



Sirhan walks, shrouded in isolation, through the crowds gathered for the festival. The only people who see him are the chattering ghosts of dead politicians and writers, deported from the inner system by order of the Vile Offspring. The great terraforming project is nearly complete, the festival planet dressed for a jubilee that will last almost twenty of its years—four pre-singularity lifetimes—before the Demolition. The green and pleasant plain stretches toward a horizon a thousand kilometers away, beneath a lemon-yellow sky. The air smells faintly of ammonia and the big spaces are full of small ideas: for this is the last human planet in the solar system.

"Excuse me, are you real?" someone asks him in American-accented English.

It takes a moment or two for Sirhan to disengage from his introspection and realize that he's being spoken to. "What?" he asks, slightly puzzled. Wiry and pale, Sirhan wears the robes of a Berber goat-herd on his body and the numinous halo of a utility fog-bank above his head: in his abstraction, he vaguely resembles a saintly shepherd in a post-singularity nativity play. "I say, what?" Outrage simmers at the back of his mind—*is nowhere private?*—but, as he turns, he sees that one of the ghost pods has split lengthwise across its white mushroom-like crown, spilling a trickle of left-over construction fluid and a completely hairless, slightly bemused-looking Anglo male who wears an expression of profound surprise.

"I can't find my implants," the Anglo male says, shaking his head. "But I'm really *here*, aren't I? Incarnate?" He glances round at the other pods. "This isn't a sim."

Sirhan sighs—*another exile*—and sends forth a daemon to interrogate the ghost pod's abstract interface. It doesn't tell him much—unlike most of the resurrectees, this one seems to be undocumented. "You've been dead. Now you're alive. I *suppose* that means you're now almost as real as I am. What else do you need to know?"

"When is—" The newcomer stops. "Can you direct me to the processing center?" he asks carefully. "I'm disoriented."

Sirhan is surprised—most immigrants take a lot longer to figure that out. "Did you die recently?" he asks.

"I'm not sure I died at all." The newcomer rubs his bald head, looking puzzled. "Hey, no jacks!" He shrugs, exasperated. "Look, the processing center. . . ?"

"Over there." Sirhan gestures at the monumental mass of the Boston Museum of Science (shipped all the way from Earth a couple of decades ago to save it from the demolition of the inner system). "My mother runs it." He smiles thinly.

"Your mother—" the newly resurrected immigrant stares at him intensely, then blinks. "Holy shit." He takes a step toward Sirhan. "Wow, you're—"

Sirhan recoils and snaps his fingers. The thin trail of vaporous cloud

*Charles Stross's previous novelette in this series, "Nightfall," made the 2004 Hugo final ballot, as did his novel Singularity Sky. His most recent SF novel, Iron Sunrise (a sequel to Singularity Sky), was published by Ace books in July, and his next novel, A Family Trade, is due out from Tor at the end of September. This novella, along with the other stories in this series, will be published by Ace as Accelerando in July.*

