. Judging from the promiscuous use of brand new gloves, Marla assumed Gough Information ran a very sanitary service. Apart from the break room, of course.

When the clock on the wall read precisely 10:30 I123, the walls of her booth retracted automatically into the floor. She stood and stretched and watched as her workmates did the same. They all headed for the break room for a ciggy and a pee. No coffee, though.

She hung back and watched to see what the others did, following behind as they filed out of the room through the passageway and into the locker room. They doffed their paper whites and put on robes that had been hung next to their lockers by an unseen hand. The used paperwhites were dumped into the wall cinerator. Marla had no doubt that she'd find a new set of sterile work clothes hanging in her locker once break was over.

As everyone moved into the break room, somebody called out "Data Girl, have a seat." No one else had as yet sat down. Marla looked to where the voice came from and a woman with chestnut colored hair was pointing at her with a cigarette held between two fingers. She indicated the chair at the head of the table. Everyone stopped shuffling in and watched as Marla moved to the indicated seat and sat down opposite the pointing woman, who then said, "You don't mind if we call you that, do you?"

"Considering we don't know who you are and what your name is," said the red-haired woman as she sat down. The others laughed and took seats around the table as well.

Marla nodded. "You can call me that or Eppie."

"Eppie, huh?"

"Yes. Eppie Jones."

"Uh huh. Not too original, but if that's what you want, it'll work. Course we like Data Girl better. Makes you sound like a super hero. You're not a SuperGirl are you, Data Girl?"

"I don't think so," Marla answered.

"Knock it off and introduce yourself, kids." Meko spoke as she eased down onto a broken sofa backed up against the wall. A puff of dust rose up when her ass made contact. Once comfortable, she opened a prepackaged juice cooler, inserted a paper straw, and sipped it throughout the break.

Marla looked to her first.

"I'm Meko, forewoman here," Meko said. "That means I referee. You got any questions about how things work or if you got a problem, are sick or shot to hell, tell me. Next." She took a swig through the straw and eyed the next woman for introductions.

Each of the eight women introduced themselves by giving a brief description of their personal history, why they were on Ansonia, and anything else that seemed appropriate.

Marla remembered two names and the faces that went with them: Meko and Janto. The others remained

for the time being a mere homogeneous mass of coworker flesh. Over the months, however, she would learn more about each one than their initial cheap introductions during this light morning of her first day at work.

Meko, who refused a last name, had long flowing hair—wiry and black. She was a large, not fat, woman with a mole the size of a lentil—a beauty mark some would call it—on her upper lip, giving her the look of a fierce spoiled child. She could win any argument with that mole and that size and always did.

She was born with only one leg.

On one side of her face she had an almost imperceptible scar running from her eye to her lip.

She often came to work with alcohol on her breath, but it never impaired her work. She consistently inputted twice as much as her closest rival. And in impeccable form, without a single mispunch. She was very, very good and she was the head of the group.

When asked how she came to be so clever with numbers, she would often answer, “Diet.”

“Diet?” the inquirer would ask.

“Yes,” Meko would answer. “I stick to a strict regimen of pills, booze, and reefer.”

The head was a head.

Years later Marla learned that Gough was Meko’s last name.

Janto was the brilliantly red-headed one. Shorter than everyone else and indeed shorter than almost everyone everywhere, Janto made up for her lack of stature by being quick-witted, loud-mouthed, and an uncouthly flashy dresser. Tin-foil, bangles, sparkles, flammables, mylar, plastique, scrunchette, and material requiring batteries made up Janto’s dress, even her pjs. As she moved about in any setting, her signature Eau de Partay wafted along with her, and long after she left any place the scent remained behind to remind the other, plainer occupants just who it was that had been there.

In a room full of shakers, Janto held the biggest court. Not only did she have a great repertoire of personal one-liners (Anybody got a match, besides me and Mr. Wealth over there in the corner?), she knew everybody else’s and gave away the punch lines. You couldn’t help but love Janto even when she annoyed the hell out of you.

As efficient and strong as Meko was, Janto was deficient and behind. Even with no one in her booth with her, Janto kept an out loud running commentary on everything around her, and it interfered with her concentration, slowing her down. She viewed each and every manifest in her in-box as new material for conversation and explored the contents meticulously. Unfortunately data input does not require meticulous exploration. It requires the steady, non-judgmental work of the type found in bee colonies. No questions; just pack the honey. Constantly reprimanded for her failure to meet the hourly rate, she was the poorest paid inputter in the room. Management kept her on because she was so damn entertaining with her long, red, ironed flat as a pancake hair. Everyone loved her. She was an entertainer.

Almost as entertaining as Janto but in a different, more intellectual way, were Squee and Pit. Alike physically, as maternal twins are, they were tall and lanky with bobbed chestnut hair and shiny bronze skin. Their claim to fame was their love of discourse and argument. It was due to their propensity to

disagree at the slightest provocation that Marla was teased out of her lonely self-hood for short periods. She had to fight to keep to a strict diet of solitude. Squee and Pit easily reminded her of the clichéd advice dragged out whenever someone is hopelessly disenchanted, angry, or suicidal: take a look at the events on the world's stage; you'll find something worse than your own pitiful self to sneer at. In other words: "It takes a big dog to weigh a ton and you're just a puppy."

Squee was liberal; Pit conservative. Of course on Ansonia the definitions of those two words are totally different than they are in tamer worlds. So different, in fact, that one never knew which of the two was the capitalist and which the socialist, which the free-wheeler and which the free-lover, which the libertarian and which the communist. No one knew where they stood on the capitals: gains, punishments, ideas, or letters. Which was more likely to have a live-in alien or which would stick to the old high school sweetheart. Which had tasted the fruits of the green planet and which chose the traditional Planet Med for vacationing. It didn't matter, for in reality the two were interchangeable and in fact changed their own personal beliefs about as often as you or I might change our sheets. Each one took whatever side her sister was not on and argued so vehemently one would think it really meant something. They'd take an opposite opinion just as easily as not. If Sis One opened with up, Sis Two answered with down.

They could carry an argument to its logical conclusion or leave it lying in the sun to stink up the place. It didn't matter, it was the contest itself that meant something. To better one's opponent on a point, using all knowledge at hand—or common sense, or hits below the belt—was the point of the play. Gentle, dirty, elegant, or low-down, it did not matter; the battle was what was important.

Lilya was a lover, as well she should be. Young and lithe, she had an athlete's self-awareness; she knew she was beautiful. And strictly heterosexual. She loved men. Being quite young, she had as yet not had any serious relationship of an intense enough nature to temper her vigorous tendencies. She'd broken hearts of course; she wasn't that green. And with curly brown hair, perfectly shaped frame, and acutely sweet laugh—a tinkling sort of titter actually, called upon at just the right moments to tease—she could not help but lure hearts in due course. With each passing love, she grew older but no wiser, retaining an unrepentant optimism when considering the brawnier sex. A male could do no wrong in her opinion and only sworn attached ones escaped her dreams of suitability.

She fell in and out of love as fast as she changed favorite shoes, which she did often—daily in fact. Her politics, leanings, deep inner thoughts all revolved around the single-minded search for the perfect man. She was a mere forty-two years of age and had so much to learn.

Too Kay on the other hand had found and displaced her man ages ago. A proud mother of four, she lived for and through her children. Exactly the same age as Lilya, the two could not be more different. Where Lilya was ebony of skin, Too Kay was ivory. Lilya was tall and athletic, Too Kay short and a bit flaccid. Lilya primped her perfectly coiffed frame and buffed her clothes thrice daily; Too Kay ran a brush through her hair in the morning, but often forgot her teeth and shoes altogether.

The difference was not merely on the physical level, though: while Lilya could never find someone man enough for all her love and often wound up empty handed, Too Kay had the product of her love's escapades. Lilya had no desire for children; she wanted a man. Too Kay, on the other hand, hated men. Was it abandonment, gambling debt, or a drinking problem? Had he beaten her or was he simply a man's man: boorish, loud, and selfish?

Once you got to know Too Kay and witnessed the energy she put into her kids' lives, you could easily make the assumption that one day her husband or partner merely floated away on a cloud of indifference. He no doubt moved on to a richer experience. In other words, he found someone to love him. Too Kay probably never even noticed and to this day cannot remember his name.

Her children's names, however, are written indelibly on her sleeve where she wears her motherhood. Everyone else in the Library knew their names as well, having heard them two to ten times daily since Too Kay first started when, before she even introduced herself, she was discussing Bibi's sinus trouble, Davie's first grade attendance record, Simmy's failure to receive an acceptable mark for naptime activity, and dear little Fred's snot-nosed nightmares of the previous day, week, month and year.

What group of people would be complete without "The Doc"—the intellectual know it all? The Doc at the Library was chubby, probably because she sat and thought a lot during her time away from the job. Combining that lifestyle with a day gig that required her to sit and jabber (slang for inputting symbols using a keyboard) all day gave her little chance to exercise down to a slim physique for which she had no use. She'd never been good at basketball during her school days, and now she'd grown into a thinker and a tinkerer. During her time at the Library, she'd written scads of scripts to save time and effort in the data inputting realm. For her extracurricular work she'd received bonuses and raises galore, and was the highest paid member of the staff besides the lightning fast Meko.

Still one wonders what a talented person of The Doc's nature was doing in the tedious keypunching industry. Oddly, though, it was her tinkering nature that landed her in the Library: she'd been fired from every other job even as she invented labor saving devices for the work there. Her former bosses never fully appreciated her contributions. The problem was most jobs require nothing more than a simple warm body moving some object from point A to point B. If one needs to move more objects, one hires more warm bodies. But with a shortage of workers, The Doc reasoned, why not invent some labor saving device that enables one warm body to do the work of two? And that thinking was welcomed. But to come up with her devices and methods took much of her time and the bosses could see her sitting and thinking, or levering, or mixing, or cranking, but they couldn't see the pile at point A moving to point B. Her inventiveness was not efficient or fast enough. They'd put up with her inscrutable theories of a thingamagig to be constructed with the simple things lying about: excess cardboard, mud, not quite hardened epoxy. They'd even let her put together a little model with working conveyor belt. But after a few days of pile at point A sitting at point A gathering dust, promoting rust, or stinking of must, they'd insist she move on to Point B or get fired by tomorrow. The overly confident Doc knew she'd have that crane working by nightfall and in the morning the pile would be sitting at point B. But as anyone who has ever invented anything knows, it never works right the first, second, or tenth time. Morning would come and there her pile would be at point A. She'd be sleeping in the corner and when she awoke a pink piece of paper would be lying on her chest. Everywhere she went a wake of prototypes, failed experiments, and incomplete beta tests followed close behind.

Data input, as mindless as it is, affords one with the superior mental abilities of The Doc to dream and scheme to her heart's content. And being locked up in a box, The Doc could not wander away so easily from the matter at hand to devise little pulleys, gear boxes, crank cases, lubricants, asphyxiates, mops, solvents, levers, sorters, cranes, earth movers, soluble dyes, counters, or biological time clocks. At the Library, all The Doc's ideas centered around the processing of numbers and words. Improvements to human-computer interfaces were always welcome. She came into her own in the digital world. She dug it there, inventing the roll-up cubicle walls as well as the pneumatic in- and out-boxes. Almost the entire process was devised by The Doc and even if you or I were convinced it had been refined to its utmost, The Doc was still tweaking away at it every minute of every day.

And finally Tiny, so named because she was a large mound shaped woman with no discernable breasts, hips, or stomach. She had a head, two arms, and two legs attached to a mysterious and possibly never seen by human eyes barrel of a trunk. She was large and thus named Tiny.

Tiny was beloved by all who knew her, especially her compadres at work, because she was an

unassuming, non-judgmental person. Spiritually enlightened, without a bad word for anybody, she never gossiped, never told racist jokes, never preached. She was intelligent without letting on. She gave everyone the benefit of the doubt without being boring. Apolitical, her arguments rarely consisted of more than one sentence—usually a concise statement so inarguable it ended a fight in its tracks. She loved children but not more than men and men but not more than children. And not enough to have either of her own.

She made a great Noddina dip, bringing her specialty to every work potluck. This was the most lovable feature about Tiny, for who doesn't love a Noddina dip at the year-end office party where the bosses get drunk, flirt with the girls, and go home without their underwear? The following workday the Noddina dip is usually the only thing anyone dares mention if they speak at all.

So Marla met the eight characters who would provide her the tools to move into the final chapters of her destiny. Not so much for what they brought to the table, but the fact that there was a table. And a sofa. In the room where Marla found them. At this moment in the narrative, she needed desperately to push beyond the limbo of her workaday life on Ansonia and accumulate a set of ideas. Or a method for finding those ideas. She needed a sense of humor, a personal definition of right and wrong, love, responsibility, inventiveness, and a spirit—none of which she possessed up to now. Or maybe she simply didn't give herself credit for having these things, and what's the difference there?

"And you're Eppie Jones, Data Girl." Meko finished the introductions and pushed herself up from the couch, indicating an end to the break. She tossed her drink in the corner to the upturned can and brushed a layer of grime from the sofa off her hands to the floor before grabbing her cane. She looked up to Marla, "Any questions?"

The workers stood and started heading for the door. Marla let them pass by as she waited for Meko. "Uh, yes, actually," she said. "What exactly do we do here?"

The entire herd stopped and turned in mid-stride.

"Input data, Stupid," the red-haired one, Janto, said.

"Hey, no name calling, please," Meko said. She turned to Marla. "Look, none of us knows specifically what we're doing. We're just inputting numbers and following directions."

"But what are the numbers for?"

"Different things, different things. Orders, manifests, surveys, books, quantities moved, quantities sold, money lost, companies created, experimental results, data of every type. Different things. For instance you're working on orders for the Boomba fireworks factory. Squee is tallying the results of the gambling returns over on Stunky Downs. Tiny's running a bunch of reorganizational models for the employees of Lorna's Goons over on Shato Eel. It's an employee owned business and they want to see how much money could be saved if some of the job functions are consolidated. You know, the bone crusher does his own talking, cuts out the smart aleck. One lieutenant gossips with the capo as he's stirring his brioschi, cuts out the second lieutenant. One flunky takes the rap for two murders at a time. That sort of thing."

"Uh huh."

"Uh huh, let's go." Meko pushed past Marla and grabbed her by the elbow to lead her into the change room where each worker was retrieving booties, changing into new whites, and moving back into the input room where the panels rolled up again.

At noon the panels rolled down and the workers retreated to the break room for lunch. Marla put on her street clothes and climbed down the ladder to find a salad vendor somewhere. She located a local krat stand and purchased two. When she returned to the breakroom, it was alive with discussion.

“It has been shown that all systems of social structure eventually evolve to a feudal state,” one of the tall ones—the twins—said. “Regardless of where a culture starts, theocracy, agnocracy, democracy, populocracy, communocracy, agrocracy, fascocracy, or anocracy, they all wind up as aristocracy.”

“I don’t know where they all wind up, but they certainly all start in the same place,” said the one with glasses.

“Yeah, and where’s that?” the first one, the twin, asked.

“In the trees, as a group fighting off the enemy together.”

“With one leader, and the beginnings of the nobility sidling up to that leader for favors or the best available piece of you know what.”

“Orange slices?”

The group laughed.

“Not all tribes with one leader wind up like that,” the fat woman joined the argument. “For instance, over on jojares, there’s a group whose chieftain owns no property and so has nothing to give as a favor. Her clothes, ceremonial gear, scepter, power ring, and even her yacap belong to the tribe and when...”

“Those are primitives,” the twin said.

“We were all primitives once. And you said that no matter where we start...” the one in glasses said.

“‘Primitive’ is not very useful as a descriptive,” said the other twin. “Some very highly evolved cultures...”

“I know all that, but what I meant was that they haven’t gotten to the feudal state yet,” the first twin said.

“The Jojare culture hasn’t changed for a thousand ...” the fat one tried to say.

“Ladies,” Meko interrupted the conversation as Marla sat down. “You’re giving Data Girl the impression that we’re an inharmonious bunch, and we are harmonious, are we not?”

“Sure, but we’re not always in the same key,” Janto, the red-haired one, blurted.

Everyone laughed again. Marla looked at her and remarked to herself how striking she was. Even in her break robe, she seemed much more attentive to her personal appearance than did the others.

Marla ate her krats, dripping pepper custard onto the table. At one point she got up to wipe up the mess, although she had no idea why as the room hadn’t been properly cleaned in a month. When she wiped her place with a towellette, the space underneath was a different color than the rest of the table.

The others took no notice of her actions and did not follow suit when they dropped their sauces and

sandwich bits on the table.

The argument over whether all cultures eventually devolve to the feudal state was never resumed. What they discussed in its place, Marla had no idea. She spent the time studying her workmates, trying to memorize faces and assign names like she was a freshman on the first night of college. It was important to learn who each one was because she was sure she'd be seeing these people for quite some time. And Marla was not quitting this job. Not this time, dammit. Something about the way they teased her, calling her Data Girl on her first day, made her relax. They seemed innocuous. So friendly and fun-loving. There was no fretting here, only jollity and gentle kidding. Who could take these people seriously? This was a simple place and the people were simple, not conniving, not plotting. Not evil and murderous. Iovvna and the dark man and the ruinous Textile Planet felt very far away.

Maybe it was the detritus lying about, giving the place a casual air. Nobody would voluntarily breach the Library ladder to such a dive. And yet, every day eight people did just that to sit and share the world and ideas and yesterday's lunch leavings, as if this was the Algonquin and they were leading the literary world.

The sofa in the corner was surely a catalyst. Any broken down room with a dusty old couch housing rodents, pill bugs, and sprung springs that leaves a pattern of dust on your butt when you get up, is far more comfortable than a modern suburban living room whose threshold has never been breached by food crumbs. The street curb couch soothes in a mysterious way that no thousand dollar divan can ever hope to.

On the other hand, perhaps it was all that wood on the floor of the data room, and the walls, and the panels of the cubicles. Nowhere else on Ansonia had Marla seen such solid texture. The shell of the building was no sturdier than the cardboard and tinfoil everywhere else, but inside, the Library would stand here a long time after Marla, Meko, The Doc, Squee, Pit, Lilya, Janto, Too Kay, and Tiny were gone. Between the reassurance of the data room and the warmth of the break room, Marla couldn't help but feel secure.

"Hey!" she shouted, interrupting the conversation at the table. She looked up at the others who had suddenly silenced. "I remember everyone's name."

No one spoke until finally Squee (or Pit) said, "We were talking about land ownership being the root of it all."

"I'm sorry," Marla said, smiling sheepishly. "I was just trying to remember you all."

"That's nice, Eppie," Tiny said. She nodded. "Real nice."

"It's Data Girl," Janto said. "Her name's probably not Eppie anyway."

"Doesn't matter," Meko said. "Lunch is over. Back to the grind." And with that everyone groaned, tossed their meal remains in the cinerator or the pile in the corner, changed into paperwhites, and returned to their cubicles.

And so went Marla's introduction to the fascinating world of data input. The group shared an afternoon break and at 1700 exactly—quitting time—shuffled to the lockers, changed back into street clothes, and retreated down the ladder.

Meko followed Marla out.

“So how did you do?” Meko asked.

“Okay, I guess,” Marla answered. “I passed the test and went from there.”

“Good. Do you think you’ll like it?”

“Like it? It doesn’t seem to be the type of work one likes or dislikes. I’ll stick with it if that’s what you mean.”

“It doesn’t really matter to me one way or another. I’m just making conversation. Anyway, you got your receipt, right?”

“That slip that printed out of the table?”

“Yes. Make sure you get that everyday.”

“Yeah, I read the instructions. I just need to find the paymaster now.”

“Just follow everybody else. We’re all going to the same place.”

In spite of Meko’s insistence on impartiality, Marla felt a sort of mothering in her actions. Like Meko hoped Marla’d stick this one out and get her life together for a change. Sad, really; how could Marla support a friendship? Besides her new-found resolve, she’d deserted Saddle, murdered Charney, and accepted gifts from enemies. She was untrustworthy, shameful, and in turn felt the same way about the world and its inhabitants.

Meko descended the ladder first, using a unique click and stick rhythm to nimbly lower herself using mostly her arms since she only had the one leg. Once she’d landed on the floor, Marla descended and the two crossed the floor together to the ticket booth at the opposite end. An old man wearing a visor on his head and sleeve garters on his biceps dispensed cash at the window in exchange for the women’s receipts. Meko and Marla joined the end of the line. Meko turned to Marla as they waited.

“So where are you from, exactly?” she asked.

“The Textile Planet.”

“Ah, far, far away.”

“And you?”

“Buxton.”

Marla stared at Meko.

“Next,” the paymaster called. Meko turned and handed him her receipt. Marla said, “Really?”

As Meko retreated from the booth, cash in hand, Marla stepped up with her receipt. Still flustered over Meko’s answer, she forgot to count her cash and rushed off to catch up to her exiting boss. (Later that evening when she was in her room and counted up her money, she was astonished at the amount.)

“And what is Buxton like?” Marla called after Meko.

Meko stopped and turned. “It’s clean, safe. Everyone is quite healthy and very well off. The air is breathable, the people charming and tactful. Education is free. It’s a little crowded but food is in abundance.”

Marla at her side now said, “Sounds perfect. Why’d you leave?”

“Well, I said the food was in abundance; I didn’t say it was great.”

“Ah.” She pondered the inscrutable answer as they walked out of the building.

Meko hailed a passing donkey cart. “Catch a lift?” she said.

“No, I, uh...” Marla hesitated. “Walk. It’s not far from here.”

“Suit yourself. Will you be in tomorrow?”

“Why not?” Marla called. It felt strange that such a highly structured job situation like the one in the Library operated on the same day-by-day principle as the rest of Ansonia where no one knew who was on board that day until the morning bell rang. But it was Ansonia after all, and nothing here came as a surprise.

Marla trudged home pondering the oddball group she’d fallen in with. As she heated a can of Luxa® on her hot plate, she counted up the roll of money comprising her day’s pay. Estimating the amount she’d have saved after a year, she added the number to her stash on hold by Ricketts & Co. It was a handsome sum. And now she knew someone from Buxton, an insider. Everything fell into place in one day. For the first time since Charney’s murder slammed her in the face three months ago, Marla allowed a glimmer of optimism to enter her dank thoughts.

#

Library life moved smoothly, with Marla easily assimilating herself into the data group. Within a few days she knew everyone solidly and she could even tell the difference between Pit and Squee. She pretended the group members were her allies—bosom buddies in on her plans for the rest of her life. And not actually being actual bosom buddies, they’d never invade her privacy, or spy on her, or report on her, or somehow wreck things in any way. They didn’t know her plans. They were her co-workers, all that and nothing more for the time being. She spent her time away from work alone on the banks of the moody river by her room. The ever present tent groups there beckoned but she had no deep desire to mingle deeply with anyone there anymore than she did with her intellectual friends in the Library.

The high conversations at break time, however, entertained her to no end. She’d never before enjoyed stimulation of this variety. Often the conversation was light, about the foibles of the workers’ children—those that had them: Too Kay, Tiny, and Squee. Meko had a son, but she’d left him on Buxton with her parents so she could go and find fulfillment on Ansonia. Once every third or fourth workday, though, a hair got up somebody’s butt. Squee or Pit or The Doc or Janto stewed to themselves about it for a while, building a volcanic situation. Come noontime the volcano would erupt and release its magma in full metamorphic glory—an astounding proclamation, controversial and a bit hard to digest. For the remainder of the break or day or even week in some illustrious cases, the statement would be tossed about in the air, batted back and forth between the inhabitants. Every aspect of the theory would be looked at and argued upon. Sometimes a consensus would be attained; often the arguments

petered out from sheer exhaustion of the subject with no clear truths brought about.

These periodic eruptions served Marla well in her long exile. Ever since her accident, her mind remained unsettled. Regardless of the fact that she had regained her memory, she had not regained total mental health. Her disconnect concerned what she perceived to be her reactions to the pressures of the Mill. She had reacted incorrectly, following overly strong-willed instincts. Most people at some point in their lives accept that free will is a bit of a mirage. We are basically all the same—save psychopaths and wealthy people—and will react in the same way to like circumstances and stimuli. Free will is moot. We accept that in our more mature moments and in the contented state known as “being grown up.”

Marla, however, discovered in her twisted way that free will was not moot at all. It was in fact a tool used against herself and others. Marla’s free will was a flaw, a bad mark, a handicap. It was a dangerous weapon.

These ideas about free will had hit Marla hard as she lay in the hospital all those months ago. She had been so convinced that her work at the Mill was not only good but great because it was she who had done it. It was her drive and energy, her being that facilitated the work and brought the positive conclusions. What a blow to find out the truth. That the work was perhaps not good. That good was relative, and certainly not her alone doing it. Her free will had been used for evil ends by evil people. They knew her and knew how far she’d go, which was too far over the top. Sure she paid the price, but so did others. Ten million shots to the gut could never redress the pain suffered by the others. These things irked her and forced her into an internal downward spiral to a great nothingness called clinical self-loathing.

The discussions in the Library somehow helped her back to normalcy on at least one level. The conversations, highly theoretical, yet at the same time based in the everyday experience of her coworkers, opened a window to Marla’s imprisoned thinking. Free will, she determined, was neither an asset nor a drawback. It simply was, moot or otherwise. Neither here nor there, human nature was not to be overcome or abandoned, praised or abhorred; it was just there.

One particular long-running discussion more than others brought about this conclusion. She often looked back with pleasure in the years that followed her release on this particular discourse. It opened Marla’s eyes to causes and effects. She found it especially applicable to her. Where others find their higher plane through enlightenment, forgiveness of sin, or snuff movies, Marla discovered it through the winding conversation of this day.

It started thusly:

“The thing about men is, they’re just so self-promoting,” Squee said.

“Who are you talking about, specifically?” Pit asked.

“I’m not speaking specifically; I’m speaking generally. All of them, any one of them. Even the so called sensitive ones. They always speak of themselves first. No matter what you say to them or what story you tell, they put it in context of themselves first.”

Janto jumped in. “You mean like with their stories? Like how they always top yours. If it’s your birthday, it’s their jubilee.”

“Some women are that way, too,” Tiny said.

“Not like men,” Janto answered. “Check it out, next party.”

“There are no parties on Ansonia.”

“Okay, if say you go to one of those riverbank what you callem’s soirees, then. Just stop in and listen a minute. Say a woman comes up to the group and says, ‘Hi, how are you?’ She won’t even say her name. Not a man. Here he comes: ‘Hey, how ya doin’? Gregor’s the name.’ And it’s downhill from there. Ten minutes the whole group knows all about Gregor, why he’s here, how great a worker he is, how he’s gonna be gone in six months. He makes top dollar and ‘won’t be long and he’ll be gone.’ Meanwhile Ms. Forgotten what’s her name is over there smiling and oohing at Gregor on cue. She could be the Dalai Lama and no one’d ever know.”

“Well,” Tiny said. “If she was the Dalai Lama, it would be fitting that no one knew it.”

Everyone laughed except Marla who had no idea what the Dalai Lama was.

“It’s called the Peacock Syndrome,” The Doc said. Everyone stopped and looked at her.

“The what?” Too Kay said.

Tiny nodded slowly in a rocking sort of manner either in recognition of the affliction or with intense interest in what was to follow.

Lilya scratched at her outer left nostril with the nail of her pinky, disinterested and interested at the same time.

Squee and Pit waited quietly for an explanation with which to disagree.

Meko said, “Makes sense. They’re so vain.”

“There’s a more complete explanation,” The Doc said. “In our culture, women are expected to be beautiful. We are judged by current standards of comeliness, but nature prefers the male’s vanity. There females have no need to outshine each other. They are in demand simply by being them. Males, on the other hand, must attract, woo, and compete. There is an innate desire in every male, driven by their genetic code, to draw attention to himself, to compete with others, and most importantly, to win.”

“Or think they’ve won.”

“Or say they’ve won.”

“Certainly it’s all part of their nature. They can’t help it.”

“What about guys that don’t do nothing?” Too Kay asked. “That sit around, drunk or high, day after day, complaining, blaming, excusing themselves from the whole game. They don’t even try to play. Where’s the peacock there?”

“I know women that do that.” Pit said.

“Well women are not programmed to be competitive,” The Doc answered. “Not to the same extent, anyway. And yes, Too Kay, some men aren’t energetic. There are various levels, otherwise society couldn’t work. Well, our society, anyway; we have equal numbers of males and females. In the grand

scheme of things, there aren't really that many males. Not much need for them after all. But long ago, in our species, we developed higher brain function and a choice to override innate tendencies. We developed culture. Culture dictates rules of behavior. Other species have few, strong short-lived males. They mate a lot in their brief span; live fast and die young. And they're very, very pretty; peacocks for instance."

"And lions."

"Most birds."

"So how come female humans are the pretty ones?" Lilya asked.

"Like I said, higher brain function in humans allowed ideas to pop into our heads. We discovered death and with it the desire to overcome it. Males especially; they have such short lives. They saw that their competitive spirit was killing them. Long ago they made an agreement with the females who, for their part, were rather unconcerned with death since they had long healthy lives, relatively speaking. The males offered to help with their womanly tasks if only the females promised to be available to them without them having to do battle amongst themselves every mating season. One of the roles males already provided was protection. That was the role that often got them killed. In addition to the protection, this new bargain provided for help in the established women's tasks, mostly the raising of the young. Not only sisters, aunts, and older siblings would be helping now, the males would help as well. Or so they said. Mostly what happened was they agreed amongst themselves to not fight each other off and not go after another males' female or her children. That was the point that finally got the women to sign on the dotted line. They didn't necessarily need help raising the young uns. What they needed was for rival males to stop killing their children. There was much energy required from the female to raise her children, so to lose them periodically was a terrible waste of her time. They were more than willing to give up the revolving door of sireship that resulted in a constant battle for their children's lives.

"As a result of the compact, the number of males grew. Social structures were changed to accommodate the numbers of men. Monogamy developed. For if all men were to mate fairly, they couldn't have many partners. Only one each so each could have one. Men agreed to not kill off rivals' children mostly because they agreed to not have rivals. At the same time the cry went up, 'I'll be damned if I'll live with another man's brats.'" So they came up with laws that prevented women from having numerous partners as well.

"Culture developed, religion along with it, to help out with the unpredictability of climate now that an agrarian society was possible since the tribe was settling down. Gods were to be appeased, ensuring a good season. If the gods became angry, sudden floods or droughts or fires or pestilence would ensue. There had to be a way to get the gods to back off. Priests with the power to know the gods' minds came into being.

"Somewhere along the line all those extra men with nothing to do but play dominoes all day long came up with a self-preserving strategy so no one could question just why they were all here when they clearly weren't needed. They came up with a set of rules for proper living which over the years became more and more like some sort of unquestioned natural law. 'This is the way it is; the way it's supposed to be; the way God wants it,' was the common assumption.

"And what were those rules? Well, they all had to do with the behavior of women. Sure, a few guidelines for men's behavior, such as don't kill my children and I won't kill yours, but for the most part, the rules simply stated that no woman was allowed to mate with anyone but her old man.

“You can’t imagine how superfluous these men were. The most important thing a species does is procreate. The male’s contribution is approximately 15 minutes, compared to the females’ nine months for gestation and countless years after that for rearing. The males, in large numbers, sat around twiddling their thumbs and feeling guilty. They needed rules to control the women so that no one would question their idleness.

“The women, of course, did not participate in the legislative process. They were too busy.”

“Yes, but why are women the beautiful ones?” Lilya asked.

“That’s easy,” Pit said. “50/50 split; you still have to have that 15 minute sperm dip.”

“More precisely the tacit agreement to not have children by more than one father in exchange for letting her children live means men and women must choose for life. A woman must now attract someone she can live with a very long time. And in spite of the fact that men are superfluous, culture did emerge and men did in fact offer more support. They are gathering the food now so women can stay in the nest and spoil the child, that is, teach it who its daddy is. The woman must attract a good food-gathering man. He must be beautiful as well as stout. There are many grades of men, but a woman must attract the best. And the priests and their followers slowly changed laws to diminish women and create a dependency in them on men, real or psychological. Society scorns an independent woman.

“Now the tables are turned and woman must attract someone she can live with for her entire life. Someone who looks good and is ‘steady.’ And because this is simply a superficial turning of the tables, where the women must attract the men, the males retain their biological need to be aggressively competitive.”

“That sounds like bullshit to me, The Doc,” Squee said.

“It may very well be, and I’m not an anthropologist, but you must admit the evidence is compelling.”

“It definitely sounds right to me,” Pit said. “My husband never hesitates to brag about the slightest accomplishment. ‘Honey, I finished the laundry, and Baby, does it shine.’ Or, ‘Dear, I finished the crossword—every single letter.’ Meanwhile I go out, earn the bacon, fry it up in the pan, never let him forget he’s a man, and I never say a thing.”

“How about my guy, proud of every pustule on his body. I have to inspect every new pimple and admire it or he won’t get to sleep at night.” Janto said.

“My husband used to announce his morning turd every day. ‘Man, that’s art,’ he’d say.” Too Kay added.

All except Lilya laughed.

Meko said, “You are such male bashers. I don’t know if all that’s true, but I feel I must say something positive for the other half. Take my baby’s father. He consistently scored the best pot around back in the day.”

Everyone turned to her to see if she was signaling the end of the conversation with such an off-topic remark.

She did not rise in her seat, though—the usual signal ending the break. Instead a sly smile played about

the mole on her face. She looked from one to the next to make sure everyone was following her and then she said, "I know it was the best, because I always heard about it through the entire first jay."

The place broke up and soon each person was jumping in to testify to the fact that men bragged too much. Only Lilya remained silent. She stood and began packing up her lunch accoutrements. The hilarity continued without her for a while until it was in fact time to return to work and the data machinery.

But Lilya didn't let the subject drop. Several lunchtimes and changes of conversation later, she brought the question up again.

"I'm not sure I agree with the initial premise, The Doc," she said.

A wedge of aged carlot and a glass of red wine sat on the table before The Doc. She was just about to cut a bit of cheese when she heard Lilya's statement. She held the knife in midair to respond.

"Premise?" The Doc said.

"That men boast because they're hardwired to draw attention to themselves. I'm not sure men boast more than women."

"Well, of course, that makes the argument somewhat unwinnable, but it's a known fact..."

"You just think men are infallible," Pit interrupted.

"No, she's on a different plane," Squee said. "She thinks they have a right to boast, because women are inherently inferior."

"I absolutely do not think that!" Lilya turned to Squee. "I just haven't observed men bragging more than women."

"Well, I have," Janto stirred. "They consistently jump on lines, especially if the speaker is a woman. They..."

"Women do that, too," Lilya said. "Look to ourselves, here. Who can even ever fin..."

"Not like men," Meko affirmed. "Look at father and mother, brother and sister. Don't just look at husbands and pals."

"Yes," Tiny said. "Look at the whole picture. Not just your own life. It's not a statistically large enough sample, and you yourself have a certain personality that attracts or repels specific types. If you always see loudmouths, maybe that's because you are short of tongue."

"Or dim of wit," answered Lilya, staring at Janto. "Maybe women are too stupid to speak up."

"Maybe," The Doc said. "Perhaps women are inferior and have nothing with which to top men."

"Yes, and the passers of tests are the ones who define intelligence. Everything is relative," Pit said.

"Including a boast?" Lilya asked.

"Self-promotion is self-evident. You know it when you see it."

“Like pornography?”

“It’s in the eye of the beholder.”

“Yes, but the results are incontrovertible.”

“What results?”

“Look at the boards of all the biggest firms in the system. Or the upper management. Mostly men.”

“At this late date.”

“That has to do with money.”

“And self-promotion.”

“And inheritance.”

“Good point. If you’re born into a wealthy family, you learn confidence early on. A serious support system goes a long way to developing a boastful demeanor.”

“What about all those bootstrap stories?”

“Always men, aggressive, ruthless men.”

“That’s different than boastful.”

“Bragging is just a benign form of ruthlessness.”

“So how do we prove that men are peacocks by nature? We can’t even determine if they’re peacocks at all.”

“Data Girl, you haven’t weighed in on this yet. What do you think?”

Marla sat up; she’d just finished her bowl of strip soup and was slumped back in her chair listening, her head moving back and forth as each person tossed an idea in. She cleared her throat. “Me?”

