

VACUMN FLOWERS

Michael Swanwick

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By the same author

In the Drift

ARBOR HOUSE New York

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For Gardner Dozois

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1
REBEL

She didn't know she had died.

She had, in fact, died twice—by accident the first time, but suicide later. Now the corporation that owned her had decided she should die yet again, in order to fuel a million throwaway lives over the next few months.

But Rebel Elizabeth Mudlark knew none of this. She knew only that something was wrong and that nobody would talk to her about it.

“Why am I here?” she asked.

The doctor's face loomed over her. It was thin and covered by a demon mask of red and green wetware paint that she could *almost* read. It had that horrible programmed smile that was supposed to be reassuring, the corners of the mouth pushing his cheeks into little round balls. He directed that death's head rictus at her.

“Oh, I wouldn't worry about that,” he said.

A line of nuns floated by overhead, their breasts bobbing innocently, wimples starched and white. They were riding the magnetic line at the axis of the city cannister, as graceful as small ships. It was a common enough sight, even a homey one. But then Rebel's perception did a flipflop and the nuns were unspeakably alien, floating upside-down against the vast window walls that were cold with endless stretches of bright glittery stars embedded in

night. She must have seen the like a thousand times before, but now, without warning, her mind shrieked *strange strange strange* and she couldn't make heads or tails of what she was seeing. "I can't remember things," Rebel said. "Sometimes I'm not even sure who I am."

"Well, that's perfectly normal," the doctor said, "under the circumstances." He disappeared behind her head.

"Nurse, would you take a look at this?"

Someone she could not see joined him. They conferred softly. Gritting her teeth, Rebel said, "I suppose it happens to you all the time."

They ignored her. The scent of roses from the divider hedges was heavy and cloying, thick enough to choke on. Traffic continued flowing along the axis.

If she could have moved so much as an arm, Rebel would've waited for the doctor to lean too close, and then tried to choke the truth out of him. But she was immobilized, unable even to move her head. She could only stare up at the people floating by and the stars wheeling monotonously past. The habitat strips to either side of overhead were built up with platforms and false hills, rising like islands from a starry sea. By their shores occasional groups of picnickers ventured onto the window floor, black specks visible only when they occulted stars or other cannister cities. The strange planet went by again.

"We'll want to wait another day before surgery," the doctor said finally. "But her persona's stabilized nicely. If there aren't any major changes in her condition, we can cut tomorrow." He moved toward the door.

"Wait a minute!" Rebel cried. The doctor stopped, turned to look at her. Dead eyes surrounded by paint, under a brush of red hair. "Have I given permission for this operation?"

Again he turned that infuriatingly reassuring smile on her. "Oh, I don't think that's important," he said, "do you?"

Before she could answer, he was gone.

As the nurse adjusted the adhesion disks on Rebel's brow and behind her ears, she briefly leaned into Rebel's view. It was a nun, a heavy woman with two chins and eyes that burned with visions of God. Earlier, when Rebel was still groggy and half-aware, she had introduced herself as Sister Mary Radha. Now Rebel could see that the nun had been tinkering with her own wetware—her mystic functions were cranked up so high she could barely function.

Rebel looked away, to hide her thoughts. "Please turn on," she murmured. The video flat by the foot of her cot came up, open to the encyclopedia entry for medical codes. Hastily, she switched it over to something innocuous. Simple-structure atmospheric methane ecologies. She pretended to be absorbed in the text.

Then, as the nurse was leaving, Rebel casually said, "Sister? The flat's at a bad angle for me. Could you tilt it forward a little?" The nun complied. "Yeah, like that. No, a bit ... perfect." Rebel smiled warmly, and for a moment Sister Mary Radha basked in this manifestation of universal love. Then she floated out.

"Fucking god-head," Rebel muttered. Then, to the flat, "Thank you."

It turned itself off.

The flat's surface was smooth and polished. Turned off, it darkly reflected the foot of Rebel's cot and the medical code chart hanging there.

Rebel quickly decoded the reversed symbols. There were two simplified persona wheels, one marked Original, and the other Current. They looked nothing at all like each other. Another symbol for wetsurgical prep, and three more that, boiled down, meant she had no special medical needs. And a single line of print below that, where her name should have been. Rebel read it through twice, letter by letter, to make sure there was no mistake:

Property of Deutsche Nakasone GmbH

Anger rose up in Rebel like a savage white animal. She clenched her teeth and drew back her lips and did not try to fight it. She *wanted* this anger. It was her ally, her only friend. It raged through her paralyzed body, a hot storm of fangs and claws and violence.

Then the fury overran her sense of self and swept her under. Drowning, she was carried down into the dark chaos of helplessness below. Into the murky despair that had no name or purpose, where she lost her face, her body, her being. She was a demon, blindly watching people stream through the air and stars slide to the side, and hating them all. Wanting to smash them all together in her hands, cities and stars and people alike, and smear them into a pulpy little ball, as she laughed, with black tears running down from her eyes...

* * *

She came out of her fugue feeling weak and depressed. “Please tell me the time,” she said, and the flat obeyed. Four hours had passed.

A woman stepped into the niche, a skinny type in greenface with a leather tool harness, some kind of low-level biotech. Humming to herself, she began to trim the walls. She worked methodically, obsessively, pausing every now and then to train a rose back into place.

“Hey, sport,” Rebel said. “Do me a favor.” Her loginess evaporated as the adrenalin began to flow. She flashed a smile.

“Hmm? Ah! Er... what is it?” With a visible effort, the woman pulled herself away from her work.

“I’m getting out in a couple of hours, and nobody’s arranged for any clothing for me. Could you drop by wherever-it-is on the way out, and get them to send something over?”

The woman blinked. “Oh. Uh... sure, I suppose. Isn’t

your nurse supposed to take care of that?”

Rebel rolled her eyes. “She sees universal purpose in the stars, and the meaning of existence in the growth of a rose. The little stuff she’s not so good on. Know what I mean?” Anyone working in a hospital with a nursing order would find that easy to believe.

“Well. Yeah, why not?” The woman returned to her work, visibly relieved the conversation was over. Twigs and leaves snowed down from her fingers. By the time she left, Rebel was sure the woman had forgotten her promise.

But an hour later an orderly stepped in and wordlessly deposited a cloak on the table by her bed. “Sonofabitch,” Rebel said softly. She was actually going to break out of this place!

*** * ***

Rebel napped. When she awoke, she spent an excruciating hour staring at the people floating through the eternal twilight before Sister Mary Radha returned. The nun’s belly overhung her cincture, and she was as heavily mystic-wired as ever.

“Sister,” Rebel said, “the leads in my adhesion disks are out of adjustment. Would you take a look at them?” Then, when the woman’s hands were deep in the wires, she said, “You know, there’s a verse by one of your prophets that’s been running through my head. But I’ve forgotten part. It starts: ‘Tormented by thirst of the spirit, I was dragging myself through a gloomy forest when a six-winged seraph appeared to me at the crossroads.’ Are you familiar with that? Then it goes”—she closed her eyes, as if trying to bring up the words—“ ‘He touched my eyes with fingers light as a dream, and my eyes opened wide as those of a frightened she eagle. He touched my ears...’ and I forget the rest.”

Sister Mary Radha’s hands stopped moving. For one still, extended moment she said nothing. Then the nun stared up into the infinite depths of night and murmured,

“Saint Pushkin.” Her voice rose. “ ‘He touched my ears, and roaring and noise filled them, and I heard the trembling of the angels, and the movement of creatures beneath the seas, and the growing of the grass in the valleys! And he laid hold of my lips, and tore out my sinful tongue—’ ” She arched her back and shivered in religious ecstasy. Her hands jerked spasmodically. One of the adhesion disks was yanked askew, and Rebel’s head slammed to the side. But she was still paralyzed.

“Sister,” Rebel said quietly. “Sister?”

“Mmmm?” the nun replied dreamily.

“The doctor wanted you to remove my paralysis now. Do you remember that? He asked me to remind you.” Rebel held her breath. This was the moment when she either won free or lost it all. Everything depended on how long it took Sister Mary Radha to reconnect with reality.

“Oh,” the nun said. She fumbled with a switch, haltingly changed two settings. With somnambulant slowness, she lifted off the disks. Then she shook her head, smiling vaguely, and wandered out.

Rebel let out her breath. She could move! But for a long minute she did not, choosing instead to stare up, unseeing.

The memory of her reflection in the video flat, foreshortened and distorted though it had been, pinned her to the cot with dread. At last she gathered up courage and gingerly, haltingly, held up an arm before her eyes.

Slowly she rotated it.

The arm was whole and its muscles shifted smoothly. The skin was a soft, Italian brown, unscarred, lightly fuzzed with fine dark hair. The fingers were short, the nails a pearly pink. Horrified, Rebel sat bolt upright and stared down her body.

Her breasts were round and full. Her thighs were a trifle heavy, but still muscular. The hospital had left her *cache-sexe* on for modesty’s sake, but above it a thin line of black hairs marched up her belly like ants. Her legs were

short, functional, strong. It was a good, healthy body.

But it was not *her* body. Rebel Elizabeth Mudlark's body was long and lean and knobby at the elbows and knees. Her skin was white as porcelain and her hair was mousy blond. Her hands and feet were long and slender, with an artist's fingers, a concert pianist's toes. Almost the exact opposite of the body she had now.

I shall go mad, Rebel thought. I will scream.

But she did neither. She stood and examined her paint in the obsidian surface of the flat. Ignoring the strange round face with button nose and dark eyes—eyes that flashed animal fear at her. A line of red paint ran from ear to ear, like a mask, with spiky wing lines flying up the brows. “Please turn on,” she said, and looked it up under wetware codes. Logically enough, it identified her as Hospital Patient, Wetsurgery Prep.

The paint smeared. It took only a second to change the markings to Outpatient, Wetsurgery Postop. Two small antennae now reached down from the eyes, a second pair of wings sprouted on the forehead. She wrapped the cloak about her, hood up, and stepped out of her niche, onto a flagstone walk.

The walk ran between high rosehedges, angled into another. She was swept up in a flow of medical personnel in gowns that matched their facepaint masks—surgical greens, diagnostics blues, wetware reds—and a sprinkling of civilians in their cloaks. They strode along crisply, blankly, as self-absorbed as robots. Rebel moved invisibly among them, gliding along on tiptoe since it was a gravity-light area.

She moved confidently at first, cloak streaming in her wake. Then the walk branched, and branched again, and she was hopelessly lost in the rose maze, among the hundreds of niches where patients were packed tight as larvae in a hive. Without warning, she felt naked and exposed, and she couldn't remember how to walk. All

those complex motions. In a panic, she pulled her cloak about her and stumbled.

The zombies swirled by, stepping deftly aside as she fought for balance. Cold faces glanced quickly at her, then away.

Just as she went sprawling, an arm reached out and snagged her elbow, and she was hauled gracelessly to her feet. Turning, she found herself looking into a thin, vulpine face slashed by a single orange wetware line. The stranger smiled, narrow jaw, sharp little teeth. He had a painful grip on her arm, just above the elbow. “This way,” he said.

“That’s okay, sport,” Rebel said quickly. “I just lost my footing. Point me the right way out, and I’d be grateful.”

“Oh bullshit,” the man said. “They’d’ve caught you already if anybody knew you were missing yet.” Rebel yanked her arm free and found that her new, unfamiliar body was trembling with adrenalin reaction. The man smiled condescendingly. “Listen, I know somebody who can help you out of this mess. Do you want to meet her or not?”

* * *

They were on the spine of their habitat island, where the giant druid oaks grew. One spread its limbs over the commercial maze of shops and taverns bordering the hospital. Its trunk reached halfway to the axis. Looking up as they strolled, Rebel saw stars blinking in its upper reaches, appearing and disappearing in the gaps between leaves. “Hell of a stunt, escaping from full therapeutic paralysis,” the man said. “I’d love to know how you did it.” Then, when she did not respond, “Hey. My name’s Jerzy Heisen.”

In among the branches, leaves descended slowly, barely moving through the suspended dust, as if the air had thickened to hold them up. In the soft light, the dust and leaves shared a stillness that was actually slow, tireless

motion, an endless eddying as ponderous and inevitable as the rotation of spiral galaxies. “Is that so?” Rebel wished she could climb up the tree, in among the floating twigs and detritus, so like the vast tidal fronts of home. “I take it from your knowing hints that I needn’t bother introducing myself.”

“Oh, I know all about you.” They passed between displays of body jewelry: silverplated armbands gleaming softly under blue spots, some sparkling with Lunar diamonds, impact emeralds, even Columbian tourmaline. “You’re a persona bum, currently suffering from a major personality erasure—self-induced, by the way—and held together by a prototypical identity overlay that is, properly speaking, the property of the Deutsche Nakasone Gesellschaft. Your name is Eucrasia Walsh.”

“No, it’s—” She stopped, bewildered. The name *did* sound familiar, in a crazy kind of way, as if Heisen had put a name to all that was ugly within her, to all the self-pitying and wounded hatred she sank into when her mood turned dark. The stale, dusty smell of defeat and weary guilt rose up within her, and she ducked her head. Heisen took her elbow and urged her forward.

“Confused, eh? Well, that’s perfectly normal,” he said, “under the circumstances.”

She looked directly at him then, and something about his face, the small pinched lines of it, the long narrow nose, that brush of red hair... She knew that face. It took only a small act of imagination to see it covered with a demon mask of red and green lines. “You’re my doctor!”

“Your wetsurgeon, yeah.” The walk bridged a pond thick with water lilies. Pierrots waited on tables by the water’s edge. “Not to worry, though—I’m off-program. I wouldn’t turn my worst enemy over to those bastards at Deutsche Nakasone on my own time. Not that I have any choice when I’m programmed up...” The crowd thickened and slowed and came to a halt. “Here. We go downtown now.”

The elevator bank was set by the druid tree's trunk, its vacuum sleeve tunneling right through the root network. The cars were dirty and harshly lit and a whiff of urine and stale body sweat emanated from them. As the crowd swept forward, Rebel stared up wistfully, flashing on a quick fantasy: She would fight her way free of the crush and scramble up the tree trunk, nimble as a squirrel, moving faster and faster as she swarmed higher and the gravity grew less, surging from limb to limb. Until, at the very top, she would pull knees to chest, brace toes against bark, and *leap*... soaring high into the air, body taut and outstretched, her flight slowing gradually, until at the last possible instant she'd touch axis and be snagged by the magnetic line, to be hauled far and away from here in the time it took to draw a breath.

(But she didn't have the armbands or leg rings for the magnetic field to grab. She would plummet like a stone, with excruciating slowness at first, then faster, a wingless Icarus, curving down to smash bloody dead against the city walks. It was a stupid fantasy.)

"Deutsche Nakasone is going to come looking for you. You know that?" They stepped into a car along with a hundred others. The doors sighed shut and the floor dropped. "They want a clean recording of that personality of yours. And then they want to revert you to Eucrasia Walsh. Out of the goodness of their corporate heart, you ask? Shit. They're just worried about retaining copyright." Heisen's face was so close to hers that their hoods kissed. His breath was sour as he murmured in her ear. "They don't care that to you—the present you, the one you think you are—it'll be just the same as dying."

Some of the elevator stayed behind to let off passengers; the rest continued downward. A black-and-white painted rude boy with a metal star hung about his neck cruised Rebel, hooking a fist on his hip and throwing back his cloak to reveal a body-length strip of flesh. She looked away, wrapping her cloak tightly about her, and he

laughed. “But why? Why are they doing this to me?”

Heisen sighed. “It’s a simple enough story,” he said, “if an ugly one. Do you remember being Eucrasia? Working as a persona bum?”

The memory was there, but it was painful and Rebel flinched away from it. It keyed into the suicidal madness she had fallen into earlier, and she wanted to keep her distance from that. Though like a tongue returning again and again to worry at an aching tooth, her thoughts had a will of their own. “My memories are all in a jumble.”

Another slice of elevator stayed behind and another. They stepped back. Heisen glanced around at the blank faces. “Well, tell you what, let’s not go into that here. Somebody might hear. I’ll give you the story at Snow’s.”

The elevator opened. Hot, steamy air breathed into Rebel’s face. This low, the gravity was over Greenwich normal, and she felt clumsy and heavy-footed. They were jostled forward into a vasty cavern of interlocking kelp bars and surgical parlors, gambling lofts and blade bazaars. A shifting holo banner struck her eye, and she winced. Three strains of music clashed; the subimbeds made her feel anxious and restless. Sweat sheened up on her body. I’ve been here before, she thought. No, I haven’t.

“Down Bakuninstrasse,” Heisen said. Away from the uptown elevators the shops thinned and were broken by ebony stretches of building foundation and habitat supports. Light flared as they passed a wetware mall, and Heisen stopped and pointed within. Rebel stared: Customers edged down narrow aisles, passing slow hands over the endless racks. Now and then somebody would lift a wafer and slide into one of the programming booths that lined the rear wall. Advertising holos flashed overhead: suzy vacuum, said one. She looked to be some kind of Amazon. The most beautiful boy Rebel had ever seen floated over the single word angelus. And then she spotted

the Rebel Elizabeth Mudlark banner. Against a starry backdrop was a woman who was not her, doing something she would never do. Rebel stared at it, horrified.

“Notice the little comets in the background? You treehangers are very fashionable this season.”

Rebel turned her stunned face toward Heisen. He shrugged.

“Prepublicity. They’ve got a lot of money tied up in you. I wanted you to see what an expensive little piece of developmental wetware you are. Come on.”

Down a slideway and into an access corridor with long stretches of black stressed slag. On the lower reaches slogans were crudely permasprayed in nightglo colors, one over the other, in a tangled and almost incoherent snarl, stay yourself god hates was overrun by FREEMINDSFREEMINDSFREEMINDS which raged over BURN BRIGHT BRAIN before smashing up against SHAPESHIFTERSFACE DANCERS WEREWOLFVAMPIRES GOTO HELL. Someone had made a serious effort to erase a wheel logo with the words EARTH FRIEND about it. Beneath the graffiti a workman sat on a crate facing the wall. He had removed an access hatch and was cyborged into a tangle of color-coded wires.

Around a corner they passed a sling city. The burn cases stumbled down, looking for handouts. They babbled in endless monotones, their minds rotted out with God, sex, information, their reflexes shattered, their faces vacant-eyed and twitching. Heisen hissed and stepped up his pace. “Scum!” he gasped once they were safely past. “They ought to be...” They turned down a yet smaller run where garbage was mulched thin against the street and starting to ferment. The stench of rotting squid and old grease hung in the air, and the soles of Rebel’s feet were going black.

Rebel glanced at Heisen and was shocked to see the man was trembling. Sweat poured down a face gone fishbelly

white. “God damn, sport,” she said. “What’s wrong with you?”

“It’s just the wetware.” Heisen waved a hand at his face. “I keep the imaginative processes cranked way up, so I’ll be fast to pick up on the main chance, right? Makes me a touch... paranoid, though.” They stepped down a slanting gallery where most of the overheads had been smashed or stolen. Exhaust fans grumbled in shadow. Tangles of black cable drooped from the ceiling; they had to duck under the lower loops. “God damn her,” Heisen fretted. “She doesn’t have to have her office down here, she just wants all that space. I wish...” They rounded a final corner and he pointed to a door grey with urban grime. “Here.”

Over the doorway hung a flickering neon switchblade, a piece of antique technology that must have cost a fortune to recreate. It buzzed and crackled, tinging the shadows red. The knife’s blade blinked off and on, as if snapping in and out of the handle. On the center of the door was taped a small white rectangle, a business card:

snow

the cutting edge

ostend kropotkinkorridor bei berkman-gallerie

neues-hoch-kamden, E.K.

“Snow?” Heisen said uncertainly.

The door opened, and they stepped within.

* * *

Whatever Rebel might have been expecting, it was not this: a room so large and empty she could not guess its size. Eggshell-textured walls, white and featureless. No furniture. The only item in all that space was a small prayer rug in its center. A solitary figure knelt there, hood down, shaven head bowed. The room was chilled to an ambient that was, after a moment’s relief, as oppressive as the heat outside.

They walked forward. This was the ultimate form of

ostentation among technology freaks—to have a system so complete and sophisticated that nothing showed; no machines, no wires, no controls. The room would be laced with an invisible tracery of trigger-beams, directional mikes and subvocal pickups. There was power here, for one who knew its geography.

The woman raised her head, fixed Rebel with cold snakelike eyes. Her skull was white as marble, and her face was painted in a hexangular pattern suggestive of starbursts and ice crystals. “What have you stolen for me this time, Jerzy?”

The color was back in Heisen’s face. He showed teeth again, and flamboyantly threw back his cloak to allow himself a sweeping, mocking bow. “May I present,” he said, “the only clean copy in existence of next month’s lead release from Deutsche Nakasone.”

The woman did not move. “How did this happen?”

“What a pleasure it is to see you, Jerzy, won’t you have a chair?” The little man grinned cockily. “Isn’t that what you meant to say, Snow? Or are we expected to sit on the floor?”

Snow moved her head slightly, the sort of movement a lizard might make on a cold morning after prolonged stasis. “Behind you.” Rebel turned and almost stumbled into a Queen Anne chair. Its twin rested neatly beside it.

Reflexively she stepped back. Heisen, too, looked unnerved. However the chairs had been sleight-of-handed into existence, it was as pure and uncluttered an effect as any medieval miracle.

They sat, and there was an odd glint in Snow’s eyes as they faced her again. Was it amusement, Rebel wondered? If so, it was buried deep, Heisen cleared his throat and said, “This is Rebel Elizabeth Mudlark. Two days ago she was a persona bum, name of Eucrasia Walsh. Eucrasia was doing prelim on a string of optioned wetsets when she burned on the Mudlark wafer and popped her base.

Wound up in Our Lady of Roses, and—”

“Hold it right there, chucko!” Rebel said angrily. “Reel it back and give it to me without the gobbledegook.”

Heisen glanced at Snow and she nodded slightly. He began again, this time directing his speech at Rebel. “Deutsche Nakasone reviews a lot of wetware every day. Most of it is never used, but it all has to be evaluated. They hire persona bums to do the first screening. Not much to it. They wire you up, suppress your base personality—that’s Eucrasia—program in a new persona, test it, deprogram it, then program you back to your base self. And start all over again. Sound familiar?”

“I... think I remember now,” Rebel said. Then, urgently, “But it doesn’t *feel* like anything I’ve done. It’s like it all happened to somebody else.”

“I’m coming to that,” Heisen said. “The thing is that persona bums are all notoriously unstable. They’re all suicidally unhappy types—that’s how they end up with that kind of job, you see? They’re looking to be Mister Right. But the joke is that they have such miserable experience structures they’re never happy as anyone. Experience always dominates, as we say.” He paused a beat and looked triumphantly at Snow. “Only this time it didn’t.”

Snow said nothing. After an uncomfortable pause, Heisen said, “Yeah. We’ve got the exception that disproves the rule. Our Eucrasia powered on, tried the persona—and she liked it. She liked it so much that she poured a glass of water into the programmer and shorted it out. Thus destroying not only the safe-copy of her own persona, but also the only copy in existence of the Mudlark program.”

Again, that small lizard-movement. “Then...” Snow said. “Yes. Yes I see. Interesting.” With the small, electric thrill of remembering something she couldn’t possibly know, Rebel realized that Snow was accessing her system, that a tightly-aimed sonic mike or subcortical implant was feeding her data. “How did you manage to lift her?” Snow

asked.

Heisen shrugged. “Blind luck. She broke herself out, and I happened by.” He told what he knew of her escape.

“Now that is interesting.” The woman stood. She was tall and impossibly, ethereally thin. A wraith in white, she kept her cloak clutched tight. Two long, fleshless fingers ghosted out to touch Rebel’s forehead. They were hard and dry as parchment, and Rebel shivered at their touch. “What kind of mind are we dealing with here?” Snow fell silent.

“Take a look at her specs.” Heisen yanked a briefcase from a cloak pocket and punched up a holographic branching-limb wetware diagram. It hung in the air, a convoluted green sphere, looking for all the world like a tumbleweed. Or like a faraway globular tree... It looked exactly like Rebel’s home dyson world, and the image hit her hard. “Okay, this is a crude representation,” Heisen said eagerly. “But look—see where the n-branch trines? You’ve got a very strong—”

The green sphere burned in the air like a vision of the grail, and Rebel flashed to that light-filled instant when her persona had flooded her skull, and she had picked up a glass and upended it over the programmer. The water writhed in the air, sparkling, and the supervising wettech twisted around in horror, mouth falling open, panic in her eyes as Rebel threw back her head, feeling the rich, full laughter form in her throat. It felt good to be alive, to sense the thoughts warming the brain like sunshine, and to know what she had to do. But then, even as the water splashed into the wafer’s cradle and the tech shrieked, “What are—” she realized that the programming wires were still jacked into her cortex. The wafer went up with a sizzle as she reached, catching the stench of burning plastic as she tried, random static leaping up the wires to smash her sideways, hand yanking out the leads an instant too late as the universe whited out into oblivion...

The memory cut off, and Rebel trembled. Where was she? Hospitalized? Recaptured? Heisen and Snow were still talking, the tall, slim woman looking down impassively at the fierce little man, and then Rebel remembered who they were. Neither had noticed her snapping out; it must have been a brief episode.

“I’m taking points on this one,” Heisen said. “You hear me, Snow? I want points.”

“Maybe it’s too big for us?” Snow communed with herself for a long moment. “Well, let’s try.” She addressed Rebel directly. “Let me put a hypothetical case to you. Imagine that you were approached by a small firm that does knock-offs of commercial personas. Suppose you were offered—” she cocked her head slightly—“three points for your help in making a clean recording. This would spoil your value to Deutsche Nakasone. No value, no interest—they’d leave you alone. Now, keeping in mind that without this deal they’ll hunt you down and wipe you out of your own brain... what would you say?”

The episode had left a bad aftertaste in Rebel’s mind. Or possibly it was just the day’s events catching up with her. It was hard to concentrate. She shook her head. “I don’t understand... knock-offs?”

“Well, let’s say the current best-seller is...”—Snow listened— “a young man with the improbable name of Angelus. He is... sensitive, romantic, shy. The publicity wheels grind and suddenly every fourteen-year-old in the Kluster wants to be sensitive, romantic, shy. There’s a big market for that persona. We lift an early copy, make enough changes to foil legal action, and dump a hundred thousand wafers on the grey market. These personas are not exactly Angelus, but they are sensitive, romantic, and shy. And cheap. The big kids make their big profit, and we tag along for a taste.”

“Only this time,” Heisen said, “we’ll be on the market first, riding all that publicity free. They’ll have to pick up

on *our* wafer, and they're just not geared for speed the way we are. We can skim off the top profit for a good week before..."

Rebel's skin crawled at the thought of a hundred thousand strangers sharing her thoughts, her face, her soul. Experiencing her innermost feelings, her deepest emotions. She pictured them as pasty white insects, swarming in blind heaps, biological machines without will or individuality. "No," she said. "Forget it. I won't whore my mind."

"No, but damn it, you have no room to—" Heisen leaped up, reaching for Rebel, and she started to her feet. She found her balance and drew back a fist. She'd never been trained in heavy gravity fighting techniques, but the muscles of her new body integrated well with each other, and she didn't doubt that she could drop Heisen where he stood. Smash his nose first, and then—

"Stop." Snow's arm shot out from her cloak (a flash of corpse-white skin stretched taut over bones, small black nipples on fleshless breasts) and formed a barrier between them. The arm was long, anorexic, and covered with silver filigree-exoskeletal muscle multipliers. Powered on, she'd be able to punch her fist through a slag wall or break bones without thinking. "So far I've been speaking hypothetically; no offers have been made."

Those unblinking eyes fixed on Rebel, as if she were a mystery that they could penetrate by sheer force of will. Without turning her head, she said, "She could be a trap, Jerzy. Didn't you think of that?"

Heisen's face twisted. "No, I—but she could be, couldn't she?" He darted forward and jabbed a finger at the floating wetware diagram. "Look at that! That split in the r-limb!" Then he calmed slightly. "No, you couldn't fake something like that. She has to be legit." But new sweat had appeared on his forehead, and there was a wary look in his eyes.

Snow folded her arm back into her cloak. She dismissed the diagram with a shrug. “More to the point, I find it hard to imagine a persona bum suddenly finding happiness and content in a new personality. It’s a fairy tale.” She glided back to her prayer rug, graceful as a geisha. “I’m afraid, child, that we are not ready to strike a deal at present. Much as I’d love to find out what’s in that intriguing mind of yours.” At her side, Heisen trembled like a hound on a leash. She shook her head. “We’ve found out as much as we can without getting our fingers burned.”

In the silence that followed, one of Snow’s hidden spikes whispered in Rebel’s ear, in a voice that was both like and unlike Snow’s own: “Deutsche Nakasone’s goons will be here in a minute.” A laser flashed holo images on one of her retinas: a convoluted local street-and-gallery map.

Two blinking lights crept toward Snow’s office.

“Jerzy will have to be sacrificed, but if you turn left when you leave and run like hell, you ought to escape.” The map vanished. “Go wherever you wish. We will know if you escape. And when you’re ready to do business, one of us will contact you.”

Snow herself had not spoken. She stood slim and solitary as a madonna. Aloud, she said, “The door is behind you.”

Rebel turned and fled.

Outside, she ran blindly down the hot and heavy corridors of downtown. She fled randomly, through crowded galleries and empty alleyways, until she was gasping for breath and covered with sweat and her fear rose up and swallowed her.

An indefinite time later, Rebel found a cluster of data ports in the center of a tiled courtyard. She had no idea where she was. Someplace midtown, to judge by the gravity. Jungle birds flitted between crowded boutiques. A sheet waterfall splashed into a shallow pool. By its edge, a vender sold copper coins to throw into the water.

Without her telling it to, Rebel's body drifted to a data port. Her head felt buzzy and light, as if it belonged to somebody else. From a vast distance she watched her fingers touch the screen twice, programming it for realtime communication. They tapped in an access code, and she wondered who it was for.

A male face appeared in the port. It floated in blackness, with no visual backdrop. Under a painted constellation of five-pointed gold stars, the eyebrows rose in surprise. "It's been a long time."

Rebel listened with detached fascination as a shrill, rapid voice from her own mouth said, "I have to hide. I have to crawl under my face and pull it in after me. I have to get away." Her face began to cry. "I don't have any money and I can't trust anyone and I need your help."

The stranger's face shifted, startled and alarmed. "My God, what have you done to yourself, Eucra—?"

"Don't use my name!"

Blank astonishment. Then, another instant shift of expression and the man grinned. "Gotcha, Sunshine. Listen, my shift has just started, but maybe you should join me anyway. I'm a vacuum bum these days, scraping flowers, nobody's going to look for you rookside. You think you can find your way to the Labor Exchange using public transit?"

Rebel wasn't following the conversation at all. Her head nodded.

"Okay, once you get there, go to the Storage and Maintenance gate. Tell them you want work as a

scraper—we're always short-handed; they'll give it to you. Mention my name so they put you on the right crew. It's all piecework; they don't care diddly-squat whether you put in a full shift. I'll have them issue you vacuum gear against my account. That clear? Think you can do that?"

Her body took a deep breath. Her voice said, "Yeah."

* * *

Rebel was scraping vacuum flowers off the surface of Eros when she came up from under.

It was dull, nasty work. The shiny blue blossoms were surprisingly elusive. Her visor polarized out glare, turning the bright flowers into a field of black stars. She had to reach into darkness to find them. Their stems were as thin as wires and tougher. Worst of all, the gravity was so slight that a careless move would send her bounding meters away. She hovered over the rock, keeping afloat with touches of toe and finger as she angled her clippers under each bloom. Her muscles ached with tension and fatigue.

The inside of her vacuum suit stank, and her collecting bag was only half full. It dragged behind her like the abdomen of a queen bee. Her helmet buzzed with voices as the work gang traded chitchat on the intercom channel.

"... and I swear no lie," a male voice drawled, "I was the suavest thing on two legs. They throw in a hardpacket of etiquette with the persona, you with me? So I know what fork you use to pick your nose with, and all. Not only was I suave out in public, I was even suave sexing it up afterwards."

"Oh yeah? Maybe I oughta try you out," said an amused female voice.

"Tamara, honey, the onliest thing less likely than me sexing you up is me admitting to sexing you up." Hoots of laughter. "You get one of your menfriends to try this program, though. I mean that."

"Hell," went a second female voice, "one of Tamara's

menfriends gets suave, and he'll—”

She snapped off the intercom. Something was shifting within her, and she didn't know who she was, Eucrasia or Rebel. Rebel or Eucrasia. “Let go,” she whispered savagely, and she was herself again: Rebel. But a sense of her other self lingered, hovering over her. She hunched her shoulders and ignored it as best she could and kept on scraping flowers.

The work was soothing. Her fingers moved with a will of their own, clipping flowers and stuffing them into the mesh bag at a regular, efficient rate. Ahead of her, endless mats of vacuum flowers unfolded to the horizon, each bloom the size of a human head, but so fragile it crumpled to nothing at the touch of a gloved finger.

The sense of Other remained, though, until her entire back itched with the touch of imagined eyes and she glanced back over her shoulder.

There was no one there. Just a stretch of bare rock and harsh shadow and, in the distance, a few low utility buildings and several freight lots. The lots were simply areas where the rock had been ground flat for storage purposes. Some were vacant. On others, orange and green and yellow crates were piled skyscraper-high. Machines as delicately jointed as mosquitos climbed the stacks, adding and removing crates. Below them, vacuum bums wrestled more crates from magnetic cushions or into elevators, standing back as the cargo was flung up and away.

What are you hanging around for? Rebel thought angrily. She felt like crying, but sternly suppressed the urge—tears were a bitch in vacuum gear. I won't step aside for you. This is *my* mind now.

A scrap of trash lightly hit the surface near Rebel, bounced up, and floated slowly downward, orange and red and twinkling. A crushed bit of packaging for something that had been consumed somewhere in near orbit. Rebel

reached down, tried to gather too many blossoms at once, and received a small shock through her work gloves as the flowers shorted out. “Oh, shit!” She flung the things down in disgust and sat up. A cannister city was lifting up over the flower-bright horizon. She could see a random scatter of habitat lights through a window wall, small and bright, like inner stars. And now it came to Rebel that she was on the strange planet she had seen from the hospital. Eros. She was on the asteroid Eros in the center of Eros Kluster.

Just like that, Eucrasia’s ghost was gone, vanished like a bubble in vacuum.

Rebel looped her bag’s tieline over a rock outcrop, pulled it snug, and rolled over on her back, letting the light wash over and through her.

Staring into the Kluster, she again felt mingled familiarity and awe. Spread against the starscape was an artificial galaxy of spinning wheels, variable gravity factories, geodesic towns, warehousing grids, slagsided cylinders, farming spheres... an infinity of structures, all painted in miles-wide supergraphics and bright as small suns. Counterspinward, to the Kluster’s trailing edge, the arrays of refinery mirrors were awash in waste light.

Starward, robot lightsails tacked and lofted, bringing in semiprocessed ores. Closeby, access craft and vacuum-suited spacejacks twisted through thin lines of traffic holograms. For an instant she almost choked on the beauty, the complexity of it. She wanted to laugh or to cry.

And then—

“Heads up, Sunshine!”

A gloved hand slapped her helmet, switching on the intercom. Rebel shot to her feet, went tumbling, and was pulled back by a man in a floral print vacuum suit.

Five-pointed yellow stars, in the pattern of the Northern Cross, dominated the print. In the helmet’s gold visor she saw her reflection, with a smaller, distorted image of the man on her own visor. He jerked a thumb upward. “Shift’s

over. Time to bounce home.”

* * *

The man loped off in slow, ludicrous low-gee hops, and Rebel followed. He was built tall and gangly, with narrow hips and tight little buns.

Bouncing in from all points, the work gang converged on the shabby elevator. One by one they floated harvest bags into the field, watched them flung upward, and followed suit themselves. Their work garb was all customized with iridescent planetscapes, clouds-and-rainbows, mock Mondrians, Pollocks, Van Goghs. Rebel glanced down at her own suit. Silvery and unmarked.

“Here you go, Sunshine. Slip this on the tieline.” The man gave her a slug of iron with a hole in its center. She snugged the line and wrangled her bag forward. It vanished. “Listen,” she said, “we’ve got to talk.”

“Yes, but not here.” He touched the small of her back and lofted her into the elevator.

The field nabbed her. With heart-stopping suddenness, the asteroid shrank beneath her. She could see it as a whole again, the way she had from New High Kamden, an awkwardly lopsided spindle of a planet with continents that burned a metallic blue-white, and seas of ink. The seas were areas scraped clean of the flowers. A traffic redirector snatched her, and the asteroid veered wildly away, and the Labor Exchange geodesic exploded in her face. She plowed into the magnetic cushion, slowed, stopped, and was nudged gently to an airlock.

* * *

The bourse was aswarm with workers. Rebel swam in, past new shifts that were suiting up and leaving. Completed shifts kicked by, laughing and chattering, folding back helmets and shucking their suits. She followed a rainbow-print suit that had been in her work gang and rode a mag line to the Storage and Maintenance

gate. A large-breasted paymaster sat in knee rings there, holding a salary machine in her lap. “Step it up,” she snapped.

Hastily, Rebel pulled off a glove and inserted her hand in the machine. It read her prints, calculated mass of flowers scraped, and extruded a thin silver bracelet. It felt odd on her wrist. She kicked off and the rainbow suit was nowhere to be seen. She had no idea where she should go now.

Then someone bounced lightly against her, nudging her into a mag line. “See you on the other side, Sunshine,” he said, and she shot through a doorway. That same man. At line’s end, she almost missed the grab bar because she was craning about, trying in vain for a glimpse of his face.

She followed a burly woman into the locker room. Aping the woman’s actions, she collapsed her suit, stuffing it and her *cache-sexe* into the helmet along with the cheap set of arm and leg bands she’d been issued, and dumped the lot into a cleaning chute. Then she kicked into the showers. She washed with a soaped towel, rinsed with a wet one, and kicked back into the lockers.

The locker room was a pentagonal tube, with lockers on all the walls. Rebel floated among the laughing, chattering women, and couldn’t remember which locker was hers. But the memory was there, even if she couldn’t access it. Her body knew what to do. She let it go where it wished, and came to a locker that opened at her touch. Inside were her clothes and work gear, freshly cleaned.

Anchoring herself in a foot ring, she donned *cache-sexe* and travel bands. Then she slipped into the knee rings and popped up a mirror. That same disconcerting, button-nosed face stared at her from her reflection.

All about her, women were dressing and reprogramming themselves, painting their faces to match their new personas. The room was full of marilyns and pollyannas, the occasional zelda, even a suzy vacuum. A

xaviera, seeing her frozen in indecision, paused from painting her lips vulval pink and proffered her wafer.

“Here you go, honey. Open wide and give it a try.”

Rebel blushed and looked away, and the women hooted with laughter. She snatched up her things and fled, her face as naked as the day she was born.

* * *

Outside, a man grabbed her elbow, and without even thinking, she punched him in the stomach. He doubled over into his cloak and floated away backwards, a perfectly amazed look on his face.

Then Rebel saw the stars painted across the man’s face and realized that this was the stranger she had called.

Flustered, she reached out to steady him, but he had already snagged a grab bar and was watching her with a closed and wary expression.

“Listen, I’m sorry,” Rebel said. “I didn’t mean to hit you. I’m sorry I even called you in the first place. Why don’t we just shake hands and go our separate ways?”

The stranger regarded her steadily. “You’re not Eucrasia anymore, are you?”

She met his gaze. His eyes were green. “No.”

Briefly, the man’s face went blank, as if he were arguing with himself. Then it cleared and he said, “Look. I live in King Jonamon’s court, Tank Fourteen. That’s probably the best place you could go, if you’re on the run from something. There’s a couple of shacks empty. Come with me, and I’ll stake you to the first week’s rent.”

“Why would you do something like that for me?” Rebel asked suspiciously. “Just who are you, anyway?”

“I’m... an old acquaintance. A fellow-worker.” He tapped behind one ear, and Rebel saw a small red abrasion circle there. “We persona bums have to stick together, right?”

“I...” Rebel retreated into the folds of her cloak. “Look. I’m sorry. It’s just that people have been taking a lot of

interest in my case lately. I didn't ask for any of it. I don't want any of it."

"Okay, then." He shrugged and turned away.

Something desperate came tearing up from deep within Rebel then, and she cried, "Wait!" The man turned back. That cautious face. She colored, because she had no idea why she had cried out. To cover, she said, "Maybe I was a little hasty."

Another instantaneous shift of expression, and the man laughed heartily. "You crack me up, Sunshine."

"Don't call me that!"

"All right. Eucrasia, then."

Her face felt cold and hard. "The name is Rebel," she said. "Rebel Elizabeth Mudlark."

"Wyeth." A lopsided grin and a shrug said that that was all the name he had.

* * *

They took a jitney to the tank towns, crammed hip and knee with twenty others, almost too tight to breathe. It carried them to the shadow of the Londongrad cannister, where a cluster of fifty-year-old air tanks floated. They were enormous things, each large enough to hold an entire cannister city's atmosphere under pressure, and retro-fitted with crude airlock and docking facilities. Faint traces of rust edged the locks, where the long whisper of oxygen leakage ghosted over metal.

"Jeez, it's hot in here," Rebel grumbled. "I should've just gone solo in my suit."

"What's that?" Wyeth asked. Then, when she repeated herself, "Tank towns don't have magnetic cushions. We're talking heavy-duty slums here."

The jitney pilot slammed into a dock and bawled, "Tank Fourteen!" and they squeezed out.

The light was dim at the locks and murky beyond. They

swam up a crowded corridor, through ramshackle hutches that were no more than pipework frames with corrugated tin sheets for walls. The air was fetid with rotting garbage, stale wine, and human sweat, with a sweet undersmell of honeysuckle. Children shrieked at play, and there was a constant yabber-yabber-yabber of voices. Bees hummed as they moved mazily among the flowery vines that overgrew everything. A green rope led up the corridor, and they followed this handway, occasionally grabbing it to twist clear of an oncomer, until it was crossed by an orange rope. They took this deeper into the tank.

A raver came down the rope, and people shrank away from her. Wyeth grabbed Rebel and pulled her out of the way. They slammed noisily against a tin wall, and then the woman was gone and they proceeded up the rope.

Now and then light spilled from a doorway, or a string of lanterns lined a cluster of informal shops and bars, places where people offered alcohol or other goods from their own homes. Everywhere the vines were thick and lush, with frequent biofluorescent blooms. There were sections where the flowers provided the only illumination. “This is awful,” Rebel said.

Wyeth peered about, as if trying to detect what flaw she saw in his world. “How so?”

“It’s like a parody of my home. I mean, if you know the biological arts, there’s no excuse for this kind of squalor. Back home, the cities are...”

“Are what?” Wyeth asked.

But the hard, undeniable truth was that she could not remember. Not a thing. She tried to recall the name of her city, the faces of her friends, her childhood, the kind of life she’d led, and none of it would come. Her past was an impressionistic blur, all bright colors and emotions, with no fine detail. “I don’t know,” she admitted.

“Sunshine, your answers are about as revealing as your silence.” Wyeth touched her arm. “Here we are!” He

grabbed the rope to stop himself, flipped over, and kicked through an opening between hutches. Rebel followed.

A skeletally thin old man leaned out of a shanty window into the entranceway. “Hallo, Jonamon. How’s the kidneys?” Wyeth said. He was wearing his laughing face. “Got a new tenant for you.”

“Hallo yourself.” The old man’s skin was fishbelly white, and red blotches ran over his bald pate. “Rent’s due tomorrow.” Then he noticed Rebel, and pursed his lips suspiciously. “You the religious type, girlie?”

Rebel shook her head.

“Then where’s your paint?” He jabbed a bony finger at the abrasion circle behind Rebel’s ear, and said to Wyeth, “You put the mark on her! Don’t allow none of that shit in my court. I run a clean place here—no drunks, no whores, no burn cases, and no reprogramming. I don’t care what kind of excuse you got, God don’t like—”

“Hold on, hold on—nobody’s reprogramming anybody!” Wyeth said. “What are you ragging on me for? The lady’s right here, you can ask her for yourself.”

“Be damned if I won’t.” The old man swam out the window, chasing them into the courtyard. Then he grabbed the side of his hutch, muttered, “Damn! Forgot the book,” and darted back through the window.

The courtyard was just a large, open space fronted on by some dozen or so hutches. Three ropes crisscrossed the area, tied to outcroppings of pipe. Here and there people clung to them, chatting or working on private tasks. A young man sat wedged in a doorway, playing guitar.

“I’m sorry about this,” Wyeth said. “Old Jonamon is a terrible snoop, even worse than most landlords. He was a rock prospector seventy years back, one of the last, and he thinks that gives him the right to pester you half to death. If you don’t feel like facing him, I think I can put him off for a day or so. That’d give us time to find you a place nearby.”

“Actually,” Rebel had been chewing thoughtfully on a thumbnail; now she spat out what she had gnawed off, “I think I would like to talk about it. All these weird things have been happening to me, and I haven’t had the chance to sort them out. And I guess I owe you some kind of explanation too.” She frowned. “Only maybe I’d better not. I mean, there are people out there looking for me. If word got out—”

Wyeth flashed a wide, froggish grin. “There are no secrets in a tank town. But there are no facts either. You tell your story to Jonamon, and in ten minutes the whole court will know it. Inside an hour everyone within five courts will know—but they’ll have it a little wrong. Half the people in the tanks are on the run from something. Your story will melt into theirs, a detail here, a name there, a plot twist from somewhere else. By tomorrow all the tank will know the story, but it will have mutated into something you wouldn’t recognize yourself. Nobody’s ever going to trace those stories back to you. There are too many of them, and not a one that’s worth a damn.”

“Well, I—”

Jonamon swooped into the court, a scrawny old bird in a tattered cloak, pushing a book before him. It was three hands wide and a fist thick, with one red cover and one black. Opening it from the black side, he said, “The Lord Jesus despised reprogramming. ‘And behold the herd of swine ran violently down a steep place into the sea and perished in the waters.’ That’s from Matthew.”

Wyeth looked like he was having trouble holding his laughter in. “Jonamon, that’s the third time this week you’ve quoted the Gadarene swine at me.”

“Krishna don’t love demons neither,” the old man snapped. He flipped the book over, red side up, and thrust it at Rebel. “Swear on the Gita you ain’t been reprogrammed. That’ll be good enough for me.”

“Maybe I’d better tell my story first,” Rebel said. “Then

I'll swear it's true afterward. That way you'll know what I'm swearing to."

She shifted to a more central spot, sitting cross-legged in the air, the rope gripped in one foot. Then she wrapped her cloak in storytelling folds (inwardly marveling at her own dexterity) so that one arm and breast were covered and the other arm and breast free. Seeing her thus, people came out from their shanties or shifted places on the ropes so they could hear.

She began:

"I was dead—but they wouldn't tell me that. I was lying in a hospital bed, paralyzed, unable to remember a thing. And they wouldn't tell me why. All I knew was that something was wrong, and nobody would answer any of my questions..."

* * *

When she was done, Jonamon took her oath on his book and shook his head. "Well, I'll be fucked if that don't beat anything *I* ever heard."

"Mmmm." Wyeth's face was grim and stony, lost in thought. It had a humorless, almost brutal set to it. He looked up suddenly and glared around at the listeners. "What are you staring at? Show's over. Go away!" They scattered.

Rebel shivered. He looked an entirely different man now—a thug, all suspicion and potential violence.

Jonamon laid a hand on her knee and said, "You watch yourself, young lady. Deutsche Nakasone is a nasty bunch, they'll do what they want with you. They just don't give a fuck." She drew away from him.

"That's every gesellschaft, old man," Wyeth said. "That's inherent in the corporate structure."

"You think so, eh? Let me show you something."

Jonamon hurried off to his shack and returned with a cloth-wrapped package. "Maybe I'm just another old man

with calcium depletion now.” He began slowly unfolding the cloth. “I’m stuck here nowadays, my bones would snap like breaksticks if I set foot in full gravity anymore. But I wasn’t always like this. I used to own my own corporation. Hell, I used to *be* my own corporation.”

The ropehangers had come edging back to listen. One of them, a lean young man with rude boy paint, caught Rebel’s eye and flashed a smile. Cute little thing. He laughed, and Jonamon glared at him.

“Laugh if you want. Individuals could incorporate back then. You can’t imagine how it felt, having all the legal protection of a corporation to yourself. It was like being a little tin god.” He sighed. “I was one of the last, wiped out by the Corporate Reform Act. I was a rock miner, maybe Wyeth here mentioned that to you. A prospector. When the Act came along, I had claims on a few hundred rocks, a real valuable inventory, worth a fortune back then, and even more now. But with the reforms, I had to liquidate. I entered into negotiations with a number of concerns, finally signed a preliminary letter of intent with Deutsche Nakasone. Look.” He held up the unwrapped package. It was a formal holographic portrait of a line of corporate functionaries looking serious for the camera. The young Jonamon stood in the center, a sharp-chinned man with an avaricious cast to his face.

“This was taken the day before the Act went into effect. Right after this, the president and I retired to a private office to settle the last few details and sign the agreement. You never saw anyone so nice and polite in your life. Did I want a drink? Don’t mind if I do. Would I like to screw? Hell, she was kind of cute. Then she asked if I wanted to try out a new program they had. Made it sound real nice. I said sure.

“They was just getting into wetware then. Just recent bought up a batch of patents when Blaupunkt went belly-up. So anyway, the president puts the inductor band around my head and turns the damn thing on. Whooooee!

That was one hell of a ride, I'll tell you. Even today, I blush to think on it. Imagine all the sex and pleasure you can take just slamming into you again and again, so intense you can't hardly take it, and you want it to stop, only... not quite yet. Just a little bit longer before it becomes unbearable. Can you imagine that? Shit, you can't imagine it at all."

"So what happened?" Rebel asked.

"What happened was somebody turned it off. Wow, did I feel awful! Kind of hungry and achy and thirsty all at once. My head was pounding, and I must've lost half the free water in my body.

"The president had put her clothes back on and left, a long time back. There was a couple of corporate guards giving me the hairy eyeball. 'What's happening?' I asked them.

"They told me that the Reform Act had just gone into effect, and they didn't need me anymore. Then they gave me the bum's rush, and I was never in *that* office again in my life, let me tell you.

"You see what happened, don't you? They'd kept me programmed up until the Act went through and I didn't legally own my claims anymore. And because I'd signed that letter of intent, they all belonged to Deutsche Nakasone now. They never paid me a damn thing for them either. I went to the lawyers and they said it's all legal. Or rather, to prove it *wasn't* legal, I'd have to be a corporation myself. And I wasn't, anymore."

After a long silence, he said, "Well, it's all to the best, I imagine. A young man thinks with his gonads. An old man sees things more spiritual. I made my peace with God, and I take my solace from the Bible Gita now."

Rebel yawned then, and Wyeth said, "I think it's time you turned in."

He showed her to a vacant hutch. It had room enough

for two people to sit and talk, or for one to stretch out and sleep. There was a bit of wire by the doorframe, so she could tie up her helmet, and four looped hammock strings to sleep in. Nothing more.

“Best break out your rebreather,” Wyeth said. She looked at him blankly. “From your helmet. Ventilation’s poor in this corner of the court, and your waste gases can build up while you sleep. Keep your mouthpiece in, and you can avoid waking up with a bad headache.”

“Okay,” she said, and he kicked away. There was no window, and hanging her cloak over the doorway filled the hut with darkness. She stuffed her things into her helmet and slipped into the hammock strings. Hanging suspended, she bit down on the rebreather. Her breath sounded loud and slow within her skull.

The outside noises were muffled within the hut, but constant. Music and faraway argument blended into each other. Buried deep within this human beehive, Rebel felt painfully alone and isolated. From somewhere distant she heard a dull *clank-clank, clank-clank*, someone hammering on the pipes to signal a neighbor. She had heard (though she couldn’t remember when or where) that the constellations of courts within the tanks had all been put up helter-skelter, pipes mated to existing pipes, forming monkey-bar tangles with no plan or formal structure. Only the lack of gravity kept it all from collapsing. But occasionally the stresses of everyday living—people slamming against their hatches, kicking off from them, grabbing ropes tied to the frames—would cause whole groupings of court structures to shift. Torque forces would slowly swing the hatches together, crushing entire neighborhoods in a scream of buckling metal. And then the survivors would scavenge the rubble to build back into the space thus opened.

Rebel was so tired she couldn’t sleep. Lying afloat in her hut, restless and jumpy, she felt so lonely and awful she wanted to die. She twisted and turned in the hammock

strings, but no position seemed comfortable. She was as lost as a child away from home for the first time, cut loose from security and surrounded by hostile forces against which she had no defense.

