

Big Guy

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The last time he linked to Way Out, Murph had deleted his nipples. He was certain Cat had noticed, even though he had kept his shirt on while they were doing it. She *always* kept something on—one of her kinks. He had almost fainted the time with the hat. But Murph was ready for more than just another haunt fuck. He wanted to tell her his name, have her invite him back to her cabin. He imagined himself opening her medicine cabinet, looking under her bed. Had she taken the hint? Could be he'd been too subtle. She hadn't said anything about his edited chest, but of course she wouldn't. Cat loved mystery. To her, it was part of foreplay.

His twenty-seven icon started flashing. Something had set off intrusion detectors in Dr. Bertrand's office. Murph was Bertrand's security op.

“Expand,” said Murph. He yawned and tilted his workseat. The chair's hydraulics sighed under Murph's two hundred and seventy-eight pounds. The ceiling screen of the cabin showed three views of the psychologist's darkened suite on the quarterdeck. A woman he had never seen before giggled as she entered Bertrand's tiny waiting room. Bertrand reached around her and waved on the lights.

“Hi, Murph.” He nodded at the camera. “Couldn't sleep so I thought I'd get some work done.”

The woman stared as if she expected to see someone in the room. Then she spotted the camera and leered. “Gotta pee first.” She had a whiskey voice, dark as smoke. Bertrand pointed at the head. She wobbled over, closed the door behind her. Bertrand's wife had left him in January and moved off the ship into town. He'd been up late a lot since then, looking for something to do. Could be he'd found it.

“Hear about Noonan?” Bertrand was pretending there was no woman.

“They say there wasn't a mark on her,” Murph said, “but I still don't believe it was suicide. Talked to her Friday and she was as sane as I am.”

“Who was supposed to be watching her?”

“Nobody. She dropped Tumey just last week.”

The toilet flushed.

“Sorry Doc, got to go. Off in ten minutes and I'm in the middle of my last round.” If Bertrand had been alone, Murph would have given him a few minutes to gripe about his life. Fat men were supposed to be good listeners. “Bumpus is covering my sites after 23:00. Don't forget to reset the system when you leave.” He shrank Bertrand's office back to an icon and IDed the woman.

She was Carree Gates, a licensed pro who had commuted all the way from Lawrence. Her most recent gynecologic workup had been just last month. Murph wondered if poor Bertrand had even bothered to check. He could've watched the old guy stretch his safegirl across the couch. Bend her over his desk. Some clients liked it better that way. But it was 22:52 and he was tired of staring through the blue flickering gloom at other people's furniture. Besides, it wasn't his kink. If he had to look at someone having sex, he'd rather watch himself. With Cat.

Could be she lived up near the bow. Or on the boat deck. The thought of hauling himself up five flights of narrow stairs made Murph dizzy. The most exercise he got was eight steps to the door or the head. What if she was one his clients? He wasn't even sure she was a woman. Once she showed as a thin, twentyish man with strong thighs and a relentless appetite. Her true sex was yet another mystery Murph meant to penetrate. He had already decided it didn't make any difference. She was still Cat. A name. An

attitude. Black fur. Just so long as she didn't live *too* far away.

Murph had spent the last seven hours watching eighty-six sites—forty-seven of his own clients, thirty-nine of Bumpus's—in order to earn enough free time to link to Way Out. Murph's list alone was heavy enough to mash the average independent op flat against his screens. Eighteen residences, all on the upper decks, nine shops that sold everything from bottle gardens to heroware, five takeouts: pizza, burger, squeeze, krill and Mexican, four shrinks, three doctors, three app repair services, a lawyer, an acupuncturist, a roomdresser, a dance/defense studio, and a 24 hour daycare. But Murph was no average op. He was a champion. His sites had the lowest incursion rate, real and virtual, of any contract op on the ship. Murph was proud that none of these so-called suicides had turned up on *his* list. He didn't mind what being the best had cost him. Sure, it would be easier working regular eight hour shifts for some corporate client like the hospital or CDM or Maxit. But then a pushy boss would try to squeeze him into a diet. Drag him to fucking meetings—he'd worked for suits before. Besides they paid in noodles. What good was free time if he couldn't afford Way Out? Or the kind of custom heroware that impressed a joyride like Cat?