“Yeah, what do you think? Are men boastful?”

“I don’t have much experience with men, actually.”

“We’re not interested in the details of your sex life. Think of other men. You can’t get away from them completely. They’re everywhere, like roaches in a warm kitchen. What about coworkers?”

“Bosses, teachers, schoolmates?”

“Uh, well,” Marla envisioned Charney and the black man. “I’m not sure I even observe any kind of long-term relation...”

“Coworkers, woman, coworkers!”

Then Marla thought of Parker, specifically the scene at the hospital. What was he doing there; they weren't friends.

"Yeah, they gloat when they win. If they don't win they whine. They cheat to get what they want when it's not deserved. Yeah, I guess they self-promote," she answered.

"Still not a statistically large enough sample," Squee said.

"Yeah, but it's a tie breaker here."

"And they lie," Marla added. Everyone stopped shuffling and looked at her.

"That has been proven," Meko said, looking around. "Remember the studies: women lie to keep from hurting others' feelings, men lie to gain something."

"Not quite the same as self-promoting, but maybe a tool in the belt."

"We're not arguing about whether or not men are inferior or evil," The Doc said. "We're arguing about whether or not there is such a thing as a Peacock Factor. Are men born boasting or do they learn it as an artifact of our culture?"

"That's still not the question!" Lilya, the lover of men, shouted.

"Lilya, you're like an ostrich, you see what you want to see. Studies upon studies upon studies."

"What is a study? What is a study? They revert previous studies, that's all. We just need one more to disprove the one we don't like right now. Studies prove what the studier wants them to prove."

"Then look around you with an open mind. You prefer to not see the truth."

"Just because I'm outvoted does not make your truth truthful. Absolute truth cannot be determined by democracy."

"How about this?" Janto jumped on it. "If it looks like a rat, sounds like a rat, smells like a rat, it probably..."

"Is a rat," everyone finished the sentence for her.

"Men are not rodents," Lilya said quietly.

"Are you sure?"

"You're just arguing using clichés," Lilya said.

"Well we're certainly not getting anywhere if we can't lay even just one axiom down," The Doc said.

"Why do we need to get anywhere?" Lilya asked. "Why can't we just accept our differences?"

"Because truth sets you free."

“It doesn’t seem to have done any of you all any good.”

“Ah, are you admitting it is truth then?”

“Never.”

“Lilya, think of how you’ve met all your men. Do some simple research yourself. Starting today. Write down every first line every man says to you. If the line is usually a question, mark it with a dit. If it’s a statement, mark it with a zed. At the end of a month, count up the dits and zeds and that’ll show you whether your average man seeks knowledge or if he simply talks to hear himself talk.”

“I’m not doing homework for you.”

“We can’t move on with this premise until we get an agreed upon axiom.”

“I’m not playing your game.”

“Then we stagnate and go back to discussing matters of less interest.”

“Oh, so now I’m holding you back.”

“In a sense, yes.”

“We couldn’t possibly discuss anything else?”

“I refuse to let it drop and will continue with my own prejudiced opinion unless someone can find a compelling argument to change my mind.” The Doc said this. “I will preach one-sided sermons unless you all join in, and I will not enter into any subject other than whether men are peacocks by nature or by nurture.

“We either take steps to get a consensus with the first axiom, or I will not contribute to any lesser arguments, regardless of how interested I am in the subject. I’m that spiteful. Either Lilya conducts research on her own and convinces us she’s right, or she believes in the axiom herself.” The Doc sat back and folded her arms across her chest.

“Oh, forget it!” Lilya said. “I’m not spying on my boyfriends. Fine, you’re right; men are peacocks even though women are more beautiful.”

“No, Lilya, you are more beautiful; women in general are not, but that’s a different argument, and I’m not budging since you are simply agreeing because you’re lazy.”

“I’m not lazy, I just prefer to do other things with my men than record their opening lines. It’s always something to do with them, I agree. I agreed a long time ago, but that doesn’t mean it’s a fact.”

“We’re not looking for a fact here, just an incontrovertible axiom so we can move on with the geometry.”

“Fine, you have it.”

“I’m not convinced.”

“The Doc!!!!” everyone shouted.

“Well, I want everyone to go around the room and tell me why they believe all men are peacocks deep down inside. After that we can move on.”

“Next time,” Meko said. “Lunch is over now.”

#

The group found next time devoid of the peacock discussion. It was as if they were worn out from the preliminaries. They chose other subjects to discuss: the nature of work, the nature of the System, the natures of life and many other natures, but not the nature of men. That was reserved for later when the participants were refreshed.

However, it was this peacock discussion that for some reason moved Marla’s constipated thinking from deep self-involvement to a slight curiosity about the world outside herself. What the peacock theory had to do with her self-loathing she couldn’t have guessed, but it didn’t matter because soon she found a sort of twisted, shallow, half-baked social life.

It started one day right after pay time when Meko asked her if she’d like to go for a travel with her.

“You know, tramp around,” Meko said.

Marla grabbed her cash from the paymaster and turned to Meko. “Pub crawling? For a peacock?” she asked.

“Heavens no,” Meko laughed. “What do you want to do, research pickup lines for The Doc?”

“No.”

“You don’t want to be trawling here, believe me. The men of Ansonia are desperate or worse.” She grabbed Marla by the elbow and pulled her through the crowd and out to the lane in front of Gough’s. “No, I meant just go for a travel around town. Have a drink and see the sights, take in a show.”

“Show?”

“Yeah, they got ‘em. Mostly horrible, but some are fun.”

“Sure,” Marla said, surprising herself but warmed by the touch of another human. Something she hadn’t felt in months; since Charney shook her hand goodbye before he got executed by the dark man. “I wouldn’t mind seeing this town through someone else’s eyes.”

“Will the view be so different from yours?” Meko held her hand up in the air to stop a passing work bus, full of end of the day muckrakers on their way home to a warm bath and supper.

“Yes, I’m sure,” Marla answered. She swung up onto the backboard of the bus and reached over to pull Meko up beside her just as it took off. Full to capacity, the bus seemed incapable of holding all the bodies reeking of muck. Meko and Marla barely fit on the backboard. Fortunately they stepped off after about twenty minutes.

“There’s a juice joint around the corner I like to go to,” Meko said, leading the way over a boardwalk.

Rounding a money lender's stand, they entered a low-slung bamboo hut without a front sign. There were no seats or stools, just belly-high drinking stands.

The place was noisy and full of after hours workers. They found a couple of empty slots and inserted a single into each receptacle. The vending flap opened and a shot glass filled with brown liquid, and mugs with home brew chasers became available.

"What is it?" Marla asked.

"Local punt. Tastes like unfiltered river sludge, but it does loosen you up. Just don't expect any anisette aftertaste. Swallow it all at once so you won't gag." As an example Meko took her glass and tossed it back like snake oil and then swigged the brew.

Marla opted to drink it like a boiler maker, chugging it whole.

"Ah, tough one," Meko said.

"What can I say? I'm a mill worker," Marla smiled, wiping her mouth with the sleeve of her flannel shirt.

"So tell me, Data Girl, you married?"

"Oh, I've never done well with the boys," Marla smiled again. "Too shy, not exactly the attractive type."

"Oh I disagree, you have a certain quirky magnetism," Meko said. "I imagine you were admired from afar for most of your mysterious life. How old are you?"

"Admired from afar. Can't say that I believe that's true. Thirty two."

"Thirty two. And what are you doing here?"

"Me? Like everybody: working."

"A mill worker? From the Textile Planet? Aren't you a little out of place? It's not like there's any cotton to pick or sheep to shear here. Why the change? What's your crime? You weren't married so you're not running from that insanity."

"I didn't really have one. I just got tired of the same ol' same ol'. How about you?"

"Oh no, you don't get out of it that easy. Nobody gets tired of the same ol' same ol'. People spend all of their youth setting themselves up in the same ol' same ol'. After that there's no energy for running around. And any courage they might have had once they forget about early on."

"You left Buxton for that reason. Or so you said."

"Buxton is not the Textile Planet. Buxton is the same ol' same ol' to the tenth power. And I had an old man, remember? Let's approach this conversation from a different angle. Where you going when you're done here? Once you make enough money. Or the statute of limitations runs out. When your deadline is past, where you gonna go?"

"Buxton."

Meko burst into laughter spraying her brew onto the table slats in front of her. A towel appeared from a dispensing unit. Marla picked it up to absorb the mess. Meko eventually giggled herself down and said, "That's a good one. Data Girl does have a sense of humor."

"But I'm not joking. I've intended to go there all along."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

"Because it's stale there. Numbingly stale, and besides I'll never go visit you there."

Marla suppressed a grin and wondered why the boss was being so friendly. She had an inkling, though.

"So where should I go?"

"Do what everyone else does, buy a planet or get lost in the foreign service. Never come back. Forget the inner system."

"Is that what you're going to do?"

"I don't know. I doubt it. I have a kid, and oddly enough I like it here."

"Here on Ansonia?"

"Yeah, why not?"

"It's disgracefully ugly; crowded, dirty, undeveloped and ..."

"And anything but boring. And there's always new meat." She pinched Marla's arm.

"I'm not new meat."

"You? You may have been here a while, but you're still so very innocent. Regardless of how you drink your punt, I can tell you haven't seen much."

"Why, because I don't respond to your passes?"

"Don't be angry; it's a compliment to be considered unjaded. It speaks about your open mindedness. You don't cackle jack like the others in the break room. You listen. And I'm not making a pass; I'm just waiting for your reaction."

"I wouldn't call what they do cackling; I'm amazed at what they talk about. And why do you need to see my reaction if you're not making a pass?"

"You don't have any opinion on the nature of men? And I'm trying to find out what makes you tick."

"No, I guess I don't. I don't have enough experience. And not much makes me tick."

"I'm wondering why you say you don't have experience. And I think a lot makes you tick."

“I’m not a popular girl. And just what are you like?”

“Because you’re shy? Me? I’m a loner.”

“I guess. And not much of a loner if this is where you hang out.”

“You don’t strike me as shy. And I don’t really hang out here much. It’s just neutral ground.”

“When it comes to men I am. And you are making a pass.”

“So you feel comfortable here, eh?” Meko gestured around the room. She didn’t answer the secondary conversation question, just gave a disapproving look as if Marla should be ashamed of not trusting her.

Marla turned and saw couples in the bar. Most were engaged in conversation. Some embraced lasciviously. A lot were laughing. One or two were inebriated and swaying.

“Yeah, sure. I guess. Meko, what are you getting at? I’m not gay, but I don’t have a male partner, no.

Meko just smiled and took another swig.

Marla changed the uncomfortable subject. “What’s wrong with Buxton, really?”

“Hmm,” Meko answered as she quietly placed the brew mug down and straightened the cocktail napkin of some errant wrinkles. She stared at Marla for a few moments and then took a deep breath. “It’s a very wealthy planet. The homes are big and beautiful. Gardens everywhere. Everything is safe and easy. Food in abundance.

“But it’s boring.”

“Worse. It’s stifling. Buxton is good as long as you are not different. If you’re the same as everyone and you have no imagination, you should go there. Are you short of imagination, Data Girl?”

“Probably.”

Meko slammed her fist on the table. “No! You’re not! Don’t kid yourself. You’re a square peg.”

“Okay, okay,” Marla said, again wiping up spilled liquid with the bar towel. “I don’t know, I don’t know. I’m not the flashy type. I always fit in, in my way. I never make waves and I’m never in trouble. I’m not like you Meko. You’re a person with nerve. I just follow orders. Maybe I want a safe, clean place.”

“Eppie, or whatever your name is. You can’t possibly be like that or you wouldn’t be on this planet. That type of personality doesn’t ever make it here. Somebody that likes it safe wouldn’t have left the Textile Planet. Darling, get some therapy. You don’t know who you are!”

Stung, Marla said nothing as Meko’s invective brought to her mind hours spent in a vertical tub with a sadistic doctor taking notes a few feet away. She stared at the table top without moving, considering all things such as whether or not she should tell her boss to shove her advice—along with the bar mug—up her therapeutic ass.

“C’mon, let’s get out of here,” Meko abruptly pulled on Marla’s arm to get her up out of her seat. She

led Marla out of the bar into the drizzly and by now dusky evening.

“I’m gonna go home,” she said. “I just needed a little after work energizer. You need directions?”

“No,” Marla said, without really hearing the question. “I’m good.”

“Fine. Cuz I’m not good with children.” Meko stopped a passing bus and left Marla to her own cleverness without waving goodbye. Marla, still pondering, didn’t notice. Finally she headed off in the direction she thought was home. Three hours later, she made it to her building, room, and bed, and for several more hours she lay awake, thinking of all her strange boss had said and done.

After that first night out, Meko and Marla imbibed after work often. There was nothing like a weekend or holiday on Ansonia. No one—workers or bosses—wanted to slow the accumulation of money—so there was no end of the week TGIF mentality; everyday had the same weight. In spite of that, a ritual developed between Meko and Marla wherein the fifth or sixth or seventh day wound up being drink day.

They usually visited an ordinary saloon or innocuous after work drink spot. Places with plain but cheap brew drinks. Once in a while they’d splurge on a night show, with a little local musical talent singing or playing a couple of sets, usually to prerecorded backup band or a tinkler on the piano. Most of it was forgettable, but if she’d had enough alcohol, Marla would join the diva on stage for harmonizing on choruses of “You’re No Good.” The ending breakdown with the rap section was especially energizing:

chorus: You’re no good, you’re no good, you’re no good, baby, you’re no...

rap: You’re lazy and a fool and treat me so bad, you’re the worst kind of lover that I ever had.

chorus: You’re no good, you’re no good, you’re no good, baby, you’re no...

rap: If shoes were Sunday and feet were small, you’d be the devil and ten feet tall.

chorus: etc.

Another time they went to see the “Olympics.” Ansonians were fond of developing various outpost-type competitions that depended for talent on who was around, athlete- and gambler-wise. They invented little sports borne of the monotony of manual work. Natural rivalries grew between laborers who fought to finish projects at hand first. The competitions would spill over into the drinking halls, and pretty soon organized bouts were advertised by word of mouth.

The competition Meko and Marla saw was between teams of assemblers in the prefab industry. Corrugated polycarb panels were shipped without vinyl endstrips, and it was always the first and most time consuming task to slip the endstrips over these panels. This annoying job, which had to be done to keep Ansonia’s never ending drizzle out of the polycarb walls of the stores, houses, banks, and offices, became fodder for one of the biggest competitions the town had ever seen. The strips were generally inflexible and it took several steps to get them installed properly. First they were reamed with a screwdriver to open them up as much as possible. Then they were forced by hand over the top edge of the panel. Finally, when the strip would travel no further by hand, a rubber mallet was used to pound it all the way to the end. Some people were naturals. With great arm strength they could push the strip quite far before having to stop and use the hammer. One particular worker had developed a technique whereby he was able to dispense with the hammer step altogether; one blow from his hand pushed the thing all the way to the end. He amazed everyone and was a mini celebrity for several months. Turned out he’d had a leather patch sewn (without anesthesia) onto the palm of his pushing hand to withstand the

cutting edge of the vinyl as he slammed his hand onto it, saving several precious seconds in each installation. Being unbeatable, he retired soon after that, but not before Meko and Marla saw him in action.

More often than not, however, the nights on the town were simple drinking affairs. In spite of the fact that Meko insisted she was a loner, she had a few friends, former Library workers mostly. Marla met some of them and actually counted them as acquaintances. She remained aloof, but had the security of knowing there were others on the planet that knew her name. At least her fake name.

Occasionally Meko conducted some sort of dicey transactions with strangers. Maybe a fellow would come up to her and ask about business. Meko would then get a hardened look in her eye. Regardless of how much Meko had drunk, the eyes always came back to focus when someone with a package stopped by. If Marla asked what the deal was, Meko would just brush her off with a “it’s just a new contract for the Library.” On the surface Marla accepted the explanation, but in reality she didn’t fully believe it. Meko had something going on over and above the mundane world of the Library. And why shouldn’t she? She was on the ball here, and here money grew on trees. Why wouldn’t someone on the ball get in on the action?

Much to Marla’s surprise, Meko never made an overt pass again. She did ask a lot of personal questions, though.

“Are you celibate?” Meko asked one day.

“Not intentionally.”

“Are you a virgin?”

“No. I’ve had my times back on the Planet when I was a weaver. I loved, well, liked a few men. Had some fun; but one day the world just got so serious. I lost track of time and now it’s as if I’ve lost all capacity for human intimacy.”

“You’ve never loved anyone?”

“Not in that way. Not with an investment.”

“Do you think you could?”

“I had a friend once. But I sacrificed her to come here.”

“A lover?”

“No, a good friend. A sensitive soul.”

“Could you love that way again?”

“Meko, what do you want from me?”

“To know your capacity.”

“I haven’t known someone I like as much as I like you for a long time, since I came here in fact. You impress me. You’re so sure of yourself: you don’t wonder about yourself or what you’re doing. At the

same time you're not unbearably hard. You're ... a dear companion. I hope we stay friends and maybe someday we'll find the ability to trust one another. Trust with total confidence. Trust as no one should be trusted unless they know each other's heart completely. Then we will be truly bonded. Many, many things must happen first."

"Data Girl, you're getting deep. Like what?"

"Like why did you leave Buxton?"

"You think you want security and cleanliness, but that's only because you've never seen it like I've seen it. You can't imagine how poisonous sterility is. It's not human. It's not life. It doesn't support life."

"Yet there's a planet full of people breathing the air of security. And they would all disagree with you."

"Disagree? There's no disagreeing there. You can't even get into it."

"I don't believe you."

"Of course you don't. You've never been there, and you've had drama and trauma in your life. The blood flows in your veins. You've been able to disagree with others: friends, lovers, parents, bosses."

Torpid's face flitted through Marla's mind. And Lamont's. And Shurm's.

"You're right, and it never did any good. In fact it worked against me. I would have gotten along better if I'd kept my trap shut."

Meko said nothing.

Marla continued. "And you have a scar," she said, running her finger along the side of Meko's face. "It runs from here to here. Eye to mole."

"I got that here. My first job. Construction spike. I had no idea what I was doing and a beam with a nail sticking out came crashing down. I was in the way and got sliced. You, on the other hand, hold your stomach when you cough. It hurts you inside when you strain."

"I was shot."

"On the Textile Planet."

"Yes."

"You see."

"I'd trade in a minute."

"I have nothing of value."

"You have a child."

"A perfect, beautiful son."

“You have a man.”

“Had a man.”

“Ah. And there’s the rub. Why did you not bring your son with you?”

“Against the law.”

“And loving women wasn’t?”

“I didn’t love women. I didn’t love anybody. I didn’t love my husband.”

“You were banished for that?”

“Yes.”

“Because you didn’t love your husband?”

“It’s against the law on Buxton.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I’m not.”

“That seems silly. You can’t force people to love, and besides you could just lie about a thing like that.”

“Everyone lies about it; I wanted an end to the charade. The perfect family units where the participants smother early only to go on and on and on with their lives in silent suffering. I printed a manifesto against it and started an underground newsletter for everyone like me on Buxton. Everyone who knew it wasn’t shame to not find a love for life. The Solitarists we called ourselves. We vowed to remain alone. The group started out small but quickly got larger—too large. It became visible and targetable. I was eventually kicked off the planet and came here. At first I kept the newsletter going. I was a revolutionary and wanted to start something, change things. But instead Ansonia changed me. I got the bug—the addiction to money. I wound up here for the cash.”

“Well,” Marla smiled. “That’s a fair trade then, eh. My past trauma for your past drama.”

“No. It’s still unbalanced. You were a victim. You did no wrong; you simply were in the wrong place at the wrong time. I was proactive. What was your sin? You know mine, but I don’t know yours. You want trust, you want to make a pact. Well you’ve got to unbuckle yourself. Tell me something wicked.”

Marla tightened her lips, angry that Meko pushed so hard. Distributing leaflets was nothing. An indication of character even. Meko loved it here, she wasn’t punished. How could their respective confessions not be equal?

“I started a revolt,” Marla said. “Out of anger, not self-righteous anger like yours, but pure bitter, selfish anger. I’d been put on the spot. Made to look bad. I was angry that no one would listen to me, me, me. Angry that I wasn’t able to do my job well. Angry that other people were getting what I should have gotten. I used a situation, a terrible situation—someone else’s pain—to get my point about myself across. I had no higher motive than personal anger and gain.”

She stopped and looked at Meko. “So I started a revolt and a cop shot me.”

Meko tilted her head as if looking at Marla from a new angle. Her eyes slitted to take in the measure of the woman opposite. She smiled. “Now we are even,” she said. “And true friends.”

“Well.” Marla slowly blinked her eyes, and then reached over to pat Meko on the shoulder. “We will be if neither of us tattles on the other.”

“To whom could I tattle?”

“I don’t know, the others maybe.”

“They’ve all got similar stories. In fact no one on this entire planet would possibly care.”

“Someone could come and take you back to where they do care.”

“I’ve been banished.”

“But you have a son. I can’t believe you wouldn’t go back one day to see him. I could alert the authorities to be on the lookout. They’ll wait at the border for you, not let you in.”

“Then you have me at a disadvantage.”

“No, I left someone behind as well, a friend on the Textile Planet.”

“Ah. And you may one day want to go back to see him. I could alert the authorities and...”

“Now we are true friends.”

“I knew we would be.”

“How so?”

“Because I wanted it that way.”

“I thought you were a Solitarist.”

“I am and so are you, that’s why I picked you. I want to be alone but I need a drinking partner. Only another Solitarist could give me that.”

Marla held up her C.R.U.D.—a mossy green brew with sparkly floaters she’d taken to drinking on their outings; with only twenty percent alcohol it was considered a health drink—and said, “To the Solitarists!”

The first few days following this conversation, Marla was uneasy even with the tacit pact of secrecy. She was angry at herself for letting the alcohol con her into telling her secret. She’d done so well hiding her past.

After a while, though, when nothing changed, no one came after her and Meko never brought it up, she relaxed and let trust seep in. One day she found that she’d stopped waiting for strangers to appear out of nowhere to take her back to the Textile Planet. Meko’s air of permanency and her solid will exuded strength and security. Regardless of the scar on her face implying a desperate personality, Meko was

steadfast. Marla stopped worrying and enjoyed the comfort.

#

One day after several months of inputting data, in the middle of an otherwise unremarkable morning, a red light on Marla's terminal plate began blinking importantly. She'd never noticed the light before; it had never blinked before. It wasn't so much a light as a tiny sign that lit up in red letters saying, "Card complete, press to eject." Next to the tiny letters was an indentation indicating a heat actuator. She removed the glove from her hand and touched the button. An 8 ½ by 11 clear Scotch™ brand sheet about the thickness of newsprint laminate was ejected from the wall next to the screen. She pulled the sheet completely out of the slot. Along the top edge were the words: "See group leader for filing instructions."

She pondered the sheet, trying to fathom what it meant. A pay raise? A sack? Nothing appeared to be layered inside the sheet, but angling it to the light gave a colored reflection of purples and pinks and greens. She lay it on the side of her work area and resumed with the work in her in-box.

At break time, she carried the sheet to Meko saying, "Hey, Group Leader."

Meko opened her mouth wide in mock surprise, raising her eyebrows to exaggerate the gesture. "Your dance card's full, Data Girl. Wow! You've been here a while. Hey look everybody, Data Girl's first data card!"

"Well alright!" Janto shouted. "We gotta go out and celebrate tonight!"

"But what does it mean?" Marla asked.

"It means you filled up your data sheet. You've got a full data sheet. Your first one." Tiny slapped her on the back.

"Do I get promoted?"

"No, but I'll buy you a drink!" The Doc said.

"Thanks," Marla said, trying not to sound disappointed. She'd spent the last half hour recalculating how much money she'd be able to save in her remaining time on Ansonia based on a one percent salary increase.

"Aw, don't be so down," Meko said. "You already earn a good coin."

"Yeah, but this is incredibly boring work, you must admit. Hardly fair compensation, in my mind."

"That's why we need to go out for a drink!" Janto yelled. "It's never enough. It could be thousands and it still wouldn't be enough!"

"Yeah, okay," Marla conceded. "So where's this thing go?" She held the sheet up to Meko.

"In the Library!" Three or four of the workers answered simultaneously. The entire troupe led Marla down the long hallway between the break room and the locker room where hundreds of sheets had been stored in slots with wooden casings. Marla passed them every day on her way in and out, and although she had noticed them and wondered about them early on, she had given them no thought since then.

“What is all this?” she asked.

“Data storage.”

“On these cards?”

“Yeah. Tiny transistors embedded in the laminate hold the data. Five and half tera per. They’re filed in any open slot, neatly and firmly...” Meko took Marla’s sheet and inserted it into an eye-level vacancy. “...to ensure contact with the sleeve. The data is called up at any time from the slot using proprietary protocols.”

“When do you call up the data?”

“Whenever someone pays for the information. Most of the time it’s an accountant paying bills or salaries. But there are also tons of other interested parties. Information is actually one of the planet’s biggest exports.”

Marla stared at Meko.

“Well, first of all no one knows about Ansonia’s capacities at information storage. We’re still viewed as a colony. Nobody bothers auditing us, and there’s no one person who knows all of what’s here. It’s really a good place to keep banks of secret data if that’s what you need.”

“Who’s in charge of it all? And I’m still thinking so what?” Marla said.

“Well, our company is in charge of it. No one in particular.”

“How’s the data retrieved and when?”

“A hard copy request comes in using an anonymous delivery system. As long as the requisite deposit is with it, we’ll order the requested dots and dits to spit out on an unregistered renderer. The results are anonymously delivered—in hard copy, of course—back to the requestor and that’s it. All information about the transaction in the computer is erased.”

“You know the ins and outs so well. Better than anybody else?”

“Sure.”

“Been here long?”

“A year or two.”

“And where is the secret renderer located?”

“Here, there, everywhere.”

Marla stared at Meko. “I feel at a disadvantage.”

“You should and, at the same time, shouldn’t. Just go back to work, we’ll talk later.”

Later never came. Not that night anyway. The Doc, Janto, Squee, Tiny, Pit, even Lilya (everybody except Too Kay who had to get home to burp the baby) filed over to the dive across the lane from Gough's. The place was nothing more than an open sided stall with a bar, behind which stood the pourer and his stack of paper cups. There were no fancy mixes or microbrewery choices, just one drink—the Grog, named after the old piss water sailors used to imbibe on long journeys away from home. Ansonian Grog was a sticky pink conglomeration of rum and lemonade mixed in a 55 gallon drum and hand pumped up to a cup by the pourer. When the drum dropped to a quarter or so full, the pourer ordered in another load of rum/water mix from the distributor. A day later the tank rolled by and a slimey black hose from the truck was inserted into the top of the drum, which was then filled to 9/10ths. The pourer then opened a barley sack of Countrytime Pink and poured (hence his job title being “pourer” instead of “pumper”) the contents into the drum via the funnel stored on a hook at the top of the stand where spider-like creatures made their homes.

There was no water for the rinsing of utensils, no towels for wiping, no disinfectant for scrubbing. What you saw was what you got—in your drink for the most part. The rum itself was alcoholic enough to kill any bacteria lurking in the cracks of the bar. Grog tasted horrible, like something an astronaut would be drinking the day before splashdown when all the good stuff had long ago been consumed. Just like the old sailing days, Grog was both revered and reviled by its drinkers. And it was imbibed for one reason only: because it was there.

At the end of the day, the girls traipsed through the Ansonian drizzle to the stall for a quick one on behalf of Marla's triumph. They agreed to cut it short for health and taste's sake. It was a school night after all, and they needed to get in to work the next day. “Just one,” The Doc said, and everyone else said “Yes.”

By midnight each one of them was sloppy, vomiting, or picking a fight with her neighbor. Meko had the presence of mind to send them all home. She walked Marla to her door, found her keys, and tucked her in, suggesting she take the next day off. Marla protested vehemently, saying, “Mmph. No! Ia;sldksa'djflkj.”

“G'night, Sister,” Meko said and then found her own zig-zag way home.

The following day conversation at lunchtime was predictably subdued. Only Janto had the energy to recount the highlights and revelry of the night before. No one responded, and after a while even she quieted down and kept to herself. Lilya sat on a chair, legs sprawled, ice pack on her forehead. Tiny sat not eating, her head on her folded arms on the table. The Doc lazily stirred a concoction in the hot pot. It smelled of oregano and Vicks. If everyone hadn't been partially anaesthetized, they would have been gagging.

“What the hell is that, The Doc?” Too Kay, the only one eating, asked.

The Doc didn't bother to answer. Just brewed it and drank it and fell asleep.

A week later things were back to normal, with the endless inputting of data and lunchtime conversating.

“Rape was a weapon,” Squee said, as Marla returned from the restroom one day.

“A tool,” Pit argued.

“What's the difference?” Too Kay asked.

Pit and Squee both turned to stare at her.

“One is used to annihilate...” Squee said.

“Dominate,” Pit corrected.

Squee looked at Pit and expelled the breath of impatience. “The other is used to ease your work. The inference being a weapon requires an atmosphere of violence, whereas a tool can be used without such conditions.”

“But Pit’s right, then,” Too Kay announced. “A weapon is used to dominate under certain circumstances, not annihilate.”

“Only after the threat of annihilation is established,” Squee said.

“Okay, but then you agree it’s a tool used to dominate,” Pit said.

“Only after the threat of violence has been shown. You have to have that first. And since it’s used as a weapon first, that is its primary function.”

“But weapons are used to defend, not just to destroy. If a destroyer comes, you use weapons to defend yourself. I just don’t think the definition of rape allows for it to be used in defense. It was proactive all the way,” Pit argued. “As a tool for dominance, it was used to keep certain groups or individuals in their place. Annihilation was not the key. What good would annihilation be? Who would do the work then? Rape was used as a tool to keep people in their place when that place was not desirable to the general population in the first place.”

“Yes, we all know that. That was discovered by the cretins,” Squee protested. “We’re trying to establish if it was used aggressively or passively.”

“That’s not the question at all,” Pit said. “The question is whether it was used to defend or effect gain.”

“If anybody thinks rape was used for defense, they’re nuts,” Janto said.

“Maybe the collective unconscious saw it as a defense,” Tiny said.

All eyes looked to her.

“Maybe one group sees a predicament. They are being encroached upon by another, seemingly stronger or more enlightened group. They become desperate and strike out, replacing what they believe to be the natural balance. They are not peacefully thinking to establish a higher existence for all, they are fighting what they perceive to be a power greater in some aspect than themselves and so defend against that power using the weapon they have.”

“Well spoken, Tiny. Well spoken!” Squee began clapping her hands. She stood and marched around the table to where Tiny stood.

“Of course,” Tiny continued, looking up at Squee, “that’s only true if the species in question is that blind to their own worthiness in the first place. If they know their own worth, they will not need to defend against another that is perceived to be greater than themselves. In that case, rape is just a tool in their kit, and their own worthiness lies in the fact that they are connivers, spiritless, without a soul. They are talented in the use of others for their own gain.”

“Yes,” said Pit. “Yes.”

Squee returned to her seat.

Marla ate her dill chips in silence, brain still trying to unravel the peacock conversation of months before.

“Data Girl, what do you think about it?” They often had to prompt Marla in this fashion before she entered the conversation.

“I, uh, I don’t have any experience with the topic. I…”

“No one has any experience. Rape went out of existence centuries ago. But you’ve heard of it. What have you read about it? People still discuss it the same way they discuss cannibalism, human sacrifice, and reality TV—all those barbaric, common practices from long ago that have been eradicated from everywhere but the history books. Surely you have an opinion. C’mon Data Girl, don’t ride the fence all the time,” Pit cajoled her.

Marla just shrugged and offered no input. They gave up on her and returned to the argument without a clear tie breaker.

Many of the lunch time debates—discussions of anarchy, socialism, free enterprise, capital punishment, birth control law, religion, and fantasy—left Marla with nothing to say. She enjoyed the banter and certainly had much to think on during the long afternoons of mindless inputting, but she was poorly read—almost illiterate. She simply had not spent an intellectual moment in her life. Or perhaps she’d moved through life with blinders on. Not that intellectual pursuit is a requisite for carrying an opinion or an abstract moral. Opinions are, as the saying goes, like assholes. Except in Marla’s case. She really didn’t seem to have one. Opinion, that is.

Meko teased her about it from time to time. “No passions, Eppie?” she’d ask.

That would have hurt Marla if she hadn’t been secretly proud of it. If she hadn’t felt it was progress in her journey to absolute solitude. “What good does all that do?” she’d counter. “I have no power to change the world. I can do one thing and that is to live.”

“How like Tiny you are,” Meko said. “And yet Tiny has opinions and ideas on how to change the status quo. She has warm blood.”

Marla would shrug and toss back her brew nonchalantly, untouched and unrepentant.

Marla’s blood warmed from only one thing: the plan to move off Ansonia. The orange air, constant drizzle, mud, temporariness, and flat landscape had long ago lost any mystery for her. It was a planet for moving away from or passing through, but not sitting and observing or enjoying. She planned to save every shekel she could and in one year, when her Textile account finally became available, leave. To Buxton if possible, somewhere else if necessary.

Buxton was the goal she’d held before herself since the day the creepy Mr. Ricketts had tried to dissuade her from it. She’d been fixated on it since then, and it was the only clear goal she’d had since leaving the Textile Planet. Besides remaining alone and unloved, that is.

Three months before the end of her year, she had a bag of notes worth about as much as a donkey cart

(or first class ticket to any planet in the inner side) when Meko put the final nail in the Buxton coffin.

“Rainbow Planet is beautiful,” Janto was saying at lunch one day. “I hated to leave, truly I did, but the fascists came in and I couldn’t have countenance on that. Besides I lost my job; they closed all the theaters. No more acting, entertaining, preaching, mugging, juggling, soliloquizing, dialoging, testifying, interacting, playing, or so much as constructing a fourth wall after that. But I tell you, for my money, there’s no place like my home.”

“Really?” Lilya asked. “Why is it like that? So beautiful.”

“It’s the humidity, no dry spells. Everything grows. No two of the same plants within the same acre. The variety’s incredible. Biodiversity in spades. And the colors? They call it the Rainbow for a reason. Every color in the RGB gamut is represented there.”

“And diseases?” asked The Doc.

“Rampant. But you gotta take the bad with the good.”

“And order?” asked Too Kay.

“Chaos. Total free-for-all. But you don’t need so much government with so much free living. Life is easy and everything’s for the taking. Until the fascists, of course.”

“Sounds like Buxton before the change,” said Meko.

“Change?” Tiny asked.

“We were terribly overpopulated. Still are. The planet’s not so equipped as Rainbow. We had some incredibly harsh times until law and order eventually evolved. It developed from a strict moral code so ingrained in each individual it barely needed to be written down. And the population just kept growing and the laws just kept getting stricter. Life is good and prosperous there now, but the population is terribly homogeneous and artistic endeavor is not valued. Living together by the code is. There’s warmth between people, but it’s mandated warmth, ordered by law. And there’s mostly just silence. A deafening, smothering silence. Four or five families live together in villas or compounds. Living quarters are cramped and there is never any time when you are alone. There are many, many children, and it’s against the law to say anything disparaging about anyone.

“Because of the intense population, strict codes prevent chaos. There is no sickness to speak of. Our efforts long ago were spent in keeping ourselves clean, curing contagion, and learning the ways of the agoraphobe.” She looked directly at Marla. “There’s just no privacy on Buxton.”

Marla defiantly showed no emotion, but she mulled it over during the long afternoon.

#

Weeks later Marla happened upon another lunchtime discussion in full swing.

The Doc was speaking. “Outwardly they had no respect for the opposition’s argument, but in their hearts, they believed a bit of what their enemies said. Instead of confronting the issue, then, they stupidly ignored it, hoping it would go away. Hence the fly swatting analogy.”

“I doubt very much they sympathized that deeply with the opposition. What happened is that people riding the fence on the issue were incensed by the fly swatting thing. They didn’t like human life compared to that of a fly. They lost massive potential for support, and eventually their cause went down the tubes for hundreds of years until finally it was proven that the soul enters the body around three weeks after birth,” Pit countered.