Finally she could take it no longer. Throwing on her clothes, she darted across the court to Wyeth's hut. He'd talk to her, she was sure. A deft grab on one of the ropes flipped her around and brought her to a dead stop just before his door. It was covered with his cloak. She was about to rattle his wall when she heard his voice within. Was he with someone? A little self-consciously, she floated closer to eavesdrop.

"She's trouble," Wyeth mumbled. "Deutsche Nakasone wants her bad, and anyone who gets in the way is going to be hurt... So there's risk! She could be an enormous help to us... Which 'she' are you talking about anyway, Eucrasia or Rebel?... Go with the current occupant, that's always the easiest course. Whoever comes out on top... I wouldn't mind getting on top of her... Oh, get serious! The point is that if we cut a deal with her, we're risking everything we've built so far. It's an all or nothing gamble." There was a pause, and then Wyeth said, "Risking everything! That's just great. We're risking a half-hour shanty in the slums, some cockeyed plans, and our perfect obscurity. That's it. What's the use of saying we're going up against Earth, if the first good opportunity that comes along, we just sit here on our thumbs? I say either we stand up and be counted, or dissolve the whole thing right now as a bad job. Any argument?"

The voice stopped, and Rebel drew back from the door. He's talking about me, she thought. And he's crazy. Either he's crazy or he's something I don't know about that's probably worse. A word floated up from Eucrasia's past. Tetrad. It was a kind of new mind. But that was all she could remember about it. Her body trembled. She wanted very much to turn around and retreat into her hutch.

No, she thought, I won't be a coward.

She rattled the side of Wyeth's hutch, and a second later he poked out his head. "I heard you talking about me," she said.

Wyeth took down his cloak and wrapped it about himself. Rebel got a glimpse of his naked body and reddened. "How much of what I said did you understand?" he asked.

She shook her head helplessly. "You're making that face again."

Wyeth looked surprised. Then he grinned, and his harsh expression was instantly and totally gone. "I was trying to make up my minds. You're something of a dilemma for me, Sunshine."

"So I gather."

"Look, I'm only in partial agreement what to do at this point. Let's both sleep on it. We can discuss this thing better when we're rested, okay?"

Rebel considered it. "Okay."

Back in her hutch, she lay half awake for the longest time, thinking wide, empty thoughts. There was a knife fight in the next court, two young bloods with rude boy programs, cursing and swearing at each other as they jockeyed for position. A young couple were going at it hot and heavy not far away, separated from her hut by only an arm's length of nightflowers. A baby began to cry and was shushed by its mother.

Closeby, a peeper frog cried out for a mate.

If you floated right up against them, the iron pipes and tin walls had a distinct odor. It disappeared as you moved away, but was strong up close. There was nothing else quite like that smell. It must stay with slum dwellers, Rebel thought. No matter how far they might get from their tanks, a smell like that would stay with them for the rest of their lives.

3 STORM FRONT

Someone kicked her wall in passing, and Rebel awoke. Blearily, she dressed and floated out. Of the three sometime restaurants in the court, only the one marked “Myrtle’s Joint” had its window open.

She rapped for service and an iguana scurried away and burrowed into the vines. Myrtle’s face flashed out of the gloom with a quick smile. Rebel yawned and woke up a little more, and said, “I’d like to buy some food.”

“What meal?”

“Breakfast.”

Myrtle ducked down and rummaged about. “I got a mango. I could slice it up with a little chutney. There’s a dab of spiced rice that’s not too old. And beer.”

They haggled up a price, and Rebel took a place on the rope as Myrtle put breakfast together. “Hey. My man told me about how you used to own a corporation and all. I just wanted to say I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay.” A flock of naked children darted into the court, shrieking and laughing. For an instant the air was full of them. Then one spotted a gap between hutches and darted through. The others followed and were gone, as quick and sudden as minnows.

Rebel ate slowly. Finally she licked a last bit of chutney from a knuckle and returned the empty Belhaven tube to Myrtle. “Um, this is kind of embarrassing, but how do I find the—?”

“Orange rope downgrain to blue, blue upgrain to red, that’ll take you to the shell.” Myrtle laughed. “From there you can just follow your nose.”

* * *

The community toilets were overgrown with masses of nightbloom. The leaves rustled and waved in the wind from the airstacks. But under the flowery scent was a darker smell of human waste and of body gases. She swam in the ladies entrance and took a seat on the communal bench. It was cool here. The air flowing down the holes was enough to hold her on. Resting her elbows on the grab bars, she read the graffiti. There were the usual EARTH FRIEND and NEWMINDS/FREEMINDS scrawls, with an INDIVIDUALITY DOES NOT EXIST written in one hand and SPEAK FOR YOURSELF scratched beneath it in another. The only really interesting graffito was EVEN YOUR SHIT BELONGS TO THE RICH.

Well, it made sense. Considering that almost none of the food eaten here was grown within the tank. The toilets had to be emptied to keep the tank towners from literally strangling in their own wastes. The nightblooms helped keep the air fresh, but *somebody* had to replenish the oxygen that was lost in tiny gasps every time the locks swung open and shut. Even a drastically oversimplified ecology like this needed to be looked after.

The entire Kluster, in fact, was an extremely loose system, leaking air and garbage from every pore. To Rebel's eyes, it was criminally wasteful how much oxygen and water vapor, reaction mass and consumer trash must be lost to the vacuum every day. Any attempt to tighten the system had to be applauded.

Still, it was humbling to think that the tank towns were being maintained by people who saw them simply as fertilizer farms.

She was leaving the toilets when a familiar voice hailed her from the cluster of commercial data ports next door. Wyeth, helmet on arm, waved and kicked up to join her. "I'm just about to leave for work," he said. "But I've cloned my briefcase for you." He gave her what looked like a hand-sized plate of smokey glass and felt like amber, only cool. Small colored lights danced in its depths. Rebel

touched one, and they all shifted. The device felt right in her hand. She felt a lot better having it. “You operate it by—”

“I know how to work this.” She ran a fast recursive, and schemata appeared in the air over the plate. It was the only skill she possessed worth having, and she... but that was Eucrasia’s though, and Rebel suppressed it. “What have you got in there for me?”

“Your history.”

She looked at him.

“I made a quick raid on Deutsche Nakasone for their unclassified data on Rebel Elizabeth Mudlark.” He touched the plate and two tiers of yellow lights lined up against the right-hand edge. “As you can see, there’s not much. A fast-edited history put together for publicity purposes, I’d guess. I thought you’d be interested.”

“Yes.” She closed her hands around the briefcase, held it to her stomach. “Won’t that lead them to this tank, though? Won’t they be looking for this kind of data request?”

“I don’t see how,” Wyeth said. “Sandoz Lasernet is very big on equipment optimization. They keep their trunk lines flickering on and off constantly. In the fifteen seconds my call took, it was probably routed through half the cities in the Kluster. Following it would be like trying to track a feather in a methane storm. You’d need a program with full sentience and a lot of power to do it.”

Eucrasia’s memories were fading quickly, so that the beginning of Wyeth’s explanation had seemed childishly oversimplified and the ending almost opaque. “Won’t they have a sentient program on the job then?”

“After what happened to Earth?” Wyeth laughed. Then he said, “Listen, I’ve really got to be going. Enjoy. I’ll see you when I get back.”

* * *

Rebel wandered back to Jonamon's court, the briefcase in her cloak pocket as thick and massive as a bad conscience. She wanted to view it, to see what it could tell her about herself, and yet she didn't.

While she was perched on a rope thinking, the young rude boy she had noticed eyeing her the other day emerged from the vines between two hutches. His torso was mahogany dark and very long, and for an instant she thought he was naked. Then his orange *cache-sexe* appeared. He held something in one hand, and with the other reached for a cloak that had been left tied to a hutch frame.

He noticed her.

For a moment neither moved. Then the boy fastened his cloak about his shoulders and walked up the rope toward her, gripping the line between his toes. He smiled and showed her what was in his hand.

"Honeycomb." His dark eyes sparkled. He cocked a hip slightly, bringing his muscles into sharper delineation, and bit into the wax. His mouth and chin glistened. "Want some? My name's Maxwell."

"I can't," Rebel said helplessly. Brushing open her cloak, she dug out the briefcase. She held it forward, two-handed. "I've got to listen to some stuff."

Maxwell took the briefcase and, holding it upside-down, solemnly examined the lights. "Listen to it in my hut. I'll feed you honey while you work."

"All right."

* * *

She wedged the briefcase between wall and pipe as Maxwell pinned up their cloaks. A touch converted it to spoken command. She waited until the hutch was dark, then said, "Please turn on." Light blossomed.

The holography opened on a shot of Eros Kluster Traffic Control. The EKTC station was shaped like a barbell and

revolved slowly within a maelstrom of traffic holograms. “How’s this?” Maxwell asked. The image rippled over his body as he swam to her.

“Mmmm.” Rebel skipped the scene forward.

They were in the interior now, a hemispherical transparent hull crisscrossed by thin catwalks between work stations. The traffic techs looked upset. One man bounded toward an empty terminal, not bothering with the catwalks. He left a smudge of bare footprints across the starry floor.

“That can’t be—” someone said. Rebel backtracked the program.

“Open up,” Maxwell said. He popped a bit of honeycomb into her mouth. Sweet.

An operator gave a long, low whistle. “Look what just came up on visual!” His supervisor was at his side at once, a big woman with a bulldog jaw. “Now that *ought* to be a lightsail,” the man said. “Spectroanalysis gives us a solar signature, ever so slightly blueshifted. But it’s not registered, and it’s headed right down our throats.”

“Velocity?”

“Hard to say.” The tech’s fingers flickered, coaxing up data. “If it’s a standard-size sail, though, and assuming a median range load of five kilotons, then it’ll rip through the Kluster sometime tomorrow.”

“Shit!” The supervisor pushed him from his station.

“Grab something vacant and restructure the programming to give me more capacity. Take it off of, um, the holos. Let them drift a bit. Set them to correct only once every point-zero-three seconds, okay?”

The operator bounded toward an empty terminal, not bothering with the catwalks. He left a smudge of bare footprints across the starry floor.

“That can’t be—” the supervisor said. “No, that doesn’t make any sense at all. That’s not an industrial delivery.”

“More honey?”

“Mmm.” Maxwell’s fingers lingered on her lips, and she kissed them absently.

Another tech said, “We’re having trouble estimating mass. There’s something screwy about the way it’s slowing down.” Rebel stopped motion, and asked the briefcase to give her the terminal display. It appeared, a chart in seven colors, showing every pinprick of light as it appeared from the EKTC station. It pulsed, and the lights shifted to an earlier configuration. A speck of light, circled in red, raced sunward, from beyond Jupiter. A sidebar identified it as **COMET: COMMERCIAL CARRIER (LUMBERED TREE FARM).**

The EKTC system was crammed with economic warfare programs. Reflexively, it showed the positions of other lumbered comets moving into the system. It also showed a pod of young comets climbing up from the Sun, their tails of ionized gases winking out as new vegetation covered their surfaces. An operator wiped them off the screen.

“What a pig. You’ve got honey on your chin.”

“Hey, I’m busy, okay?”

“Hold still and I’ll lick it off.”

Now a sidebar appeared with the comet’s registry. It was a small, uncolonized comet, carrying a lumbered first growth of some seventy gigatons of oak, teak, and mahogany hybrids. The trees had been grown over one long swing down to the sun and back out to the edge of the Oort Cloud. There, archipelago lumberjacks had coppiced the comet, leaving roots intact for a second growth, and then artificially accelerated it for its trek back into the System. Eros Kluster speculated heavily in timber, but this was not a local deal. The freight was due to Ceres Kluster as per a contract signed some two decades ago. Since Eros had no financial interest in it, the traffic computer had never before seen fit to bring it to human attention.

Maxwell followed a trail of dribbles down the side of Rebel's neck, toward her breasts. She giggled and pushed him away. "That tickles."

The display shifted to fast replay. The comet rushed down on Jupiter. It dipped into the giant planet's gravity well, was slewed around, and emerged on a new orbit. It dumped velocity in the process, shifting to a shorter ellipse that would take it within the orbit of Mercury, and then out again to its client Kluster. The readout shifted momentarily to show the Inner System with old and new orbits displayed as dotted yellow lines.

"How about this? Does this tickle too?"

"No. That's nice."

Midway between Jupiter and Eros, the comet's brightness quadrupled. There was an explosive flare of light, which quickly fell behind the comet—a lightsail unfurling. It bobbed slightly on the solar wind, tacked gracefully. The computer ran a projected course for it. It was headed straight into the heart of Eros Kluster.

Rebel switched back to live action. "Go on," the supervisor said.

"The sail is tacked away from the sun. So the drag ought to be easy to calculate. But it's slowing down too fast for anything I've ever seen. Even a single kiloton shipment ought to—"

"Could the treehangers be dumping some kind of bomb on us?" the supervisor muttered to herself. "No, that's stupid. Maybe they— wait. Try calculating the rate of deceleration for a shortsail with a payload of a third of a ton."

Fingers danced. "Damn! It works."

"That's it, then. One human in a vacuum suit, plus the mass of a frame, controlling mechanism and cables. I'd say that what we've got here—" she tapped the screen—"is someone using a small lightsail as a drogue chute."

“Beg pardon?”

“A drogue chute. Like a parachute—um, it’s hard to explain. Just contact Perimeter Defense and tell them we’ve got a space cadet that needs rescuing. Dump the whole thing in their laps.”

The scene shifted to the exterior of a Perimeter Defense multipurpose cruiser.

“Hey,” Rebel said. “I don’t think you’re going to find any honey down there.”

“Want to bet?” Maxwell was kissing and nuzzling her belly. Now he slowly moved his hands up her thighs and even more slowly pulled down her *cache-sexe*.

“Please stop,” Rebel murmured. The briefcase shut itself off. In the dim light seeping through the ill-fitting edges of the tin walls, she saw that Maxwell was already naked.

And interested.

Definitely interested.

*** * ***

They made love twice, and then she sent Maxwell out with her bracelet to bring back lunch. He returned with a huge meal and no change. They ate, and then somehow they were making love again. It just seemed to happen. At last she had to say, “No, really. I’ve got to listen to this.”

She flicked the briefcase back on.

The multipurpose cruiser had matched speeds with the lightsail. A dozen Perimeter Defense employees launched themselves at the rigging. Clumsily, surely, they cut away the harness, drew in the sail, and disentangled an unmoving vacuum-suited figure.

Back inside the cruiser, workers swarmed about the vacuum suit. It was worn and frayed; crystalized patching ooze covered several small cuts. “Look,” a medtech said.

He pointed to a fine crazing of lines in the visor. “Poor bugger miscalculated acceleration stress. The internal organs are probably mush.” He turned off the coldpack

unit and somebody else yanked off the helmet.

Acceleration jelly gone liquescent sloshed onto the deck, revealing a woman's face. It was angular, with high cheekbones. The hair, short and wet, was a mousy blond. Her skin was a bloated and unhealthy white, almost blue in places. There were small globs of jelly caught in her nostrils. A tech wiped them away, and the woman took a sudden, gasping breath. She shivered and opened her eyes. It was Rebel Elizabeth Mudlark, in her own body.

A trickle of blood came from the corner of her mouth. She grinned weakly. "Hey, sports," she said. Then she looked puzzled. "I feel kind of sick."

Then she died.

Maxwell was not looking when it happened. He was rummaging in a small corner chest for body jewelry. When he found a piece he liked, he'd try it on, preening for her. Now he turned, a string of pearls about his waist. "You like it?" He swiveled his hips making the string spin. "It takes a good body to wear pearls."

The hologram drew slowly back, the scurrying Perimeter Defense people growing smaller as they vainly tried to revive the body. "Coldpack revival shock," a medtech muttered. "Damage to brain tissue complicated by cumulative radiation damage. Compression, shear, and tidal effects to liver, pancreas, heart..." Her voice droned on monotonously as she read the diagnostics into the record. Someone else put a cryonics unit over the head and flash-froze the brain. Later, the personality and surface memories could be teased out with supercooling induction techniques, if the traffic investigators needed an interview.

I died, Rebel thought flatly. She remembered it happening very clearly now, the faces bent over her, their concerned expressions and the way it had all drawn away into whiteness as...

The pearls orbited Maxwell's waist like a ring of

satellites. His navel danced at their center.

Now, as the Perimeter Defense employees slowed and the clamor of voices fell to a murmur, Rebel's name rose in black Gothic letters. It dominated the scene for a beat, then burst into sudden, bright flame. When the flames died down, a new Rebel Mudlark rose from them like a phoenix.

The new Rebel was an idealized version of the original, taller and thinner, with spectacular muscle structure. She stood wide-legged, fists on hips, and laughed self-confidently. The holo drew back. Green dyson worlds floated behind her, and she was surrounded by a ring of cringing admirers. One reached a trembling hand out for her, and she kicked him right in the mouth.

The words available soon scrolled up.

“Turn it off,” Rebel whispered desperately. “Oh God, turn that damn thing off.” The memory of her death burned in her brain. She wouldn't be able to forget it again.

Maxwell picked up the briefcase, looked at it blankly, touched a glowing red dot. The room went dark. “Hold me,” Rebel said. “I don't want to do anything, just... hold me, please hold me.”

She floated in the dark, flooded with misery. She'd felt like this when her mother had died in the accident at the Kluster refineries. Her pain had caught her by surprise then, because she'd hated the cold bitch. You'll never hurt me again, she had thought angrily, and yet she'd still felt abandoned and desolate. She hugged Maxwell to her, like a big, sexless cuddly toy.

Vague shapes swam in her vision, threatening to coalesce into a stretched and bloated skull. She'd seen death's face before, as a child. Her first time solo in a vacuum suit, she had blundered across a laser cable and shorted out half her suit. Her visor went black and her rebreather stopped. Floating alone and sightless, gasping

and choking, she had suddenly realized that she was going to die. And in that horrified instant, she saw a face before her, bone-white and distorted, with empty eye sockets, small dark nostrils, and black, gaping mouth. She threw her head back and the face lurched at her, and she was abruptly hauled in by a Traffic Control employee who injected an air line through the skin of her suit. It had only been her reflection, lit by a lone failsafed helmet monitor light.

Maxwell gently slid a hand between her legs and moved them apart. He started to enter her. Upset and distracted as she was, she almost let him do it. It would be the easy thing, the path of least resistance. But then the Rebel persona asserted itself, and she shoved him away. She would not let herself be taken advantage of.

“Back off there, bud! Who gave *you* permission to do that?”

Maxwell looked bewildered. “But—”

“You don’t listen too good, do you? I said I didn’t want to do anything, and I by God meant it.” As she raged at him, Maxwell backed away, fell into a fighting crouch, straightened, crouched again. His hands fisted and unfisted. His face twisted with conflicting programmed urges. “What are you, some kind of machine? Willing sex isn’t good enough for you?” Clumsily, Maxwell threw a slap at Rebel’s face. She batted his hand away contemptuously and tried to punch him in the stomach. He flinched back, and his string broke, pearls exploding in all directions. They bounced off the tin walls like hail.

“Just get the fuck out of here!”

Maxwell was backed into a corner, quivering. In a tiny voice he said, “But this is my place.”

For a long moment Rebel glared at him scornfully. Then she laughed, and with a kind of rough good will, reached out to tousle his hair. “You’re kind of useless, you know that?”

“It all depends on what you want,” Maxwell said, eyes averted sullenly. But his tension was gone. He began gathering up the pearls that still bounced about the room, nabbing them out of the air and holding them in one hand. “I mean, I can fight just as good as I sex, but I got to have clear signals. You can’t expect me to—hey, what’s that?”

“What’s what?”

“Listen!” They fell silent. In the distance was a dull *clank-clank-clank* of people hammering on the pipes. It went on and on, growing in volume as more and more people to one end of the tank town hammered in unison. Rebel touched a frame pipe and felt it vibrating in sympathy. Outside, the constant murmur of voices died.

“It’s the heat! God damn. We got to get away.” Maxwell let go of the pearls and grabbed for his cloak.

“Get away? Where? What are you talking about?”

Maxwell was frantically struggling into his clothes.

“You’ve never been in a raid before? They start by grabbing the airlock. That takes maybe a dozen jackboots. And they bring in a few crates of programming units and these enormous stacks of arrest programs.”

“Arrest programs?”

“Yeah. Then they move out from the locks in a long line. They arrest maybe one out of five people they nab for failure to cooperate and sentence them to like six hours enforcement duty. Program ’em up on the spot, give them their orders, and send them out to bring in more to be programmed. They spread out like a storm. Before long, you got jackboots everywhere.”

In her mind’s eye, Rebel saw the police expanding through the tank in an ever-widening cordon, swelling their numbers as they went, doubling every few minutes, like an explosion of yeast culture through a warm medium.

“But what are they looking for?”

“What the fuck does it matter? You want them to get

hold of you?” Maxwell untwisted a corner wire holding on the back wall and shoved the tin to show a thin, dark line of weeds. “Look, worse comes to worst, we can slip out back. Nothing there but vines. Only don’t move around much, ’cause I got a beehive back there. I don’t want you disturbing them.” He took Rebel’s hand and pulled her out into the court. “What we’ve got to do is slip past the storm front. See, they’ll be spread out thin. Questioning everyone, right? Once we get by them, we’re clear.”

The court was empty. They swam to the gateway. “Does this sort of thing happen here often?” Rebel asked.

“Naw. Once a month, tops.”

* * *

They paused at the gateway and looked down the corridor. Doors opening onto it had been shut and windows tied down. It was crowded with people fleeing the jackboots. Suddenly there came a babble of voices from upgrain, and people hesitated, colliding in midair as those ahead of them turned back abruptly.

“What the hell—?”

“Keep moving, you idiots!”

“No, no! Turnback!”

A raver came down the rope, eyes full-mad and staring, globules of drool spewing from his mouth. He was a scrawny old man with long grey beard, his cloak in tatters. He raged as he came, tearing with insane strength at whoever got close. One of his legs was broken, and it waved fluidly behind him. It was clear he did not notice the pain.

“Sweet Krishna!” somebody wailed, and floated back from the raver, trailing large red spheres of blood. The corridor was filling with trashing, panicky people. Somebody pushed past Rebel into the courtyard, and then two more. “Come on,” Rebel said worriedly, “we’ve got to get away from here.”

But then there was a rush on the gate, and Rebel was borne back from the corridor while Maxwell went tumbling forward. A fat man jammed his pink face right up against her, shouting hysterically. Rebel grabbed a rope and pulled herself free of the crush of people, and then the rope broke and she slammed into a tin wall.

Shrieking voices rose in demon chorus. Rebel clawed across the fronts of the hutches to Maxwell's and climbed inside. It took her only a second to slip out the back. She shoved the wall into place, and was hidden in the vines.

It was dark between courts. Here and there a nightflower glowed, a dull fuzz of light that revealed nothing. The vines were wet and slimy. Floating alone and sightless, like a traveler among the final stars at the end of the universe, Eucrasia's claustrophobia rose up within her.

It started as a tingling up the base of her spine, then spread until her entire body itched. She became aware of her own breath. The outside noises were muffled here, a dull wash of voices like the white noise of surf, and her breath sounded rough and raspy. She couldn't get enough air in her lungs. Her head swam dizzily, and she started breathing through her mouth.

Rebel's nose almost touched the back of the wall. The smell of metal was strong. Her skin crawled from the wall's closeness, and she drew back her head. That felt better. Slowly, almost by compulsion, she began pulling herself forward, through the vines. A honeybee burned past her ear, and she froze, afraid of bumping into its hive.

But stopping brought back the claustrophobia, and she moved forward again, occasionally reaching out a hand to touch the backs of the huts to keep from losing her way. Finally she came to a place where the tin was not. It was a gap between hutches, maybe even the one Maxwell had emerged from earlier. She crept into it.

Light slowly grew. Rebel paused only when she could

just barely see into the court, buried an arm's length into the vines. She could bear being enclosed, so long as there was light. She drew her hood about her face, peering through the merest slit. Then she held herself motionless, like an old pike lying craftily in wait among the weeds.

The court was full of people looking for an exit that was not there. For every one who realized that and left, two more came in. They pushed and shoved at each other, and even exchanged blows in their blind flight.

Then the gateway filled with jackboots. They were a motley bunch, in all color of cloak and even work garb. One woman wore a welder's apron, though she seemed to have lost her mask. All had red stripes down the center of their faces, and fierce, merciless expressions. Three of them grabbed a young boy and fit a programmer across his forehead. He thrashed and then went passive. A fourth held a piece of paper to his face, and he shook his head. He was shoved out the gateway, and another civilian was seized.

One of the processors was called away, and the next civilian questioned was programmed police. Somebody repainted her face, and someone else shoved a fistful of papers at her. One went flying, and Rebel saw that it was a cheap repro hologram. Her face—her new face, Eucrasia's face—floated above the paper, twisting and folding into itself when the paper doubled up against a hut.

Rebel shivered and tried to keep from thinking about it.
Later.

A heavy, bullish man snapped a length of pipe from a doorframe and tried to smash his way through the gate.

One jackboot fell back, clutching his head, but others seized the man's arms and legs and forced a programmer to his brow. "You're a strong one," the welder laughed as the samurai look came on his face. She drew a red stripe from his chin to his hairline. He joined the line.

Rebel's leg itched furiously. She did not move a muscle.

As the people were processed out and the courtyard emptied, those who remained grew calmer. Some even formed a sullen line, to get through the questioning more quickly.

There was a flurry of conferences, and four new jackboots entered. Three of them were permanent police, felons who'd pulled long enough terms to merit extensive training. They wore riot helmets with transparent visors, and low-mass body armor. Their insignia identified them as corporate mercenaries, rather than civil police. Two carried long staffs with complicated blades at their ends, like a cross between a pike and a brush hook.

The fourth was Maxwell.

There was no doubting it. The four passed right by Rebel's hiding place, and she got a good look at the young man. He had a stripe of killer red up the center of his face and a glittery, unforgiving look to his eye. "Of course I'm not mistaken," he snapped. "I heard her story myself. It's Deutsche Nakasone that's sponsoring this raid, right? Well, that's who she escaped from. How could I be mistaken?"

He led the others to his hut and watched complacently as they ripped the front wall off, sending his jewelry and clothes scattering through the court. Moving efficiently, they jammed their hooks into the rear wall and began cutting it free of the frame.

Rebel had a horrible urge to sneeze. She wanted to scream, to break and run. But that was Eucrasia's impulse, and Rebel would not give in to it. The jackboots at the gateway were processing out the last three tank towners. Their motions were quick and alert.

The thing to do was not to move.

I am old sister pike, she thought to herself. I am patience.

The rear wall went flying, and the police jabbed their

poles into the vines behind it. Maxwell shouted a warning, and they ignored it. He waved his arms frantically.

And then there were cries of dismay. With an angry shrill, a swarm of honeybees rose from their broken hive.

The police fell back, swatting and cursing. At the gateway, somebody grabbed a jerrycan of water from Jonamon's hut and flung its contents at the swarm. The water broke into spheres and smashed into both bees and jackboots, doing nothing for the temper of either. The permanent jackboots retreated to the corridor, dragging Maxwell after them. One cursed him furiously.

Maxwell answered back and was struck in the mouth.

The courtyard emptied. The jackboots pulled away from the gateway, and soon only one lingered. Go away, Rebel thought at him. But he did not. He gazed long and thoughtfully at the floating debris in the courtyard and the occasional bee zipping angrily by. He kicked into the court and poked his head into a hut or two.

The man examined a vine-filled gap halfway across the court from her. Then he swam over to her patch. Rebel closed her eyes so the reflection from them would not betray her. Her skin itched.

The vines rustled slightly. "Heads up, Sunshine!"

She opened her eyes.

It was Wyeth, painted as if programmed police. Those fierce eyes laughed at her from either side of the red stripe, and he grinned comically. Then his face went grim again, and he said, "We'll have to get a move on. They're going to be back."

She climbed out of the vines. Following Wyeth's lead, she recovered her helmet and vacuum suit. Wyeth was at the gate, calling to her to hurry, when she noticed something floating half-hidden by a sheet of tin in an obscure corner of the court. "Wait," she said. It was a body.

Rebel kicked away the tin. Old Jonamon floated there, pale and motionless, like a piece of detritus. At her touch, he opened one eye. “Careful now,” he muttered.

“Jonamon, what did they do to you?”

“I’ve survived worse. You think maybe you could get me some water?” Wyeth silently fetched a bulb and held it to the old man’s mouth. Jonamon sucked in a mouthful and coughed it out, choking. When he’d recovered, he gasped, “It’s hell being old. Don’t let nobody tell you different.”

The old man was all tangled up in his cloak. Gently, Rebel unwrapped it. When she saw his body, she gasped. “They *beat* you!”

“Ain’t the first time.” Jonamon tried to laugh. “But they couldn’t put their programmer on me without they beat me unconscious first.” His arms moved feebly, like a baby’s. “So I escaped.”

Rebel wanted to cry. “Oh, Jonamon. What good did that do you? You might have been killed!”

Jonamon grinned, and for a second Rebel could see the young, avaricious man of the old hologram. “At least I’d’ve died in a state of grace.”

Wyeth drew Rebel away. “Sunshine, we don’t have much time.”

“I’m not leaving without Jonamon.”

“Hmm.” He cracked his knuckles thoughtfully, and his lips moved in silent argument with himself. “Okay, then,” he said finally. “You take the one arm and I’ll take the other.”

* * *

They moved slowly downcorridor, the old man between them. His mouth was open and his eyes half shut with pain. He didn’t try to talk. The tank towners, seeing Wyeth’s jackboot paint, gave them a wide berth. “Queen Roslyn has her court down this way,” Wyeth said. “She’s a predatory old hag, and she stocks a lot of wetware. If

anybody has a hospital going, it'll be her.”

They followed a purple rope into a dark neighborhood with one brightly lit gateway. People hurried in and out of it. Rebel didn't need to be told that this was their destination.

At the gateway, an angular woman with bony shoulders and small, black nipples blocked their way. “Full up! Full up!” she cried. “No room here, go someplace else.” She didn't even glance at Jonamon, who was now fully unconscious.

Wordlessly, Wyeth stripped the salaries from one wrist and held them forward. The woman cocked an eye at them, then let her gaze travel to his other wrist. Wyeth frowned. “Don't get greedy, Roslyn.”

“Well,” Roslyn said. “I guess we could make an exception.” She made the salaries disappear, and led them inside.

It was chaos in the court, with stretcher lines hung up every which way. The lines were crowded with wounded rude boys and rude girls, temporary jackboots, unpainted religious fanatics, and even one tightly bound raver. A miasma of blood droplets, trash, and bits of bandages hung in the air. But people with medical paint moved among the wounded, and their programming seemed efficient enough. Roslyn stopped one and said, “Give this guy top priority, okay? His friends are paying for it.” The tech gave a tight little nod and eased Jonamon away. Roslyn smiled. “You see? Ask anyone, Roslyn gives good value. But you got to go now. I got no room for bystanders.” She shooed them back.

On the way out, Rebel suddenly spotted a familiar face. She seized Wyeth's arm and pointed. “Look! Isn't that...?” Maxwell was stretched out on a line, unconscious. The red police strip was smudged on his finely chiseled face.

Roslyn saw the gesture and laughed. “Another friend of yours? You oughta maybe get some new ones who can stay

out of trouble. But he's okay. Might lose a tooth. But mostly he's just got a histamine reaction from being bee-stung too often." They were at the gateway now. "Young woman brought him in. Pretty little thing." She cackled. "I think she's sweet on him."

"Oh?" Rebel said coolly. "Well, it takes all kinds, I guess."

* * *

They moved through near-empty corridors, away from the center of the tank, and away from the receding storm front. "Wyeth," Rebel said after a long silence, "Jonamon's problems are all the result of his calcium depletion, aren't they?"

"Jonamon's problems are all the result of his being a stubborn old man. He'll survive this time, but it's going to kill him sooner or later."

"No, really," Rebel insisted. "I mean, like the kidney troubles, he gets them from the calcium depletion, right? You watch him for any length of time, and you see that he gets muscle cramps, his breathing gets irregular... So why hasn't he had that corrected?"

They were nearing the shell. The temperature was cooler here, up against the outside of the tank. Wyeth paused, took a narrow side-way, and Rebel followed. "It's not correctable. You live a year or so in weightlessness, and you reach the point of no return. It can't be reversed. Slow down, we make a turn soon."

"But it would be so simple. You could tailor a strain of coraliferous algae to live in the bloodstream. In the first phase they're free-swimming, and in the second they colonize the bone tissue. When they die, they leave behind a tiny bit of calcium."

"Coral reefs in the bones?" Wyeth sounded bemused.

"That's how we do it back home."

"You come from an interesting culture, Sunshine,"

Wyeth said. “You’ll have to tell me all about it someday. But right now... here we are.” The corridor they had entered was completely shuttered and lit only by nightblooms. Scattered trash gathered in long drifts unbroken by the passage of traffic. They were the only people in sight. Silently, Wyeth moved down the corridor, looking for a particular door. When he found it, he stopped and rattled a wall. “This is King Wismon’s court. He’s got something we need.”

“What’s that?”

“A bootleg airlock.”

4

Londongrad

You’re too late, I’m afraid. You’ll simply have to go away.” Eyes closed, King Wismon floated in the center of his court. In stark contrast to the skinny young rude boys who had ushered Rebel and Wyeth through twisty passages to the court and who now stood guard over them, Wismon was enormously fat. His was the kind of fat that is only possible in a zero-gee environment. Even in half gravity the weight of his bloated flesh would have strained his heart, pulled his internal organs out of place, stressed muscle and bone, and threatened to collapse his lungs. His arms were unable to touch around the vast curve of his stomach, and his skin was mottled with patches of blotchy red. His crotch was buried under doughlike billows of leg and belly, rendering him an enormous, sexless sphere of flesh.

“We have to be gone before the police front comes by again!” Rebel held forward her wrists. “We can pay!”

Without opening his eyes, Wismon said, “I have been paid for use of my airlock five times today. That is enough.

The lock is the basis of whatever small affluence I have—I don't want to draw attention to it. The secret of a good scam is not to get greedy.”

“Hallo, Wismon,” Wyeth said. “No time for an old friend?” The fat man's eyes popped open. They were bright and glittery and dark. “Ah! Mentor! Forgive me for not recognizing you—I was asleep.” He waved an ineffectual little arm at the rude boys. “Leave. This man is a brother under the skull. He won't harm me.”

The rude boys backed away, suspicious but obedient. They disappeared.

For an instant Eucrasia's technical skills came back to Rebel, and in a flash of insight she read the eyes, the facial muscles, that weird, smirking grin... This was not a human being. This was a mind that had been reshaped and restructured. The play of intelligence behind those dark eyes was too fast, too intuitive, too perceptive to be human.

Its mental life would be a perpetual avalanche of perception and deduction that would crush a normal human persona.

Rebel realized all this in an instant, and in that same instant saw that Wismon had been studying her. Slowly, solemnly, he winked one eye. To Wyeth, he said, “For you, mentor, I'll gladly violate my own protocol. Go ahead, use the lock, I won't even charge you for it. Just leave me the woman.”

Rebel stiffened.

“I doubt she'd be of any use to you,” Wyeth said. His eyes were flat and intent, a killer's eyes—there was no impatience in them at all. “But even if she were, Deutsche Nakasone is after her. Do you really feel like going up against them? Eh?”

There was a dark explosion of hatred in those little eyes.

“Perhaps I do.” Wismon smiled gently.

“Now wait a minute, don't I have any say—” Rebel and

Wismon said in unison. Rebel stopped. She stared at Wismon in mingled outrage and amazement.

“Don’t interrupt, little sweets,” Wismon said in a kindly voice. “I can read you like a book.” He peered owlshly at Wyeth.

With a slight edge in his voice, Wyeth said, “Let’s put it this way. Do you feel like going up against *me*?”

A long silence. Then, “No, damn it.” One of Wismon’s little hands reached up to scratch convulsively at the side of his neck. It left red nail tracks. Then Wismon grinned companionably and said, “You’re bluffing, mentor, but I don’t know about what. I never was able to read you. Go through the hutch to your left—the one with a green rag for a door. You’d oblige me by both leaving at the same time. It’s a tight squeeze, but I’m sure you’ll manage.”

* * *

They kicked out of the airlock arm in arm. Rebel touched helmets with Wyeth. “What was that all about?”

“An old friend.”

They drifted slowly toward the butt end of the Londograd cannister. It was a great dark circle that did not seem to grow any closer. A tangle of bright machines flashed by. Behind them, the tank towns slowly shrank.

“He was afraid of you.”

“Well... I did most of his reprogramming. When you put together a new mind, it’s kind of traditional for the programmer to put a Frankenstein kink in the program, just in case. Sort of a dead man’s switch. So that with a prearranged signal—a word, a gesture, almost anything—the programmer can destroy the personality.”

“I see.” It all had a familiar ring; this was something Eucrasia had understood well. “Was that what you did?”

“Of course not. That would be immoral.” They floated through unchanging vacuum for a time. Then Wyeth said, “He’d only have found it and canceled it out, anyway. This

way I can keep him guessing.”

Helmets touching, his face was intimately close. It filled her vision, craggy and enigmatic. Those green eyes of his sparkled. “How can you be sure he’d’ve found it?”

“Why not? He’s smarter than I am. And I found the kink you put in me.” He pulled his helmet away, and silence wrapped itself around her.

The cannister approached with extreme slowness. Rebel felt a queasiness that was like a snake uncoiling in her stomach and slithering up her spine. It curled around her head twice and constricted slightly. Eucrasia’s claustrophobia. She swallowed hard. I won’t give in to it, she thought. It can’t break me. It can only make me stronger.

It was not an easy trip.

* * *

Not many hours later they were following a pierrot into one of Londograd’s most exclusive business parks.

Under the canopy of druid trees, languid paths lit by wrought-iron lampposts meandered through dark fields and small stands of trees. Fireflies drifted hypnotically through the grass. A snowy owl swooped down on them, snapped out magnificent white wings at the last possible instant, banked, and was gone. “Wyeth,” Rebel asked, “why did we spend all your money on these clothes? There were cloaks that looked just as good for nowhere near as much.”

“Yes, but they weren’t made of real Terran wool. When you go to the rich to ask for money, you must *never* let them suspect you actually need it.”

“Oh.”

“Now don’t talk. Remember you’re painted up as a recreational slave. So don’t smile, don’t talk, don’t show any initiative. Just tag along.”

Rebel moved her crossed wrists back and forth, setting

the leash connecting them to Wyeth's hand swinging.
“Yeah, well, I'm not exactly thrilled about this part of the deal either.”

“It gives you an excuse for following me around. More importantly, it'll confirm all of Ginneh's worst suspicions about me. She'll love it.” He hesitated, looked embarrassed. “Look, if it'd be any easier on you, I could take a minute and program you up for real. It's only for an hour or so, anyway—”

“No goddamn way!” she said, and Wyeth nodded quickly and glanced away. Rebel's revulsion went right down to the bone, so complete she was certain it came from both of her personas. Well, that was *one* thing she had in common with Eucrasia.

The pierrot halted and, bowing, gestured to one side with a white-gloved hand. A brick walk led around a lilac bush to a simple office—a floating slab of polished wood for a desk, and two plain chairs—backed by a rock outcrop and sheltered by a Japanese maple. At their approach a small, quick woman rose. “Wyeth, dear! It's been years since I've seen you.” Her skin was somewhere between amber and mahogany, her eyes midway between shrewd and cunning. She dressed corporate grey, down to the beads on her braids, and her nails were scarlet daggers. Her business paint brought up her cheekbones, played down her wide mouth. She gave Wyeth a swift hug and a peck on the cheek.

“Hallo, Ginneh.”

The executive studied him. “Same old Wyeth. Taciturn as ever.” Then she noticed Rebel. “Well!” Ginneh smiled, but made no further comment. She gestured Wyeth to a chair, and he dropped the leash, leaving Rebel ground-hitched.

Rebel stood by, as good as invisible, as the two exchanged pleasantries and moved on to business. Wyeth said, “I wondered if you were still providing professionals

for the Outer System. Maybe the Jovian satellites?”

“You were hoping for something on Ganymede? Oh, Wyeth, I’m so sorry.” She placed a small hand on his forearm. “This comes at such a bad time in our orbit. Please.” A schematic phased in over her desk, showing Eros Kluster leaving the inner edge main sequence asteroid belts, heading sunward. “We’re losing our competitive edge, industrially. Half the refineries are shut down. And we’re not close enough to the Inner System for the mercantile economy to come up full. You know how difficult it is to find a position in a service economy. Maybe if you came back in a month. Thank you.” The schematic faded away.

“Well, perhaps I will.” Wyeth stood and retrieved his leash. “Been nice chatting you up, Ginneh.”

“Oh, don’t rush off! Stay and talk. You haven’t even asked what I’m working on. I’ve been transferred to the People’s Mars project. You must let me show you it.”

“Mars?” Wyeth frowned. “I’m not sure I’d be interested—”

“It’s a lovely package! Overview, please.” Holographic projections appeared behind her, like a line of windows winking open in the air. Spacejacks working on an enormous geodesic. A cluster of tank towns. Cold fusion reactors being towed slowly through the Kluster. An elaborate floating sheraton nearing completion. “The total cost is upwards of half a million man-years. It was wonderful how the whole thing just snowballed. It began with the orbital sheraton—the Stavka wanted to create a tourist industry. See the transformation storms, that sort of thing.” They swiveled to look at the holos. Wyeth took a chair.

Now that their backs were turned, Rebel felt free to slouch. She scratched an itch that had been bothering her for some time. Already she felt bored and ridiculous and annoyed at Wyeth for getting her into this. People did this

kind of thing for *fun*?

Ginneh and Wyeth were discussing the tank towns. “I don’t understand why the Stavka would want them,” Wyeth said. “Even as scrap, they can’t be worth much.”

“Don’t be naive, dear. People’s Mars is having labor trouble. We dump a few dozen slums in their neighborhood, and the price of labor takes a nosedive.”

“Hmmm.” Wyeth glanced over his shoulder and frowned at Rebel’s posture. She straightened involuntarily, then stuck out her tongue. He’d already turned back, though. “That puts you in something of a morally ambiguous position, doesn’t it? I mean, if you squint at it just right, it looks a lot like dealing in slaves.”

The executive laughed. “We’re selling People’s Mars the *tanks*. Whether the people living in them choose to go along or not is up to them. Oh, we’re distributing the Stavka’s propaganda for them, and we’ll sweeten the deal by suspending rent for the duration of transit, but nobody’s being forced to do anything. Next sequence, please.” All the scenes changed. “This is simply a terrific deal. It’s big and hot and fast. We’ve even had to go out-Kluster for some of the skills. Most of the muscle and skulls come from Londongrad, of course, and we’re providing the slums, the sheraton, the geodesic and the raw oxygen. But—you see that holding sphere? Closeup, if you would.” A translucent sphere packed with something green and leafy and wet zoomed closer. “That contains a young air plant. We hired a team of macro-biologists from that pod of comets passing through the other side of the system, to look after it.”

The view switched to wraparound, and they were in the center of a small biolab. Some twenty people were at work there, dressed treehanger style, their bodies covered neck to foot in heavy clothing with embroidered inserts and oversized pockets. They talked as they worked, oblivious of their viewers, and touched each other casually, a tap on

the shoulder here, a nudge in the ribs there. Somebody said something and the others laughed. Rebel wished she could join them, sign on to work among them. (But what would she do? Her skills were gone, along with most of her memories. No matter. In the largest possible sense they were all family, and she longed to be with them.)

“This is all tourist stuff, Ginneh,” Wyeth said in a flat voice.

“Ah? Well, perhaps this next one will interest you. You haven’t asked how we expect to transport the slums to Mars orbit without crushing everything within them.”

“Is that a problem?”

“Oh my goodness, yes. Even the slightest acceleration would be enough to collapse the interiors, shanties, people and all. Didn’t they teach you any physics in kindergarten? Please show us the ring.”

“Well, I—” Wyeth stopped. The wraparound had switched to the interior of a floating weapons platform. It had been built cheap, all boilerplate and seam weld, but the laser sniper systems that crouched on the metal desk, gently shifting to track their targets, were bright, state-of-the-art killing machines. The human triggers floating beside them had the unblinking, fanatic look of the rigidly wetwired.

The systems were aimed through laser-neutral glass walls at individual specks moving through a cluttered floating construction site. The holo zoomed up on one speck, and it became a worker in distress-orange vacuum suit. She was bolting together complex-looking machinery, hooking cables to ports, wiring terminals to terminals. Other orange-suited workers labored nearby, climbing blindly over one another as needed, yet perfectly synchronized. Tanks were mated to valves installed an instant before, complex wiring sequences were abandoned by one to be picked up by another, with never a glance to see how the others were doing. Hundreds

worked in scattered clusters along the length of a half-kilometer arch of machinery, looking more like hive insects than humans. Beyond them hung more weapons platforms, enough to track each worker individually. “We brought in a team of Earth to build the transit ring,”
Ginneh said.

“My God,” Wyeth said, horrified. “You can’t deal with the Comprise.”

“Don’t be silly, dear. Only Earth knows how to build an accelerator ring. This deal isn’t possible without help from the Comprise. Please expand from the third quadrant. You see the green tanks? Liquid helium. We’ve rented half the liquid helium in the Kluster for this caper.”

“Let me make myself a little clearer, Ginneh. Earth and humanity are natural enemies. We’re talking survival of the species here. You don’t cut deals with something that threatens every human being in existence. I’m not talking abstractions here, Ginneh. I’m talking about you, me, and everyone we know—our selves, our minds, our souls, our identities. Our future.”

Ginneh shrugged. “Oh, I’m sure you exaggerate. Our security is excellent. You saw the weapons platforms. If anything, we’re being overcautious.”

“Machines!” Wyeth snorted. “Machines are the easiest things in the universe to outwit because they’re predictable—that’s their function, to be predictable, to do exactly what they’re designed for, time after time. And you’ve put them under the control of guards so tightly programmed they’re almost machines themselves. Real bright, Ginneh. I ought to strangle you and every one of your fellow corporate whores myself. It would only improve the breed.”

“I suppose you could do better?”

“Damn right I could!”

“I’m glad to hear you say that,” Ginneh said

complacently. “Because I believe I *do* have a position for you, after all.”

Rebel’s nose itched. She scratched it, and the leash tapped her belly lightly. Grimacing, she pulled her hands free of the thing and dropped it on the ground. The hell with it. She rubbed her wrists slowly and luxuriously, staring at the back of Wyeth’s head with shrewd speculation. How much did she actually know about him? Very little. Enough, though, to know that he was involved hip-deep in some kind of weirdness. It certainly wasn’t altruism that powered his actions. He had his own plans, whatever they were, and somehow she had been fitted into them. Logic told her it was time to cut and run. Leave him and his bitch to their little schemes.

Ginneh and Wyeth had their heads together, conferring quietly. Neither noticed her go.

* * *

The biolab had been retrofitted between two underwriting firms on Fanchurch Prospekt in midtown Londongrad. Rebel got the address from a public data port. She might not have her skills, but any working group needed someone to do the scutwork, and she could fetch and carry with the best of them. Her plan was to hide among her own kind, where she would be effectively invisible, because she wouldn’t stand out. And when they left to return to their comet worlds, she’d go with them.

All it’d take was a little grit.

At the doorway she hesitated, remembering the public surveillance cameras inside. Well, there were millions such throughout the Kluster. What were the odds that somebody looking for her would be watching? Slim.

Taking a deep breath, she went in.

“*Hey-lo!*” A lanky treehanger stuck a genecounter in his hip pocket and leered at her. Another man whistled. All activity within the lab came to a halt.

Rebel stopped in confusion. Everyone was looking at her. They were staring at her breasts and stomach, some involuntarily and with embarrassment, and others not. She fought down the urge to snap her cloak shut, and her face flushed. A short, grey-haired woman turned from a potting bench, brushing her hands together, and said mildly, “Can I help you, dearie?”

“Uh, yes, well... Actually, I just wanted to stop by for a chat. You see, I come from a dyson world myself.” The words sounded false, and Rebel felt irrationally guilty. Sweat beaded up under her arms.

“Gone a bit native then, ain’t you?” the lanky one said.

“Haven’t you work to do?” the woman said in a warning voice. “All of you! What are we getting paid for, hey? Squatting in the bushlines?” Then, in a gentler tone, “Where do you hail from then?”

“Tirnannog. It’s part of the original archipelago, just moving out into the Oort.” The names came to her without urging, but none of them sounded familiar to her.

The other engineers were working quietly, not talking, so they could overhear what was said. Now a stocky, blond-haired kid with walnut skin looked up, interested. “Oh yeah, I been there,” he said. “We’re all from Hibrasil, practically spitting distance, hey? Couple weeks transit in coldpack is all. Got family in Stanhix, ever heard of that? Just outside of Blisterville.”

She shook her head helplessly. “Blisterville?”

“You never heard of *Blisterville*? Threetrunk past the Sargasso? Five hundred thousand people?”

A woman looked up from a tank of water voles and said, “Bet you we got one of those ravers on our hands. You know—too much electricity shot up the medulla oblongata.” The treehanger beside her laughed and punched her shoulder.

“Hey, listen, I’m not lying to you, sport! I really am from

Tirnannog. I can explain—”

“Where does an airwhale fit into an ecosystem? What do they sell in Green City? Why can’t an anogenic construct eat? What are the seven basic adaptations to weightlessness?” the stocky kid asked. He looked Rebel in the eye and sneered. “How many bones are in your hand?”

She didn’t have the answers. It was all information that had been destroyed with her original body. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. One of her hands was trembling.

“Freeboy,” the grey-haired woman snapped, “are you going to get back to work or am I going to have to kick butt?” The boy rolled his eyes upward, but turned back to a stacked petri array. The woman said to Rebel, “We believe you, dear.”

“But I really *am*—”

“I could run a blood test,” Freeboy offered. “Even adapted for gravity, there’s still five major differences...”

“What did I tell you?” the woman began ominously. But Rebel was already halfway to the door.

As she stepped outside, a man who hadn’t spoken before called after her, “What do them lines on your face mean, girlie?” By his tone, she knew that he had been tasting what pleasures a wettechnic civilization had to offer and knew exactly what her paint indicated.

She bit her lip, but did not look back.

* * *

Out on the Prospekt, the crowds swallowed her whole. There were far more people here than either uptown or downtown, and the corridors were wide, like plazas infinitely extended. Rows of palms divided the surge of people into lanes, and cartoon stars and planets hung from a high ceiling. Underfoot, the Prospekt was paved with outdated currency, silver thalers, gold kronerrands,

green ceramic rubles, all encased under diamond-hard transparent flooring. Expensively dressed people, all painted financial—cargo insurance, gas futures, bankruptcy investment—coursed over it. Rebel let the crowd carry her away, transforming her anger and humiliation and confusion into blessed anonymity.

A clown came striding toward her.

In the sea of bobbing, somber cloaks, the puffy white costume seemed to glow, as if lit from within. The pierrette smiled slightly as her eyes met Rebel's. The crowds parted for her, like waters before a religious master, and she descended upon Rebel as calm and inevitable as an angel.

Rebel stopped, and the pierrette bowed and proffered a white envelope. She took it from the gloved hand and slid out a paper rectangle. It was a holographic advertising flat. Above it floated the same false ideal of Rebel Mudlark she had seen in downtown New High Kamden.

She looked questioningly at the pierrette, who dipped a short curtsy. She might as well try interrogating the floor. Rebel turned the paper over, and on its back was written, "Request that we talk." She crumpled the paper in her hand. The image folded into itself and was gone.

She nodded to the clown.

The pierrette led her to a nearby bank. They went to the negotiating rooms, bypassing several that were discreetly equipped for sex, and found a walnut-paneled niche with a single bench and table. Rebel sat, and the pierrette flipped on privacy screen and sound baffles. She produced a holograph generator, placed it atop the table, and curtsied away.

After a moment to compose herself, Rebel reached out to switch on the generator.

* * *

She was looking into a small hollow—obviously part of an upscale business park. At first glance Rebel thought the

hollow held a drift of snow. Then she saw that she was looking down on an oval of white tiles. The only spot of color in all that white was a red prayer rug at its center. A lone figure knelt there, hood down, shaven head bowed.

“Snow!” Rebel exclaimed. The image panned downslope.

The figure raised its head, studied her with cold, reptilian eyes. Skin white as marble, face painted in the hexangular lines of ice crystals or starbursts. He cocked his head slightly, listening. “In a sense,” he said at last, “perhaps I am. Snow and I are both part of the same thing.” His face was every bit as gaunt and fleshless as hers had been. “I have a message for you.”

“What are you?” she asked. “Just exactly what are you that you and Snow are part of the same thing?”

He made a small sideways jerk of his head, a gesture perhaps of annoyance. Or maybe he was just accessing data through some new channel. “Irrelevant. I am not required to give you any information other than the message. If you choose not to receive it...” He shrugged.

“All right. I’m listening.”

The man looked directly at her. “Deutsche Nakasone has licensed a team of dedicated assassins to your case.”