Bumpus checked in at 23:07, filling the entire right screen of Murph's cabin. “Sorry I'm late.” Normally he was a twitchy mouse of a man with liquid gray eyes. Tonight he had the faded, copy-of-a-copy look of someone who has just jammed a month's worth of living into a couple of hours. Murph knew that look. He'd seen it in his mirror. “Had to clean up.” Bumpus opened a window to show Murph his blood workup. The scrubbers had brought his alcohol level down to .02, neocaine to .005. “Any more suicides?”

“Not on our lists.” Murph accepted the report. “You owe the government sleep?”

“Not until the weekend, soonest. And I just boosted.”

Sleep was pure downtime. All the best ops stayed boosted as much as possible. Ultramen like Murph preferred to pay sleep debt in one lump sum. The minimum daily requirement for a working op was two hours and Murph was always working. Once a week he had to burn fourteen precious hours of his free time in bed. “Okay,” Murph said, “I've got thirty-two active sites on my side. Looking at twenty-nine of yours.”

He briefed Bumpus on both lists. It was quieter than usual because a few places had closed for the Labor Day weekend. Some of Murph's residential clients could actually afford to leave the ship. Bumpus had just moved on board a couple of years ago and was still struggling to build his list. So far he had mostly C & D deck types. The only vacations they had time for were virtual. Like Bumpus, who lived down in what used to be the engine room. He was an old forty-six, already vague and a little forgetful. It was what happened when you spent too many years being in too many places at once. Bumpus was fine for the occasional free time or sleep swap but Murph didn't think he had either the dedication or attention span for independent round-the-clock security anymore. He was nobody's champion.

“Where did you link?” Murph asked.

“The usual.” Bumpus eased onto his workseat and lowered the console.

“Like?”

“Like around.” Icons began to wink off Murph's screens as Bumpus picked up both lists. “Here and there.” He had a high shiny forehead; he rubbed it absently. “Let's see ... Bliss Market. I peeked at Exit 13.” His night out did not seem to have made much of an impression. “And Future Shock, I think that's

where I ended up.”

“Way Out?”

He yawned. “Your kink, not mine. What's your sixteen site again?”

“Krill Grill on D deck.”

“Looks like nobody's—oh, there she is, coming out of the head. Probably bopping her hair.” He swivelled to face another wall of screens. “Isn't much action on the haunts these days. Or if there is, I sure as hell can't find it.”

“Not like it used to be, eh Bumpus?”

“Maybe never was.” The last icon cleared from Murph's screen. “Think next time I'll just take a walk.”

“A walk?”

“Walk. You know, with my feet.” He waved randomly at a bulkhead. “Off the ship into town.”

“Next you'll be worshipping the sun and eating dirt.”

Bumpus's mouth twisted. “When was the last time you left ship?”

“It's Kansas out there, remember?” Murph didn't have time to wander off. He was carrying a list of forty-seven sites. “See one amber wave of grain, you've seen them all.”

“Yeah, but how many bedrooms can you watch before you crack?”

“Your kink, Bumpus. Not mine.”

Bumpus grunted and tapped at his console. Murph realized that he'd gotten more reaction out of Bumpus in the last ten seconds than in the previous two years.

“Okay.” Bumpus slumped back in his workseat like a balloon with a slow leak. “Your list accepted at 23:17:38. Six hours of free time, starting now. Live fast, fat man.” He broke the link.

Bumpus had been Murph's only active screen. When he wiped Murph without warning, the cabin went dark. “Hey!” He had left Murph utterly disconnected from the world. No input, no output. It spooked him. Only two of the six surfaces of Murph's cabin were not screens: the floor and the utility wall. Murph couldn't see anything but the red light of the clock over the sink.^{23:17:41, 23:17:42, 23:17:43}, seconds of his hard-earned free time dripped like blood into silence and the night. The air seemed to clot with nothingness. He swallowed. The workseat's armrests felt sticky against his wrists. It was like the time he tried to sleep without pills.