“I think it was more due to the fact people finally accepted the idea that non-human life is just as sacred as human life. That’s when they regained their position,” Tiny said, speaking somewhat dreamily as if she had been there all those years ago consistently asking what the difference was and pointing out how chicks are culled, geese are force fed, and baby cattle are inhumanely treated in the production of veal.

Most of the room’s inhabitants said nothing and the conversation entered a lull.

Meko sat at the head of the table, watching Marla sit down with her hot pack from the microwave. Suddenly she blurted out one word: “Marla.”

Everyone looked up, startled out of their private reveries by an unusual word that didn’t seem to further the argument one way or another.

Marla jerked her head upward, an involuntary response to a name she’d heard her whole life—ever since the time her soul entered her body at three weeks of age—but lately had not.

“Come with me, we have a problem,” Meko said, getting up from her seat. She hadn’t pulled her own lunch box down yet. She’d been waiting for the new girl named Marla.

“Follow me,” she said over her shoulder as she moved out of the lunchroom and back into the data room.

Marla’s heart pounded as a million thoughts collided in her brain, mostly concerning the dark man, Charney, Saddle, Ivovna, and the sound of clanking chains. She followed Meko into her cubicle at the far end of the room. Once they were inside and the walls had moved up into place, the whole work station moved slowly down away from the data room.

“Hydraulics,” Meko said to the unanswered question.

Marla’s palms sweated and she had an urge to relieve the gas that suddenly built up in her stomach as she kept asking herself why she’d ever trusted Meko. A few more weeks and she’d be free of this place, but now some sort of jig was up.

The cubicle came to a soft stop. The panel behind the data screen withdrew into a side pocket, revealing a room with thousands of floor to ceiling wires tacked to the walls, hither and thither, with no apparent order. Interspersed with the jumbled wires were pneumatic tube slots lining one wall. In the center of the room stood a chair, a table, and a dot-matrix printer. On the far wall a map of the known solar system, lit from behind, commanded a fair amount of the space. Each planet on the map was labeled in large letters. Information too small to read from a distance accompanied each entry.

Hard copy lay everywhere: bound books dog-eared from use, loads of input sheets to be sorted and assigned, reams of printouts with holes running up the sides, phone lists, contact information, software manuals, cash receipts, stacks of newly printed somethings, accounting ledgers, and two waste baskets as big as pickle drums filled to overflowing.

“Am I getting a raise?” Marla asked, weakly trying to joke. The place reminded her of her office back at the Mill.

“Welcome to my cubicle.” Meko said, pushing Marla into the room.

“This is where you work? While we’re up there?” Marla pointed to the ceiling.

“Often, yes, but usually I’m up there with you.”

“They all know about this?” Marla nodded her head up to where she thought the lunchroom was located.

“Mm, sort of, but not really. No one’s been down here but me. They know the boss is down here, they assume I come down here to work with the boss.”

“How come I never knew about it?”

“I don’t know. You have a curious lack of curiosity. You’ve never taken much of a look around the input room. The booths are soundproof, so you can’t hear what’s going on elsewhere. And even with the bit of a view to my cubicle, you never noticed it was gone occasionally. Not that it’s gone much. But still...”

“Am I supposed to keep it a secret?” Marla wondered if she should be happy for Meko’s trust, angry that their pact had not included this information, or scared that now she was being let in on something strange and immense. “Isn’t this where the hero gets tied to the conveyor belt?”

“Maybe,” said Meko. “But it doesn’t matter anymore.”

Marla looked around for the giant buzz saw.

“What exactly is all this?”

“It’s the base of operation: the filing cabinet, the sorting bins, the sales office, the distribution channel, the brains. I needed you to see it so you’d believe what I’m about to tell you.”

“Just shouting my name out in the middle of lunch wasn’t enough?”

“Nobody here knows your name? Nobody anywhere on the planet? Not even Dealy knows your name?”

“You know her?”

“I know everybody in the shipping business. The great thing is, Dealy doesn’t know me. Nobody knows me. Or rather, they don’t know me personally. They only know about me.”

“Dramatic.”

“No, smart. When you’re in my business.”

“What exactly is your business?”

“Data input, Marla. You know that.”

“This your business?”

“Yes.”

“I mean, *your* business.”

“Yes.”

“And you know everything about everything.”

“No. Everything about everything is probably retrievable from the data files, but I personally don’t know everything about everything. Only a computer can know all that. For instance, I only learned who you were last week. I’m sure the information’s been there for some time, but it hasn’t been requested so why would I have had a reason to check on some silly psycho experiment on a backwater planet, no more interesting than any other nothing place. But last week a contract came in from that backwater. A huge contract. You can’t believe what it’s paying.”

“Should I be impressed?”

“Yes. This isn’t about me telling your secret to anybody. It’s about me telling their secret to you. Something I wouldn’t do under any other circumstances. I’ve built my business and my reputation on my fabulous ability to remain quiet and uninterested. But things have changed. We made a pact and exchanged secrets. You have this stupid obsession with Buxton. If you go there, not only will they find you, which in such a well ordered society is a foregone conclusion, they will find out about me as well, and then when I, as you put it, return one day for my son, I won’t be allowed back in.”

“They banished you. They already know about you, and you’re already not allowed in.”

“As things stand, it’s easy to sneak back in. They’ve pretty much forgotten about me and I’m small potatoes so they don’t really care what I do as long as I’m not stirring things up. But if you go there, bring your history with you, things are going to get stirred up plenty. All of a sudden I’ll be on the front pages again. “

“What do you mean ‘when they find me’? Who on Buxton is looking for me?”

“Nobody now, but when they do your background check—upload your personal files—that open APB tickler is going to set off an alarm. They’ll identify you immediately and know all about you, your history, who you’re connected with now and, by connecting the dots, me. And we’ll all be in the news, updated IDs and all. No more faked entries. We’ll be tracked. I’ll be tracked.”

“Why would anyone have an APB out on me?”

“They need to finish their job on you; get their ‘product development’ completed. My company—The Library—collects, analyzes, and stores data from every type of business, legitimate or otherwise. All the contracts come in hand delivered. Most of the stuff is from firms doing fast business here on Ansonia—I do the payroll for most everybody, with such a high turnaround of personnel, it’s faster; I do the books for business, with such a high turnaround of product, it’s cheaper—And I have the best security system ever. Lots of business comes from other planets because of it. When somebody wants data analysis or storage of top secret somethings or to retrieve information, they come to me. Do you know a Dr.

Ivovna?”

Trapped, Marla closed her eyes and lowered her voice. “You know I do.”

“Well she’s here. She got in last week and she handed me a packet as soon as she got off the boat.”

Marla’s blood froze. “What?”

“I don’t accept work except in person. Remember Schwamp’s rule: the shortest route between two persons is the most secure; if a line can be hacked it will be; the longer it takes to develop a newer, better security system, the shorter it takes to break into. In other words, Sister, nothing is safe. I only accept assignments in person. You’ve seen some of the handoffs with the originators. No lackeys with leather pouches. No satellites. No phone calls, emails, or faxes. You weren’t paying attention, as usual, and so had no idea what was going on, but you saw it.”

“So you’re telling me that Ivovna’s tests are top secret and she brought them to you last week. For what, storage?”

“Analysis and information.”

“Big deal. I don’t care. I already knew they wanted me back there to finish it.”

“But did you know she’s speaking to Trest?”

“No, I didn’t know that. Why would I? I have no idea who Trest is. I’m assuming he or she or it is an abductor you put her into contact with to get me out of here and back to where no one on Buxton will ever hear of me.” Marla’s face flushed. “Pretty fuckin’ sharp, Meko. You looking for a counter offer from me or what?”

“Marla, Marla, Marla. Don’t get confused. Trest is the other subject of the study. Another AWOL. The cop that shot you. I would’ve thought that they’d have told you his name. She found him here.”

Unable to be shocked further, Marla said nothing to the news so Meko continued. “His study wasn’t as important as yours. Sort of a side thing, I guess, but they need him now to get to you. He played a big part in your recovery. According to the study data you mentioned him every other day during your recovery. Ivovna’s got a scheme for you and him.”

“I’ll just bet. He murdered a friend of mine, you know.”

“What makes you say that? Judging from what I’ve seen, I find that very hard to believe.”

“Can I see the data?”

“It’s nothing but numbers. Too Kay’s got the project. She’ll be done in a couple of days. When I compile it, I can show it to you, but I’d prefer you leave by tomorrow.”

“What are you talking about? I’m not going anywhere.”

“Trest knows you’re here. He follows you. You’re too blind to notice anything around you, otherwise you would have seen him. You can’t miss him with that gray hair.”

“The cop that shot me had black hair.”

“Well this guy that Ivovna has been speaking to knows you, follows you around carrying a terrible guilt about shooting you, and has gray hair.

“How do you know all this?”

“I know Dealy.”

“How does Dealy know this?”

“Dealy knows everything. I noticed this guy, this Trest, sniffing around you. I snapped a shot of him and hired a dock master to take it to Dealy. She said he was a stowaway on boat #39. I looked up the date of the shipment, thinking it might have been the one you came in on. It wasn’t, but yours was #38. What a coincidence. And then when Ivovna’s study came up, the graphics package included you and Trest. I got curious—worried—and did something I never do. I read up on the background material in the data before setting the templates up. I was shocked by the purpose of the study, impressed actually. And interested; your whole psychology was laid bare. I saw you naked even as you came to work fully clothed.”

“And so what do you think now that you know all about me?”

“I don’t know. I thought we were alike, but you’re not like me. That’s disappointing. I thought I had finally found a GDI that I could relate to; another loner from Loners Anonymous. We could be bravely alone. But you’re a liar.”

Marla started.

“It’s not a bad thing, Marla. It’s just that to think we could give each other solace and understanding is not true. You are alone because you are searching, not because you’ve found yourself as I have. You are still unformed.”

“You know, I used to have faith in psychology, but it’s not much more than religion is it?”

“But you can only be what you are: lost. And I can only help you leave so you can find yourself, or finish yourself, or punish yourself, whatever it is that you’re doing. It is selfish of me to keep you here so we can be alone together. You must never return to the Textile Planet. Nor can you go to Buxton where every item of your person is documented, published, and transmitted across the inner system once you land on the planet. That’s their way. How do you think I came up with this system? With every cell of my body revolting against such a revolting lack of privacy, that’s how. Every person is born a criminal on Buxton. That’s the premise. Curtailing personal activity is their way of ensuring security. If you go there you will be subjected to their ways and in no time you will be handed back to the authorities on the Textile Planet. You will be forced to return to the Mill where you rightfully belong. And BAC will get their product development.”

“I’ve been considering going back anyway.”

Finally Meko stopped talking. For the first time in half an hour she had absolutely nothing to say. Somewhere amidst the pile of wires, the cooling unit for a ten-gallon processor kicked in, breaking the silence.

Marla continued. "This place, this planet, is not home. It's not breathable here. So Iovvna wants to continue studying my brain. Big deal. Who cares? I have to admit I hate the work here, Meko. Even as I admire you for what you've done. And who you are. Your work is nothing but mindless drivel. Numbers added to more numbers. It's dehumanizing."

"Iovvna's not just going to study you," Meko answered. "That would be the least of your worries. Studying you is only the beginning. She's got big plans for you. She's going to turn you into something you or anybody should not be. And for your information, there are much worse things to do than what I have you doing here. I imagine hand scooping primitive privies—the kind that don't flush—for hours on end might be worse. Contributing pin #2 to the wheel shaft of large vehicles passing before me, 2000 times an hour, 8 hours a day, 6 days a week, for 40 years might be worse. How about forcing a work group to process twice as much material as is physically possible with half a staff, the workload increasing daily until your people are killed one by one? Might that be worse?"

"How bad could it have been? And there are other things I could do at home."

"All roads lead to Iovvna. Do you not understand? You have no more free will when she finds you."

"How so?"

"First off you owe terrible amounts of money. Your free time has been garnished for the next twenty five years. You'll be old before you have time for so much as an after work walk in the park. But more important, they won't let you go anywhere, Marla. They want you back at the Mill. Need you there. They'll kill you before they let you live out your life somewhere else. You have to leave tonight."

"Everyone told me to go to Ansonia. That was how people got lost."

"Remember Schwamp: the shortest distance between two people is probably hacked."

"And that means?"

"I'm saying. Buy a planet. An uncharted planet. Go and live by yourself. I saw your mind. I know you more than you know yourself. I want to help you. I'd like a partner in my solitude, yes. But you squirm, like a cat in the arms of a child. Please, go and finish yourself."

"I don't have enough cash saved. I have plenty of money, but I can't get it until my year is up."

"Forget that. I'll buy the planet. I'll work a deal with Ricketts to send you your account minus the cost of the planet once you're settled and your year is up."

"You know Ricketts, too?"

"He's my biggest customer. I looked up Eppie Jones about five minutes after you signed on here. I don't usually do that, but I wondered why you were here. In a planet full of untrustworthy people you stood out as an innocent. I liked you. Not sure why I felt that way; according to Iovvna, you got no soul."

"What?" Marla stammered.

"Don't pretend that that's news to you. You don't have children. You've never had a lasting relationship. You've not seen your parents in ten years. And I'm just joking, anyway. What I mean is, you're a self-contained unit. Some day you'll see for yourself the results of Iovvna's study and you'll

agree. But for now, let's pick a planet. Please."

She indicated a back projected screen lit up on the far wall. A few stacks of orders sitting on a portable water unit blocked the view, but most of the screen was visible. It showed travel brochures lit up with cozy scenes from various planets. Meko flipped through pages of deserts, tropical paradises, temperate zones with prim yet wild places. Lost in thought and sick to her stomach, Marla barely watched and rarely answered Meko's questions as she talked of each place with faked abandon.

Meko's delivery quickened and increased in pitch as she flipped through the pages without Marla registering proper enthusiasm. Finally she burst onto a high note.

"Marla! You have to choose!" she shouted. "You can't stay here. Iovvna offered me a million in cash if I found you. I have every movement of every individual from every corner of this system in my database. It's just a matter of processor power to track out one person. She knows that. She won't believe I can't find you. She won't leave until I help her. And I gotta tell you, it's very tempting. No one is that special; don't ask me to sacrifice so much for you. If you don't choose within five minutes, I'll turn you in!"

"What?" Marla looked over to where Meko was standing with the heel of her hand on her forehead. "I thought we could trust..."

"Each other?" Meko screamed maniacally. "Each other! I'm trying to help you. Risking my business. Throwing a fortune away. We'll never be able to trust each other, Marla! We can't be friends! We, neither of us, has a soul! For us friendship is...is...mutually exclusive." The light from the screen reflected a shine in the corners of Meko's eyes.

Marla took a deep breath. "I, uh..." She looked up at the screen showing a desert with nary a plant as far as the picture could go. "That one's...fine."

"That's nothing but stones and rubble, Marla." Meko sobbed.

"It's fine. I, I like it. I think I could grow grapes there. Or, or something. I mean, it's good for goats, right? And I don't believe you'd ever turn me in, Meko. You care way too much."

"And you care too little."

"I know," Marla said.

They went through the motions of putting the bid in for planet number XKJ10 in the outer system. Barely charted and never explored, the planet had no other information on it besides the picture of stony cliffs in Meko's travel brochure. The bid was accepted at midnight. Meko went with Marla to collect her things and the savings she had stowed in her little room by the river.

Early the next morning they were hugging on a platform with the transport pilot pointing anxiously at his watch.

"If you ever need me to do anything or come get you," Meko said, "just send a message. Send a message collect telling me you've got my money."

"I've got your money?"

"You've got my money."

Marla pulled Meko in to herself tightly, wrapping her arms around the big woman. Meko's cane fell to the floor where it lay all the while Marla silently held its owner. Marla finally released and reached down to retrieve it, but Meko shook her head, insisting she get on with it as if any minute Ilovna, Trest, and the whole gang of BAC idiots would burst onto the scene.

Marla kissed Meko's cheek and then briskly, bravely entered the two person jet carrying cargo for various planets and three Ansonian months' worth of food for Marla in her new life on XKJ10. Meko had also given her a temporary hut made of mylar and insulated with fabrocare just in case the place was ass-biting cold.

According to brokerage rules of planetary purchasing, once dropped off on XKJ10, Marla would be alone to fend for herself for the first quarter. She'd have to work to find food and whatever else she'd need to stay alive beyond that period. Hunter, the pilot, or whoever was in the neighborhood, would return after three months (I123 time) to check on her. If she was still alive she could either leave and try to get her money back, or put in an order for whatever she needed to stay—sustenance-wise, entertainment-wise, and otherwise.

As soon as she stepped aboard, Hunter asked if she would like a little company during the period it would take to get there.

"No thanks," said Marla as she found her seat in the cabin. "I'm a loner."

Hunter returned to his charts and mumbled something like "No shit."

The jet took off. With no viewer port on the platform side, Marla did not get a last look at Meko, but the mole and scar running up the side of her friend's face would be in her brain forever, right next to the pictures of Saddle, Charney, and the dark/gray man.

Chapter Five

For half a split second, Marla considered asking the pilot to deviate towards the Textile Planet. Facing the scary unknown—the lifeless planet XKJ10—was surely worse than facing Ilovna's brain digs. What could be so bad about ten years worth of debt? Or working back at the Mill? So she'd get demoted to a loom. Maybe she'd get a job like Cindy's—President Shurm's uninspired assistant. Ah, to be getting coffee for the boss.

Course she was scheduled to work for that asshole Parker. And Charney was dead so Meko could very well be right about them preferring her likewise as opposed to being out and about and blabbing off. The half split second passed.

Hunter, the pilot, was a bony sort of man with a robust laugh: a skinny little guy with a boisterous voice. The incongruity made him look like a lumberjack with a goatee instead of a big burly beard.

While Hunter seemed like an able pilot, easily maneuvering his jet out and about, his craft looked like something that might have fallen off the back of Dealy's freighter and didn't survive. It instilled no easy faith. Judging from the numerous bolt holes missing bolts on the various panel frames, Marla assumed a

maintenance schedule in arrears. The ATM (altimeter trip mechanism) moved right to left instead of vice versa, giving negative height readings. The faces on most analog readouts were cracked or gone. Grease smears here and there on actuator levers added to the just-been-worked-on feel to the pit.

“You’ll get there,” Hunter said when he noticed Marla noticing things. “Mama never lets me down.”

“You named your ship Mama?”

“Me and myself alone, actually.”

“Ah.”

“I usually only transport supplies.”

“So what happened this time?”

“Well, I’m having cash flow problems.”

“I hadn’t noticed.”

“This bird’ll fly, don’t you worry about it.”

“Uh huh.”

“I know what I’m doing, I’m like a turtle.”

“Slow?”

“No. Kind of clunky on land, but once in the water, smooth and fast.”

“Did you know we were heading into space?”

“It’s just an analogy. I’m not so good with paper, but when it comes to flying, I’m Einstein.”

“Paper as in cash flow?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know where I’m going?”

“Hell no. Nobody knows where you’re going, Sister. We’ll be tracking new territory.”

Marla said nothing. Despite the fact that she had no confidence in Hunter beyond his ability to maneuver his “bird” into automatic, she was not all that worried that no one had any idea where she was going. If this so-called pilot had no idea where she was going, maybe nobody could ever follow her.

Soon after liftoff Hunter instructed Marla in the use of the sleeping booth. “You need to suspend your animation for about six weeks,” he said. “I’ll set the time clocks and join you after the course is input.”

Marla looked at him with the corner of her lip raised in the “What the eff?” position.

“In my own booth,” he quickly added.

She opted to stay awake for a time in her launch seat to watch the flight progress. Hunter had scheduled himself for a number of stops to deliver goods and pick up mail at established outposts, and Marla asked to remain awake to see some of it. She wanted an idea of what went on in the great beyond.

He tried to convince her to go under for the whole trip. “The ride can get messy at times,” he said. “It’s easier for me if I handle the tricky ins and outs on my own without any distracting conversation.”

She ignored his suggestion, assuming he simply didn’t want her to see him in the act of duct taping readouts and consoles as the ship slowly came further apart at the seams. However, if the ship started breaking up, she wanted to be awake to help with the taping.

“How much time are we bypassing to get there?” she asked.

“Fifty years, I believe, but I won’t know exactly until we get to your planet,” he answered. “I truly don’t know where it is. All I know is that it’s on the pastel section of the map.”

“Pastel section?”

“The part that’s not accurately mapped yet. You’re definitely on the edge, Dear.”

“Edge of what?”

“Of the known universe. Quite a chance you’re taking, but don’t let me sour the deal for you.”

“How far out can it be? I saw pictures of it. Photographs. Somebody had to be out there before.”

“Virtuals, Hon. They knew the planet’s makeup—physically and chemically—by remote detection, so they built a photo of it. Happens all the time. There might not even be any life there.”

“How can there not be, if the air is breathable?”

“Okay, okay, eatable life forms. You have to think about those sorts of things. Did you read the brochures, I’m sure there’s some sort of instructions about striking out for food first thing. You only get a three month supply y’know.”

“Yeah, yeah. But I can always sell the place within a year, right? What is it with a year?”

“How would I know? I just fly ‘em, I don’t buy ‘em.”

“I’m pretty sure that was the deal: if I don’t like it within three months, or find something of value or some reason to stay, they’ll buy it back.”

“Uh huh.”

“No, that was the deal.”

“Uh huh. Full price?”

“Uh...”

“Right.”

“I wonder if that’s three months at I123 or local time or what? I mean does this planet have a couple of suns or what’s the turning radius?”

“Look, I have no idea. It’s supposed to be in your packet. Take a look, take a snooze. We’ll be there and you can find out for yourself when you wake up. All I know is I’m not taking you back to Ansonia, so get that idea right out of your head.”

“I haven’t said a word about going back.”

“Read your stuff.”

She settled back, turned on the magnifier on her helmet and leafed through the packet. A few minutes into the information her stomach gurgled. The glossy radar projections and virtual photos could not prettify what lay beyond the adspeak.

“Gorgeous weather year-round” obviously meant no rain. Ever. And further translated to nothing lived there and even further to there was nothing to eat but rocks.

“Glorious sunsets over a mountainous backdrop” meant an impenetrable topography.

“Lazy days with ample time for reflection and relaxation” meant absolutely nothing to do there and no one to do it with.

“Wide valleys with uninterrupted vistas” meant not a drop of water in the plains.

A round of bile arose along with her panic.

“Where’s the barf bag?” she asked weakly.

“Are you kidding?” Hunter asked.

Marla shook her head.

He pointed to a panel above her. She pressed it and a rubber contraption fell onto her lap. She squeezed the spring loaded neck to open it up and heaved inside. She felt better, but the bag’s odor of freshly pressed latex threatened to bring on another urge. She breathed through her mouth and tried to force her stomach to calm.

Laying her head back, she watched out the portals. There was nothing to see except blank black—a weird effect of the time reduction required to travel to very far places. Heretofore her travel accommodations had been normal velocity trips, but this freighter, with its two-person-and-a-ton-of-goods load, flew in your face. It really did. Not much separated her from the dark matter of Einstein’s day. To read about it, or even theorize about it, was one thing, another to actually observe it. If you want to call looking at the big blank an observation, that is. With nothing to see, it could have easily been just a virtual photo, just like the ones of her new home, XKJ10. But the nothingness is what it is. How does one define nothingness? Or paint a picture of it? It is unfathomable and unviewable. So in reality what should nothing look like? Kind of a trip checking it out. But then again, it was rather boring.

Her thoughts drifted forward to her destination—XKJ10. She conjured up visions of other globes that might have been her new home. More hospitable places she might have chosen had she taken Meko's slide show to heart. Her thoughts meandered and recollection set in. She thought of mannekins bringing her coffee. The past and the future and the might have beens collided into one present moment, another weird effect of the time reducers outfitted on the ship and evidenced by the big blank outside. She saw everything at once and oddly understood it all and experienced all the emotions at the same time: frustration, fright, serenity, happiness, security. Maybe even joy. For what? A cup of coffee? A planet with water? Maybe emotions were like Crayolas. A yellow and blue make green. An anger and a courage make joy. Who knows? What a trip!

She threw up into the bag again.

Hunter let out a sound of disgust.

"I'm going," she said, relaxing her white-knuckled grip on the vomit bag so it could retract into overhead receptacle. "You need any help with anything?"

"Uh, no," he answered, flipping a couple of switches in front of him. "I do this by myself all the time; it's a one-man op. Total mama."

"Too bad. I could use a job."

He grunted in understanding, as if he actually did get the joke.

She retreated to the cabinet in back and followed the instructions to get the electro-sonar generator tuned in to her body's chemistry. She started up the hypnoguide and set the timing to align with Hunter's programmed schedule. Just as she strapped in, the ship's fake gravity took hold of her lower jaw and an incredible euphoria overcame her. She was so very glad Hunter had no job for her, she was on her way home to the most beautiful planet in the world where absolutely nothing lived. Peace and solitude were hers upon awakening.

#

What did she dream as she slept? Nothing. The actinomyelin sheaths were deactivated, the electrolytes immobilized, the thoughts frozen. Nothing crossed a synapse. Her mind locked down. If she had dreamt perhaps she would have dreamt of the societies of XKJ10. Were they underground, large, friendly for the most part? Were they agrarian? Did they have public education? Arranged marriages? Did they dispense justice or skip that and go straight for the punishment? Were the cops on the take, moms on the pill, and granddads on Viagra? Did they pay their teachers well? How often and how long were the traffic jams? Democracy, tyranny, total anarchy? Mini, midi, mod, or full-length? Did they get high, depressed, or incontinent? Were children institutionalized from the age of 5? What do these children swing from if there are no trees? Do the children ever get hurt or is their psychological growth stunted for safety reasons? Do they feel guilty for leaving their loved ones behind?

#

"Prepare for rehydration."

The words broke the silence in Marla's head. Without a clue as to what it meant, she prepared the best way she could, planning for an influx of water and an ensuing bloated feeling. What else could she do

after such a statement?

Actually the words were not meant for her. An automatic message to the pilot reminding him of some step in the landing procedure, she heard it as she roused from her sleep and the door to her booth opened before her.

Her limbs tingled, her stomach lurched, her hair stood straight on end. She opened her crusty eyes and without having the strength to remain awake, closed them again. This time she slept normally, dreaming all the above-mentioned questions and waking twenty seconds later. A line of drool fell lazily to her lap.

She tried to speak and call to someone—the voice maybe—but was unable to. Claustrophobia crept in as she fought to gain control of senses and muscles.

She watched the pilot return to his seat, hale and fully revived. He slapped at switches, turned knobs, followed red lettered readouts, and ignored her struggle behind him. At one point he glanced around at her and noticed the gossamer drip line connecting her lip to her lap. “Guess we’re fully rehydrated, eh?” He laughed.

She tried to force her face into a question, but he wasn’t looking at her. He knew though. “Weird huh? Feels like you’re dead, I know. Just wait a few moments. Everything has to start pumping. Relax a bit. Enjoy it, that’s as close as you’ll ever get to it without actually being it.”

Her head dropped forward and the drool line snapped, bouncing up to her chin. She felt the coolness of it and was glad for a sensation other than the tingling of limbs. She knew she looked ridiculous, but the pilot, Hunt maybe was his name, wasn’t watching now.

“We’re almost there now, Lads,” he said. “We’ve been in entry for about 90 minutes. In half an hour you’ll be able to wipe your ass. Hungry?”

“Uh.” Baby’s first words.

“Sure you are. First meal on XKJ10 is on me.” He guffawed and reached over to the empty passenger’s seat to press an ejector there. The front panel flipped up and a bright orange prepack popped out. He pulled the package up and threw it into a reconstitutor behind the seat, leaving it there to percolate.

Marla’s hair pulled at her scalp as if Mommy had pulled the pony tail a bit too tight.

“Ow,” she whispered.

“Just rub your scalp,” Hunter said. “You need to get circulation going. In a minute you can flex your toes to get rid of heel cramps.”

Miraculously, her arms were able to lift her hands up to her head. Thick rubbery gloves prevented her from doing much good though.

Hunter turned around to her and saw the problem. “Take them off,” he said. “You don’t need them anymore.”

She complied, placing them in her lap.

“Is this how it always is?” she asked, surprised that she was able to speak so well, when moments ago,

all she could say was “uh.”

“Every time. Like a sacred ritual. Going to church for instance. And just like in church, you always end up with a cramp after sleeping through the sermon.”

“Sermon? Ow!”

“Flex your toes, Dearie.”

She flexed.

A view of the planet’s surface came into focus in the forward monitor. One word described it: brown. Or maybe “tan.” Or “taupe.” Or “sand.” Sand in fact described the color, texture and chemical composition. Nothing but silicon dioxide everywhere.

“What’s this place like?” she asked.

“How should I know?”

“Why was it for sale?”

“Are you talking to me or just babbling? I don’t know, why’d you buy it?”

“I have no idea. Do you know anything about it at all?”

Crags, pinnacles, outcrops, and dirt barrens emerged from the general sand-colored mass.

“Nope.”

“Huh.”

“Actually, I did hear a rumor about a lunatic getting dropped off here years ago. Some crazy nut stowaway on a freighter asked to be dropped here. Apparently the captain obliged, figured it was the same as shoving him out the evacuator tube without a suit which is what you’re legally obligated to do to a stowaway.”

Marla leaned forward to stretch her back. “You’re kidding!”

“No, weight is weight and time is money. Any extra represents lost time in interstellar travel.”

“Isn’t the ship weighed before takeoff?”

“Nope it’s calculated based on registered load. Any unknowns get ejected through the tube.”

“Cruel.”

“Yeah, well, the Pinks don’t like freeloaders.”

“I see.”

The landing procedure began as the velocity dropped below Mach 1. The enveloping roar suppressed

further conversation, preventing Marla from asking for details about the Pinks, the lunatic, available weapons, and how to find water on a dripless planet. Mostly she wanted to know if someone had already been there, why was the location of the place uncharted. But by the time she was framing that question, the flyer had powered down and the hatch was opening onto the glory of dawn on XKJ10. She forgot everything she wanted to ask.

Although Marla's suit had provided massage and effector therapy throughout the trip, her months of suspended animation found her muscles unable to propel her up from her seat. Hunter turned and reached over to press an actuator on the side of her booth. Her seat pushed her up to the standing position where she began flexing leg muscles in anticipation of self-propulsion. After half an hour, she moved to the passenger seat next to Hunter.

They ate the lunch as the planet contents sampler spilled out results of tests it had been conducting since the landing. The numbers confirmed what the travel brochures had promised: breathable atmosphere, survivable UV factor, and even a bit of moisture to serve as drinking water once her extractor apparatus was up and running.

After what the lunch wrapper purported to be a vitamin complete meal, Hunter reached to the back and yanked a side panel open, exposing the freight section. He jumped up and tossed Marla's survival packs to the ground. They hit the sand with a thud.

He followed the packs, stating, "Everything you need for three months of living is right here. Instructions included, usually deep inside and available only after you unroll the whole box. I can't vouch for the accuracy or whether or not the manufacturer spoke the People's English as a first language, but they are complete and if you follow them, you'll have no trouble. If you get into deep shit, there's a virtual flare that will send out a signal if you activate it. It'll probably take a month for the first available pilot to get here and that's only if there's a scheduled run in this quadrant."

"What's that mean?"

"That means don't use it for some stupid reason like Godzilla's showing up and you can't find any overhead wire to distract him."

"Or bridge."

"Or commuter train."

"Or Empire State Building."

"That would be King Kong, but you get the idea. Don't use it unless you are genuinely in trouble."

"I'm already genuinely in trouble." She shook her head and, trying to combat the need to cry, she turned away from Hunter.

"Look, Kid," he said. "I feel bad for you, but I can't take you back. The contract states you have to at least try for three months unless you are truly in trouble, sick and unable to care for yourself. If we let people have look-sees first this system would never work, we'd never make any money. Nobody likes to be alone at first. Just gotta give it a day or two. Them's the rules."

Marla turned to him and nodded weakly and then looked out over her new project, her home. The wind blew up at intervals and the sand swirled in mini-cyclones off in the distance. Low peaks from apparent

years of that type of weather formed the only relief from the relief. A tear fell onto the ground where a pile of barf would have been if her lunch hadn't been so perfect it was designed to stay down under any circumstances.

Hunter continued. "It happens all the time. Somebody that can't rub two sticks together to build themselves a fire, buys a planet thinking they can camp out alone. They go nuts. You gotta be in a war to have the right mentality for that kind of thing. Humans just ain't cut out for it. It's not the elements. Not the privation, but the privacy. People just can't be alone.

Marla spun around. "I can."

"You don't know that. No one knows that until they're faced with it."

"I can! I'm just scared of this place. This huge... empty... I could be a caveman easily, but take a look: there's no caves."

"Or trees. Yeah, yeah. Listen, I got a few hours to kill. There's nothing on this place for me to collect, you want me to help you set up your kit? I've done it before. I kick in a hand now and then if the ride went well and I'm ahead of schedule. What else am I going to do, sit in my ship until liftoff time? Besides you might need help, considering how bad the instructions always are. Half the information's gone and everything else is spelled wrong."

"I thought you said they were complete and I'd have no trouble if I followed them."

"Yeah, well that was before I realized I had so much time on my hands."

"Well," she said. "Sure, if it'll help you, go ahead, stay a few hours."

Four days later he was still there. He'd insisted they do some sort of reconnaissance to find the best spot for pitching her cabin. Oddly, after a short walk they did actually see some boulders on the distant horizon in a direction he called south simply because he could. The compasses didn't work, there were no known maps of the planet, so south was what they decided it was.

"This is south," Hunter said. "Keep that in mind and as long as you're in this valley you'll know where you are."

"Yeah, in the valley."

"Well, it looks to me like everywhere in the valley is like everywhere else. You could easily get lost even in this little area. Keep your eye on south."

"Yes, Mom."

Half a day later, which on this planet was two interplanetary hours following standard I123 time, they plopped her kit in the middle of the boulder area. Out of the wind and at the edge of the valley, the place provided the thus far only visible respite from the planet. The ground was hard, scoured from the periodic winds blowing across the surface. The ten-foot high boulders provided purchase for her cabin, which inflated nicely, wedging itself between the rocks.

They set up the water extractor in the afternoon and outfitted the pantry with the reconstitutable delicacies such as stew, banana cake, and a couple of whole fryers. Three months of freeze-dried food

sat on the rubber shelving. They alphabetized everything so even the Koolaid could be found easily enough between the Kielbasa and the Kornflakes.

Two compact solar panels found a place on the top of a flat rock to the “west” side of camp and connected via blackcable® to the battery housing under the cabin’s power flap. An inverter built into the flap provided ac to the sockets located at convenient intervals inside the cabin so Marla could read at night, cook without gas, take a hot shower, or communicate via radio with any planet within five light years that had their ears on. Nothing tuned in immediately so they decided to more thoroughly check all bands at a later time.

To be truthful, the hot water never tested out very well. Humidity was so low on XKJ10 that the tank took forever to fill up. They found themselves drinking the entire accumulation before having a chance to do the dishes or take a shower. Sand cleaning seemed to be the order of the day. Marla looked forward to a year of under the arm spritz baths, but didn’t worry too much. It’s not like she’d be going to the ball or anything.

By the time the sun was rising for the second day, the camp was set up. The furniture and appliances had been inflated. Closets unfolded. Food alphabetized. Her effects—a blanket, several changes of underwear, some sweat suits, Ricketts’ travel brochure, and the Material Safety Data Sheets for silica (declaring sand to be safe for everything except human consumption and even that wasn’t so bad)—were stowed.

They spent the day exploring the planet, keeping aware of south. They had a borscht soup picnic in the cabin and then a mesclun mix one out on the sand later. The only difference between the two picnics was the color of the food. Reconstitution is reconstitution. Might as well all have been jars of Gerber baby food; it all tasted the same. They talked of this and that, ideas for how Marla could explore more of the planet. What the chances of finding something besides sand were.

“It’s an incredibly small planet,” Hunter observed. “You’ll be lucky to find anything at all.”

“Well I’ve got three months to find something.”

“And what will you do if you don’t?”

“No idea. All your life, when you run into problems you always tell yourself there’s someplace you can hide to start over. First you run from your parents to a place they’d never look. Then you run from your creditors to a planet that’s not well connected. Some place without a complete database. Where do you go after that? Well to the end of the known system. After that, there just isn’t any place, right?”