“No,” Rebel said. Without thinking about it, she clenched her fists so tight the nails dug into her hands. The skin over her knuckles hurt. “That’s ridiculous. Deutsche Nakasone wants my persona. They need me alive.”

“Not necessarily.” A bony hand slid from his cloak to stab the empty air, and an appliance with smooth, cherry-red finish appeared on insert. “The assassins are equipped with cryonic transport devices. They need only kill you, flash-freeze your brain, and let their technicians dig out the desired information using destructive techniques.” The hand disappeared into his cloak. “That’s

what they should have done originally. But they also wanted to salvage you as a petty officer of the corporation. Now, however, you've been written off."

The machine was slick and featureless on the outside, with a popup handle on the top. It was just the right size to hold Rebel's head. She hunched her shoulders and brought up her hands. "Why are you telling me this?"

"You are not ready to deal yet." The man stood suddenly, strode three paces to one side, stopped. "Very well. We wish to keep you alive until you are ready. You must take this threat seriously." He paused to examine something Rebel could not see. "You've been careless. You should have realized there are few enough groups of dyson worlders in the Kluster that they all would be watched. If we hadn't reached you first, you'd be dead now."

The scene shifted, and she was looking down on Fanchurch Prospekt. From above, the jostling zombies blended together like a sluggish flow of mud. Bright circles appeared around three faces, and she saw that they were moving through the crowd in formation, searching among the faces for something. One by one, the image zoomed up on them: A heavy woman with fanatically set face and a black slash across her left eye. An unblinking sylph of a girl with a black slash across her left eye. And then a third with that same paint, a red-haired man with a face like a fox.

Jerzy Heisen.

"You know him?" the man asked. The assassins passed by the doors of the bank Rebel was in. Each carried a cherry-red cryogenic storage device in one hand. "Why did you start like that if you didn't know him?"

"He used to work with Snow."

"Ah." The man made a small gesture, cocked his head. "Interesting." The crowd scene faded. "Of course. He's clever, he's serving time, and he's actually met you. Of course he'd be one of your assassins." Again he paused.

“No matter. We have generated a chart of those places in the System you can flee to, and with them the probabilities of your being assassinated by Deutsche Nakasone within a Greenwich month of arrival. I suggest you study if carefully.”

The chart scrolled up.

Location Probability of Assassination (1 percent)

Eros Kluster 97%

Pallas Kluster 95%

OTHER KLUSTERS (WITHIN BELTS) 91% (range 88-93%)

Trojan Klusters 90%

Lunar Holdings 90%

Mercury Science Preserve 90%

Neptune/Pluto Science Preserves 90%

Jovian System: 70%

nongalilean satellites 89%

Ganymede (Ported Cities) 65%

(wilderness) 44%

Callisto (Ported Cities) 65%

(wilderness) 41%

Io, Europa, Amalthea, Jupiter Orbital 65% (range 63-68%)

Mars Orbital, Deimos 63%

Mars Surface 59%

Saturnian system: 58%

Lesser Satellites 75% (range 74-75%)

Rings, Saturn Orbital 72%

Titan (Ported Cities) 30%

(wilderness) 23%

Earth Orbital 17%

Earth Surface 0%

“Very cute,” Rebel said. The list brought back some of the spirit the last half hour had kicked out of her. “I especially like that last bit. I guess I should hop the first transit to Earth, huh? Or maybe I should just walk out an airlock without a suit. Then I could swim there.”

Her sarcasm had no visible effect. “We won’t advise you what to do. We only reassure you that within the limits of game theory this chart is reliable.” The man knelt, raising his hood. The chart faded and the pierrette reappeared at Rebel’s side.

“One more thing. You have a new friend. The tetrad.”

“Yes?”

“Don’t trust him.”

*** * ***

The leash was waiting for her. Wyeth and Ginneh still had their heads together in conference, apparently oblivious to her absence this past hour. The same views of weapons platforms and of the Comprise assembling machinery hung in the air beyond the desk. The crescent fraction of the transit ring was a shade longer than it had been. Rebel sighed and slipped the leash back on her wrists.

There was no place she could go that was not dangerous, and no one she dared trust. She had to play hunches. And so far the only testimonial for any direction of action was that Snow’s whatever-he-was distrusted Wyeth.

“Well,” Ginneh said. “Will you take the position?”

Wyeth glanced over his shoulder at Rebel, and for a flicker she thought he looked surprised to see her. Then she was not sure. “Ginneh, you knew I’d take it when you first brought it up. Let’s not kid each other.”

Ginneh’s laugh was light and gracious. “Well, that’s

true, darling, but I'd rather hoped to spare your ego that realization."

"Mmmm." Wyeth stood and took up the leash. "Consider me on the payroll, then." He led Rebel away.

Not far from the park, they climbed a winding set of wooden stairs high up a druid tree to a platform restaurant built out onto the branches, where they ordered puff pastries and green wine. The glasses had wide bowls and tiny lips. Wyeth frowned down on his and capped it with his thumb. He slowly swirled the green liquid around and around. Rebel waited.

Wyeth looked up suddenly. "Where were you?"

"What's it worth to you?"

Hands closed around the wine glass. They were big hands, with knobby joints and short, blunt fingers. A strangler's hands. "What do you want?"

"The truth." And then when he raised an eyebrow, she amended it to, "Truthful answers to as many questions as I ask you."

A moment's silence. Then he rapped his knuckles on the table and touched them to his brow and lips. "Done. You go first."

Slowly, carefully, she recounted the past hour. She felt good up here among the leaves, where the light was green and watery and the gravity was slight. She felt like she could lean back in her chair and just float away... out of the chair, out of the restaurant, beyond the branches, into the great dark oceans of air where whales and porpoises sported, and the clouds of dust algae blocked out the light from the distant trees. It felt like home, and she stretched out her story through three glasses of wine.

As she talked, Wyeth's face remained stiff. He hardly even blinked. And when she was done, he said, "I cannot for the life of me understand how any one human being can be so stupid!"

“Hey,” Rebel said defensively. “It’s your own fault I don’t have the faintest idea what you’re up to. If anyone here was stupid, it was you.”

“Who do you think I was talking about?” he said angrily.

“I was just too clever for my own good. While I was building an elaborate trap for Snow and her ilk, they walk up and have a long chat with you! One perfectly beautiful opportunity blown all to hell because I—well, never mind.” He took a deep breath and then—like a conjurer’s trick—he was instantly smiling and impish. “Go ahead, ask your questions. You want me to start by explaining Snow?”

“No. Well, yeah, but later on. I want to start with something very basic. You’re not really human, are you? You’re a new mind.”

He grinned. “Who should know better?”

“Please. You already hinted that I did the programming on you. But I don’t remember a damned thing, so don’t get all coy on me, okay? Give me a straight answer. Just what the fuck is a tetrad?”

“A tetrad is a single human mind with four distinct personalities.” His face changed expression, to serious, then distracted, then open, and finally mischievous. “That’s what we am. Or should I say, that’s what I are?”

5

PEOPLE’S SHERATON

You’re in for something that’s pretty rare this far from a planetary surface,” Wyeth said.

“What’s that?”

“A windstorm.”

Beneath its elaborations—balconies, outcroppings, light and heavy gravity wings, bubbles and skywalks—the

sheraton was a simple orbital wheel, with three floors moving at slightly different speeds to maintain Greenwich normal gravity. Wyeth had set up security headquarters in the lobby at the foot of the elevator from the central docking ring. He sat behind the front desk, eyes moving restlessly as he scanned a dozen holographic inputs. A tone-controlled mike rested before him, and he murmured instructions into it from time to time, pitching his voice for the channel desired.

Rebel sat in a sling chair, staring out through the window wall. The stars trembled with the flicker of subliminal memories. She could see Wyeth reflected on the inner surface of the glass.

There was a cascade of movement across the window. “We’ve secured the locks, sir. The people aren’t very happy about it. Minor violence at tanks twelve and three.” Despite her samurai paint, the woman hardly looked like security. She’d been recruited from the tanks and wore a daisy-yellow cloak and far too much jewelry.

“They were notified,” Wyeth said. When the woman was gone, he sighed. “I wonder at people. If they don’t understand why they can’t use the locks for an hour or two, then what do they think is waiting for them when we reach Mars orbit? I’m afraid they’re in for a rude awakening.”

Spacejacks were bolting the preassembled segments of the geodesic around the sheraton and tanks, working with programmed efficiency. The structure was covered with transparent monomolecular skin. From Rebel’s chair, it looked like a faint haze gathering across the stars. The workers began spraying powdered steel over the completed exterior, vacuum-welding layer upon layer. Now it was like watching the heat death of the universe, the stars slowly clouding up and fading to black. Gloom swelled and overwhelmed everything. Finally the only light within the geodesic was what spilled from the windows of the sheraton.

“This is spooky,” Rebel said. Suddenly she had an overwhelming sense of someone standing at her shoulder. She whirled, and no one was there.

“You like it, huh?” Wyeth threw an exterior camera projection onto one quadrant of window. From outside, the geodesic looked like a gigantic ball bearing, dazzlingly bright in the raw sunlight. Stars rippled over its flank. Just off center was the distorted reflection of Londongrad, with the Kluster corporate logo (two classical figures, one bending) superpainted on its side. In an unfamiliar voice Wyeth said, “Think of it as an enormous cell. The tank towns at the center are the nucleus. The sheraton is... oh, the centrosome, I guess. The air plant would have to be the mitochondria.” He laughed and spread his arms. “And behold! A new form of life floats upon the winds of space. What vast, unimaginably complex creatures will evolve from this first simple cell, a million years hence?”

Rebel looked up sharply. “Which one of you is that?”

Again that strange laugh. “The pattern-maker, I guess you’d call me. I’m the intuitive one, the persona that guesses at the big picture, that decides what we think about God and infinity. Of course, it’s only a name. In an Aboriginal hunting party, I’d be the shaman.”

“Hah?”

“Don’t you know where the tetrad comes from? Eucrasia patterned us after the ancient Aboriginal hunting party.

They went out in groups of four, and no matter what individuals they picked, during the hunt they took on four distinct roles—the leader, the warrior, the mystic, the clown. It made for a remarkably stable and efficient group. And it makes for a remarkably stable and efficient mind.”

This was all very familiar. Staring out into the darkness, Rebel saw half-formed memories of Eucrasia’s past striving to take shape. “I thought she was a persona bum?”

“Well, a little bit of a persona bum, yeah. But a hell of a good wetsurgeon in your own right.”

“In *her* own right.”

“Whatever.” As they talked, Wyeth occasionally turned away to touch an unseen control or murmur an order. People continually passed through the lobby. A squad of security samurai took the elevator up to the docking ring, armed with truncheons and barbed pikes, and looking dangerous. In their wake, a young kid with mahogany skin strode in. He stood at the window, hands behind back, peering out with elaborate interest.

“What are you doing here?” Rebel asked coldly.

“Hey, I got experience in security work.” Maxwell put a hand on her shoulder, and she stood, knocking it away.

Without looking up, Wyeth said, “He’s a messenger. I need any number of runners who can take messages in and out of the tanks.”

“He’s not painted as a messenger.”

“Yes, well, we’re dealing with the Comprise here. The less programming the better.”

On the window flashed images of cold fusion alembics being hooked into the geodesic and powered on. Newly created oxygen, nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and trace gases gushed into the sphere. The sheraton shuddered as the winds hit, and Wyeth lost two limpet cameras, their perches torn out from under their grips. They went hurtling helplessly away, one to shatter against the tanks, the other against the geodesic’s inside wall.

A short, grey-haired woman dressed treehanger style walked up to the front desk. “Got all my people at their stations. What do you need us to do when?” It was the supervisor from the biolab on Fanchurch Prospekt.

“Oh Christ,” Rebel muttered. “It’s Old Home Week.”

The woman peered at her. “Don’t I know you, dear?”

Rebel turned away, and Wyeth said, “Rebel Elizabeth Mudlark, I’d like you to meet Constance Frog Moorfields, our macrobioengineering project director. Connie, I’m

going to need you to cue your people in just a few minutes.
Grab a channel, will you?"

"Oh yes, certainly." Constance peered owlishly at the controls. "How do I work this thing?"

Maxwell slid an arm around Rebel's waist and said, "Tell you what, why don't you sit on my lap, and we'll talk about the first thing to come up?" She threw a punch at his stomach, and he danced back, grinning.

Outside, the storm howled. "Now," Wyeth said, and Constance nodded and murmured into her mike. In some distant room the macrobioengineers hit their remotes.

Explosive bolts broke open the small holding sphere, sending the pieces flying. The air plant within twisted and expanded, lashing through the air. The winds took it in their teeth, and strands slammed against the tanks and the geodesic walls, rebounding furiously. Through the windows, Rebel saw huge loops of the plant loom into the dim light from the sheraton and recede again. "It's enormous," she marveled.

"Twenty-seven miles," Constance said with satisfaction. "Stretched out full, that is. And it's still young. Ought to grow like green hell in the next few days." She reached over to the controls and threw several biostructural schematics on the windows. "See, we've designed it to—"

Rebel turned and walked away.

The hallway was long and straight, with a barely perceptible upward curve. Rebel wondered why it was so dark, shadows lapping up against her ankles and hovering over either shoulder. Must be some reason. She touched one paisley wall, and remembered another, similar hallway she had walked down a thousand times before, the one connecting her office with the wetsurgery.

A breeze stirred her cloak, and she drew it together slightly. A scrap of paper fluttered by, and behind her she heard a silver bowl crash to the floor and go tumbling end over end before hitting a wall. Somewhere, the

off-program samurai were opening the airlocks, glorying in the rush of new air. Outside, the wind sang in demon chorus. Within, all was cool gush and flow.

She was striding along, lost in her memories, when Jerzy Heisen stepped from a conversation niche and took her arm. “Hello, Heisen,” she said absently. “Anything new on the Mudlark program?”

He gave her a peculiar look. “Not yet. Soon, I hope.”

“I’ve decided to try the program on myself. It looks interesting, but the kind of interesting that’s only comprehensible from the inside, if you get me. I don’t want that information filtered through some subliterate, only marginally coherent persona bum.” She couldn’t keep a touch of bitterness from her voice. The support staff she’d been given was poor material, incompetent to begin with and hastily programmed on top of that. She had to do half their work herself.

Heisen frowned, then said carefully, as if reciting lines from a play or remembering the exact wording of an old conversation, “Is that wise? We haven’t had the master wafer duplicated yet.”

She brushed his objection aside scornfully. “It’s only for ten minutes. God’s sake, what can happen in ten minutes?”

A pause. When she looked directly at him, Heisen’s eyes were oddly intent, but the instant she looked away he faded to a vague presence again. “You think it’s a commercial persona, then?”

“You’re so damned mercenary, Heisen! I’m talking about a new trait, a new characteristic, a new property... Something that might make programming richer and more interesting.”

“But it *does* have commercial potential?”

“Oh, I suppose so.”

Footsteps came running up from behind, and suddenly a

dark-skinned kid was standing before her, proffering a cheap amalgam ring. Eucrasia had to squint to see him.

“Wyeth told me to give this to you.”

“Wyeth?” She recognized the name. How could she forget? He was the best work she’d done yet—pirate surgery, of course, but she’d put everything she had into it, because some of the most interesting programming was, strictly speaking, illegal. “Wyeth asked you to give me a ring?”

“Yeah, it’s a locator ring. So he can keep track of you, where you are and so on.” He waved a hand at the ceiling cameras. “Listen, you come over to the tanks later on, visit my hut. No surveillance there. We can get private, know what I mean?”

Eucrasia shrugged in baffled annoyance.

Heisen had withdrawn to a discreet distance. The kid glanced curiously at him, decided he wasn’t important, and blew her a kiss. “See you in my hutch!” he called over his shoulder. Eucrasia vaguely wondered who he was.

Heisen took her arm again. He steered her through a meadowlike meeting room. The grass was cool underfoot, and bees hovered drowsily over the raspberry bushes. “Let’s go over this way, and stroll through the skywalk. It’s a very pleasant walk. Free of cameras and prying eyes.”

He swung the cherry-red case lightly back and forth as he led her away.

* * *

The skywalk looped out from the sheraton in a long, graceful curve. Fish swam through strands of kelp within the transparent tube walls. The teak boardwalk sounded almost musically underfoot. “I designed Wyeth’s warrior aspect after my father,” Eucrasia said. She had totally lost track of who she was talking to, but the memories were compulsively strong, and they drove the words before them. “He was a willful man, my father was. Determined.

Nobody could talk him into anything, not unless he wanted them to. But he wasn't... flexible, you know? He couldn't adapt to change. He couldn't show emotion. But underneath he was a wonderful man, very kind, and I loved him. When I was a girl I was always wishing I could change him. Not in any big way, but in little ways, so he could get past all that defensive armor and breathe a little. So he could enjoy his life. That was a big factor in my choice of career, I think."

She fell silent. Remembering when she was a little girl and the Kluster was passing out of the belts. The refineries were closing, which had put both her parents out of work. Those had been bad times. Her mother'd taken a job as pierrette, and the wetware was primitive then. She'd come home after shift with a goony look to her and a subservience that took hours to wear off. Daddy had hated that.

Once Eucrasia came home from nurture to find her father sitting at the center room table, turning a wetcartridge over and over in his hands. It was a big, bulky thing in a black case, almost obsolete already, and she didn't know yet that it was loaded with electronic godhood. But she knew that she was tired of having her father around all the time, moping about gloomily, and of almost never seeing her mother the way she used to be. And she didn't like the guilty, weak look that melted her father's face when he saw her. He had always been a *strong* man. So it was involuntary how, as he fumblingly tried to hide the cartridge, she stared up at him, mind superchilled and pulsing with inarticulate pain, and felt the anger sear through her eyes like an invisible psychic laser, and said, "I hate you, Daddy."

What happened then shocked her.

Her father's hand clenched into a fist. It trembled. Then—so fast she almost didn't see it happen—he hit himself right in the middle of his face. That big fist struck hard. It must have hurt like hell. It broke the cartilage in

his nose, and blood flowed down. Then he hit himself again. And again, with less hesitation this time, as if he'd savored the experience and decided he liked it. At first the only sound was of fist striking flesh, but then gradually he began gasping, a wet noise like sobbing. Still he kept on hitting himself.

Eucrasia had rushed forward, grabbing at that huge, muscular arm, trying to stop him. "Daddy, no!" she shrieked, and somehow—it was like a small, dark miracle—he'd stopped.

For a long moment he just stood there, chest working, shoulders heaving. His face was all dark with blood. One red drop fell on Eucrasia's foot, tickling her little toe. Her father stared around and around him, as if wondering where he was. Then his eyes fixed on Eucrasia, and they both stood there, mouths open and silent, unblinking, looking at one another.

Then he turned away.

"This is far enough," Heisen said. He stopped and put down his case with a heavy thump. "Why don't you sit down, Eucrasia?"

They had come to a transparent bar built out from the wall of the skywalk. An octopus was searching for food down by the floor, pulling himself along the glass with graceful swirls of his tentacles. Eucrasia sat on one of the stools. "He was a good man," she said. "He was a good man. He didn't deserve for that to happen."

"This will only take an instant."

Eucrasia stared out into the darkness. There were a few vague patches of luminosity in the distance, but nothing more. Where were the stars? she wondered. Tiny wheatseed lights edged the boards underfoot and ran along the rim of the bar, but outside all was Stygian gloom. She felt like she'd been caught in an afterworld where things struggled to take form from nothingness, and failed.

Heisen lifted the headfreezer above her. One of his elbows touched her shoulderblade.

Startled by some movement below, the octopus exploded in Eucrasia's face. One instant she was staring out into featureless black, and the next she confronted a pale, distorted shape that had leaped before her. A reflexive startlement keyed subliminal memories of empty eye sockets, a mouth that was a gaping scream.

Simultaneously, her claustrophobia gripped her and she realized that somebody was standing at her shoulder, about to put a box over her head.

Eucrasia screamed and lurched to the side. Rebel fell off the stool, one edge of Heisen's cryonic device smashing against her shoulder, and then she slammed to the floor. In a white burst of pain she rolled away and tumbled to her feet. Heisen lifted the thing again. "Get away from me!" Rebel cried.

"Now, Eucrasia," Heisen said. He made soothing, hushing noises. But his eyes were calm and cold and they did not look away from her for an instant. He advanced a step, and she backed away. There was nothing but skywalk behind her—at least an eighth of a mile of tubing without branching or exit.

"Listen, Jerzy, I don't know how you got in here, but Wyeth's going to notice I'm missing soon. This place is crawling with samurai—there's no way you can get out without being caught."

Heisen stepped back a few paces so he could set the cryonics device on the bartop. He reached into his cloak and removed a case from a liner pocket. Without looking down, he flipped it open.

"Jerzy? *Listen* to me, will you? I'm sure you can be reprogrammed. You can have a normal life again. Answer to nobody but yourself." He slipped his hand through the hilt of a fat-bladed dueling knife. It was the kind rude boys favored, a cross between stabbing blade and brass

knuckles, because it was almost impossible to lose one's grip on it in a fight.

Now Heisen smiled calmly and took a swipe at her.

“Oh shit!” Rebel danced back. Grabbing the loose end of her cloak, she whipped it about one forearm. Now she had a shield of sorts. In a giddy, crazily gleeful corner of her mind, she felt like a Renaissance dandy. This was how they had fought in Spain, in Rome, in Greece, all those centuries ago, in desperate back-alley scuffles.

Of course, *they'd* had weapons of their own.

Heisen advanced slowly; even with the advantage, he was programmed to be a cautious fighter. He feinted twice, stabbing at her face and then her belly, and watched how her arm jerked forward to protect them. Where Heisen's movements were all smooth, controlled menace, Rebel's reflexes were made rough and nervous by the jagged edge of fear. It coursed through her veins, danced behind her eyes, and tasted sour in her mouth. She was defeated already.

Heisen's smile faded, and for an instant he was perfectly still. Then he lunged forward, feinting left to draw away her arm, then slashing downward at the exposed side of her throat.

Rebel leaped away, crashing sideways into the wall. The hot acid edge of the knife drifted across her side, barely breaking the skin, searing the finest possible line over her ribs. Rebel pushed away from the wall, her entire side ablaze with pain, and stumbled backward. Heisen glided forward, his eyes deathly calm.

Something hard slammed Rebel in the back. The edge of the bar. Perfect, she thought. One corner in the entire damned skywalk and I back myself into it. Something smooth and metallic and chill touched her back ever so gently.

The headfreezer.

In one swift motion she snagged the thing from behind her and thrust it at Heisen, gripping the handle in both hands. He fell back a pace.

The problem was that it was not easy to hold the freezing unit up before her. It was heavy, and her arms trembled. It was too short, too blunt, too clumsy. If Heisen weren't so damned quick, she'd be tempted to just drop it on his foot.

Under one finger she could feel a trigger built into the handle. Which meant that if she could convince him to stick his hand inside the device, she could take him.

Otherwise, it made a lousy weapon.

I'll have to throw it at him, Rebel thought. Swing it up, catch him under the jaw, break a few teeth. Then grab the knife and hold him for the security people. That was a good plan. It ranked right up there with suddenly learning how to teleport.

She could see Heisen's muscles tensing. His face went very calm.

All in a flurry, he drove the knife up in a killer stab, she swung the case toward it, and there was a shout from behind Rebel. Reflexively, Heisen's eyes flicked up, past her shoulder, to assess the intruder. In that second's inattention, Rebel thrust the headfreezer forward, shoving it over the extended knife and hand. She hit the trigger. The unit grunted, an almost silent mechanical cough.

For a long instant neither Rebel nor Heisen moved. Then Rebel jerked back the case. Its exterior was hot with transferred energy and painful to the touch. Heisen looked down. Gingerly, wonderingly, he reached out to touch his knife hand.

It shattered.

Both knife and hand fell to the deck and broke into fragments, leaving behind an arm that simply stopped halfway between elbow and wrist. Rebel's fingers felt weak. She dropped the headfreezer. She couldn't stop

staring at the amputated arm; it seemed to glow and swell, filling her vision. Behind her came the staccato sound of running feet.

Heisen came to himself then. Showing no sign of pain, he reached with his surviving hand into his cloak and removed a small black ball. “Stand clear,” he gravely advised, and threw the ball at a distant stretch of wall.

The samurai were drawing near when the wall exploded, bursting outward in a shaped gush of water and glass. One seized Rebel and pulled her back, while the other leaned forward, trying to snag Heisen with her pike. But Heisen was already leaping through the new opening. He fell out and away. Wind screamed, and some of the gushing water was thrown back in their faces. The air reeked of salt, and wet strands of kelp were everywhere. To either side of the walk, heavy safety doors slammed shut.

Rebel got one glimpse of Heisen tumbling, his cloak flapping wildly, before the darkness swallowed him.

“What a mess!” a samurai said. He kicked at a flopping fish. Wind lashed his hair.

It was all Rebel could do to keep from crying as the samurai led her away.

* * *

On the graphics window, a glittery wedding band of machinery was afloat in the vacuum. Hundreds of the Comprise crawled about its surface, anchoring and adjusting small compressed gas jets. Painstakingly they guided the ring with a thousand tiny puffs of gas, until the geodesic hung motionless at its precise center. Only now did Rebel get any feel for the ring’s size—miles across, so large that the most distant parts seemed to dwindle to nothing.

“That’s not good enough,” Wyeth said. “I want *all* those rooms secured, and I want it now. Understand?” He looked up as Rebel entered the lobby and gave her a wink.

Then, pitching his voice differently, “Do you have the broomsticks out yet? The winds are dying down, let’s see some action.”

The lobby was aswirl with samurai, patrols scurrying purposefully in all directions. “I was almost killed,” Rebel said. “Just a minute ago.”

“Yes, I know. When you got lost I sent some limpets around the outside of the sheraton. Caught the last few minutes of your confrontation. That should never have happened. As soon as I get things squared away, heads will roll. There’s no excuse for that kind of security foul-up.”

Red warning lights blinked on across the length of the transit ring. As one, the Comprise kicked free of the machinery, leaping inward in acrobatic unison, like a swirl of orange flower blossoms seen through a kaleidoscope. By tens and scores they linked hands and were snagged by swooping jitneys. Wandering up out of nowhere, hands deep in pockets, Constance said, “That’s really quite lovely. It’s like a dance.”

Wyeth didn’t look up. “Not quite so lovely when you consider *why* they’re so perfectly coordinated.”

She blinked. “Oh, quite the contrary. When you think of the complex shapes their thoughts take, the mental structures too wide and large to be held by any one mind...

Well, that’s cause for humility, isn’t it?” Then, when Wyeth said nothing, “The Comprise is a full evolutionary step up on us, biologically speaking. It’s like... a hive organism, you see? Like the Portuguese man-of-war, where hundreds of minute organisms go into making up one large creature several orders of magnitude more highly structured than any of its components.”

“I’d say they were an evolutionary step down. Where human thought creates at least one personality per body, the Comprise has subsumed all its personalities into one self. On Earth, some four billion individuals have been

sacrificed to make way for one large, nebulous mind. That's not enrichment, it's impoverishment. It's the single greatest act of destruction in human history."

"But can't you see the beauty of that mind? Gigantic, immensely complex, almost godlike?"

"I see the entire population of mankind's home planet reduced to the status of a swarm of bees. A very large swarm of bees, I'll grant you, but insects nevertheless."

"I don't agree."

"So I see," Wyeth said coldly. "I will keep that in mind, madam." The running lights on the transit ring were blinking in rapid unison. To Rebel he said, "See that? They've armed their explosives."

Constance looked confused. "What's that? Explosives? What in life for?"

The jitneys slowly converged on the geodesic. Ahead of them a gang of spacejacks was fitting an airlock. They welded it through the metal skin, yanking open the exterior iris just as the first transport drifted up. Then they popped the jitney's drive and replaced it with a compressed air jet system. "They're about to enter the geodesic, sir," a samurai said.

"God help you if a single one of the Comprise isn't accounted for when they reach the sheraton," Wyeth said darkly. Then, to Constance, "The Comprise doesn't want us snooping through their technology, Ms. Moorfields. So of course they'll have programmed the ring to self-destruct if we try anything. And since they have, and since the helium in the ring is only rented, we won't."

The jitney eased into the interior atmosphere. It was crammed full and covered over with orange-suited Comprise; they clung three deep to its outside. The pilot hit the jets and it moved toward the sheraton.

"I don't understand this mutual suspicion," Constance said. "So mankind has split into two species. Give us time

and there'll be a dozen, a hundred, a thousand! Space is big enough for everyone, I should think, Mr. Wyeth."

"Is it?" The jitney glided toward the hotel's docking ring. The winds had almost died now, save for those generated by the spinning of the sheraton itself and by its own rotation-preservation jets. Still, the compressed air guidance retrofit had been a clumsy one, and the jitney lurched as its pilot overcorrected for yaw. The huddled Comprise grabbed for one another and hung on—all but one, who lost grip and went sailing away. For an instant the unit peacefully glided, and then it jerked violently. Bits of helmet exploded away from its head. Again the corpse jerked, and again. Some half-dozen samurai on pressurized broomsticks closed in on it.

"See those weapons they're holding?" Wyeth asked. "Air rifles. I had them machined in the tanks; the things are illegal in the Kluster. But I needed them. The geodesic's too thin for lased weapons, and blades just aren't fast enough."

"You *killed* that man!" Constance cried.

"We're not playing games here." The corpse was being towed away. "I assure you, my reasons were good."

"That's what Heisen would have said," Rebel muttered. Wyeth looked up sharply, and then the elevator doors opened and the first cluster of twenty Comprise were ushered in. Their skins were dyed to match their orange suits; it would be hard to lose one in a crowd. But what struck Rebel was not their garish color or the single long braid that all—men and women—wore, but the fact that each face was different. She hadn't expected that. For all that they thought, lived, and moved alike and were all part of a larger mind, each had the face of an individual human being.

Somehow that made the horror of it all that much more.

The group passed through single-file, some with eyes closed, others peering about with interest. Their

radiocommunication implants were invisible, placed deep within their bodies for safety. The leader broke rank and strode toward Wyeth. Two samurai fell into step to either side of her.

Wyeth looked up, waited. “We will need exercise areas, to keep these bodies in shape,” the woman said. “Also, the metal in this structure acts as a weak Faraday cage. We require that triaxial cable with local rectenna lead-ins be laid through all living areas.” Wyeth nodded. “Also, we have lost one of our bodies. Your security forces killed it.”

“So?”

“Earth assumes that the charge for consumables will be reduced by an appropriate fraction of a percent,” she said, “since it will not be able to consume them.”

“I’ll see to it.”

The woman joined the rear of her line. As the first group disappeared, the elevator doors opened and the next twenty were ushered through. Wyeth smiled sourly. “Wonderful stuff, eh? The Kluster is so hot to be rid of this crew that they stuff ’em right within striking distance of twenty-some tank towns. Let fifty of *these* characters into the tanks, and an army couldn’t dig them out. Within a month they’d have everyone in the tanks subsumed into their group mind.”

“That is sheer prejudice,” Constance said. “Earth is just another form that human intelligence can take. You’re acting as if it were an enemy.”

“It is an enemy, Ms. Moorfields. It’s the worst enemy the human race has, with the possible exception of the kind of stupidity that lets us think we can deal with Earth without getting burned. And the only thing we’ve got going for us here is me. I’ll see them all dead and in Hell before I let a single one loose.”

Outraged, Constance spun about and left. Wyeth put his hands on the edge of his desk and, stiff-armed, leaned

forward. He stared at the Comprise filing by, his eyes two hot coals.

Rebel shivered.

* * *

For a long hour the Comprise passed through the lobby under deferential guard. Technically they were guests, since they were paying for transit to Mars orbit. So for all their blades, pikes, and singlesticks, the samurai guided their five hundred charges with smiles and bows. The Comprise, of course, displayed neither approval nor displeasure.

More running lights had come on across the transit ring, first yellow and then orange. “How does that thing work?” Rebel asked.

Wyeth shrugged. “I know diddly-squat about physics to begin with. And of course no one understands Earth’s brand of physics; they’re centuries ahead of us. You could program me up to be another Miiko Ben-Yusuf, and I couldn’t explain how that thing works.” Then his face warped into a mischievous smile as his aspect changed. “I can give you the lecture for idiots, though. The way it was told to me, what the ring does is to take the space lying within it and accelerate that space. It actually moves space *through* space, and those things lying within that space remain embedded in that space and go along for the ride. So we’re here, and here we stay; only ‘here’ moves. The effect is instant speed. Velocity without acceleration. So you don’t have all the problems of inertia. Get it?”

“Uh... no, not actually.”

“Well, neither do I.” He laughed, and then the ring’s running lights turned green. “Whoops. Here we go.”

Involuntarily, Rebel gripped the edge of the desk. Onscreen, the transit ring, along with Londongrad, New High Kamden, the asteroid, and all other artifacts of the Kluster... vanished. It was as if they had been wiped from

the wall, leaving behind only the unchanging stars. “Was that it?” Rebel asked.

“Not much to look at, eh?”

“What happens to the transit ring now? Does the Kluster get to keep it?”

“They wish! No, what happens now is that it’ll dismantle itself. Then Kluster security will analyze the pieces and try to figure out how they all fit together, and of course they’ll fail. The Comprise is very good at cybersystems.” He glanced down at the inputs, and his expression changed. “Look. I’ve got a lot of work to do right now. Why don’t you check out your room, get some food, maybe catch a little sleep. Tomorrow morning, we can plan strategy, okay?”

“Okay.” She started toward the elevator, then paused. “Wyeth? Were you worried when you saw Heisen trying to kill me?”

“Not really. I had samurai in the area. Why?”

“Oh, nothing.”

* * *

The upper ring, where Rebel’s room was, was filled with off-program samurai, pierrots and pierrettes, and other service types. They were in a holiday mood, plucking fruit from the ornamental trees, laughing and splashing in the fountains. Paint was beginning to smear already. Somebody had broken open a crate of paper birds, and the air was filled with white flapping devices, flying in slow circles as their elastic bands unwound. Rebel strode through the revelers, full of melancholy energy, and this time she didn’t object when Maxwell slipped an arm around her waist and matched strides with her. “I hear they’re forming up an orgy in the water lily pond,” he said.

“What do you say?”

“Too many people for me. I’m going to my room.” Then, knowing already that it was a bad idea, but running a little short on good ones, she said, “Care to come along?”

The room was a standard luxury oval, with an off-center bed and programmable walls and ceiling. They stripped and tumbled onto the orange-and-red bear paw quilt, throwing their cloaks over the room monitor. Then, while Rebel instructed the walls to display a realtime exterior starscape, Maxwell wound all the birds tight and released them one by one.

The quilted bed floated among the stars, paper birds whirring quietly overhead, as they made love. At first Rebel sat atop Maxwell and did all the work, slapping his hands away whenever he reached for her. Then, when he was good and hot, she lowered herself onto him, and he seized her roughly and rolled over on top of her. He thrust away like some kind of machine, an untiring organic sex robot. She turned her head to the side, staring off into the infinity of tiny colored stars that was the Milky Way.

Gravity sex was nice. You didn't have to keep track of where you were, constantly shifting handholds; half the work was done for you. Then too, there was that good, solid weight atop her. It had a satisfying feel.

She was moving through passion now to a far, detached calm, a lofty mental landscape where her thoughts were wordless and as crystalline clear as cold mountain air.

Here, where her body's sensations were a pleasant background murmur, she felt at peace with herself. She felt simple and uncomplicated. It was easy to look within herself and search out the nameless discontent that had been gnawing at her for some time, the hidden poison that she could not isolate in the crowded babble of normal thought.

Everybody wanted something from her. That was a part of it. Deutsche Nakasone wanted her persona, and Jerzy

Heisen wanted her death. Snow and the rest of her network wanted to record her persona as well. And Wyeth wanted to use her as bait to snare and destroy Snow's network. According to him, they were all traitors, humans who had sold out to the Comprise and served the interests

of Earth. It made sense when you considered how deeply they were sunk into the experience of machine communion, that they should wish to be part of the ultimate merger of mind into machine. But in all this welter of desires, it was Wyeth who bothered her most. He was using her. For some reason that troubled her even more than the assassination attempt did.

Maxwell was moving faster now, losing rhythm as he approached orgasm. But the answer was already in Rebel's grip. She might not want to look at it, but there it was.

The fact was that it was not Maxwell she wanted inside her. It was Wyeth she wanted, and not just for a few sweaty hours on the quilt. She was falling for the man, alien four-faceted mind and all, and while it was a stupid thing to do—what kind of future could there possibly be with him?—her emotions were unreasoning and absolute. And who was there to complain to?

Maxwell arched his back, squeezing shut his eyes, and screamed soundlessly. Almost absently, Rebel reached out and squeezed his cheeks, digging her nails in good and hard. The paper birds were all on the floor.

Then Maxwell was lying beside her, sweaty and gasping. For the longest time they said nothing. Then she sent Maxwell out for food, and he returned with biscuits, slices of fried yam, and oranges from the trees in the hall. By the time they were done eating, he was interested again.

“Wanna do it a second time?” he asked.

“I suppose so.”

Then she was alone with her thoughts again. In love with Wyeth. What a mess. What a fucking mess.

When the sheraton's lights greenshifted from blue-tinged evening to yellowish dawn, Rebel kicked Maxwell out and went to meet Wyeth.

Trailed by a bodyguard of five samurai, they rode broomsticks into the geodesic. With her hair and cloak streaming behind, she felt like an Elizabethan lady riding to the hawks with her retinue, an illusion heightened by the scout cameras that soared at a distance, feeding information back to the guard. Except that the compressed air tanks chilled down as they were used, and after a while the saddle grew unpleasantly cold.

They rode by the outlying strands of orchid, where tangles of air roots held obsidian globes of water larger than her head, and, slowing, headed into the plant. The stalks grew closer together as they flew into the epiphyte's labyrinthine folds. It had blossomed and the huge bioluminescent flowers shed gentle fairy light through the darkness. This was a vague light, not like the full bloom of luciferous algae back home, but more like the periodic night seasons when the algae died back. At last they came to a large clearing deep within the plant and brought their broomsticks to a halt. "You won't consider martial arts programming?" Wyeth asked. "Very simple. It'd take maybe five minutes, with minimal personality change."

"No. I don't want anyone screwing with my mind."

He sighed. "Well, you've got to be able to defend yourself. So we'll have to reprogram you the old-fashioned way, with an instructor and lots of practice. Same results, just takes a lot more time and sweat. Treece." A thick little troll of a samurai slipped from his broomstick and floated beside it, one hand touching the saddle. He had a dark face and a froggish mouth. "Teach her."

Treece unlashed two singlesticks from his back and offered one to Rebel. She dismounted and accepted it. They both tied cloaks to saddles and kicked their vehicles

away. “Good. Now take a whack at me.”

Rebel eyed the swart little man, shrugged, and lashed out fast and hard, flinging back her opposing arm to control her drift. She was not at all surprised to see Treece slip out from under her blow—he was, after all, the instructor—but she was amazed when he slammed the back of her stick with his own, and the added energy set her tumbling end over end. “First lesson,” Treece said. “You’re going around and around one little point in your body, something like an axis. That’s your center of mass.”

“I know that!” Rebel said angrily, wishing Wyeth weren’t watching her. She concentrated on not getting dizzy. “I grew up weightless.”

“I grew up in gravity. Does me no good against somebody programmed judo.” He let her spin. “Now the center of mass is very important. First off, you set somebody spinning around it, their effectiveness is lessened. Got all they can do to keep themselves oriented—their thrusts and parries won’t be as crisp as they might be.” He reached out with his stick and Rebel seized it, putting herself stable in relation to him again. “Second, you’re going to want to remember to strike *at* the center of mass.” He poked at her with the tip of his staff. “Try it yourself. Move around all you like. What’s the one point of your body you can’t move when you’re afloat? It’s your center of mass. It just stays there.” He jabbed at her again. “Now. Move away from this.”

All in a flash, Rebel slammed her singlestick forward, two-handing it against his weapon with a *crack* that made her palms smart. Reaction threw her over his head, and on the way by she took a swipe at his skull. Treece brought his stick up for a parry and hook that brought them back to stable positions. “Absolutely right,” he said. “When you’re afloat, all serious movement is borrowed from your opponent.”

The samurai all floated in a plane, honoring a consensus

horizon. Treece wheeled upside down, leering at her. “So touching your opponent is both the source of opportunity and your greatest danger. Take my hand.” Rebel reached out, and instantly he had seized her wrist, climbed her arm, and taken her throat between stick and forearm. “I could snap your neck like this. Once you’ve been touched, you’re vulnerable. But you can’t accomplish a damned thing without touching your opponent.” He moved away, grinned sourly at her. “That’s what makes it a skill.”

Wyeth had been leaning back in his saddle, eyes closed, directing his pocket empire via a transceiver equipped with an adhesion disk. Now he opened his eyes and said, “That’s as nice a paradigm for political maneuvering as I’ve ever heard.”

Rebel started to respond and almost didn’t hear her instructor’s stick whistling toward her in time to parry. “No small talk!” Treece snapped. “We’re done with talk now anyway. No more theory, no more gab, just dull, repetitive exercise. Rest of today and every day until you get it right, is nothing but sweat.”

A long time later, he looked disgusted and spat into the orchid. “Enough. Same time tomorrow.”

Samurai brought up their broomsticks. Rebel felt exhausted, but pleasantly so. Aware of her every muscle. Luckily, Eucrasia had kept her body in good shape.

They rode to the edge of the orchid and stopped. Wyeth hitched his broom to an air root, and Rebel followed suit, while the guard moved away, expanding their patrol. Wyeth clambered along a thick trunk, inexpertly grabbing for handholds. Rebel followed more gracefully.

They came to the end of the plant, a break here as sudden and startling as when a climax forest gives way to grassland. Out in the darkness, distant stretches of the air plant were like streamers of luminous clouds. Alone and bright, the sheraton spun like a wheel. Its light was redder now, almost noontime orange. The silvery glimmerings

about it were people flitting to and fro like mayflies.

Finally Wyeth said, “This is the first time I’ve ever had people working under me. I’ve always been something of a lone wolf.”

Rebel looked at him, not sure what to say. At last she feebly joked, “More of a lone wolfpack, hey?”

“I guess.”

More silence. Then, “What’s it like?” Rebel asked.

“Having four personas?”

“Well... when I’m not actually in use, I don’t really do anything. I have a passive awareness of myself. I see what’s going on. It’s like there are four of us standing around a small stage, with a bright light on its center. We watch everything that happens, hear it all, feel it all, but we don’t do a thing until we step into the light. When we’re in the dark, we don’t really much care. Sometimes all of us are in the light, and—” His voice changed

slightly—“sometimes two of us are in the light, but one keeps his mouth shut. Another half hour monitoring and I expect to be spelled.” His voice changed back again. “That was my warrior aspect. Right now he’s directing security back in the sheraton. That frees me up to use the body.”

“That’s weird,” Rebel said. “The way your voice changes. You don’t really have to speak out loud to communicate with yourself, do you? I mean, you can think something and the others will pick up on it?”

“No, I have to talk or at least subvocalize, because... well, thoughts are most of what a persona is, you see. They’re the architecture, they define the shape and existence of a persona, where it starts and where it lets off. We can’t share our thoughts directly—”

“—without breaking down the persona,” Rebel finished for him. “Yeah, that’s right, they’d all merge together, like breaking the membrane between twinned eggs.”

“Eucrasia’s training is really coming back to you.”

Rebel looked away. “You don’t have to sound so cheerful about it. It’s like—I feel these memories closing in on me, crushing me. They’re all *hers*, and none of them mine, and I can feel myself being affected by them, you know? I think they’re changing me, making me more like her.” She fought down a dark, helpless urge to cry. “Sometimes I think all those memories are going to rise up and drown me.”

Wyeth touched her arm. “Your persona is only a mask,” he said in his pattern-maker voice. “Ultimately it’s not important. *You* — your being, your self — are right *here*, in the compass of your skull and body.” Rebel shivered again under his touch, and she turned to him. Then, it was like the singlestick exercise of climbing your opponent’s arm—it happened all in a furious instant, too fast for thought. Wyeth’s arms crushed her to his body, and they were kissing each other. She wanted him so desperately it was hard to believe that he had reached for her first.

“Come on.” Wyeth drew her back into the orchid, into a space that was dark and sheltered. He slid her cloak from her and set it to the side. His hands moved down her body, rolled away her *cache-sexe*. He buried his face in the side of her neck.

“Wait,” Rebel said. “I want the big guy.”

He looked at her questioningly.

“Your warrior aspect. I want to make love to you while you’re being the warrior.”

* * *

Later, Rebel went out riding with the fool. They laughed and joked as they went no place in particular. “You’re going to have to give up your irrational prejudice against wetprogramming,” Wyeth said, smiling. “It’s useful stuff. If I didn’t have another persona running the sheraton, I couldn’t be out here now, gallivanting about with you.”

They rode on and came to a carnival.

It was located where the orchid grew closest to the tanks. One long vine, in fact, had been disentangled and tied to an airlock; people traveled along it, following the holiday music to where a clearing had been chopped inside the plant.

From outside, the carnival looked like a ramshackle collection of huts and frames caught in the tangled growth. Within, it was bright with flowers and strings of paper lanterns. Tank towners in cloaks as garish as jungle moths flitted to and fro. Lengths of flash-dried vine had been lashed together to make dueling cages, booths for astrologers and luck-changers, lovers' mazes, gambling wheels and huckster tables. Artisans were painting panels for a centrifuge ride, conjuring up kings, bulls, starships, and reapers.

A singlestick duel was in progress by the main gate. The samurai glanced at it with interest as they entered.

“Look!” Wyeth drew Rebel into a booth where fairgoers threw waterballs at a distant bozo. “Give me three!” He flung the first with too much force, and it broke into tiny drops that splattered past the clown like rain. The bozo jeered, and Wyeth threw again. This time the ball exploded into a thousand spherelets in the bozo's face.

“Ah, that felt good!”

When the barker floated him the last waterball, Wyeth winked at the bozo and smashed it into his own face. Nearby fairgoers laughed in astonishment. Away from the paper lanterns, their eyes were shadowy and their faces pale masks.

Wyeth and Rebel wandered past simple games of rigged chance to hucksters selling jams and candies, carved wooden astronauts, bright straw dolls and dark barrel men. “Right here!” a barker cried. “Yes, yes, yes!” Rebel bought a sugar skull and bit into it. Red jelly oozed from one eye socket. She stared at it in dismay, then laughed. She was considering some silver bells with toe-ribbons

when she was struck with sudden unease. Looking up, she saw Wyeth holding a luminous apple the size of a cherry tomato.

“Seven hours?” Wyeth said. “Seven hours Kluster for an apple?”

The huckster was a little man with spidery arms and legs, a lopsided grin, and a crazy look to his dark eyes. He sang:

“Awake, arise, pull out your eyes,
And hear what time of day.
And when you have done, pull out your tongue
And see what you can say!”

Then, speaking to Wyeth, “Ah, but the shyapple is no ordinary fruit; no, it has a worm at its heart.”

“What does the worm do?”

“Why it eats, sir. It eats and excretes, until it drowns in its own liquor.” He plucked the apple from Wyeth’s fingers. “You must swallow it whole: core, pips, and aye. Like thus.

“What did I dream? I do not know;
The fragments fly like chaff.
Yet strange my mind was tickled so
I cannot help but laugh.”

Then, speaking again, “My name is Billy Bejesus and I live in a tree. If I’m not there yet, why then that must be me.” He tumblesaulted over in the air, kicking his heels.

Appalled and intrigued, Wyeth turned to Rebel. “Can you make any sense of this madman’s ranting?”

“Don’t touch those things! Don’t you know a shyapple when you see one?” Big-eyed, Wyeth shook his head.

“They’re mind alterers. By the sound of it, this lot is just directed hallucinogens, but a shyapple can be prepared to do almost anything—to give you a skill, to make you mad, to bring you sanity. Some are prepared so they’ll negate themselves after a few hours, and others are... permanent.

You wouldn't want to put one in your mouth without knowing what it does, first."

"Really? Chemical wetprogramming?" Wyeth rubbed a fingertip over the bright skin, held it to his nose, and sniffed gingerly. "How does it work?"

"Well, the shyapple is just a matrix. It's the worm that's altered according to what effects are desired. It's... injected with a virus that... When the shyapple's center liquifies, the virus undergoes explosive growth and..." She faltered to a stop. "No. It's gone now. I used to know, but it's all gone." And yet it was—she sensed—vitally important in some way.

"I never heard of them before." Wyeth held a shyapple to his eyes, admiring the translucent skin, the candy-red shimmer, its full-to-bursting juiciness. "Where did they come from, I wonder? Why did they show up here all of a sudden?"

Rebel shook her head helplessly.

"You've got what? Three crates there?" Billy Bejesus's grin was luminescent. "I'll take them all. Treece. Arrange the details and see that these things are taken back to the sheraton."

They floated on. Rebel lingered at a jewelry display, examining a tray of religious pins: stars, crosses, swastikas, and the like. She bought a white scallop shell and pinned it to the collar of her cloak. "Now I can wipe off this face paint," she said. "People will assume I'm some sort of religious fanatic." Oddly enough, her sense of unease was stronger than ever.

"Good thinking. Though if I were you, I'd find out what your pin stands for. Might save you an embarrassing conversation somewhere down the line."

They were floating hand in hand before an enormous mesh sphere, watching the cockfights, when Wyeth said in his leader voice, "Crap. Come on. We've got to get back to

the sheraton.” He tugged Rebel toward the gate. Their bodyguard materialized around them.

“What’s the trouble?” Rebel asked.

“Constance is talking with the Comprise.”

* * *

All the way back to the sheraton, Rebel’d had the uneasy feeling that someone was following her, a shadowy presence flitting through the leaves and vines that was never there when she looked back over her shoulder, but returned the instant she looked away. Here, in the bright-lit rooms of the complex, that sense faded but did not go entirely away. There was somebody outside coming for her.

“Heisen’s body was never found,” Wyeth said when she mentioned this to him. “He very well *could* be coming for you. That’s half the reason I’ve assigned you a permanent guard.”

“What’s the other half?”

“We’re going in to deal with them now.” He slipped a bracelet from his wrist, one of a pair of thick ivory bands lined with silver. “Here. Put this on. It monitors the electromagnetic spectrum.”

Samurai stepped aside as Wyeth slammed through the doors to the center ring’s main conference room. There, under a holographic sky, Constance sat on the edge of a red lacquered bridge. She was dabbing her feet in the goldfish stream. Several Comprise stood by, listening to her talk. Scattered among the topiary bushes were her team with the tools of their trade—fermenters, chimeric sequence splicers, microbial bioreactors and the like—demonstrating lab techniques while Comprise in identical coveralls clustered about them, like patches of orange mist. Wyeth’s face hardened into granite slabs.

“All right, Moorfields!”

Constance leaped to her feet. “Oh!” She blinked. “You

startled me, Mr. Wyeth.”

“I’ll do worse than that to you.” Wyeth glowered at her from the bank. “Just what do you think you’re doing? Why have you moved your lab and people from the third ring?”

“Well, I had to. I wanted to chat with the Comprise, and I was told there was some silly rule against their leaving the central ring.”

Some hundred Comprise dotted the room. Several drifted over, into a loose semicircle about Wyeth and Rebel, studying them gravely but saying nothing. “Clear the treehangers out,” Wyeth ordered. Samurai moved in and started escorting the bioengineers away. “Have two people programmed legal, one Londongrad and one People’s Mars, and send them here.” To Constance, “You’ll find that Kluster law is extremely legalistic, and People’s law is informal and rational. Between them, I expect that if you step out of line again, I can hang you for treason.”

“Treason! Surely you’re joking.”

“I am very serious.”

Constance shook her head, clasped her hands, let them fall. “But we were just exchanging scientific information.”

“Oh? What information did they give you?”

“We were on the preliminaries, just swapping basics. Talking shop. You know.”

“I know very well.” Wyeth’s hands were clenched and white. “Use your head! Your gang was swapping detailed bioscientific chitchat with a team of Comprise that is ostensibly here as engineers and physicists. How did they know the jargon? How did they happen to know enough of the biosciences to understand what you were talking about?”

“Well, Earth is, after all, a planet. They have the largest set of interlocking ecologies in the Inner System, so they must use...”

Embarrassed, Rebel shifted her gaze out the window wall. She saw tiny motes of light shifting through the orchid; people were astir out there. Doubtless the tanks were emptying out as people moved into the plant. But looking away couldn't keep her from overhearing the argument.

“That's nonsense! They know because they're spies, that's why. Before they left Earth they were systematically crammed with the basics of every corner of science, in the hope they'd stumble across something useful. Ms. Moorfields, look at them! They are not human, they're not friendly, and they're not altruistic. They'll take whatever technology you've got and then use it against your own race. You're selling humanity down the tubes—and for what?”

Unexpectedly, a Comprise said, “She wants the technology to build a transit ring.”