“Infoline!” His voice cracked. “Sportsworld! Jabberwock!” On the ceiling, the Captain-Mayor was downplaying the ship's most recent suicide. To his left, the center fielder for the Kansas City Royals loped under a high fly. He flipped his sunglasses and raised his mitt. The woman being interviewed on his right was wearing nothing but a swarm of bees. The busy waiting world gleamed through the walls, reassuring him that he wasn't really alone.

Staples made the catch and headed for the dugout without breaking stride. Two to nothing Caballeros, top of the fourth. Murph shivered and pushed his anxiety away. No time for it—Cat might be waiting already. He wiped the Captain-Mayor to order a cajun potato squeeze, then called up his heroes on the back wall.

Murph's heroware collection went back eleven years. When he first could afford to link, he had settled for cheap generics. He had a Samson with a cock as thick as a cucumber, a Sir Knight with three add-on armor modules and a vampire that could change into a bat or a wolf. Later, as he discovered more sophisticated haunts, he had splurged on the limited edition Dragon and *ahomo habilis*. Mirrorman, a custom job, had cost him six month's savings.

Eventually he'd realized it was all kids' stuff. High fashion in heroware catered mostly to drones who didn't like being who they were. They were afraid they were too ugly, too boring, too ethnic to attract beautiful, exciting people—and they were right. So they hid in anonymous virtual bodies and played games that kept them from finding out anything important about one another. Fighting games, drug games, sex games.

Once upon a time Murph had been one of them, a miserable slab of fat. He had nothing he was proud of. So he had worked harder than anyone he knew. Now he was a champion and he had Cat. He pointed to the last icon in his collection. Big Guy filled the back wall.

Murph, Cat and their familiars in Way Out had stopped wasting their free time playing games. Their heroware shredded the mask of virtual fashion, by hinting who they might *actually* be. Cat, for example, claimed she showed furry because she refused to shave her legs or wax her upper lip. Her eyes made it plain that none of her people had come to America on the Mayflower. Shortly after he'd found Cat and Way Out, Murph had commissioned Big Guy. Himself, swollen to three times his real weight, a lavish, dripping feast of flesh. Big Guy had a six chins, breasts ripe as any marilyn on the Bliss Market, a gut like a bass drum. Had he waddled into one of Bumpus's usual haunts, the drones would have laughed. Or worse, they would have ignored him. Locked him right off their screens as if he didn't exist. In Way Out, no one ever got locked off. People talked before they fucked. Sometimes they even told each other their real names. Invited each other home.

Murph eyed Big Guy, who looked back at him. "Strip." Big Guy was immediately naked. He still had no nipples. Cat had to have seen—his shirt had come completely unsealed last time. Erasing parts was in Way Out 's seduction protocol, a final step in the dance to intimacy. Could be she hadn't said anything because he had only hinted at what he wanted. Less would say more.

"Select." Murph extended his hand toward Big Guy's groin. On the screen, Big Guy reached for him. The cock was the only thing that wasn't outsized. It was Murph's own: wrinkled, circumcised, the color of Cat's lips. He flattened his hand to the screen. "Delete." Where it had been, there was now static.

The door chimed and its icon started flashing. "Expand," he said. A delivery girl peered into the camera. "Large cajun potato," she said. He hadn't seen this one before. She looked a little like Mandy Moore, whose vid "Not Now," was Murph's favorite. He collected covert pictures of Mandy and taped them to the mirror on the utility wall. Slightly illegal but still a hot barter item. Poor Mandy needed a new security op—a champion like Murph. No one had coverts of *his* clients. The delivery girl had limp hair the color of sand. Brown eyes. A funny little flat spot at the tip of her nose. "Nine-ninety-five," she said. She was maybe thirteen—too young to be making deliveries at 23:25.

"Paying." He authorized a fifteen dollar debit to Squeeze Pleeze. "You're new," he said, while they waited for the transaction to register. "What's your name?"