“There’s a lot of lost planets, Eppie. I know a garden of Eden somewhere that has had hardly anybody on it if that’s how you get your kicks.”

Marla said nothing. Inhaled and exhaled. Closed her eyes.

The sun was going down, and it was obvious Hunter was going to spend the night again. The loneliness of the planet hit. Not hit. It hit the minute they stepped from the jet yesterday. Hit home this time. The loneliness of the planet and life in general hit home.

“I have some wine in my pit,” Hunter said. “It won’t take me long to fetch it.”

“Good idea,” Marla said. She cleared the salad plates and began running them through the sand to clean

them.

“Don’t put the blanket away just yet,” Hunter said as he was walking off. “It’s nice outside. With all this space, your cabin feels claustrophobic.”

“And smells like hot plastic.”

“I wasn’t going to point that out.”

She watched his cigarette body walk north into the setting sun. He had the skinny legs and barrel trunk of a man whose occupation requires him to sit for long periods of time.

A bit past dark, he returned with a half-empty, half-full bottle of Shiny Red, last year’s vintage which was quite well known for being cheap and effective. Marla lay on her back on the picnic blanket, staring up at the blank sky. A battery operated candle was burning off to the side.

“Funny,” she said. “The sky’s clear, but there aren’t any stars.”

“I noticed that myself,” Hunter answered, settling down on the blanket with the bottle. “Weird sector you got here. When I say it’s on the edge, it’s really on the edge.”

Marla sat up and grabbed the bottle, uncorking it with her teeth. “I don’t suppose there’s any cheese and crackers to go with,” she said.

“Uh, no,” he answered. “All my munchies are like your munchies—dried.”

The bottle emptied fast without much effect besides a yearning for more of the same. Hunter, having been through this before, pulled out a relief bottle from his back pocket.

“Ah, you snake. You devil, you. Got a cork screw?” Marla reached for the bottle.

He pulled the bottle back out of her reach. “A what?”

She moved forward on her knees and reached toward him. “A bottle opener, cork borer, screw jack, top popper, wood buster.”

“Not so fast, Girlie,” Hunter laughed and slapped her hand away. “We have to break the seal first.” He made a big show of stripping off the plastic sealer.

Marla sat back on her haunches, a goofy smile of anticipation on her face like a kid waiting to lick the bowl while Mommy takes too long scraping out the batter.

“Gimme that,” she reached for it. He pulled back too fast and fell backwards. She scrambled across his belly to grab the bottle, ripping off the coating without bothering to get up.

He laughed underneath her, reached his arms around her to pull himself back up to sitting position. She wound up in his lap holding the bottle up triumphantly.

“Looks like you need a tool, Girlie,” he said, and reached inside his shirt to extract a doohickey on a chain.

Marla watched as he stabbed the mechanism into the cork. The thing hummed and bored itself down into the rubber, where it stopped and two tiny mechanical legs extracted themselves from the sides of the mechanism to clamp onto the edges of the bottle, providing leverage for the doohickey to pull itself up and out with the cork attached. It held the moist stopper up in the air for the purchaser to sniff and approve.

Hunter held the bottle up to Marla's nose, keeping his eyes on her the whole time. She watched his eyes as she inhaled. She hadn't noticed his eyes before. They were a fierce blue-green, an odd color for a human, most of whom had brown eyes. Hunter was from the mountains, she could tell now. His skin and features, clear and weathered, marked that race of people that stayed to themselves and didn't buy into the infrastructure. Self-sufficient, they were. She couldn't remember from which planet, but she knew it was the mountains. How sensuous he was she noticed for the first time. And full of silent knowledge. Knowing but not telling.

Suddenly she wanted to know many things about this person. Things she'd never known about anybody. Never wanted to know. Maybe it was the loneliness of the planet making her curious. Perhaps it was the little bit of wine she'd already drunk on this driest of dry planets.

Hunter removed the cork contraption and, still not taking his eyes from her, offered her the first sip. She took it right from the bottle and passed it back to him. The bottle was half-gone, half-full when they stole their first long kiss. And the evening and the morning were the third day.

Marla woke up with the feeling one often wakes up with after a night of drunken romance. It was a combined feeling of claustrophobia, guilt, and depression. She lay next to Hunter on the blanket, both were totally nude. As the events of the previous evening—the wine, the kiss—went through her hungover mind, she wondered what the aitch she was supposed to do now. Eventually she got thirsty and roused herself. Hunter snored.

After getting dressed she went inside the cabin to check the contents of her water extractor. A full quart. She drank a cupful and oomphed herself down onto a chair. She could hear Hunter making waking sounds: a morning cough, a restlessness as he searched for underwear. She poured him a cup as well. He came in and oomphed down on a chair across the room. He looked at her and scratched at the back of his head, searching for something to say. She handed him the water. He gulped.

"Um," he said.

"You taking off today?" she asked, relieved and scared at the same time.

"Well, er, that is to say... I guess so. I think I've overstayed my welcome."

"Not really. To be honest, well, I'm glad you stayed as long as you did." She smiled. "But I'm getting low on water."

"Yeah, well, we could always use what I have, but I'm getting behind on my schedule, now."

"I know. I appreciate your staying this long. It's really helped, but I think I need to accept the fact that I'm alone. Alone is what I want, and alone is now what I am."

"Let me send someone to get you. I'm scheduled to return in a year, but someone else can come get you. No one should be this alone. No one's cut out for this place. You'll go nuts in a matter of days."

“No I won’t. I’ve got my mind around it now and actually I’m looking forward to it. I’m scared to death, of course, but looking forward to it.”

Hunter stood to place his cup on the table. He walked to where she was sitting and put his arms on her shoulders, a patronizing move with none of the previous evening’s lust.

“You’ll do okay.”

“You think?”

“Sure. Lots of people do this. Some go nuts, sure, but some don’t.”

“Why do you think I’ll be one of the lucky ones?”

“Lucky? I never said anything about lucky. You’ll make it because you are scared. The ones that don’t are nuts to begin with. But lucky, no, you’re not lucky. People who need people are the luckiest people in the world, Dear.”

“Hunter, I’m grateful for last night, but...”

“No magic, huh?”

“No.”

“We can pretend can’t we? What else does one ever get?”

“I don’t know. I don’t have those fantasy dreams that keep other people going. The cold hard reality of life in general precludes any belief in Santa Claus for me.”

“Well, you’re in the right place.”

“That’s what’s so scary. Listen, there’s a favor I need from you.”

“I’m not leaving any wine, no.”

She gave a short laugh, and nodded. “No, thanks for the thought, though. The fact is, I’m doing this, not just because I need to get away from it all, but because I’m trying to hide from somebody. Someone that will hurt me if they find me. Two people actually. So I’m wondering if anybody asks you about me, could you just tell them that I died on the voyage and you shunted me out?”

“Yeah, sure, but...”

“The guy’s name is Trest. He’s a Throwback. Had black hair and white skin. Not paper white, just not brown like everybody else. Pasty. And ink black hair. He was striking with it, but I hear he went gray now. His name is Trest. The other person could be anybody because he or she will be a hired hand.”

“You don’t need to give me details. I know the routine. I’m not supposed to know what happened.”

“I don’t really know what happened to be honest. They did a brain flip on me and I’m having a hard time understanding reality now. Reality about myself. I’ve heard you can’t fix your head once a procedure’s been done, so I’m removing myself; taking myself out of circulation.”

“Sounds like you need a lawyer.”

“Maybe, but if there was one thing I learned on Ansonia, it’s that you can only fight money with money, and I don’t have any. Justice is on the take. Big disappointment that, but we all have to grow up. Sometimes justice is just falling through the cracks and so that’s what I’m trying to do. I’m just asking you to seal up the crack.”

“Well, I’m sorry you’re in a mess. I’ll help you, yes, I will. And I know you’re out of circulation, but can I still come and visit you sometime?”

“Let’s take it one day at a time.”

“And you know there’s all kinds of therapy now. You can flip back, y’know.”

She stood up and pushed him gently away from her. “Therapy’s the last thing I need. I had therapy. That’s why I’m fucked up. I just need rest. And time to think. I need to pee my pants from fright. I need to wander around the desert with no stimulus coming in. No news, no people, no talking.”

“Oh, I get it. You need to suffer, punish yourself. Right. Okay. I’ll go get the branding irons and stoke up the fire.” He zippered his flight suit. “And you needn’t worry about any visitors. I’ll see to that. The houseboy is leaving; he’ll lock up on the way out.”

Marla’s shoulders slumped.

He turned to go. Marla followed him to the outside.

“I’m going to make it a whole year, you know!” she shouted.

He turned and scoffed. “Of course you are. You have a lot of penance to pay. A lot of things to get out of your head. A need for space and solitude. “

“No, because you’re scheduled to come back in a year and I want to be here then.”

He stopped about ten feet away, turned abruptly, and walked to her and embraced her roughly. He kissed her on her forehead and then turned and walked off. In an hour she watched his ship fly off and instantly he was gone from the sky.

She crumpled to the ground in a violent heap, crying. The wind began to blow the sand up around her. When she looked up it stung her face. With no reason to move, she remained there for hours, watching the sky as if someone would come for her. If not Hunter, someone else. Even Iovna’s goons at this point would be welcome.

Night fell like a rock. It came fast and hurt. Sounds came with it. Far off clicking sounds, like strange animals communicating, perhaps about her, wondering if she was good to eat. She lay on her inflated bed in her inflated cabin, her blanket pulled up to her ears. It staved off the cold, but not the terror. She kept a light on the whole sleepless night and fell off only when the sun rose to heat the day and her dreams of false love.

She slept until midafternoon, ate a little reconstituted biscuit, and went out to sit amongst the boulders to formulate a plan. She looked out on the interminable sand and thought about a map with her camp at the

center. South had been defined, other directionals could be set up so she could find her way home again in the days of travel ahead of her. She'd only survive if she set up a good system for finding her way back to the inflated cabin.

At this point many, many people would give up the fight for sanity, the bleak canvas of this planet proving itself insufficient to sustain logic. Anyone would turn numb early on. But the very emptiness of the planet was the thing that saved Marla. The bleak canvas with its promise of hills and outcrops just beyond the edge of sight fueled her imagination. It allowed her previously too wound up mind to unravel. And think. No stimulation coming in, just like she said. No guilt stopping progress or off the wall philosophy discussion mucking up the works. Just pure uninhibited thought of a selfish nature rolled around in the mow. The one antidote for fear was curiosity.

A thousand places to go and discover and a need to find supplies beyond her three-month cache kept her from focusing on her vulnerability and lack of survival skills. She needed to find out about her place; it couldn't all just be sand.

She started with short treks out mostly in darkness, since she was too scared to sleep then. She slept through the daylight hours and worked with the handheld lightable at night. It threw ghastly shadows on the boulders around her camp, frightening her almost more than the clicking night sounds which had recently been accompanied by swooshes and whooshes like the wind in tall grass. Without a patch of green anywhere within sight, Marla wondered what the source of the noise was. Or what it actually was.

Nothing showed itself though and after several weeks she got used to the whooshing. Even started nodding off in the darkness. Soon she was taking short forays in the afternoon light, walking as far as she could across the land to just where she could barely see the home base. She'd stare at the horizon and watch heat waves in the shimmery distance, wondering if the optical illusion invented or obscured what was there—shelter, more boulders, apartment complexes. At sunset she'd return to her hut and mark where the sun stood in relation to where she stood, using the boulders Stonehenge fashion.

She knew nothing of solar gazing, or standardized charting methods, but thought the best way to learn was to simply do it and chart the best she could. Maybe someday someone that knew how to tell formal time by an unmapped sun would drop by, look at her logs, and set things right. Meanwhile she had a project that required her to obtain data—a marvelous pastime for someone with a bleak canvas and a lot of time on her hands. Uncharted, informal time.

After a month she no longer cried for hours at a time. She resigned herself to her situation, decided she ought to get a move on if she was to find a way to sustain herself after her three months were up. She had eight I123 weeks of food left and no money with which to buy more. She'd have to find something to trade with. Something of value. Something beyond SiO₂ which was plentiful around the universe and not particularly saleable. Nobody ever packed sand on Ansonia. The sun was beginning to get on her nerves.

She planned for an extended jaunt to really get out and survey the place. Straight opposite the sunset (which would make it north), she'd discovered an interesting outcrop on one of her further reaches. Interesting in that it was the only outcrop she'd seen besides the one she resided in. She packed a week's worth of food and water, a change of clothes (the one change she had), and a goal of finding a source of water or something else of value. Gold came to mind. Maybe something alive. Anything of interest. A pit full of worm bait, a hill of leftover cabbage, a stack of last year's National Geographics, jokes from the Twentieth Century no longer appropriate but still funny because everyone had forgotten them. Hope, peace, good will. Anything of value. Wouldn't it be funny if she had her own cache of black marble in some sinkhole somewhere?

After a week, she returned empty-handed, down-hearted, and dead tired, but was ecstatic with the fact that her water reclaimer had filled itself with enough water to not only wash her clothes (both sets), but give herself a shower if she didn't rinse. She even did her hair and went to bed naked under her blanket. Next day she rose realizing her clothes were superfluous at this point. Even if she came across some living thing, far from being human, it wouldn't know a titty from a dicky and what was the point of modesty? The clothes were hot and despite the dry climate managed to develop moisture stains under the pits that required washing she could ill afford. She left them folded for the special occasions when she'd be forced to receive visitors.

Despite wallowing in self-pity, she planned two more forays—the first to the right of the sunset (east) and the second to the left (west). It took several weeks to complete these treks, and they both proved fruitless. Only the road leading directly into the setting sun, the direction that Hunter's jet had lay in when Hunter himself was laying in, hadn't been explored.

A standardized time piece she manually wound after approximately every 26 hours helped her keep track of time. She estimated there was about two and a half weeks left before her three iodine months were up. With half a heart she set out for one last trek to find a rainbow. One last attempt to find a diamond mine. Or a truffle farm. Or a Hollywood ending.

Overstating the obvious, she wondered if Ivovna would be waiting for her when she returned to Ansonia. Perhaps Marla would be able to sneak back to Meko who could then maybe hide her. Maybe. For a while. If Meko was so inclined.

Where the eff could she go if Ansonia was the last place in the civilized Solar System? Everyone had said to go there to hide. Yet she'd been tracked to there. They found her after all. So she'd gone to a place at the absolute end of the Universe and it was unlivable. So where to now? With no plan. And no Hollywood ending.

She walked toward the sun as it set and rested herself in the center of the valley for two days. For two days she sat and pondered, immune to her personal urgings to get on with her search for the platinum mine, or the chemical dump, or the lost ark of the covenant. The sun came up behind her, beat on her brown and naked body and then set in front of her at the end of its 6-hour day. Like a worshipper, she sat and stared at it until it almost blinded her. Her apathy, or perhaps her devotion, kept her rooted as if she refused to move until an answer came. And all the time she stared at the burning object of her worship, she developed a deeper hatred for the sun. The cabin key around her neck grew hot and left square red marks on her skin wherever it lay.

She thought of Saddle and Charney and Meko. Her guilt tired her, fed into her ennui, by repeatedly asking what the point was. During the second XKJ10 day of the outing, she wondered how she came to be where she was. The tears never came, though. Her body, more alert to her situation than her mind was, didn't permit her to cry and thereby conserved its moisture. She decided she felt little remorse anyway. Now giving up on her final quest before she even started, she continued to sit and allow her mind to dull further. The ache in her heart finally diminished. Her stomach quelled. Her skin burned in the daytime and froze in the night. The storm in her brain quieted.

"How easy," she thought.

It was the only conclusion she could come to, the only thing to do: sit and become a grain along with the rest. Slowly her skin would fry to a crisp, roll off, and finally her muscles and bone would be exposed. One day they would burn and flake off as well. Her ashes would fall in a pile and mix with the rest of the dust here. And then she would be home.

In her dream she heard the creaking of a chain moving along a conveyor belt accompanied by a screech. It was a sound in her dream but somehow as she slept she knew it was a real sound out in the world beyond the dream and it woke her with a start.

She found herself lying on her back, shivering with one arm raised above her head and resting on the sand. Pulling herself up, she stretched her legs and flexed her arm muscle to wake it. She rummaged in her knapsack to retrieve the blanket as the night air was cold and she was naked.

A whistle pierced the air and the sky lit up in a flash. Her head jerked up to see a massive explosion of sparks and light over to the right of where the sun sets. And then all was silent and dark again. She looked around but could see nothing. Wondering where she was, she vaguely remembered squatting down before. Earlier in the day? Yesterday? Her stomach growled from hunger, her bowels gurgled in pain, but she was too frightened to move.

Another screech, another flash, and another explosion, this time off to the left of where the sun sets. She pulled the blanket around her as if to protect herself and then turned to run back towards her cabin, hoping the inflatables would afford a refuge.

Almost directly in front of her another flash exploded, accompanied by a screech. She turned again and fled towards the sunset, clutching her blanket and knapsack to her breast. She ran for hours as the screeches and flashes increased in frequency and volume. They seemed to come closer. At one point she tripped and fell, her knapsack careening to the ground far in front of her and her blanket collapsing over her head. Something whistled through the air and landed at her feet. She jumped. A crackle came from behind. She turned and saw a fire burning in the distance, silhouetting the rocky outcrop she called her home. It was her home. She watched with terror for several minutes as bits of melting plastic floated up and off on the updraft. The explosions continued around her, louder and increasing in number. She hid herself under her blanket like a child.

Finally a lull came; the thunder slowed. She picked herself up and grabbed her knapsack and considered which way to go. Then the fireworks picked up again with more fury than before, propelling her forward in the direction she recollected had been the sunset. She continued for hours, dropping and resting for a few moments, then picking up and running again into the sunset. Finally, exhausted from the endless running and her unquenched thirst, she dropped one final time, unable to pick herself back up. She fell asleep amidst the streaming fireballs flying mostly behind her.

When she awoke, all was quiet and the hated sun blazed overhead.

A layer of ash covered her, falling off into a heap that easily disintegrated in the sand as she raised herself up. Slowly she brushed herself off and reached for her blanket. The stench of rotten chicken eggs hit. Except for the fact that there was no blessed mist accompanying the smell, it reminded her of Ansonia. As far as she could see, a layer of ash covered the entire landscape in all directions, including the one back to where her cabin would lay if it hadn't been burnt up in the firestorm.

Her heart sank as she remembered the flames silhouetted by the rocks which she couldn't even see now, she'd run so far away. Didn't really matter, what would she gain by going back there? Her emergency signals would be gone, her water unit melted, all of her self-support systems would have been destroyed in the fire. At most she had 3 or 4 days of water and rations on her. At most. Her fancy thoughts of staring into the sun for two days until eternal sleep overtook her fled immediately as the real threat of death became obvious. Instantly she wanted to live. At all costs now, she must find water.

The sand stretched before her, her old enemy the sun rose behind her. She had to move before it mesmerized her into stopping to think again. She must overcome the inertia. The time for thinking was over; now she must trudge, or die.

The following two days and nights brought no new vistas besides sand. Not even any rocks came into sight. She fought off panic as best she could, but by the second day of enduring as much thirst as possible to save the little bit of water that was heating up by the minute, she began to dream of cliffs to jump off from and ovens to thrust her head into. She considered heading back North to home to tie a noose from a rock, but was quite sure she'd never make it that far at this point.

Finally the cooling night fell with its black starless tarpaulin. She rested in the sand, staring up at it, welcoming it as an indifferent friend. Someone she knew all about, but neither loved nor hated. A familiarity in a world of questions and disappointments. She found herself unable to fall asleep, and so, despite exhaustion, she rose and walked.

The third day began with a blazing, cruel sunrise, unwitnessed by any human because the only human on the planet did not bother to turn and look at it as she trudged forward. No tears fell though her body rocked with sobs.

She drank nothing all day and ate her rations dry. By nightfall she was delirious and fell face forward into the sand, unable to unroll the blanket, and hoping to freeze to death in her sleep. But the nights had been warmer ever since the firestorm, so no relief came there.

And what of that storm? She had so hoped it was some sort of war between sophisticated yet cretinous people. Sophisticated in that they had advanced machinery for carrying out a war, and cretinous in that they were even in a war, something that had been bred out of humans long ago. She had seen no flying machines shooting off missiles or dropping bombs or firing napalm, so where had those flames come from? She'd hoped monstrous yet brainy organisms would creep out of the corners of the sky to view the damage and possibly, hopefully, eat her. Maybe, dared she dare? even help her. Anything they did would be welcome. Anything to relieve her of the boredom of this drawn-out death.

But no living thing came forward. Not a sound, not a soul, not a thing besides the stink of burnt geology emerged from that show of arms. It was just weather after all. Wouldn't you just know that the weather on a desiccated planet would be fire. Sodden Ansonia never looked so good.

She slept, or lapsed into a coma, her lips cracking, stomach digesting itself, hair knotting and skin flaking.

Her eyes twitched awake and optimistic dreams of months long drizzle faded with a sinking realization of where she was.

"No walking today," she told herself in her mind. "Today is my death day and I can do anything I want and what I want to do is nothing. I will drink my last drop, piss my last water, eat my last crust, and stare at the sun until death do I part."

Truth was, she hadn't the strength to get up anyway. She couldn't even lift her head to watch the sun if she truly wanted to do that part of it. She lay with her eyes open staring at the sand crystals before her. A black sand grain caught her eye.

"Black?" she thought to herself.

The region of ash had been left far behind, and as far as she knew, the entire planet was tan. A black

sand grain stood out like a melanoma on a bald albino's head.

The black sand grain moved. Of its own volition. Of course it moved of its own volition, it had legs and was walking!

She held back an involuntary panting that had started in her lest she blow the thing away with her breath.

Not only did it have legs—eight if the first two weren't mandibles—it had antennae and multiple body parts, well two anyway.

She found the strength through extreme joy to pull herself up without knocking sand over the thing. Without taking her eyes off the black dot, she rummaged in her pack for a little spyglass carried there in the hopes of finding mold or lichens or some other edible fungus.

Her dried food bags, underwear, water bottle, drawing pens and paper came flying out of the sack as she rifled it looking for the glass.

The ant-like thing, the ant! was rapidly moving away. She crawled along leaving her sack flotsam in the sand behind her as she frantically searched for the peer glass. Finally she found it and, unfolding the contraption, she switched on its light and stared after the ant. Ecstatic, she watched it do what every ant in every solar system across the universe does: it got on line. It got on line! It got on line!!!!

Why do ants get on line?

Marla jumped to her feet, her body racked with tearless sobs. She shouted out loud. No more talking to herself. She shouted out loud to herself the recitation that children learn when studying the behavior of ants under glass:

“There are three places that ants go.”

“First they go home.”

“Always they go home.”

“Where else do they go?”

“They go to a food source”

“What is the third place they go?”

“They go to water.”

She stopped and raised her face to the endless sky, to the burning sun, her enemy, and shouted out her curse at it: “THEY GO TO WATER!”

She collapsed in a heap to the ground, tears flowing now, her arms crumpled around her head as she cried openly, stammering, “The water, the water. The water.” Finally she lay down and whispered it, “The water.”

Her final bout of strength spent, the last ant disappearing over a rise in the sand, her last gulp of water yards out of reach, she lost consciousness with her mouth open in the sand and a mirage of a single tree,

much like a trite painting of a palm on the edge of a luscious lagoon and the moon reflecting all in the water, on the lens of her eyes.

Only it wasn't a mirage. There wasn't a lagoon, and it wasn't a palm tree either, it was XKJ10's version of a palm tree. A little scraggly, short and with no coconuts, but it definitely was a tree-like thing with a vascular system, roots for the uptake of water, and xylem to pass it up to the leaves. Unfortunately, Marla was once again in a coma or asleep or half-way to death.

Then it rained. Not acid. Not brimstone. Not oobleck. Water. Like the word she'd cursed at the sun a few hours earlier. It fairly sizzled as it fell on her fevered body. It moistened her matted hair and collected enough of itself to run down her face. She witnessed it, truly she did, half asleep as she was. She hadn't the strength to rise and open her mouth to catch the drops. She assumed she was hallucinating anyway, but just in case when enough water had pooled in the inside cheek of her mouth, she forced herself to swallow. Half of it fell out through her lips, but the other blessed half made it to the back of her throat where it dissipated in the dryness there. But the inner linings of her mouth and throat were lubricated. The next pool in her cheek made it all the way to her gullet.

As did the next and the next and the next. When the rain ultimately stopped, she'd managed six full swallows in all. And the evening and the morning were the fourth day.

Night gave way to blistering sunny day. Back on the Textile Planet, such a morning would be accompanied by bird song. On Ansonia it would be the tramp and whine of workers. Here on XKJ10 the morning sun was accompanied by silence and the never ending thirst of a dry planet. And the crunch of a foot on the sand.

The crunch of a foot on the sand?

Marla stared at a naked human foot planted in front of her face. She craned her neck to see what it was attached to. A knee came into view as the foot's body knelt down to bring a pink plastic cup of water to her mouth. She barely had the strength to raise her head to drink, so a hand reached under her neck to support it. She drank from the cup. She lay back down then and stared up at the grizzled man with the three foot long beard and piercing eyes. Like her he was unclothed, except for the beard, and no doubt a lunatic.

Hunter had told her about the Lunatic; she remembered him telling her now, although she hadn't thought about it since then.

Her stomach flopped. She breathed deeply to quell the flutter.

"You need to get to the shade," the Lunatic said in a gravelly voice that seemed unused to speaking.

Marla closed her eyes and whimpered. She wanted nothing more than to get to the "shade." Hadn't she been trying for months to get to the shade?

"I'll help you," he added.

She took a deep breath and tried to push herself up to her elbow. Her face flushed and then drained. The Lunatic reached over and helped her to a sitting position.

Black spots swam before her eyes. When they cleared, she breathed in deeply and pulled her feet underneath herself, steadying for a push off.

He lifted her to her feet and held her up as nausea came on, passed and came on again. Finally he forced her forward, carrying her for the most part as her feet dragged. The Lunatic was strong and, with one of her arms over his shoulder, he carried her buddy fashion forward a hundred, two hundred, three hundred paces to the shade of the single palm-like tree. When she dropped to her knees she passed out, not waking for ten or more minutes.

The Lunatic placed a wetted rag on her forehead and gave her more water from the plastic cup to drink. After a couple of hours, he gave her something slimy and salty to eat. It tasted vile, but everything felt vile so what the aitch did it matter? She swallowed it, her stomach didn't retch and she actually felt better.

When she woke again, the sun was down and the Lunatic was gone. Her blanket covered her and her knapsack was underneath her head.

The next few days passed with a series of sleep/walk/eat episodes in which Marla barely participated. The Lunatic fed her slimy food, gave her water. Sometimes when she woke he was there, sometimes not. One day she woke to see him down on all fours, talking to the sand and laughing, chuckling actually. She knew for sure he was the Lunatic then, but didn't mind. The next time she woke up it was dark. She felt drugged as usual, yet strangely energetic at the same time. She knew if she only waited half an hour or so, she'd be able to move about.

And so it was. Bending her knees and stretching her muscles, she felt strength returning. A marvelous feeling. Her fingers reached to the cool sand below the blanket and dug, clutching a fistful. She lifted her forearm and let the sand pour out. Her muscles felt sore, a bit atrophied, maybe, but all in all, marvelous.

Her legs and arms stretched out as far as they could reach, and then she rolled over. A slight faintness overcame her, but then passed as she pushed herself up to her knees. She inhaled the dry cool night air through her mouth and then returned to her former sleeping position for the duration.

When she woke the next time, she had a deep desire to spring up and walk around. The sun shone and the Lunatic was nowhere to be found. She rolled over easily, coughed up a phlegmy substance, swallowed it, and pushed herself to her feet. Her muscles creaked. She stumbled and fell back to the sand. She threw back her head and laughed.

Hungry and still weak, despite her desire to run and jump, she sat with her back resting against the trunk of the tree. Eventually she dug into her knapsack for her clothing. After a bit of rest, she pulled on her underwear, t-shirt and beloved Sleazos.

Soon after that, the Lunatic showed up with his pink cup and a plate of the slimy, salty whatever.

"You feel better?" He smiled as he handed her the plate and cup.

"Yes, thank you," she said, swallowing the water and a couple of the "eels."

She took a breath and looked up at the Lunatic. "I can't tell you how happy I am to meet you. I don't know who you are, or why you're here, but I am so blessedly happy to meet you."

The Lunatic dropped to the sand next to Marla. He stared at her for several moments and then finally said, "My name is Sol."

"Sol?" she smiled and nodded. "Like the sun, Sol?"

“Well, sure, if you like, but actually its my name: Solovir.”

“Sol. The sun on the planet of the sun. I don’t think I’ll be forgetting it too soon. I do hate the sun, but not you. Can I ask you a question?”

Sol smiled a small, knowing smile. Almost sad. “Just one?” he asked.

“Why are you here? No. How did you get here?”

“It’s a long story. Why don’t you finish your breakfast and if you have strength enough we can go to a better place, and then we’ll talk about it.”

“A better place? How can anything be better than this place. It has everything one could possibly need.”

“You are right. Here the only thing you need is shade.”

“And talk is so easy here.”

“We’ll stay.”

“No, no. It’s a burden for you to keep bringing me things here. Is it far to the next shade?”

“You’ll never be a burden to me and it’s not far.”

She nodded and smiled. Her lips cracked.

The Lunatic, Sol, stared at the key around her neck. He reached forward and held it in his hand, trying to make out the number stamped there. A single tear rolled down his cheek. Eventually Marla would discover a number of inscrutable things about Sol, the Lunatic, so the tear was soon forgotten, but right now, she wondered what horrible sin had been inflicted on the poor Lunatic’s soul that a simple cabin key could elicit such a profound reaction in him.

Suddenly he smiled, reached for her empty plate and softly said, “Whenever you’re ready, Princess.”

Marla blushed and her lips cracked again. She rolled up her blanket, grabbed her knapsack and stood herself up. The lightheadedness and nausea came and went. She leaned slightly on the Lunatic, inhaled deeply and stepped out into the dreadful sun.

Sol led her several miles in the direction she called south. Palm trees appeared once in a while, and they stopped to rest at each one. Half a day later they reached a ridge of rocks they’d been watching on the horizon all morning.

They slept among the rocks and when they awoke set out again. The trees were thicker after that and in fact a valley with sparse vegetation—scrub brush—appeared. Across the floor of the valley a rift-like line ran. Next to this line a conglomeration of tents, all connected to each other, flapped in the breeze. Sol’s home. Marla almost fainted from ecstasy.

Later that day, after she’d settled herself, Sol gave her short little tours of his house. He’d explain about a room while she sat and rested. They’d eat and then they’d visit another room and so on. Once in a while he’d add a tidbit of his personal history. It took several days and numerous conversations to get the

full story out.

Apparently he'd landed a few years ago. The time apparatus of his carrier had gone out of whack. They shouldn't have landed so early, but as it was it took negative time to get here. The ship was transporting a load of circus equipment and because of the miscalculation of time, they needed to change the energy/mass factor. To do so they dumped ballast by leaving twenty tents and Sol. It took him a year to stitch everything together into the present mansion complete with eat-in kitchen, full bath, several guest rooms, exercise room, sleeping room, root cellar, billiard room, conservatory—all very neat and totally devoid of furniture. The place was spacious, airy, and remarkably cool from a type of passive air conditioning that required opening and closing of tent flaps to either catch the breeze or shut out the sun.

He had a well head with a peristaltic pump set 500 feet below into the sand. Just a smallish affair using Tygon tubing to deliver the water up to his catch basin. The power for the pump came from solar panels installed above the battery room.

Marla was impressed.

“All this hardware came with you?”

“Not at first. The only thing besides the canvas that came with me was a Gempler's catalog. I put my order in the first chance I got. It took a couple of years to accumulate everything here. For a while I had stuff coming and going every six months.”

“I thought nobody ever flew to this place. Nobody even knew it was here.”

“The outfit I flew with never reported the time failure; they would've lost their license. They gave me a few clandestine drops because they felt guilty; but I haven't seen them in a couple of years now. That's okay. I have most of what I need. The hardest part was digging the well, of course, but the fleas helped me with it.”

“Fleas?”

“Yeah, they pretty much run the joint. Saved my life y'know. And yours, they found you out there and came and got me.”

“Fleas?”

“Yeah, the sand fleas. They're everywhere.”

“Fleas?”

“Yes! Those little socialists that run around under the sand here.”

“The ants, you mean.”

“Sure, the ants, the fleas, whatever. They're neither actually, but I call them fleas. You call them ants. Either way, they're pretty industrious. Got a whole cave complex over across the river and they're pretty smart. It took me a year to be able to communicate with them, but once we got the hand-to-antennae protocols down...”

“You're kidding, right?”

“No, they told me where to dig the well and then pumped the sand out for me. It was an amazing feat on account of my size compared to their size. They’re quite advanced scientifically speaking.”

“You know they call you the Lunatic.”

“The fleas?”

“No, them. The people out there.” She gestured in the general direction of the rest of humanity, implying numerous fences over which neighbors gossiped.

“That’s a little judgmental, but sticks and stones you know. On the other hand, if you think I’m nuts, well... Well, c’mon!”

He led her from the breakfast nook where they had been sitting at a makeshift table out to the observatory room. Observation in this case was not directed towards the nonexistent stars but towards the ants, or fleas, if you will. The room was small but brightly lit, and in the middle of the floor was a two-foot square glass plate. Peering through the plate, Marla saw another room, tiny and tiled, like Barbie’s bathroom. On a stand next to the plate was a magnifying glass. Sol held the glass for Marla to look through. In the little tiled room, she saw a contraption consisting of gears and pulleys made of what looked to be brass, all in motion. It was a conveyor of some sort, moving smallish materials from some little place to another little place. In a corner of the tiny room stood a tiny panel with tiny glowing lights and even tinier buttons for tiny little hands (feet?) to actuate.

“So what is this, some sort of model train get up?” Marla asked.

“No, of course not.” Sol seemed indignant. “It’s their sand pump. They need a lot of tunnels and this is what they use.”

“I guess, but where are the tunnels? Where’s the sand that they dig out? Where are they?”

“The thing runs pretty much on its own, they’re out and about. The tunnels are everywhere under the sand. If you dug down, you’d probably hit one, but don’t dig down, please. You might hit a nursery or something or cause a cave in. Just trust me on this one. The amount of sand that is displaced is on a scale too small for us to notice. Ever dumped sand before? It seems to seek its own level, like water or wet cement. It spreads by itself.

“Anyway, when we schedule a meeting, we hold it here in this pump room. You’ll meet them at some point and see what I mean. The room below the glass is atmospherically controlled for the gear lubricant, it’s real comfy.”

“It’s not too loud in there what with the equipment and all? I mean, y’know, for the ‘meeting.’” Marla had a hard time not laughing.

“Noise isn’t a problem. Our language is all visual. Hand to antennae. Like I said.”

“Uh huh.”

“Look. I’ll prove it to you later. I’ll call a meeting and introduce you.”

“But first you have to set it up, right?”

“I don’t care what you think. The fleas saved your life, you’re going to meet them eventually, and I’d appreciate it if you’d show some gratitude even if you think I’m nuts. Okay?”

“Sure, Sol. So what else the ants got going? Some agribusiness maybe?”

“Oh yeah! You gotta see it.” Sol jumped up, ignoring the sarcasm. “C’mon!”

Marla, still recovering from near starvation and dehydration and now suffering under a weighty incredulity, took her time. She wore her morning robe and had as of yet not combed her hair from her shower, but she relented and followed Sol outdoors. They walked about half a mile along the river, and just when Marla was going to suggest they turn back, Sol dropped to his knees and started gently blowing on a sand pile.

“Here,” he said, looking up to Marla. “Come look.”

She knelt down and saw hundreds of green nodules about 5 mm in cross section, very plantlike and organized in a neat grid.

“Huh,” she said.

“It’s their farm.”

“Ah,” Marla said.

Sol pushed the sand away from around one of the nodules, revealing a long stalk reaching down into the sand, much like a root would if XKJ10 had the ability to support vegetation in a normal manner. He picked the nodule and gave it to Marla. “Here, try it,” he said.

“You aren’t going to get in trouble for robbing the cabbage patch, are you?”