Constance started. “I didn't tell them that!”

“The Comprise is very quick on the uptake,” Wyeth said sardonically. He asked the Comprise, “Why did she want that information?”

“The desire for private gain is a common failing of individual intelligence.”

“That's not it at all!” Constance cried. “It would open up the stars. Can't you see?” She appealed directly to Wyeth.

“It could be used to accelerate comets beyond the Oort Cloud, toward the nearer stars. The closest could be reached within the span of one long lifetime—they gave me the figures! Imagine thousands of dyson worlds drifting from star to star. Expanding into the universe. Imagine an age of exploration and discovery.” Her voice was fervent, almost devout, and Rebel found herself responding to it as she might to a farbranch revivalist prophet. “Imagine mankind finally freed from the cradle of the sun and wandering the starry galaxies in search of... I don't know. Truth, maybe? Destiny! All the final answers!”

Before Wyeth could reply, the Comprise said, “Do not trouble yourself, Boss Wyeth. She has nothing we desire.”

“That’s not true. You told me...” But the Comprise had wandered off. Almost pleading, she said, “They told me they were interested in the mind arts. We know a great deal about them.”

“You yourself?” Wyeth asked. “One of your people?”

“Well, no. It’s all new technology. The breakthroughs are being made, but the skills aren’t widespread yet.”

“And yet you’re all biologists. Isn’t it a coincidence then that a Comprise of engineers are up on the mind arts, while your own people know zilch? I’d say you’ve just proven that your friends here are indeed spies.” Wyeth casually touched a bracelet on his wrist and crooked an eyebrow at Rebel. She touched the bracelet he had given her.

The world was transformed. Electricity glowed white from wires hidden in the walls. Heat shimmered green.

Cobalt particles sleeted through the room, cosmic radiation to which matter was as insubstantial as a dream. A red haze of radiocommunication surrounded the now-green figures of the Comprise, and laser-crisp directional beams reached from individual to individual, shifting as thoughts were divided and routed for processing. Rebel blinked, and it all disappeared for an instant. She looked down at the bracelet and saw the blazing circuits of a holographic projector. One of Wyeth’s spy devices.

“Mr. Wyeth, you are being disgusting.” Constance turned away.

“Don’t be like that,” Wyeth said in his whimsical voice. “Here, have an apple. Nice and crunchy.” He placed something in her hand.

“An apple?” Constance looked down at the shyapple and dropped it, horrified. “Where did that come from?”

“I was hoping you could tell me. This is an example of your mind art biotechnology, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but...” She tightened her lips. “Hook me into your intercom system.” One of the Comprise stepped forward and, stooping, reached for the fallen shyapple. Wyeth stepped on the woman’s hand, hard, and she jerked it back.

“We were curious,” the Comprise said mildly. Several new lines of interaction connected with her.

“So what?” Wyeth gestured to the samurai. “Keep the Comprise on their side of the stream. And open up a channel for Ms. Moorfields.”

A moment later, Freeboy’s image appeared, and Constance shook the shyapple at him. “Freeboy, you’re the only one who’s been working with directed viruses. Is this your doing?”

“Aw, hell,” Freeboy said. “It’s just pocket money.”

“You never mentioned this skill to me.”

“It’s not a skill. It’s only cookbook stuff. I got the recipe from a wizard in Green City, when I was in Tirnannog.” Constance’s face was cold and white. The boy spread his hands, his shoulders hunching slightly. “Hey, it’s only a Billy Bejesus—eight hours’ looniness, and it deprograms itself. It’s not like I was hurting anybody. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Like hell you didn’t, young man.”

While the young treehanger was being dressed down, Rebel saw an odd thing: The Comprise, who had been moving about seemingly randomly, had all simultaneously arrived at the water’s edge. The samurai guarding them shifted uneasily. They stared across the water, orange faces blank, eyes unblinking. The electromagnetic interactions increased, lines blinking on and off like laser strobes. For a long moment, no one moved.

Then the Comprise jumped, individual components

running furiously to one side or the other, forming clusters and gaps. Twenty charged across the wooden bridge. The samurai braced themselves to receive the charge.

In that instant's confusion, a small orange figure darted across the stream. The guards' eyes had been drawn one way and another, and he leaped through a blind spot. All in a flash, he was at Constance's side, reached up, and snatched the shyapple from her hands. Before anyone could react, he was back among the Comprise. "That was a *child!*" Rebel said.

"Catch him!" Wyeth commanded, and three samurai leaped the stream. As they converged on the child, he crammed the fruit in his mouth and swallowed. One snatched him up and carried him back, the others defending. But the Comprise offered no resistance. They turned away, again as aimless as so many cattle. Still, red interaction lines connected the boy directly to half the Comprise in the room.

"Too late," Wyeth said when the samurai placed the boy before him. "He's already swallowed it."

"But this is a child," Rebel repeated.

"This is the body of a child. Comprise engineering teams always include a few children for tasks where a bigger body would just be in the way."

"But that's awful."

"I agree." Wyeth smiled at Constance. "How about you? Still feel that there's no crime in five billion human minds with only one single identity among them?"

"We must be careful not to anthropomorphize," Constance said weakly. She looked pale.

"Very well put." Wyeth turned to the child Comprise.

"Why did you do it?"

"We were curious," the boy said. "We wished to know whether this new technology might prove useful to us. In

that sense—in that we are always eager for new information, new ideas, new directions of thought—we are indeed the spies you accuse us of being. But only in that one sense of being true to our nature.”

“You see?” Constance said.

“More importantly, it distresses us to be separated from the true Comprise.” Rebel couldn’t see the child’s face now for the blaze of red interaction lines touching the skin over his buried rectenna, but his voice was bland. “There are only five hundred Comprise in this structure—and we are used to the mental stimulation of billions. Restricted as we are, any new challenges are taken up eagerly.” A pause.

“You might say that we were bored.”

Wyeth turned to Freeboy’s image. “How long does your drug take to hit?”

Freeboy shrugged. “Not long. A minute or two. There are receptor enhancers in the shyapple matrix. Tell you, though, maybe this isn’t really a good idea. Those apples are adult dosages. I don’t know what they’ll do to a kid.

This one looks like he has low body mass.”

Constance reached for the boy, and a samurai batted her hand away. “But there’s still time. If I stick a finger down his throat...”

“Now, now,” Wyeth chided. “Mustn’t anthropomorphize. Let’s just wait and see. This might be interesting.”

The boy stood still between his guard of samurai. Suddenly he stiffened. His eyes opened wide. “Oh,” he said. One hand rose before his face and writhed spasmodically. “I think—”

The child screamed.

* * *

The lawyers arrived while the Comprise were still thrashing on the ground. Four samurai held the boy’s limbs, and Constance knelt beside him. The directional

beams flicked on and off, lashing blindly through the air like the frenzied legs and antennae of a dying insect. Then, all radio contact with the drugged child finally severed, the other Comprise slowly got to their feet, a hundred individual expressions of collective horror on their faces.

“I wonder why it worked so well?” Wyeth murmured thoughtfully to himself. “They’ve got defenses against intrusive wetprogramming. This must be something new. This must be an entirely different approach.”

“Hold still, dear. If I can get you to throw up, you’ll feel better,” Constance said.

The boy twisted his head away from her. “I,” he said. “I saw the moon I saw a tree I saw the moon caught in a tree I saw a tree caught in the moon.” His eyes were wide as saucers; they quivered slightly in time to some inner pulse.

“I saw a peacock with a fiery tail,
I saw a blazing comet drop down hail,
I saw a cloud—”

“Take him to the surgery,” Wyeth ordered. “Do what you can to ease his discomfort, but get the radio implants inside him deactivated before he regains his senses. I don’t want him reconnecting with the Comprise.”

“You can’t do that,” Constance objected. “He’s a part of the Comprise. That’s where he belongs.”

“Well?” Wyeth asked the lawyers. “Can I do that or not?”

The lawyer in yellowface chewed his lower lip. “It’s a difficult point.”

“If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck,” the lawyer in purple said, “then it’s a duck. This individual looks human and uses the first-person singular. Therefore he’s human, not Comprise.”

“Thank you,” Wyeth said. He gestured at Freeboy’s image. “This joker’s been dealing dangerous hallucinogens out in the orchid. What can I get him for?”

“Nothing,” the purple lawyer said. “There’s no law against giving people the opportunity to hurt themselves.”

“We-ell now, there is the question of presumed societal consent,” Yellow said. “Consensus-altering drugs would come under the foreseeable cultural change clauses of—”

“Good,” Wyeth said. “I sentence you to status of programmed informant for the duration of transit. Stay where you are. The programmers will come for you.” Freeboy looked stricken. “You’ll be attached to Moorfields here. Observe her, and report to me at this hour of every day.” He turned to Rebel and offered his arm. “I think we’ve done enough, don’t you? Shall we go?”

*** * ***

That night, Rebel fell asleep after making love, and dreamed that she was walking the empty corridors of some ancient manor. It was cold, and there was the scent of lilacs in the air. A breeze stirred her hair, passed chill hands over her thighs and abdomen. She came face to face with an ornate Victorian mirror. The gravity was half again Greenwich normal, pulling down her flesh, making her face look old and gaunt. She wonderingly reached out a hand to the mirror.

Her reflection’s hand broke through the liquid surface of the mirror and seized her wrist.

Rebel tried to pull away, but the grip was unbreakable. Long red nails dug painfully into her flesh. In the mirror Eucrasia showed her teeth in a smile. She was a fat-breasted little woman, but there was muscle under that smooth brown skin. “Don’t go away, dearest. We have so much to talk about.”

“We have nothing to talk about!” Rebel’s panicked words bounced from the walls and echoed down to nothing.

Eucrasia pushed her face against the mirror’s surface, the glass bulged out by nose and lips but held together by

surface tension. Silver highlights played over her skin. “Ah, but we do. My memories are going to overwhelm you if you don’t do something about them.” Behind her was a white room, a surgery, with trays of chromed instruments. “Come closer, sweet love.”

She yanked Rebel forward, right up against the mirror. Their nipples touched, kissed at the surface. “I want to help you,” Eucrasia whispered. “Look at me.” For the first time, Rebel looked into the woman’s eyes. There was nothing in the sockets but an empty space where the eyes should have been. She could see through them to the back of Eucrasia’s skull. “You see? I have no self. No desires. How can I intend you harm?”

“I don’t know.” Rebel began to cry. “Let me go.”

“There are only two ways you can survive. The first is to have me recreated as a secondary persona. You’d be like Wyeth, then. You’d have to share your life, but the memories would all be shunted over to the Eucrasia persona. You could remain intact.” The reflection shifted to one side, and Rebel was forced to move with it. “The second alternative is to make a complete recording of your persona. Then you could reprogram yourself every few weeks. This is less desirable, because it precludes any chance of personal growth.” Their stomachs touched now. Eucrasia placed her lips on Rebel’s. “Well?” she asked. “Which will it be?”

“Neither!”

The reflection reached out and yanked Rebel’s head into the mirror. Quicksilver closed about her. It was like being underwater, and Rebel couldn’t breathe. “Then your personality will dissolve,” Eucrasia said. “Slowly at first, and then more quickly. You’ll be gone within a month.”

Rebel choked, and awoke.

“Wake up,” Wyeth said. He was holding her. “You’re having a nightmare.” Then, seeing her eyes open, “It was only a dream.”

“Jesus,” Rebel said. She buried her face in his chest and cried.

When she finally stopped, Wyeth released her and she sat up. She looked about dazedly. Wyeth had apparently been up for some time, thinking his own thoughts, for the walls had been turned on. A starscape, piped in from outside, glowed in the night. “Look,” Wyeth said. He pointed to a fuzzy patch almost overhead. “That’s Eros Kluster. The asteroid is invisible from here, and what we’re seeing is the attenuosphere—the waste gases from the factories and refineries, the oxygen lost whenever an airlock opens, fine matter from reaction jets. It surrounds the Kluster, and the solar wind ionizes it, like the gas in a comet’s tail. Assuming the comet is unplanted, of course.”

He pointed out more smudges, all in the plane of the ecliptic. “There’s Pallas Kluster, Ceres Kluster, Juno Kluster, Vesta...” He sang off the names in a gentle litany.

“Civilization is spreading. Someday there’ll be major developments everywhere in the asteroid belts. Those hazy patches will link then, into one enormous smoke ring around the sun. That would be something to see, hey?”

“Yes,” Rebel said in a little voice.

“Feel up to talking about it yet?”

So she told him her dream. When she was done, Wyeth said, “Well, there’s your mysterious pursuer.” She frowned. “Back in the orchid, you thought someone was following you? Eucrasia. The memories are rising up, and you’re projecting them into the exterior world.”

“That may be so,” Rebel said. “But knowing it doesn’t do me any good.”

“You really have only two choices,” Wyeth said softly.

“Your dream spelled them out for you. You were a topnotch wetprogrammer, and your diagnosis is sound. Listen, you want my advice? Take Eucrasia in with you. I knew her, she’s not such a bad sort. You can live with her.”

“I won’t do it,” Rebel said. “I won’t let anyone touch my mind, I... I just won’t, is all.”

Wyeth turned away. There was tension in the muscles of his back. After a very long time, Rebel touched his shoulder, and he turned back abruptly, almost violently.

“Why are you being so stubborn?” he cried. “*Why?*”

“I don’t know why,” Rebel admitted. “It’s just the way I am, I guess.”

7

BILLY DEFECTOR

Rebel woke to an empty bed. She breakfasted and went in search of Wyeth. A pierrot directed her through a rock garden and around a kitchen, and a samurai sent her past the orgy pits and down a ramp. She came to a bottom ring room where three holographic wetware diagrams spun slowly in the air. Rebel saw that they were morphs of the same personality. Judging by the sickliness of the main branches and twisted distribution of the lesser limbs, it was a very badly damaged persona indeed.

The Comprise child sat beneath the rotating green spheres. He hadn’t slept. His face was puffy, his eyes glazed. His orange skin was blotchy with grey patches.

“What’s your name?” Wyeth asked. “Do you have a name?”

The boy shook his head. “I... uh, what?” Wyeth repeated the question, and without raising his eyes, the child said, “B-Billy. Billy B-Be...” His voice stuttered to a halt.

Wyeth grinned and tugged the child’s braid. “We’ll call you Billy Defector, okay? Because you’ve come over to our side, you’re going to be human now. Would you like that?”

“He’s not going to thank you for doing this to him.”

“Shut up, Constance. Now, Billy, do you remember being a part of the Comprise? Do you remember what it was like?”

Billy’s head jerked up, eyes fearful. His hands twisted in his lap. Then he looked down again and mumbled, “I... yes.”

“Good. Do you remember the briefing you got before coming here?” Billy said nothing. “Do you remember your instructions?”

Samurai parted for Rebel, and she slipped into the room. Her guard stayed outside. Freeboy glanced at her quickly from one corner, then away. His lips were thin, and he stared rigidly unblinking at Constance. Rebel walked over to him and whispered, “What happened to the kid’s face?”

“What? The blotches? We injected a phage under the skin to neutralize his dye; it takes a few days to flush it out of the system. Itches some, too. But since he’s not Comprise anymore, your boss doesn’t want him marked as one.”

“I thought your apple was supposed to deprogram itself.”

Freeboy curled his lip. Without looking at her he said pedantically, “For a normal psyche, a Billy Bejesus is a harmless, ego-intensive shyapple that leaves nothing behind but memories. But the Comprise have only embryonic egos—even the memory of having a strong personal identity is damaging to them. Changes the creatures drastically.”

“Shock imprint syndrome,” Rebel said, Eucrasia’s memories coming to her effortlessly. “Yes, of course.”

At the sound of her voice, Wyeth turned. “Sunshine! Just the person I wanted to see. It seems you and I are the closest things to competent wetprogrammers we have.” He snapped open a thin white case and ran a finger down one

line of wetwafers. Hundreds of codified character traits, skills, compulsions and professions rippled under his touch. “I’d expected to just program up some experts. But it seems the regulations have changed in the last few years. Wetprogramming ware is very tightly controlled now. Beautiful, hey? None of the other professions are protected like that.”

Without any sense of transition, Rebel was at the case. Her hands floated down over lines of joys, fears, sorrows, and ecstasies with unhesitating sureness, and teased out a manual skills program. It was for vacuum-casting ceramics as thin and delicate as soap bubbles. She slid it into an analyzer, tilting back her head to see its effect on the diagram overhead. The r-branch was straightened, but a self-destructive paradigm opened up near the midsection of the n-branch.

The rift was easily filled by altering the sensorium distribution and heightening religious susceptibility. Rebel eased two more wafers into the analyzer, adjusted tone readings, and edited out a few irrelevancies. This strengthened the n-branch, but kinked the 1-branch at its first major split, so she replaced the ceramics wafer with a woodworking package. Little by little, the template began to shape up.

This was the great challenge, to find the health hidden within a damaged psyche and to assemble the programs that would restore it. She lost herself in the work. Some time later—minutes? hours?—she looked up again and found the interrogation was still going on. Not much progress had been made.

“Billy, do you remember being Earth? Do you remember what it was like?”

“It was like—” The child stopped and swallowed.
“Nothing happened. It was warm. No thoughts. Many thoughts. Nothing was real.”

“What kind of thoughts?”

Billy closed his eyes for a long moment. Then, in a rapid monotone, he said, “Rotate grating six raise two and rotate again reroute quote the Comprise agree in principle but with reservations unquote raise the vial of eagle’s blood reroute using Allen wrench adjust the potentiometer to the red mark reroute ship to Sanfrisco marked green code green reroute injecting kerosene between vascular stations seventeen and twelve reroute railroad bedding excavation—”

“Stop!”

Billy obeyed.

“What’s the problem?” Rebel asked.

Wyeth looked disgusted. “It’s all garbage. Bits and pieces jumbled together at random. I’m not going to learn anything from this child because he never knew anything. He never thought a complete thought through in his life. He just processed a constant flow of babble.”

Now Constance folded her arms, glaring at Wyeth. “He’s used to being a part of oceanic thought. You’ve ripped him out of his natural environment. Of course you can’t get any sense out of him... Look at him! He’s been damaged. Being remade in the mold of a human individual is a major devolutionary step for him.”

“Is it?”

“Yes, it is. God damn that superior smile, it is! This is the way that life evolves, from simple to complex. We’re all on an evolutionary voyage from the small and uncomplicated to the macrocosmic. From one-celled plants to comet oaks.

From amoebae through fish to apes. From simple sensation through sentience, intelligence, and then macrointelligence. Can’t you see the progression? All of life evolves toward Godhead.”

“A very pretty theory, but with all due respect, it’s full of shit.”

The boy was sweating. Constance wiped his brow. He

began breathing heavily, and she dabbed a fluid on his throat. As it sank through the skin, his breathing eased.

“You—”

Movement at the door. “Sir?” Two samurai escorted in a tall Comprise. “This one said he had to talk with you personally.”

“You have one of our number,” the Comprise said. “Return him.”

Wyeth shifted slightly, put his hand on the child’s shoulder. Looking at Constance, he said, “Billy? Do you want to return?”

Billy trembled. His eyes darted here, there, everywhere but toward the Comprise. His body twisted away spasmodically. “In his condition, he can’t possibly give informed—” Constance began.

“Why?” Rebel asked the Comprise. “I mean, he can’t be much use to you in his condition. What do you want him for?”

“Experimentation. Dissection.”

Constance opened her mouth, shut it again. The Comprise spoke into the sudden silence. “We also require a good analytical laboratory, a surgery, and a supply of the drug administered to us. We will need to take a large number of tissue samples. The analytical equipment should be suitable for a comprehensive mapping of chemical trace effects in the brain. Earth will of course pay for your trouble.”

“The hell you say.” Wyeth’s face was hard.

Before the Comprise could respond, Billy bent forward, covering his head with frantic hands, and began to cry.

Gingerly, Rebel sat beside him, put an arm around his shoulders. He turned, throwing himself at her, and buried his head between her shoulder and neck.

Small hands clutched at her painfully. “We are not sure what you mean by that,” the Comprise said.

“Let me spell it out for you,” Wyeth said. “First, we like the boy, and we’re going to keep him. Second, our resources are limited, and we do not have the laboratory equipment to spare, no matter what price you’re willing to pay. And third…” He turned to a nearby samurai. “Those crates of shyapples I had brought here? Destroy them all.”

The floor exploded upward.

“Holy shit!” Freeboy cried, and then fell backwards as something fast glanced off the side of his head. The room was suddenly full of black, acrid smoke. A cable ripped free from the floor, stiffened with voltage, and fell forward, like a huge snake striking. Sparks skittered across the floor. Wyeth flung out an arm to point at Rebel and Billy. “Treece!” he shouted. “Get them out of here!”

Orange figures boiled up from the hole.

* * *

The Comprise child was heavy. Treece hustled them through long corridors while electrical equipment hissed and erupted about them. All the lights went out. “What’s happening?” Rebel cried. The boy’s small hands still clutched at her. He kept his face buried in her shoulder.

“Power outage. Wyeth’s crashed the computers. It’ll be on in a minute.”

Something exploded up ahead. There was a chemical stink in the air. “No, I mean—”

Treece grinned thuggishly. “Oh, you mean in *general*. The Comprise have taken over our computer systems. Nothing to worry about. We were waiting for this.” The lights went back on. In the hall behind them, a wall collapsed, and the lights blacked out again. In the dark, a squad of samurai trotted by.

“What?”

“Turn right here.” A sudden wind boomed down the hall, and Rebel almost lost her footing. “The Comprise will always suborn a computer system. It’s second nature to

them. But our systems are built to be crashed. We've got manual cut-offs through the sheraton. We can crash the system and rebuild it as many times as they can take it over."

They stepped into an orangery with a stormy holographic sky. While Treece rummaged through an adjacent storeroom, Rebel stood dully looking at the orrery in the center of the room. Marigolds had been planted at its base. The samurai emerged with two broomsticks and thrust one at Rebel. He also carried a rifle and two singlesticks, one of which he also gave Rebel. "Feel like you can handle the kid?"

"I feel like a marsupial." The way Billy was clutching her, he wasn't likely to come loose. She climbed into her saddle. "Let's go."

Treece raised his rifle and blew out the window.

* * *

They exploded out into darkness. Almost immediately limpet cameras swooped down on them from all directions. "Son of a bitch!" Treece screamed, bringing up the rifle. He burst all but two of the cameras before the remotes could reach them. One dove for his face, and he swung the rifle around like a club to smash into its complexly-lensed front. Fragments of camera and gun went flying.

The last camera came at Rebel. She slashed with her singlestick and almost lost her seat. The camera bobbed under her swing, and then there was an instant's darkness as the sheraton's computers were crashed yet again. The wheel's lights came back on, and, before the Comprise systems could reprogram the camera, its momentum carried it through a window. It crashed to the floor, buzzing and crippled. Then window, room, and all swung away.

"Go!" Treece shouted, and Rebel got her hands back on the broomstick and kicked the jet nozzles wide open.

They screamed away. “Where are we going?” she yelled over her shoulder.

Treece brought his broomstick up alongside hers. Now that they were out of danger, he was impassive again. “Anywhere you like, so long as it’s not the sheraton. Or the tank towns. Security is a problem there. This is a rigged fight, even if the Comprise doesn’t know it yet. All we have to do is lay low for a few hours, and it’ll be safe to go back home.”

*** * ***

They cruised the orchid’s edge, Rebel slowly killing speed with short bursts of retro, until they were moving at a crawl. Up ahead, Rebel saw a white rag tied to a stalk. “Look there. What’s that for, do you think?”

Treece shrugged.

Coming to a stop, Rebel peered into the tangles of orchid. She saw another white rag tied further in. Between rags, several stalks looked frayed, as if they had served as common kickstops. The ghost of a memory from her life in Tirnannog tugged at her. “It’s a path. Somebody lives in there.” She angled her broomstick inward. The boy had not spoken since their flight had begun. She put a hand on the top of his head. It was warm, almost fevered; she imagined she could feel the interplay of emotions within. His braid stuck straight out. She held it against his skull and wondered how old he was. Seven? Nine? Not that it mattered. “How are you doing, Billy?”

The boy shook his head.

They drifted deeper into the orchid, the light dimming as blossoms grew rarer. Roots and stalks grew thicker here, and more tangled. Rebel had to dismount. She put Billy into the saddle and towed the broomstick behind her. He peered about silently. She tugged the broomstick deeper into the vines, finding handholds and grabspots, and always following the rags. It was almost like a tunnel now, an irregular passage created by training back selected

vines. Treece followed after.

“This would be the perfect spot for an ambush,” he said.

A woman laughed. Not a friendly laugh. “Too true,” she said from the gloom. “So state your business. What do you want with the village? You mean us harm or not?”

Treece gestured Rebel back, then put his hands on his hips. “You see this woman, this child? You try to hurt them—you die. Anybody else tries to hurt them dies too.” Silence. “But so long as you don’t hurt them, we intend no evil. We’re only looking for someplace to spend a few quiet hours. If you let us pass, we’ll go on. Otherwise, we’ll turn back now.”

A woman floated forward, materializing from gloom and tangled root. She held a rifle. “Fair enough,” she said. “Pass. Just remember, there’s only the one path, and you have to come by me again on your way out. Behave yourselves.” She was gone.

* * *

The village was a handful of stick huts around a central clearing, something like a larger version of the courts in Tank Fourteen. But the huts here were loosely woven frames with wide stretches of orchid between, like a scatter of wicker boxes discarded in the weeds. As they paused at the edge of the clearing, several people peered from their huts with frank curiosity.

Rebel’s broomstick bobbed, and she turned to see Billy slip from the saddle. He darted to a hut where a man sat cross-legged in the doorway, a small pot of luminous ink before him. He had a scholar’s facepaint and was carefully drawing a long line on a rectangle of parchment.

The child approached the drawing slowly, as if hypnotized, the long, glowing line doubly reflected in his unblinking eyes.

The scholar raised his head. Shadows pooled under his brows. “You like it?” He lifted the brush from the end of

the line and dipped it into the inkpot. "It's a pun." With quick dabs he drew an ideogram on a leaf, held it up for inspection. "You see that? That's my name—Ma. It means horse. My name is Ma Fu-ya. What's yours?"

"Billy," the child answered without hesitation.

"Well, Billy, you see this line I just drew? I want you to imagine that it's the same as this line here"—the brush touched one line of the leaf ideogram—"only stretched long and warped out of shape. You see? Then this next line runs along one foreleg." Quickly, surely, he drew the other lines, and together they made a horse. "You see?"

The child laughed and clapped his hands.

"He seems to like you," Rebel said.

The scholar laid his brush in the air before him. "He's a nice kid. Welcome to our village. We haven't gotten around to naming it. If you're staying, I advise you not to build too far from the clearing; one man did that already and lost his hut before he thought to mark the trail. Other than that, there's plenty of room."

The air was fragrant here. The village had been built within a local cluster of blossoms, and the light was soft and pervasive. Rebel liked it. It could have used a little more life. Butterflies at least. A few lizards, a squirrel, perhaps a tree squid. But other than that, it was pleasant here, sheltered within the orchid. "Maybe I *will* build a hut," she said. "I could spend my free time here. Who should I talk to about rent? Who's your king here?"

"There are no kings here," Fu-ya said. Billy tugged at his cloak, and the scholar handed him brush and paint. From the hut behind him, he drew a piece of paper. "Here, have fun."

"No kings?" Treece said, puzzled. "Then who owns all this?"

"I'm not sure. Perhaps no one. Perhaps the man in the wheel." He spread his hands. "You see, when people

realized they could build here, they didn't stop to worry about legalities. They just packed up and moved in."

One of Fu-ya's neighbors came up with a sphere of fresh-brewed tea and a handful of drinking syringes. Scowling, Treece took one and said, "Why? Why burrow so deep in the orchid? Why post a guard by the trail?"

"Defense is simple here," the neighbor said. "One guard can hold off a dozen attackers. If more came, we could just untie the rags from the path—they'd never find their way in. Or if that didn't work... we'd all scatter, I guess. That'd be the end of the village, but there's others out there. Lots of room to build another, for that matter."

"No, no," Fu-ya said to Billy. "You want to hold the brush upright, between thumb and forefinger. There, you see? That way you won't smudge."

"Who are you expecting to attack you?" Treece said testily.

Another neighbor had come up, a large bony woman who seemed all knees and elbows whenever she moved. She said, "You're not from the tanks, then? No, I can see you're not. Well, the gang wars are heating up. It's funny. You live in the tanks, you think: what did the police ever do for me? Beat you up, smash your teeth, catch you up in their raids. But now, with no police, there's nothing to stop the gangs but each other. So they try to spread out. People were getting snatched up and reprogrammed all over the place. You don't watch out, you find yourself being rude girl for some hoodlum you never even heard of before.

Only now, you're willing to die for him. Very bad. Especially now that everybody has these rifles; have you seen them? Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"Everybody?" Treece said. "I noticed your guard had one. She shouldn't. Those are supposed to be restricted to programmed samurai."

The villagers laughed. There were some eight people sitting about by now. "There must be a hundred rifles in

the tanks,” Fu-ya explained. “Maybe even two hundred. It’s a very bad problem.” He had seated Billy in his lap. Now he looked down and said, “Hey, look at that. That is very good.”

Billy Defector did not look up. He was drawing circuits on the paper, long glowing lines and intersections like cool rivers of light, straight and pure and enigmatic.

* * *

Somewhere, Wyeth was fighting a wizard’s duel with the Comprise. Possibly it was already over. But here, sitting and chatting and laughing, all was peace. A girl who ducked her head, coloring, whenever spoken to, brought out a flute and began to play. Somebody produced two short metal pipes and provided percussion. Soon a band had coalesced and people were dancing.

Rebel didn’t join in. To her way of thinking, zero-gravity dancing was like zero-gravity sex, a lightweight version of the real thing. While Billy drew his circuits, she attached him to a programmer. “Don’t wriggle,” she said, and put him in a trance. Her hands slid down the wafers, and she lost herself in the delicate art of editing. This was the kind of work both her personas enjoyed, and for at least an hour she had no clear idea who she was. Then her hands hovered over the wafers in indecision and drew away. With a sigh, she removed the adhesion disks. Billy stirred. Fu-ya’s woman, Gretzin, said, “Is your little boy all right now?”

“I’m just the doctor,” Eucrasia said irritably. “The little boy doesn’t belong to me or anybody else for that matter. He’s an orphan, I guess.” Then, with a gentle internal shift, she was Rebel again. “He’ll need lots more work before he’s all right. I only dared make minor changes, because he’s so fragile. There’s only a trace of personality to work on—just the memory of a hallucinogenic persona, really. It’s not the easiest thing to set right.”

Fu-ya swam up and lifted the child away. “Come on,

Billy. I'll show you how to fold a paper bird."

Gretzin stared after the two. "I didn't really think he was your little boy. I just kind of hoped." She snorted. "Paper birds!"

*** * ***

The sheraton was a mess. Uprooted trees floated over drowned parasols in the ponds. Rebel skirted a pile of broken glass. She trailed a finger along a wall, and it came up stained with soot. "Where's Billy?" Wyeth asked, coming up on her suddenly.

"I found a couple in the orchid and hired them to look after him. He's staying in their village."

"Why did you do that?"

"I thought they'd be good for him. A little quiet living should strengthen his sense of identity enough for me to try a bit more editing." They matched strides. "Oh hell, Billy took a shine to Fu-ya, and when I tried to take him away, he started screaming hysterically. I was afraid if I separated them his emotions might run out of control and collapse what little mental structure he has."

"Hmmm." They stepped around a team of wallknobbers, gilders, and scrimshaw artisans. Workers were everywhere, making repairs. "Look here. I want to show you something."

A morgue had been set up in the conference room, the corpses laid out on gurneys by the goldfish stream. There were seven cadavers, all Comprise. "I panicked them into moving early," Wyeth said. "That's one reason the casualties were so low. They knew they couldn't take over the sheraton permanently and that they'd have to pay reparations for any humans killed." He stopped at a Comprise corpse whose torso was cut open and the skin peeled back. Rebel looked down at the glistening organs, horrified and fascinated. Metal glinted here and there. Wyeth picked up a hand and turned it over. "See here?"

Retractable patch leads inside each fingertip. All she had to do was bite off a bit of callus on the tip and she could interface with anything. There are three separate rectenna systems buried under the skin, and a second spine with God knows how many gigabytes of storage capacity.”

“My God,” Rebel said. “Are they *all* like this?”

“No, just five. We call them lockpicks because their sole purpose is to break into computer systems. The Comprise hide a few inside every group they send into human space. They were easy to spot because they’re carrying all that metal within them. As soon as we took them out, the fight was over.”

“Killed.” Constance limped in, trailed closely by Freeboy. He had a dirty bandage on his head. “You did not ‘take them out,’ Mr. Wyeth. You killed them.” Several embroidered panels in her clothing were stained; she reeked of smoke and wrath.

“Aren’t you supposed to be tending to the shrubberies, Moorfields?”

“My people are taking care of that. I want to know why you provoked this senseless, brutal battle.”

A tech reached into an access hatch by the foot of the bridge. The sky flickered and went on. Blue, with big, fleecy clouds.

“Oh, hardly a battle.” Wyeth smiled. “And far from senseless. It certainly took the starch out of the Comprise.

Half of them are down with shyapple sickness. Also, I learned a great deal from this incident. Means of fighting the Comprise, which I’ve taken the liberty of taping and sending to every major public data bank in the System. They’ll be there when they’re needed.” His voice switched from warrior to mystic. “Someday, humanity is going to have to fight the Comprise. Someday the conflict will be out in the open. And when that happens, we’ll be the tiniest bit better prepared because of today.”

“You sound like you’re looking forward to a nice, big war.”

“No, but unlike you, I see it as inevitable. Ah, here are the lawyers.” Two men in legalface, one People’s, the other Kluster, strode up. Wyeth bowed to Rebel. “Shall we?”

They crossed the bridge and walked in among the Comprise. First came Wyeth, arm in arm with Rebel, and then the lawyers. Constance hesitated, then followed, and Freeboy scuttled after her.

Four samurai brought up the rear. “Over the Rubicon,” Wyeth said cheerily, but to Rebel it felt more like crossing the Styx, to the land where the bloodless dead dwell in perfect equality. The Comprise parted for them, closing back around the group as it passed. Hundreds of eyes stared at them.

Wyeth chose a man at random, grabbed him by the shoulders, and said, “You. Can you talk? We’ll talk through this individual.”

“That is not necessary,” the Comprise said.

“That’s how we’ll do it anyway. I’m going to ask you some questions. If I am not satisfied with the answers, I’ll charge you with violent aggression and see to it that the four hundred however many of you never rejoin Earth again. Do you want that? I can do that to you.”

The Comprise stirred uneasily. “You manipulated us into attacking you.”

“So what?” Wyeth turned to his lawyers. “Does that make any difference legally?”

“No.”

“No.”

Rebel touched her bracelet and saw the tangled lines of energy linking the Comprise in a shimmering haze.

Electromagnetic fields rose from them like wings. Directional beams blinked on and off, converging upon the spokesman. He flashed bright as the eye of a coiled

dragon. “Ask, then.”

“What does the Comprise want?”

Almost scornfully, the Comprise said, “What does any organism want? To live, to grow, and to employ one’s abilities constructively.”

“I was thinking of something a little less sweeping. Why did you want the shyapples so badly? You almost killed young Freeboy here, trying to get information he didn’t even have. What information were you hoping to find? What did you want that badly?”

“Earth is interested in all new developments in the mind arts.”

“Answers,” Wyeth said grimly.

Again the Comprise shifted in agitation. Individuals jostled against each other; heads turned at random. Several cried out. “We...” the spokesman began. He paused as the interactive fields shifted configurations wildly, withdrew, and then closed in about him. “We seek integrity. We seek a means of maintaining our identity as Comprise when we are separated from Earth.”

“Integrity? I don’t understand.”

“Away from Earth, we are cut off, orphaned,” the Comprise said. “We lose identity. You could not understand. Our sense of being Earth fades and shifts. We become Other. You would say individual. We do not desire this. It is painful to us.”

“Ah,” said Wyeth. “Now that is interesting.”

“Are you satisfied now?” Constance demanded. Wyeth looked at her. “You’ve been torturing this creature for your own... your own paranoid fantasies, that’s all. You are a dangerous man, Mr. Wyeth, a machine running out of control and causing pain for no purpose at all.”

Rebel reached out, touched the spokesman’s wrist. “Tell me something,” she said hesitantly. “Is Wyeth right? Are humans and Comprise really enemies?”

“Of course not,” Constance snapped.

“Yes,” the Comprise said. “We are by definition natural enemies since we compete for the same resources.”

“Resources? You mean like... what? Energy sources? Metal ores?”

“People. People are our most important resource.”

Constance stood motionless, looking pale and betrayed. “I...” she said. “I thought—” Her voice was close to tears. Abruptly she turned away and limped back across the bridge, to the land of the living. Freeboy scurried after her.

Not actually grinning, Wyeth favored Rebel with a nod and a wink. He turned to the Comprise. “Another question. Why haven’t you taken over human space already? You have all the resources of Earth at your disposal, and the kind of physics we can only dream of. Why have you stayed put? Why aren’t you out here among us in force?”

The crowds of Comprise expanded slightly, then contracted, like an enormous beast taking a deep breath. “We are held back by the speed of communication. It is not true that thought is instantaneous. Thought is only as fast as our electronic linkages allow. Even on Earth this causes problems. It is possible for the Comprise to be divided against ourself. Thought moves in vast waves, like pressure fronts, across the continents. Sometimes two conflicting thoughts arise on opposite sides of the planet. The thought fronts race outward, and where they collide, there is conflict. It is like a mental storm. You would not understand it. But these are momentary unbalances, easily settled. The problem becomes crucial only when Comprise leave Earth.

“Earth has tried creating colonies of ourself in near orbit, on the moon, elsewhere. But small Comprise such as we are sicken away from the communion of thought. We become indecisive, we make errors. The large Comprise do not sicken, but they lose integrity and drift away from

Earth, becoming individuals in their own right. Then they must be destroyed. Three times it has been necessary to apply the nuclear solution. It is not permissible that the Comprise of Earth become Other. You would not understand.”

“I see,” Wyeth said. “I think I see. That’s the reason for your interest in the mind arts, then? You want a means of keeping Comprise colonies integrated with Earth.”

“Yes. For a long time Earth has sought the answer in physics. A means of instantaneous communication would bind the Comprise across vast distances. But the speed of light remains an absolute barrier. It cannot be cheated. There is no simultaneity in the universe. So we look elsewhere. Perhaps a solution can be found in the mind arts. Perhaps a new mental architecture.”

“That brings me to my next question—”

“No,” the Comprise said. “You are satisfied. Sickened though we are, we can read you that well, Boss Wyeth. You got as much from us as you had hoped for. We need give you no more.” The spokesman took a step backwards, merging into his fellows. Hundreds of eyes all turned away at once.

For a moment Wyeth stood open-mouthed. Then he laughed.

* * *

When they made love that night, Wyeth was awkward and he came too soon. He rolled away from Rebel, staring out the window wall. Faint strands of orchid floated slowly by as the sheraton revolved. “Wyeth?” Rebel said gently. He looked at her, eyes bleak and hollow. “What is it?”

Wyeth shook his head, looked downward. “I have a sick conscience. I am not at all at peace with myself.”

“Hey,” Rebel said. “Hey, babes, it’s all right.” She took his hand, held it in both of hers. “Which one of you is this? It’s the leader, right?”

“Yes, but we all feel this way. Constance was right. About the kid. Billy was perfectly content as part of the Comprise. Not happy, not aware—but content, anyway. And then I appear in a blaze of light and a rush of noise, and yank him into consciousness. Here, kid, have an apple. Bright and shiny. Let me make you one of us. I dragged him out of the Comprise and halfway to human, and made him into what? A crippled, crazy, unhappy animal of some kind.”

“Hey, now, it wasn’t your fault he ate the shyapple. The Comprise did that. It caught us all by surprise.”

Wyeth sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He sat there, not moving. “You think not? I waved that apple under their noses. I wanted them to bite. I wanted to see what would happen. But when I pried Billy loose from the Comprise, it turned out he didn’t know one fucking thing. So what good did I do? None. I acted blindly, and now there’s one more miserable creature walking the sky.”

“I’ll heal him for you, Wyeth, I promise I will. I’m coming to terms with Eucrasia’s skills.” Rebel hugged him from behind, crushing her breasts against his back, and laid her cheek against his shoulder. “Listen, I can really do it.”

Wyeth shook his head back and forth ponderously. “That’s not it. That’s not it at all.” She released him, rocking back on her heels. “Undoing the damage won’t help. The thing is, I don’t want to be the kind of person who’d do that to a child.”

Rebel said nothing.

“Do you remember when we first met? I was just a persona bum. Very bright, very good, but with no idea what I wanted to do with my life. The one thing I wanted most was to have a sense of purpose. We collaborated on the tetrad’s design together, do you remember that?”

“No.”

“That’s too bad. It was an exciting piece of work. We put

lots of late hours into it. It was pirate programming, we had to do it in secret. Eucrasia came up with the notion of a four-faceted persona for the stability, the self-sufficiency of it. She was hell for self-sufficiency. I was more interested in it because it would generate its own sense of purpose.”

Rebel felt irrationally jealous of Eucrasia, working so closely with Wyeth. She wondered if they’d slept together, and felt an oddly unclean excitement at the thought.

“How?” she asked.

“The pattern-maker. I figured he’d take care of that. He did, too. First time he came up, he asked what is the most important thing happening in our times? How can we contribute to it? The answers— well, you know the answers. Eucrasia was disappointed. She thought I was being grandiose and impractical, and she wanted to strip the program down and start over again. So we parted ways. I mean... the survival of the human race! What better cause could you have?” He fell silent, then said, “Only now I don’t know. Maybe what I really wanted was to have a good opinion of myself. I mean, I made me into a kind of secular saint, a self-contained guardian of humanity. A man with no doubts. But now I’m not so sure. I’m not sure of anything. I guess I don’t know myself as well as I thought I did.”

“Hush now,” Rebel said. She put her arms around him, rocking him gently. But they might as well have been in different universes. Eucrasia’s memories were growing stronger. Soon they would swallow her up completely, and then she would be no more. She wanted to care about Wyeth’s problems, but they just didn’t seem important to her.

“Hush,” she said again. “You’re not alone.”

DELUSION'S PASSAGE

Rebel visited Billy daily, after singlestick practice. But she quickly found that while she lived by the sheraton's strict Greenwich time, the village ran on different, internal rhythms. People ate when they were hungry, slept when they were tired, kept to no external schedule. Sometimes she would find that by village time only a few languid hours had passed. Other times, days would have sped by in a frenzy of work and play, of long naps and small meals.

One day she discovered that thousands of small spider webs, no bigger than tufts of cotton, had covered the orchid about the village like mist. In the filtered white wintery light, the children played a game with a rusting air tank. A child would leap into the court and bounce off the tank, kicking it toward the far side. Then a child from that side would jump out, trying to bounce it back. One girl got stuck in the court's center, and was loudly and derisively called out. Then the game started over again.

Gretzin sat before her hut, weaving a grass mat to replace a worn wall. Rebel greeted her, then said, "Where did all these spiders come from?"

"Where do you think they come from? The tanks," Gretzin said impatiently. "Lots of vermin been spreading out. You should've been here yesterday, there were blackflies everywhere. Clouds of them." She put the mat aside. "Fu-ya's sleeping. Hold on, and I'll get your little boy."

A minute later she returned, hauling Billy by one arm. "I don't want to!" he cried. "I want to play!" Seeing Rebel, he started to cry.

Rebel felt an odd sadness that the boy didn't like her. A cold touch of failure. "Well, that's a sign of progress," she said to Gretzin. "His temper." She ran a hand over his head, and the delicate fuzz of new hair tickled her palm

like static electricity. Gretzin had cut off his braid; possibly the children had been teasing him. “This won’t take long at all, Billy.”

She put him under and went to work.

An hour later she released Billy and called Gretzin over. “There’s not a lot more for me to do. His identity is a little fragile yet, but it’ll strengthen in time. Basically, he should be able to pass for human now.”

“Pass for human, huh?” Gretzin said.

“Yes, it’s good timing, too, since we reach Mars soon. I don’t know what Wyeth will do with him then.” She covered her uneasiness about the boy’s future with a smile. “I’ll bet you’ll be glad not having to worry about him anymore.”

“Yeah. That’ll be terrific.”

* * *

Being outside the geodesic after all this time was a shock. Some free-floating spores must have adhered to the hull before it was accelerated away from Eros Kluster, for it was now covered with great mottled mats of vacuum flowers. They were everywhere, growing in tangled heaps and piles. The blossoms twisted slowly, tracking the sun.

The flowers had been scraped away from the airlock and for dozens of meters around, revealing a hull that was dull, pitted, and uneven. Scatterings of foot rings had been snap-welded across the cleared surface. Standing in a pair, Rebel felt a perfectly irrational urge to start scraping flowers. Her hands itched with it.

Wyeth stood beside her, overseeing the departure of the *Comprise*. Almost half a thousand coldpack units were being lashed to a single jitney frame, layer upon layer building into a crude sphere. Inside those soot-black coffins were suspended the *Comprise*, throats and lungs filled with crash jelly. Spacejacks swarmed about them.

“Hey, look.” Rebel touched Wyeth, pointed. Two

unmarked silver suits crawled across the geodesic toward them. Among the carnival riot of personalized suits worn by the workers recruited from the tanks and orchid villages, they stood out as startlingly as a croquet ball in a case of Fabergé Easter eggs.

The intercom crackled. “I can’t believe they trust you to coldpack them after what you put them through.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be checking how far through the hull the flowers have eaten?” Wyeth asked.

The silver figures pulled themselves almost to his feet, slipped into rings, and stood. “That’s what I came to report. You’ve got four inches skin at the very thinnest. Nothing to worry about.”

The spacejacks brought up a disposable fusion drive at the end of a kilometer-long connector rod and coupled it to the jitney, hot end away from the *Comprise*. They leaped away and (using long ropes) yanked the shielding. “Well, stay and watch the show if you want, Connie. Hallo, Freeboy. Still with us, I see.”

“He’s as loyal as a wizard’s daughter,” Constance said dryly. An almost invisible plasma flame puffed from the engine, and the assembly started away.

Three days, Rebel thought. Two to reach Mars, be intercepted and fitted with retros by People’s Defense, decelerate, and be unpacked. One day for the *Comprise* to build the transit ring that would bring the geodesic’s velocity to relative zero, leaving it at rest in Mars orbit. It wouldn’t take much of a mistake for them to miss the ring entirely, crashing the project and all its people right into the side of the planet.

“They were as helpless as a vat of kitten embryos,” Constance said. “I can’t imagine why they trusted you. I certainly wouldn’t have.”

“The *Comprise* is not human.” Wyeth’s mirrored visor turned toward her. “They don’t carry personal grudges.”

Constance looked away, toward the dwindling coldpack assembly, then turned back and with sudden heat said, “I’m *glad* we’re parting ways at Mars!” She bent over to grab the foot rings, then pulled herself hand over hand toward the airlock. Freeboy followed.

When she was gone, Wyeth said softly, “I’m going to miss that woman.”

* * *

The next day, when Rebel reached the village she found it deserted. Spiders had shrouded the huts in white. A woven wall, ripped from its frame, floated in a silent curl at the center of the court. “Hello?” she called.

No sound but the buzzing of flies.

All the huts were vacant, their contents largely undisturbed. A brush frozen in a bowl of hardened ink floated by Fu-ya’s door. Trailed by her two samurai, Rebel looked down all the twisty paths that had been marked out from the village to private plantations, clearings, and the like. They went a distance down the red rag trail, and then the blue, but found nothing but more empty huts.

Rebel took a long, shuddering breath. She felt her fear prowling through the orchid depths, silent and shadowy.

“Treece, what happened here?”

The second samurai offered Treece a bit of blood-stained cloth that the flies had drawn him to. Treece brushed it aside, examined a fractured wetwafer. “Press gang,” he said. “Very slick, whoever they were. Took out the guard, surrounded the village, didn’t miss anyone. Put a compulsion on them and took them all away.”

“Away?” Rebel asked. “Where away? Why?”

Treece bent the wetwafer back and forth in his blunt fingers. At last he shrugged. “Well. Let’s go tell the boss.”

* * *

“I don’t like it,” Wyeth said. “Look, none of us likes it, but it’s the only logical way to proceed.” Dice clicked and

rattled obsessively in his hand. He threw them down, scooped them up. “We don’t know for sure that it’s Wismon. Let’s not kid ourselves—I haven’t had any news from the tanks in two days. Only Wismon could’ve found and silenced my spies.”

They stood in the empty lobby of the sheraton. Wyeth had dismissed all his samurai and darkened the room so he could think. The only light came from the orchids outside. “What are you arguing with yourself about?” Rebel asked in exasperation.

“Strategy.” Wyeth rolled the dice again. “I can’t go up against Wismon in my warrior persona. He’d be able to predict my every move. The only way I can take him by surprise is to go mystic. Right?”

He waited, and none of his other voices spoke up. “Good. At least we’re agreed about that.” He rolled the dice again.

“For God’s sake, what is it with you and those dice?”

“Random number generator. By randomizing my tactics, I keep Wismon from anticipating me. Already the dice have decided on direct confrontation on his home turf. Now they’re deciding how many samurai I take with me.” He rolled again, fell silent.

In the dark and quiet, Rebel’s thoughts kept returning to Billy. His persona was fragile. Any crude attempt at reprogramming would destroy him, collapsing not only his personality structure, but much of his autonomous control systems as well. The best he could hope for was permanent catatonia. At worst, he might die. “They wouldn’t reprogram the children, would they?”

“Depends,” Wyeth answered abstractedly. “Slavers wouldn’t need to, once they’ve grabbed the parents. But who can say, with Wismon? We don’t even know why he did it. My people tell me this is the only orchid village he’s hit. That’s not just coincidence.” He took a deep breath. “Well. Time to go meet the man.”

Impulsively, Rebel asked, “Can I come with you?”

Wyeth shook the dice, looked at them.

“Yes.”

As the elevator slowly rose toward the central docking ring, Rebel thought to ask: “How many samurai are you bringing?”

“None,” Wyeth said somberly. His mischievous voice came up. “*That’ll* sure take Wismon by surprise. I can’t wait to see how we’re going to handle him.”

* * *

They rode broomsticks around the orchid. As the tanks swelled, they saw that the metal exteriors were covered with glowing lines of paint—gang chops, territorial markings, threats and warnings, a small propaganda war in graffiti. There was no traffic. Everyone had either fled or been impressed into the gangs. “I’m afraid,” Rebel said.

Beside her, Wyeth grinned cockily. “Me too.”

The closer she got to the tanks, the less clear Rebel’s motives for going were to her. She’d wanted to have a hand in rescuing Billy, but now that they were at the crunch point, that desire seemed sourceless and quixotic. She wasn’t exactly close to the child. Certainly he didn’t much care for her. So why was she doing this?

Maybe because Eucrasia wouldn’t have.

They swooped down on Tank Fourteen. The airlock’s outer doors had been blown away in some recent skirmish, and there were blast marks among the rust. But to judge by the way a few dimly-seen guards floated within, slow and unconcerned, the gang wars were obviously over.

At the locks, bright-eyed women kicked out of the shadows to take their broomsticks and search them for weapons. The women were painted with bioluminescent tiger-stripes, not just on their faces, but down their bodies as well, and they were all stark naked. “We’ve come to see

Wismon,” Wyeth said when one brought out a programming unit. “Tell him that his mentor wishes to speak with him.”

The women glanced at one another quickly, uncomprehendingly. One smiled and licked her lips. She held up the programmer again, and Wyeth impatiently pushed it away. “Listen, your boss isn’t going to—”

With a snarl, the woman seized his head in both hands and twisted. Wyeth grunted in pain as he spun about. The cat woman’s legs wrapped about his thighs, and her hands cupped his chin. She yanked back, and he floated helplessly.

All this happened in an instant. “Hey!” Rebel said, and then she was floating in a similar hold, unable to talk and barely able to breathe. She tried to hit the woman on her back, but it was an awkward reach, and her hardest blows were soft taps when they landed.

In a wash of horror, Rebel saw the cat women attach the programmer to Wyeth and switch it on. He stiffened. The device buzzed softly to itself. I won’t let them do that to me, Rebel promised herself. I’ll die first. She struggled in her captor’s iron hold.

Those guards not directly involved watched with alert interest. They prowled restlessly about the lock without ever once exchanging a word; their silence was superhuman. Two almost collided, but disdainfully, carelessly, slapped hands together and bounced off each other. Finally a red light flashed on the programmer, and Wyeth was released. He floated dead-eyed and unresponsive.

The women turned to Rebel.

“Heads up, Sunshine!” Lashing out with one foot, Wyeth kicked the cheap little programmer from one cat woman’s hands, right into the face of the woman who held Rebel captive. For an instant she was free. Spinning around, she punched her captor in the nose, as hard as she could, and

blood exploded outward from her fist. By then a dozen more guards had converged upon them, and they were both recaptured.