“Yeah, right.” She flipped her hotpak open. A large potato squeeze was the size of Murph's shoe. It came wrapped in crinkled foil. Wisps of steam curled from its crown. Even though he couldn't smell anything through the security door, he could imagine its moist starchy fragrance. Yes, and that edge of garlic and onion and nasty red pepper. He opened the delivery hatch just wide enough for her. The hotpak chimed when it verified his payment.

“Five buck tip?” She glanced up from the readout suspiciously. “What for?”

“After you give me the squeeze,” he said, “keep your hand in the hatch.”

Her eyes widened. “They told me about you.”

Squeeze Pleeze was on his list. “They tell you I'd bite it off?”

“I'm no joyride, mister. I'm here. I'm real.”

Murph heaved himself off the workseat. “Until I say.”

“You won't hurt me.” She made it an order.

“No.” Dizzy, he was dizzy. Probably because he had been sitting for almost eight hours.

She had to be from town, a commuter. He probably could've IDed her, but why bother? He watched her kneel in front of the door. He turned all the lights in the cabin up. The squeeze came through the hatch. He stooped. When he took it from her, the tips of her fingers curled slightly. The foil was very hot and he dropped it to the floor. The smell was intoxicating.

She was wearing a glove, of course. It came to the folds of her wrist. He tugged at it. She twitched but did not pull away. He uncovered her palm slowly, exposing the ball of the thumb, the head line, a beautiful heart line. She had long, sensual fingers—a woman's fingers already. He brushed their length, lingering over the arches and whorls of her skin. It felt like a dream. When he'd been her age, he'd slept every night. He must've had dreams then. He couldn't remember. When he finished, he crumpled the glove and pushed it back through the hatch.

“Okay.” Murph picked up the squeeze, shifting it from hand to hand to keep from burning himself.

She paused uncertainly outside his door for a moment. “Thanks,” she said.

“Live fast.” As Murph closed the hatch, he realized that she probably couldn't. Her folks would be waiting up for her when she got home. She'd sleep seven, eight hours. Tomorrow she'd ride crowded buses, bump through the halls at school, stare out of windows and let boredom eat her alive. The weight of all that free time flattened people like her. It cost Murph a lot to live the way he did, but at least he was never bored.

On the back wall, Big Guy was naked. He still had a hole between his legs. Murph copied a patch from the belly. Smooth skin, fine blonde hair. 23:30:02. He put Big Guy's clothes back on. Loose, blue microseal shirt, black jeans, mesh shoes—what *he* was wearing, only bigger. He had five hours and forty-seven minutes. He picked up his dinner and stuck his tongue through the foil into the warm, runny, spiced inside. He flopped onto his workseat.

He wondered what would Cat say when she realized that the only way they could do it tonight was in person.

* * * *

Way Out's welcome screen came up on all three walls and the ceiling. He showed as a huge sleeping black face. He was framed by a tangle of gray hair, side burns and a beard.

Murph pressed the last brain tap into place and the system began sampling activity in his primary sensory cortex. As each sense came online, its icon glowed on the console. *Auditory ... visual ... olfactory ...* Direct cerebral I/O cost Murph three year's income. He'd had to take out a loan, but it was worth it. Before, he'd have wasted half an hour wriggling into his reeky joysuit. If he planned a fuck, he'd have to stick his cock into a penile wrap. *...somesthetic ... kinesthetic ...* The system was already accessing his secondary cortex. When most people linked to the haunts, they were pleased through their nerve endings. Murph wasn't afraid to invite Cat right into his brain. 23:34:52. He was ready.

"Hi, it's me," he said.

Way Out awoke. "Big Guy!" The corners of his eyes crinkled when he smiled.

"She here?"

"Sure." His voice boomed. "Lots of people here."

"Waiting long?" said Murph.

Way Out yawned. The haunt's breath tickled Murph's face. He lowered the sensory gain. "I've got five hours and forty two minutes," said Murph.