“Well, if I made it a habit, sure, but this is a special occasion. Go ahead, try it.”

“All of it?”

“Don’t be nasty. This is enough for a flea family. It’s not meant to fill you up. I’m just trying to get you to see what it is they’re doing.”

Marla stuck the nodule on her tongue and bit it in half. The flavor of a slightly sweet Brussels sprout filled her mouth.

“Not bad,” she said. “Maybe with a little butter.”

“Don’t be silly,” Sol said. “There are no cows here.”

“No tiny little Jerseys or Guernseys? How about some teenie weenie goats?”

“No, but they... Forget it, forget it. Look, they’ve got their top geneticists working on enlarging the varieties here so we’ll be able to have something besides that kelpweed to eat. Of course we’re going to have to dig human size tunnels below to grow the stuff. The stems will have to rise about 30 feet through the sand, we’ll have to do all the work below that. We’ll need tunnels for it.”

“Huh?”

“They dig tunnels, then plant the rootstock in the tunnels. The stems tunnel upwards and the roots tunnel downwards geotropically. Once the heads emerge, the stems stop growing, and they soak up the sun to enlarge. Meanwhile the roots go down about a hundred feet to find water.”

“How come they have to go down so far to get water, when this river is right here at the surface?”

“That’s a man-made river, I cut the ditch and lined it with polymer plastic. Now I have a river whenever there’s an overflow.”

“No wonder it’s kind of ugly.”

“You don’t like it?”

“Oh it’s not that, it’s just that, well, there’s no plants or anything, it’s just like a gash across the sand.”

“Well, it is a gash across the sand, I haven’t done the landscaping yet. I’ve got so much work to do and now that you’re here...”

“You’ve got some help.”

“No, I’ve got someone to do it for.”

Marla dropped her smile and looked away momentarily.

She turned back and said, “I’m sorry, Sol. Everything is so overwhelming, I just don’t know how to react. All of this is wonderful. Crazy, and illogical, and totally weird. I don’t know how to deal with it because, well, I can’t get past the biggest question of all.”

“I don’t know why I’m here. I’m here because I need to be here. Same as you.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s... who are you exactly?”

“Nobody. Just like you.”

“I don’t know about that. You’re a strange man, wearing nothing but a beard. You’ve been here alone for, what, four, five years. You’re not a lunatic at all, but you should be, yes?”

“I am a lunatic, yes. But I’m your lunatic.”

Marla dropped her head and laughed. She wanted to put her arm around Sol and call him in out of the sun, but she didn’t want to end the moment either. She turned to look at the nodules again.

“So how do you propose to start this garden of yours? How are you going to tunnel like the ants?”

“Well,” he grabbed Marla gently by the elbow and began walking back to the house. “Your survivor’s shuttle is due in a few days, you said. I thought that I’d order some hardware, like what the fleas have, for a sand pump. Human-sized of course.”

“Gee, I’d forgotten about that shuttle. To think I was all worried about that thing coming and having nothing to buy more supplies with and no place to go back to if I couldn’t support myself here.”

“Yeah, well I’ve got to get going, now that I think about it,” Sol said. He released Marla’s elbow and started on ahead of her. “I’ve got to get my order together. I’m going to need a lot of things.”

Marla rushed to catch up, her robe flapping in the breeze. She’d lost her modesty a few days ago when she realized Sol was never going to wear any clothes and he didn’t seem to notice his or her nudity. Of course he had a three-foot beard to cover his shyness, but beyond that he never seemed interested in matters sexual. As if gender was the least of the two lost people’s problems. As indeed on such a dry planet it was.

It had never occurred to Marla to worry about Sol. Having nearly died, she didn’t worry over details. She was curious, sure, but worried? No. She’d been so happy in the last few days to have company, food, respite from the sun, and a shower every day, it never occurred to her to consider whether or not Sol was indeed a lunatic. Or a murderer. Or a card shark, encyclopedia salesman, tree hugger, alcoholic, child abuser, church lady, or boot licker. Hell, he could be a perfectionist, and at this point she wouldn’t even care.

Sol wrote up a list of things he needed for the sand pump designed by the fleas and scaled up to human size. He seemed to have a stash in an account somewhere to pay for the gears, pulley, vacuum equipment, concreting chemicals, and solar panels with which to power everything.

Marla wondered about the sanity of building a mechanism that would supposedly pump sand. She’d never heard of such a thing. Why hadn’t this been thought up in the real world? Seemed like a useful piece of equipment. Surely someone would have built a sand pump if it was indeed possible. And how deep was the sand? What would happen when they got to dirt and then rock? Would the pump work then? When she suggested they get a bulldozer and just dig it out, he mumbled something about not having that much money. So he had a stash, but not a big stash.

She added her own modest number of items to Sol’s list, mostly food. The idea of eating something besides the river kelp—the slimy food that was the mainstay of Sol’s diet—made her forget the oddity of the sand pump. The fact that she didn’t really believe the ants were an advanced civilization also seemed to slip her mind. What difference did it make, anyway? Sol might be a lunatic, but he was her lunatic.

As they eagerly waited for the ship to come in, they looked for things to make the time pass quickly. Marla showered daily, read tent manuals, stayed in the shade during the day, and rested on the sand in the evenings. Sol tidied up after her, prepared the kelp meals, listened to her rail against the sun and tried to teach her the ant/flea sign language.

“It’s more a pouting than a frown, uh, Eppie,” he’d say.

“A pout? A frown? C’mon, they’re the same,” she’d answer.

“Yes, but one means you’ll think about it and the other means absolutely not. You’ve got to learn the difference or they won’t know what you mean.”

“Yeah, well, my pout and my frown are the same; it’s not going to work for me.”

“Well we can’t rewrite the language at this point. Watch again.”

Sol stuck his lower lip out in an exaggerated pout.

“Uh huh,” Marla said and tried to imitate the pout which on her looked like a monkey watching itself in a mirror.

Sol started laughing.

“What?” she said.

“You just asked what time the next meeting was scheduled for.”

“Forget it!” Marla stood up in the sand and stomped into the tent. “Forget it!” she repeated.

Sol let her go without a word, knowing she’d want to sulk. Later that day, after loading in the water supply, he went to speak to her. He thought he’d find her on the living room floor rereading his old pump manuals—her favorite—but instead discovered she was “locked” in her room. Locking the door in this mansion meant tying the tent flap down. She remained there the rest of the day and night and the next day as well.

Even after the shuttle was heard flying overhead, she remained inside her room, not answering him when he gently called her name.

“Eppie,” he said quietly at the flap. “The shuttle’s here. Don’t you want to come and see?”

No answer.

“It’s not that you have to, but it is a new face. And don’t you have a list of stuff?”

“I don’t have any money,” she stated from beyond the door.

“We went through that before, and besides, if it’s really so horrible here, you can just leave, you know. It’s your last chance to get away from...this place.”

She opened the flap and stuck a red face out.

“Where am I going to go?” she asked.

“Well, I just thought...”

“Forget it,” she said and the flap closed in his face.

“Well then, give me your list. I’m spotting you.”

“Forget it.”

Sol opened the flap a little.

“Don’t be so proud. That list was for me too. Those are things I need too. Want.”

Marla turned, a clear frown—not a pout—on her face. She stared at Sol and then said, “The list is in the kitchen, under the kelp jar.”

“You don’t want to go for a walk?”

“No!” Marla flopped face forward onto the pile of folded up canvas extras in the corner that was her bed. For several minutes Sol stared at her and then left for the shuttle drop.

When he returned she was up and changed and energetic. She had no interest in the particulars of the shuttle and wanted no discussion about if they’d had a problem with the list or if they were curious about how she was getting on. Sol gave no information; he was just glad she was in a better mood.

And so the rescue shuttle came and went, and Marla remained under the dreaded sun.

#

“So how long are you gonna be here?” Sol asked one day after the shuttle had long since been gone. They were having breakfast in the nook.

“I don’t know,” Marla said. “At least a year, I guess, that’s my goal. How about you?”

“Well, I have a lot of work to do once the equipment gets here.”

“What will we do until then?”

“Explore, learn about this place, work with the fleas.”

“The fleas, the fleas. Sol, why are you here?”

“Hm. Why am I here? Would you be happy if I told you that I was on a religious pilgrimage when my ship’s time capsule got rear ended? I got off track and lost fifteen years of my life. And wound up here. Would that make you happy if I told you that?”

“If it was true, but then I’d wonder about your pilgrimage.”

“Well, you age fifteen years in the blink of an eye and see how fast you get religion.”

“Don’t you miss civilization?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“No reason,” he said quickly, and then he stood up to clear the table. He sealed the kelp can in preparation for returning it to the river to keep it cool.

Marla never returned to the subject of why Sol was here. He didn’t seem anxious to talk about it. As time passed she realized that he was indeed a lunatic. His insistence on communing with the ants, his garden, his plans for constructing a full-scale building in which to reside. All by himself he was going to do this. And why? Always for Marla, as if she was his only child and her mother was the long lost love of his life. Marla was the only thing he had.

He organized treks further and further away from their river and tent complex. Marla participated

eagerly, convinced she could find something of value on the planet to entice a future buyer. Sol could stay forever if he cared to, but Marla wanted to leave. She had no idea where she would go, but somehow she figured if she had enough money she could solve any problem. If Marla had learned one thing on Ansonia, it was that money could buy anything. If she'd had money she would have been able to solve her problem her own way, not the way Meko had decided. Meko's heart was in the right place, but had taken Marla off guard. She hadn't been ready with money to buy anonymity in paradise rather than on a dead planet.

If she sold XKJ10 at a handsome profit and headed back to Meko's to find a better place, she could take her time; do it right. Sol could go or stay. Whatever he wanted—his choice. She was growing fond of the naked man, though. His enthusiasm, although not exactly catching, was uplifting. When she surveyed the sand, she saw rocks and perhaps a barren hill; Sol saw potential campsites, good places to dig for minerals, possible well sites. She'd miss him if he stayed.

The two often traveled beyond the area the ants inhabited. Off to the west, far, far away from where they lived, a rather large patch of scrub grew—an indication that perhaps the area saw some rain. Not much, but some. They camped in the patch for several days and made plans to install a base camp there, outfitting it with a permanent tent and hopefully at some point a water reservoir if they could find a source. Future trips could be planned for weeks at a time from which they could make further forays in their search for even more hospitable territories.

For now, though, they merely stayed a few nights. Marla had her blanket and Sol slept on the ground, his beard providing the only covering. Marla offered to share the blanket, but he declined. The temperature was cool to cold, but the Lunatic never shivered.

On the last night of their jaunt, she dreamt a sad but beautiful dream of sheep and wool and textiles and looms and Mama and Grant Parker. And Saddle. The world had evolved beyond its cross purposes. Everyone loved everyone. Clocks had stopped and animals were free to wander where they would. They moved up to the high hills in summer to escape the heat and the shearer. Mama and Saddle became best buddies, and even Grant Parker somehow settled into a companionable mode, never demanding more than his share. Meko showed up to run the Mill. Charney looked after the bosses—Torpid, Lamont, and Shurm—seeing to their regular haircuts and mealtimes. Nobody drank coffee; they all smoked pot.

The sun rose, and Marla awoke happy for a second, but then immediately after that happy second, she remembered where she was and sickened.

"This is the best place on the planet, besides the oasis," Sol said facing his back to the sunrise. "I'll bet we'll find an actual pond or pool with a day's walk. What do you think?"

"What do I think? I think there's nothing on this planet but sand and rocks."

"And scrub brush and palm trees and sand fleas."

"Sand fleas bite your ass."

"Not here. They're more like ants here, socialists."

"So why aren't they right here if right here is so great?"

"Don't know. Maybe they don't like it here for some reason. Maybe there's worms or something that

would eat them.” He dropped to his knees and began digging in the dirt which, being particularly hard here, hadn’t seen a burrowing rodent, arthropod, or annelid since the laying down of sediment occurred sometime after the planet’s birth when there was an actual accumulation of water here.

“Let me know if you find any. I just can’t wait to get the compost pile started.”

“Now you’re talking.”

“Actually I’m not talking at all. I’m not even thinking. In fact, I’m going back to sleep. Everything makes sense there.”

“What’s up your tail this morning? We have a gorgeous day ahead of us. What’s wrong?”

“Your enthusiasm is beginning to wear on me.”

“Well if you’d just try to be a little more positive maybe you could enjoy the experience, eh?”

“Positive? Enjoy the experience? Sol, this is a dead planet. And this dead planet is now my life. It’s an ugly wasteland. Worthless. I’m supposed to be positive with what I’m working with?”

Sol stood up, brushed his knees off. “You’re not alone, Eppie. You’re not the only one with a lost life. And you do have things to be grateful for. You were alone and dying. Now you’re alive and not alone.”

“I wanted to die! I’m tired of living. There’s no point. You’re right, the place is perfect. You keep trying to find life—grow things—Why? It’s perfect the way it is. This is the end of the line. I came here to die. Why are you here?”

“You want me to leave? You going to make it on your own?”

“That’s not the answer I’m looking for. The point is, you keep keeping me alive and trying to give me a reason for it. I’d prefer to fade away into oblivion. What I need to do, I can’t do, so what’s my point?”

“What is it you need to do? You need to live, that’s it. No one needs more than that!”

“This isn’t living here. This is barely surviving.”

“Now, yes, but haven’t you noticed it gets better every day?”

“Barely. Barely. Not enough. Not fast enough. I can’t wait for the rainshine and mugginess and condensation on a glass of mint julep as I sit by the pool drinking myself to death. I want sleet and icy conditions in the winter, roiling fog in the spring, weeds in summer, and decaying matter in the fall. Oh how I dream of the foul smell of rotting flesh! I want maggots, buzzards, road kill, bottom feeders, and internal parasites. There’s nothing here but arid, hot sun. The weather here is a sky full of fire. What kind of life can it possibly support?”

“Well just go back home then! Go back to the grind and the sweat and the insanity. The day in, day out senseless work. People turning into robots. The deadlines without rest, the belief that you’re free because you have no actual chains, because you can just say ‘no.’ But you never do. Every year, every month, every day, you silently agree to sign on more and more. Get deeper into debt, buy another piece of worthless laundry, plan another vacation which will be spent making plans on what you’ll do as soon as you return to work.”

“You’re right. Maybe I will go back there.”

“Why don’t you then, if it’s so horrible here.”

“I would if I could. Believe me...”

“Oh how convenient to think about it now. Whyn’t you go back with the shuttle? Your temper tantrum then was mighty convenient.”

“Bullshit! I couldn’t go back, I didn’t have money for the fare.”

“You could’ve borrowed.”

“You didn’t offer.”

“You didn’t ask and I had no idea you wanted to go back. This is the first I’ve heard of it.”

“Well now you know.”

“Now I know. And as soon as the next drop comes, remind me to pay for your passage. I’d hate to think I’m the one standing in the way of your happiness.”

“It’s not you; it’s the contract. There’s no way I’m getting my money back from the sale of this place as is.”

“So what? What do you need money for? You can just go back home, go back to your old life. That’s what you want, isn’t it? You just said so. Go back home; go back to your old life. You hate this place.”

Marla jumped out from under her blanket.

“I can’t go.”

“Why not?”

“Please, Sol, you can’t possibly understand my problems.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re a lunatic, that’s why not.”

“Why am I a lunatic?”

“Just look at you, you don’t even wear clothes.”

“It’s 40 effing degrees here. Who’s the lunatic?”

“Forget it!” she hollered into his face, and reached down to grab her blanket and canteen and knapsack before stomping off in the direction she thought was home.

“I won’t forget it,” Sol called after her. “Things would be a lot easier without you being around. You’re a

drag sometimes and you're not even trying and for your information, I know why you can't go back. You're scared!"

Although she heard all of what Sol said, she pretended she didn't and continued to trudge onward. Under normal circumstances Marla would have been worried about getting lost on her way back home, but biting off your own nose to spite your face precludes worry about minor details. She stomped blindly back and threw herself into the first lounge chair she came across. Tears came. She hoped to cry herself out before Sol came back. She refused to let him know he'd had an effect on her. Perhaps he didn't. She felt sorry for herself. She was ashamed of how things had gone with Saddle and Charney and how she couldn't respond to Meko. She knew Sol was right, this place was perfect for her, soulless hollow tube that she was.

Eventually she left off and stared blankly at the floor of the house. A line of black insects entered the room she was in: the ants. She picked up the closest spy glass at hand and waved the "hi" gesture, one of two that she had picked up, the other being "bye." Franny, the lead ant, waved her antennae frantically. Why Sol gave the leader a female name, she never understood. It wasn't clear whether the ants had genders or not and, if they did, which one Franny belonged to. But Sol named her Franny so there it was.

Franny was beside herself with information. She talked so fast that even if Marla had bothered to learn the language, she wouldn't have been able to follow her. Marla kept repeating the "hi" gesture, a rapid pushing out of the lips in an exaggerated kiss. Franny knew Marla didn't understand the language but continued to speak unceasingly. Finally she wore herself down and herded the trail of ants underground hastily as if some sort of weather was on its way.

Since XKJ10 only had one kind of weather and Marla had a black mood on, she moved outside to take in the glory of what she thought was the ensuing brimstone. Hopefully she'd get plowed by a fireball. Instead of a fireball, however, a black jet, outfitted for quick exit and reentry flew from one end of the horizon to the other in an instant. It moved so fast, she almost mistook it for a fire bomb and clapped her hands in delight. At the last moment she recognized it for what it was, and a deep feeling of dread swept over her.

Anyone else might have been happy, considering her conversation with Sol. A wayward pilot, maybe outfitted with Jim Beam and some well worn porno material, could provide some entertainment and perhaps a ride back to the Continent. Sol could spot her the fare and she'd be done with the place just like she said she wanted to be.

But Marla was not happy. As much as she hated XKJ10, she had nowhere else to go. Everyplace she'd gone, everything she'd tried in the last two years of her life had been worse than before. For most people change means an improvement, but not Marla. Change always proved worse. The hospital was worse than the Mill. The ride to Walloon was worse than the hospital. The ride to Ansonia was worse than the ride to Walloon. Ansonia itself, with the exception of the camaraderie of the Library, was worse than anything. And here. Well, here was certainly hell, no one could argue with that. In a moment of anger, she'd said she would gladly go back to the Textile Planet, but she couldn't. If she did return, she'd have to face...

But now what? Now what? Now what? She can go back, Sol will lend her the money. She might not be able to just buy any old place in the dark matter, but certainly she can go back "there." Their jet flew over, just like a fireball. They're here and they'll take her back. They are here for her in fact. They are not here on a fluke. They have found her. She doesn't need Sol's money, this trip is gratis. No charge. They'll foot the bill for you, Honey. But she can't, she just can't. What would she do? Go back there? Are you nuts? What are you, a lunatic? She can't go back, but there is not a rock or bush in sight that

will hide her from there.

A black jet has flown overhead.

She crept further inside the canvas mansion and found the deepest darkest corner to ponder and try to remember where Sol kept the knives.

Sol returned after dark to find her huddled in the commode room, next to the hole in the ground as if alluding to the fact that her life had gone to shit. She shivered and neglected to acknowledge him as he pushed the room's flap back.

"Eppie," he said, sitting forward and kneeling down to her. "I'm so sorry. I was wrong."

She said nothing, just slowly closed her eyes and shook her head; her lips formed a grimace.

"Come out of here, you're cold," he said. When she didn't move, he added "Let's at least get the blanket."

He looked at her, as she shivered from fright more than cold. He felt guilty for putting her into some sort of state or being unkind during the fight, or something.

"Alright," he said. "I'll go get the blanket then."

He left her and retrieved the blanket from the middle of the front room floor where she'd left it. He returned to her and placed the cover around her shoulders, pulling the excess across her back. Her shivers continued so he knelt down again and reached his arms around her. She yielded and leaned into him. A tear fell onto his lap. Automatically, without thinking of consequences, he pressed his lips to her forehead and kissed her there. She sobbed and clutched his hand, squeezing it roughly as if all her thoughts could pass from her to him through that connection and then he'd understand. Quite impossible, though, since she herself did not understand.

They sat for an hour that way until finally she said, "Someone is coming for me."

"I don't think so," he said softly, rocking her gently.

"A jet passed before you came home. A black jet. Probably landed in the old valley."

"I saw it. I don't think it means anything. It could be anybody. Maybe somebody got lost like I did."

"It's a bit of a coincidence, don't you think?"

"I don't know. Maybe this planet is a magnet for wayfarers or something. Maybe people get lost here a lot. Maybe there's something about this place."

"Yeah, maybe," Marla said, kissing Sol's forehead and then feebly standing up. "Maybe it's because I'm on it."

Sol looked up, his face the picture of incomprehension. "What's going on in your head?"

"I don't know."

Sol stood up next to her. "You know, they could be looking for me."

"Why would somebody be looking for you?"

"Maybe. I committed a crime."

"Violent?"

"It involved a gun."

"Why hasn't anybody come before? Everyone knows the Lunatic lives here. Why are they just now coming?"

"Paperwork?"

"Don't try to cheer me up."

She opened the flap and entered the hallway.

"Why would anybody be after you?" Sol asked, following her. "You're pretty harmless here. This is a good place to keep you out of trouble."

"Yeah, maybe. Maybe they'd go anywhere to get me, though, because they need me. Maybe." She headed toward the front room.

"I'll take care of you. I'll hide you. Tell them you died in the fire. There's lots of corners in this place."

"Yeah, behind all the rocks and yucca plants."

"Right here in this tent, in one of the cupboards." He pulled the flap back on a table as if to prove it.

"Thanks, Sol. I'm just so tired. I really just don't care anymore. I'll go back at this point; I don't have any options, anyway."

"No!" Sol shouted. "You can't go back."

She spun around. "Yes! I can! I'm just running away here. Not facing myself more than anything else. For the last twelve months I've been telling myself and everybody else what I need is to be alone. Now I'm alone and I hate it. So what's my problem? What's really bugging me?"

"I don't know! I don't know, but you'll be back where you were before and back in your rut if you return. You should work it out here first. Find yourself. Everybody goes to the desert to do that, right? Why? Because it works. I guarantee you it does. It worked for me."

Sol stood directly in front of Marla and stopped her. He held her two hands in his.

"Besides, you can't leave me here alone. I'd go nuts."

"Don't try that ol' guilt trick, Sol. As if you aren't the brains behind this outfit. You do all the work. You're right; I've been a drag." Marla disentangled her hands from Sol's and moved to step around him.

“No!” Sol stopped her. He put his arm up against the canvas wall to trap her. “Yes, you’re a bit of a slug, but you won’t be after a while. You’re just lost in the head momentarily. I see your enthusiasm grow every day. Once you get in the groove of this place, you’ll see.”

“And what about today.”

“A minor setback.”

“I’m faking it, Sol. Just trying to make time pass. I can’t wait to get out of here, and I’m resigned now that I think about it. Now that you’re helping me clear things up.”

“Why? Because I care for you? About you?”

“Come with me. Don’t stay here on this dead planet.”

“It’s not dead and I’m never going back there.”

“Where?”

Silence. Sol breathed angrily in and out.

“There.”

“Where?”

He dropped his arm, turned away. “What difference does it make?”

“None. A lot.”

“Skip it.”

“Skipped.”

He turned back around. “And you shouldn’t go either.”

“Because it’ll turn out bad or because you’ll miss me?”

“Both.”

“How bad could it be?”

“Don’t go.”

Silence. Marla stared at him.

“We’ll see,” she said.

“Really?”

“We’ll see.”

Sol danced a lunatic dance around her, holding up the blanket for a partner. “You know I was a young man not too long ago. Young and tall.”

“You’re tall now,” Marla said, dancing.

“Taller and darker.”

“No!”

“Yup.”

“Weren’t.”

“Were.”

Marla threw her head back and laughed at the thought of Sol young and dark. She began dancing along with him. “And I was a coordinator giving everybody orders and organizing things and greasing wheels and ramming rods. I wasn’t a slug then. I just wanted a rest but I couldn’t stop.”

She stopped dancing.

“Until I stopped one day and now I’m a slug.”

“Everything changed that day. Everyone did. And it wasn’t your fault.”

“Was.”

She leaned against the canvas wall and slid down to the floor. She laid her forehead into her hand and sobbed. He knelt down next to her and put his arm around her.

“I don’t want to go back,” she whispered. “But they won’t give me a choice.”

They sat for a few moments and listened as the unmistakable sound of boots crunching through sand came closer.

Sol stood up and extinguished the lantern. She heard him following the tent wall to his own room where he rummaged through personal effects for a certain something.

“Yo ho! Who’s home?” A voice boomed from outside the house. “Who’s here? Anybody got a drop for a thirsty flyer?”

Sol returned to where Marla was sitting, and together they listened to the intruder fumbling with the front flap, trying to gain entrance. As she felt Sol move past her into the center of the room, she reached out for him but missed him in the dark. She wanted desperately to keep him back by her, safe and keeping her safe.

“We don’t have anything to spare,” Sol called out clearly and confidently. “Just get on back to your jet and fly out.”

“Oh, but I’ve got something for you. A story. Everyone loves a story, eh? And you, lucky man, living like a lunatic, are the first to hear it and profit by it.” The man reached inside now and pushed a light

through, shining it directly at Marla. Sol pulled his trigger and a certain something flew past the man's left ear. He jumped back into the night, leaving the flap to close.

"No need for that, Man!" the intruder shouted. "I can give you fire power if that's what you want. I say you are badly out powered though." A blast fired into the night, attesting to his word. The sky outside lit up like daytime. "So you can either listen to my story or you can introduce me to the proprietor. A Ms. Eppie Jones, I believe I'll be needing. The folks at the realtorssaid she bought it half a year ago. I have a proposition for her, fair and square. Make her a lot of money if she likes that kind of thing. All I'm asking is a drop of water to mix with my dried whiskey and someone to listen to my story. So what'll it be now, old man? Do I get my drop or do I burn your hotelhere?"

"Let him in, Sol," Marla said. "He'll kill you otherwise. We can figure something out later. He's alone."

"She says to let you in," Sol called. "Says you sound like a nice man. That true?"

"Oh, I'm most nice. But I need my drop to stay that way. I'm a beast without it."

Sol reached up and pulled the lantern cord. The front room illuminated. The flap pulled back, revealing a man holding a gallon jug with a black label in one hand and a power puncher in the other. He had a thick red beard, curly hair down his back, and an eye patch. He couldn't have been more picturesque if he had a parrot on his shoulder.

"But I got plenty to share!" he shouted, a broad smile across his face. "Just need a gallon or so and somebody to celebrate with."

Sol stood saying nothing, keeping the xanthan gun trained on the man. Marla stood up, left the blanket on the floor and walked to the man.

"Eppie Jones," she said, extending her hand and smiling. He placed the bottle of Jack into it.

"Put 'er there," he said, throwing his head back and laughing. "And bring some cups. We're all going to be rich!"

Thus began the longest, drunkenest night of Marla Gershe's life. The dried crumbs of Jack's finest sitting in the bottom of the jug reconstituted nicely and proved to be such a fine proof as to satisfy all three revelers.

Morning found the newcomer, Zud was his name, lying face down in the middle of the front room. Three playing cards lay beside him. Three treys. The missing two and the remaining deck lay strewn about, some tucked in hiding places (a crevice in the canvas, a pile of clothes, a hole in the tent leading to sand, inside the tuck of a belt) for use in cheating.

The Lunatic lay on his back, feet resting on the room wall, which, although made of canvas, was quite sturdy in that it was supported by an ingenious system of French seams that provided a backbone in several places. His mouth flopped open and he snored. His beard fell to the side, and he appeared quite vulnerable in his animalistic exposure.

A huge mess of clothes and canvas over to the side were thrown together like a pile of neatly raked leaves. Somewhere in the middle Marla slept blissfully. Her stud hand was intact and she clutched it tightly, as if gripping them would prevent her from losing that which she gambled on.

One of the characters in the scene groaned. A hand moved and a cough rang out. From the middle of the floor a throat cleansed itself and a marvelous wad of spit shot to the corner of the room. Zud, now leaning on one arm, shook his head to clear his double vision.

“Hey,” came a weak protest from the Lunatic who, without turning his head or even opening his eyes, knew what had transpired in the corner and who would be cleaning it up later. “Go outside to do that.”

“Uh,” groaned the giant. He rolled back over onto his face and fell back asleep for another forty-five minutes.

The pile of clothes—mostly unfolded laundry and a few tent pieces—moved. Marla poked her head out from a large sleeve and looked around the room with half-opened eyes. If she didn’t need to urinate so badly she would have likewise returned to sleep.

“Sol,” she said. “You awake?”

“Mm,” he answered.

“I gotta pee.”

“Don’t do it there.”

“Oh, okay.”

She pulled herself unsteadily up, finding the going somewhat difficult as the clothes and canvas impeded her movement. She wrestled a linen jumpsuit and got tangled in a couple of overly huge thigh socks. (The fleas had given them to Sol last year on his third anniversary. Geniuses though they were with inventions, they had a hard time fitting an invention to its task. Woven materials never seemed to agree with the girth and length of a recipient’s body part.) Finally she threw her legs over the obstacles and pulled herself out.

Stopping to rest on the periphery of the pile, she glanced at the visitor Zud. His huge bulk rose and dropped in response to his breathing. She looked at the hand in her hand and then at the hand in his hand. She snorted through her nose. “My planet, indeed!”

“Hm?” Sol answered.

“He thought he’d get it. Not with his lousy hand. Funny how the rest of his cards are lost so we’ll never know who actually won.”

“You shouldn’t have gambled,” Sol said, moving his beard to cover his privates.

“We could have had his ship.”

“Is he sleeping?”

“Yeah.”

“He’d have killed us first.”

“He could kill us if he wants this place.”

“The deed’s registered; you have to hand it over.”

“Yeah, well, that’s academic. Who’d ever know.”

She moved past Sol into the hallway and headed for the commode room. The visitor rolled over and belched. She listened in the back as he went through his hangover experience with a rude desire to share. He farted and scratched and spit in his long drawn out way.

Sol, disgusted, eventually fought his own headache and atrophy to get up and make tea. Soon they were all in the breakfast nook, head in hands or on the table, and planning out the day as a jaunt from one corner of the mansion to another.

“Anybody got a drop of water?” Zud asked after a while.

Sol and Marla shook their heads.

“No, it’s not a bit o’ the hair I’m looking for,” Zud said. “I’m really just dry. You two are a fine coupla’ drinkers; I won’t be needing to repeat that episode for a while.”

“Mm,” Sol answered. “Behind you in the cooler.”

The man swiveled in his chair, stood, and found the cups next to the cooler under a flap. He availed himself and returned to the nook apparently refreshed and ready for business.

“So,” he began. “Old man, what is the reason for your shirking your clothes. Considering everything.” He shot a glance at Marla whose head lay flat on the table.

“Everything being what?” Sol shot back.

“Considering there’s a lady present,” Marla spoke into the table. She’d heard that excuse used her whole life when men felt the need to explain certain behavior, or beg pardon for stepping beyond the bounds of polite society.

“Lady?” Sol asked. “Oh, you mean Eppie? Well, you shoulda seen Eppie when I first met her. She was modeling the same fashions as me that day.”

Marla lifted her head and looked at the fat man. “The point is, it’s hot as hell here and nobody ever comes around. What’s the point?”

“Well, you see a point,” he answered. “You’ve got your swaddlings.”

“I’m more shy and he’s a lunatic. He can do what he wants. I’m sane and have to follow rules.”

“Sane are you?” he said. “But you don’t seem to want...”

“...to sell a worthless planet. Yes, I know. I’ll say it again. You’re not offering enough, Sir Zud.”

“It’s a fair price.”

“Not when you stand to gain so much.”

“I’m only speculating.”

“No one’s speculating on this planet. You must have a sure thing. But you want to play a game? Fine. I got a game for you. Get a message to my man, Hunter...”

“Hunter the navigator?”

“Hunter the pilot.”

“Hunter the guy that has one in every port?”

“That Hunter.”

“Yeah, and...”

“And I’ll see. I was planning on hanging on to it, but if you get a message to Hunter to get here, I’ll talk with him. Put some feelers out to see if I can get a better buyer. If not, I’ll consider your offer seriously.”

“Aw Sweetie, by then I’ll have something else somewhere else and I won’t be needing you.”

“Well, go and find that place now, then. There’s lots of empty worlds, you said so yourself. Besides, Sol and me got a home here. We don’t want to leave.”

“You call this a home?” Zud gestured to the canvas walls.

“We’ve only been here a short while. We came with nothing. Year or two when we get the central air hooked up and the indoor plumbing sorted out, this’ll be a tourist destination.”

“Ha!” Zud roared. Everyone clasped their hands to their heads in pain.

“Sorry, just can’t get over your ign’ance,” he said. “You don’t understand that I’m going to take out a patent on this thing I found; I’ll be the only one with a use for this old planet. Nobody else will be able to touch this section. I’m your only customer so if you don’t deal with me, you’ll be alone, dearies.”

“You’ll be our neighbor, couple of planets away. Won’t be so bad, we’ll get the runoff,” Marla said.

“Ha!” he shouted again. Again they groaned.

“Sorry,” he said, quietly. And then: “You wouldn’t happen to have any TummyPump® would you?”

They shook their heads, hands still clasped.

“Well, I gotta get started then. It’ll take me two hours to get back to my ride to get some. I don’t suppose you’ll have lunch waiting for me when I return.”

“Sure,” they both said at once, unsmiling.

With a huff and a cough and spit, he stood up and stumbled out of the nook.

“You don’t mind seeing yourself out, do you?” Sol asked.

“Don’t mind at all,” the big man answered.

They heard him shuffling down the canvas hallway and out into the front room and eventually through the door flap. He stopped momentarily at the front door and then his crunching footsteps were heard retreating into the distance.

“Hmph,” Marla said. “What do you think he’s doing?”

“No idea,” Sol said.

“You think he’s getting something to, I don’t know, do something to us with?”

“Maybe, but he can’t kill us. He got us drunk. He got us playing cards, but he lost, so that didn’t work out for him. You take him seriously?”

“No.”

“That why you’re not taking him up on his offer? I mean you mope around here whining about not having any money to get off this hole, now somebody comes along and makes you an offer and you pass it off like it’s carp gizzards or something.”

“I’ve come to the conclusion that it’s not just the money. Well, it’s sort of the money. I still don’t have any place to go. A massive amount of money, more than what he’s offering, would get me out of debt and I could go home. But I still wouldn’t be safe there. And besides I don’t want to go there. So to return to civilization, I need a lot of money to make myself disappear. I need more than what they’re paying to find me. He’s still not giving me a good enough offer. So it is about the money sort of, but I also think he might be telling the truth.

“About his discovery? You think he’s discovered heaven like he says.”

“Sort of. It sounds crazy and I certainly don’t understand it, but he’s definitely found something. A phenomenon. He can’t patent it, I’m quite sure, regardless of what he thinks. It’d be like patenting, I don’t know, a human gene sequence or something ludicrous like that.”

“Yeah, that does sound pretty stupid. So what does that mean for us? For you, I mean.”

“Even though it’s not what he says it is—heaven—it’s something. He’s not getting exclusive rights to anything, let alone heaven, so we’re going to be getting a lot of visitors. For some reason, that guy seems to think this is the best planet for them. He really wants this place. If he could go to some other planet and do whatever his business is he would. There’s other places this far out without anybody on it to buy from. He wouldn’t spend so much time here unless this is where he needs to be. Where it’s at.”

“If it’s not heaven, what do you think it might be?”

“Something big. Important. Something you need a jumping off place for. That’s what he needs this planet for. It’s something near here and it’s something big.”

“Bigger than heaven?”

“Not necessarily bigger, just real.”

“Like what?”

“Well, I don’t remember my cosmography very well, but there has to be something that humans have been searching for since the beginning of whenever.”

“Besides heaven?”

“Besides heaven, besides God, besides eternal unconditional love.”

“The Grand Unification Theory?”

“Sol, Baby! Good answer. Something big like that. Only real. I think what he found was the matter/antimatter divide.”

“Never heard of it.”

“Not surprised. People don’t talk about it anymore. They’ve pretty much given up on it. But the fact is, a long time ago significant antimatter showed up on the Distant Antimatter Spectrometer, and once that happened people stopped searching for eternal youth and started searching for naturally occurring antimatter that would lead them to the divide. It sparked our collective imagination. We know it has to be there, but where?” She stopped abruptly and turned to Sol. “I mean knowledge is great, mystery solving is fine, but think of the potential.”