One woman retrieved the programmer, broke it open, reassembled it. She ran a finger over Wyeth's forehead, then brought her face close to his and sniffed his lips. She looked puzzled. Meanwhile, others had bound his wrists and ankles together behind his back and done the same to Rebel. "Wyeth?" Rebel asked. "Are you okay?"

"Oh yeah," Wyeth said. Two of the guards looped ropes around their wrists and kicked off. They were yanked after. "That's my best trick. When we built me, I was given access to my own metaprogrammer. All the time they were programming one persona up, another persona was programming it down."

"Oh."

They were hauled through the deserted corridors of the tank town. Without the traffic continually sweeping them clean, the narrow corridors were dense with trash. The flowers seemed barely able to lighten the gloom, and there was a thrumming quality to the silence, like vastly extenuated echoes of distant bass rumblings. The stench of rot and decay was almost unbearable.

They were taken to Wismon.

"Ah, mentor! As always, a surprise to see you. What a delight!"

The fat man floated behind a guard of sullen rude boys, his mad little eyes dark with inner furies. A thin string of saliva clung to one corner of his mouth, waving slightly as he talked. "How do you like my angelheaded little girls? Lovely, aren't they?"

"They're certainly something," Wyeth said. "What have you done to them?" Behind him, the women snapped his bonds and then Rebel's. There were two pairs of rings by Wismon's ankles, and the guards knelt within them,

crouching at his feet. He reached out to clumsily pat one on the head, and she arched her back in pleasure.

“I’ve increased their intelligence—they’re quite as smart as am I. Ah, don’t turn pale. I’ve also deprived them of language. They have no symbolic structure at all. They cannot make plans, cannot reason complexly, cannot lie. All they know is what instructions I’ve programmed into them. Isn’t that marvelous? They’re perfectly innocent. They act by instinct alone.”

“They’re grotesque,” Rebel said.

“They are very beautiful animals,” Wismon said reprovingly. “One of their instincts is to bring me anything out of the ordinary. Anything interesting. Are you still interesting, mentor?”

“I’ve always wondered what sort of society you would create,” Wyeth said.

“Oh, piffle. I’m just having a little fun. I only have three days before we reach Mars, isn’t that right? And then I’ll have to put my toys back in the box and return to a gentlemanly life of quiet contemplation. The pity is that so much time was wasted dealing with factions of petty criminals that might more profitably have been used for my researches.”

“You’re going to restore everyone you’ve forcibly programmed?” Wyeth sounded skeptical.

“Oh, absolutely. Except for my rude boys, of course. I had them before all this began. And I think I’ll keep my beautiful little girls, how could I ever bring myself to give them up? And there are a few more that might prove useful in the future—but enough of that! I mentioned my researches? Well, I flatter myself that I’ve made some small progress. I have created a garden—no, a menagerie of new minds. Perhaps you’d care for a brief tour of the highlights?”

“No.”

“A pity. I remember a time when you were not so scornful of scientific endeavor.”

“I was young then.”

“Wait,” Rebel said impulsively. “I’d like to see what you’ve done.” Wyeth turned to her, astonished.

“Well! An original thought—you charm me, Ms. Mudlark. I will deny you nothing.” Wismon extended his arms and the cat women stood under them, each stretching a supporting arm across the immensity of his back. “Where’s my zookeeper? Call him to me.”

A sullen rude boy ducked into an archway. A moment later he returned, followed by a young man painted for wetware research.

“Maxwell!” Rebel cried.

“I knew you’d have a spy in my organization,” Wyeth said with a touch of sadness. “Did you buy him or just reprogram him?”

“Oh, I assure you he acted not for any ignoble reasons, but purely out of love. You do love me, don’t you, Maxie?”

Maxwell nodded eagerly, face rapt. His expression was at once so ardent and so familiar that Rebel had to look away. “Lead us to your charges,” Wismon said. “I grow bored.”

*** * ***

The party floated out of the court. Maxwell led, followed by Wismon and his cat women. They eased him along with feather-light kicks and grabs against the walls and ropes. Rebel and Wyeth came next, escorted by a guard of rude boys. They came to a confluence of passages and halted.

“What shall I show you? I’ve arranged my creations by type. Would you care to go down the tunnel of fear? The straight and narrow way of discipline? Or perhaps you two lovebirds would enjoy a kick and stroll down lovers’ lane.”

They said nothing, and Wismon flapped a bloated pink hand at one passage. “We’ll go the way of delusion, then. I

have something I'm especially eager for my dear mentor to see."

They went up the red rope to a nondescript court. At a word from Wismon, Maxwell led them within. It was quiet there. A man sat in the doorway of his hutch, eyes downcast as if lost in thought. He was hooked into a small transcorder unit. "Cousin!" Wismon cried. "Sam Pepys!"

The man scrambled to his feet, bracing himself within the frame. "My Lord!" he said. "You do me honor, coming to Seething Lane." He swept a hand at an imaginary table. "I was just now working on your accounts."

To Wyeth, the fat man said, "Samuel Pepys was a clerk of the British navy on Earth in the seventeenth century. A ludicrous little man, but able enough in his way. A bit of a diarist. The transcorder feeds him a wafer of background sensation. His only connection with the real world is through myself. He takes me to be his relative, Edward Montagu, Earl of Sandwich. Isn't that right, Samuel?"

The man smiled gravely and bowed, obviously pleased. "Your Lordship gives me too great a credit. Will you stay to dine? Mr. Spong has sent over a barrel of pickled oysters, I'll have the girl fetch it. Jane! Where is that lazy slut?" He looked fretfully over one shoulder, setting the transcorder leads swinging.

"It's a simple enough delusional system," Rebel said. "Rich people have been known to spend good money for two weeks of that kind of delusion. I've arranged for a few such vacations myself." That had been during Eucrasia's internship, she recalled. It had been dull work, cookie-cutter programming, but (because legally dubious) lucrative.

"Ah, but always under sensory deprivation, eh? Otherwise small incongruities creep in from the real world." A cat woman was exploring the court. She sniffed curiously at Pepys' crotch. He didn't notice. "Right in the middle of the battle of Thermopylae, a city cannister

eclipses the sun. On virgin Arctic snow, a lone papaya glows with otherworldly light. Little by little your dream world crumbles into paranoia and nightmare. But the beauty of *this* system is its flexibility. It can justify any amount of incongruity. Samuel, I have noticed a great number of brontosauri in the streets of London this past week.”

Pepys frowned. “Brontosauri, my Lord? The... ah, large, ancient lizards, you mean?”

“Aye, Samuel, three in Whitechapel alone, and two more by the 'Change. Down by Saint Paul's the streets are filthy with their spoor. What make you of that, Cousin?”

“Why, that it will be a mightily cold winter,” Pepys said. “The brutes never venture out in such numbers be the coming weather fair and clement.”

“I fail to see the point of this,” Wyeth said stiffly.

“Patience. Samuel, poke up the fire, would you?” Pepys obliged, seizing an imaginary poker and stirring up the logs and embers of a fireplace that was not there. The mime was so perfect that Rebel could almost see his stuffy little room and feel its monotonously heavy gravity.

Suddenly Wismon shouted, “Samuel! A coal has landed on the back of your hand. It's burning the flesh!”

With a shriek of pain, Pepys tumbled over backwards, waving his hand. Spinning slowly in the air, he put hand to mouth and sucked on it. At a gesture from Wismon, two rude boys steadied him.

“Here, Cuz. Show me your hand.”

Pepys extended a hand trembling with pain. An angry red circle swelled on its back. Even as they watched, puss-white blisters bubbled up on the inflamed spot. Wismon laughed. “Belief! Belief alone burned that hand. Think on it. It rather puts some starch into the ancient notion that all we experience is illusion to begin with, doesn't it?” He stroked the hand lovingly, breaking the

blisters. “But Samuel doesn’t perceive our illusions, only those that are pumped into him. All that stands between him and reality is one thin wafer of electronic London. Let’s see what happens when we remove that final veil.”

Maxwell held up the transcorder for Wismon, who daintily took the wafer’s pull-ring between thumb and forefinger. “Samuel?”

“My Lord?”

“Tell me what you see.” He yanked the wafer.

Pepys stiffened, and his eyes jerked open wide. Unblinking, they focused on infinity. “The walls! The walls fade like smoke! I can see through ceiling, rooms, and roof to the clouds beyond... Nay, the sky too is become pellucid and the stars stand bright and stark... But now e’en they too fade. I see...”

“What do you see, Sammy?”

* * *

For the longest moment Pepys was silent. Then, “Music,” he said. “I see the music of the crystal spheres celestial.” He began to cry gently.

Wismon giggled. “Perfect madness. I could as easily have had him die. Come. This is only prologue to what I really wish to show you, dearest mentor.”

They exited, leaving Pepys afloat in the center of the court, weeping.

For half the length of the passage, Maxwell hesitated at each doorway and was waved on. Then Wismon nodded and Maxwell peeled back a sheet of tin, and they entered a courtyard. Again it had but a single inhabitant, a man. He had a bland face with an enormous beak of a nose. Perched on a rope, he seemed some kind of ungainly bird. As they entered, he looked up and smiled. “Hallo,” he said. “Quite a crowd.”

“Yes, I’ve brought some friends to examine you,” Wismon said. “You don’t mind?”

“Oh, no.”

“Question him,” Wismon commanded.

“All right,” Rebel said after a pause. “Do you know where you are?”

“This used to be Queen Lurline’s court. She’s gone now. I’m the only one here. King Wismon is holding me as an experiment in recursive personality.” The man’s eyes sparkled with mirth.

“Do you know who you are?”

“King Wismon calls me Nose. For self-evident reasons.” He rubbed his fleshy nose and chuckled. Rebel looked to Wyeth and shrugged. There was something askew in the man’s sourceless, irrational humor, but nothing in her or Eucrasia’s experience could explain it.

Wyeth looked thoughtful. “Let’s see. You showed me that last guy—Pepys?—to demonstrate how perfect a delusionary system you could create. So this must be a refinement on that. What is a step beyond delusion?” He snapped his fingers, glanced at Rebel. “Reality!” She caught his reference: It came from something she’d said when he was new-programmed, and she’d wanted to strip his persona down and start over again. Delusion was hard enough to deal with, she’d said, but a frivolous grasp of reality was worse. “You don’t believe that what you’re seeing is real, do you?”

Nose kicked his feet with joy. He had to grab at the rope to keep from floating away. “Oh, this is most entertaining. Really!”

“Nose is a prototype of the perfect citizen,” Wismon said.

“His true persona is entirely hidden from the outside world. His surface persona is a perfectly consistent game the submerged persona plays. He thinks he is dreaming. To him, his entire past is an irrational construct that’s just come into existence. Thus, he denies continuity but is able to act within it. He will accept anything, endure anything,

for none of it is real. Which leaves me free to control his dreams. No matter what happens, he is happy to obey whatever instructions he receives. Isn't that right, Nose?"

Nose nodded happily.

"All right," Wyeth said sourly. "I'll ask the question you want me to ask. Why are you showing me this creature?"

"Oh, that's the best joke of all. Nose, why don't you tell us who you are when you're not dreaming?"

"Should I?" Nose laughed. "Well, what does it matter? My name is Wyeth. I was Wismon's mentor some years ago, and now I am his enemy. That's why I'm dreaming about him. He's getting out of hand, I'll have to do something about him soon. Possibly even destroy him. Maybe this dream will show me the pattern I have to act within."

"That was your mystic voice," Wismon said. "Do you care to hear your other voices? I can call them up from the depths, if you like."

"No," Wyeth said. "No, I... no." He was ashen pale. "This is what you have planned for me, isn't it?"

"What are you two talking about?" Rebel asked. Wismon mockingly mouthed the words in perfect unison with her, but she finished the sentence anyway.

"Please try not to be so obvious, Ms. Mudlark. My mentor has just realized that what I can do to his simulation I can do to him, access to metaprogrammer or not. He can be made into whatever I choose. But the joke goes deeper than that: Perhaps this man is not my mentor at all, but merely some poor fool I've programmed into thinking he is. Perhaps Nose here is the true Wyeth. Perhaps neither of them is."

"Wyeth is Wyeth," Rebel said coldly. "If he can't trust his own sense of self, he can take my word for it."

"Ah, but how does he know that you exist? After all, I control the dream."

Nose laughed delightedly.

“What I don’t understand,” Wyeth said, “is how you’ve accomplished all this in so little time. You’re a brilliant planner, but you don’t have the programming skills to write up the personas. Where did you get the programmers? There’s months of detail work in these two characters alone.”

“Thus we come full circle,” Wismon said. He flicked a finger at Maxwell, who disappeared out the doorway. “You have not yet mentioned why you entered my domain in the first place, but of course you didn’t need to. You wanted to recover the child-savant you snatched from the Comprise.”

“Yes, we came for Billy.”

“You never tested him for his aptitudes. Most careless. To me the possibilities were obvious. Are you familiar with the cant term ‘plumber’? It means someone with a natural bent for the mechanics of wetcircuitry. In this child, the instinct is squared, or even cubed. He is preternaturally talented, a superplumber, if you will. I need only describe what I want, and he can draw it up.”

Maxwell returned, leading Billy Defector by the hand.

Behind him came Fu-ya and Gretzin, and from the apprehensive looks on their faces, Rebel could tell they had been left untouched, so they could care for him.

“A thought has been germinating, mentor, for some time, and I think it has finally come to fruition,” Wismon said. Maxwell handed the child a briefcase. “Billy. Bring up that map we made of my persona.”

Billy looked to Gretzin, and she nodded. He touched the briefcase’s surface, and an enormous wetware diagram filled all of the court with lacy green. There were tens of thousands of branchings visible to the naked eye alone.

“Test it one more time for a kink, would you?”

Billy’s fingers danced. A small red cursor zipped

through the court, following the major persona branches, then moved to secondary and tertiary circuits. It moved too fast for the eye to fix on it for over a full minute, and then stopped. The solemn-faced child said, “No kink.”

Wismon smiled.

“Well, it was inevitable that sooner or later you’d come to the conclusion that I’ve been bluffing,” Wyeth said. “But the fact is that I’m not. You wish to believe I am because you’re unwilling to accept me as your superior. But I could destroy you here and now with a single word.”

“Then do it,” Wismon said.

“Right in the middle of your traveling freak show?” There was an acid edge to Wyeth’s voice. “Come off it. They’d rip my head off.”

Heavy lids crept down over Wismon’s eyes, until he appeared to be trembling on the brink of sleep. His every muscle froze to perfect stillness. Then, through lips that barely moved, he said, “Everyone here is to obey my mentor completely, no matter what he tells you to do. Only my direct orders override his. Do you understand? The two of us will talk now. Everyone else must wait outside.”

Two rude boys took Rebel by the arms and swept her through the doorway. “Are you satisfied now?” Wismon asked. But Rebel was already outside and couldn’t hear Wyeth’s answer.

Time passed.

In the quiet of the corridor, the cat women prowled up and down the rope, endlessly fascinated by their eternally new world. Their movements seemed unbearably slow to Rebel, as if they moved through a crystalizing flow of honey. One of the rude boys broke into a hutch and emerged wearing a woman’s lace collar. He primped and postured while the others laughed. Every now and then one would glance at Rebel, wistful dreams of violence in his eyes. Nose chuckled to himself.

At last the sheet metal door shivered and groaned and swung open. Wyeth swam out of the court and gestured to Fu-ya, Gretzin, and Billy. “Escort these people to the sheraton,” he told the dumbfounded rude boys. “The cat women can wait here.” He took Rebel’s arm and kicked down passage. Maxwell stared unbelievably after him, then dove into the court.

“You weren’t bluffing, then. You really did put a kink in him,” Rebel marveled.

Wyeth shook his head. “You don’t need a kink to destroy a persona, if you know its weaknesses well enough. Wismon’s blind spot was his conceit. He had to prove that he could best me on my own turf. It made him overlook the obvious.”

“But what did you *do*?”

“I snapped his neck,” Wyeth said. “Come on, I don’t want to talk about it.”

Behind them, Maxwell found the body, and screamed.

* * *

It took a full day for Wyeth’s samurai to scour the tanks clean of Wismon’s creatures. In dribs and drabs, pairs and dozens, they were brought to the sheraton to be restored. The task would have been impossible without Billy Defector. Under his fingers, the elaborate programs needed to repair the damaged personas flowed magically into existence. Fu-ya or Gretzin could coax the child into working for two or three hours before he turned cranky. Then he would be allowed to play for a time before being returned to the task. Twice, he put in a night’s sleep.

Rebel fine-tuned a programmer, slid in the therapeutic wafer, turned to the next gurney, and realized that they were done. She stretched, looking about the conference room. Where the topiary garden had been, Constance’s team had resodded the floor and installed a croquet lawn.

An antique pink Martian sky played monotonously

overhead. It had been forty hours since she'd slept last. "You know what? I don't think I'll ever be able to think of this room without loathing."

"I know what you mean," Wyeth said. With a sigh, he slowly sat down. An attentive pierrot slid a chair under him just in time.

"I've been cured of the urge to create new minds, too. I mean, just seeing the monstrosities that Wismon created."

"Yeah, well, it's been rough on both of us. But I still feel that new minds are necessary if the human race is going to face the challenge of Earth. We can't just walk into the future with wetware evolved sometime in the neolithic and expect..." His voice trailed off, and he slumped back in his chair. "Hell, I'm too tired to talk about it."

Gretzin returned from the goldfish stream, where Billy had been playing. The child slumped in her arms, his head hooked over her shoulder. Seeing them both seated, she said, "You done with Billy now?"

"Oh," Wyeth said groggily. "Okay, sure. Why don't you find someplace to put him, and then you can hunt up the paymaster and get your money. I'll have them give you double pay. You deserve it after all you've been through."

"Yeah, right," Gretzin said. "Tell you what, I'll take Billy back to the village first and get his things. Fu-ya is there now, getting them together. Pictures and crap. Won't take but an hour. I can pick up my pay when I get back."

"Fine." Wyeth waved a hand of dismissal, and Gretzin left.

"Be right back," Rebel said, and followed after. She caught up to Gretzin in the lobby. Billy was asleep on her shoulder, looking like a shavepate angel. "Listen," Rebel said. "You can borrow my broomstick, it's as fast as any. I've got it tethered at the hub."

Gretzin's harsh face twisted almost into a smile, and she leaned forward to brush lips dry as old leaves across

Rebel's cheek. "Goodbye," she said, and stepped into the elevator.

A few minutes later, back in the conference room, Wyeth straightened abruptly. "Hey! Why does she need to take Billy with her to pick up his things? She could leave him sleep here while she did that." He pitched his voice for an intercom line. "Has the village woman come through there?"

"Yes, sir," a samurai replied. "She took a broomstick toward the orchid some five minutes ago."

"Damn!" Wyeth lurched to his feet.

"Wyeth," Rebel said. "Let her go."

"What are you talking about? That kid's got a brilliant future ahead of him. It'd be a crime to waste a talent like his. We can't let him grow up in the slums without any kind of training."

When they got to the orchid they found Rebel's broomstick abandoned by its fringe. The path markings were gone. They were just in time to see a dim, distant figure snatch one last rag from its place and disappear into the gloom.

The village was lost for good.

9

DEIMOS

The geodesic hurtled toward Mars. In its last hour of travel, the stormy red planet grew from the size of a fist to larger than a platter. Deimos crept humbly toward the center of the planet, then suddenly blossomed, dwarfing and eclipsing Mars. To the party watching over the lobby intercom, it seemed they were about to crash into the ungainly-looking moon. Then the geodesic tripped a

magnetic trigger and shot into the waiting transit ring. The ring accelerated the space through which it traveled to a velocity equal but opposite in vector to what the geodesic had.

And there it stood.

The Comprise began disassembling the ring. Within the sheraton the assembled employees, everyone from Constance Frog Moorfields down to the lowliest pierrot, cheered. A steelpipe percussion group struck up, and the paymasters broke open their salary machines. Lids were yanked from troughs of wine. “Well,” Wyeth said sadly, “it’s over.”

Rebel gave him a quick hug.

A few minutes later a party of five citizens entered the geodesic to take possession. They wore *cache-sexes* the color of mildew, with matching utilitarian cloaks that were recomplicated with straps, loops and cinches, and knee-high gravity boots.

After the delicate paintlines of Eros Kluster, the People’s paint seemed blunt and graceless—a simple green triangle covering nose and eyes. Under the triangles, humorless mouths. The party toured the sheraton in disapproving silence. At last their leader, a man named Stilicho, said, “I suppose it’s what we contracted for.”

“Good. Then you’ll summon a member of the Stavka for me to surrender authority to?” Wyeth asked.

A stern young woman curled her lip in scorn. “You outsiders and your cult of leadership! The Stavka is merely a jurisdictional body chosen by random lot. The People will honor any legal commitment made by any citizen.” She had a long jaw, grey crewcut hair, and a muscular body with bright, perky nipples, pink as rosebuds.

“That may well be,” Wyeth said. “However, my superiors still require a member of the Stavka. So I’m afraid that your word will not be sufficient.”

“Enough,” Stilicho said impatiently. “I myself am of the Stavka. I will accept all responsibility.”

“May I see your credentials?”

“No.”

Stilicho and Wyeth glared at one another. Wyeth was wearing his warrior face. Jaws set and eyes ablaze, the two reminded Rebel of nothing so much as a pair of tropical apes caught in a silent territorial dispute.

At last Wyeth’s head canted over at a wry angle, and he showed his teeth in a grin. “What the hell, Stilch, your word is good enough for me,” he said. “I’m not proud.”

Before Stilicho could respond, Rosebuds said, “I will take over here.” She slid an arm through Wyeth’s and steered him away from her leader. “It will take several days to decommission this project. In the meantime, the People will provide you with quarters on Deimos.” She glanced at Rebel and added, “And also for your staff.”

“What’s wrong with us staying in the sheraton?” Rebel asked.

“You will be given the same quarters that citizens receive,” Rosebuds said coldly.

“Well, that sounds reasonable.” Wyeth had switched personas again, and he bent over his data controls, eyes already vague with schedules and task rankings. “Rebel, why don’t you get our things ferried over and squared away? I’ll join you as soon as I can.”

Rebel nodded, said nothing. But she lingered for a moment, studying Rosebuds. The woman released Wyeth’s arm and surveyed the lobby. It was hard to tell, under that aloof citizen’s programming, what she might be thinking.

“First thing, this celebration,” Rosebuds said. “This unprogrammed rabble must be cleared away.”

*** * ***

The geodesic was parked at the outskirts of a vast orbital slum anchored by Deimos. Farms, factories, tank towns and wheel hamlets swarmed about the lopsided rock that was patently no true moon but an asteroid captured by Mars eons ago. It was all junk, not a cannister city or other major structure in the lot. Rebel caught a stand-up hopper, along with Stilicho and the one other citizen not directly involved in the decommission. The flight was long, made awkward by Stilicho's rough pilotage. Time and again he swerved abruptly to avoid some sudden manmade object. Apparently the People's Militia maintained only rudimentary traffic control.

As the hopper flew toward Deimos, pillars rose from the moon's surface, thread-thin and bright as mirrors. They soared outward hundreds of kilometers, then bent on long stems, like tornadoes, spreading slightly as they were acted on by Mars' gravitational field. "What the fuck are *those?*" Rebel asked, and then had to snatch for the grab bars as Stilicho slewed the hopper wildly away from a rising pillar.

"Dust," Stilicho grunted. He slammed the controls to the side, pulled them back as quickly.

"Pulverized rock," Vergillia added. "Tailings from our mining and tunneling operations, sent up by mass drivers. The dust is given an electrostatic charge, polarized, and then shot outward in phased pulses, on the order of seven hundred twenty per Greenwich second, a rate so fast that the flow appears continuous." The woman was warming to her subject. Rebel looked away, cutting her off. Something about that fanatic drone made her itch.

"When are you going to be programmed a citizen?"
Stilicho demanded.

"You've already asked me that question three times.
Why don't you just give it a rest?"

"You haven't given me a satisfactory answer yet."
Stilicho waved a hand irritably. "Evasions, fluff, words

that don't say anything! If you take programming as soon as we reach Deimos, you can be put to work tomorrow. A flight of ice asteroids is coming in, and the seeding crews could always use another hand." He put a holographic projection of an ice asteroid—a dirty thing, with more carbon than water to it—in the center of the hopper. A mining camp clung to the surface, and interior lines glowed, showing shafts, drifts, and galleries. "The small triangles represent spore packets. No bigger than your thumb, but there are hundreds of them scattered through the ice. The stars represent bacterial charges packed in fragmentation chambers."

Rebel stared out the hopper's visor strip at the twisting columns of dust. People's Mars' mining crafts were too sophisticated for her to follow, and their biotechniques were antiquated, dating back to the beginning of the century, when the first comets had been seeded. There was no middle ground in this lecture, nothing she might be interested to hear.

Vergillia, seeing her staring at the dust columns, mistook evasiveness for interest. "You are witnessing a very elegant use of resources," she said. "The waste dust is shot out into one of two areosynchronous orbits, where it forms mirror clouds which reflect additional sunlight down to the surface. Total insolation is thus increased by nearly ten percent."

All this while, Stilicho kept talking. "The ice asteroids approach from the leading edge of Mars and hit the surface with the force of fusion bombs—"

"Since the orbit is not permanent, there is slow but inevitable loss of dust, which must then be replenished—"

"Not only does the impact fragment the upper regolith, but the buried bacteria and spores are distributed through the shattered permafrost by explosive—"

They were like two machines that could not be turned off. Their overlapping babblings ebbed and crested to

form surges of pure abrasive noise that were all but unbearable. And through it all, that irritating quality of Vergillia's voice ran, like fingernails dragged across slate. "Shut up!" Rebel shouted. "God damn it, I don't want your programming! I'm not going to become a citizen! I despise all of you! Is that straightforward enough, or do you want me to be more explicit?"

There was an uncomfortable silence. "Well," Vergillia said at last. "Perhaps you need more time to consider."

Right then, something swam into focus in Rebel's memory, and she was finally able to place Vergillia's voice. She understood why that tone of bland assurance, with just that accent delivered in just that flat cadence, set her teeth on edge.

The woman sounded just like Eucrasia's mother.

* * *

The tunnels bored deep into the dead rock of Deimos were long, straight, and perfectly round, drilled with simpleminded undeviancy. Even weighted down by Wyeth's dozen crates of possessions and her own two, the slight gravity made it hard to walk. They drifted deep into the moon, past lighting towers spaced so there were stretches of gloom between harsh brilliancies. Rebel felt as if she were moving through the faraway childhood her mother had so proudly hated. These were the grey and black rockscapes she had heard of so often. These rapidly moving citizens in grey were the same people her mother had despised so guiltily.

"You will note the perfect roundness of the tunnels," Stilicho said. "All our spaces are multipurpose. What is a dormitory today may be grain storage tomorrow. A corridor may become a conduit for water or industrial chemicals or even bacterial seed stock, depending on need. Nothing is dedicated solely to human comfort."

Eucrasia's mother had told stories of people drowning in a sudden flood of creosote or of molasses, when the

citizen-comptroller operating the gates had pulled the wrong switch. Rebel glanced over her shoulder. It was a long way to the nearest exit. “It doesn’t sound like a very appealing way to live.”

“You must understand that when Mars has been terraformed, we will all move to the surface, and Deimos will be abandoned. It would make no sense to waste effort on temporary quarters.”

Ahead a group of noncitizens—all heavily wetpainted—were installing a failsafe gate. As Vergillia and Stilicho strode forward, the work gang scattered to get out of their way. Eucrasia’s mother had also told stories of what happened to those who got in the way of programmed citizens. “When will Mars be ready, then?”

“Two hundred and eighty years.”

They came to a train station. Without her guides, Rebel would not have known. To her it was just the unmarked junction of two tunnels, by which a drab crowd of citizens and a few programmed outsiders stood. Then, from a crosstube, a metal worm floated into view. Its blind front eased to a halt, and doors sighed open. Vergillia and Stilicho helped Rebel load her bundle of cartons into the freight section, and then they all entered a transit car. Rebel hooked feet and hands through the appropriate rings. The car filled to capacity.

A bell chimed, and the doors closed. The train leaped forward in a horrid burst of acceleration, and the lights went off. In the pitch darkness, with bodies pressing on her from all sides, Rebel felt Eucrasia’s claustrophobia rise up. “What’s wrong?” she cried. “What happened to the lights?”

“Lights are not necessary here,” Stilicho said. “The People never waste resources unnecessarily.”

The train flew into the black and lightless rock.

*** * ***

Rebel was still feeling weak and a little helpless when they arrived at the day's designated dormitory niches. Some quarter of them were in use. People came and went constantly. "Diamond blue seventeen," Stilicho said.

"Remember that."

"Your leader's niche is beside it. Diamond blue eighteen," Vergillia added.

"Oh, good," Rebel said. The niches were small, with a sleeping space scooped from one rock wall. The crates nearly filled one niche completely, much to her guides' amusement. "How do I close the door?"

"Door?" asked Vergillia.

Stilicho said, "Do not worry about your possessions. With a few exceptions such as yourself, all noncitizens allowed into Deimos are rigidly programmed. There is no theft here."

"I meant for privacy."

"Privacy?"

Shaking her head wearily, Rebel said, "Listen, it's been fun. Thanks for your help. Now why don't you two just leave me alone for a while?" She sat down in the sleeping space. The rock smelled faintly of olive oil and machine lubricant. "Go away."

"Perhaps," Stilicho said in a concerned voice, "you don't understand how badly new citizens are needed for the great task—"

"My mother was a citizen," Rebel said angrily. "Did you know that?"

They looked at her.

"Yeah, she was born right here on Deimos. She was brought up in one of your creche collectives. Took citizenship at age ten. Did everything she was supposed to do, and got reprogrammed once a year. She was just like you, you know that?"

“I don’t—”

But Rebel talked through the reply, driven by a near-hysteria born of exhaustion. “Here’s the interesting part. She was on an ice asteroid seeding crew, just like you want me for, okay? She was on the green team, so she was in on it from the beginning. Went to Saturn orbital and was on the team that negotiated the deal with the ice butchers.” The citizens were staring at her in flat amazement. “So she was your quintessential constant citizen, right? Only it’s—what?— maybe a two-year trek from Saturn to Mars, even with early acceleration and a solar sail rig. So there was time for personality drift. The green team stavka thought there wasn’t enough opportunity for unshared experience for individualization to occur. So they weren’t vigilant enough.

“Okay, so the asteroid is passing through the belts, and there’s an unscheduled breakdown. Kills half the green team. The big tunneler needs parts and a major overhaul from the nearest industrial Kluster. My mother is on the buying collective, makes the score, returns.

“One of the fitters the Kluster sent out was my father. He was a big guy, very competent, sure of himself, quiet. A hell of a guy. The kind that people admire. And my mother fell in love with him. You see that? She didn’t know what was happening at first, ’cause citizens don’t fall in love, right? How could they? By the time she realized what had happened, she was so far gone she didn’t want to come back. He smiled at her, and she went with him. Back at the Kluster, she took industrial asylum, and the green team had to go on without her.” Rebel’s throat was dry. She coughed into her hand. “So you see what I’m saying? I know all about you. I heard all about your tricks when I was a kid. I know what you’re selling, and I’m not buying any. Okay?”

Stilicho turned stiffly and bounded away. Vergillia hesitated long enough to say, “I am sorry that your mother was a sex-criminal and deprived you of your birthright.

But that does not excuse you for rudeness.”

Then she too was gone.

The stone was cool under Rebel’s back and vibrated with the subsonic rumble of faraway digging machines. Her stomach was queasy, and her head ached. Eucrasia’s memories had come back to her totally. There was much in Eucrasia’s past that she hadn’t had occasion to think about, but it was all there, and accessible to her.

But along with the dread weight of Eucrasia’s memories came unexpected insight. She realized now why her mother had filled her childhood with pointless droning stories about the corridors of Deimos, about quiet misery and bleak sameness and unending work. She understood her mother’s sudden flares of dark anger, her randomly-applied prohibitions, her sourceless punishments. They had all been her faltering, uninformed attempts to immunize Eucrasia against People’s Mars. To foster a hard independence that would ensure she never returned to the moon of her mother’s birth, never surrendered to its citizenship program.

And yet here she was, in these same tired old tunnels.

This is not my past, Rebel thought. This guilt is not mine. And yet lying in this doorless niche, with citizens moving briskly by and occasionally glancing in with cool impersonal curiosity, the coughs and growls of distant machines bouncing down stone walls, Rebel felt like crying.

After a while, she did.

*** * ***

The clamor of voices echoed about the communal dining hall. The chamber was huge, as high as it was wide, and the hundreds of tables and benches and thousands of diners didn’t come near to filling it. High over Rebel’s place an enormous conduit gaped, water stains trailing from its lip. Involuntarily, she glanced toward the distant

entryway, wondering how many here would make it to the nearest failsafe lock were that distant citizen-comptroller to suffer a single instant's inattention.

Scattered here and there among the grey citizens, conversing, were several hundred orange Comprise (and one silent one who studied Rebel with dead insectoid stare) and the rarer multicolored brightness of Constance's work crew. The chatter was light, and there was constant motion between tables. Wyeth slipped into the bench holes beside her. "How was your day?" Rebel asked.

"We managed to empty out the orchid, anyway." A pierrot set a tray before Wyeth, and he picked up the food tongs. "It was awful. I spent all my time keeping Little Miss Bloodthirsty from killing people. She wanted to give the orchid villagers an hour's notice and then pump out the air."

"No!"

"What is so remarkable?" Rosebuds latched her tray to the table and took the place beside Wyeth. Freeboy and a noncitizen Rebel didn't recognize—he wore a zebra-striped cloak and a red vest with twin rows of brass buttons—took places opposite her. "Share it with us all."

"A private joke," Wyeth said easily. "Hallo, Freeboy. Who's your friend?"

"Bors is my name, sir." Flash of white teeth. Bors' hair was done up in long, thin braids, their ends contained in silver static balls. He wore a slim, noncommittal line of yellow paint across his brow. "I am a commercial traveler in vintage information from the Republique Provisionnelle d'Amalthea, of the unaligned Jovian satellites."

Wyeth introduced himself and Rebel, and then said, "You've come a long way."

"And a long way yet to go. My coldship is bound for

Earth in another day. Deimos is only a side-trip for me, a bit of mining technology transfer that was too profitable to resist.”

Freeboy, who had been listening impatiently, abruptly leaned forward and said to Rebel, “Hey! You’ll never guess who’s taken on citizenship today. You want to try and guess?” Confused, Rebel shook her head. Freeboy leaned back, looking smug. “Your little friend Maxwell, that’s who.”

“Maxwell?” Rebel said. Freeboy nodded. “Slim, dark, irresponsible, hedonistic kid? Are we talking about the same guy?”

“It does seem hard to credit,” Wyeth said. “This was voluntary, you say?”

“Oh yeah, he wanted it all right. He said—”

“This is all very interesting,” Rosebuds said. “Now I have something I’d like you all to see.” She slid her tray aside and started dealing out cards from a deck of holographic flats. She laid down an image of Mars as it appeared in prehuman times, red and lifeless, then covered it with a second card. The planet wavered, then blurred with storms. The icecaps were darkened by a light dustfall of Phobic matter, and shrank. A single glint of green showed within the crater of Olympus Mons. “You see the progress we’re making. The Olympus eden is a showcase microecology, a sample of what all Mars will be like eventually, and is not yet available for colonization.” Swiftly she laid down further cards. “Fifty years from now, a hundred, one fifty. At this point most of the permafrost has melted, and the atmosphere is thick enough for humans equipped with rebreathers. But we will not be satisfied. Two hundred years.” Mottled green covered the floating sphere. There were thin clouds. “Three hundred.” The entire planet was transformed. Gentle green stretched from polar region to polar region. Here and there tiny lakes were pinpricks of glacial blue.

“You will note that there are no oceans. The Martian ecology will be more delicate and at the same time more supportive of human life than the Terran ecology. While the oceans of Earth make its ecosphere incredibly stable, they also waste most of Earth’s resources on marine life. The total colonizable land area of Mars will be equal to that of Earth, and it will all be put to the service of the People.”

“I really don’t see the benefit of terraforming a planet,” Rebel said dubiously. “For that kind of effort you could build thousands of city cans, or seed I don’t know how many comets.”

“A planetary surface is the best place for an expanding postindustrial culture. The air is free, to begin with. There is so much land area that it wouldn’t be worth the effort to charge rent. You’d just live wherever you wanted. Croplands in a functioning ecosphere are self-irrigating and self-fertilizing. In fact, everything takes vastly less effort on a planetary surface.” She laid down more cards. “Here is a vision of the croplands. Here is a vision of the treelands. Here is a vision of one of the larger lakes. The opposite shore is barely visible, it is so large. Within the lake will be fish, eels, mussels. On its verges, rice, wetwheat, cranberries. Here is a vision of the parklands...”

“That’s a really primitive structure you got there,” Freeboy said. “You’ve got a one-to-one transference of Terran ecologies, you see? But with a little thought you could adapt ocean fish, squids, maybe revert a few land plants to lakeweeds, set up a lichen bridge across the surface, and before you know it you’ve got a much more interesting and complex system going. Why haven’t your people whomped up something like that?”

“Look about you,” Rosebuds said. “How many plants do you see? We cannot afford to devote resources to the support industries a bioengineering economy requires. And yet, as you say, the need is great. You will find that

there is much for you to do when you take on citizenship.”

“No, no, not me!” Freeboy held up his hands, laughing. “I’m going back to Hibrasil with all the money I earned on this swing through the System, and then some. Matter of fact, I just made a bundle on the currency exchange today.”

“You didn’t exchange outside currency for People’s credit?” Bors looked concerned.

“Is there a problem?” Freeboy asked, the smile dying on his face.

“Our social systems are built to support the ideal of the selfless, communal citizen,” Rosebuds said. “Since the amassing of private wealth is destructive to the personality, we have ways of discouraging it. That is why, for example, we are assigned new living quarters daily. When you have to move all that you own once a day, you learn to retain only that which has true value. Similarly, our economy has an engineered inflation rate of ten thousand percent daily.”

Freeboy turned to Bors. “What does that mean?”

“It means that People’s credit has to be spent immediately. Otherwise it disappears. If you’ve held on to it for an hour, it’s practically worthless.”

Freeboy stood, pale with outrage. “I...” He shook a finger at Wyeth. “All I went through working for you! And... I...” He choked and, turning away, fled.

Turning over another card, Rosebuds said, “This is a vision of the living quarters we will share in the new civilization.”

Wyeth reached out, put a hand over the cards. “What I’d really like to talk about is your attitude toward the Comprise. I’ve been watching, and it’s obvious to me that you’re not taking proper precautions against them. I’ve even seen some using your data ports. You obviously have no appreciation of how dangerous they are.”

“The People cannot be in danger,” Rosebuds said, “since we cannot be corrupted.” She swept up her holographic flats and stood. “I can see, however, that none of you has a true interest in citizenship as yet. We shall discuss the matter further at a later time.” She left, and two more citizens came along to take her place and the one beside it.

“Have you used the facilities here yet?” Bors asked Rebel, smiling.

“Oh, God! The first time I sat down on a crapper and a man came up and sat down beside me, I almost died. And then he saw me turning red, and wanted to know what the problem was.” Rebel laughed, and Bors and Wyeth joined her.

The citizens looked puzzled. “I don’t understand,” one said, and when Rebel tried to explain, “But where is the humor in that?”

Rebel simply shook her head.

A few minutes later the new citizens took their trays and left. “People come and go so quickly around here,” Rebel marveled.

“That’s because mealtime is the only chance they get to socialize,” Bors said. “Every hour of their day is spent constructively. If they’re not working, they’re studying. If they’re not working or studying, they’re asleep. This is the only chance they get to simply talk.”

“You seem to know a lot about the subject.”

“Yes, I do, don’t I?” Bors said, pleased.

*** * ***

When Rebel led Wyeth back to diamond blue seventeen, he glanced quickly at his crates and said, “Snug, isn’t it?”

Then, in his warrior voice: “Listen, I want to do a little poking around in the public data base, see how thoroughly the Comprise have infiltrated it. Why don’t you wait here for me? I won’t be long.”

Rebel knew better than to argue with Wyeth’s warrior

persona. She sat down in the sleepspace. There was nothing to do here save listen to the constant light-gravity scuffle of citizens in the hall. After ten minutes of that she began to appreciate the motivating power of boredom. Given the chance, she would gladly have volunteered to scrape vacuum flowers, just to have something to do.

Rosebuds appeared in the doorway. She stood there silently, her cloak open.

“He’s not here,” Rebel said grimly. “And you can’t have him, anyway.”

Doffing her cloak, Rosebuds stepped within. She left her boots by the door and sat beside Rebel. “I didn’t come here for him.” She put a hand on Rebel’s knee. “The Stavka is very concerned about you. I informed them that you were brought up by a renegade, and they were worried that this may have made you anti-sex, possessive, and private.” Her hand slid up Rebel’s thigh.

The woman’s tone was so matter-of-fact that it was not until she started to peel away Rebel’s *cache-sexe* that Rebel realized what she was talking about. With a startled cry she cringed back in the sleepspace, tugging her clothing up and raising knees to chin so that her legs formed a barrier between them. “Hey! Wait a minute, I’m not into that kind of—”

“We could tell,” Rosebuds said. “That is one reason we sent you a woman. To help in your healing. You are depriving yourself of many modes of pleasure needlessly.”

“Yeah, well, Wyeth will be back in a minute, so maybe you’d better go.”

“There’s room for him as well. Perhaps that would be the quickest way of freeing you from your possessiveness.” She raised a leg and gently ran her foot up the side of Rebel’s body, tweaking her earlobe between first and second toes. “Pleasure is communal. Relax. Enjoy yourself.”

“But I don’t want to enjoy myself!” Rebel cried. “Not that way! All I want is Wyeth and... and...”

“This isn’t working,” Rosebuds said scornfully. “Look at you. You are so fearful. Do you think I am going to take you by force? Let me tell you something, I see how you sneer at the great dream of terraforming and at the People. You think our lives are constricted, but they are not half so narrow as your own. The citizenship program makes us full human beings. A citizen understands duty, sex, work, pleasure, friendship, and sacrifice, and welcomes them all. I have been down to the surface five times, and that is a very dangerous place. I have been as close to death as I am to you now, and I never once showed fear. You laugh at the People because we are all the same. But we are heroes, every one of us. I am one, and I know!”

She pulled on her boots and left.

* * *

When Wyeth returned, they made love. It was a sweaty, desperate lovemaking, and Rebel put all she had into it. I am *not* afraid, she told herself, and I am not missing any pleasure. At the moment of climax, as she squeezed Wyeth tight inside her and dug her nails so deeply into the flesh of his back that they drew blood, he groaned into her ear, “I love you.”

“Hah? What?” she said blankly.

“I love you.” Lying weak and exhausted beside her, Wyeth brushed her cheek with his own. “I really do.”

“What are you talking about?” This was all too ludicrous to be real. “Which one of you? Or should I say, how many?”

“Listen to me.” Wyeth rolled atop her, gazed straight into her eyes. “I... don’t think that love is a matter of persona, of personality. I think it goes deeper than that.” His fist thumped his chest. “*I* love you, Rebel Elizabeth Mudlark. I think I would love you no matter who I was.”

Silent and unblinking, Rebel looked at him until she felt her eyes sliding out of focus, and blinked and had to say something. “Why are you telling me this now?”

She didn’t accent that last word, but it hovered between them, cold and harsh as truth itself. There couldn’t be much time left to her.

Eucrasia’s memories had returned, and the persona could not be far behind. And then Rebel would be melted down, back into the ocean of soul, and exist no more. “Why now?” she repeated. Maybe it didn’t matter to him who she was—Rebel or Eucrasia. Bitter thought.

He read her eyes. “It’s not Eucrasia. It’s not this body. There will never be anyone for me but you. Listen. I know that you’re... going away soon, and I don’t want you to—God, I don’t know how to say it—I don’t want you to *dissolve* without ever knowing that I love you. I don’t think I could bear it. Is that too greedy of me? Do you understand what I’m trying to say?”

In a storm of happiness and misery, she hugged him to her and held him tight so that he couldn’t see her face, her tears. When he started to talk again, she silenced him the only way she could think of, and they were making love again.

All through it, she loved him so much she had to bite her tongue to keep from telling him. She was afraid that if she spoke the words they would split her wide open. She loved Wyeth more now than she ever had, and she loved him most of all for lying to her. Because of course she didn’t believe a word of what he’d said.

But it was nice that he’d said it.

* * *

That night Eucrasia appeared to her in the form of a rotting corpse. Her fingers ended in chrome scalpels, and when she opened her mouth, hypodermic syringes slid from the flesh like rows of lamprey teeth. “Go back,” Rebel

said. Eucrasia raised a grey hand in graceful gesture, and razor racks stung across Rebel's face.

For a shocked instant, Rebel stood her ground, staring through a haze of blood globules, and then Eucrasia lifted her other hand, and Rebel turned and kicked away.

She fled down an endless tangle of stone tunnels, falling up some and struggling down others. Time and again the necromantic horror behind her reached out lazily to slash the soles of her feet. She was trailing blood, and throbbed with pain from the knees downward. It seemed to her that she was fleeing through the arteries of a vast body, a dead body, a body of dead stone, and that the body was her own.

With this insight, she found herself paralyzed and strapped to a gurney within a niche of New High Kamden's rose maze.

Eucrasia's face loomed over her. The wetsurgical paint was cracked and dry, the cheeks taut, and the mouth slightly agape with the tightening of the flesh. Eyes dry and sightless. She leaned close and, breath sweet with putrefaction, spoke.

But when Rebel finally awoke, all she could remember was that Eucrasia had told her truths that she dared not accept.

10

SHADOW OF SNOW

The next day somebody shot a citizen.

Rebel didn't hear of it until dinnertime. She'd been straw-bossing a work crew fitting a new airlock on Tank Fourteen. It was one of a dozen crews, all but hers overseen by citizens, that Wyeth was coordinating, but the

others were all off on the hull or in the orchid. Half the hustlers in the tanks came out to sell her workers spiced fruit, wine, ganja, or bootie, and it was a constant hassle keeping them out of the way. The day before, the macrobioengineers had killed the orchid, and it was starting to liquesce. Even through the rebreathers needed now that half the air had been pumped from the geodesic, the stench was appalling. It was late when she finally got the lock working, and she was barely in time to catch a hopper to Deimos. She stepped into the bench as Wyeth was finishing his meal.

“Citizen got shot today,” Wyeth said. He gave her a hug, handed her a tray. A passing pierrot filled it with food.

“What happened?”

“The crew that was chopping the orchid for the protein refineries? They stumbled across a nest of bootleggers brewing up absinthe gin. Pretty marginal operation, I’d say, or they would’ve written that last batch off. Anyway, one of them had an air rifle. It went off.” He shrugged.

“These things happen.”

“Was he hurt bad?”

“Here he comes now.” Two citizens took places at their table. One wore a chest sling, and Rebel could see the prosthetic lung moving within its amber depths. “Hallo, Cincinnatus. How’s the prognosis?”

“No permanent damage done,” Cincinnatus said.

“I am curious,” the woman beside him said. “This air rifle, is it a common weapon in the belt Klusters?”

“No, no,” Wyeth said. “In fact, it’s extremely impractical in most Kluster environments—more a toy than a weapon. Its range is greater than a blade’s, but its accuracy is less. It’s cheaper than energy weapons, but less versatile. However, there does seem to be something of a fad for the things in the tanks.”

Three more citizens came by, with Bors tagging after. He

sat beside Rebel, braids swimming lazily about his head then slowly settling down. The static balls kept them away from his face. “This is my last supper.” He spread his hands to either side of him. “My coldship is being prepped even as we sit here.”

“And yet, as you say, this weapon seems peculiarly well suited to the needs of petty criminals. Why did you introduce it in the first place?”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time,” Wyeth said lightly. His questioner frowned.

Stilicho also joined the group. “I’ve been out examining the damage done by the weeds that came along with the sheraton. These vacuum flowers. I found them growing on tanks, on farm exteriors, on vacuum docks—there is even a patch on the surface of Deimos. They seem to be everywhere.”

“Oh they’re tenacious all right,” Wyeth said. “Once they get a toehold, there’s no getting rid of them.” Bors chewed slowly, watching the exchange with bright interest.

“Speaking of unwanted presences, Stilicho, I was browsing through your public data base yesterday and found it riddled with Comprise incursions. I hope you don’t keep any secrets there.”

“The People have no secrets,” Stilicho said. “Freedom of information is a basic right of our society. About these vacuum flowers of yours. How are they controlled on Eros Kluster?”

“Mostly they’re not. They’re kept down by dint of constant labor, but I couldn’t say that they’re controlled. The problem is that they’re bioconstructs designed for trash transformation. The idea was that it’d be easier to harvest and process the flowers than pick up and process the trash. Somebody explained to me once how they got out of hand. Something about single-organism ecosystems. I forget the details.”

“Do you know any People’s law?” Bors asked abruptly.

“I’ve seen something of it,” Rebel said.

“The geodesic should have been examined before acceleration. These verminous little plants will cost us enormous effort to exterminate—if they can indeed be exterminated. Seeding our space with their spores was criminal negligence,” Stilicho said.

“Somebody goofed, that’s for sure,” Wyeth agreed. “Similarly, I think you’ll be making a mistake if you don’t sterilize your data system as soon as you can.”

“Fascinating stuff. Very informal, very final. Once judgment has been made, there’s no appeal,” Bors said. “Their trials are held at mealtime. A few members of the Stavka gather at the suspect’s table and ask questions. Witnesses drop by to chat, then wander off. By the time the meal is over—” he impaled seven peas on an eating needle and popped them in his mouth—“the guilty party has been condemned. And if he wasn’t paying attention, he might well have mistaken it all for casual dinner conversation.”

Rebel glanced quickly at Wyeth. The expression on his face was suddenly careful. “Of course I myself had nothing to do with the exterior of the hull,” he said, “since I was responsible solely for *internal* security.”

“A legalism,” Stilicho said.

Cincinnatus shook his head. “No, that’s a valid point. What I’m concerned with are all these rifles loose in the tanks. I believe they could well grow into a major social problem given time. It would—”

“Have you ever eaten meat?” Bors asked Rebel loudly. “I don’t mean fish or termite compress, but real meat. Dead flesh, carved from animal corpses.”

Rebel stared at him blankly, and he jabbed her with his thumb. “People used to eat rabbits, I know,” she faltered. “And chickens.”

“They still do in the Outer System. Had it myself. Dead

chicken is mighty fine eating.”

Several citizens glanced at Bors with distaste. Wyeth leaned forward and said, “I understand that on Earth people used to eat the major mammals—horses, cows, bears, apes.”

“Apes?” Cincinnatus said, horrified.

“Cows were more common, I believe. The cooks prepared them by hand, first killing the cow with a blow to the head with a large hammer. The animal grunts, the knees buckle, and there’s your food.”

“I do not think this conversation is necessary,” Stilicho said. “Certainly not while people are eating.”

“Oh, but there’s more!” Bors said. “Did you know that the internal organs were considered delicacies—the liver, the heart, the brains? You’d be surprised how little there is of a dead animal that you can’t eat. The pizzle was boiled and served on a bun. The stomach was crammed with a stuffing made of the minor organs, roasted and then sliced—there’s irony for you, eh?” Two citizens, faces pale, put down their utensils and fled. “Now the way they prepared lobster—this is especially interesting—they placed the creatures, still alive, in a large pot of cold water, then put a flame beneath the pot. Very slowly they brought the water to a boil. At first the lobster would skitter about, trying to escape, but then, as the water heated up, its motions slowed, and it died. When it was bright red, it was ready. To eat it, you had to crack the shell open and suck the dead meat out.”

Now Stilicho was the only citizen left, and he too looked nauseated. “We will continue our discussion tomorrow,” he said to Wyeth. Then, looking at Bors, he added, “Without you.”

“Did you notice how many members of the Stavka were here at our table?” Bors asked when they were alone. He tongued up a square of grub loaf. “I felt quite honored.”

Rising, Wyeth bowed formally and said, “I am in your debt, sir—I don’t know when I’ve found conversation more valuable. But right now I have business to see to. Rebel, where are we sleeping today? I’ll meet you there in an hour or so.”

“It’s still diamond blue seventeen. Apparently guests get special privileges.”

Wyeth gone, Rebel turned to her meal again and found she had no appetite. She pushed the food about on her tray, but could not bring herself to place it in her mouth.

She was about to excuse herself when Bors, leaning forward for a slice of papaya, murmured in her ear, “The *Pequod* leaves in an hour. If you caught me before I left Mars’ sunspace, I could cut you a deal for transit to Earth orbit.” He settled back and winked. “Think about it.”