"Price went up, Big Guy." Way Out's smile shrank to a rueful grin. "Sorry."

"How much?"

"Seven hundred thirty an hour." When he shook his head, his hair danced. "Raised my insurance."

A fifty dollar an hour bump. If he linked for the rest of tonight's free time, he'd zero his debit account and activate his line of credit—at 23% interest. But that wasn't going to happen. Could be he'd get off in an hour or two, if Cat said yes. "So what?"

"Live fast, Big Guy." He opened his mouth.

"Have to," said Murph.

The jaws spread wider and wider, like a snake's. Murph walked Big Guy in. Way Out's breath was warm and minted to cover a faint whiff of eggs. Murph stepped over the gleaming row of incisors onto the damp, nubbly surface of the tongue. The epithelial cells that lined the inside of Way Out's mouth shone with a slick, pink light. Murph ducked under the uvula and entered the hall of faces.

They seemed to stretch to a vanishing point. Way Out had sorted them so that only the first couple were Murph's familiars. To his immediate left, one face morphed from Dead Mike to Plumber to Feelie to Blue to Negro to Dead Mike again. They all called to him in turn to join their party. "Big Guy, right here, right, Big Guy, live fast." Next to them were Jelly Donut and Handgun, both solo, both happy to see him.

“Hey, Big Guy!” The Log and Cow Girl were together but weren't looking for company.

He ignored them all. The first face to his right was Cat's. She watched him silently for a moment, her expression unreadable. Then she was replaced by Shiva. “Big Guy,” he said, without enthusiasm. Shiva was a pale man with curly red hair and three eyes. He was wearing a necklace of little human skulls. “She's been waiting.” He opened his mouth. Murph hadn't liked Shiva the last time they'd met and had no reason to like him better now. But he was with Cat. Reluctantly, Murph stepped through.

The corn came up to his chest. They had must have trampled it down before they spread their blanket in the middle of the vast field. There was a wicker picnic basket next to Cat, who lay on her side, watching him. Beyond her in the distance he could see the funnels and upper decks of the ship. It rose twelve stories tall on its foundation, anchored forever in a sea of corn. The sky was a flawless, nightmare blue. The sun was bright as pain. Way Out was a genius.

“Sit.” Shiva was already naked except for the necklace and a dhoti loincloth.

Murph eyed the blanket doubtfully. There wasn't room, not for Big Guy. He stood at the edge, crouched low as he could go, grunted, toppled backwards. Corn stalks whipped to the ground under his weight.

“Sorry I'm late,” said Murph. The ground was ridged to the corn rows. It smelled of worms. He wiggled his ass, flattening a comfortable spot.

“Shiva was just telling me he lives in Gardner.” Cat was wearing a high necked polka-dot dress that covered her ankles. Her bonnet matched the dress.

“The town?” Not something Murph would have admitted.

“21 Spring Street,” said Shiva. Murph couldn't tell if he was trying to be rude or if he just didn't understand the protocols. “It's a big, green Victorian with a porch and a swing. Been in the family nearly two hundred years.” He was much too pushy with personal information, even for Way Out. Next he'd be giving them his real name. Murph hadn't even told Cat what deck he lived on yet, much less his cabin number.

“Maybe we should drop by sometime, Cat.” Murph shot her a who-is-this-pumpkin look.

“That'd be fine.” Shiva laughed easily. “I see a lot of people, but hardly any ship folks.”

Had Cat told him already that they lived on the ship? Murph wondered what other secrets they had shared.

“I'm a doctor, you know.” He turned to Cat and held out his hand. “Name's John. John Ghatak.”

Now Murph *was* shocked. It was as if Shiva ... Ghatak had crapped on a napkin and held it out for them to admire. Murph fought the impulse to slap at the offending hand. “What the hell are you doing?” Instead he leaned forward and pushed it slowly, firmly back to Ghatak's side.

“Living fast.” Ghatak winked his third eye at Cat. “Isn't that the point? This costs seven hundred and thirty dollars an hour.”

Cat slid closer to him. “A doctor. Really?” Her head was almost in his lap.