“Potential?”

“This is a gold mine. For everybody.”

“I’m not seeing it.”

“Look, if this is what Zud or whatever his name is found, everybody and their uncle is going to be scrambling, not to patent or buy it—they can’t—but they’ll scramble to study it first and then do the closest thing to patenting it that they can do: name it after themselves. And of course after that, big business will shoulder themselves in to exploit it.”

“How?”

“I have no idea, but I imagine the energy stored or created or something in the belt of annihilation has got to be enormous. What does everybody on every planet everywhere need? Even the most simple subsistence level low-tech places need energy. Look at this place. What separates you and me from death here? A crank to pull up the water. The panels to make the extractor work. The ants and their micromechanisms.”

“Fleas.”

“Fleas, ants, whatever. The discovery of a bottomless well of energy is, well, big. And owning this planet is like owning the pick and shovel concession.”

“So you’re going to hold out for a better price, then?”

“No, Sol. We don’t have to leave. We got a way to make a living now. We’ll set up shop, get the importers in on a regular basis. We can start a hotel for miners, a store for their supplies. We’ll sell them

shirts at top-gouge prices. We'll be set. Right here! It solves all my problems."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Look, you want to stay here. Funny, me too! I can't leave until I make a pile of money to either pay off my debts and go home or hire the most sophisticated security system in the world—maybe not even invented yet. Face it, any place I go in the civilized world I'll be logged and databased, and somebody eager to cash in on my bounty will discover the new address. That leaves uncivilized places like this one. What's the difference between one uncharted planet and the next? The amenities. So all we need here are amenities to make it palatable."

"I'm finding it hard to believe that this is going to be a paradise just because some scientific mystery spot is just beyond the horizon. How's all this going to come about?"

"I don't have the details worked out yet. Nothing's even confirmed. I mean Mr. Zudbeard might be out of his mind or something and then this whole thing is off, but I don't think so. He doesn't play poker well, but he doesn't blather either. He's on the square."

"So what you're saying is that all we need is a little bit of money, well a lot of money, to make this place not suck. I need a bulldozer, some building materials, some serious topsoil. You need... I don't know what you need. I think you need a drink with an umbrella or something and we're a long way off from that."

"Ah Sol, Sol. A drink with an umbrella would be a start. I need a herd of goats and some tin cans to feed them. A place to come in out of the sun. Yes we need a lot of money for all we want and we're about to get it. Once the news about Zud's discovery is out we'll be swarming with reporters, scientists, adventurers, thrill seekers, and finally venture capitalists. If everything goes well, we'll stay on the fringe of it all for the rest of our lives. No, we're not selling, and we're not developing either. We're just going to open a nice little general store and maybe a hotel. Someday when things get going, maybe the other planets around will develop and they'll get into a war and we'll still be here supplying their guerillas with ammo and Slimfast. Sol, we got a lot to do, now. We gotta get a list started."

"What are we going to do about...?" Sol nodded his head in the general direction of where the big man had gone off to.

"Yeah, we gotta get him off and on his way. He's got a lot of squawking to do about his find. He's gotta get the gold rush started."

"You sure are animated considering you have a hangover."

"Don't worry about my hangover. You just worry about that grocery list."

"Ah yes, the things we need for our construction project: the tourist center, the saloon, and the supply store."

"Yeah, and a tack and feed shop."

"Now you're talkin'. I'll get to working on it right away." Sol laid his head down on the table and soon began snoring.

Marla, as animated as the day she'd fomented revolution back on the Textile Planet, collected the

morning cups, did up the dishes using the time-honored sand method, folded the laundry, straightened the throw rugs, brushed off the canvas walls and similarly organized her own room. She found a stash of notepads in a corner somewhere and proceeded to brainstorm on making this new thing happen:

- build temporary supply tents
- contact Hunter to set up supply lines
- list supplies needed
- list inventory items (what will people need?)
- get steady food sources (grow here? ship in? costs? labor?)
- what about goats?
- exploration of this planet for possible resources – water, suitable growing conditions, oil (yeah, like this place ever supported a dinosaur)

Along about midnight, the crunch of boots on the sand returned, jolting her out of her thoughts of, on the one hand, how to get rid of Zud, and on the other hand, how to get him to contact Hunter. She wrestled between hinting at thoughts of selling the planet in order to get him on his way, and flat out refusing to do business with him until he told her what he was doing. He hadn't really mentioned the matter/antimatter divide. Hadn't even hinted at it; she merely surmised all that herself. As far as he knew, she believed he'd discovered heaven. But she needed to know the truth. If he really believed it was heaven, the deal was off—he was just another nut case. But if he had a real scientific find, well, the...

When Zud entered the room, she was sitting on the center rug pad. She looked up, intent on saying: "Welcome back, my friend. We've got some business I believe," but she never got it out. His appearance stopped her in mid thought. All she got out was "We..."

He was wearing ostrich skin John Wayne boots, a recently-brought-out-from-the-trunk leather setup (creases still present)—pants, jacket, bola—a visored cap, jauntily tilted to one side, sun shades, fringed gloves and a fragrance somewhere between Sáise °12 and Hai Karate which wafted through the mansion and created a stir in the back where Sol awoke to a coughing fit from a sound sleep.

"Well," Marla said, confused, impressed, and entertained. She stood up and bowed. "I am...nonplussed."

Zud entered further into the room and removed the cap, revealing a head clearly worked on for more than a short while. The pomade had been applied freely, and now not a single hair rebelled. All was in order and pink. He smiled sheepishly.

"I'll bet you want a cup of tea," Marla said. "Come, let's talk." She took him by the elbow and led him to the nook, seating him by the window flap. Sol entered just then, rubbing his eyes and stretching.

"Sol," she said, poking him in the ribs to get him to open his eyes and just look at what we have here. "We have a guest. Can you put the bottle on?"

"Kettle." Sol yawned again, swallowed and opened his eyes to look at Marla. "What are you talking about?"

“Mr. Zud has come calling. He and I need to talk.”

“Mm.” Sol stood there, dazed but looking at the guest for a few moments. He dragged himself out of the room and down the hall back to the back.

“Zud,” Marla said. “You needn’t come courting like I’m the new thousand dollar widow. For one, I’m not the marrying type. For two, I’m not giving the planet up. For three, let’s approach this from a different angle.”

“Why, Ms. Jones,” Zud guffawed. “I never intended to come to you, hat in hand...”

“Your hat is in your hand, Zud,” Marla said, pointing to the cap that rolled around in his hands as if a marriage proposal was forthcoming.

“Just a figure of speech, Ma’am. What I’m trying to say is that there’s no reason we can’t compromise.”

“I don’t really see a need to compromise. This is my home and you’re a visitor.”

“You’re mighty alone here. Someone could easily come and take your virtue. Your boy’s slingshot isn’t much to stop.”

“Alone? With an entire army?”

“Ha!”

“Don’t believe me? Take a look.” She pulled him up and dragged him into the hallway to the pump room. Pulling back the rug, she pointed to the ant works. “They built a hydraulic pump for water. It’s the only way Sol and I have survived. They’re designing a garden for us too.”

Zud sat back on his heels and laughed, slapping his knees and coughing up phlegm.

“I don’t care if you believe me,” Marla said. “Truth is, I don’t believe you. I don’t believe in heaven, you see. Or God, or anything. I think you’re running from someone and this is a good place to hide out. You have no proof of your heaven. Besides, what do you want with this planet anyway? Even if you can patent heaven. You said yourself you’d get any old planet if I didn’t sell. So go ahead.”

Zud scowled. He slapped his hands on his thighs. “You’re a stubborn so and so. Got half of it figured out. Yes, I want this planet, it’s the last link to heaven. That’s why it’s so sparse here and dry. Nothing much around in the sky and nothing on the planet either. It’s the last link, the Pearly Gates. It’s gotta be hell here: it’s the entrance to heaven. But if you’re an unbeliever, you’re the one that could get a planet anywhere. This is only special to me, not you.”

“Yes, but it’s my home now. You could just build a space station, infinitely cheaper than buying my planet, I would think.”

“I’ve thought of that,” Zud stood and stepped back. “Not sure of the logistics of that. You think it would be cheaper than buying a planet?”

Marla stepped closer to him, exuding enthusiasm. “When I was on Ansonia, I worked in a finance office. You can get construction loans cheaper than mortgages. You’ll come out ahead in the long run. A big

space station, large enough to house scient...sinners that need to repent before they even consider the Pearly Gates, why that would be a sca...service that couldn't lose. Trick it out with icons, prayer beads, prayer shawls, rattlesnakes for the more, er, fervent. How about some TV crews? Get out your state-of-the-art media kits with live action repentance and you'll get great press. Even more if you can catch some damnations. You'll be raking it in so fast you'll forget you ever wanted this God-forsaken, 'scuse my French, planet."

Frustrated, Zud began pacing. "No, no, no! I'm not running a hotel for sinners. What do I look like, a host?"

"Well, what are you thinking then?"

"There's always more money in product than in service. You gotta have a product."

"I see your point. Okay, then, so what you need is a sanctuary for yourself alone. A shop from which to mine this, this everlasting happiness. You want to bottle it up and sell it elsewhere. Even better! Zud, you're a genius."

Zud stopped abruptly and pointed a finger into the air. "Exactly!" He turned quickly and took a step toward Marla, then stopped and ran his fingers through his greasy hair, wrecking two hours of mirror work in half a second. "I need to patent it, first thing. Then the space station."

Marla pointed her finger into the air. "Exactly! You'll be the only one to profit from the, uh, salvation. What do people all over the galaxy want? They want to sleep in on Sundays, but they can't, not if they have to go to church. You can give them that sleep without the muss and fuss. Get 'em off their knees, stop the genuflecting, the candle-burning, the looking up with Saturday night's blood-shot eyes. You've got what they're looking for: forgiveness of sins, at discount prices when buying in bulk, no doubt."

"Eppie Jones, you oughta go into business."

"Me? Nah. I prefer the quiet life. I'm a homebody. I don't mind struggling for my ounce of water a day."

"Guess the ants aren't all that helpful after all."

Marla shrugged. "Yeah, well, listen Zud Baby, I really appreciate the effort with the motorcycle outfit and all. I like the touch with the hair. If I didn't have a boyfriend already, I'd really go for you."

"Boyfriend? That guy?" Zud pointed to the back of the mansion.

"No, not him."

Zud threw back his head and laughed. "Hunter! You could do better than him," he advanced on Marla with a dopey smile on his face.

Marla backed up. "Sh! You'll wake the baby," she said, bobbing her head toward the back.

Zud stopped, looked confused for a moment, then straightened out. "Well, I've got to go and get started on my plans," he said, heading for the exit. "There's a couple of people I need to contact, some details I have to iron out, I need to get this verified but keep it all confidential, eh? No letting it slip until I have the evidence filed and patent owned, eh?"

Marla smiled weakly; she still hadn't confirmed what it was that Zud had discovered. And she still hadn't figured out how to get word to somebody, somehow. Then it hit her.

"Confidential?" she called after him. "You ever been to Ansonia?"

Zud stopped and wheeled. "Of course."

"You ever heard of a woman named Meko?"

"Maybe, why?"

"She's the queen of confidential. You need something researched confidentially—she'll hook you up."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, that's her biz. Getting research done or documents filed or information all obtained without a scrap of paper trail. Or with if you prefer. She can create a dodge or an alibi. It's expensive of course, but it's just the cost of doing business. If it didn't cost a lot, you'd wonder about the security, right?"

"I guess. Where do I find this Meko person?"

"Get yourself to Ansonia, 31A North Lane. Talk to the woman with the whistle first thing in the morning. Can you write?"

"Long hand?"

"Yeah, long hand, short hand, cursive, pen and paper, all that stuff."

"I guess."

"I hope so. Write a request for a meeting with Meko, stick it in an envelope, and pass it to the woman with a whistle when you speak to her. She'll hand carry it to the proper authorities. As long as you have a physical address—can be anywhere, your ship in its spot at Ansonia Intergalactical, doesn't matter—and she'll meet you there."

"The woman with the whistle?"

"No, Meko. And bring cash. Mention my name to her. Tell her I have her money, but can't get it to her because I can't get off this stinking planet."

"I'd be happy to bring it to her."

Marla patted him on the head. "Zud, I love you. Just tell her I have her money, that'll do me fine."

Zud shrugged. "Yeah, sure." He turned to the exit flap. "I'm leaving then."

"No time like the present, I always say."

He stopped halfway through the flap and turned. "How about a goodbye snort?"

"Zud, you're a pal, but I'm nursing a hangover and thinking seriously of taking a nap."

“How can you sleep at a time like this?”

“Time like this? It’s midnight.”

“A new day’s dawning. We’re about to change the world.”

“World, Zud? What world?”

“The world and all mankind. I mean, think of it.”

“I am thinking of it. What about it? This is your thing.”

“Yeah, but it’s for everyone.”

“Heaven?”

Zud frowned. “Yeah, sure, heaven.”

“You’re just selling snake oil, Zud, you know that. I know that. Everyone but the true believers will know that.”

“Snake oil? What are you talking about? This is the real deal!”

“Prove it.”

“Well I…”

“You got some sacred dust to bring to your, uh, verifiers? Healing waters? You got a miracle to show the team so you can prove what you have?”

“Miracles?” Zud laughed. “Yes, I have miracles.”

“Uh huh.”

“You want miracles? I’ve got a miracle on my ship. You didn’t think I would just be able to go off and make a claim without proof, did you?”

“No, of course not. I know you’re not that stupid. So what proof do you have?”

“I’ve got a whole wad of tracings from my quarkalyzer. It’s authenticated—time and space stamped. It’ll be proof enough for any panel of experts, and it’s all I need for the patent filing.”

“You mean application.”

“Oh no, this is a sure thing. I’m getting this patent. Once they see the data. I mean things don’t just disappear.”

“Of course they don’t.”

“Not under heaven, anyway. But in heaven?”

“So you found a place where things just disappear.”

“Without a trace, nothing but pure energy left behind.”

“Well that sounds like evidence to me.”

“You want to see, we’ll just walk over. They’re still in the HP.”

“HP, eh? Nah, I believe you. I need to take a nap. But you have a safe trip. And remember: total confidential. Don’t say peep until you’re face to face with Meko. She’ll take it from there. I don’t want anybody buzzing around here, looking for Gabriel’s headquarters.”

“Not a peep until the press conference after the station’s built in a year or two.”

“That’s my boy.” Marla yawned and waved goodbye to Zud, who finally made it through the flap. The sound of his boots crunching in the sand receded, and a couple of hours later Marla watched his jet fly across the sky again.

“He’s gone,” she said as Sol stepped through the tent flap. Marla was sitting in a lawn chair watching the dawn sky where the jet had previously been. She sipped a special concoction Sol had invented: kelp tea flavored with minced palm leaf and steeped in the sun and kept cold and refreshing in the river. The glass had a homemade paper parasol on a palm twig resting on the edge.

“You celebrating?” Sol asked.

“Yeah, Bon Voyage.” She raised her glass. “Care to join me?”

“Yeah. I’m pretty dry I guess.

He fixed his own drink and returned to Marla’s early morning celebration.

“So how’d things turn out?” he asked setting up his lounge chair in the sand.

“It’s definitely matter/antimatter.”

“How do you know?”

“He’s got a quarkalyzer.”

“And that is?”

“An old machine used for paranormal investigation: spirits, auras, ghosts, that sort of thing.”

“I don’t get it. Sounds like he was really looking for life after death. Maybe he did find heaven.”

“No, that’s camouflage. With a little modification, you can use a quarkalyzer as matter/antimatter collision detector. In a pinch. If you’re roughing it somewhere, say...”

“On the edge of humanity?”

“Right.”

#

And so Zud returned to civilization, intent on communicating his secret in a way that only those he could profit from would hear about it. His intentions were to secure his patent and a huge loan, hire a contractor for the space station, and eventually rule as the King of the Matter/Antimatter Divide.

Within three months of his departure, Hunter showed up at the door with news from said civilization. He'd found Marla in her new location easily enough since they'd painted a big red target on the top of their canvas mansion. The ants had supplied the dye extracted from clay shale located far below the site. They pumped it up through little tubes that acted as paint brushes. It was a slow process and took them half a month to get the outer circle alone done since the paint stream was so slow, but what else did they have to do?

Hunter rushed up to the campsite with the not so surprising news. Marla and Sol were sitting in lounge chairs in the front yard, waiting.

“The whole world's going to be beating your door down very soon,” he said breathlessly to Marla. “Everyone's outfitting already. I'm gonna make a fortune transporting goods and people. You could easily do the same if you get in on the action. Who's the nude?”

By now Sol had taken to wearing a canvas loin cloth so technically he was no longer naked, but it was a small loincloth and his beard still seemed to be his only modesty.

“Sol, meet Hunter, Hunter, meet Sol,” Marla stood to give Hunter a hug.

“Sol, huh?” Hunter looked him up and down.

“Yes,” Sol unabashedly held out his hand. “Welcome to the planet.”

“Hm, yes.” Hunter reached out to shake firmly. They stared at each other for a moment, and then Hunter turned his attention to Marla.

“I think you got one, two months at the most before offers start coming in.”

“Offers?” Sol asked.

“To buy the planet,” Marla answered.

“How'd you figure it out?” Hunter asked.

“We're talking about the matter/antimatter divide, correct?”

“Yeah, you meet that Zud character?”

“Oh yeah, he told us all about it. Wanted to buy the planet himself.”

“Yeah, apparently it's the last jumping off place. The closest you can get without subjecting yourself to it. To get closer you'd have to outfit a special ship. Everybody's going to want to have a base here. This is going to be busier than Lauderdale in April.”

“Hm, we’ll see. So how long did Zud hold off before blurting out his secret?”

“I don’t know, I heard about it on the galactic news stream and called in to my dispatcher for details. She gave me the coordinates and I couldn’t believe it! I hightailed it over immediately. That was just a few days ago, but I have the turbo drive when I want it, so...”

“So he didn’t even wait to file a patent before squawking.”

“Patent? What are you talking about? He can’t file a patent. That’d be like patenting a human...”

“Gene sequence. Yeah, I know. But that was his plan. I told him to head over to Ansonia for the proper research connects, but I don’t think he made it. I wanted him to get a message out for me, but no matter, I really just wanted to send for you and here you are. But the word’s out, huh?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Hunter said.

“And your offer is for what?”

“Offer?”

“Yeah, what are you here for?”

“Uh, you said you...”

“To buy the planet, right?”

“Well, uh, not exactly. I’m not a land owner, that should be obvious. However, I’d like to negotiate some landing rights, preferably sole.”

“Uh huh.”

“It’s not for nothing, Eppie. I’ll help you get set up here. You need me for that. Isn’t that what you wanted me for?”

“You know you’re right, Hunter. Sol here has a very long shopping list and so do I. If you can call it in, make the arrangements, front me the money, float me some credit, spot me a loan, cosign or somehow get me this capital, we could easily be in business with your landing rights. You can have a fleet of flyers, jets, shuttles, space stations, puddle jumpers, bubble jets, or Frisbees all home based here. Whatever you need to take advantage of this most fortuitous location and the lengthy yet rather frivolous friendship you and I have shared in the past, but which now will be elevated to new heights, will be yours. I do have a little in a secret account over on the banking planet. You can have that to start but this’ll take a lot more.”

“Girl, you sure do talk! So where’s the shopping list?”

“Well, I guess we need pen and paper and a notary public for one. Gotta draw up a contract. Sol, you know anything about the law?”

“I was in security at one time,” Sol answered.

“You never mentioned that before,” Marla answered.

Sol shrugged.

“Well, I guess that’ll have to do. Hunt, good enough for you?”

“Do I have a choice? Doesn’t seem to be anybody else around.”

“We could ask the fleas,” Sol mentioned.

“We could ask the fleas,” Marla said.

“Fleas?”

“Well, communications is a bit slow, and a lengthy and complicated contract fraught with subtleties and legalistic detail might be hard to get across using hand to antenna signaling,” Marla said. “Perhaps we should just stick with Sol.”

“Okay.”

“Fine.”

“Agreed.”

“So what do we put into this contract?” Hunter asked.

“Um, how about: ‘Hunter...What’s your last name?’”

“Do I have to?”

“We can work that out later.”

“ ‘Hunter is hereby given sole license to land on planet XKJ10 in exchange for attached schedule A materials.’ “

“Good start,” Hunter said.

“ ‘Signed Eppie Jones, Sol the Lunatic, and Hunter the man with the unknown last name. The End.’ “

“Good ending.”

“Like that? Shake.”

Marla extended her hand. Hunter looked at it and reached up for it, just as Marla grabbed Sol’s hand and pulled it into the agreement. Hunter retracted.

“What’s he bringing to the table?” Hunter asked.

“His notoriety.”

“Uh huh.”

“Look, do this the easy way or the hard way. We all need each other, and that’s the only fact we have here. Either one of us can balk, contract or no. This will only work if we want it to. Sol’s my partner, he saved my life. I’m not doing this without him.”

“Good enough for me.” Hunter grabbed Sol’s hand and they all shook.

And then hugged and then got down to business. Marla brought out the lists of supplies. Sol’s list consisted of equipment and materials, including a bulldozer to dig a sizeable well (A sand pump is nice and all but a dozer! Now you’re talking.), cement and two-by-fours for a store, barn, swimming pool (covered with evaporation prevention beads) connected to a hotel, and a remote sensing lab for the scientists soon to be stationed there. That would be outfitted later since no one had the slightest idea what equipment beyond a quarkalyzer a scientist used.

Marla’s list dealt with exploration and exploitation. She continued dreaming of finding something of value in the planet aside from its proximity to the Divide. She ordered a land rover and two geologists (standard T90 models) to explore the planet’s surface. She ordered a herd of goats and an agronomist to design a farm. She ordered an ad for the Ansonian billboards for a doctor with allergies—somebody that needed a dry climate.

Hunter was off the next day, having spent the previous evening securing the port at XKJ10. Marla saw him off with a smile, a kiss, and a last minute mandate.

“One thing,” she said as he was stepping into his jet.

Hunter turned with the look that he’d give his wife after she requested he try the sofa in this corner one last time. If he had a wife.

“Which is...?” he said.

“No video transmission of XKJ10.”

He stepped toward her. “You gotta be kidding, Jones. You can’t control that. They’ll be taking shots from 20,000 miles away.”

“Of the planet’s makeup, sure, I don’t care about that. Let ‘em see how dead the place is. It’ll keep the lightweights away at least. But no one gets a close-up shot. No photos. No recording pictures. You’ll be the only one getting a flyby. No pictures. If Sol or I end up in a frame, we revoke your license. I’ll patent my own vacuum space and nobody’ll land here. Right?”

“You can’t patent the vacuum. That’d be like patenting a...”

“Human gene sequence. They did it, read your history. Took ‘em years to figure out it wasn’t working out and then only because the patent holders kept getting sued for mutations. Meantime, lots of damage was done because patent owners refused to let anybody but themselves work on patented genes. And...”

“Look, I’ll do my best, but what you’re asking is...”

“I mean it, Hunter. Nobody records a shot of Sol and me, got it? We’re just aliens—a couple of sand fleas—for all anybody knows.”

“Sure.” Hunter turned back to his machine, shaking his head. Marla returned to the mansion and her lounge chair and drink which had seen an improvement with some seltzer Hunter had brought with him. A small piece of rubber tubing with a tiny bit of palm frond attached hung on the rim.

Sol entered the scene from the tent. “He gone?” he asked.

“Yup.”

#

And so began the fourth great incarnation of Marla Gershe’s life. A few weeks passed, bringing a flurry of activity to the planet, all directed by Marla.

The geologists came disassembled in their case. Sol and Marla took half a day to put them together and then sent them out in the land rover for a two-week expedition of the dark side of the planet.

The canvas hotel arrived as did the research lab, the dozer with well masonry. They set up a regular supply schedule with Hunter so that orders could be fulfilled quickly and with regularity. At first supplies came every other week, radioed in and then received two weeks later. Eventually Hunter hired a fleet of hyper speeders, costing into the millions, but well worth it considering the effort. The outfitting of the lab, the hotel, the store, all required much, much more capital than was previously realized. Shopping became a daily activity. Marla’s bank account over on Suiba was unlocked and emptied in one fell swoop. Sure she was good for payment, Hunter advanced her materials on credit after that.

After two weeks the geologists returned with reams and reams of information, all amounting to the same thing: the planet was dead all over. Nothing but the occasional firestorm had occurred for thousands of years. She gassed them up and sent them out again.

And again.

And again.

Meanwhile, on the colonized side of the planet, one sunny day the first visitors—hopeful buyers accompanied by a scientist to verify things—arrived via Hunter Vacuum Enterprises—a growing business with a new bookkeeper to help Hunter with the paperwork. He was finally overcoming his cash flow problem. Construction on XKJ10 was not complete yet, but the hotel had been erected, so at least they could get out of the sun as they negotiated with Marla. Food was still pretty much subsistence level only, a chef had not yet been ordered. But the meetings were held, and the visitors eventually left for more powerful meetings back on their home planet. It took a week for the next set of visitors, but after that a new bunch of matter/antimatter venture capitalists arrived daily. The pure scientists—those that everyone was banking on to be interested—weren’t too far behind. At some point, everyone knew the oil companies would be getting involved.

The increase in activity changed Marla. The ennui and apathy she’d existed under for the previous two years gradually faded. New purpose inflicted a schedule upon her. She looked forward to starting and completing each project with latent energy. It came to her effortlessly, and with each passing day she gained strength and momentum. Weeks went by without the usual self-reproach and guilt for her former sins. Everything was going swimmingly until the day Sol shaved. The world took a turn for the worse that day. Regression set in.

It wasn't Sol's fault; he'd been wearing clothing for weeks, ever since the planet began civilizing. It was only a matter of time before he removed his four-year beard.

In the middle of Marla creating one of her endless lists of things to buy, in this case the soup pots for the hotel kitchen, something at the scullery door caught her attention—a breath of wind, or a beam of light maybe. She turned and saw a tallish figure backlit in the doorway there. The gray hair was cut short and was now bristly. The crisp worker's clothing—short-sleeved t-shirt and pressed slacks—looked like some kind of uniform, complete with deck shoes capable of tying jibs or perhaps jumping overboard to save a lost soul. The unfamiliar face did not smile as it entered the room and presented itself to her. She stood up from the soon to be hooked up sink.

The sun entering the room from the open flap threw his face into shadow; she could barely make out his features.

From somewhere in the depths of the hotel tent, a worker Hunter had hired for installations finished hooking up a sound system and was now testing it with a tune from his private collection. A sparse bit of music, it consisted of a flute and a lot of reverb. A rough voice sang words that lost themselves in the swirl of the hotel caverns. Only the strum of the lap steel came through clearly and at regular intervals, sad and romantic.

Sol, still unsmiling, looked down into Marla's face and took the limp hand that had seconds ago dropped its pen. He raised the hand into the air and his other hand behind her back to pull her in close. The man whose hair had turned white and so looked old was really still young and strong as he held her close. They swayed and he whispered into her ear, "Marla."

When the music died away, she turned to him and kissed him on the lips.

Three days Sol and Marla were absent from the goings on of the central camp at XKJ10. No one knew where they were. Deep in the bowels of Sol's original mansion, gone on a mission to some caves the robot geologists had found, fishing in an underground lake the ants/fleas had created. Any one of those things could have been it. But no one ever knew.

When they returned, her hair was mussed, his face was shiny, but for all intents and purposes they were happy. They offered no explanation. He wore a cabin key around his neck.

Without so much as missing a beat, they resumed work where they left off: she making her lists, he supervising the digging of the pool. But as the days wore on she found herself losing energy. She became uncommunicative and despondent, as if the outing had been a sin and now gave her pause. A week and a half later she stayed in bed all day. For three days.

Sol contacted Hunter on the private band.

"She doesn't eat, she hardly speaks, she cries a lot."

"She pregnant?"

"No. I mean, I don't think so."

"Could she be?"

"That's a personal question."

“Well I heard talk.”

“Not from me.”

“About you.”

“Let’s just say I don’t think so. This is a psychological thing.”

“And you would know?”

“Yes.”

Hunter was silent, nothing but white noise between them. Being a reformed lunatic, Sol spoke with some authority. He should know from psychosis.

“So what are you suggesting?” Hunter broke the static.

“Something’s bugging her and she needs to deal with it.”

“Something’s bugging her? She’s got a lot going on. This is the last thing she needs to do right now. Sounds more like she’s plain deranged.”

“Could be.”

“What did you do, Sol?”

“I shaved.”

“Yeah, I heard, big deal.”

“We knew each other before. We had a history that she had pretty much forgotten about until I shaved. I think she’s struggling because I’m reminding her of the history.”

“History, huh? Bad?”

“Not really, but she thinks it is.”

“So what should I get: Prozac, Valium, laudanum?”

“I don’t know, I’m not a psychiatrist. I had to work through this thing in my way, and now she’s got to work through it her way.”

“And so where do I fit in?”

“I’m going home,” Marla said, standing in the same doorway of the kitchen Sol had stood in with his shaved self two weeks before. Sol looked up from the radio set and stood when he saw her.

Her hair was plastered to the side of her expressionless face.

“Marla.”

“I left Saddle behind. I shouldn’t have done that. I deliberately left my burden on her. I couldn’t carry my burden, and instead of making sure she didn’t either, I left her with it. I used her to escape and then left her with the mess. She’s a sensitive, not ready for this world soul, and if she’s still alive, she’s in hell. And not only did I leave her there, I put her there.”

The radio set hummed. Hunter could barely hear what was going on, but understood Marla was speaking. Sol remained silent because as wrong as he thought Marla was, he knew that only she could push herself up through the insanity. He returned to the radio and took a deep breath.

“Uh, you need to come and get her, she’s going to be taking a trip and she’ll only go with you.” And then he signed off.

Over the course of the next few weeks as they waited for Hunter to turn up, they worked out the details of how Marla could return to the Textile Planet in secret. Sol had a few ideas, having previously worked in security. The plan they came up with would take a year to execute. Since she’d be gone for so long, she drew up instructions on how to finish setting up the hotel, the store, the gases in the lab.

Explorers and speculators arrived daily now. Offers came in to buy the planet hourly. She had no intention of selling and instructed the staff to carry on carrying on. Sol was to be in charge. She had no fears of the planet being sold while she was gone, because she’d be gone and so couldn’t sign any papers of transfer. She wrote up a will giving the planet to Sol in case of her death and left the will with the ants who had a special high security lockup just for those types of things.

Finally Hunter came, and she hastily collected her knapsack and blanket. She bade a tearful two-hour goodbye to Sol, who stoically told her she was doing the right thing even though he thought it sounded like the stupidest thing he’d ever heard. He felt certain she’d never return, but didn’t worry too much about it. He’d followed her before, he’d do it again. He kissed her passionately goodbye and at the last moment returned the cabin 31A key to her. Just in case.

She brushed away a tear, picked up the knapsack and blanket, and boarded Hunter’s jet for Walloon.

Chapter Six

The ride to Walloon took a number of months—not as long as to go from Ansonia to XKJ10. Now that Hunter had money, he’d upgraded his personal flying apparatus. It was a faster boat (one equipped with a turbo time driver) and he could afford high-octane. Suspended animation came and went without event. The two spoke little during the flight. Marla’s mind was focused on one thing, and it wasn’t snappy patter. Hunter, for his part, spent most of his air time on the cell phone, concentrating on his booming business.

Once on Walloon, they disembarked onto a tiny pad allocated to private jets. They walked up to the gate together, and by the time they had reached the point of separation—the point when somebody should mention getting together sometime while here—Hunter pulled at Marla’s elbow.

“So when shall I collect you?” he said.

"I don't know," Marla answered. "I've got to hitch a ride to the Textile Planet and then I have no idea how long I'll be there. Will you be here long? On second thought, I can make other arrangements. I don't want to tie you up."

"What exactly are you going to be doing?"

"I have to get Saddle, if she's still..."

"Did it ever occur to you that..."

"Don't even think it!"

"What? That your friend, uh, Saddle is it? is okay?"

"That would be the worst thing," Marla said. "If she's okay, she's dead."

"Aren't you being a little dramatic?"

"Oh and you know everything about the Textile Planet. You're the one who had amnesia, brain experimentation, water bath therapy. You're the one who got shot in the gut."

"I thought that was an accident."

"Listen, I owe you... I don't know, more than money, Hunter. I owe you at least the respect of hearing your opinion, but I just can't. Nobody that hasn't been there can possibly understand what goes on there. I need to do this, that's all there is to it. And I've got to get going, catch a ride. I'll be alright; I'll find a transport back to XKJ. I don't want you to worry about that. My head's too full right now to try and get this formal goodbye done correctly; I apologize for that. What else do we need to do here? Hunter, what else do we need?"

"Eppie, Marla, Eppie, relax. No pressure from me, Babe. You do what you like, I just don't want to see you get hurt is all."

Marla hung her head to the side and rolled her eyes. "I'm being dramatic?"

"Okay, forget it. But if you're hitching a ride somewhere, we need to find you an amicable pilot. Let's see who's here."

"You don't need to do this, Hunter."

Under his breath he said, "Yeah, right," as he walked to the dock monitor at the side of the gate area. Marla followed behind and watched him insert his captain's token into the meter. He then held his barcode up to the scanner and the screen opened with a question mark. He leaned forward to speak into the sound collector.

"Haulers in dock," he said.

The screen responded with a scrolling list of numbers and locations. Hunter waved over the halt patch and slowly perused the list with the up and down buttons, mumbling as he read through names and arguing with himself over the merits of each possibility: "Never heard of it, never heard of it, Tick, yes. Uh, no, wrong trajectory. Nope, never heard of it, no, no, ah. There's one. Bigger Hughes. Semi-private

gig going to the Textile Planet.” He turned to Marla. “Got anything against psychedelics?”

Marla looked up at him and with a half-smile answered, “I don’t think so. Psychosomatics maybe, but never psychedelics.”

“C’m on.” He grabbed her by the elbow to pull her forward. At one point he put his arm around her shoulder and gave her a squeeze like Dad helping out because the kids at school are so mean and, and... She couldn’t help but be moved by his gesture. Despite the fact that time was money and Hunter was losing a million a minute, he’d helped her out with a mission that seemed impetuous at best and insane at worst. She put her own arm around his skinny waist and they shuffled quickly onward.

Eventually they had to separate to maneuver through the throng in Walloon’s terminal to get to the gaming room next to the bus depot. A wave of something—*déjà vu* or nostalgia maybe—hit Marla along with the ever-thickening green smoke. The dreaded monitors blared out their news, reminding her of Charney and the fact that she had been sure it was the dark guy, Trest, that had killed him. She knew now that it hadn’t been him, but who it was, was a new mystery more frightening than ever. She stopped just inside the doorway as the clanging and buzzers of game boxes, the whooping and weeping of the players, hit her. A drunk behind her bawled at her to move on.

Hunter turned around and scowled at her, indicating she needed to follow him. He turned back to the room and spotted his target at a far box where a short woman with a bleached bouffant and plastic ear bangles thrust from the hips with every pull of the lever. She stared into the box, oblivious to the confusion of bells and gamblers and monitors surrounding her until Hunter clamped her on the shoulder.

“Bigger Hughes, my love!” he shouted above the din.

She barely looked up to acknowledge him and continued with her virtual dice. Finally her play came to an end when the box announced “Next!” in a whiney, mechanical voice.

Bigger Hughes then turned to Hunter and, with all the eloquence of the lady she’d been born, jumped into his arms and wrapped her legs around his waist to give him a sloppy hello.

“Hunter, Darling!” she yelled. “Man, do I love you!”

“Me too, Bunny, but you’re not getting any money from me just the same.”

A number of bettors paused for half a second in their play. They started to look up momentarily at the noisy couple, but kept their glance to themselves at the last second, maintaining their attentions on the matters before them. Marla stood with her back to the pair, transfixed by the scene just above the door, her thoughts moving sluggishly, ever slowing, until time and motion stopped completely. She watched the monitor there without hearing Bigger Hughes and Hunter patter good-humoredly in the far corner. After they both threw back their heads and laughed, Hunter took notice of Marla and let Bigger Hughes slip to the floor. He led her toward Marla, and just as they reached her, the sound of their voices hit her.