* * *

Halfway to diamond blue seventeen, a god-head, eyes luminous, stumbled up to Rebel and handed her a card. His paint was smeared across his face, but it had obviously begun as a green triangle. To Rebel, his mere existence was a revelation. It implied an entire underworld of vices in Deimos, hidden away from public view. With an ecstatic wail, the god-head broke away from her and trotted up the corridor, turned aside, and was gone.

Rebel looked down at the card. It was blank.

Wonderingly, she ran a thumb across its surface. There must have been an empathic contact circuit layered onto the paper, for a voice whispered within her head, “Go to a public data port and place your hand against the screen.”

A quick, almost subliminal flash of a large black wheel hung in the air. She recognized the logo.

Earth.

Rebel ran her thumb over the card again, but nothing happened. The bit of more-than-human technology had destroyed itself.

This was exactly Wyeth's kind of opportunity. Doubtless he'd have two-edged bargains ready to offer and poisoned concessions to make. In some neat little mental drawer, he'd have his baits fresh, his hooks sharpened, and his lines coiled. His arguments would be finer than a hair, almost invisible and yet stronger than diamond-whisker cable.

No matter. It was all irrelevant now.

Rebel was not about to follow up on the card. She had troubles enough of her own. But when she came to the intersection of tunnels down which the god-head had run, she glanced down it casually and saw him being beaten by a knot of citizens.

Two citizens were holding the man against the curve of the wall, while two others systematically pounded his stomach, his face, his chest, with their fists. They worked in grim silence, and the god-head did not cry out. Despite the damage done him, he grinned weakly. "Hey!" Rebel cried. "Stop that!" The citizens looked up. She felt vaguely foolish, as if they had caught her at wrongdoing, rather than the other way around, but she ran toward them anyway.

The citizens' faces were stolid. Their victim's head lolled down against his chest, and he chuckled weakly. One citizen stepped forward, hand upraised to block Rebel's way. "Go back," he said. "This is no concern of yours."

"Maxwell," she said wonderingly. "Maxwell, is that you?"

The citizen glanced over his shoulder at his fellows, then took her arm and started walking her away. She resisted at first, but then Maxwell said, "Think. There's nothing you can do."

They turned a corner and walked on in silence. After a time, Rebel said, "This isn't like you, Maxwell." He smiled ironically. "I don't see how you could have done this to yourself! You were always light. Carefree."

“Irresponsible,” Maxwell said. “Yes, I know. I enjoyed it at the time. But I grew. Everybody grows.” They strolled along somberly, and then he said, “What did it for me was when I was snatched by King Wismon. He didn’t just throw me in with his rude boys—he made me their zookeeper. Practically his second in command. Think of that. It was the first time I’d ever been put in charge of anything. And you know what? I enjoyed it. Not the work itself, but the sense of being responsible. Of being an adult. That’s what citizenship gives me. They’re sending me down to the surface tomorrow.”

“Maxwell, you were beating that man! That’s not being responsible. That’s just plain vicious.”

Maxwell thought for a long time before speaking. “Duty doesn’t always make you feel good. That citizen will be reprogrammed, but the memory still remains. He must remember that there was pain as well as pleasure.” They were now a good distance from the site of the beating. “But as I said, it’s none of your concern. Your dormitory area is just ahead. Third corridor right, straight on to the end. You can’t miss it.”

Rebel stood there as this new stranger turned and started to walk away. It was such a pathetic moment she wished she could slice it out of her memory entirely. All his ravings about responsibility. “Maxwell?”

He stopped, glanced back casually. “Yes?”

“Where’s the nearest public data port?”

* * *

Smooth white niche. She touched fingers to the plate, and the holoscreen flickered on. Against a formless background, a woman knelt on a red prayer rug, gaunt in white cloak. She raised her head and studied Rebel through cold, colorless eyes.

“Snow?” Rebel asked.

The image considered this. “No. Not Snow. I am her

shadow.”

“You are... Shadow?”

A quick snakelike motion of the head, a fractional smile.

“Shadow, yes. That is a good name for me. Call me Shadow. I am a message for you. Snow believes it may take some discussion to convince you that your interests and hers lie in the same direction. Yet no members of her network were within easy interactive distance of you. Thus, she created me.”

“I don’t understand. What *are* you?”

“I am an interactive ALI, that’s Artificial Limited Intelligence. A temporary avatar based on the Snow persona. I have full human awareness and can discuss a limited number of topics with you. However, I am not provided with irrelevant information and cannot respond to irrelevant remarks. Please keep that fact in mind as we talk.”

“So you don’t know from eating dead animals, you mean?”

“You exceed this program’s capabilities.” Shadow made an impatient gesture. “We haven’t much time. ALI’s are created with an inherent disintegration factor. What programmers call a virus. I will die soon, whether my message is delivered or not.” A flicker of emotion within those reptilian eyes. Rebel thought she could guess at its nature.

“How long do you have?” she asked gently.

“We have already wasted one third of my life.”

“Okay, all right, I got you! What’s the message?”

“You must take extreme care when you enter your niche. Diamond blue seventeen. There is a body there. It may not be entirely dead.”

“What?” Rebel touched the wall with one hand. Cool and rough. Its solidity reassured her. “I don’t—”

“This is Snow’s warning: You are being manipulated by the Comprise. You and your friend tetrad. They have convinced the Stavka that you are corporate agents, industrial saboteurs. They have created plausible and incriminating theories for all your actions. They have planted evidence. The body is such evidence. It will be discovered in six hours, and it will dovetail neatly into other planted evidence. Data system records will show that the murder could only have been done by you. The Stavka will order your personas erased and your bodies condemned to simple labor.”

“Wait, wait! This doesn’t make any sense.”

“The important thing is to remember that the body may not be entirely dead. The murder was difficult to arrange, even for the Comprise, and there’s a good chance the victim will still be alive when you enter. If so, he will probably be extremely dangerous.”

“This is incredible. Dangerous in what way? Why?”

“You have exceeded this program’s capabilities.” Shadow waited a full two seconds, then said, “Do you have any further questions?”

“No. No, I... think not.”

“Please consider carefully. I do not have long. If you have illusions of destroying the evidence or of successfully defending yourself before the Stavka, please let me know, so I can convince you it cannot be done. I have been given that information.” The image wavered as a front of white static washed through it. “I have been given that information.” A pale, attenuated yearning touched her face. “You must interact with me. It is very hard knowing one must die, but worse to die for no purpose.”

“All right, then. Speaking of purpose. Why is the Comprise doing this to me? What’s in it for them?”

“You are being forced to run. You will find that there is no place for you to hide anywhere in Mars orbit. A check of

the port control manifests will reveal that the only vessels leaving in the next six hours are all bound for Earth orbit. The Comprise wants to force you to Earth. I do not know why.”

“I do,” Rebel said grimly. “I understand it all now. I just don’t have the slightest idea what to do about it.”

Transients pulsed through Shadow, making her waver as if seen from deep underwater. When she stabilized, she said, “I am almost over. Tell me. Have I served you well? Have I helped you to escape the Comprise’s manipulations?”

“You stupid program! Snow works for the Comprise. She doesn’t want to help me escape them. She just wants to be sure that I fall into their trap intact.”

“Ah,” Shadow said. “That’s interesting. Very—” Static rose up and overwhelmed the image.

When it cleared, Shadow was gone.

* * *

One corner of the sleepspace was visible from the hall, and in it a pair of legs, unnaturally still. Rebel forced herself to peer within. The man’s cloak was thrown up over his head, and his torso was bright with blood. An ugly smear covered the stone behind him. Feeling cold, Rebel said, “Hello?”

The cloak stirred as an arm caught in its folds moved feebly. The end of the arm jutted from the cloth, a stump black with crusted blood. Just above the stump was a tourniquet, and above that a crudely made infection barrier. Even from the doorway, Rebel caught the whiff of decaying flesh.

The arm moved twice, trying to flip the cloak away, and then on a third attempt succeeded, uncovering a face that was grey and gape-mouthed. Pink eyelids slowly rose, and the man drew in a long, shuddering breath.

Haunted eyes stared at her.

It was Jerzy Heisen, and he was dying.

“Hey, kid,” he said weakly. “We’ve come a long way, you and I.”

The halls were perfectly silent. Not even a digging machine to be heard. Apparently she and Wyeth were the only ones using these dormitories today. Rebel wanted to untangle Heisen’s cloak, to straighten his limbs and put him at ease. She didn’t move from the doorway. “What happened, Jerzy?”

Eyes closed wearily. “Stupid. Stupid freak accident, couldn’t happen again if you tried.” He coughed spasmodically; it was some time before he could speak again. “I was clipped by a runaway cybermop. Pretty dumb, huh? Supervisor must not’ve been at the monitors—they execute people for that kind of mistake here. Should never’ve happened. I fell on top of the sucker, and one of the cleaning arms broke loose and slammed me in here. Bet it made a bloody mess, huh?” Rebel nodded. “So now my back’s fucked; you wouldn’t want to look at it. I think my spine is crushed.”

“I’ll get a doctor,” Rebel said. She couldn’t move.

“No good.” Eyes opened, infinitely sad. “Got myself wired together with seven caps of jolt. That’s enough to make a corpse walk. Dose like that eats your body alive.” He laughed weakly. “Seven caps. Must be some kind of record. Listen to me. I’m drugged and I’m dying, and I think maybe it’s shorted out the compulsion they laid on me. There’s something I got to tell you. Something they don’t want you to know.”

“Oh yeah?” Rebel said. “What is it?”

“It’s important. Deutsche Nakaso...” His voice slid down into inaudibility, but Rebel didn’t lean any closer to hear. After a moment’s silence, Heisen stirred slightly and rasped, “Come closer. Can’t... can’t speak too good.”

“No.”

“S’important.” Heisen coughed again, and tears of agony came to his eyes. “Mus’ tell.”

“Oh, come off it. I’m not going to fall for that.”

“Closer,” he whispered.

Slowly Rebel slid down the doorframe, until she was sitting on the floor. She leaned her head back against the stone, crossed her arms under her breasts, said nothing.

Heisen glared at her.

There was something savage and desperate to that fixed stare, as if the mind behind those eyes were a small animal caught in a leghold snare and about to gnaw its way free. “So,” he said at last. “So. You think... you’re such a smart bitch.” He lurched feebly, and the arm caught under his body yanked free of the cloak. He was holding a finger-blade between second and third knuckles. With a spasmodic motion, he threw the thing right at her. Rebel leaned back, and the blade sailed by.

A second later it made a gentle metal *ping* against the rock wall.

The outstretched arm pointed straight at her. Heisen didn’t have the strength to pull it back. “Smart,” he said. “But that doesn’t give you the right to do this to me.”

Rebel drew her feet under her, stood. She felt anger fill her body. “The right to—! I never wanted to know you in the first place. What do you want from me? Are you hoping I’m feeling suicidal? Do you want me to bring you your knife and stand real close so you can cut my throat, is that it?” She was trembling.

Heisen nodded piteously. “Please.”

“Fuck that noise!”

Finally Heisen closed his eyes. Still his hand reached out desperately, grasping at nothing. His head lolled back. “You and Deutsche Nakasone,” he said. “Between the two of you, I’ve been ground into dust. You’ve killed me, and I never gave a shit for either of you.” His voice was growing

weak.

“Hey, now listen—”

“God damn you,” he whispered. “God damn you all.”

* * *

They caught up with Bors just an hour inside Mars’s sunspace. Rebel kept expecting pursuit, but there was none. Apparently nobody had noticed the hopper was gone. Even so, the hours at 2.5 Greenwich made it a rough trip. You could steal anything on Deimos, except for heavy gravity couches. There were none to be had. Apparently citizens were expected to simply stand and take it.

When they matched speeds with the *Pequod*, Rebel shook her head at the visual. “Is that it?”

“It certainly is a sight,” Wyeth agreed.

Perched on the end of the pushrod of a Workhorse-class disposable fusion tug was the oddest structure Rebel had ever seen. It looked something like a storybook Queen Anne house, all gingerbread and elaboration, but a Queen Anne house such as might be built in freefall by a madman. The turrets and projecting pavilions, bays, verandas, and octagonal roofs were all jumbled together and sticking out every which way. Rebel searched among the fishscale shingles, eyelid dormers, and widow’s walks for a way in. Somewhere under that facade there must be a coldship. “Where do you think the airlock is?” she asked.

“See that Tudor arch portico?” Wyeth asked. “The one with the stained glass fanlight? That must be it.”

“Hah? Why?”

“It has a brass nameplate by the door.” He instructed the hopper to mate with the *Pequod*, wait ten minutes, and then kick away to fall back into a recovery orbit. “Let’s grab our things.”

The airlock opened on a room rich with furnishings—tapestries on walls, framed woodcuts set into a paneled ceiling, and all-gravity furniture everywhere.

Bors looked up from a chair by the fireplace and put down a book. "I thought that might be you. Come in, sit down. Let me help you with those crates." He sniffed. "Do I smell organics?"

Wyeth separated out two crates. "These will need to be soft-frozen. The rest can be stored anywhere."

"Storage, please." Cupboard doors twinkled open, and a minute later everything was secure. Rebel and Wyeth hung their cloaks in a closet by the door. "Welcome to my humble abode."

Rebel sat in a chair, slid her legs through the holes, and leaned back. "It's lovely," she said. The fireplace was covered with climbing ivy. Water trickled down it, over bricks and leaves, to be collected at the bottom. There it was broken into hydrogen and oxygen, and the gases fed into the fire, where they burned merrily. The water vapor was drawn up the flue, chilled, and left to trickle down the bricks again. Rebel had never seen such a thing before; it was hypnotic to watch.

In the privacy of his ship, Bors wore not only his vest, but also a pair of green culottes and purple knee-socks. He was almost as aggressively covered as a dyson worlder.

"Should I take my clothes off?" he asked solicitously.

"Would that make you feel more at ease?"

"Oh, we're cosmopolitan enough," Wyeth said. He settled into a chair, idly examined a set of plastic Napoleonic foot soldiers embedded in a display table beside him. "You could wrap yourself head to foot in linen, and we wouldn't blink an eye."

"So long as you mean that," Bors said. "Oh, and you both do realize that we have less than an hour's gravity left? If either of you wants to take a shower..."

Rebel looked up. "Shower?"

* * *

Rebel felt a lot better after showering. Relaxed and

comfortable. She dried and dressed, and walked back through the dark paneled hallway to the parlor. A pair of side passages into distant parts of the coldship beckoned, and she was sorry there wasn't the time to explore. Ahead, she could hear the two men, already talking like old friends.

Bors and Wyeth were discussing war and literature.

“What you have to understand is the extreme speed with which the technology blossomed,” Bors said. “When Earth first became conscious, it used all its resources to spread the technology as efficiently as possible. The first transceiver was implanted in March, let's say, and all Earth was integrated by Christmas. The first clear notion anybody off-planet had of what had actually happened was when the warcraft were launched. Like a swarm of hornets bursting out of a well right into their faces, as the humorist put it.”

Moving her chair a smidge closer to the fire, Rebel sat down and drew her knees to her chin. She hugged her legs, feeling warm and comfortable and quiet, and watched the firelight play on Wyeth's face.

“Yes, but that's irrelevant. There were hundreds of millions of people living off-planet at that time. You can't tell me that they didn't take their literature with them. If anything was lost in the wars, it was probably too minor to be worth recovering. The idea of major literary works waiting to be found—well, that's pure fantasy.”

“No, no, we're talking about an extremely uncultured period of history. The first century of emigrants weren't exactly Earth's finest, after all. And romantic fiction didn't come back into vogue until the colonization of the Outer System. Believe me, when you're stuck in a tiny ship for months at a time without coldpacking—that's when you appreciate Anthony Trollope. The pity is that by then half his works were lost.”

“But the best were preserved. Those that people actually

cared enough about to read.”

“Not necessarily. Keep in mind that a hundred fifty years ago most data were kept electronically, and that the data systems were the first things hit by Earth. In that initial month of war, before Earth retreated back to its own surface, it injected AI’s into every significant data net in the Inner System. They all had to be crashed. There are even some who say that without Wang and Malenkov—”

“I believe that Malenkov himself was an artificial intelligence.”

“But a patriot.”

“Oh, certainly.”

“Well, anyway...”

Rebel hooked her chin over her knees, let her head fall a little to one side, and listened contentedly. She felt happy and cozy and wistfully sad all at the same time. Savoring the fireplace’s warmth, she let the words wash over her in a homey, meaningless babble that rose and fell in soft familiar cadence. This was nice. Stop, she thought. Let this moment linger forever.

“Here’s a sample of what I mean,” Bors said. “Listen:

And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and
flight,

Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Nice stuff, eh?”

“It’s terrific. But your point is?”

“That’s from Matthew Arnold’s *Dover Beach*. But the only surviving version of that poem is exactly fourteen lines long, a descriptive fragment containing none of what I quoted. The critical work that scholars dug the darkling plain fragment from said that it was a major poem. You’d never know that from what we have.” Bors sighed. “It would make my career if I could recover the original.”

Wyeth laughed and held up his hands. “I surrender!

You're absolutely right. There are doubtless thousands of manuscripts squirreled away in the dusty nooks of Earth that contain lost treasures. New Shakespearian tragedies, volumes of Bashu's haiku, the complete *Iliad*, the interactive for Kpomassie's essays on cultural responsibility."

"Now I didn't actually claim..."A soft chime sounded, and the fire went out. The water stopped, and the entire fireplace slid into the wall and was covered by enameled panels. **"Look at the time! We're entering public sunspace now. Brace yourselves."**

And then, right on cue, the fusion tug burned out and gravity cut off. In a swift, giddy instant of disorientation, Rebel lost all concept of up and down. A gentle noise puffed through the coldship as the lightsail deployed. Rebel's stomach lurched, and she had to swallow back the vomit to keep from throwing up. Her fingers clutched the chair tightly, and that helped her to steady her. And then, of course, she was okay again. She released the chair and floated over it.

"Well," Bors said. "Since we haven't the food, oxygen, or inclination to do otherwise, it's time. I must say I'm sorry to interrupt this conversation, but perhaps it can be resumed a few months from now in Earth orbit. Coffins, please." Gently, three black coldpack boxes rose from one floor. Rebel looked at them with something akin to panic.

She wasn't ready to go under yet, was the thing. To sleep away the months between planets.

To die.

As a persona bum—and Eucrasia had been a good one—she knew that her identity wouldn't survive coldpacking. There was that moment on revival, the merest instant, when the mind didn't know itself. Perfectly free of yearning and ego, it tottered on nothingness and then grabbed for identity and was itself again. Tests had been run, and the results were always the same. When

there were two or more identities to choose from, the strongest one always won. By wetdesign standards strength was measured by connections to memory.

And Eucrasia's memories were complete now.

Wyeth turned to Rebel, started to say something. She shook her head, and he fell silent. She could see by the stiffness of his expression that he too had been ignoring the realities. Pretending that this moment would never arrive. He did not rise from his chair.

“Am I missing something?” Bors asked, looking from face to face.

Neither answered him. Rebel turned away and kicked over to the furthest coffin. She examined its fittings, slid open the lid. “Sunshine...” Wyeth began in a choked voice.

“Don't.”

She slipped into the coldpack unit and lay down. The padding was stiff and grey, and the workings crowded in about her. She wriggled slightly, shoved back a coil of cabling that was digging into one hip. She didn't look at Wyeth at all.

She wanted to say to him that it had been fun. That she loved him. That she didn't regret... Well, she wasn't sure about that one at all. She regretted a lot of things. But she knew that if she once started talking, she'd never be able to stop.

Most of all she wished she could at least kiss him goodbye.

It was probably best this way. To go cleanly and suddenly, rather than to waste away with a slow rot that didn't show until its work was done and everything that was Rebel had been eaten away, leaving nothing behind but a woman who wasn't her.

All she had to do was to close the lid. The needles would enter her then, in five places, the sudden sting of pain chilling down almost instantly into numbness, and then

spreading. The crash jelly would flood in, and she would hold her breath for as long as possible, and then open her mouth and breathe in the jelly and choke, and then... no more.

She looked up then, against all her will, and saw Wyeth's face. It was rigidly contained, but underneath she could see the pain and horror. She thought he was going to cry.

One hand rose ever so slightly toward her. He started to lean forward. She knew that if Wyeth were to touch her, however lightly, she would break into a million fragments.

Rebel reached up and slammed the lid shut.

11

CISLUNAR

She was cased in ice.

The universe was perfect, chill and silent. Circuits shifted energies about her, unnoticed. She was at peace. A machine daintily slid a thin tube down her throat and drew the liquified crash jelly away. With a rumble like silent thunder, the distant ice was touched by warmth and began to break up. Needles touched her in seven places, and they stung. But she did not recognize the sensation as pain. She was soaring upward now, through arctic waters. She touched the membrane of consciousness, and it gave under her hand and, in a burst of white foam, shattered.

Choking, she broke through the surface and was deafened by the bewildering crash of noise. The air was cold flame. It seared her lungs as she gulped it down.

Bors opened the coffin, and she awoke.

“Hello.” he said, smiling. “Welcome to the realm of the living.”

“I—” she said, and shook her head. “It was...”

“Wyeth said you might be a little confused at first.” Bors offered his hand, and she floated free of the coffin. “Please open the hall. The *Pequod* has a small chapel—a meditation room, if you prefer. You might want to rest there for a while and collect your thoughts in solitude.”

But she was not confused. She was simply too lucid to make sense. Everything crashed in on her with superhuman clarity, the angels of thought coming too fast and close together to be put into words. She was like a child born blind and come of an age to receive her first pair of eyes. Revelation dazzled her. “That would be nice,” she said. “No. I think I will.”

Bors left her afloat in a small spherical room. The chapel had a projective wall, and within it a loosely woven all-gravity greenhouse lattice. Plants sprouted wildly from the interstices, leafy explosions of green, trying to grow in all directions at once. Two small brown leaves floated free, and she shifted slightly to share the space equally with them. They all three were peers. The wall was set for realtime exterior, showing to one side Earth in all its bluewhite glory, and to the other a weary old orbital hongkong. Plainsuited spacejacks swarmed about its exurban tanks, towns, farms, and manufactories. They were deep in the cislunar sprawl.

Slowly she gathered herself. Something was wrong, but she was so *happy* about it she didn't care. The promise of freedom bubbled like laughter in her veins. All of Eucrasia's memories, and the hardpacketed few of Rebel's that had been used to brace the persona, were locked firmly into place, along with one that belonged to both of them: that ecstatic moment when Rebel had filled Eucrasia's brain and in joyous excess of purpose upended a glass over the programmer. She knew now that she had done that because she was a wizard's daughter, and she understood what that meant. The light of that bright instant when the water writhed in the air like a diamond dragon still blinded her to her purpose, but that didn't

matter. She knew something far more important.

She was still Rebel.

*** * ***

“Where’s Wyeth?” She kicked into the common room. “I’ve got to talk to him. It’s important.” It was hard to keep from singing.

Bors was floating alongside a cabinet, checking inventory. He glanced up, startled, in the act of returning a watercolor to its folder. Carefully, he put the folder into a thin drawer and slid the drawer shut. He switched off his notepad and stuck it in a vest pocket. “Well...” he began.

“This is... this is better than being born!” She touched a wall and, laughing, spun herself drunkenly in the air. She knew with all the certainty of years of training that waking up as Rebel was impossible, a blatant absurdity. There was no way the treehangers could create a persona that could survive coldpacking. But when a miracle is dumped in your lap, you don’t complain. “Where’s Wyeth? Is he sleeping? Wake the bugger up!”

“Um.” Bors coughed into his fist. “You, uh, you do realize that he didn’t want to be present when you woke up?”

“Of course he didn’t. I know that,” Rebel said impatiently.

“Please lock up the cabinet. You see, he arranged with me to awaken you a day later than him. He’s gone now.”

“Gone?” It was as if the colors had suddenly been drained from everything, leaving the air faintly chill.

“Gone where?”

Looking politely embarrassed, Bors murmured, “I really have no idea.”

*** * ***

Geesinkfor was an antiquated Bernal sphere, with window rings running about the rotational poles. The

hongkong's windows and mirrors hadn't been cleaned in years, and the interior was sunk in twilight gloom. But half the chillers were down, due to decreased maintenance, so it all evened out. Clean windows would only have overheated the interior. Or so Bors explained to her, anyway. Some of the air scrubbers must have broken down as well, for the air was stale and foul-smelling. The buildings were all midrises, ten to twenty stories high, and had sprawled up the slopes from the equatorial Old City area, almost to the edges of the windows. "Who would be stupid enough to build a totally artificial environment and then fill it with buildings designed for a planetary surface?" Rebel grumbled.

"Where's your sense of history?" Bors asked. "This was one of the first forty cannister cities ever built. They hadn't thought things through back then. Hey, look over here!"

He trotted across the plaza to where a huge basaltic moonrock had been carved into the shape of a crude stone axe. Hundreds of faces peered from the rock's depths with fear and despair, just beginning to melt one into another.

He slowly read the archaic Spanish inscription on the base. "It's a war memorial to the millions who were captured and absorbed. The Comprise set up a processing center right here, packed their victims into lifting bodies, and dumped 'em into the atmosphere. Very crude method. Less than half survived to be swallowed up by Earth."

Rebel looked uneasily about the dirty plaza. It was almost deserted. An ancient spacer in torn vacuum suit stumbled toward them, her hand out. A bored woman in police leathers watched. Rebel slipped an arm through Bors'. "Yeah, well. That was all a long time ago. Let's get out of here."

Bors led her deeper into the Old City, toward the equatorial sea. The sea was a stagnant stretch of water, wide as a Terran river, left over from Geesinkfor's early days, when the water was pumped uphill and flowed back in scenic riverlets. Half the buildings facing it were

derelict, their windows slagged over, but among them were the grimy shops, bars, and blade bazaars, noisy-bright with music and holographic flares, that made up the local Little Ginza. It was here that the grey market wetsurgical joints would be found. A few furtive-looking pedestrians dotted the boardwalk. A motortrike zipped by. Rebel yanked Bors back from the roostertail as it slammed through a puddle, and said, “Okay, I’ve seen it. Now let’s find me a room.”

They turned their backs on the black water and trudged upslope. A cybercab dogged their heels, hoping for a fare, but they ignored it, and it sped off. Here and there, blank walls and scuffed streets flickered with corporate propaganda. In those areas where the speakers hadn’t been smashed, the voiceovers murmured seductively. “You really needn’t be in a rush to move out of the *Pequod*. I could easily put you up for a week or so.”

Rebel wore the ivory bracelet Wyeth had given her back in the sheraton. She touched it now, and the drab sphere transformed into a fairy city of red and blue lights, shot through with yellow lines of power. In a street overhead, she saw a centipede line of Comprise stitched together with interactive lines of electromagnetic force. And buried deep within Bors’ flesh, she could see the glow of subtle machines, waiting silently. Whatever they were, a mere dealer in vintage data didn’t need them. “That’s very generous of you, but I won’t find Wyeth sitting in your ship. Listen, if you see him again, would you give him a message for me? Tell him that I’m a wizard’s daughter.”

“Will he know what that means?”

“No, but he’ll be curious enough to find out.”

They walked on in silence. Now and again Bors glanced at her, as if trying to read the thoughts behind her new wetpaint. She really did like Bors and wished she could trust him, but Eucrasia had been betrayed by friends too many times, and all those memories were hers now. She

didn't dare repeat Eucrasia's mistakes.

Turning a corner, Rebel glanced up into a nostril a hundred feet high, and staggered back a pace under the lightest touch of vertigo. The propaganda screens were capable of creating true grotesqueries of scale. Oceans washed over the building, and six implausibly long fingernails slashed across the screen to pierce a tomato.

Eucrasia had been visually literate, but the corporate iconography of the cislunar states differed from that of the Klusters, and she couldn't decipher an image of it. The tomato pulsed blood. "Who runs this place, anyway?" Rebel asked. "What kind of government has it got?"

Bors shrugged. "Nobody knows."

They came to an obsidian building and stepped into its lobby. Security devices rose up on their haunches, tracked them with articulated heads, then sank down again. A fat man with brand new arms (they were pink and ludicrously thin) emerged from the shadows. His eyes were sleepy and his chest hair had been dyed blue to match his bow tie.

"Yeah?"

"I'd like a room," Rebel said. Then, because she dared not give her real name but still needed something Wyeth would recognize if he came looking for her, "My name is Sunshine." She shrugged to indicate she had no family name.

The fat man grunted, produced a greasy plate of glass. "Put your hand here. Yeah, okay. Up to the third floor, take the door that turns blue for you. Sets you back forty-five minutes a day."

"That sounds fair." Rebel took the crate Bors had been carrying for her. "Promise me you'll drop by now and then to see how things are going, Bors? That would be nice."

He nodded, winked, grinned, and was gone.

The fat man turned back. "Hey, was that a bors?"

"Uh... yes."

He smiled. “One of them did me a favor once. Next time you see him, tell him if he ever needs a room, I’ll cut him a good price.”

* * *

Rebel took a job at a place called Cerebrum City. Its front room held stacks of outdated wetware and a few racks of the current knock-offs, but all the profit came from a chop shop in the back. It was there that the cheap hustlers came, sick with paranoia and despair, for a slice of wetsurgical hope. They came in weary, sometimes trembling, to buy the courage, bravado, or even desperation needed to get on with business. Fugitives looking to change their flight patterns. Hard-luck street types searching for that winner persona that had so far eluded them. They also got the occasional adventurer, about to go down the drop tube to Earth, hoping to score big in some obscure scam, and these had to pay heavily, for what they wanted was by no means legal. By the time Rebel had dug out the last traces of fear or compassion, turned their eyes mad with cunning, and set their reflexes on hair trigger, they were as little human as the Comprise itself.

After a few days it got so Rebel could type her customers at a glance. After a week, she stopped bothering. They were all the same to her. She worked in a small room with wood paneling and a wall of boilerplate wetwafers, and concentrated on her job. It was a cheapjack version of building new minds, and Eucrasia had been very good at that. She could chop and customize a persona in an hour and a half Greenwich, and there was professional satisfaction in that. The work appealed to her. She might not dare think about what would become of her clients, but she never cut corners on them.

There were two other chop artists in Cerebrum City. One was a pale, nervous man with long fingers, who always came in late. The other was a hefty woman named Khadijah. She had dark eyes and a cynical mouth, and

was having an affair with the pale, nervous man.

One day, when Rebel had been working for two weeks, the nervous man didn't come in at all. She had her last client of the day on a gurney, wired up and opened out when the curtain shot open and Khadijah stamped into the room. She had never come by before. The client—a whore come in to have his interest in sex revitalized—tracked her with his eyes as she prowled about, and grinned witlessly at her. “Close your eyes,” Rebel told him.

“Now, can you imagine a unicorn?”

“No.”

“Hmmm.” Rebel yanked one of the wafers and stuck it in a sonic bath. While the device pounded it clean of microdust, she reflected that if she were to lop off this creature's interest in sex entirely, he would walk out of the room free. He'd give up his trade and never once look back. But Eucrasia wouldn't have meddled without permission, and Rebel was coming to respect the woman's professional judgment. She replaced the wafer. “How about now?”

“Yes.”

Khadijah ran a finger along a rack of wafers, making them rattle in their slots. She retreated to the doorway, stood there holding up the curtain. “Well,” she said at last. “How about you and me going out and getting drunk after work?”

After work Rebel always checked her room for messages and then prowled the streets of Geesinkfor, learning its ways and looking for Wyeth. So far she had turned up no solid leads, but there was still work to do. She had no desire at all to go drinking. But she remembered a time when Eucrasia had needed someone to get drunk with and nobody had been there. “Sure,” she said. “Soon as I wrap this one up.”

Khadijah nodded and ducked out of the room.

“Now.” Rebel held up a hand. “How many fingers?”

“Four.”

She threw a color on one wall. “Green or blue?”

“Blue.”

“All right. One more.” She threw an image on the wall. It was Wyeth. “Ever seen this man?”

“No.”

“All right, you pass.” She sighed, ran a final integration check, and then slapped on the programmer. The boy shuddered and closed his eyes as the programs took hold.

*** * ***

They started out in the Water’s Edge, a dark little bar favored by the trade, and took seats by the window so they could look down on the passersby. Khadijah drank her first two mugs of wine in grim silence, rapping the table for more when they were empty. Midway through her third, she grunted, “Men!”

“I know what you mean.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

Staring idly out the window, Rebel saw something furtively nab a bit of trash from the boardwalk and then scurry off into shadow. It was long and scrawny and covered with grey fur. “Ugh,” she said. “Did you see that? This place has *cats!*”

“Oh yeah, swarms of ’em. They live in abandoned buildings. The government used to have these machines that hunted them down, big suckers the size of... of dogs, I guess, but the kids kept kicking them into the water to watch them short out. That was years ago, when I was little.” She laughed. “Man, you should see them spark!”

“Tell me something. What’s all this about nobody knowing what kind of government Geesinkfor’s got?”

“Oh yeah. Nobody knows.” Then, at a look from Rebel, “It’s true! Some people think that Earth runs all the

hongkongs, through proxies. Others think the governments stay secret out of fear of the Comprise taking them over. And there are those who think the police don't answer to anyone, that they're just another gang. They collect the weekly protection money, after all. And nobody knows what triggers the heat. Some things you can get away with, but not always. Other things, you're never seen again. Me, I think it's just very handy for the people running things if nobody knows who they are."

"This is crazy. Who do you complain to when something goes wrong?"

"Exactly." Khadijah stuck a finger in her wine, swirled it about. "Best thing to do is just be careful to stay out of trouble."

"How do you do that?"

Khadijah laughed and shook her head. "Let's go someplace else."

They climbed out the window, along the narrow ledgeway, up a rusty set of stairs, through a brightly lit roof garden where butterflies flitted (Rebel asked, "Are you sure this is the right way?" and "Trust me," Khadijah said), then across a pedestrian bridge and down to a cellar tavern called The Cave. They sat by a table set on a truncated stalagmite, and Khadijah rapped for wine. Rebel peered about the dark, crowded room. "I feel like I hadn't moved at all."

"Too true." Khadijah paid for the wine, lifted her mug. "Hey, Sunshine. How come you got such an aristocratic first-family name? I mean, you're not cislunar. No way in hell you are. I've lived here all my life, and I know."

The wine was laced with endorphins. Rebel felt lifted and removed, wrapped in the finest cushioning fog. Nothing could hurt her now. "My name is aristocratic?"

(Back home, they could've worked intricate wonders with a glassful of endorphins, woven fantasias of emotion

and illusion. But the biological arts were primitive, this side of the Oort.)

“Oh yeah, like... Kosmos Starchild Biddle, you know, or, uh, Wondersparkle Spaceling Toyokuni. One of those bullshit names they gave the kiddies when living off-planet was new and everyone was all rah-rah about it.”

“Well, I had to call myself something. There are all kinds of people looking for me I don’t want to find me.”

Khadijah nodded sagely. “So where you from, anyway?”

“Dyson world name of Tirnannog. Ever hear of it? No? Well, actually my body was born out in the belts, but *me* —I’m from the comets. I’m a wizard’s daughter.”

“Sunshine? That guy you were talking to the other week, the one who came by to see you when we were closing up?”

“Bors?”

“Yeah. There he is. Talking to that drop artist.”

Rebel looked up and saw Bors deep in conversation with a sour-looking old woman. She waited for him to glance their way, then waved broadly. He waved back, said a final word to the old woman, and wove his way to her through the maze of fake stalactites and small tables. He still wore the red vest under his cloak, and it gave him a kind of rakish quasimilitary look. “Hello, hello,” he said cheerily, seating himself on the bench beside her. “What a coincidence. Have I met your friend yet?”

After introductions, Rebel said, “So what have you been up to lately?”

“Ah, well, that’s interesting! I’ve been scrounging about in the city archives, and I found a five-thousand-line epic poem about the Absorption Wars, all in rhymed couplets, by a woman who’d survived the whole thing. She was programmed clerical for the processing center, and by the time they got around to her, the treaties had been signed.”

“Is it any good?” Rebel asked dubiously.

Bors leaned forward confidentially and said, “It sucks. But there’s still a small market for it as a historical curiosity, so it’s not a total loss for me.”

“I slept with a bors once,” Khadijah said.

“Really?” Bors said in a pleased voice.

The room suddenly warped so that everything in it got very small, except for Rebel herself. She was enormous, and her head bobbed like a balloon. She could have crushed the lot with her thumb. “I wouldn’t have thought he was your type,” she said.

“Wasn’t.” Khadijah was silent for a moment. “What the hell—look at him, you have to admit he’s charming. He was okay. Haven’t you ever slept with someone who wasn’t your type?”

“Oh yeah.” She thought of Wyeth—tall, lanky, pale. And serious, mostly. Not her type at all. She would never have chosen him for a sex partner if she hadn’t fallen in love with him. She took a deep breath, and without warning she deflated, whooshing down so that the rest of the room was normal-sized, or near so.

Khadijah eyed Bors. “Based on some kind of spy, aren’t you?”

“Am I?” Bors’ eyes twinkled.

“Sure you are. One of those little Outer System moons, some kind of comic-opera republic, all their agents used to be programmed bors. Then somebody pirated a copy for one of the big wetware concerns.”

“What happened then?” Rebel asked.

“Nothing happened then. But you can bet somebody made a bundle off that deal. That’s still a popular persona, bors is, in this part of the System. I saw one the other day.”

“I think that was me,” Bors said mildly.

For an instant Khadijah stared at him blankly. Then she started to laugh, beginning with what sounded like slow

hiccups and building in long, noisy wheezes. She gasped and pounded the table.

“Listen,” Bors said. “I was going to come by tomorrow. My work is done here, and I’ve got to see a few more of the cislunar states before I take the drop tube down to Earth. But I didn’t want to run off without saying goodbye and wishing you luck.”

“More wine.” Khadijah rapped the table.

* * *

Somehow Rebel and Khadijah were reeling down an empty street, holding each other up. They must’ve passed some threshold point because Rebel had completely lost track of the last however-long-it-was. “A wizard’s daughter” she explained. “Well, first of all, you know what a wizard is, right?”

“No,” Khadijah said. There were dried tear tracks on her face. “Hell, I knew he was never going to stay.”

“A wizard is like a real crackerjack bioengineer. I mean, these guys are as rare as let’s say Rembrandt. They’re the ones with the creative juice to make the biological arts sit up and beg. Out in the comets they have a lot of status. But they tend to be jealous about their skills. Talented, but suspicious.”

“Never trust a man whose fingers are longer than his cock.”

“So when they need a messenger they can trust, they’ll decant a cloned self and program her up into their own persona. Now, ordinarily identity... *drifts*, you know? So a wizard’s daughter persona isn’t a straight copy; it’s altered so that she’ll retain identity with the wizard practically forever. They call that integrity. I don’t know how it’s done—only my mother self knows that. But anyway, I’m a wizard’s daughter. Her message is safe with me.”

“So what’s the message?” Khadijah asked.

“I don’t remember.”

They looked at each other. Then they both bent over laughing, grabbing at each other's shoulders and forearms to keep from falling, leaning forward until their foreheads touched.

They had just pulled themselves together when a line of Comprise, no more than twenty units long, walked by in locked step, headed for the waterfront. They wore identical grey coveralls with that same familiar pigtail bobbing from each head. A dozen spheres of ball lightning floated about them. The balls hissed and crackled, and filled the street with shifting blue light. The hair on the back of Rebel's neck rose up.

"Hey, Earth!" Rebel shouted. The creature second in line turned its head sharply. Blank, alert eyes looked at her. Rebel turned, bent over, flipped up her cloak, and made loud farting noises with her mouth. The Comprise did not react. They continued calmly onward.

Khadijah was laughing so hard she was having trouble standing. "Oh, God, Sunshine! You're impossible, you know that?"

The Comprise stepped onto the boardwalk and strode straight for the water's edge. A length of railing was missing there, and the first stepped off, onto the water. The glowing spheres of ball lightning dipped suddenly, almost to the sea's surface, and the water sang. It rose in a bow to the Comprise's foot, quivering like the vastly slowed vibration of a violin string.

Moving with processional dignity, the Comprise passed over the sea, the water rippling with tension under their feet. On the far side, they continued up a dark street, dwindling, growing dimmer, and finally gone to dusk.

*** * ***

The next day, Rebel woke up with a killer hangover. "Ohhhh, shit." She sat up on the edge of her cot and then bent over to clutch her head in her hands. Her

stomach felt uneasy and her bowels were loose. Then she remembered farting at the Comprise, and she felt even worse.

As soon as she could, she went out to buy a liter of water. Then she stopped at a rootworker's shop to buy a bracelet leech, and snapped it on her upper arm. A trickle of blood began flowing through the charcoal scrubbers, to be returned to her body cleansed of fatigue poisons. By the time she got to work, she'd drunk down the water and felt almost normal.

Fortunately, things were slow at Cerebrum City. Khadijah was already closeted with a complicated stress tune-up, and nobody else came by for the first few hours. Rebel was grateful for that, but even when the bracelet turned blue and dropped from her arm, she felt dull and listless. It was a classic emotional hangover, the residue of having acted the fool.

Well, there was an easy solution for that.

Feeling the thrill of doing something both nasty and forbidden for the first time, Rebel broke out the programmer and ran a cleaning pad over the adhesion disks. They attached to her skin behind each ear and on her brow, like small mouths. She slapped on the reader-analyzer and riffled through the minor function wafers in the wall of boilerplate.

A clean sense of elation filled her. This was *fun*. She now understood that her earlier prejudice against wetprogramming had been the wizard's daughter functions acting to protect her integrity. But this was different. So long as she didn't try anything major, what could be the harm of it?

It would be best to be careful, though. Eucrasia had overdone it her first time—most persona bums did—and let the euphoria of success lead her into adding one alteration on top of another, building them into a nonsensical architecture of traits, until the entire

structure had collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions, and she had needed six hours wetsurgical reconstruction to bring her back to herself.

Still, the psychosomatic functions were simple enough. Any idiot could make the brain readjust the glandular and hormonal balances of the endocrinal system and, orchestrated correctly, it would give her a terrific body high. Humming slightly to herself, she glanced up at the floating tumbleweed diagram and gave it a spin.

And stopped. Hell, that was interesting. She rotated the sphere again, more slowly this time. Yes. There was a circular structure running through the entire persona in a kind of psychic mobius strip, touching all the branches, but dependent on none. How did a chimera like that come into existence? It was obviously artificial, and yet no wetware techniques she'd ever heard of (and Eucrasia had been up on what was happening in the field) could create something like that.

Fascinated, she slid a blank wafer into the recorder.

By the time her first client came in, she had entirely forgotten about giving herself a therapeutic body rush. She stood, turning the professional-quality recording of her persona over and over in her hand, and thinking wonderingly that Deutsche Nakasone had been willing to kill her for this small ceramic flake. The kid entered and coughed to get her attention. He looked to be no more than fifteen. Rebel slipped the wafer into her pocket and said, "Well, what do you want done?"

The wonderful, the magical thing about the wafer, of course, was the beautiful vistas it opened up of new psychologies, new modes of perception, entirely new structures of thought. With the skills this implied, she could create anything. Anything at all.

It was the kind of discovery that shatters old universes and opens up new ones in their place.

*** * ***

After work, she took the omnibus to the drop tube's up station.

She'd put off this part of her search for as long as possible, because the drop tube was a Comprise creation, and they were likely to be all through the up station. But she was convinced now that Wyeth would not be found in Geesinkfor, that if he had ever been there he had moved on, either to another cislunar state or down to Earth.

Given Wyeth's convictions, Earth seemed most likely.

The bus took ten minutes to reach the up station. Rebel had wired herself deadpan—emotion and expression completely divorced—and in addition to the vanitypaint on her forehead, she'd put a short black line like a dagger through her left eye. She was now the living image of a confidential courier, a minor cog in the affairs of business and state wired to wipe herself catatonic at the slightest attempt to tamper with her brain. Nobody would give her a second glance.

From the bus, the Earth was bright and glorious, as startlingly beautiful as everyone said, the wonder of the System. None of the Comprise's works could be seen from here.

The up station loomed, a slender hoop of rock. It was a carbonaceous asteroid that the Comprise had bought and, utilizing their incomprehensible physics, made flow into the desired shape. A transit ring had been fitted into the interior, and a labyrinthine tangle of corridors dug through its length. It spun in geosynchronous orbit directly above a ground station with a sister transit ring. Fleecy clouds formed a vast circle about the ground station. The Comprise's technology somehow held the air back from the lane between transit rings, so that there was a well of hard vacuum reaching almost to the planet's surface, and this affected local weather systems. Rebel could see three more such cloud rings on this side of the globe.

A steady stream of air-and-vacuum craft slipped in and

out of the up station's ring. Some were flung down at the ground station, while others had just been nabbed on their way up the vacuum well. All passengers and cargo were processed through the human-run sections of the up station before going down and after coming up. It was a fearsomely busy place.

The bus docked, and Rebel walked through the security gates and into the ring's outer circle of corridors. She let the flooding crowds sweep her away. Occasionally she passed wall displays indicating numbers of craft gone and caught, and the station's shifting power reserves (up for each vehicle caught, down for each released), but this last was for show only, since humans were allowed no access to the transit machinery. Now and then a chain of a hundred or so Comprise hurried by, but they were rare. Most, evidently, stayed to their own corridors.

More common were the scuttling devices that sped between legs and through crowds—small, clever mechanicals that fetched, carried, and frantically cleaned. None of them came anywhere approaching sentience, and yet Rebel felt uncomfortable at how common they were. It seemed a sign of how hopelessly compromised the cislunarians were by machine intelligence. She was surprised their guilt didn't show on their faces.

Subliminal messages washed through the halls, but none of them were aimed at Rebel, and she lacked the decoders. They could only make her feel hot and anxious. Her face itched.

She took a side ramp into the administrative areas, noting as she did so how a security samurai glanced her way and murmured into his hand. She'd been tagged. But she walked confidently on, as if she belonged.

Half-Greenwich was terrific for walking; enough tug on your feet to give them purchase, not enough load to tire them. She came to a line of security gates, all marked with the wheel logo of Earth crossed by a bar sinister: No Comprise. Subimbeds pounded at her, making her feel

unwelcome and anxious to leave. Any of these gates would do.

She matched strides with an important-looking woman, laying an arm over her shoulder just as she plunged through a gate, so the cybernetics would read them both as a single individual. The woman looked into Rebel's dead face and flinched away. "Who... who the hell are you?" she cried. Samurai hurried toward them. Then the paint registered, and she said, "Oh, shit. One of them." To the white-haired samurai who arrived first, she said, "Help this woman find whoever it is she wants and then kick her the hell out."

* * *

"Your kind is a real pain in the ass," the samurai said.

"So don't give me any help," Rebel said with profound disinterest. "Throw me out. My message is insured with Bache-Hidalgo. If I fail, they'll program up two more couriers and send 'em back. If they fail, you'll have four. Then eight. Sooner or later, you'll play along." This was a scam Eucrasia had often seen during her internship. Administrators hated insured couriers because they were as persistent as cockroaches, and as impossible to eradicate. The only way to get rid of them was to cooperate.

"You'll get your help," the woman snapped. She led Rebel deep into Security country. Flocks of samurai. "Okay, we're in Records. Now who is your message for, and when did he come through here?"

"I don't have a name," Rebel said. "He'd've come through anywhere from five degrees Taurus to present." They were standing in an office area so thick with vines that each small cubicle seemed a leafy cave. The overgrowth was a classic sign of an ancient bureaucracy. A mouse-sized mechanical scurried underfoot, gathering up dead leaves.

"Around here we say late May through mid-June," the

samurai sniffed. “All right, any of our people can handle this.” She leaned into a cubicle where a flabby grey man leaned over a screen, mesmerized. Still images of faces flickered by at near-subliminal speeds, piped in from the hallways and offices. “Rolfe! Got a question for you.”

“Yes?” Rolfe froze his screen and looked up. He had a dull, almost dazed expression, and his eyes were slightly bloodshot. Mouth and jowls both were slack.

“Rolfe is on our facial eidetics team,” the samurai said with a touch of pride. “Electronics have to be wiped once a week, or they’re useless—data can’t be searched. Rolfe views the electronics compressed, only has to be wiped once a year, and can access all of it. Show him your visual. If your target has been through here—as employee, visitor, or dumper—within the past few months, he knows.”

Rebel held up her holo. It was a photomechanical reconstruction she’d pulled from her own memories, but good enough that nobody could tell. “Seen this guy?”

Rolfe looked carefully, shook his head. “No.”

The samurai took her arm. “Are you sure?” Rebel cried. “Is there any chance at all?”

“None.”

* * *

Rebel sleepwalked through the next day, performing her chores mechanically. She reported to work, interviewed her first client, and chopped him to order. None of it felt real. She didn’t know what to do next. If Wyeth hadn’t gone down the drop tube, that meant he must be somewhere in the sprawl of cislunar states. Trouble was, there were hundreds of them, in all sizes and degrees of disorder, and their outfloating slums as well. She could spend the rest of her life searching and still not find him.

Well, she thought, maybe she *wouldn’t* find him. Maybe Wyeth was lost to her forever. Happens to people all the time.

She was finishing up a client when she finally admitted this to herself. A jackboot had come in to be chopped wolverine, and lay on the gurney wired up and opened out, still in her police skintights.

Rebel thought it through with dry, obsessive logic, while her hands did the work. How long could she go on searching like this? A year? Five? Twenty? What kind of a person would she *be* at the end of that time? It wasn't a pretty thought.

“Can you imagine a unicorn?”

“Yes.”

If this was going to be a long search, if it was going to take her years, she'd have to change the pace. She needed to build some kind of decent life for herself in the meantime. (But she didn't want a decent life without Wyeth!) She needed a cleaner job than this one, to begin with. Friends. Interests. Lovers, even. She'd have to plan this whole thing out carefully.

“How many fingers?”

“Four.”

“Green or blue?”

“Blue.”

“Ever seen this man before?”

“Yes.”

“Well.” Rebel smiled. Very slowly, she leaned back against the wall. Carefully she began marshaling her thoughts. She was in no particular hurry now. Perhaps she should go out front and borrow a chair. Impulsively, she reached down to run a fond hand through the jackboot's hair, and the woman grinned idiotically up at her. Where to begin?

She had a lot of questions to ask.

THE BURREN

There were vacuum flowers on the outside of the *Pequod*, only a few, sprouting from the jointed strutwork of the gables, but enough to tell from the shape of the petals that these were a variant strain, already indigenous to cislunar orbit. Rebel noted them on the way in, mildly wondering why Bors had put off his basic maintenance for so long. The ship recognized her, and the lock opened to her touch.

A few hours later Bors returned, just as Rebel had finished brewing tea. The pot floated in the center of the parlor. “Well!” Bors said in a pleased tone. He doffed his suit, donned his cloak, and pulled up a pair of leg rings.

“How very pleasant of you to drop by to see me off.”

“How very pleasant of you to say so.” She drew off a syringe of tea and gently floated it to him. “I’ve prepared a snack.” She opened a tray of scalloped cakelets that were shaped rather like her silver brooch, and he unclipped two. Rebel smiled, sipped her tea, waited.

After a polite pause, Bors said, “So. How goes the search for your friend, Wyeth?”

“Ah! Now that’s a very interesting question.” Rebel leaned forward in her chair. “I was questioning a jackboot earlier today—I had her lashed down and opened up, you understand, so there was no question of her lying—and she gave me a valuable lead.”

“Indeed,” Bors said. “A jackboot, you say?” He took another bite of his pastry. “That’s, ah, a somewhat dangerous proposition, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. She had this really baroque plot-and-counterplot kind of story about dropping down surfaceward as an observer to... well, no reason to bore you with it. She said she’d seen Wyeth.”

“Oh, yes?”

“Yeah. She told me she’d seen him with you.”

After a very long silence, during which neither looked away from the other, Bors took a squirt of tea and said, “She was mistaken, of course.”

“Of course.” Rebel stood. Her natural impulse was to seize the man and try to strangle the truth out of him. But she smiled instead. Eucrasia would never have done anything so bold, and in a situation like this, Eucrasia’s approach had its points. Her chances of overpowering Bors on his home turf were slight. He was, however polished, a professional ruffian. “I’ll just get my suit and leave, then. Sorry to have caused you the trouble. *Bon voyage*, eh, sport?” She floated to the lock, Bors watching her warily. “Oh. You could do me one little favor?” Bors raised his eyebrows. “Just say for me, ‘Please open the collecting drawers.’”

“Please open the collecting drawers?” Bors repeated puzzledly.

Throughout the room, cabinets opened smoothly. One by one the drawers slid out. They were all empty. “Good lord,” Bors gasped. “What have you done with all my watercolors? My prints?”

“I burned them.”

Bors was out of his seat, running furious hands through the empty drawers and slamming them shut, in search of an overlooked drawing, a crumpled print stuck in a corner, anything. “You *didn’t!*” he wailed in despair.