Ghatak rattled his necklace of skulls. "That's why I'm Shiva. Death bringer and lifegiver, god and ghoul." He grasped the string of Cat's bonnet. "Male and female." He pulled it taut. "The lord of sex." The knot under her chin raveled.

"You cut people?" she said.

"Sometimes." Ghatak paused, taken aback. "If necessary."

"Enjoy it?"

"I wouldn't say I enjoyed"

"Stop!" Murph didn't want to waste another second of his life on this. "You can't tell strangers things they don't want to know."

"I was telling *her*, not a stranger." He swept the polka dot bonnet back and stroked the top of Cat's head. "You were just eavesdropping, Big Guy."

"Funny. Never would've guessed a doctor." She purred and rose to his touch for several strokes. "I'm a biocommodities broker."

Both Ghatak and Murph stared. Cat smiled at them.

"Blood futures mostly. Some kidneys, lungs, the occasional liver." She sat up and settled herself between the two men. "So, a doctor. A broker." She lifted the necklace of skulls over Ghatak's head, dribbled it idly into her open hand, turned to Big Guy. "And you?"

It was all going too fast. Ghatak and Cat weren't strangers. They had been waiting for him. How many times had they been together before? They could afford Way Out better than he could, a rich blood broker and a doctor. Probably doing it while he's watching Squeeze Pleeze and Moon's Noodles and Burger King twenty-four hours a day just to make the monthlies on his brain taps. So he finally frees up enough time to see her and she asks him to spill his real life on some rude asshole who's too cheap to do Way Out right. Who cared what it cost? This was his *fucking life*.

"I protect people." Big Guy's voice was so smooth. Back in his cabin, Murph was shouting.

"What, a cop?" said Ghatak. "A security guard?"

Cat's eyes glittered. He couldn't tell if she were angry or pleased.

Big Guy nodded, definite as a bullet. "Independent op." There were only nine on the ship. He tried to calculate how long it would take her to figure out which one he was.

"I didn't know security guards did that well." Ghatak looked skeptical.

"He's here, isn't he?" said Cat. "Protect me, Big Guy?"

"This is virtuality," Ghatak said. "We don't need protection."

"No?" She smiled, showing Murph her tiny square incisors, the dagger canines that fit into grooves in her gums. Murph had seen that smile before. He peeled the shoe from his right foot.

“So Doctor ...” Cat reached behind her to unseal the dress. “... when you cut them open, what exactly do they smell like?”

“*What?*”

She dipped a shoulder and the dress sagged down to the collarbone, revealed the swell of a breast. “Inside, I mean.”

For a second Doctor John Ghatak of 21 Spring Street, Gardner, Kansas froze. He looked about as godlike as a rabbit caught in headlights. He tugged abruptly at his dhoti and then popped like a lie. There was a sharp gasp, as air rushed to fill the void he'd left. All that was left was the necklace of skulls.

Cat threw her head back and laughed. “Lacked the courage of his erection.” The dress fell to her waist. The fur on her breasts was only as thick as the hair on Murph's arm. “I thought he'd never leave.”

He wanted to rub his thumbs across her nipples. “Why were you with him?”

“You were late.” She picked up Shiva's necklace. “And he tasted desperate. I liked that.” She wrapped it idly around two fingers. “Thought he might try hanging off the edge with me.” The skulls clicked. “But he was only pretending not to be afraid.”

“So what do I taste like?”

She licked her lips. “Don't know. Yet.” She put the necklace on and shed the dress. Her gaze was steady, testing, as she lay across the blanket. She arranged herself languidly, propped on an elbow, hips cocked toward him.

“I'll hang off the edge with you.” He reached for her. “I'll even let go.” She opened her arms to him. Her mouth. Her tongue was thin and pliant at the edges, but like sandpaper deeper in.

He knelt in front of her. She unsealed his pants, slipped her hand inside. Her palm glided over the curve of his great belly. Lower, *lower*. He watched her, quivering with dread and desire.