Hunter was speaking to Bigger Hughes. “I can’t give you money, but I can cancel your previous debts.”

“Ah, Hunter Baby. You saying you got no cash?” Bigger Hughes said.

“That’s what I’m saying,” Hunter answered. “What I got is a friend.”

“This your friend?” Bigger Hughes asked, pointing with her thumb towards Marla. “The one in the fog?”

Marla remained rooted in her spot, transfixed by the newsfeed above the door. She neglected to introduce herself.

“That be her,” Hunter said.

Bigger Hughes swung her head to Hunter and stood with her hand on her hip. “I’m supposed to risk my numerals on that barnacle?”

“You and me are squared.”

“How much I owe you?”

“More’n you got, more’n you’ll make this quarter, more’n you’ll lose next year. It’s a pretty sweet deal, Short Stuff.” He looked down benevolently at Bigger Hughes with his eyebrows raised.

“Is it got a name? Can it talk? Does it have to be resuscitated in the morning? Or watered? Parle it ingles?”

“Eppie!” Hunter called. He grabbed Marla and pulled her through the door. “What’s wrong?” he asked out in the hall.

She said nothing but shook her head slightly as if trying to fathom the situation. Finally she turned to Hunter and looked him dead in the face. “I’m scared,” she whispered.

The plea, like a pathetic cry from the whelp to its mother, went straight to the heart of Bigger Hughes. She wheeled around Hunter’s frame and stepped between him and Marla.

“What you got, a tick on your neck? Somebody after you?” she asked.

Marla stared at the four-foot woman—all nose—standing in front of her, but said nothing. Having moved from stupefaction to petrification only moments before, she found herself unable to articulate anything. Or even comprehend for that matter.

Bigger Hughes, on the other hand, moved easily from cheerfully animated to animatedly cheerleading in the matter of a second.

“Because I can get you in and out of a hair crack faster than a dust bunny moves under the couch,” she said. “And quieter too. Just tell me what you need, Honey. I got the car, the oil, the crankshaft, and the shop manual. We’re set. What do you need?”

“Uh,” Marla managed.

“Eppie, meet Bigger Hughes, one of the best smugg. . .pilots in the vac. She specializes in specialties, if you know what I mean.” Hunter stood behind the strange little woman.

“Special assignments,” Bigger Hughes nodded with eyebrows raised as if that would help Marla understand she smuggled drugs for a living. “C’mon,” the little woman said, as she linked her tight small arm with Marla’s limp one. “Let’s go get a drink, Hunter’s buying.”

Hunter followed behind as Bigger Hughes led Marla Gershe around the corner and into the mass of

people on the food court.

Following a round of rye and two of gin rummies at a quiet little strip club, Marla finally relaxed into the atmosphere Bigger Hughes easily created. She even laughed as Bigger bragged incessantly with professorial ease about big name clients, close calls with the authorities, and lots and lots of gambling coups.

After the third round, the three came to an agreement as to Marla's need for undetected entry onto the Textile Planet, Bigger Hughes' need to be free of debt, and Hunter's need to get back to his business of transporting millions in goods and people to XKJ. True, none of the parties fully understood each other's circumstances, but the needs were somehow all agreed upon. Hunter gave his enthusiastic and drunken farewell to the women so he could see to his need. Marla and Bigger resolved their more urgent need for a restroom, and afterwards left for the Textile Planet to satisfy their bigger needs.

Lying on the weight manifest in her transport papers left Bigger Hughes room for her usual contraband shipment and the 65 kilos Marla cost her. Down below the fake floor of the pilot's pit, Marla remained in the fetal position for two weeks. Most people would have a hard time with this, but Marla, dusted with the contents of white paper packages all around her, found the time easy.

The two women became friends, probably because they had to, considering their proximity to each other. When the ship was boarded mid-vac by a couple of members of the Transit Authority, Bigger Hughes allowed Marla out for a stretch. The boys were getting paid off, and nobody else'd be sniffing around while they were there. Might as well make it an official party. Everyone got looped, and the boys eventually flew off sideways to the nether regions. Bigger Hughes, used to navigating with crossed eyes, never missed a beat and docked the rig half a day early much to Marla's chagrin. Her fear slipped past the ether haze of the upper lip powder and into her soul. There it remained throughout the landing and eventually settled in her knees, which trembled and threatened to fail her.

Fortunately Bigger Hughes' egotistical overconfidence won the day.

"So where to from here, Big Girl?" she asked, as the two debarked.

"Uh," Marla stammered. "I have to get to Harper's Mill and I completely forgot to borrow some cash from Hunter. You got anything?"

"You kiddin'? Tell you what, though, look up my friend, Bob Ricketts. He'll get you fixed up."

"Uh, yeah, I know him, but he's a bit steep. I got papers this time," she flicked her left earring, "but no money. I get the feeling he doesn't let anyone off easy."

"Ricketts?" Bigger Hughes laughed out loud. "He's a tulip. Ever notice how he hides in the shadows and talks real soft?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Listen, the clue to Ricketts is to push him around. Talk loud, bluff your way. He's so weird he gets over because people think he's evil. He's not. He's just weird. Talk loud, demand your money back or special treatment or invoke my name. He gets scared at all that fine wire. Play the piano, man. He'll respond."

"Wire?"

“Yeah, tap dance under the hood. It’s just percussion.”

“I can’t begin to understand what you’re saying.”

“Just be forceful. We’re not talking assertiveness training here. What you want is balls out aggression. Don’t be shy.”

“That sounds like it would work for you; I’m just a little creep myself.”

“Bullshit! Keep in mind he ripped you off. He owes you his first rugrat. Haven’t you ever in your life been mad at getting the short end? Role play, baby. Stanislavsky. Be there in the moment. Get yourself hot and then blow off point blank at the man’s half-baked face.”

“Are we talking music or acting?”

“Whatever it takes.” Bigger Hughes lit up a stogey. All she needed now was a monocle and a derby and the picture would be complete. “Who’re you mad at, Eppie?”

“Mad?”

“What’s buggin’ you and whose fault is it? Everybody’s got a beef.”

“You don’t seem like it.”

“Me? I’m mad as a hatter that never got over it. I learned the trick: got in the moment and stayed there. Get mad, Girlfriend. Who is it? Old boyfriend screwing around, sibling rivalry, Junior High in general?”

Bigger Hughes pulled the cigar out of her mouth and stood on her tippy toes to speak into Marla’s ear. “Ever been fucked in the ass by a hot poker?”

Marla looked down at her. Images of too many torturous water baths gave way to rusty, oil showers and a woman with a hand broken by a loom.

“Maybe.”

“Not maybe, Darlin’. Absoeffinlutely. You got the shaft, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, so what? Everybody takes their turn.”

“Not the Ricketts of the world. They take it from anybody that worked for it. Ever seen his office?”

“It’s modest.”

“Sure it is, because he’s got no taste. Look at the worms that work for him. Little cubicles a mile from the water cooler and no windows. He’s in a 20 by 20 with a view of the liftoffs. He doesn’t even work for it. They do. Rake it in for him, in fact. He squeezes them just like he squeezed you. What’d Ricketts ever do for you, that nasty bastard? You’re in trouble and he takes advantage. Total scum. He needs to be wiped!”

“How do you know all this?”

“He’s a pal, we do lunch occasionally.”

“Yeah, well he pretty much pulled me out of a jam. He’s worth it.”

“What’d he do, take all your money just to provide you with papers?”

“Something like that.”

“Papers are a dime a dozen. Every corner tobacco joint in Gatown can do it for a buck three eighty.”

“I didn’t see any.”

“You didn’t look. Ricketts told me his scam a long time ago. Sets himself right up on the platform and intercepts any sucker without luggage. Keeps reminding them about the papers and charges 1000% profit. He ripped you blind, Girlie. Well, at least you got a blanket for the smoking section. The tobacco joints are shit cheap, but they don’t provide blankets.”

“A bl...?”

“He didn’t give you a bl...?”

Marla’s eyes squinted.

“Yeah,” Bigger Hughes said. “Now you’re talkin’! Eppie Jones, it has been a pleasure to know you. Maybe I’ll go and visit your XKJ at some point. No transports though, Hunter’s got the contract. Of course, if I do it on the sly, who’s to know?”

Bigger laughed at that. She hugged the unmoving Marla and strode off in a puff of cigar smoke, looking for her contact somewhere in the dark recesses of Gatown’s terminal.

Marla watched the enormous amount of space the small woman took up. She could hear Bigger Hughes’ boots clicking well after she disappeared around a corner. Her huge laugh as she met someone she knew echoed and reechoed for minutes. The noise from the terminal’s central room with its circle of passengers easily purchasing tickets to places like Buxton increased in intensity. The place buzzed, as if Bigger Hughes’ presence was felt by all there and the world could now resume revolving now that she was here to serve as the reference point.

Marla turned and passed through the ticket-buying throng and out the north exit. She marched across the alleyway, up the fire escape, and through the broken back window like a woman who knew what she was doing. Like she had a cookie jar stash of millions and a shady background that Ricketts would love. She walked to the broken piano in the corner and slammed a fist down on the keys at the left end which responded with an angry off-key roar.

Banging through the door and wearing her purpose on her sleeve, Marla stomped into the hallway filled with jabbering agents and their assistants. They paused in their ticketing momentarily to regard the red-faced woman, but then continued immediately as they realized it was not they with whom she had business.

Marla strode past Sheldon sitting on Shirley’s desk just outside Rickett’s office. Just before he noticed the oncoming Marla Gershe, he laughed at a little joke he and Shirley were sharing. Suddenly he jumped

off the desk, confronting Marla like a drill sergeant guilty of playing patty cake with Patty's cakes.

"Excuse me," he said. "I don't believe you're supposed to be in here, Ma'am."

"Knock it off, Torpid!" Marla said, brushing him aside. "I'm here to see Shurm."

"Torpid?" Sheldon rushed behind her. "Who the hell are you? You can't go in there. Does he know you?"

"Back off Cindy!" she yelled as she slammed the door to Ricketts' office open.

Ricketts swiveled around in his chair, angered at the intrusion.

"I need a train ticket to Harper's Mills, two returns and two for a bubble ride to Walloon tomorrow. Take it out of my change from the first trip. I believe there was a mistake on my charge. I believe I overpaid." She leaned onto Ricketts' desk a foot from his face. "I never got a blanket!"

"Why, Eppie Jonez, er, Mar Gerzhe, I believe. Am I right?"

"You know you're right. And that's not the response I was looking for."

The man sat back and set his feet on his desk, hands clasped behind his head. His coat crackled like a shower curtain.

"Meko zsaid you'd probably come szniffing around after a while," he said.

"Meko?" All the punch drained out of her.

"Your friend," he said, smiling his chapped smile. "Zhe told me under no circumzstancez was I to fazsilitate your return to the Tegzstile Planet, Girlie."

"I fazsilitated my own return," Marla barked, her fire returning. "And what business is it of yours? Or hers?"

"We all sztand to lose a lot if that witch Iovvna findz you here, my dear."

"Geez, that's tough, Ricketts. I've lost everything, what the eff do I care about you?"

"Oh you care. Not about me, but about Mizzy Meko. I'm zhure you care." He laughed a phlegmatic laugh. One of his front teeth had been replaced by a wooden peg. "Meko leads a pretty ztolid life, but not totally impregnable. She took a chancze with you and now zhe'll loze it all. Not that it'll hurt zo bad. Zomeone with as much money as zhe has can get themselves out of any zcrape. But deep down inside, our tough little Meko is fragile. If she thinkz you betrayed her, her little heart will break."

Marla said nothing, trying hard to remain impregnable.

Ricketts continued. "Not to mention how zhe'll cut her goonz looze on your zkinny bronze hide. I would zuggest lining up your plaztic zurgeon today, Honey. Let's not forget the humble beginningz of Rickettz' Travel, Inc. We're a very talented outfit, and Meko iz a partner of exzellent qualities, not to mention money."

Marla slumped into a guest chair on the opposite side of Ricketts' dusty chip-painted aluminum desk. She hung her head.

"Mr. Ricketts," she said, looking up after several moments. "It's not like you think. Meko is sure I want to go back to the Mill, that's why she's worried. But she's mistaken. I have no intention of staying here. I'm leaving tomorrow, in fact. No one, not anyone at Harper's Mills, especially Iovvna, will know I'm here. I can't possibly meet with Iovvna, she wants me, oh I don't know, better than dead. I'm just here to collect my friend, Saddle—you don't know her—and get her out of there, so she can't fall into Iovvna's hands herself."

Ricketts fell into a fit of laughter requiring him to drop his legs to bend over and expel a sizable hack to the floor. His face turned a blotchy red and his jeweler's eye fell to his lap when he sat back gasping for breath.

Once collected, he spoke. "Thisz-is-a-hero-thing?" he asked, laughing and spitting again. "Like in the movies?" He slapped his hand on his ink blotter to get the air back into his lungs. "And you're the hero? Ms. Big Pants, can't figure out how to get off the planet, how to zset up zhop for herself. Had to ezscape to the end of the univerzse to zsave herzself the bitter agony of having no zsoul and you're going to zsave zsomeone? Look to yourzself zsinner, there'zs a big beam in your eye!" And he fell back into another fit of laughter.

Insulted, Marla stood up and slammed her own hand on the desk. "Look Ricketts, I may not be made of stern stuff. No, I don't have what it takes to run a business charging shmucks like me ten times the regular fare just because they gotta get out of town fast, or hiding people's secrets until a better bid comes in, or smuggling happy dust, or even cashing in on the latest science fad, but..." She stopped and thought a moment. "Well, actually, I am doing that, but..."

"But nothing, Girlie, the truth is, you have no idea what you're doing here!" Ricketts stood up and leaned into the desk so his face was next to Marla's. "You made a mess—a trail of disasterzs follows you everywhere: the Mill, Trezst, that albino fellow, Meko'zs zsick to death with worry—one of the finezst business partners I have is a bazsket cazse. And you should zsee what that Zsaddle" Ricketts abruptly stopped his tirade. He stepped back and stared at Marla and then began pacing around the room, the coat crackling like a bed wetting sheet.

"You say you want to get your friend out. Your friend Zsaddle, uh..."

"Dent, yes. Saddle Dent. You know her? Of course you know her. You know everything about me. You and Meko both."

"You want Zsaddle Dent out of Harper'z Millz?"

"Off the Textile Planet."

Ricketts pondered the ceiling. "Uh huh."

He walked to the door and opened it. He cleared his throat and very quietly spoke. "Zheldon, we need a round-trip ticket on the Gatown Eggzprezz, one return ticket on the zame and two zspots for tomorrow's afternoon bubble to Walloon."

"Tomorrow?" Sheldon echoed from out in the hallway by Shirley's desk.

“Yeys,” Ricketts answered. “That will be fine. My account.”

“What?”

“My account.” Ricketts smiled and nodded and brought the door to a quiet close. He turned to Marla. “No charge, Honey. But you will keep thizs totally out of zsight, of courzse. I can’t afford to get in on whatever that Ivovna witch izs cooking.”

“Ivovna won’t know I’m here. She can’t know, I’ll never get out alive if she finds out.”

“And remember our little Meko izs fragile. Her heart will zsurely break and zhe’ll have to...”

Marla stood full up, her lips pursed in an angry pinch. “Meko would never do anything like that to me.”

“No, of course not. But zhe hazs no feeling for little Zsaddle Dent. Nor do I.”

Marla scratched at the crease between her lower lip and chin. She decided a retort meant nothing here. “Nobody will know. In and out—quieter than a dust bunny in air.”

“Ah, you’ve met Ms. Hughes, I see.”

Despite the smooth transaction she had with Ricketts and the surety of her success, fear crept in on the train from Gatown to Harper’s Mills. It intensified as the train sped past the landscape, which had liquefied to a homogenous blur. In a short time the ride slowed to a halt, without giving Marla a chance to formulate a plan. Tired from her previous efforts at blustering and not at all confident it worked anyway, she decided against using that method, favoring a low profile just as she had promised Ricketts. She had snuck out; she’d sneak back in.

With no money, no ID, no bank card, and no transportation, she had little choice but to head straight for Saddle’s on foot. She slunk through the underground passages, following crowds of day trippers funneling to the sales booths and side shows. She took passages seemingly at random, but in fact they were the shortest route to the lower reaches of Saddle’s building.

Was it her imagination, or was there a pronounced optimism in the air? Perhaps the circulators were set on high and the freshness of it dizzied her. Whatever, her heart felt light as she called for the lift and practiced opening lines in her head.

“Man, you can’t believe how hard it is to find strawberry,” or “Gee Honey, all these pads look alike. I got, like, really lost,” or “Hey Kiddo, how ‘bout a coffee?” Anything but the actual, “I’m sorry, one last time: I’m sorry.”

Her stomach flip-flopped as the lift stopped at Saddle’s floor. Although she told herself repeatedly to ignore the hall camera, she couldn’t help but glance at it. Funny, it wasn’t where she thought it would be. Had it been moved? It seemed to be totally out of sight.

The walls were freshly painted a respectful gray, and even the artsy bubble architecture had permuted somewhat to a friendlier style of trifle and lace, giving the place a homey feel. Marla felt, if not welcomed, at least not challenged to come up with something better.

She knocked on the suede covered something or other that stood for Saddle’s door. It wasn’t even pink. As the door swung back, all cute and clever hellos dissolved into an overlarge intake of breath.

A short haired bespectacled youth of about thirty stood before her. She slumped as she exhaled.

"I'm here for...Saddle," she said.

"Saddle?"

"Saddle. She lives here. Or maybe she doesn't," Marla added in a diminishing voice.

"You're right, there's no Saddlehere. I've been here for about eight months and there's never been any Saddle here, but I do get a lot of crazy mail for her. Ribbons, fancy stamps, chewed gum on the outside. Really great stuff. Wanna come in and take a look? I've saved it all because I felt like I should give it to somebody. And it's such great material, I couldn't just trash it."

"Of course not. I'm a little behind schedule, though. I really should get going," Marla said.

She turned to go, but at the instant her foot changed direction, two thoughts ran through her brain. One, she had no place to go and two, this person might know something about Saddle besides the fact that she was into mail art. Maybe other friends had stopped by looking for her.

"On second thought," she said. "Maybe I will take a look."

She entered the room that used to be Saddle's. It had changed to the opposite extreme from when she had last been there. Every article in the room was angular and manufactured by processes only a well developed tool handler, such as the whole of humanity, would come up with. Ninety degree arcs on all edges. Lightweight yet strong wooden frames. Earth-tones and dander-free fabrics. Not sterile, but very looked after. The only anomaly was a pair of lamps flanking a brown plaid divan. The lamps were clearly constructed of shellacked chicken bones.

Had Saddle left in a hurry? Had she been thrown out or snatched in the night? Had she been swallowed by a machine, and the hole she left behind slowly filled with castoffs from the Campbell plant? Were these two lamps all that was left of Saddle?

"How did you happen to rent this apartment?" Marla asked the youth of thirty. "Through an agency or a billboard, maybe?"

"Oh, a friend turned me on to it," he answered. "Said she'd heard about a vacancy in this part of town. I've always wanted to live here, haven't you?"

"Uh, well, actually...yes. Yes, I have. Is your friend around? Maybe she knows my friend Saddle."

"Val?" The youth harrumphed like anybody who knew Val would know she'd never be around here. Val was a go getter and a come taker. She had way too much going on to stay in this dump. "She disappeared right after I got here. Borrowed all my cash and split. Hey, if you find your friend, maybe she can turn you on to where Val is."

"Yeah, maybe." Marla doubted Saddle would turn her on to where Val was. "Listen..." she said.

"You want some coffee? I got it from Down South." The guy seemed lonely.

"Oh, wow, yes, I would, but I've got to find my friend."

“Just a quick cup, it’s already heated.” He rushed into the kitchen and returned with Saddle’s old percolator to show how easy it would be for the two of them to get chummy.

“Did this place come furnished, by any chance?” Marla asked. “I mean, was there other stuff here when you moved in?”

“Oh yeah, but I tossed most of it. A lot of cheap fol-der-rol: junk and photos and stuff on the wall. The mail art was cool, though. Let me show it to you. Maybe you want to take it with you.”

Marla started to decline, then changed her mind. Maybe she could use it somehow, get an address or something. “That’d be great,” she said.

The youth set the percolator on a blonde box holding one of the chicken lamps and opened the box drawer, pulling out a set of beribboned, belaced, and begummed envelopes. They had hand drawn cartoons and stamped figures interspersed with sticky stars and glitter. The whole package was tied together with a piece of dental floss strung with tiny purple dyed beads.

He indicated the floss and bead strand. “That was hanging on the wall when I got here.”

She looked to the wall where he pointed and a lump formed in her throat. “There wasn’t a big baby photo there when you moved in, was there?”

“Oh, yeah. Really tacky. I pulled it down first thing. First thing!” He said it with a face that assured the world he was not putting up with someone else’s gauche taste.

Marla looked back at the packet of mail, inhaled deeply and looked into the face of the youth.

“Well, thanks,” she said, and then added: “What’s your name?”

“Ivan,” he said. “Ivan.”

“Thanks, Ivan.” She wanted to smile but her face wouldn’t. “Thanks for these.” She lifted the bundle, nodded her head, turned to go.

“What about your coffee?” he called after her.

She turned back. “No, no thanks. Maybe next time.” She smiled now and let herself out into the hallway, still unsure of where the camera was.

The radical change from bulbous annelid castings to neo chic in the hallway decoration probably meant new ownership and possibly new supervision as well. As soon as the lift hit the lobby floor, she played her hunch and took a left and asked for the super. Turned out she was right—the new super was not the old super.

The new super’s copper colored ringlets fastidiously clung to her head like small tight mousetrap springs. She carried her pass code on a chain around her neck, advertising her authority over residential privacy.

“Excuse me,” Marla said when the woman was pointed out to her. “I’m wondering if you have a forwarding address for one of your former tenants.”

The woman turned briskly and faced Marla with upraised eyebrows the same copper color as her hair. “We can’t give out that information. Everyone knows that,” she said.

“Yes, well, I’ve been out of touch with my friend. Off planet on business and I hadn’t realized she moved.”

“Some friend if you can’t buzz her to find out.”

The new super turned and walked away.

Buzz Saddle. Marla had not thought of that.

“Actually, I have that information,” she called to the new super. “But I don’t have a yakker.”

“Uh huh.”

“Can you at least tell me when somebody left? Maybe you have it in a log or records or file somewhere.”

The new super turned. “Like the scofflaw file maybe? The one that lists whose rents in arrears?”

Marla halfway laughed. “I don’t think Saddle would have left like that. It’s not one of those type deals. This would be strictly legit. She wouldn’t have left at night.”

“Saddle Dent?”

“Yeah, Saddle Dent. You remember her?”

“Oh, yeah. No, she didn’t leave at night, not that one. No, no, no, no, no.”

“What do you mean?”

“Wink, wink, nod, nod.”

“What?”

“All I can say is when I decide to flip my lid, I hope my friends are as nice as hers, know what I mean?”

“No. What do you mean?”

“I mean,” the woman walked up close to Marla, invading her personal space. “I mean, when my time comes I hope the gentlemen with the butterfly nets are as good looking as the ones came to collect her. Ha!”

The new super unintentionally spit into Marla’s face. Marla didn’t budge. “They came and took her away?”

“Just like Stalingrad.”

“What?”

“She’s in a better place, I’m sure. Somewhere that fits her sense of proportion.”

Moments passed without a word, then Marla spoke. “Do you know where they took her?”

“Where do they always take them? Out of town, right? Well, Kiddo, it’s nice to speak to a former friend, but unless you’re moving in or out today, I’ve got a roto job to do.” The woman turned and entered her closet, presumably to extract an electric snake. Marla heard her rummaging through supplies and humming to herself.

Leaning against the wall and rubbing her forehead with her hand, Marla considered everything. Things had moved so quickly in the two years she’d been absent. Or had it been three years? Maybe not so quickly after all. Things moved just as they moved. Just as Marla had expected. It took a year for them to get to Saddle like they’d gotten to her. Bastards! Marla wasn’t enough; they needed Saddle as well. But Saddle wasn’t Marla. Saddle was less prepared and was probably now reposing in the dungeons of the Hospital, dreaming of brutish men and dancing glitter balls.

The paralyzing guilt held her fast in a moment of gluey indecisiveness. Should she still try to help Saddle, or should she assume Saddle was indeed in a better place? In good hands with kind-hearted therapists and knowledgeable doctors. Visions of a vertical tank holding a scared and pink young girl who cried incessantly and slowly went insane, her wild creativity inventing monsters bigger than reality intermixed with those of a young white-headed man suffocated by a pillowcase during the act of love. What a world, she concluded, and left the building to board the train to the Hospital, without thinking about how she’d pay for it now that her Sleazos were positively hollow.

The walk to the train stop took half an hour, giving her time to clear her head. The air was fresh, fresher than she remembered it. The sounds of the warehouse and its work seemed muffled, almost stilled, as if today’s work was slow and easy. In spite of her heavy circumstances, Marla’s spirits lifted optimistically. She could think of no obstacles in her way.

The scent of roses hung in the air. She passed a coffee stand, and the strong home grown smell of hazelnut reached her nostrils. She slowed, inhaled, and then moved on.

As she climbed the steps to the transportation platform, she searched for the ticket vendors. The marquee lit up with destination information, but it gave no instructions for the purchase of tickets. She pressed the door button and walked to the far end. Once there, however, she found no clues.

“Excuse me,” she said to a woman in a green mohair jacket passing her on the platform. “Where are the ticket prices?”

“Ticket prices?” the woman said. “What train are you talking about? There are no prices; the ride is free.”

“You’re kidding,” Marla said. “Since when?”

“The cooperative pays for it, of course.”

“What cooperative?”

“Are you new here?”

“I guess.”

The woman smiled and nodded knowingly. She turned and clicked down the platform. Marla watched her go, squeezing her brows into a question.

The train came and Marla boarded, glad for the fact it was free. She found a seat easily, the car being half-empty. It sped through the city, past the dark working district which seemed oddly light today, and then the shi shi district, positively pink in its wealth. The entire city seemed bathed and perfumed in a happy shade of rose.

The outskirts gave way to a morbid drizzle that replaced the optimism in Marla's heart with a wet dread. Her thoughts returned to the puzzle of Saddle. With her worst fears now realized, she needed a plan to get Saddle out of Ivovna's head factory where they were reprogramming her, or maybe even losing her as they tried with Marla.

Why couldn't this happen to Grant Parker? Such a worthless asswipe certainly was a more appropriate victim than a defenseless creature dreaming of beautifying the world, yet barely capable of coloring her own little room.

Why didn't they ever go after the milksops, the worthless, the panderers, the bootlickers, those who had no lives or loves beyond the hindquarters of the boss?

Maybe those without a soul got selected for scrutiny and eventually adjusted, but why the harmless but weird as well? Marla knew her punishment—her adjustment—was her own fault and possibly even deserved, but Saddle was a victim. An innocent wandering in a forest. The wolf found her easy prey, but she wasn't fat in the least and so should have been left alone. Why was her delivery so necessary, even asked for in the first place?

The Lightray stopped at the familiar corner across from the hospital. Marla had an urge to race down, storm the building, and scream out Saddle's name, but thought better of it. She walked inconspicuously, dully, quietly down the steps and across the street to the entranceway of the building.

The nurses' station stood at the intersection of three great hallways just like before, on the day she'd checked out two years ago. Her boots scuffed on the floor as she walked forward, but no one heard them over the general clatter of gurneys, orderlies, and dinner carts.

Two nurses fussed at each other behind the window—one male, one female. The female stood with her back to the window, the male was in the doorway at the back. They bobbed their heads and gestured with their hands while sniping. Marla knocked on the bulletproof glass as if they could hear.

"Hi there!" she called.

The woman turned around in surprise and too late thought to close the window, but Marla caught her eye, and the nurse forced a smile and slowly pulled her hand back from the shutter.

"Can I come in please?" Marla shouted and mouthed obviously.

The guy in the back answered inaudibly. The woman turned to hear what he said; she then frowned and moved to the front door, opening it a crack.

Marla stepped in, forcing herself to be dealt with. No closing of doors in her face this time. The male nurse stepped forward into the room.

“I’m looking for Saddle Dent,” Marla stated. “I was told she was a patient here.”

“Uh,” the woman said.

“The computer’s down,” the guy at the back said.

“We can’t help you now,” they both said.

“Try tomorrow,” the guy said. The woman moved to usher Marla out, but Marla lifted her hand to stay the door.

“Well, I can wait while you reboot.”

The two nurses exchanged a glance.

“We don’t have a waiting area,” they said together.

“We’re not that kind of a hospital,” the female said.

“I know you’re not that kind of a hospital,” Marla said. “The question is, what kind of hospital are you? I’m sure you don’t even know. However, I don’t see anything wrong with waiting right here in this little chair. It looks quite...”

Just as Marla was sitting in the plastic seat, a dot matrix printer in the other room began cipherring like a news feed on stock market crash day.

“Well, there you are,” Marla said, standing straight up. “All fixed.”

“That?” said the woman. “Why that’s just...”

“The doctor’s log,” the guy said.

“Yes, it’s just listing doctors who currently have patients here,” the first one said.

“For insurance reasons,” the other one said.

“Actually, if you have the doctor’s information, you can look up Ivovna and find Saddle Dent that way, can’t you? Ms. Dent is her patient.”

The male doctor left to go check the printer.

“Ivovna you say,” the nurse that remained said.

“Yes, Saddle Dent’s doctor. Maybe you could even call her and ask her where Saddle is. Tell her some mail arrived for the patient.” To prove to the nurse that mail had indeed arrived for the patient, she pulled the packet of mail out of her knapsack.

The woman called to the back room in a high-pitched voice, “Can you page Dr. Ivovna for a code yellow?”

The male returned to the room and said, "I just did." Then he stood next to Marla and said, "Why don't you have a seat and wait? I'm sure we'll get a response soon and everything will be all over."

"All over?" Marla sat in the seat.

"I mean, your troubles'll be over," the guy said. "The doctor will be here, and she'll help you find this Saddle person and your troubles'll be over."

Marla stood up. "I don't want to see the doctor. I just want you to find out where Saddle Dent is so I can give her this package." She headed for the door, but the woman closed the door before she reached it. A chart with the various color codes hung on the back side of the door. Red was an emergency/law suit, blue was a phone call, green was a patient waiting, orange was lunch, pink was an insurance meeting, and yellow meant patient restraint required.

Marla pretended not to notice the chart and returned to the seat, relaxing and nonchalantly smiling at the hovering nurses. As soon as she heard a commotion outside the door, she steeled herself, and just as the first nurse rushed to the door to fling it open, Marla jumped up and pushed the nurse into the two orderlies on the other side. She ran past the knot of uniforms before anyone had a chance to recover and block her escape.

The rolling contraptions provided perfect confusion as she jumped over low tables and around high ones. She pushed food carts out of her way and swung them to behind her if possible. The contents splattered the walls and floors. Coming to a crossway, she took a sharp right and continued onward, turning down all halls that crossed her path. Sirens rang, and bewildered patients and interns stepped out of the way to let her pass. A few had the presence of mind to reach for her, but she pushed them off easily, like an American-style football player carrying the ball and knowing it was his day for glory.

She blundered down one hall to the end and found it blocked by a stainless steel door as big as the bank vault on a wealthy planet. She pressed the numbers of the key coder on the wall, frantically trying to force the code. In a last desperate attempt she slammed the box with her fist. The only reaction was another wailing siren.

Ambulatory patients came from rooms to watch by their curtained doorways. Just as she heard her pursuers entering her wing, she ducked down a side hall into the first room on the right. She picked up a stool and smashed it through the window and then rolled under the patient's bed to watch her pursuers' feet enter the room. They rushed up to the bed to question the patient lying there—a completely bandaged soul unable to speak.

"Where'd she go?" they hollered.

Tube socks and sneakers spread themselves apart in a threatening stance, looking as if they'd do more limb damage to the poor patient if he or she didn't cooperate.

One of two things happened next. Either the patient pointed out the most obvious escape route with a feebly raised broken hand, or the tube socks themselves had the intelligence to figure it out. Either way, the sneakers raced over to the window as three more pairs and some clogs entered the room. A frantic discussion followed, resulting in three pairs of feet leaving the room through the door on the double. Two pairs scrambled onto the stool and presumably crawled out. The clogs hung around for a while and eventually walked lazily away. Countless more sneakers and clogs came and went one way or another. Some were accompanied by barking orders, others by cool discussion. This continued until the din finally subsided several hours later. The lights were then lowered and the hall quieted.

Eventually a pair of orthopedists and a broom came in to clean up the glass on the floor.

“We’ll get this fixed just right, Mr. Twing,” the voice said sweetly as it reached down to sweep up the pile. Fortunately, the head with the voice never turned Marla’s way. Nevertheless, she slunk back into the darkened shadows under Mr. Twing’s bed. After clearing away the glass debris, the owner of the orthopedists duct-taped a piece of cardboard over the window and then left the room.

The hospital returned to a state of calm, with the sound of muted voices intermittently coming from the hallway and the whirring and buzzing of carts continuing, but at a demure level. Marla’s host, Mr. Twing, remained silent above her, allowing Marla to make plans for the search and rescue of Saddle. They were short and for the most part inadequate because she had no idea what to do. In spite of her fear, thirst, anger, and sublime motivation, the day’s events and previous months’ endless travel wore her out, keeping her immobile underneath Mr. Twing’s bed. She fell into a quick and troubled sleep interrupted a short while later by the grip of an unseen hand on her upper arm. She jumped awake and stared wide-eyed, trying to focus. When her eyes adjusted to the small amount of light coming in under the door curtain, she saw a bandage running elbow to knuckle gripping her tightly. The arm had reached down into the space between the bed and the wall to grab her.

Forced by the situation into silence, Marla breathed quickly and hoarsely, holding back a scream threatening to burble up. A loud shhhh! came from the bed above, and she turned her eyes upward and saw a mummy’s head staring down at her. She thought it stared at her, although it was hard to tell where the eyes behind the two holes in the bandage apparatus were actually looking. For some strange reason, it looked to Marla as if the mummy was smiling at her as well.

Her panic subsided as the grip on her arm eased. The hand opened but stayed her, reminding her to remain calm and quiet.

Marla mouthed a “W” as in “What?” or “Who?” or maybe even “Why?”

“It’s me,” a muffled whisper from behind the bandages said.

Her heart leaped as she thought of Saddle, the only possible “me” that could be here. She struggled to push the bed further away from the wall enabling her to sit up. She couldn’t believe the unbelievable: Saddle was here in the very room she’d taken solace in. This nightmare was almost over.

“Are you okay?” Marla asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“What happened?”

“You fell asleep and started snoring. I never snore, and I knew the nurses would suspect something.”

“No, I mean, why are you in bandages?”

“It’s a cover up. I’m not really sick; I’m hiding out.”

“Hiding out? From who, Iovvna?”

“Yeah. Ivanovna. She’s hounding me.”

“We gotta get outta here.”

“Are you nuts? They’ll track us down.”

“No they won’t, not where we’re going.”

“Why would we leave, though?”

Marla’s heart sank. Two seconds ago it seemed so easy; now it dawned on her that she’d been a bit presumptuous to think Saddle would be in the same frame of mind she was in when Marla had left.

“Listen, Saddle,” she began. “I know this will be hard...”

“Saddle? Saddle who?”

The whispered voice had seemed so clear; now it didn’t sound like Saddle at all. She felt sick to her stomach.

“Who are you?” Marla asked.

“Who’d you think I was? Charney!”

A shock ripped through Marla’s entrails. She leaned against the wall and tried to stave off a blackening in front of her eyes. “Charney,” she whispered, barely audibly.

“In the flesh, I’m hiding out from Ivanovna. She’ll never find me here.”

“But you’re dead.”

“No, man, they just told you that.”

“Nobody told me that, I saw it in the news.”

“Same thing; I faked that.”

“Back on Walloon. That Stan guy; he suffocated you.”

“Faked it. I hired him to fake my murder to throw Ivanovna off.”