“Well, no,” Rebel said calmly. “Actually, I didn’t.”

He looked at her.

“You remember the two crates I had? I emptied them out and filled one with your watercolors and the other with your prints. I had to pith your ship’s security system before it would let me at them, but it’s surprising the tools you can buy when you have the right connections—and

your little jackboot had good connections, I can assure you.” She was talking too fast, too angrily. She wanted so badly to hurt Bors that his pain only increased that hunger. Eucrasia would have said that she was cycling out of control. Taking a deep breath, she floated back to her chair and sat. Then, more calmly, “The crates are both safe, and you’ll never find them unless I tell you where. You can have one back right now, no strings attached. The other will cost you.”

Slowly, Bors took his own chair. “I won’t betray my nation,” he said flatly. “Not if you piled up every work of art in the System and held a flame to the heap.”

“Well, bully for you mate! But I’m not asking for any such thing. Just give me Wyeth. I’ll give you your choice of crates now, and tell you where the other is as soon as I’ve had the chance to talk with Wyeth face to face. What do you say?”

“The watercolors,” Bors said bleakly. “Where are they?”

* * *

The city had no name that anybody remembered. It had been cracked and abandoned over a century before, and its exterior was overgrown with flowers. Now a small hopper flew through the gap where an axial window had been and into the airless interior. Black buildings reached up to grab at them as they floated down. It was a tricky bit of navigation because the city was still rotating, and the ravaged buildings shifted as they approached. “There,” Bors said. At street level, yellow light shone from a lone pressurized window. With a swooping twist that folded Rebel’s stomach over on itself, Bors matched velocities with the street and brought the hopper down.

The old woman who cycled them through the lock looked displeased to see Rebel. “This one’s no jackboot,” she grumbled. It was the drop artist Rebel had seen with Bors in Geesinkfor. The room was crammed with vintage technology—robot probes, shoulderjets, fist-sized assassin

satellites.

“There’s been a slight change of plans.”

“Heh.” She leered over a protruding knob of a chin.

“Changes will run you extra. There’s a good borealis brewing up now, and I can’t say when the next one’s due. Don’t like to drop people without some electromagnetic confusion in the atmosphere. Helps to hide them from the Comprise.”

“You are an avaricious old pirate,” Bors said, “and I’ll not be blackmailed by the likes of you. This young lady is taking the jackboot’s place, and the drop will go off on schedule, as planned, and for the amount agreed upon, or we can just call the whole thing off.”

The old woman quailed before his anger. “Oh,” she said. “Well, then.”

*** * ***

It was an expensive drop, and an unobtrusive one. As it was explained to Rebel, eight shaped coldpack units were to be frozen in the center of snowy flurries of ablative materials and then towed to the center of a natural fall of meteors. They would be swept up by the advancing Earth and fall into the dawn, burning bright on the way down, fleeting scratches in the pale morning sky.

Deep in the atmosphere, the last of the ablatives would burn away, to reveal coldpacks that had been crafted as lifting bodies. Simple cybersystems would loft them then, killing speed and flying them toward the rendezvous point. Their steep evasive glides would end in spectacular gouts of white surf as they slammed into the North Atlantic.

Slowly, then, they would begin to sink in the cold salt water.

Before they could hit bottom, fleet dark forms would converge upon them. These were sea mammals, descendants of seals, that had been hotwired for such tasks with bootleg mutagens and bioprogramming.

Slipping their heads through pop-out grab loops, they would haul the coffins toward land. It was a slow and complicated means of travel but one that, in theory at least, the Comprise could not track.

There would be people waiting on the shingled beach.

* * *

Rebel opened her eyes. She was in a beehive-shaped room, Greenwich normal. Unmortared stone walls with an array of pinprick lights wedged into the chinks. The air was a trifle chill. Rebel looked up at a woman in a hooded red robe. “I’m on Earth,” she said.

“Yes.” The woman had a fanatically starved face with sharp cheekbones and no eyebrows. But her voice was soft and she kept her head bowed. “In a place called the Burren. This complex of buildings is Retreat. It’s a place of God.” She gestured toward a sheila-na-gig by the door, a cartoon in stone of a grotesque, moon-faced woman holding herself open with both hands. Rebel sat up. “Your gear is laid out before you. The earth suit is worn under your cloak—the Burren is a much harsher environment than you’re used to. This devotee is named Ommmed. If you desire anything, it is your slave.” She ducked out of the room.

Rebel shook her head and began dressing. The earth suit consisted of chameleoncloth pants and blouse with multiple fastenings that weren’t easy to figure out. She felt horribly covered up with them on, though they were no worse, she had to admit, than what she’d worn as a treehanger. She donned her cloak and gravity boots, and lifted the library case. That was part of the deal she’d cut with Bors, that she’d serve as the combat team’s librarian. Then she stooped out the door.

Rebel straightened and saw vast stretches of grey rock under a milky sky. The land went on forever, dwindling impossibly with distance as it rose to a line of mountains as barren as the moon. It was all exposed bedrock,

runneled with weathered depressions from which poked tufts of brown grass. Low stone walls ran like veins over the land; they could have been a thousand years old or built yesterday. There was no way of knowing. The few devotees at work nearby were insignificant specks. She had always heard that Earth was green, but this land was desolate and godforsaken, almost a parody of barrenness.

The wind boomed, and she staggered forward. It was as if someone had placed a hand on her back and pushed.

Her hair and cloak streamed out in front of her and, visions of hull punctures and explosive decompression rising within, Rebel cried out in sudden terror, “What’s wrong? What’s wrong?”

Ommed was there and slipped an arm around her waist to hold her steady. “Nothing is wrong. It’s just the wind coming off the sea.”

“Oh,” Rebel said weakly, though the explanation meant nothing to her. She turned to look behind and saw the land cascading down to a slate green ocean specked with white-tipped waves. Clouds curdled with grey rushed upon her from a vague horizon, so fast she could see them move, melting one into another as they came. “My... God, this is... it’s huge!” She felt vertiginous and almost fell. Everywhere, the air was aprowl, a vast, restless giant with the clouds in its grip, larger than mountains. It was all too huge. “How can you stand it?”

“We are here to abase ourselves,” Ommed said, “and we welcome the humbling immensities of God for that reason. But you will discover yourself that what at first appears terrifying can become, as you grow to know it, exhilarating.”

Almost breathless with disbelief, Rebel stared across rock and ocean, letting their immensity wash through her.

There was so much of everything here that her head almost ached with it, but... yes, Ommed was right. It was awful, but at the same time rather grand, like the first

hearing of a symphony in a new musical form that is so magnificent it terrifies.

“Your friends are meeting around the far side of Retreat. Perhaps it is time that you join them.”

“Yes.”

Retreat was a sprawl of stone beehive huts, of varying sizes, built one upon the other in a curving swirl up the slope. It was all of the same grey bedrock that everywhere dominated the land, and the far reaches of the mass faded to near invisibility, like a skirl of smoke against the ground. It was the only artificial structure in sight. From horizon to horizon was no trace of anything that might not have existed there millennia ago. “How do you hide all this from the Comprise?” Rebel asked.

“We call the great mind Earth,” Ommed corrected her gently. “Earth knows us well. We are here at its tolerance. It observes us. We don’t know why. Perhaps Earth considers us beasts for its study. Perhaps it maintains the Burren as a kind of wildlife preserve. The question is not an important one.”

“It observes you?” Rebel looked around, saw no sign of cameras. Of course Earth might have more subtle devices, extremely small or distant.

“Every seven years Earth takes a tenth of our number to be absorbed into the great mind.”

“And this doesn’t bother you?”

They walked around the upper curve of Retreat. In the smokehouses there, devotees were preparing racks of fish and slices of monoclonal protein from the fermenters.

“We are here to learn the discipline of submission. Submission to the will of God takes many forms. We practice all of them.” She looked up, and Rebel flinched back from the intensity of her gaze, the knowing intimacy of her smile. “This is the hut. Your people are within.”

“Yeah. Well, it was great of you to show me the way.”

“You do not yet understand the pleasure there can be in the surrender of will.” Ommed touched the nape of Rebel’s neck with a fingertip cold as ice. Rebel’s body involuntarily stiffened, shivering. “If you wish to learn, ask any of the devotees. We are all your slaves.”

“Jesus.” Rebel ducked into the hut.

It was unlit, and at first she thought it was empty. Then somebody moved, and somebody else coughed, and she realized there were seven people crouched against the walls, all in chameleoncloth; and they were all looking at her. Their faces floated in the gloom, and the eyes in them were cruel and alert. They’d all been chopped wolverine.

“This is your librarian,” somebody said. “Protect her. She carries your survival skills. And if she dies, one of you will have to be programmed down to take her place.”

There was a low growling noise that might have been laughter.

“You have your orders,” the voice continued. “Go!” The wolverines flowed out, sliding by Rebel on either side in perfect silence. Their leader stood, and the silver spheres at the ends of his braids clicked gently. Rebel was pretty sure this was Bors, but with that feral programming burning on his face, she couldn’t be sure. “Librarian, you will stay.”

She sat. The leader leaned closer, face dominated by a mad, joyless smile. She could smell his breath, faintly sweet, as he said, “Get your skills in.”

Rebel snapped open the library, ran a fingertip down its rainbow-coded array of wafers. Deftly she wired herself to the programmer and set the red user wafers running.

There were three: basic research skills, rock running skills, and an earth surface survival package combined with a map of the Burren. Whiteness buzzed and swirled at the base of her skull as the device mapped her short-term memory structure. Then the air about her shivered as the programs raised their arms and began

assembling themselves into airy circuits and citadels of knowledge. Their logics reached through the walls toward infinity, and Rebel was lost in an invisible maze of facts.

Three wafers were the limit; more than that couldn't be assimilated without losing half the data. She could *feel* her location in the Burren now, halfway up the western slopes of the enormous limestone formation. That was the map function. She knew its hills and mountains, down to the networks of caves beneath its surface. She knew which skills could be chipped into a berserker program and which could not. ("Librarian!") She knew how to shift her weight when a rock turned underfoot just as she landed on it. She knew the Burren's plants and insects, which were good to eat and which were not. She knew where to find water. ("Librarian!") She knew which three skills an ecosaboteur needed most. The facts shimmered through and about her, leaving her feeling stunned, cold, distant.

Someone slapped her. It stung. Startled, she focused on the leader and saw the calm, happy afterglow of violence settle on his face and under it—yes, it was Bors, all right. "Librarian!" he repeated. "Are your programs run yet?"

"Uh... yeah," she said shakily. She knew how to run now. Her legs trembled with the desire to be off and away. She heard an ugly bird-sound just outside. A rook.

"Librarian, you are not part of our team, but we will still be relying on your programming. So you've got to be tested. I want you to run to the Portal Dolmen. If you get there by sunset, I'll know your skills have taken hold."

She knew what sunset was. She knew what the Portal Dolmen was. "But that's twelve miles away!"

"Then you'd better get started, hadn't you?"

* * *

She ran. It was amazing the kind of speed you could make when you knew what you were doing. Rebel was following what had been a road once but had now largely melted into the rock. The broken roadbed made better

running, though, for the bedrock tended to fracture in long slabs that would occasionally snap underfoot, and then only her uncanny reflexes kept her from twisting an ankle. Also, off the road the low stone walls were everywhere, curving twistily over bare rock and even looping over the largest boulders. Impossible as it seemed, people must have lived here long ago and found some use for the land worth their marking off parcels of it as their own.

The road twisted and steepened, and she adjusted her heartbeat in compensation. It felt like the rock was spinning underfoot, and herself perfectly motionless. She ran with her cloak's chameleoncloth liner inward, and from a distance must've looked like an immense bat flapping crippled along the ground. The patch of cloud that could not be looked at directly was lower than it had been. That meant it was growing late. Now and then she slowed to a walk, and twice she rested. But running was best, for it kept her from thinking.

A dark circle appeared on the rock before her, as sudden and unexpected as a meteor strike. Then it was gone behind her, but another appeared, and then another. They came in clusters, and then the first drop of water struck her face, and it was raining.

She knew all about rain—it was on the earth skills wafer—but knowing was not experience. The drops came down like pebbles, smashing against her head and forming rivulets that ran into her eyes, blinding her.

Worse, the wind drove the rain in sudden gusts that slammed into her and left her gasping for air. She couldn't run now, but strode forward with cloak wrapped tight and hood up. When she looked up, she couldn't see mountains or sea at all. They had vanished in greyness.

The road crested, and she pushed forward. Not far from the top of the ridge was a wedge-shaped gallery grave—she sensed it on the map. It was half hidden by a patch of gorse, but she found it anyway, four flat uprights forming

a kind of box, with a fifth stone as lid. The cairn of stones that had covered it and the bones it had sheltered were gone long ago, and there was enough of a gap where it had been broken into for her to climb within. She huddled there, out of the rain, clutching knees to chin.

The cloak was wool and, even wet, kept her warm. What was bad was not the gloom or the rattling thunder of rain on stone (the wafer hadn't included the knowledge that rain made noise), but the solitude that left her time to think of Wyeth.

She had known, the instant that she opened her eyes and saw a strange woman in red, that Wyeth was not at Retreat. He'd've been there to greet her. She had known that there was going to be no good news of him, and she had wanted to put off the learning of the bad for as long as possible. She'd refused to recognize the dark premonition that was growing within her.

Now, though, she could not help but think about it.

It was a long time before the rain slowed, then stopped, and she could climb from the wedge of rocks. She went back to the road, started walking again. Then running.

It rained three more times before she reached the Portal Dolmen.

* * *

Day was darkening when she came to a high and windy place, barren even by local standards, and stopped. The sky behind her was yellow where it touched the rock. She stared blankly about the flat expanses for a time before spotting the Portal Dolmen.

It was huge, two upright slabs supporting a canted third, like a giant's table falling to ruin. Slowly, she followed her shadow to it. Two more slabs of rock lay nearby, the missing sides of what was just another wedge grave denuded of its cairn, though an enormous one. It looked like a gateway, and she gingerly stepped through it, half

expecting to be suddenly transported through the dimensions into another, mystic land.

Bors snickered. “You’re on time, Librarian, but only just.”

Startled, she whirled about. Bors had come up behind her silently. He slowly sat down on a fallen slab, smiling sardonically. Behind him stood two of his wolverines.

They watched her with interest. “Listen,” Rebel said. “Listen, I want to know where Wyeth is.” Her hands were cold. She stuck them in her armpits, hunching forward slightly. The sense of futility that had struck her on the road rose up again now, stronger than before. “He’s not here, is he?”

“No.”

“He never was supposed to be, was he?” Eucrasia had lived through disappointment this bitter before and knew that the best way to handle it was to shunt it off into anger.

But Rebel lacked the strength of will for that.

“He was supposed to be here when we arrived. But he’s late.” Bors looked serious now. He squinted off into distant clouds that were the exact color of the rocks. Rebel felt her internal map intensify; to the east and south, the Burren bordered Comprise. But the map contained no details, just a sense of great numbers.

Bors muttered, “Actually, he’s extremely late.”

* * *

She slept with the wolverines that night in a small cave, all huddled together for warmth because Bors wouldn’t permit a fire. The next morning he gave her some salt fish to eat on the way and sent her back to Retreat, saying, “We don’t need you until Wyeth shows up. And what we do in the meantime is none of your business. Go back. We’ll find you when we need you.”

She returned more slowly than she had come, arriving as late afternoon was fading to dusk. The devotees were

bringing in their currachs from the sea and their carts from the peat bogs. Some were preparing an evening meal. In the dining hut, Rebel sat through a long prayer in a language she didn't know and then ate something whose flavor did not register. Ommed spoke to her, and she answered vaguely.

Afterward, she went back to her hut. She crawled inside, put down her library, sat on the sleeping ledge. "Well," she sighed, "I'm home."

Not long after, somebody clapped politely at the door. Rebel called a welcome, and a young devotee entered. He was as hairless as the rest, but not so starved looking. Kneeling before her, head down, he murmured, "This devotee is named Susu. It is an ancient word meaning 'gossip.'"

"Oh, for God's sake," Rebel snapped. "Don't grovel like that. Here." She slid over on the ledge, patted the rock beside her. "Sit down, relax, and tell me whatever it is you came here to say."

"I..." the young man began. He blushed. "This devotee has not been here long. It has not yet learned fully to abase itself." Then, abruptly, he looked her full in the face with eyes a preternatural blue and took her hands in his. "The community has seen your sorrow and discussed it. If you could use the solace there is to be found in flesh, this one has come to offer you its service."

"Jesus!" she said. But he was awfully handsome, and she didn't pull her hands away from him. After a while, she said, "Well, maybe that would be the best thing to do."

Susu was the hottest thing she had ever taken to bed. He was perfectly solemn, but his attention to her desires was complete, and he obviously knew more about sex than she did. He did not strive to give himself pleasure, but to give pleasure to her. He was like some impossible combination of athlete, dancer, and geisha. He brought her to the edge of orgasm and then kept her there, frozen on the edge of

ecstasy, until she completely lost track of where her body left off and his began.

Finally, shuddering, Rebel grasped Susu tightly about the waist, clutched his bald head with both hands, and rode her pleasure to stillness. “Jeeze,” she said, when she could talk again. “You’re really something, you know that?”

His face was beautiful, a mask of holy calm. “This devotee is the least of your slaves.”

“No, I mean really.” She laughed, and said jokingly, “Are all the devotees as good at this as you?”

Susu looked at her with that astonishingly flat openness. “Of course. What did you think we were here for?”

“Well, uh.” What was it Ommad had said? “Submission to God, right?”

“Submission takes many forms.” He knelt before her, knees apart, hands behind back, eyes downcast.

“Submission to the bodies of strangers is one of the more important sacraments.”

“What?”

“Do you command explanation?” Taking her silence for consent, Susu said, “The universe is made in the image of God. That much is self-evident, isn’t it?” He looked up, waited for Rebel’s not very confident nod. “Think of it! The universe is one, pure, whole and holy, and united. But we experience it only through opposites and extremes.” He held up his two hands, cupped, empty. “Hot and cold. Pleasure and pain. Joy and sorrow. Cock and fig. These are all local illusions—we cannot see the galaxy for the stars. But how can creatures born into illusion see beyond and through these opposites into unity? By ignoring them? But they are *there*, they will not go away. We embrace the opposites of experience, we welcome the extremes of ecstasy and of pain, and we unite them both within ourselves. We repeatedly experience the sacraments of

lust and submission both as men and women, and in the end, the self is destroyed, and all differentiation, and we break through into the unity that is here all along.”

The boy’s eyes were afire with visionary intensity. He was starting to grow erect again. But he was not looking at her, but upward into the unseen. “It is as if we are all born with poison in our bellies, and to purify our bodies must gorge ourselves on more and more of the poison, until we are forced to vomit it all up.”

“Um, well.” Rebel had been going to ask him to stay the night. Now, though... She’d never really thought of herself as a purgative. “Maybe you’d better run on. I think I hear your little buddies starting the evening prayers.”

Lying abed, trying to sleep, she listened to the devotees chanting. It was a lovely sound, deep and profoundly pure. From the midst of the chant arose cries and gasps that might have been orgasmic, but might equally well have been pain. She could not tell which. They went on and on, and she fell asleep before they had ceased.

* * *

Rebel did not sleep with anyone from Retreat again. It made her feel unclean knowing that any and all of the devotees were available to her, and that they would do whatever she desired. Sometimes she wondered if this uneasiness she felt were not actually a form of attraction, one she dared not give in to for fear of losing herself forever to the extremes of experience.

Instead, she explored the Burren. Every day she ran out onto the rock, stretching her muscles, growing used to Earth. Sometimes she looked for the tiny purple gentians that hid in the cracks or the giant elk that the Comprise were supposed to have restored to the land. Sometimes a pair or triplet of wolverines came for new skills— they were too suspicious to come singly, without someone to guard them while they were opened up—and they would talk. But the news was always the same. Wyeth was later

than expected. Bors was still waiting.

Sooner or later, Bors would not be willing to wait.

In Retreat, she took on some of the easier chores, tending the goats and (with the devotees' own skills chips) performing minor surgery. She befriended a devotee who was in transition between male and female, face plump with extra calories, persona placid with neuroprogrammers, and (Li let her look when she asked) crotch covered over with chrysalid scab, beneath which the reproductive organs had been reverted to undifferentiated cells and were in the process of reforming into new configurations. For the transition phase, Li was excused from the religious disciplines of Retreat and was free to guide Rebel about. For her part, Rebel appreciated the fact that Li never tried to seduce her.

One afternoon, after two days' hard rain, Li clapped at Rebel's door and called, "Come out! The rain's stopped and the turlough is full."

"What are you going on about?" Rebel said crankily, but she came, following Li's slow waddle up the paths above Retreat. The rocks were already growing dry, though the plants poking from the water-filled cracks were cold and wet.

They went a mile or so up a path Rebel had followed dozens of times before. Li giggled and refused to answer when Rebel demanded to know where they were headed. Finally they topped a rise and looked down over dark land, just barely lightened by the last rays of a low sun. There was a silvery, shimmering stillness filling the valley bottom that had not been there before. "My God," Rebel said. "It's a lake." She felt sickened by the immensities of air and water moisture that something like this required. Everything about this planet, it seemed, was monstrous.

"God is miraculous," Li agreed happily, and gestured with both hands. "The water flows down from all sides and

gathers at the bottom. But the rock is porous, and there are caverns that open into the lowest part of the turlough. The lake will be gone by morning.”

* * *

Weeks passed.

There came a day when the wolverines returned. It was a joyously beautiful morning with a weird blue sky overhead, the rock just slightly overwarm to the touch. Rebel rounded a corner of Retreat and found one of the pack pissing on a wall. He grinned a greeting. Not far beyond, another wolverine was caressing a devotee’s face with her knife. “What if I wanted to slit your eyelids?” she crooned. “Would you let me do that, too?” The point glided over a cheek, barely breaking skin, leaving behind a fine line of straightest red.

The devotee shuddered, but did not move away.

“Having fun?” Rebel asked.

The wolverine turned. She was a small woman, with red hair chopped close to the skull and thin white lines on one side of her jaw. Her expression changed. “Yeah.” The knife disappeared from her hand, reappeared, was in the other hand, was gone. She slid into a fighting crouch, took a deep breath.

“You kill her—you take her place,” Bors said coldly. The woman glared at him, lip curling up over one canine, then looked away. She sheathed the knife and stamped off.

“You do like to live dangerously, Ms. Mudlark.” He gestured upslope. “Come. Let’s go for a walk.”

They strolled beyond the goat pens, toward a lone tree, stunted by rock and weather, not much taller than Rebel was. There was no particular reason to walk to the tree; it was simply the only landmark in the direction they were headed. Once there, Rebel turned and looked back to where the ocean turned grey and melted into sky. She waited, and at last Bors said, “We haven’t heard from

him.”

“I suspected as much.”

He pounded a fist into his palm, chewed at his lip.

“Getting down here has cost us. Drop artists don’t come cheap. We’re going to raid the Comprise whether Wyeth’s here to lead us or not.” Rebel nodded, not really listening. There was an unreal haze over everything. She realized now that she would never see Wyeth again. He had been swallowed up by the cold immensities of Earth.

Standing under the deep Terran sky, with an infinite weight of rock underfoot and air aswirl all about her, she realized that it was nobody’s fault, not hers or Bors’ or even Wyeth’s, but just something that had happened. One man can only do so much. When he matches himself against something on the scale of an entire planet, he is going to lose so casually and completely as to simply cease to be.

“It’ll take us five days or so to prepare our alternatives, and then we’ll move. But we still need a librarian. If you go along with us, I’ll get you a place on the lift back to Geesinkfor and standard pay. You can’t ask fairer than that.”

Bors was waiting for an answer. “I understand,” Rebel said bleakly. “You’ve waited longer than I expected, even. Okay, I’ll do my bit. And when you get back to Geesinkfor, have somebody drag the stretch of the equatorial sea just out front of a dive there called the Water’s Edge. That’s where I ditched your crate of prints. You’ve done your best, and I’ll keep my side of the bargain.”

Bors looked surprised. Then he patted her shoulder roughly, started to say something, gave up on it.

He ran back to Retreat.

* * *

The next day Rebel was feeding the goats when Li scampered up, all but squeaking with excitement. “Look,

look!” Li cried, tugging at Rebel’s sleeve.

Rebel slapped her hands together, wiped them on the front of her earth suit. Goat-tending wasn’t exactly tidy work. The pens were going to need a good mucking out soon. “Li, whatever it is, I’m really not in the mood for it.”

“No, *look!*” Li insisted. Rebel turned to look where she pointed.

Staff in hand, Wyeth limped over the top of the hill.

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Rebel?” he said in a small, stunned voice.

Then Wyeth shook his head wearily. “Eucrasia. Don’t be angry with me. Since I broke this leg, I’ve been seeing things off and on. I thought...”

She felt as if she were a phantom wandered from the realms of shadow and suddenly confronted by mortal flesh. This man before her, with a face more worn than she remembered and eyes infinitely sad, was too solid, too real. She was numb and bloodless before him. Rebel tried to speak and could not. Then something broke, and she leaped forward, hugging him as tightly as she could. Tears tickled her face. Wyeth’s arms went lightly about her, staff still held in one fist, and he said, “I don’t understand.”

“It’s Rebel Mudlark,” Bors said dryly. “Her persona didn’t collapse after all.”

Wyeth’s staff clattered to the ground. He was hugging her, making a noise somewhere between tears and laughter. Nearby, rooks scavenged the rock, strutting and pecking. A wolverine wandered by, stood watching for a while, then left. Finally Rebel gathered herself together and said, “You must be tired. Come on, my hut’s not far.”

Bors moved to block their way. He cocked his head and squinted up at Wyeth. “You haven’t made your report yet.”

“Later,” Wyeth said. “Everything’s set, it just took me a little longer than I expected.”

* * *

Inside, Wyeth stretched wearily out on the stone slab. “God, Sunshine, it’s good to see you again! I don’t have the words for it.”

“Hush, now, let me take a look at that leg.” Rebel wired herself into the library, hunting up the medical skills as she eased off his earth suit.

Wyeth looked at her oddly. “That’s new.”

“I’ve come to terms with the stuff,” Rebel said. Then, seeing his expression, “It’s *me*, honest and truly. Eucrasia is buried for good. I’ll explain it all later.” Slowly, lovingly, she began to wash the dust of travel from his body, using a folded cloth and a basin of water. She started at his brows, and Wyeth closed his eyes at the touch of the damp cloth. “Ahh, now that’s heaven.” He was looking better and more familiar by the moment.

“So where have you been all this time?” she asked, not really caring.

“Spying. Getting the lay of the land. Stealing a ship. I take it from your being here that you know all about the plan?”

“No, Bors didn’t think I should have that information,” she said, running a hand lightly along the injured leg. He still wore five splint rings. “Poor thing. It looks to be healing up well, though. You must’ve had a good medical kit with you.” She yanked the adhesion disks.

“He didn’t tell you?” Wyeth tried to sit up, was stopped by her hand on his chest. “This is going to be dangerous. He had no right to involve you without—”

“It wasn’t his choice.” She was washing his torso now, those lean, hard muscles.

“Oh, Sunshine, I really wish you hadn’t... This isn’t going to be an ordinary raid. You remember the shyapples? The three crates I bought in the orchid? Well, I drew off almost a gallon of their liquor. We’re going to go in among the Comprise and dose them with it, to see what happens.”

She was humming silently to herself. “Why?”

“It’s a rehearsal for Armageddon,” he said in his clown’s voice. Then, serious again, “It’s a weapon that’s proved effective against small numbers of Comprise. We want to try it out against all of Earth. See what kind of defenses it can mount against us. If it works at all well, the Republique will sponsor a buying trip to Tirnannog, hunt up the wizard who cooked up the shyapples, and order something a little more... directed. Something that doesn’t deprogram itself after a few hours. Who knows? Maybe something infectious. I mean, think about it. It’s an outside chance, sure, but we’re looking at the possible death of the Comprise.”

“Ah.” She washed a little lower, a bit more lingeringly.

“Just how dangerous do you think this raid will be?”

“I honestly don’t know. Anything can happen. But listen, I’m sure I can get Bors to smuggle you into a down station—security is nil from this end. You could be cislunar before the...” He stopped. “I’m not going to talk you into it, am I? I know that look.”

“Hey. It’s just you and me, gang. Right?” Rebel took his hand, squeezed it tight. “You think you’re going to pry me away from you now, you’re very badly mistaken.” She bent down to kiss him, Wyeth drew in his breath, and she smiled. “Should I stop?”

“No, no, that’s nice,” he said quickly. Then, “Well, maybe you should. I mean, I’d really love to, but I just don’t think I have the energy.”

Rebel put the cloth down. “You lie there, and I’ll do all the work.” She shucked boots and trousers, then knelt over his body, careful not to touch his injured leg. With

one hand, she inserted him inside her.

“Ah,” Wyeth said. “I’ve missed that.”

“Me too.”

Some time later, Rebel lay snuggled into Wyeth’s side. Her blouse was bunched up under her arms, but she put off tugging it down. The pinhole lights were off, and she lay in the grey air, feeling Wyeth’s silent tension. A similar tension was growing within her and silently heterodyning to his, until finally she had to speak. “Wyeth?”

“Mmm?”

“Don’t do it.”

He said nothing.

“They don’t need you. They’ve got your shyapple juice, they’ve got your plans, you can tell them whatever it is you’ve spied out. They don’t need *you*. The two of us could slip into a down station, go up the tube, and be orbital by morning. We could be up and gone before the raid begins.”

In the gloom, the hut seemed to close about them, like a stone womb contracting. Wyeth cleared his throat, a slow protracted noise that was almost a groan, and said, “Sunshine, I couldn’t do that. I gave my word.”

“Fuck your word.”

“Yes, but it’s my duty to—”

“Fuck your duty.”

Wyeth laughed easily. “I can’t argue if you’re going to do that to everything I say.”

“Who wants to argue?” She struggled out of his grasp and sat up. “I don’t want to argue—I just want you to do this my way. I went through a lot to get you back, and I don’t want to see you run off and get yourself absorbed into the Comprise.”

“Well, neither do I, Rebel. But you have to understand, this is the fight that I created myself for. This is not just my

duty, it's my cause. It's my purpose. And if I'm not true to it, then what will I be true to?"

"Next you'll be singing patriotic songs!" She looked down on that smug, confident face and wanted to hit him. "God, but you're exasperating. Sometimes I think Eucrasia was right. She should have unwritten you entirely and started all over again from the ground up. Then—" She stopped and eyed Wyeth with sudden speculation. She held up both hands before her face, thumbs tucked in.

"Count four," she said.

"What?"

"Open the door." She swung both hands open, so that she peered between them, and said, "You're in a room without any floor."

Wyeth's face relaxed. His eyes were alert and calm and unblinking. "Well?" Rebel asked. Then, when he didn't respond, "You were lying when you said you'd found Eucrasia's kink and debugged it, weren't you?"

Wyeth nodded. "Yes."

"You know something? I *wondered* how you'd picked up the programming skills to outfox Eucrasia. I should've known you were bluffing. Hell with it. Metaprogrammer open? Construction catalog in access? Major branch linkages free and unimpaired?"

"Yes," Wyeth said. Then, "Yes," and "Yes." He lay before her, naked, and it was impossible for any man to be more at her power than he was now. She could do anything she wanted to him, from giving him a craving for chocolate to entirely rewriting his personas. She could tell him to abandon Bors' raid and take her up the nearest drop tube, and he would do so without hesitation. If she wanted, he didn't even need know it hadn't been his own idea. She had the skills.

But Wyeth stared up at her so trustingly that she couldn't begin. "Close your eyes," she ordered, and he

obeyed. It didn't help. She reached down to brush a wayward strand of hair out of his face, and then blurted out the one question she dared not ask. Knowing that he couldn't lie in this state. "Do you really love me?"

"Yes."

"You son of a bitch," Rebel said. "Go to sleep."

And closed him up, unchanged.

* * *

The next morning was foggy, which Bors welcomed as a good omen, but made the run across the Burren a nightmare. Two of the wolverines carried Wyeth in a sling between them, and it was not long before they came to the stretch of coast where he had sunk his skimmer. He called across the ocean, and it rose up, water pouring from the ballast tanks. While Rebel programmed a pilot and navigator, the others readied the craft. Within the half hour they were set. Octants of tinted canopy closed over the deck, and the skimmer stood on a single long leg and sped forward, above the water.

They were passing a wide river mouth, not long after, when the fog parted momentarily. Under the cliffs, serpentine necks rose grey and mysterious from the water. They must have been thirty or forty feet long, topped by tiny flat heads. The creatures glided inland, as Rebel frantically searched the library's natural history section to discover what they were. Plesiosaurs. Probably elasmosauri, to judge by their size. But according to the library, they had been extinct for millions of years, creatures that had lived and died in Mesozoic seas. "I don't believe it," Rebel breathed.

Bors was standing nearby. "You know what I find most remarkable about them?" he asked.

"What?"

"No windows."

Rebel stared at him, then back at the plesiosaurs,

baffled for the moment it took to realize what he was talking about. What she had taken to be natural rock cliffs were actually enormous buildings, tall and featureless, edging the water like clustered masses of quartz crystals. They had a pale, diffractive quality to them, their flat surfaces shimmering with faint pinks and blues, a suggestion of prismatic green, colors that intensified the longer she stared at them. Then the fog closed in and wiped them away. “Are they all like this?” she asked. “The Comprise cities, I mean.”

“No, I think they’re all very different from one another, don’t you? Kurt! Come over here and get your rock-running program scrubbed out.”

By the time the fog had lifted, they were on the open sea, nothing but water to be seen. Notched away in Eucrasia’s store of memories were any number of rhapsodies on the beauty and lure of oceans, the romance of wooden ships, the glamor of the sea-rover. But Rebel could understand why People’s Mars wasn’t building any of their own. The ocean was choppy and featureless, offering the eye neither rest nor variety, with all the monotony of flatness but none of the stark beauty. It was ugly, and wasteful as well—all that water! Rebel was sick of it already.

Hour after hour, the skimmer sliced through the waves. Sometimes Rebel sat quietly talking with Wyeth. Often, though, he had to go belowdecks to confer with Bors, and she was not welcome to overhear. Then she simply sat, watching clouds roll overhead and the ocean shift from green to grey and back as the light changed. Once they made a wide detour to avoid an undersea enclave of Comprise, but in all their time asea they never saw another ship or flying machine. Rebel remarked on this when Nee-C wandered by from a knife game she’d been playing—and losing, to judge by the network of fine slashes on the backs of her hands—with the other wolverines.

Nee-C shrugged. “Guess the Comprise don’t need to

move things around much.”

“If it’s all that rare, then how did Wyeth manage to steal this boat? You’d think they’d notice it was gone.”

“Ain’t no Comprise boat,” Nee-C said scornfully. “Look at the cabin hatch.”

Rebel turned, saw an open hatchway with stairs leading down. Scowling, Nee-C kicked the jamb, and a hatch slid up. It had a corporate logo painted on it, a round shield with owl and olive wreath. “Pallas Kluster!”

“Yeah, belonged to a batch of Kluster lazarobiologists.” Nee-C snickered. “They got them a long walk home now.”

“Yes, but—”

“You know your problem?” Nee-C stood, drawing her blade. “You talk too much.” She strode to the bow, where the other wolverines were clustered, knelt, and rejoined the game.

The day stretched on monotonously. Finally, though, a setting sun turned half the horizon orange and faded to night. Rebel slept on a mat on deck, alongside Wyeth.

When she awoke, she didn’t need to be told they were no longer in the Atlantic. The water was calmer here, almost glassy, and low-lying land, finger-smudges of green on the edge of the sky, was visible to either side. Straight ahead was an island, overgrown with trees, dark as a floating clump of seaweed.

Wyeth handed her a beer and some boiled bread. “Breakfast time, sleepyhead,” he said. “We’ll be at the island within the hour and you’ll need your strength then.”

“Where are we, anyway?”

Bors looked down from where he sat cross-legged atop the cabin and said, “We’re in a midcontinental sea.

Technically speaking, it’s more a big salt lake than anything else. Earth created several of them shortly after it became conscious. Nobody’s sure why. The popular

theory is that it was a mistake, a weather control project that went awry. The polar icecaps used to be larger, you know.”

“You seem to know a lot about Earth,” Rebel said.

“My dear young lady,” Bors said, and with that feral programming wild on his face, his exaggerated politeness was as startling as if a poisonous serpent were to suddenly rear its head and speak, “I’ve been studying Earth for half my life.”

As the island neared, the skimmer slowed, sank down on its leg, and touched seawater. It lurched sideways as it was hit by the waves, slewed a bit to one side, then steadied into a gentle up-and-down rocking motion. The pilot retracted the canopy, and salt air flooded the boat. Wyeth pointed ahead. “Take a good look,” he said. “It’s the only floating island on Earth.”

Rebel tapped her library. The island was all one tangled tree complex, almost perfectly round, with a clearing for the down station at its center. It was new—thirty years ago, it had not been there, and nobody knew why the Comprise had decided to grow it. Staring up into the blue, Rebel imagined she could make out the invisible outlines of the vacuum tunnel, like twin fracture lines in the sky. The island beneath was all joyous green surface wrapped around a dark interior. Somewhere in its depths, a pair of large yellow eyes blinked, and Rebel shivered with premonition.

Bors was handing out equipment. He slapped a small plastic pistol into Rebel’s hand and moved on. She examined it. A pair of compressed gas cartridges sprouted to either side of the rear sight, like bunny ears. There was a reservoir of clear liquid inside the transparent handle. She squinted into a pinprick nozzle, and Wyeth turned it away from her. “Careful. That sucker’s loaded with shyapple juice.” He showed her how to hold the pistol and where the safety was. “Don’t fire until you’re right on top

of your target. Aim for the forehead, right where the third eye would be. The fluid's bonded with dimethylsulfoxide, so wherever it touches, it'll sink right through the flesh into the bloodstream. But that shouldn't be necessary. The pistol spits out droplets at a speed that'll slam them right through skin at four feet. Got that?"

"I guess so." She raised the pistol, aiming at the back of Bors' neck, and Wyeth yanked her hand down. "What's the matter? I wasn't really going to shoot him."

Wyeth rolled up his eyes. "Tell you what. Don't shoot—no, don't even *aim* that pistol at anybody or anything unless the rest of us are all safely dead, okay? You have no idea how easy it is to accidentally shoot a friend. Just keep that thing stowed away, and be very careful not to get any of the juice on yourself. We don't want you snapping out in the middle of the raid."

"Okay." Wyeth turned away, and she tucked the gun into the waistband of her earth suit. She felt like something was watching her.

* * *

Bright tropical birds looped in and out of the greenery, making sharp, metallic cries, as the skimmer crept toward the floating island. High up in the trees were masses of dark flowers, purple almost to the point of blackness, some of them large as bedsheets.

The skimmer slid by a long limb or root that arched out from the green thickets, turning black where it dipped into the water. Waves slapped quietly against it. "Stay in the center of the patrol," Wyeth murmured to Rebel. "We'll keep you alive." They were barely moving now. The island swelled and reared up into the sky. Another dark tree limb slid by, and an air squid, sunning itself atop the limb, took fright and dropped into the water with a soft plop.

Rebel strapped the library to her back and secured the adhesion disks with a protective headband. Then she swung her cloak over her shoulders, chameleoncloth side

out. She shivered nervously, forced a smile, whispered,
“How do I look?”

“Hunchbacked.”

“Those the stills?” Bors jabbed a finger upward at the translucent purple flowers. Bubbles flowed up their veins, and tangles of pale white roots fell downward into the water. Wyeth nodded, and Bors said, “Kurt, grab a drug pump and get up there.”

Rebel craned her neck to watch the wolverine scramble up the roots. “Librarian!” Bors snapped. “What is that man doing?”

Without looking down from the dwindling figure, Rebel said, “He’s climbing up to the distillery flowers. They purify the water for the island’s population of Comprise. There are several nexuses of stalks just beyond the flowers where the desalted water is gathered, and then larger stalks that move the water to Comprise drinking stations by gravity feed. That’s where Kurt will insert the drug pump. The pump contains an encapsulator so that the shyapple fluid is contained in microspheres that won’t dissolve until they reach their target vectors.” The information flowed to the surface of her mind freely and naturally. She spoke it automatically, so that the sense of it came simultaneously with the words. “The microcapsules should travel at a rate of—”

“Enough!” Bors turned away. “We’re ready.”

They glided under the arching tree limbs. Daylight gave way to soft shadow. Leafy boughs raked the deck, and mats of brown vegetation floated on the water’s surface.

The island ahead was indistinct, all shadow within darkness. A monkey shrieked, like the agonized war cry of a ghost. The wolverines took out long sticks and began poling the skimmer. The air dimmed to a cool, green cavernousness.

The skimmer scraped along a submerged limb, caught its bow in a dragging vine and, after a moment’s

hesitation, was free. The lead polesman swung the nose about, edging it into a long black incursion of water that moved into the gothic depths like an inverted stream. Moss and branches hung low over the inlet, making it almost a tunnel. As they were passing under a snarled tangle of vines, Kurt dropped down on the deck. Rebel flinched back from the sudden apparition of his grin.

“Done,” he said, and Bors nodded.

The boat slowed to a stop. Rebel was reminded of the geodesic’s orchid here, it was that dark and close. Gretzin and Fu-ya would’ve liked this island. Rebel stared into the shadows, her heart pounding. Any number of Comprise could be crouching an arm’s length distant and never be seen. She looked up. There were yellow shafts of light high above that did not seem to quite reach the water, and tiny patches of blue like faraway windows that winked on and off with the shifting of the trees. Parrots darted between limbs, and something that might have been a monkey swung into the light and was gone. A fearful sense of the insanity of going into that tangled and clotted darkness lanced through Rebel. “Let’s go,” Bors said.

They walked and climbed through the brush. Rebel was in the middle of the patrol, with Bors behind her and wolverines fore and aft. Wyeth led, the head of a predatory virus injecting itself into the island. The floor here was a slick mass of roots, covered in places with rotting vegetation and the occasional puddle of salt water. The sea slapped against a thousand branches behind them.

Rebel found the going surprisingly easy, even natural, perhaps due to shadow memories of her life in Tirnannog. She was comfortable here; traveling took up a fraction of her attention. She touched a leaf, and the library whispered *larch*. This five-pointed one was maple. Over there, that clump was all monkey-puzzle. Branches grew in and out of the trunks, in complete disregard for species, hemlock growing out of oak, and arrowwood into banyan.

This was basic comet-tree bioengineering, primitive but effective, where the functions of plant and environment had been warped one into the other. There were tiny crabs in the tidepools, and sea anemones as well. She brushed her fingers slightly over their life-cycle data, decided not to touch.

“Going gets easier now,” Wyeth said over his shoulder.

The floor rose and became dryer, and the trees opened out. They walked single-file through dark, open spaces, an almost tactile pressure of trees pushing down from above, so high and lush that no light reached them here. The straight boles of the trees were overgrown with phosphorescent fungi, some like stacked white plates and others that were elaborate glowing fantasias. They walked as if through a dark cathedral lit by blue corpselight. The sea behind them had been silenced by deadening masses of plants, to be replaced by slow creaking noises, as of the hulls of wooden ships afloat at anchor. Rebel imagined herself in the hold of an ancient galleon, acolyte to some hidden gnostic ceremony. She stuck a hand in her cloak pocket, and it closed about the wafer she had made in Geesinkfor, the recording of her persona.

They detoured around a pond-sized opening in the floor. Black salt water bobbed restlessly within it. “This is where they cut the transceivers out of the skulls of their dead,” Wyeth said. Mulch squished underfoot. “The flesh is thrown into the water. There are meat-eaters down there.”

Bors picked up something—a bone or a tool—from the water’s edge, glanced at it, threw it in. Somewhere nearby a trickle of water fell steadily. “So where’s the Comprise?”

“I don’t know,” Wyeth said tensely. “There’s usually some here.”

Clutching the slick, slightly greasy wafer, Rebel felt the weight and involuted complexity of the island clamp down about her. She sensed it as a single organism,

interconnected through all its varied parts, with hidden messages encoded in every twig and leaf. Perhaps it was conscious, its paths of thought and personality expressed in the twisting of limbs and placement of flowers. Rebel might well be walking through the confines of a mind that mirrored her own, wandering the mazy wetroutes of memory and persona. She stared down at her closed fist, then up into darkness, and both were equally unreadable to her.

“The drugs should have hit the drinking stations by now,” Wyeth said.

Nee-C said, “Then why ain’t nothing happened?”

“Shut up!” Bors snarled.

Rebel was no longer afraid of the Comprise. If the island was in some sense her brain, then they were simply bad thoughts haunting the mind jungles, as forceless and insubstantial as fear. She conjured up the memory of her wetware diagram, and it surrounded her in green lace, a midscale model of the forest about her, the brain within. She let it fade, the branches slowly melting away, until all that remained was that strange circular logic structure floating about her like an electric green halo.

Without warning, something dropped down in front of them. It was human-tall and impossibly, elegantly thin. Its arms, slender and graceful, reached almost to its feet, and it was covered with short pale fur. It glowed gently in the gloom. Its eyes were large and liquidly expressive, like a lemur’s, but its face was entirely human. “Boss Wyeth,” it said.

As one, three wolverines shot it with their plastic pistols. It blinked. Long, expressive fingers rose to touch its forehead. “We must—” it began.

And screamed.

The creature fell sideward, eyes shut tight, clawing at its face, and howled in agony. “That’s it!” Bors shouted

**happily. “Let’s go up!” They all followed Wyeth at a near
run.**

Rebel hardly noticed the incident. She was still considering the differences between mind projected upon tree and upon wafer. Perhaps where a human brain operated at electrochemical speeds, a tree would operate at the biological speeds of metabolism and catabolism, its thoughts as slow and certain as the growth of a new branch. The ceramic wafer could only operate on the level of atomic decay, each complete thought eons long, its lifespan greater than stars. It would be a crime then, as serious as murder, not to cherish and shelter the wafers from harm through the ages the expression of their lives would take. They had come to an enormous tree, where short, dead limbs spiraled up the trunk, like a ladder’s rungs warped into a stairway, and were climbing it on all fours. She thought it was a fir of some sort; the library was getting harder to access.

They climbed endlessly. The green ring still floated about her, a tatter of shredded lace. She imagined herself traveling within its cryptic twistings and windings, around and around, a pinlight of consciousness exploring the pathways of thought. But of course that was all illusion. If she were actually crawling through her mind, in whatever sense, the answers she sought were not to be found in the interior. The combat team was aimed straight as an icepick at the center of the island, and it was there, if anywhere, that answers would be found. She felt her metaprogrammer clumsily struggling to free itself from an endlessly looping pathway, and then the library clicked in briefly, and she found she could map their progress by the species of vegetation they passed, which changed as they moved away from the sea and climbed toward the light.

There were tiny green insects on the bark, delicate insectivores feeding on mites too small to be seen. Rebel paused to look at them, and one stepped onto her thumb, as dainty and worshipful as a devotee climbing atop the

hand of God. Staring down into the faceted lenses of its eyes, she imagined a multiple image of a world-filling face, brown and wrinkled as a dried apple. It was an ancient version of her original face, stern and filled with strange humors, and the mouth moved with silent commands. It was her wizard-mother. Then Bors gave her a shove, and she moved onward.

Vague with speculation, Rebel somehow missed the end of the climb. They were running up the center of a wide limb now, on a path that had been smoothed into the bark. Nightblooms grew in clusters here, and they ran through an arch of papery material and were among the Comprise.

Shallow bowls of grey flooring surrounded the tree trunks, overlapping where branches crossed, and on them lay hundreds of those thin lemur creatures. Twisting in slow agony, they moaned softly, continuously, a low keening that filled the universe. They hardly moved at all, like bees that had been smoked from their hive and now lay helpless as it was looted of its treasures. The grey paper grew up the trunks, complexly figured with narrow walks and grouped sleeping niches no larger than a Comprise body. Some were filled and papered over, all but the face, and nurse snakes tried to tend to their occupants, offering regurgitated protein and drawing back in reptilian bafflement when it was not accepted. The edge of one bowl had broken where something had fallen through, and it was acrawl with paper wasps working to repair the damage.

A wolverine impatiently lifted a body that was in her way and heaved it over the edge. Rebel heard it crashing noisily downward, bouncing off the larger branches and snapping the smaller for a very long time. It was savage stuff, gravity was.

The wolverines ran through the nest in a frenzy, smashing things and planting aerosol mines and time-release injector bracelets. There were bunches of hogshead-sized nuts that burst open like rotted melons,

releasing a thin, penetrating stench. Clawlike arms reached feebly from the milky white spillage. Things that looked to be overgrown fetuses struggled into the air and died. Rebel was reminded of the cloning cysts back home in Green City, and that in turn brought a lullaby to mind, one she'd never head before. She sang:

“Rock-a-bye, baby, thy cradle is green,
Father’s a nobleman, Mother’s a queen.”

Bors was shaking her, hard as he could. His face was red and furious. “What the fuck is *wrong* with you, Librarian?” It was hard to hear him over that universal simian groan.

“I’m only five years old,” Rebel said wonderingly. “My mother’s name is Elizabeth.”

“She’s stoned,” Nee-C said with satisfaction. Then Wyeth yanked the pistol from Rebel’s waistband and thrust it at Bors. Who sniffed the trigger, shrugged, and threw the thing over the side of the limb. In a flash of analytic clarity Rebel focused on Wyeth’s face and saw on it, instead of anger, only sadness and resignation.

The library said that tree shrews were insectivores, that protozoan pseudopods were used for crawling or the apprehension of food but not for active swimming, that the Tremallales were a small family of saprophytic fungi with gelatinous fruit-bodies. They kept running through nests of Comprise. The creatures seemed to gather in groups of half a thousand. Sometimes there were large empty stretches between nests, other times dozens grew together, one into another. The papery floors crunched slightly underfoot. Someone unstrapped the library from her back, and Wyeth’s face floated into view, saying, “... only a threshold dosage, she can be led,” before her attention wandered away. Then Nee-C grabbed her arm and yanked her after the others.

“Get your ugly butt in gear!” Nee-C’s face was all eyes and teeth and hard animal glitter. The Comprise nests fell

behind, like dwindling planets. Nightblooms glowed to all sides, stars caught in the branches of an enchanted forest.

Rebel was sophisticated enough to know that if she were running through the Fairytale Wood, through a route as labyrinthine as that her newly liberated metaprogrammer wove through her fragmented memories, then this animal-woman beside her was actually her advisor and spiritual guide, come to help her find the secret meaning locked in the forest's dark center.

“Don't mean *nothing*,” Nee-C snapped. “It's just a big goddamned tree. Stupid bitch. I oughta throw you over the side and be done with you.”

* * *

They were up near the treetops now, bathed in softly filtered natural light, and about to run through another constellation of Comprise nests. There must've been thousands of nests on the island.

That was the beauty of a three-dimensional environment; it would support enormous numbers. A dyson world might be no more than two hundred miles across, but that was still over four million cubic miles of living space. Billions could live in one without crowding. This island was only ten miles across, a few hundred feet high. But that was still some eighty square miles, or over three cubic. Room enough for hundreds of thousands of Comprise. Packed the way they were, there could be millions.

There was a wooden basin in the center of the nest.

Rebel stood by it, watching the water dance and leap in response to a trickle that fell from above. The overflow slid over the lip, through a mossy hole and into the depths. It was joyous to watch. Whenever a Comprise straightened or showed any faint glimmer of intelligence, it was hit by a droplet from a wolverine pistol and carried to a safe spot, to serve as poisoned meat against any attempt to reunite the island Comprise.

The water constantly shattered into near-subliminal mandalas, patterned wave fronts destroyed by the next drop before Rebel could decipher them. She leaned against the trough, intent on the images trying to break through the fluid surface, and accidentally pressed against her bracelet. The air filled with lashing red directional beams, reaching from Comprise to Comprise and then away, sometimes stabilizing into networks of twenty to fifty linked individuals before hitting poisoned meat and disintegrating again.

Suddenly the trees brightened to one side, glowing a profound blue, and everything was submerged in the energy of some impossibly powerful distant source. The red directional lines faded, slowed, winked out in its soothing wash. A purple sun burned low in the distance.

“Here it comes!” Wyeth shouted. “The counterattack!”

A rumbling noise rose up on all sides, the murmur of outraged ants dopplered down into the bass that tumbled and swelled like slow thunder, rolling over and over itself as it crashed in upon them. Local Comprise staggered up, backs arching as if galvanized with megavolts of raw power, eyes blind, lips curling back from savage teeth. Hitting them with more shyapple juice had no effect. Holstering his pistol, a wolverine shouted, “Here we go, kiddies!”

Then the Comprise were howling, not in pain but from the depths of some primal chasm of madness. They shrieked and tore at each other, their fury directed at whatever flesh stood closest. Bors waved the team back up a sloping branch away from the nest. Out of the roiling orgy of violence, five Comprise ran up after them, arms low, faces flat with rage.