Her touch lightened when she realized what he'd done. She glanced up at him. “Why?” She tugged at his pants until they slid down and gathered in great folds at his knees. “You want something different?” But she knew, she had to know.

“To meet you,” he said. “Touch your face, see where you live. Everything.”

“But you'll lose Cat.” She leaned forward. Her tongue scratched at the smooth skin between his legs. “She can be anything, do anything. I'm locked into what I really am.”

“I love Cat—and Big Guy. But I'm ready to give them up if you are.”

Her breath burned him like steam.

“It's time,” he said. “Tell me your name.”

“Yes.” Her eyes seemed to get very deep. “Oh, yes. But first, I have to taste you.”

She stretched as if just waking up. Crouching on all fours, she arched her back, holding the upward thrust at its peak. Then the shape of her body changed. She slid her hands forward and raised her rear end, like she wanted him to take her from behind. Her spine rippled. She seemed to grow larger.

“It’ll hurt at first.” Her head swayed back and forth hypnotically. “But then I’ll close the pain gates in your brain. Afterward will be all pleasure.” Her splayed fingers folded and knit themselves into short furry stumps. Her nails flowed like honey, pinched into cruel hooks.

“Hurt?” He saw her muscles bunch as she gathered herself. Everything seemed so slow. Like a dream. He tried to tell her not to. He wanted to hurl himself out of her way but he was tangled in his own pants. She sprang.

The impact knocked him onto his side. Her claws raked his shoulder and he almost fainted from the pain. It was as if his nerves had frozen and were shattering into razor shards. Then she was on top of him. She howled in his ear, bit into the side of his neck, shook him. With that first shake, the pain changed. He heard himself scream but it was the sound of ecstasy. He tried to scabble away into the corn. Stalks rustled and thrashed at him. Terror was his bliss. She pounced on his back, brought him down, worried at the back of his neck. New wounds spurted like multiple orgasms. He tried to heave her off him and saw the warm soil darken beneath them.

“I’m bleeding,” he moaned.

“Good for the corn.” She caught him a blow that drove his face into the ground. She put one paw on his head, the other on his back. Her weight caressed the breath from his lungs. “Sleep now, Murph.”

She knew just what he needed. He was tired of Way Out, yes. He needed to sleep. Just before she gave him the killing bite, Murph realized that he had never been more alive.

* * * *

His cabin was dark. He woke to the light of his clock. 03:21:35, 03:21:36. His first thought was that he had one hour and fifty-six minutes left. His next was that he had died. Cat had killed him. He picked at the memory and found it still gave him deep and scary pleasure.

“Messages?” He stripped off a brain tap.

The right wall displayed the mail queue. Ads, bills, Dennis the acupuncturist’s August payment, funeral notice for poor Noonan. Nothing. He couldn’t stop thinking about Cat. How she’d gotten rid of Ghatak. The way she’d said yes. *Oh, yes*. But how could they meet now? Then he remembered.

She had called him Murph. “Get Bumpus.”

Bumpus replaced the queue. He was slumped in the same position he’d been in when he’d wiped Murph. For a moment Murph thought he had fallen asleep with his eyes open. His face was dead as stone.

“Back already?” said Bumpus.

“No. I want you to watch me. Here, for the rest of my time.”

“You?” He yawned. “Why?”

“Could be I'm having a visitor.”

“Not a woman?”

“Could be.”

“I watch you having sex?”

Murph's door chimed. “Don't know what's going to happen,” he said. “Just watch, damn it!”

“It'll cost ...”

Murph wiped him, yanked off the last tap, got up from his workseat. The darkness seemed to spin as he picked his way to the door. He thought about turning on the hall camera, seeing who it was. But if it was really her, he didn't want his first glimpse to be on a screen.

The door chimed again. Still he hesitated. How had she found out his name so quickly? Where he lived? More mysteries. 03:25:12. He was a champion. 03:25:13. This was a very stupid thing to do, letting a stranger in at 03:25:15. Even if it was Cat—especially if it was. But he wasn't afraid. He had to live fast, or not at all. He opened the door.