Marla’s breath came in shallow bursts; she tried picturing Charney underneath all the bandages. It wasn’t making any sense. One minute Saddle was here and everything was over; now it was Charney, and things were just beginning. She shook her head, trying to clear the confusion. “Why are you here?”

“Walloon wasn’t my bag. I only went there to set the whole thing up; to throw her off.”

“But you were heading towards, I forget where. Why would you come back? And how?”

“Isn’t it obvious: here you get three hots and a cot. And it’s so easy to fake records. I have all the security codes, still. They didn’t even reprogram anything after I left.

“Because they had you killed and they didn’t need to.”

“I had me killed. They would have, but I beat them to it.”

“Charney, you shouldn’t be here. You’ll get caught eventually. Somebody’s going to catch on. I mean, how long have you been here?”

“Two years.”

“Two years! All this time under wraps? Nobody’s noticed you haven’t been getting better?”

“You kidding? Nobody reads the charts. The shifts change. Incomplete turnover, you know?”

Marla ran her hands through her hair, letting the situation sink in. She thought it was an unbelievable coincidence that she’d found her way to Saddle’s room, but this beat even that.

“Charney,” she said, staring at a shiny seam in the floor where two stainless steel plates had been welded together with a slight shadow on the lee side of the light. “You really had me going. I thought they killed you. That they were looking for me too.”

“They were looking for you. I’m sorry I left you in a lurch like that, but I had to do it.”

“You didn’t leave me in a lurch. I took care of myself, but I got scared and lost. But it didn’t really make any difference. I wound up where I had to go anyway. Just got there a little faster because I thought...”

“That’s good, that’s good. If you’d gone any slower, they would have had you. But you’re safe now, you just need a get up like this and you can hide out here forever.”

“Hide out here? Are you...?” Silence. “Well, it is a great idea. I can see why you’re doing it, but I have something I need to do first. I have to get somebody out of here.”

“Somebody else they’re after? That Saddle guy?”

“Yeah. But I have no idea where she is. They didn’t give me any information down at the station.”

“Nah, they don’t do that. It’s not that kind of a hospital. Not set up for visitors you know. People that come here are supposed to be left indefinitely. They’re supposed to get lost. People come here and can’t leave.”

“I left.”

“They let you leave. They needed to spy on you. Believe me, they were going to bring you back when they were done with you.”

“Yeah, well, how do you think I can find my friend?”

“Your friend Saddle?”

“Yes.”

“Well,” Charney shifted his weight to a more comfortable position. “Between one and one-fifteen,

nobody's out in the hallway. Nobody, not even a self-propeller. The cameras are on, but nobody watches them. I know this because that's when I go out."

"You go out."

"Yeah, to go and gather information."

"Uh huh."

"Yeah, I always need information on running this scam."

"You need to get out of here."

"Not yet. Not till I'm ready."

"Okay, so then what do I do with this fifteen minutes of media downtime?"

"You go and get some service whites from the closet. Return here and change into them. Head back out and pick up the first med cart you see and start checking out the rooms like you're dispensing meds. It'll take you all night to check each room, but nobody will ask what you're up to. Nobody'll notice. You don't have to check each person, just the chart at the end of the bed." He pointed to the digital readout on the bed frame. His chart lit up "Twing."

"What time is it now?"

"By the clatter of the food carts, I'm guessing about eighteen hundred. They'll be bringing in my spinach soon. Just stay quiet and they won't know a thing. After that you'll have to wait a while, but I'll tell you when."

"Where's the closet with the whites?"

"Shh, they're coming."

Indeed, the hallway noises had increased with the removal of tin plate covers and the normal chatter between orderly and patient about how great the food is. A roller cart with a pair of accompanying feet stopped just on the other side of the room curtain. The feet entered and brought Mr. Twing's stewed spinach. The feet left and Charney ate.

After a while he leaned over the side of the bed and offered her the remains of a dark soupy mass in his bowl. Hungry as she was, she turned it down.

"No thanks. But thanks for the thought. My stomach's too jumpy right now. I'll get something later," she said.

Charney undid his leg slings and walked to the bathroom. Marla watched him go, wondering what the point was of hiding from someone in the exact place they would put you if they found you. She heard the waste suction as he bent over the commode, after which he returned to the bed and refastened the slings.

Eventually the orderly returned to pick up his meal remains. Soon after that she heard Charney's even breathing.

After several hours the din in the hallway was replaced by sleeping noises—loud exhalations and the whimpering of dreams—out in the hallway.

She whispered, “Charney,” and upon receiving no response repeated it. Still no reply, so she spoke in a low but full voice, “Charney.” Charney awoke with an “uh.”

“Charney,” she whispered again.

“What?” he answered after a few moments.

“Is it time yet?”

“For what?”

“You said I should go after one. Is it one yet?”

“Go for what?”

“To the closet, for the whites.”

“Oh yeah. Yeah. Wait a bit, I’ll tell you.”

His breathing evened out.

“Charney!”

He jumped a little above her. “Yeah, yeah. Go now.”

Half believing him, but too tired of waiting to wait anymore in a place that was obviously asleep, she crept out from under the bed.

Charney jumped awake again. “Where are you going?” he asked. He sat up now, wide awake.

“To get the whites.” She stood right next to him and whispered to his bandaged face.

“Good idea.” He lay back down.

“Good idea,” she said to herself and walked slowly to the door and pulled the curtain back slightly. Carts and rolling tables stood immobile in the hallway. Neither soul nor non-sentient moved. A cough emanated from a far room. She turned back to look at Charney who was lying on his back, returning to sleep. She stepped out into the deadened hallway.

The lights had been dimmed to low—just enough for her to pick her way through the maze of food carts and empty gurneys stored for the night in no fathomable order. Her progress was slow as there was barely enough room to move past the obstacles. Just as she found herself at the intersection of the hallway to the left a blood curdling scream lit out from behind her. She jumped a foot and turned to see Charney in his bandages standing at his doorway and pointing to her.

“She’s getting away,” he screamed. “Stop her! Stop her!”

Immediately an intern ran into the far end of the hallway; following hard by were a second and third.

Ahead of her, the hallway was short and ended in a linen closet. To her right was the stainless steel vault door she'd had no luck with earlier. Behind her was the traitorous Charney, standing at the ready to stop her if she attempted to escape through the taped window.

She pounded on the keypad next to the vault. After several short seconds the vault door swung creepily inward, allowing a swift escape in that direction. She ran through without a thought and instantly stopped dead-still. Just beyond the door was a gymnasium-sized room with a conveyor running along the ceiling, doubling back on itself four or five times. Naked human bodies hung from the conveyor by leather straps attached at their wrists. The conveyor pulled the unconscious bodies back and forth slowly along the length of the room until finally they exited through a hole in the far wall.

Marla fell to her knees, coughing, doubled over, and clutching her stomach. The interns found her there and easily put her out with a syringe full of happy juice.

#

No glitter ball this time. No dark man with a top hat. No lap steel or spaghetti straps. No one danced and no one fell in love. As Marla languidly roused from her deep well of unconsciousness, she found herself strapped down in a blinding white room. The ceiling was white, the walls were white, the light burned white above her. Even if she had the strength to, she could not move, as her body had been interred under a set of hefty straps attached to the table.

The sick smell of age-old decay mixed with chloroform or hydrochloric acid or maybe "Evening in Paris" lay in the air. The lights above buzzed and flickered at intervals. She heard no other sounds—no footsteps, no carts, no gurneys, no PA system announcing bingo in the dining hall, no alarms, no cushioning carpet ambience—nothing but light buzz. The buzz increased in decibels, slowly at first, and then as it gained in intensity the rate of noise increased, increased until it fairly screamed in Marla's ears. It was not unlike the approach of a nasty race of flying insects, purposefully traversing the desert byway in search of a partially destroyed carcass. Once they find it, the frenzied action begins: nothing but bones in a matter of minutes. Marla envisioned tiny stinging locusts entering her head via her ear canal and chomping their way through her sinuses to her brain. She actually heard the change in drone as the mandibulizing parasites chewed through her flesh. Just as she was about to scream, a head sporting the cutest little bob this side of Harper's Mills came into view over the side of the bed rail.

"Marla," the head said. "You're awake."

A short intake of breath caused Marla to cough. When she tried to sit up but couldn't, the waif mercifully undid the leather straps.

"Saddle!" Marla coughed out, pushing herself up to embrace her former assistant. Tears came, and Saddle laughed and slapped at Marla's back to effect the release of some sort of particle lodged in her lungs.

"Don't talk," Saddle said. "Just cough. You have to get rid of that garbage in there."

Marla coughed and spit to the floor. Though somewhat dazed, she swore she saw the grasshopper-like ball of phlegm crawl away.

"Saddle!" Marla coughed and cried and hugged the waif close. "Saddle, Saddle."

A single tear formed in the corner of Saddle's eye. "Marla," she said.

Marla pulled herself away and closed her eyes, afraid it was a mirage brought on by her half-eaten brain fibers hopelessly short-circuiting themselves. Finally she inhaled and looked at Saddle. “What happened?” she asked.

Saddle smiled and looked at the floor, shaking her head but understanding the depth of the question. She burst into tears and hugged Marla close.

“Where are we?” Marla whispered.

Saddle laughed then and released her grip. “Relax,” she said. “You’re just in the recovery room.”

“What did they do to me?”

“Nothing, just put you under. You’re okay. They didn’t do anything. They didn’t know who you were, so they put you under.”

“And when they knew who I was?”

“They still don’t really, but you were babbling about me, so they looked up Saddle Dent on the exchange, got my number, and buzzed me. So here I am and so happy to see you. I have so much to tell you. As soon as you’re okay, we’ll head out. You just need to get your breath back.”

“Why am I strapped down?”

“They got scared. They didn’t know who you were or why you were blathering about some doctor named Ivovna and stuff. Why did you think I was her patient, Marla? You’re her patient.”

“I...”

“Never mind. We’ll sort it out in a bit.”

Marla sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed.

“I told them I was looking for you, but they tried to, I don’t know, lie!”

“Lie? Why would they lie? They don’t know who I am, why would they lie?”

“Because you’re a patient here.”

Saddle laughed. “No wonder you want to know what happened. Why would you think I was here? This is an insane asylum. Are you saying I’m nuts?”

“No, it’s the people in your old apartment building. They told me...”

“My old apartment building.”

“They said the men in the white suits came to take you here.”

“That old cliché! That only happens in the movies, Marla. Look. How did you come to be here? The first time I mean.”

“I got shot and two men in white suits took me here.”

“Yeah, alright, so sometimes it does happen like that; nevertheless, I’ve never been here except to see you. Bob and Ted helped me move out of my apartment, but they weren’t wearing white.”

“You left your stuff there. You left it behind like someone forced you to leave in a hurry. In the middle of the night, like Stalingrad.”

“Those chicken lamps?”

“Yes. And your mail art and your wall photo.”

“Oh, Marla. Grow up. I did. That was all kids’ stuff. I didn’t feel like keeping it, and the new guy said he wanted it. He was kind of weird. Said he was into folk art, so I left it for him. To be honest I think he was just fantasizing with it. He probably was hoping I’d leave some underwear behind. Anyway, come on. We have a lot of talking to do. I mean, why’d you leave like that? Three years ago, I mean. I had a real mess. I was so pissed for a while.”

Marla stood up on her feet. She turned to Saddle and pulled her into a full body hug. She stood whispering Saddle’s name and rocking.

“I am so, so sorry. I fucked up, I know. And I will make it up to you, for sure. I have been in hell for the past two or three years for what I did to you, but I’m going to make it up to you. Whatever you want, whatever you need, I’m going to give it to you, but you must promise me you’ll forgive me. Maybe not today, but someday.”

Saddle pushed Marla away. “Marla, please, what is your problem? I forgave you the next day. It wasn’t that big of a deal and in fact the best thing that ever happened to me. I was a baby for way too long. I needed to grow up. And you did it for me. I was mad for a while, but...”

“You were mad! I knew you would be. I didn’t prepare you.”

“I wasn’t mad, actually, just pissed that you didn’t leave me the password to your desktop.”

“Password... I...my desktop?”

“Yeah, desktop. I had to get Chiggy to break into the system and reprogram. Agnes was pissed for a while; kept screeching about breeches in security and shit, but after a day or so she calmed down.”

They walked out of the recovery room and into the hallway while Saddle continued the story.

“Mama and Parker didn’t get along, of course, so they promoted him out of the unit. He’s in training now.”

“Perfect. Total dead end.”

“Yeah, he gets to brag about all his experience working on the show and how he hobnobbed with the elite. The newbies worship him for a day and then laugh at him behind his back once they find out the real deal.

“Can we leave? I’m getting uncomfortable here. It smells funny, and I think I hear some water running. Sounds like a tub filling.”

“Sure. I just have to make sure you’re not dizzy or nauseous. Are you?”

“Of course. This place is making me dizzy and nauseous.”

“You sound like your old self. Listen, we’ve just got to make one stop before you get blessed.”

“Blessed?”

“Checked out, approved. You know it is a hospital and they want to...”

“Make sure my insurance is in order?”

“Sure. C’mon.”

Saddle led Marla down a corridor to the right, past the spongy rooms with padding on the walls and hooks from the ceilings.

“Are you sure you’ve never been in here?” Marla asked. “And what’s with the navy blue and no bubblegum?”

“Yeah, well, I wanted to be subtle. I didn’t know how you’d be feeling. I wouldn’t want to startle you into a ...”

“Relapse or something?”

“I guess. Besides I’m not into yellow and pink anymore.”

“All grewed up, eh?”

“Yeah, well.”

“So how are things at the Mill? They still pushing or what? I mean, how’ve you dealt with the pressure?”

“Well the old pressure you’re thinking of is gone. Ivovna got Shurm’s management team indicted and we’re a cooperative now.”

Marla stopped and held Saddle back. “What?”

Saddle looked at her. “Shurm and Lamont and even Torpid all got arrested. They’re doing golf time on the prison planet now.”

“What?”

“Ivovna won her case against them.”

“What?”

“C’mon,” Saddle pushed a dumbfounded Marla Gershe through a door to the left into a plush blue

consultation room with three cane chairs and a woman with her hair in a bun seated in front of them.

Immediately Marla turned to bolt and ran into Saddle barring the door. Saddle smiled and said, "Relax, Marla."

"But it's..."

"Dr. Iovvna. Yes. She'll tell you what happened since you left. Things aren't what you think."

"But she..."

"Lied to you. Yes."

"Marla," Iovvna called softly to her.

Marla spun around. "You lied to me!"

"Have a seat, Dear. Let's talk," Iovvna said.

"I won't."

"Still angry and stubborn. Saddle, how did you put up with her?"

"She was a great boss, actually," Saddle said, entering the room around Marla and taking one of the chairs. "Everything I learned, I learned from her."

"Well, then, considering how things turned out, you had a great teacher."

"Yes, and how did things turn out?" Marla advanced on the woman, spitting the question out.

"The only way they could. The Mill lost one good but a little too over the top coordinator, and the hole that was left was slowly filled in by competent others who, while not able to be such a force as the one preceding them, did provide a calming effect which was needed at the time. You see, Marla, the Mill was under surveillance. Well, upper management was. There'd been complaints to the central Galactic Workers Organization about abuses of the management standard. Preliminary investigation showed the possibility might exist, but there was no proof. Take a seat, Dear."

Marla had been edging forward and now stood just behind an empty rattan chair facing Iovvna. The doctor continued her story. "The management standard was set up about, oh, three hundred or so years ago. It states the limits and procedures for managing any organization that employs humans in the work force. It outlines human rights, workers' rights, fair labor practices, hiring and firing procedures, things like that."

Marla took the seat. "The Charter," she said.

"Yes. The Charter. No company is given a license to trade with any signatory unless they themselves are a signatory, so everyone signs.

"I heard about it. Maybe even have a copy."

"Which you no doubt never read."

“Don’t be patronizing. Of course I never read it. I don’t read the privacy statements from the credit card companies either.”

“Of course not. That’s why you remain ignorant of the requirement for a psychologically clean work environment.”

“Never heard of it.”

“Of course not.”

“So what is it?”

“It’s a somewhat hard to define requirement, not easily assessed. However, if my group received...”

“What is your group?”

“I’ll tell you.”

“I can’t wait.”

“My group is the Intergalactic Organization of Organizations. If we receive a complaint from someone—in this case the Galactic Workers’ Organization hinting at a psychologically unsafe work environment at a signatory company—we are required to investigate. We’d received enough complaints on this particular outfit—five is the requirement—to warrant an assessment. I was assigned to undertake the investigation of BAC at Harper’s Mills.

“And you couldn’t do this before I got shot?”

“Marla, Marla, Marla. You need to let me finish. The prelim was done before you even got promoted into your position. We picked you, in fact, as our star spy.”

“What?” Marla turned to Saddle. “What?” She returned to Iovvna. “What?”

“You didn’t know you were chosen, of course, but we picked you via the results of the psychological profile you’d taken the first day of your employment. After our prelim we realized we needed to build a case against your upper management, but for that we needed recorded incidents. All we had at the time was hearsay. Reliable hearsay, but hearsay nevertheless. So we ran everybody’s profile through the brain picker and came up with some possibilities for management that also had a certain, how shall I say it, energy.”

“And I was one of them.”

“You weren’t so much one of them as the only one.”

“Uh huh.”

“You had the qualities we needed: a certain amount of courage, excellent communications skills, honesty. You were a team player and you were ambitious.”

“ ‘Driven’ was the word you used when you told me this story,” Saddle interjected.

“Overcompensating, maybe,” Ivovna said.

“Inexhaustible,” Saddle added.

“Forward-minded,” Ivovna said.

“Blindly moving forward, actually.”

“Impatient.”

“Goal-oriented.”

“A team player.”

“You said that.”

“Oh, okay, unquestioning in allegiance.”

“Overly attentive.”

“Obsessed!” Marla shouted. “Okay, I get it. You picked me because I have no soul. Enough.”

“You never missed a deadline,” Ivovna said. “You never allowed yourself to fail. In your entire life.”

Marla sat back with her lips poked out. She stared at Ivovna.

“You were perfect. We approached the management team posing as an efficiency outfit. We said we had a product that would guarantee productivity. The product entailed doing brain experimentation on its employees to determine how to eke out every last bit of juice from them. As everyone knows, the highest cost of running a business is its human labor. Humans just cost too much. And with the crippling minimum wage and benefit laws, management is forever trying to cut costs there. They have two choices: either cut the labor, or get more labor out of labor. Our product, we claimed, would do the latter.

“We promised to carry out an ongoing study to find out how to push and where to push, to get their cheating employees working up to full potential. We knew the tricks, we said, and we’d use them.

“They jumped at the bone, and we knew then that it was just a matter of time before we’d have the documentation that we needed to prosecute. Any management that is eager to do brain experimentation on its workers has obviously no respect for a psychologically clean climate.”

“So you got me promoted? I didn’t get there on my own?”

“Well, you operate under the mistaken belief that a person gets promoted because they deserve it. They don’t, Marla. A person must be relentless in their quest; they have to constantly push themselves in the face of upper management to get considered. Especially, well, let’s not go there. Ambitious as you are, you are not that type. You succeed in everything you are assigned to, and when you’re young—in school—you get rewarded for that with good grades and a gold cord around your neck at graduation. That’s not the way it is in the real world. No one grooms people for management. That’s just a line they give their investors to show what a forward-thinking management team the company has. Truth is, a potential manager needs to grab it on their own. Doesn’t mean there aren’t people like you that deserve

it. Just means it's not going to happen for them unless they realize they need to grab it."

"Uh huh. So how'd it happen for me? If I didn't grab it?"

"Easy. As part of our product we made recommendations on who should go where. We spotted you early as our spy and told them they needed you in a coordinator position, one of those key places that makes a big difference in an organization but never gets much attention from the muckety mucks. They don't usually care too much who gets in there because you're not going to be a golfing buddy at that point. Anyway, BAC put you there immediately upon our recommendation. No questions asked."

"And four years later, here I was. I can't believe you set me up. You fucked up my life. I could've been weaving happily all this time. Frustrated maybe, but living at home."

"Marla, you could've turned down the promotion. You wanted it. We could see it in your profile. You were chomping, seething even, even if you didn't say anything. It was a matter of time before you either figured out what you needed to do or quit."

"Yes, but you did something. Manipulated the situation. You made it worse. I knew something ungodly was going on. If you hadn't been there, I would have made a move on my own, but the Mill wouldn't have gotten so, so outrageous. You made it happen!"

"Did we?"

"You know you did. You had the tools, the product!"

"We lied about that. We simply used you; someone who would never fail, regardless of what task was put before her. All we ever did was put you in that position. Your upper management did the rest."

"You told them to push me."

"We never did. We never said the words."

"You suggested it in your lurid sales promotion."

"Maybe. All we ever said was that the ongoing research would continuously feed cues back into itself, refining the system. Your team," we said, "would always be performing optimally. That's it."

"Sounds like a law suit to me."

"I've already lost my license because of what happened to Zennie Stapper and you."

"And the cop. And Charney lost his job."

"Charney quit. Don't make this bigger than it is."

"It is bigger than it is. I saw him on Walloon."

"You saw him on Walloon?"

"Yeah, he told me you were watching me and were planning on pulling me back to finish your experiment. He was scared shitless of you so he faked his own death to throw you off. But I'm not

scared anymore. I've got you, now. I'm back and sure I owe a lot of money, but I'm going to be coming into a lot. I'm suing you and that Organization of Organizations whoever they are. And if you think you're putting me back into this hell's kitchen, forget it. I'll kill myself before you check me into this meat house, Charney or no."

"Marla!" Saddle's face turned white. Iovna glanced at her disapprovingly. She slowly stood up.

"If you were with Charney on Walloon, is there some reason why I shouldn't call an intern right now to have you bound?" the psychiatrist asked.

Marla stood up and advanced to Iovna. "Go ahead and just see if I can't get my hands around your neck before they get here."

Saddle jumped up. "Marla! What's wrong with you? Don't say things like that. Dr. Iovna, what's happening?"

Iovna's lips tightened to thick rubbery strands as her eyes stared at Marla. She addressed Saddle without turning to her. "Your friend here is either a murderer or an accessory to murder. I don't recall her stepping forward to help the police on Walloon, yet here she admits to seeing Charney there and probably knows what happened."

"Come off it. If you had any investigative powers at all, you would have checked into it and discovered the whole thing was a fake. Charney hired a news crew to document the event. He told me all about it last night."

Iovna came from behind the desk and stood face to face with Marla. "I viewed the body, ID'd it positively, and tested the brain scans. Charney was very much dead. It was not a faked thing. And if you know anything about his death or his murderer, I suggest you leave immediately for Walloon to make a report. The case is still open. I'll go if you don't go."

Marla stepped back out of Iovna's realm of influence. "I talked to him. He's here! In the room with, with the broken window."

"Mr. Twing is a long-term patient here. A former computer hack. He hacks so well and has done it for so long, he's gone a little buggy from finding out a little too much about others. He knows other people more than he knows himself and, in fact, has taken on a number of former employees' personalities, his current favorite being Charney—someone who long ago quit and left the planet, but left a bit of information behind in the form of his files here."

"But he knew all about you. He was, he was, was hiding from you and, and, and said I should be hiding, too. He knew all about all that."

"All he knows is that someone named Charney used to work here. Any other information he used to convince you that he was Charney was supplied by you. Charney has been murdered. He's dead. No one, so far, knows why. Maybe you do."

"You know why!" Marla burst into tears. "You know why!"

"I know many things about human nature, but I don't know why people engage in neo-nacro sex. I doubt very much Charney knew what he was getting into. Marla, I don't really suspect you. A man named Stan Dyde had rented the room. Whoever he is, he is probably the murderer, but if you know

anything at all, you must speak to them on Walloon.”

“Yeah sure. Simple. Some long gone guy did it. How convenient. Why did you have to ID the body? He had family on some bread planet. That’s where he was going. Why did you have to do it?”

“His family requested I do it. I was his doctor. I met them there. They needed a professional, I was the most qualified, and I had his records. Marla, why would Charney have screamed everybody awake when you were trying to escape last night? If that was really Charney, would he have given you away like that? Mr. Twing is nuts.”

“What is happening?” Marla screamed into Iovvna’s face. “What is happening? I ran from Walloon because I was scared. Everyone, Charney, told me to run to Ansonia; nobody could find me there. You found me there. How? Why? Why? Why are you chasing me? Why was the dark man chasing me? Where can I go? Help me!” She sank to her knees and raised her face to the sky, pleading with the higher powers to intercede on her behalf and strike the evil force before her dead. “Help me!”

Saddle ran to her and put her arms around her. “Marla, Marla, we’re here to help you. We’ll help you. Doctor, what’s happening? What’s wrong with her?”

Iovvna stood above the screaming Marla, looking down. She smiled. “She’s healing,” Iovvna said.

Eventually Marla fell forward, her screams stopped and she started whimpering, panting. “Help me,” she whispered.

“Marla,” Saddle said.

“I wanted so much for Charney to be alive,” Marla spoke to the floor.

“It’s not your fault, Marla,” Saddle said.

“He wouldn’t have gotten fired if it wasn’t for me.”

“He quit,” Iovvna said from behind her desk where she’d casually sat down.

Marla shot up and looked at her. “So you say.”

“Even if he got fired, Marla,” Iovvna answered coolly, “people get fired of their own accord. Why are you responsible? For anything?”

“Why did you chase me?” Marla asked.

“How did you know I was?”

“My friend, on Ansonia, told me.”

“That woman Meko? Very uncooperative, perfect for the Swiss information industry. I followed you because, well, you weren’t healed yet. I had put you in a situation you couldn’t get out of. I needed you to be done. I thought going back to work, facing the situation would be the final therapy you needed. I was wrong. You weren’t ready yet.”

“Am I whole now?”

“What do you think? Why are you here?”

“Maybe I’m here to get healed.”

Ivovna shook her head and stared silently at Marla and finally responded. “I may have lost my license, Marla, but I can suggest someone who...”

“No thanks,” Marla answered

“It can help if you need it.”

“Why couldn’t you just tell me the truth?”

“I did, Marla. You refused to work with me, ran away.”

“You told me I had to go back because of my debt.”

“I didn’t think you’d go back any other way.”

“So what if I didn’t go back. How bad off would I be?”

“I had someone else to think of, too. Somebody that needed to see you back at work; otherwise he wouldn’t be healed either. Someone else just as scarred. More so almost. He needed to see you back where he thought you belonged. Even if you never belonged there, he wouldn’t get well unless he convinced himself of that.”

“But I didn’t go back anyway.”

“Yes, you gave me quite a scare. Things started to turn out pretty ugly. At least you’re okay, and now I can move on myself.”

“No, I’m not. I’m more lost than ever. I traveled the entire known system and beyond just to get to the edge of reality, and now I’m alone. That’s how whole I am.”

“Alone?”

“Well, me and Sol and about a thousand visitors a day.”

“Sol?”

“Yeah, the Lunatic. He was on the planet when I got there, only he’s gray now. Not the dark man anymore. He’s still young looking though.

“Sol Trest?”

“Yeah.”

“Marla,” Saddle whispered.

“What?”

“He’s the...”

“I know. And you know what? It doesn’t matter.”

“And you know what?” Iovvna smiled at Saddle. “She’s right. Let’s go get a drink so you can tell Marla all about the cooperative. And she needs to go visit the Mills. And she needs to tell us what it’s like having a thousand visitors a day on the edge of reality.”

And so they took the air train together to Harper’s Mills, past the rosey shi shi neighborhoods where Saddle had moved to. They stopped in a quiet corner tavern in a cozy neighborhood on the outskirts of town where Saddle told them both about being a coordinator in the new coop. Top brass had been indicted and not replaced. The new non-hierarchical organization was run by the workers with a committee of twelve making decisions. The committee served for one year, and then new blood was rotated in to ensure cronyism never took hold. The company was not as efficient as before: squabbling was common, and certainly the money wasn’t being raked in like before, but without a heavy executive load, the company didn’t need to make outrageous money. Everyone’s stock portfolio was certainly better (especially since nobody’d had one before); the business was flourishing nicely in the niche all-natural fiber market.

The main improvement was in morale: nobody was hungry, angry, lonely, and tired anymore. Sure there were a few slackers, but the general increase in enthusiasm made up for the dead wood. Even Minzt joined the union. Had to. Couldn’t work there otherwise. Ricketts Travel Agency over in Gatown suffered a lot because hardly anybody was high-tailing it these days.

Which brings us to the rest of the cast. Mama was one of the biggest share holders and was soon to retire to Bathysphere, an all beach planet in the next solar system over. Doran got hired full time and was given a corner in the stockroom to sit and invent all day. Parker, as was mentioned earlier, moved to training to become the laughingstock of BAC. Zenny Stapper quit long ago. She had a prosthesis now and her own business doing greeting cards. Agnes, the CIA, got a new motherboard. The mannekins got oiled on a regular basis.

Saddle herself served on the committee every other year. She did well as a coordinator, bringing a sophisticated artistic sense of style to the evening shows, blending bright colors with natural fabrics, essential aroma included. When I say “natural,” I don’t simply mean sheeps’ wool or undyed cotton. What I’m talking about is anything not made out of petroleum products. Copper wire counts. Feathers from Quetzlcoatl birds count. Latex spin-offs count. Flax spun into gold counts.

The best thing about the new coop was that they had real coffee. From Down South.

Marla hung around Harper’s Mills for a few days to take it all in. Once she got a sense of the changes and improvements, the question became, why leave? Her debt had been forgiven and the work climate was now humanized.

But she missed Sol and the excitement on XK. Harper’s Mills and the Textile Planet had become downright boring. No wonder Ricketts had wanted to get rid of Saddle. Nobody was leaving anymore. Satisfaction makes for slow movement. Disgruntlement is so much more lucrative.

Marla soon left with a suitcase full of clothes—Saddle had taken her shopping—and a note for Sol from Iovvna to get in touch with her if he ever needed a therapist. “I don’t have a license,” the note said, “but I can recommend somebody.” Iovvna no longer felt concerned over the mental states of Trest and Marla

Gershe. They seemed to have found a way to work through their connected disconnect. Their week in isolation together sounded a lot better than any therapy Ivovna's discipline could give them. It beat the water bath, anyway. The doctor was now in a new career as a hall monitor at Gatown Junior High. She enjoyed the work, but had dense varicose veins from it and was feverishly working on a disability claim.

On her way to XK, Marla stopped at Walloon to tell the investigators what she knew of Charney's death. By this time, the investigation had been over for a year. They actually caught the guy: Stan Mur—his real name—was a fairly well known sex criminal. He'd been interred for eight months at this point and was awaiting sentencing. Everyone was convinced he'd get life in suspended animation. The detectives thanked her for the info, though, and bade her have a nice day.

She moved on to XK with her new clothes, a stack of books, and a good set of channel locks that Sol had often longed for but always forgotten to add to the list whenever Hunter's ship came in.

Chapter Seven

5:15 am

"Pops, where's those..." Gershe hollered as she barged through the aluminum doors leading to the galley of the Planet X Central Hotel and Ant Farm. Immediately she stopped and stared at the mounds of unwashed stainless steel cookery, confirming the obvious: the shipment had made it in, but that was as far as it got.

"...workers?" she finished. "We're opening today and we're going to need a shitload of dishes."

Pops, who had been in the food industry so long he'd acquired the moniker every venerated artiste in any discipline anywhere acquired, looked at her over his reading glasses and shook his head.

"Your pal, Sol, took them over to the retread shop to get them ready for the onslaught," he said.

"What? Where's Angel? I'm gonna need..."

"Here, Marla, here." A voice came squeaking up behind Marla along with the cutest frizzed out 'do this side of the palm tree on the dark side of X.

"What are you, sleeping in now, Sweetie?"

"No, I knew Mr. Trest wanted those kids over to the gas station so I went ahead and got the dishwasher hooked up. I can't seem to get the solarizer linked to the extractor, but it should be ready in an hour or so. We just need to get these pots loaded in.

"Yeah, but what about those food crates sitting out on the dock since last night?"

"Those have been done since last night. Everything's been sorted.

"And the waiters and host?"

“They came last week. We got them programmed over the weekend. Here’s one now.”

An eight-foot tall robot of the Rosy type entered from the dining hall entrance—retracting its head to get through the door—bringing a cup of coffee and as big a smile as a riveted jaw would allow.

“Did Ms. Gershe want milk or sucrose with that?” the robot asked.

“Uh, geez. No one ever asked that before. Neither, I guess, well, maybe a little milk. Do we have milk?” She turned to Angel to ask.

“Well we’ve got Mealy® cactus juice from the south quadrant. A lot of people think it tastes like milk. Or we have powdered.”

“Uh, cactus juice I guess.”

“Your booth has the day’s orders in a stack,” Rosy the waiter said. “You can sit there and sign them.”

“Sit?”

“And sign,” Angel said. “In your booth, where you can relax and think and plan. You know, do your job.”

“I’m gonna cry.”

Rosy and Angel ushered Marla into the dining hall and sat her in a booth in the back. Her booth. The one she assigned herself for writing out orders of the day and making lists of things to do and supplies to secure.

Today was the opening day of the hotel/restaurant and although there had been explorers and antimatter scientists dropping out of the sky for a year, today they were expecting a multitude. They’d been booked up for months; even plots in the surrounding sand had been rented out to those with tents and shovels. Billions of cubic hectares of fuel had been purchased and stored for incoming ships, even though it was assumed everyone’s energy needs would soon be supplied by the Divide. Hands had been hired for the maintenance and cleaning of flyers and equipment. Robots had been assembled for serving guests and assisting mechanics. Gardeners had been on board for a year, in training with the ants in the new underground agriculture. Even interior designers had been consulted on how to make the hotel conducive to scientific study but not so stuffy as to be boring.

Months ago Sol had suggested Marla get an assistant. She asked for a recommendation from Meko, who sent her son, Angel. Meko had wrenched custody of him from the blighted planet, Buxton. Angel was an orderly lad, but totally unfit for Ansonian life. He agreed to do a year’s internship on a distant planet before going off to college. The fit seemed perfect; he was sorting out to be a brilliant organizer as well as a calming influence on Marla, who had become a wreck a week after her return from the Textile Planet.

Today she sat in her booth, sipping her coffee with cactus juice mix. She reviewed the day’s orders and realized how everything was somehow going according to plan. Yes, the world had evolved, she had healed, life had become endurable.

Her reverie was brutally interrupted by the reality of the galley alarm cutting through the silence of the empty dining room. After jumping through the proverbial roof, Marla ran through the aluminum doors to

the galley and found the entire staff of the planet: waiters, mechanics, geologists, gardeners, Angel, Sol, even Hunter assembled amongst the cook plates, stove hoods, gas lines, cupboards, counters, and cutting boards. They stood laughing, drenched in the downpour of the overhead shower system. The robots, of course, stood back to prevent rusting. The alarm holo message in the air above stated, “Shower test complete. Result: positive. Good luck, Marla Gershe, on your first day of business!”

Sol stepped forward. “They programmed the message for you, Marla. We’re all happy for you and congratulate you.”

The crowd clapped and starting slapping each other on the back, enjoying the success of the place as much for Marla as for each other. They danced around and started a chant: “Who’s the best? We are! Who’s the most? We are!”

Suddenly the shouting died down as one by one the waiters, mechanics, geologists, gardeners, Angel, Hunter, and Sol noticed that Marla Gershe had fallen to the floor. They stepped forward to see what the matter could be. Trest bent down to his knees and brushed back the hair from her forehead.

“It’s all right,” he said. “She’s just a little taken aback. It’s a lot of excitement. She’ll come around.” He had a worried look on his face that belied his words.

The room fell silent then, with only the sound of the sprinklers as they continued to stream like a light spring shower. It was the only sound in the room. Everyone listened except Marla Gershe. For her, all was silent.

Chapter Eight

No, it wasn’t a heart attack. She just fainted. She was fine.

The End

Author’s Biography

Sue Lange has published two books, *Tritcheon Hash* (Metropolis Ink, 2003) and *We, Robots* (Aqueduct Press 2007), as well as numerous short stories and diatribes. She can be found at <http://www.suelangetheauthor.com> and at her Singularity Watch blog (<http://scusteister.livejournal.com>).

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