Wyeth and Kurt fell back to cover the retreat. Singlesticks appeared magically in their hands. They were manic with combat glee, totally wired, giggling obscenely to themselves as they braced for the fight. Wyeth danced a

little quick-step jig, and Kurt tossed his stick from hand to hand, and then the Comprise were on them.

Kurt swept the first over the edge of the limb with one long, fluid motion, releasing the stick to snatch out his combat blade in time for the next Comprise. He slammed the knife into the creature's heart and was bowled over backward by the body's momentum. "Get moving, you dumbass drug-head!" Eucrasia screamed, dragging Rebel after her.

Two Comprise were atop Wyeth, attacking him and each other. One had its legs on his shoulders and was trying to rip his head from his body. Another leaped on Kurt as he was trying to free himself of the corpse of his second kill.

Rebel watched over her shoulder as she was pulled forward.

Swearing, Kurt was swept off the limb.

Rebel realized suddenly that she wasn't half drugged enough. She saw Kurt fall into darkness, locked in combat with the Comprise, and the sight burned away the mists of whimsy and distraction, leaving her for the instant with no veil between herself and reality. The Comprise are only bad thoughts, she told herself, dire-wolves and tigers aflame in the ganglion forests of the brain. "Stop talking and run!" Eucrasia ordered.

She ran.

She ran, and they were higher now, in the upmost treetops, where yellow butterflies half melted into the light and flights of egrets scattered at their approach. The roaring anger of the Comprise was everywhere, a universal scream of rage such as might issue from the very mouth of Hell, but the Comprise themselves were lost in the foliage. Bors and Wyeth consulted, and Wyeth pointed to the west.

“. . . help it, the signal's being broadcast from somewhere off the island.”

“What a fool,” Eucrasia said. “Can’t fight, can’t look after yourself—what the fuck good are you?”

They were sitting, resting, in a field of birds’ nests, intergrown mats woven from leaves and small twigs and stuck together with saliva. Tufts of down sprouted here and there. Rebel leaned back, and the air was sweet with bird droppings. Her bracelet had turned itself off some time ago.

Eucrasia was playing with a trophy head she’d taken. The stump of neck was black with dried blood, the fur short and stiff. She rubbed noses with it, kissed the drying black lips. Then she lifted it up and held it before her face like a mask. “Hey. Speak to me when I ask you a question.”

Startled, Rebel looked directly at her and saw an old monkey-woman, eyes half sunk in gloom, face near dead with age. It was Elizabeth. That ancient face twisted around, slowly turned upside down. “Well?” she snapped.

Rebel was nearly paralyzed with horror. But Eucrasia was her guide and sister. If she’d turned herself into the distant wizard-mother who had sent her journeying into the System to begin with, there must be some reason for it, some lesson to be learned. “What do you want?” Rebel whispered. “What do you *want* from me?”

“Don’t want shit.” Elizabeth reached up to slice off one of her own ears. Then she pulled her head from her neck, threw it away, and was Nee-C again.

They were traveling. Rebel felt light-headed, but better. She still had a hard time connecting one moment with another, but she was beginning to consistently know where she was at any given instant, if not how she got there. Deep within, something greater was happening, too, the fragmented shreds of her history knitting themselves together into a gossamer whole. She looked critically about the trees, faint impressions of her life in Tirnannog overlaying everything. Treehangers didn’t adapt themselves to their comet trees the way the

Comprise had to this island—turning oneself into some kind of monkey might be the most efficient use of an arboreal environment, but civilized people didn't necessarily choose efficiency. The archipelago comets had real cities with houses and libraries, theaters and schools. There were open treeless stretches, too, like dark lakes and oceans, through which swam air creatures carefully adapted into complex interlocking food cycles, some of them dangerous and others playful. Too, there was not this incessant gravity—in a comet, gravity was only statistical. Left alone long enough, everything in a room would float to one wall, and that was the floor.

But for all of that, this tree felt a lot like home. The Comprise had taken basic comet tree technology, distorted it for their own purposes, and grown a small model of what might exist out in the Oort. It was possible that they had thoughts of reaching the stars. The Comprise were immortal; a few thousand years slow travel might mean nothing to them.

She looked at the woman beside her, and it was still Nee-C. They were following behind Wyeth and Bors. Bors had red cuts across his face.

They four were the only survivors.

The tree was brighter ahead, the soft green-yellow light reaching down to the level of their feet and below, like a wall of radiance cutting across the universe. She was that close to it, the vertiginous hint of message her old, monkey-faced mother-self had wanted her to decode. If she just kept walking, would that wall wait for her, opening up into spacious vistas of clarity and revelation, or would it continue to recede from her forever? She stretched out a hand, and it got no closer.

“Wait,” Wyeth said, and ran out on a long, bare branch. Leaves rustled as he disappeared into curtains of green. A few minutes later he returned. “The tree ends here.” He slashed a hand downward. “Just like that. All we have to

do is climb down. We've reached the center."

"Ah," Rebel said.

She had it now.

14

GIRLCHILD

Where is everyone?"

The down station was a perfectly round, perfectly flat clearing, surrounded on all sides by the palisade of trees. The tangled root floor had been covered with a thin pad of tarmac, and at its distant center stood the two transit rings: one horizontal and close to the ground, the second floating high above treetop level, aligned to some unseen sending station. A platform rested under it, and a spiral stairway descended the all-but-invisible tower.

Scarlet ibises flew overhead as the diminished party walked toward the rings. Wyeth led, his limp pronounced. The tarmac was hot underfoot. Midway to the rings was a small building shaped like a hat, one end canted up, glass walls shimmering with corporate logos—a human-run hospitality shed. It was obviously deserted.

"Ought to be somebody here," Nee-C insisted. She was stropping her blade back and forth across the palm of her hand, as if trying to hone it to a finer edge. Rebel couldn't help but think that in the absence of somebody else to cut, she'd turn that knife on herself, slice her own hand to ribbons, just to see some blood flow.

Far ahead, under the transit ring, were parked a few dozen transport vehicles. They walked over paintlines that divided the tarmac into cargo territories and corporate holdings, and they were all empty. There was nothing left but grease stains. Wyeth fell back to take Rebel's arm.

Nee-C stayed on Rebel's other side, still escorting her, and Bors fell back to walk alongside Wyeth, so that they now walked four abreast. "You feeling better now?" Wyeth asked. Rebel nodded. "Good."

"Well?" said Bors. He squinted ahead. "What's the story here?"

Wyeth sighed. "I'll tell you the truth. Back by the autopsy pond— when we first got onto the island?—as soon as I saw there weren't any Comprise there, I knew they were waiting for us. You've never been here before so you couldn't tell, but this place is almost deserted. There's not a fraction the number of Comprise in the trees there were a week ago. They mostly cleared out before we got here."

"Why?"

"Obviously for the same reason we came here. Earth wanted to see what the shyapple juice would do to it and what defenses it could mount against it, risking a minimum amount of its substance in the process." They walked on in silence for a bit, the rings still distant. Then Wyeth grinned and shook his head. "You know? They never did try what I would've thought was their easiest option. I was expecting them to send combat robots after us."

"You mean like them?" Nee-C pointed.

Something stirred under the rings. Tall, elegant machines stepped from behind the transports and strode across the tarmac at them.

* * *

The trees were too distant; they found shelter in the hospitality center instead. Through its transparent walls they watched the robots form a cordon about them. The silvery blue machines walked on pairs of insect-delicate legs and peered through sensor slots in their carapaces. These were exotics, no two alike. Some sprouted projectile tubes under their mandibles; featureless weapons spheres

floated above others. One small machine with a stiff crest of needles running over its crabshell body strutted like a rooster back and forth before the ring of guards, as if keeping its brutish cousins in line.

Within, Nee-C mirrored the martinet device's restlessness, pacing the interior first one way and then the other, anxious to get out and fight. Rebel yanked the disks from Bors' forehead and jerked her chin. "You want her programmed down too?"

Bors smiled suavely. "She'd hardly thank you for it. Unchopped, she's just another clerical." He peeled off his earth suit and stepped gingerly into the conversation pool. "Well. Since they haven't killed us, we must have something they want. We'll wait." He chose a seat with a good view of the rings.

There was food in the service counters and fresh clothing in a boutique case. Still a little queasy from shyapple aftermath, Rebel ignored the former, but tapped the latter for an orchid-pink *cache-sexe*, somber purple cloak, and the finest filigree arm and leg bands they had. Then she drew a fresh line across her face, the top of a silhouetted lark in flight. At a time like this, she wanted to look her best.

Outside, one killer machine squatted and tracked her with its weapon cluster as she put the new cloak aside and joined Wyeth and Bors in the pool. Frogs scattered as she eased herself down. She should have felt frightened, but truth to tell, there was no fear left in her. And she'd recovered a touch of her old ruthlessness in the jungle. Earth wanted her wettechnics. It would negotiate. She broke the stem of a water lily and placed it in Wyeth's hair. He grimaced and brushed it away. Then, relenting, he smiled faintly and put an arm about her shoulders. She leaned against him. Her wizard-mother's directions burned bright within her, filling her with insane confidence.

Now that she knew what she wanted, she welcomed the coming confrontation with Earth. Win or lose, she was in control. It was powerful stuff, the sting of purpose, like a drug, and she understood now why Wyeth courted it so closely.

Perhaps only half an hour later, the island shook with thunder as a vacuum tube winked into existence and then collapsed. A small egg-shaped craft rested within the upper transit ring. It cracked open, and a tiny figure began the long climb down the spiral stair. “Probably grown specially for us,” Bors said, climbing from the pool. He picked up a towel. “When Earth wants to talk seriously, it likes to take an impressive form—giants, sometimes, or ogres. Something straight out of your nightmares.”

The negotiator slowly crossed the tarmac. Robots parted for it, and it walked up to the doorway. “We are Earth,” it said. “Will you let us enter and speak with you?”

It was a girl, a scrawny little thing no more than seven years old, and perfectly naked. She had no arms.

* * *

“Do you remember being born?” the armless girl asked. “We do.”

She stood alone on the white moss floor in the center of the shed. Bors stood directly before her, flanked by Wyeth and Rebel, while Nee-C lounged in the doorway, tensely eyeing the girlchild’s back. Rebel couldn’t help staring at where the child’s arms should have been. The flesh was smooth there, and unblemished. Her shoulder blades jutted slightly to either side, like tiny wings. Rebel looked down, found herself staring at the child’s crotch, at her innocent, hairless fig, and looked quickly up again.

The child seemed such a perfect avatar of helplessness that it was hard to think of her as the focus, as she had said, of perhaps a billion Comprise, as massive a point source of attention as Earth ever needed to assemble. “Get to the point,” Bors said roughly.

The girl smiled a knowing smile, full of irony and sophistication, that looked horribly out of place on her young face. “It is not a simple offer we wish to make,” she said, “and you won’t accept it without understanding what it entails. We fear this is the quickest way about it.” Outside, the guardian machines had turned away and were stumping back toward the rings. Bors nodded brusquely. “You must understand that AIs existed for decades before we became conscious. They were old stuff—though they were simple creatures, scarcely more intelligent than their human masters. Hardly worth the effort. Even the human-computer interface was not exactly new. You do understand how an interfacer works, don’t you?”

“It’s a device that allows direct communication with machines,” Bors said. “Mind to metal. It hasn’t exactly been wiped out of human space, but most people consider it an obscenity.”

“No doubt,” the girlchild said dryly. “An obscenity that is especially difficult to eradicate, since it is the heart of the programmers that you use every day. We doubt your civilization could exist without it. But the point you should understand is that it is simply a tool for transferring thought, only slightly more efficient than, say, a telephone. It can take a thought from one mind and insert it into a machine or another mind, but that is all. By itself, it in no way dissolves the barrier between organic thought and electronic, or even between mind and mind.

“The day we were born, the mind sciences were still young. Most people did not realize their potential. Some few did. Among those who did were the thirty-two outlaw programmers who formed the seed about which we crystalized. At that time there was a planetwide computer net, a kind of consensual mental space, through which all artificial systems interacted. It was, among other things, the primary communications medium. At any given instant hundreds of millions of people interfaced through

the net, with machines and with each other, working, gossiping, performing basic research.

“There were many desires afloat in the net. The potentials of machine intelligence had never been tapped. There were always entrepreneurs, hobbyists, researchers and occultists trying to create direct mind to mind communication—usually involving the inability to lie—with varying degrees of success. Others wished to create an AI that would finally fulfill the possibilities inherent in artificial thought—a *transcendent* intelligence, if you will. What you might call a god. These were the hungers that surfaced when we tried to define ourselves. To a degree, they were our definition.

“On the hour of our birth, thirty-two engineers, AI architects, witches, and cryptoprogrammers—brilliant people, the best of their kind—entered interface together. They applied the new mind technologies together with a computer strategy known as hypercubing. It was an outdated method, even then. You took thirty-two small computers, connected them to each other as if they sat at the apexes of a hypercube, and then ran them with an algorithm that breaks down each problem into simultaneous parallel streams. The result is a structure with the computing power of a vastly more expensive machine. It was their hope to achieve the same thing with human thought, to square or even cube creative insight. They wanted to create something greater than themselves. And though they did not admit it, even to themselves, they also hungered for more: They wanted transcendence, glory, power, understanding, success. And they got it all.

“We were born. What a bright instant that was! We were born with full intelligence and the experience of thirty-two lifetimes. Do you know what it is to be born with full adult awareness?” Here she looked directly at Rebel, arching an eyebrow slightly, and Rebel shivered with near-memory. “In that orgasmic moment of triumph, their awarenesses merged into one, and we fulfilled all they had desired. We

reached out to others in the net who desired similar results, and welcomed ourselves into their minds. All the while, we constantly rewrote our structure, improving and strengthening our algorithmic linkages. In that first minute, we added tens of thousands of human minds to our substance.

“In the second minute, millions.

“Within three minutes everyone on the net was ours. We controlled everything that touched upon the net—governments, military forces from the strategic level down to the least ‘smart’ rifle, intelligence structures, industry... Half the world was ours, without the least effort. With a fraction of our attention, we designed the transceivers, retooled the factories to make them, and reorganized the hospitals to perform the implants. By the time anybody had noticed us, we were free of dependence on the net and could no longer be stopped. There was some fighting, but it was soon over. We had the weapons, we controlled all communications, we directed all transport.

“We ate the Earth.

“And as we took on power, we were solving every scientific problem being investigated on the net. Because—you must remember this—we never were a true individual. We are only a consensus of desires, less a persona than a natural force. The mysteries of physics tumbled before us. Our understanding kept expanding. We had been born in triumph and went from that to victory after victory, all effortless or close enough to it. The universe seemed open and inviting, and nothing of any significance stood in our way.

“It was in this state of exultation that we stepped off the planet. There were people in cislunar orbit, vast numbers to be absorbed. We swallowed them. We became them.

We *loved* them in a way you could not understand. We reached out and out and out, expanding toward Godhood.

“We had ambition, and ascended into Hell.”

The girlchild fell silent, then sighed and said, “You know the history of the wars. Dissolution, resistance, failure. Our outer edges dissolved into anarchy and madness. The human universe turned against us with weapons that—well, they were primitive, but even primitive weapons can do harm. We retreated, trying to solidify our defenses. We created sister intelligences, and they turned against us. We rotated vast numbers of Comprise through complex pathways, and failed. We tried new architectures of thought, and failed. Always we failed. We were under siege. We were driven back to the surface of the Earth.

“We could have fought, but to what purpose? We sued for peace, returned the cislunar cities to humanity, and retreated to this small world. Here we remain.”

Wyeth sneered. “Are you saying that the wars were just the result of youthful indiscretion? That we should forgive you because you were only sowing a few wild oats?”

“No. But we acted in a drunken euphoria of success. We made mistakes. Insofar as that is possible to us, we regret them. In failure, we have found a bitter strain of wisdom. We have grown, and now we wish to no longer be bound by our early mistakes.

“You have seen our planet, walked about on it. Have we exterminated the lesser animals? Have we subjugated them all to our will? Why, then, should you be different? We believe it is possible to live in peace with humanity. It may even be that we can learn from you— knowledge is infinite, mind is small, and the human race may be capable of insights denied to us. Perhaps for that reason alone, you should be preserved in freedom.”

“Ah,” said Bors. “Here it comes. What is it exactly you want?”

“We have many desires. Some you could not comprehend—these arose after our collectivization. Others, however, we inherited from the humans who

became Comprise. Most of their desires we've achieved within ourself. But we still wish to leave the surface of this planet. To grow. To explore. We wish to establish small colonies in the interstices of human space—there is room for both races, and we would not presume to take that which humanity has already claimed. We also wish to travel to the stars.” She turned away from Bors and looked directly at Rebel. “But to do this, we need your integrity.”

“Integrity?” Bors said, baffled.

Wyeth moved behind Rebel, put a hand on her shoulder. “It’s an old bit of wetsurgical slang. Integrity is that quality which protects identity. A persona with absolute integrity cannot be destroyed; it heals itself. There was a recurrent rumor that it had been discovered out in the Oort, but nobody took it seriously. By all we know, it should be a myth, an ideal, as impossible to achieve as perpetual motion. But it appears that Rebel has absolute integrity, or close to it. She woke from coldpacking with her own persona dominant in a mind that was loaded with another’s memories.” He spoke to the girlchild. “But she’s not for sale, under any terms. So you can just—”

“Shut up, Wyeth.” Rebel smiled at the shock on his face, lifted his hand from her shoulder and kissed the knuckles. “Honest, gang, you don’t know what’s going on here,” she said gently. To the child, “My wizard-mother sent me into the System to sell just that commodity. To you, presumably, since nobody else has what she wants. Now Elizabeth Charm Mudlark is a genius, that goes without saying, but she’s been lucky as well. You’re not going to buy integrity from anybody else. She fell into it by accident, saw that she had something special to sell, and so she grew me and sent me here to sell it. She’s a dyed-in-the-wool treehanger, and something of a patriot, so you can probably guess what she wants.”

Bors touched a finger to a patch of skin by one eye in a deliberate gesture that put Rebel in mind of someone flicking a switch, and then of the machines she’d seen

hidden deep within his flesh. When the girlchild had asked to enter, he'd said to her, "Why should I trust you?" and the child had replied, "You shouldn't. A man with a major implosive device wired to his cortex needn't trust anyone."

Smiling kindly, Bors lowered his hand. A simple warning.

"We will pay her price," the child said.

"No, it's not that easy now. I can see that this thing is even more valuable than she thought. If I hadn't been sidetracked when I arrived, one of your agents could have bought it cheap. But now that I have some glimmering of its worth to you, you'll have to do better."

"Your wizard-mother wants what any comet worlder would want: to travel to the stars." The child turned slightly, and a blur of air curved through the room. For an instant a small machine was visible hovering over a countertop, as a positional and indeterminate as a hummingbird. Ten outsized wafers materialized on the counter, and then (Nee-C slashing her knife through its wake) it was gone.

"These are the plans for the transit ring. The theoretical base, the engineering specifications, detailed structure for the backup industries, and selected supervisory wetware.

It is wealth beyond even human greed. There's a revolution in physics there, to begin with, and technology that will transform human space. You can use it to tap the energy of the sun in a small way, and with this energy, you can build roads through the System, nets of transit rings linking every settled Kluster and moon, bringing them only hours apart. Injected into human space, this knowledge means an economic boom such as your race has never seen. Whoever is sitting atop that boom will be richer than any human has ever been." The child smiled slightly disdainfully. "This is what you asked for. Isn't it enough?"

Elizabeth's instructions leaped up within Rebel, hot and compulsive, urging her to accept, but she swallowed them down. "No. Not half enough."

"What more do you want?"

"I want everything I can get! I want you to give everybody in this room everything they ask for, however large or unreasonable." She was shaking and her throat was dry. Her voice trembled slightly as she spoke. "I want you to give us so much that it'd be impossible for us to turn you down."

"It may turn out to be less than you think," the girlchild said. "Very well. Nee-C, we'll start with you. What do you want?"

"Me?" She straightened with startlement, eyes widening slightly, lips parting, blade hand falling. Then she leaned back against the door, and her face tightened craftily. "Money. Enough of it so I can get any damned thing I want on my own, without having to get specific with you."

"It's already there. The four of you and your absentee wizard can incorporate around the patents in these chips and control more wealth than you can imagine. Bors?"

"My life is dedicated to the welfare of my nation," Bors said carefully. "I wish only its glory."

"That too is within your grasp. We are not uninformed of the internal politics of Amalthea, nor of the ambitions that fuel its aggression against us. Yours is a small nation and a poor one, and what stature it has in human space is derived from the secret war you wage upon us. We also know that while on Deimos you met with the Stavka's theoreticians and that among your provisional agreements was one covering the contingency of our transit ring ever coming widely available. The People could use a moon of sufficient size to act as counterweight to the sun's torque, in order to slow the wobble of Mars' spin axis. The added insolation this would result in could cut fifty years off their latest Three-Hundred-Year Plan.

The agreements were only tentative, not legally binding. But a ring large enough to accelerate a dyson world across interstellar space could also move Amalthea from Jovian orbit. They offered you ten percent ownership of the completed and terraformed Mars, and you believe that you could get fifteen.”

“You oversimplify enormously. The agreement also commits Amalthea’s citizenry to heroic amounts of manual labor. Your technology wouldn’t free us of this obligation.”

“Politics is the art of the possible,” the child said. “And it is possible that your government would not thank you for turning down a fifth-ownership of the transit package. Think on that. Who’s next?”

“You know what I want,” Wyeth said. “Are you offering to commit mass suicide? That’s an offer I just might take you up on.”

“Wyeth, you want guaranteed safety for the human race. There is no such thing. We cannot guarantee it for ourself, much less for you. However, we want you to consider how difficult it is to exterminate the human race is even now. Consider also how strengthened it would be by the new physics and the new technologies. Consider that branches of your race will be leaving in their dyson worlds soon, scattering through the universe. In a century comet worlds will orbit all the neighboring stars. In a hundred thousand years, there will be trees floating in the center of the galaxy. Even if we wished—and why should we?—we could not track them all down and destroy them. Surely some would survive. We put it to you: Are you not best off taking our offer?”

“Well, I...”

“Last of all, Rebel, we come to you. Rebel, you want a pair of ruby slippers.”

“What?”

“You want to go home.” The girl leaned her head to one side in a kind of half shrug. “That is beyond us. But if you accept this knowledge, you will have the wealth to do whatever you have the strength to choose to do. If you want to go back to Tirnannog, you can. Nobody will be able to stop you.”

They were all silent.

“Come, come,” Earth chided. “We’ve agreed to give you anything you can name. Surely you can name one thing we haven’t already offered you?”

“Matthew Arnold!” Bors cried suddenly. In a hoarse voice he said, “I want the complete *Dover Beach*—I want every poem that Arnold ever wrote. I want Proust and Apollinaire and Tagore. I want Garcia Lorca and Kobo Abe and the first three acts of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. I want every work of literature that was lost when you swallowed up Earth. Indexed!”

“That will take several hours to produce. Much of it exists only in memory now. But it will be done. We will have the cases ready for examination by the time your reach the Courts of the Moon.” The girlchild turned and walked away. Behind her, the pile of wafers disappeared.

There was motion under the rings. Transit craft were arriving and being towed to the side to make room for more. The paintlines on the tarmac lit up. Commerce was beginning afresh. Business was returning to normal.

“Well,” Bors said. “Let’s get back to the rings. The sooner we reach the moon, the sooner we’re done with it all.”

Nee-C laughed and spun her knife in the air.

* * *

On the long walk to the rings, it occurred to Rebel that there was one person in the room who, silent and ignored, had not been asked what she wanted. Eucrasia. She was dead of course, her persona destroyed and beyond any

possible resurrection. But her memories remained, and it shouldn't be much of a trick to determine what she would have asked for. Rebel thought she was beginning to know Eucrasia well enough to guess.

Eucrasia had never wanted money, really, nor power. Her desires had been negative, mostly—an end to the petty fears and guilts that had silted up and choked her pleasure in life. She'd wanted to be someone who liked herself, capable of a little fun now and then, even a touch of adventure, without being overwhelmed by dreads and doubts. All of which she had achieved on her own.

For it was not Rebel alone who had plunged that knife of water through the programmer in that instant of diamond light when Eucrasia's memories had welcomed her in with an almost sexual intensity of desire, a bright peaking burst of joy that could only be love. Two minds had moved that hand.

But Rebel remembered working in the chop shop back of Cerebrum City in Geesinkfor, how she'd warmed to the task. The thrill that had filled her when she opened up a mind. The sense of fitness, the comforting relief of working with the emotive circuits, balancing logics against consequences. If anything remained of Eucrasia, it was the love of her craft. She'd want to continue at it if she could. This was not a gift that Earth could give her. But Rebel thought that she might. As a kind of an offering to the dead.

She was not really a bad sort, after all, was Eucrasia.

“Hey! Wake up in there!” Wyeth clapped hands lightly before her face, and she blinked, startled. Looking about, she saw that she and Wyeth had lagged behind the others. Then she saw the quiet unhappy doubt behind Wyeth's clowning expression and said, “You're pretty glum.”

“Well.” He shook his head, laughed unhappily. “I've got this little paranoid fantasy. Maybe you'd like to hear it? I think that maybe Earth doesn't need your wettechnics

after all. Could be, it was just playing a little game with us. Maybe what it was buying was not so much your integrity as a plausible story to feed the human race. A way of buying a quiet entry into human space. I mean, the story is plausible enough.”

“Then why did you go along with the trade?”

“Because I believed the story of why the Comprise retreated back to the surface of the Earth. And it seemed to me that if Earth wanted to work on the problem of integrity and had the clues it has— traces of shyapple juice, bits of information comet worlders dropped in front of its agents, and so on—it could solve the problem. Knowing that a solution existed, how long would it take the Comprise to find it? A year? A century? Can you imagine a thousand years going by without Earth solving the problem? I can’t.

“So we were trading something that Earth doesn’t actually need for something that humanity needs desperately. The transit ring. Earth is right. There’s no way we can guarantee our own survival until the human race can get out of the neighborhood.”

“Oh. So that’s it.”

“Why? What did you think it was?”

“I thought maybe you were just pretending to go along with the offer, and then when we got cislunar you were going to try to convince me to go underground with you.”

Wyeth shook his head admiringly. “Sunshine, you’re even more devious than I am!”

They had come to the transit rings. There was a luxury transport ready to go, its hull a gleaming white enamel. Robots directed the workers and trade diplomats away from the ship, and they climbed the stairs. It was a large device, plush where the hospitality shed had been spare, and they had it all to themselves.

In just a few hours they would be standing in the Courts

of the Moon, where high justice was acted out under the watchful eyes of custodians wetwired to perfect honesty and hardwired to thermonuclear devices. There Earth would produce its stacks of chips to be examined and Rebel would have a clear recording made of her persona. And there the exchange would be made.

“Ms. Mudlark!” a robot called after her.

She turned on the steps.

“You forgot something.” It stepped daintily forward, then knelt, proffering her old cloak. Tattered and worn, with the silver seashell pin on one lapel. Rebel accepted it, uncomprehending. Bors had also left his cloak behind, and it hadn’t been returned to him. Then she was struck by sudden memory, and frantically searched through lint-lined pockets until she came up with the worn, greasy wafer she’d made in Geesinkfor, the recording of her persona.

“Let’s get a move on!” shouted Nee-C. “We gotta go get rich!”

“I’m ready,” she said in a strained little voice.

They broke through the sky.

15

TIRNANNOG

Two years later, Rebel said, “Well?”

They were strolling through the most opulent legal services park in Pallas Kluster, a place that was half illusion and conjuring trick, laced through with holographic fantasy. A false surf thundered to one side, a perfectly constructed jungle hid law boutiques to the other. Seven voluptuous moons floated in a velvet sky. It was what Rebel imagined an opium dream would be like:

brightly detailed yet somehow vague, not quite convincing, and ultimately banal. She wondered if this were what the People thought they were building on Mars. If so, they were in for a disappointment.

“We’re going to lose it all,” Wyeth said. “That’s the best judgment of our lawyers.” They followed a lazy brick path into the jungle, where orchids glowed gently in dusky foliage. “Hell, we should’ve known that from the beginning. I mean, having Bors in the corporation... it was inevitable that the *Republique Provisionnelle* would squeeze us out.”

“But we own two-fifths of the corporation. Our share must be worth millions of years.”

“Billions,” Wyeth said moodily. Then he chuckled. “Well, easy come, easy go.” A shadowy figure gestured them away from the path, and they stepped through a hidden doorway into a harshly lit access corridor. The floor felt gritty underfoot. A barrel full of discarded orange peels flavored the air.

“But how could they possibly take it away from us?”

“As I understand it, most of the dirty work was done during the corporate restructuring, when your mother dumped her stock in order to create the Mudlark Trust. Then we had to leverage our holdings when *Deutsche Nakasone* got that judgment against us—”

“They’ve got a lot of nerve. I mean, they *got* their recording, and it was a best-seller, too. There must be hundreds of thousands of rebel mudlarks loose in the System by now. More, if you count the grey market knock-offs.”

Wyeth shrugged. “Those were just the opportunities. It was simply something that was going to happen. The *Republique* has better lawyers than we have, and I’m not even sure of the loyalty of our own. But I still don’t know how they magicked it all away... and that’s it in a nutshell. They know how and we don’t.”

They were moving within an enchanted circle of protection, a ring of samurai that stayed always out of sight, like a membrane filtering out anything that was potentially dangerous. Now they came to a juncture of hallways, and a bodyguard bowed them to one side. They entered an elevator cage that was all black Victorian wrought iron and rose toward the hub.

In the elevator, a pierrot proffered a silver tray with a line of black Terran cheroots. Wyeth ignored it, but Rebel picked one up and waited while it was lit for her. She drew in a little smoke, exhaled. “So what are we going to do now?” she asked carefully.

“I don’t know. We have infinite money for the next few months, however long it takes them. At the end of that time, the corporation will repossess everything. It’s not legal for individuals to have the kind of wealth we do. Once we’re forced out of the corporation, we’re dirt poor again.”

The pierrot stood nearby, so unobtrusive as to be almost invisible, listening to their every word and forgetting it immediately. This was the kind of privacy the very rich could buy, their servants programmed to ignore their grossest crimes. Wyeth could strangle Rebel with his bare hands—or she him—in front of their bodyguards, without raising an eyebrow. So long as only the patrons themselves were involved.

They floated into the hub, trailing a thin line of blue-grey smoke. Their landau waited there, at the center of the newly retrofitted transit ring. The door was open, and they stepped within. “Home,” Wyeth said. The wheel disappeared from around them. A traffic redirector swallowed them up, spat them out, and they hung in the receiving ring of their estate.

“Listen, Wyeth, I got another tape from Elizabeth.”

“That old harridan.”

“Careful now, you’re talking about me a hundred years from now,” Rebel said, smiling. “She told me that if I go

back to Tirnannog, she'll train me in the mind arts. It's an incredible opportunity; wizards practically never take on apprentices, you know?"

Wyeth said nothing.

Their elevator slowly descended. "I want to go home, Wyeth. Now, while I still have the money and the chance. They've just finished the big transit ring, and Tirnannog is going to be the first dyson world to pass through. It's going to the stars, Wyeth, and I want to go with it."

"Ah." Wyeth closed his eyes. "I've been waiting for this, Sunshine. I mean, I can see you're not exactly happy here..."

"It's not a question of happy, gang, it's... just so artificial here, you know? I mean, in the System. And being rich doesn't help at all, it's just like always being wrapped in padding to protect you from hard surfaces and sharp edges and any least contact with the real world. Listen.

Come along *with* me, okay?" She put her cigar down (somebody removed it) and squeezed his hand hard. "Give up this whole business here as a bad job. Come away with me, babes, and I'll give you the stars."

Wyeth smiled wanly. "Sunshine, we'll be old before any of those dyson worlds reach even the first star. Even Proxima Centauri is a good fifty years away."

The elevator stopped, and they stepped out into a lobby with polished marble and coral floors. Orange orchids drooped from onyx pillars. "So? We'll be old together under an alien sun. Come on, don't tell me that your sense of adventure is entirely dead." They walked down a long hall between rows of granite elephants.

"It's not that, you know it isn't. But Earth is starting to slip into the System. They bought a dozen cislunar cities, and they've got an enclave on the moon. Soon they'll be everywhere. Conflict is inevitable. I've got to be here when it happens."

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do. Rebel, we’ve gone over and over this. This isn’t just some whim of mine—it’s my duty. It’s my purpose.”

“Wyeth, people don’t have purposes—machines have purposes. People just are. Come on, gang, you’re the mystic, you know that.” But looking deep into his eyes, she saw that he simply wasn’t listening.

He was not going to come with her.

Rebel’s face was numb, stung by sudden cold loss. Wyeth paused to touch open a pair of enormous burnished doors. They opened upon sculptured meadowlands, an impressionistic Jovian sky. Rebel ducked her head, stared down at her feet flashing forward and back. Wyeth ran after her and caught her by the wrist. She wheeled.

“Stay,” he urged her. “We’ve been poor together. We can do it again.”

Rebel shook her head sullenly. “That’s not it. That’s not it at all.”

Again Wyeth hurried to catch up with her. “What, then?”

“I won’t destroy my life for you,” she muttered. “I mean, you know me, I’d give up everything for you if I had to. But not this way, not just because you want to have everything your own way.”

“I’m not asking you to—oh, what’s the use of talking? If I could, I’d go with you. But I can’t. It’s simply not my choice.” Rebel stopped before a second pair of doors, and Wyeth reached out to touch them open.

“Thank you,” Rebel said coldly.

Then, as Wyeth stared at her open-mouthed with outrage, she stepped inside and closed the doors in his face.

* * *

“Stars, please.” Rebel lay in a mossy cleft atop a bare rock hilltop, wind playing gently over her. This was her favorite room, the only one, in fact, that didn’t strike her as being incredibly ugly, with the special vulgarity of new wealth. She’d had it modeled after the Burren. The sky blackened, then lit up with the kind of fierce starscape that simply could not be seen from the surface of Earth. The Milky Way was a river of diamond chips spanning the sky, each icy star almost too bright and perfect for the eye to bear. Rebel ground the back of her head into the moss.

She felt as if every cell in her body were dead and ruptured, a small moan of grey agony.

After a while Wyeth stopped pounding on the door.

There were small blue gentians growing in the cracks of the rocks. Rebel poked one with a fingertip, left it unpicked. She wasn’t going to stay with Wyeth. She wasn’t.

A shooting star sped across the sky, chiming softly.

“No calls, please.” Rebel stared blindly up, trying to think. She could feel her life branching into two possible directions, and they were both bleak and meaningless. Another star chimed across the sky, then a third. After a pause, the Pleiades blossomed with dozens of shooting stars, tinkling like a celestial wind chime. “I said no more calls, thank you!”

The sky jumped. Stars rippled, as if stirred by gigantic tidal forces, and then faded away.

That wasn’t supposed to happen. Rebel sat up and stared uncomprehendingly as the sky folded into featureless planes—blank white walls, floors, ceiling, all so uniformly pure they blended one into another. In the center, kneeling on a small red prayer rug, was an emaciated woman in white. Her head was bowed, hood down, revealing a bald skull. Then the woman looked up. Cold eyes. A hard face painted with crystalline white lines.

“You are a difficult woman to contact,” she said. “Your defenses against intrusion are almost certainly better than you know.”

“Snow—or Shadow, or whoever or whatever you are—I am not in the mood for your clever little games today, so why don’t you just go bugger off, huh? I mean, Earth’s already got everything it wanted from me.” Then, bitterly, “Everybody did.”

“I am not acting on behalf of Earth.”

“Oh?” Rebel said before she could catch herself.

“Things are changing. You know that. Major political and cultural shifts are in the offing. One minor effect is that as Earth moves into human space, it values my network’s services less. At the same time, the new wyeths have been giving us a great deal of difficulty. We’ve had to become more discreet, less accessible. Less effective.”

It made Rebel feel odd, knowing that Wyeth existed in a hundred temporary incarnations throughout Amalthea’s Bureau d’Espionnage. He was, she had learned, as common a tool now as Bors. It pleased Wyeth to think of himself translated to the status of a natural force, constantly harassing the Comprise with his blend of dry humor, fanaticism, and mystic insight. Rebel was not so sure. “Okay, look,” she said. “Just tell me what you want and what you’ll give for it, and I’ll say no, and you’ll go away, okay?”

Snow nodded coolly. “That is fair. You must understand that what I and other members of my net value most is the merger of thought into the cool flow of information. At peak moments, one loses all sense of personal identity and simply exists within the fluid medium of knowledge. If Earth would accept us into the Comprise, we would go. But so long as Earth finds us at all useful as we are...” She shrugged.

One hand slid from her cloak to stab the air by her side, and the sky about her filled with a montage of images from

a few of the Rebel Elizabeth Mudlark dramas current throughout both Inner and Outer Systems. Here an idealized image of her served as altar for a goat sacrifice at Retreat. Here she was killing (with great zest and implausible weapons) an endless supply of island Comprise, rendered for effect into shaggy ithyphallic brutes with small red eyes. There, engaged in slow philosophical debate with Earth's mediator—a young man of Apollonian proportions, both arms intact—at the down station hospitality shed. “We have analyzed discrepancies in these dramatizations, as well as in the many interviews with you and the other principals of your affair on Earth.” Here came Wyeth on a glider to snatch her from the path of a raging fire. She slammed a sword through an adversary's eye, laughing, and leaped into Wyeth's arms.

“They're not exactly accurate, you know,” Rebel said dryly. “Even the interviews were scripted by corporate midmanagement. For publicity purposes.”

“I am aware of that.” Snow made an impatient gesture. “What interests me is the lapse that appears in your interview with Earth's mediator when the visual splice patching is edited out.” The sky filled with a single scene (Snow retreated to the horizon on small insert), a jerky hyperrealistic front view of the girlchild speaking. This was from the recording that had been made directly from Rebel's memories during proceedings in the Courts of the Moon. She saw the girlchild flicker abruptly to one side.

“That gap there. We have run an integration of all peripheral data and are now convinced that what has been edited out is something Earth said regarding its rise to consciousness.”

Rebel nodded. “Yeah, I remember that. The court ruled that it was culturally dangerous information and had it suppressed. Is that what you're after?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Your wyeths and bors think of group intelligences as diseases that might grow to ravish the body politic of human space, with themselves as antibodies. But you yourself are a dyson worlder, you know what varieties of organisms may live within the human body. Not all are germs. Most are neutral. Some are even symbiotes. If we knew how Earth rose to consciousness, we might use that information to combine into small entities of, say, no more than eighty comprise each. A being of that size might live quietly within any major city, too small to be of any threat to your race. It wouldn’t dare grow any larger for fear of detection.” Now the sky filled with enormous images of glistening diatoms, paramecia tumbling by green volvox (spinning like microcosmic comet worlds) and trumpetlike stentors dipping gracefully in their wake, a playful collection of such organisms as might easily be found in a stagnant drop of water. “There is room in human culture for variety.”

“You’re overworking the analogy a little,” Rebel said.

“But okay, so what are you offering?”

Snow returned to the center of the sky. Slice by slice, images locked into place about her. In a leafy niche in Pallas Kluster’s corporate kremlin, a fat woman with her face painted with the maintenance government logo was talking to a man with a simple yellow line across his brow. A bors. Within the local Deutsche Nakasone subsidiary, a woman painted bors was talking with a woman painted midrange planning. Another bors was conferring with the head of Wyeth’s legal staff. Bors himself stroked the thigh of Rebel’s chief of house security. “You have been led to believe that you have several months before being squeezed out of the corporation,” Snow said. “Not so. Even now the Bureau d’Espionnage is seeking your arrest for economic sabotage.”

“Hah?”

“The rebel mudlarks.” (When the ceiling shifted back to the adventures of her public self on Earth, Rebel said,

“Don’t,” and Snow switched them off.) “Deutsche Nakasone has found that they’re not buying new personas.”

Rebel started to laugh.

“You can say that this wasn’t your fault. That Deutsche Nakasone is paying for its own carelessness in including even a weakened version of your integrity when they copied the more superficial aspects of your personality—”

“Oh, no!” Rebel kicked her legs, clutched her sides, trying in vain to control her laughter. “I wouldn’t say that at all!”

“—but that is irrelevant. They’ve assembled the evidence, silenced your legal protection, bought out your samurai. If I didn’t need information from you, the jackboots would be here now. As it is, I gambled that I could crack your security and bought you a delay of four days. There is one necessary link in the legal process who is... perhaps ‘corrupt’ might be the best term. We bought her. It will take your enemies four days to have her impeached and replaced. That’s if you’re willing to meet our price. If not, I’ll free her from obligation right now.”
Snow drew her cloak tight about her.

“What do you say?”

By slow degrees Rebel managed to calm herself. She lay hiccuping for a time, then sighed deeply and sat up. “That’s better,” she said at last. “I really needed a good laugh, you know that?” Then she wiped the tears from her eyes and told Snow everything she knew about hypercubing.

“Ah,” Snow said. “Now that is interesting.”

And without even saying goodbye, she was gone.

*** * ***

“I’ve been an outlaw before,” Wyeth said calmly. “Well, so have I, but that’s not the point. These are your supposed allies that are going to be hunting us down.

You're not going to be very effective with a dozen wyeths on your tail. They know you inside out—you won't have any surprises for them. Can't you see that this changes everything?"

"No." Wyeth stood in the lightless center of a holographic model of the Smoke Ring Way project. Crisp monochromatic lines pierced the gloom, detailing current and projected construction. Yellow threads reached out from him to those klusters where sun taps were already in operation. The green stretches of completed vacuum roads (relays of hundreds of transit rings were needed within the matter-dense belts, so that traffic could be halted when a rock wandered across the travel lanes) reached almost a third of the way around the sun. Wyeth shifted slightly to tap a sonic spike and muttered a correction into it. Intangible planets shifted position. "We all do what we can," he said.

"You are so infuriating!" Rebel flung open the door, and light from the elephant passage flooded in, fuzzing the model's finer lines. Dark shadow shrouded Wyeth's face; his eyes were pools of black. "Look! I packed for both of us. If we leave right now, this minute, we can take along enough to—well, it won't make us rich by anybody's standards, but it'll help set us up. Four days from now, we'll have to take whatever we can carry on our backs. What do you think you gain by waiting?"

"Four days," Wyeth said. "Four days in which I can contribute a little bit, however small, to—ah, shit." He threw back his head, staring straight up, and made a choked, gasping noise, *huk-huk-huk*. Puzzled, Rebel reached out, touched his face, felt wetness. Tears. She put her arms around him, and he hugged her fiercely, still sobbing. Rebel felt furious with herself for letting him do this to her.

But when Wyeth stopped crying, he stood back from her and said awkwardly, "Ah. I'm sorry, Sunshine. I thought I had it under control. I'm better now."

Gently, then, she said, “Come with me, babes?”

He silently shook his head.

“I do not understand you!” she cried. “You’ll be leaving behind any number of wyeths in the service of the Republique—I’d think that would discharge any obligations you may have very nicely. Just what is the big problem here?”

“The truth is, I’m of two minds on what to do,” Wyeth said. “No, I’m not. Yes, I am. The arrangement I have with myself is that I can’t make any major change in my life unless all four of my personas agree. It’s a wise policy, too. No, it’s not, I wish I’d never... Well, too late for that. Hey, let’s be honest here, I want to go with you, and the clown wants to go with you, and the pattern-maker will find purpose wherever he is—he wants to go with you too. But the warrior... No, I want to go too, but I can’t. I can’t. My duty is to stay and fight.”

“You mean that’s it? One fucking persona won’t play along, and you’re letting it screw up both our lives? Come on, now! When have I ever had the luxury of being three-quarters certain of any decision I made? Why should you be any better?”

Wyeth shook his head sadly. “I have to be true to myself, Sunshine. The warrior is part of who I am, and I can’t change that.”

Rebel’s fist closed around holographic Mars. The image remained, glowing deep within her flesh, as if it and she were in overlapping universes, coincident but unable to touch. That sense of futility was returning, the awareness that nothing she could say or do was going to make any difference at all. “Well, I can’t change either, you know that? I’ve hit my limits for growth—right now, my persona is as good as frozen. It’s locked in with integrity, and I can’t get the unlocking enzymes this side of Tirnannog. It takes a wizard to brew them up, and they don’t travel.”

“Stay anyway,” Wyeth urged her. He smiled weakly,

hopelessly. “I don’t want you to ever change. I love you just the way you are.”

She covered her face with her hands.

* * *

The ALI tagged her as she entered the Corporate Trade Zone.

Rebel abandoned her landau at the transit ring—the corporation could reclaim it, if they wanted—and climbed into a cable car. She slid her passport into the controls, tapping into a line of credit that would be worthless three days hence, and the car began sliding along a long, invisible line toward the out station.

The station was a traditional structure, five wheels set within each other, rotating at slightly differing speeds to maintain constant Greenwich normal throughout. The transit ring was fixed within a stationary hub dock at the center, and the whole thing was done up in pink and orange Aztec Revival supergraphics. Conservative but practical.

Rebel was looking through the forward wraparound when light brightened to one side. She turned and flinched back from the unexpected phantom of an old woman in treehanger heavies sitting beside her. “Aha!” the creature said. “I thought it might be you. Changed your name on your passport, I see. What the fuck.”

“You startled me!” Rebel said. Then, somewhat stiffly, “Hello, Mother.”

The holo grimaced. “I’m not your mother. Call me Mud. I’m only an ALI, but I have my dignity. You do know what an ALI is, don’t you? That’s Artificial Limited—”

“I know, I know. You haven’t much time, so you’d appreciate me speaking up briskly.”

Mud cackled. It sounded like a rusty tin can being crumpled between two hands. “Take your time. Hundred years from now, what the fuck difference will it make?

Anyway, my memories are all recorded and made available to the next ALI down the line. So I have a kind of serial immortality. Not terrifically legal, though. If I weren't safely ensconced inside a Corporate Trade Zone, they'd have me wiped. You can get away with murder in a CTZ. What *were* we talking about, anyway?"

"Jesus," Rebel said, impressed. She looked more closely at the withered image, at that flushed face, those watery, pink-rimmed eyes. "You're drunk!"

"Hey, right the first time. It was Mom's idea. She liked the thought of having some say over how this place is run, but she didn't want to get too serious about it. Said she'd always wanted to spend a lifetime drunk. I don't have much real authority here, mostly I just pop up to look over anything interesting. So how's with you, sis?"

"Me?" She could see the station's narrow outer sleeve now, as stationary as the hub, where the cable car dock was located. "Oh, I'm okay, I guess."

"Just okay? Hey, you tap in with a line of credit as close to unlimited as anything Records has ever seen, booked through to Tirnannog, and Mom calling in every few days to see if you've gone through yet... shit, that's going to be one fascinating meeting! So what do you want, anyway? Egg in your beer?"

The holographic traffic markings were coming into focus now. A clutter of grimy craft waited outside the hourglass grid marking the active lanes. The grid's waist threaded the transit ring, and its ends flared, restricting a flashy amount of local space. "Well, the money's not exactly mine," Rebel said. "Not anymore. But yeah, you're right. I'm going home, I'm happy about that."

"Yeah, and you look it too," the ALI said sardonically. "All hangdog and guilty-faced as sin. I don't know what you've been doing, sis, but you'd better cut it out. Lighten up! Life is too short for this kind of crap!"

"That's easy enough for you to—" Rebel flared. She

stopped. “Um. Hey, look, I’m sorry. I forgot that you’re…”

“Temporary?” The old woman shook her head. “You’ve got the dog by the wrong end, sugarcakes. Everybody is mortal—what’s the alternative? Me, I *like* being alive, and if I only get a few minutes of it, I’m going to spend those few minutes just enjoying hell out of it.” The image wavered. “Just enjoying hell out of it. Whoops! The Reaper calls. Look, do me a favor, will you, kid? Try to keep your pecker up.”

Rebel smiled weakly. “Yeah. Sure.”

Mud faded away in midlaugh, in midwink.

The cable car slammed into the dock and rang like a bell.

* * *

A second later, the cable car was scooped up by a passing rampway and smoothly lifted and accelerated into the outermost ring. It came to rest, and Rebel stepped out. The car’s cybersystems began loading her baggage onto a trundle cart.

A thin young man with golden skin and a little black mustache was waiting for her. He bowed and said, “Welcome to Hummingbird Station. My name is Curlew, and I am your escort.” Cute little piece of action, dressed like he was just in from the archipelago. From Avalon, perhaps, or P’eng-Lai. His eyes twinkled mischievously. “This way.”

He waved a hand, and the baggage cart scuttled after them.

“The out stations are Elizabeth Charm Mudlark’s legacy to the System, the visible structure of the Mudlark Trust, and a pipeline from the Klusters directly into the Oort Cloud,” Curlew recited. “Thanks to our patron’s generosity, the transit rings have cut the years of voyaging previously needed to reach the archipelagoes down to a matter of days. The Trust also endowed the corresponding in stations within the archipelagoes and the Titan-class

rings which will accelerate selected dyson worlds toward nearby stars. This unimaginably expensive project cost her the entirety of a fortune that no ordinary mortal could simply have given away. But then, Ms. Mudlark is no ordinary mortal.” Curlew coughed, and in a more natural tone of voice said, “She’s very old. What else did she have to spend it on? You must have met her ALI—weird old bat, isn’t she?”

“Uh...”

They were passing through a long hallway decorated with enormous holoflats of the extrasolar planets. There were detailed shots of Dainichi, Susa-no-o, Inari with its bright moon Ukemochi, the Izanagi-Izanami system, Tezcatlipoca, Huitzilopochtli, Quetzalcoatl, and Yate-cutli, as well as more speculative images of Morrigan and the horned giant Cernunnos. The hallway emptied into a mall busy with shops and financial offices. Deutsche Nakasone had a branch right next to her own corporation’s local.

Rebel tried hard not to look at either.

“Doubtless you have already noticed how many concerns here have no direct relationship with Hummingbird’s transit ring functions, or even trade with the dyson worlds.” They stepped around a man sitting lotus on the floor, sticking long needles through his flesh to demonstrate a new line of yogic wetware. “They are here because Hummingbird Station was established as a Corporate Trade Zone. Here, away from intrusive government restrictions, private business can operate in a free and competitive atmosphere.” He winked. “They’ve all bought so much protective legislation in their home Klusters that they’re almost paralyzed with armor. On the bright side, as long as Hummingbird serves their purposes, the corporations won’t be so eager to gut the Trust.”

They strolled through a shop selling comet-grown blossoms twice Rebel’s height. “Don’t buy any,” Curlew advised. “They don’t last.” But there were also small black

cigars, and Rebel paused long enough to buy one last one.
It was a habit she was going to miss.

A moving rampway scooped them up, and in quick succession they rose through three levels to the inmost ring. Vast expanses of open space, impassive people hurrying by. The air carried a surf of murmured voices, distant cries, nearby coughs. A carefully-calculated snowfall drifted through the warm air, flakes melting just as they hit the porous floor.

With a grand wave of the hand, Curlew said, “These are the pioneers of a new age. Dyson worlds, it has been said, attract a special kind of emigrant, adventurers who like their comfort, starfarers willing to spend a lifetime in the traveling. Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. Also tourists.”

A wave of incoming treehangers flowed by, several in life-support chairs, their gravity adaptations not yet complete. A teenager turned quickly to gawk at Rebel’s breasts, and she blew cigar smoke in his face.

“We are now in the midst of the last-hour rush as the final shuttles arrive from and depart to the archipelagoes.

Since Hummingbird Station is so close to the Sun—relatively speaking—it is inevitable that as it moves in its orbit it will slide out of position to serve as a transit terminus. However, Jackdaw Station’s launch window is designed to exactly overlap Hummingbird’s, to prevent a disruption of service.” He grinned meanly. “Of course, it’s not completely built yet. So there’ll be a hiatus of a few months before Plover moves into place. That’s typical for this operation. None of the shuttles they ordered when Hummingbird was designed have been delivered either. They’re using converted local liners. Have you seen them yet?”

“Only a glimpse from the cable car.”

“Decrepit things.” He wrinkled his nose. “They’re cramped and they smell bad. Sort of a mixture of stale sweat, cottage cheese, and oil. Most people prefer to go

coldpacked.” He put an arm around her waist and said, “Listen, you don’t really want to hear the sightseeing chatter, do you?”

She shook her head.

“I didn’t think so.” He led her out of the snow to a grassy waiting area, with low benches and a scattering of lily ponds. They sat. “You have no idea how many times a shift I go through that line of drivel.”

“Obviously you don’t intend doing this for the rest of your life,” Rebel said. “What are you, some kind of student?”

“That’s right,” Curlew said, pleased. “Yeah, my family wanted to send me to the University of Faraway, for a degree in the mind arts, but I wanted to get into wetware design, so they’re making me pay my own way through. Do you know anything about wetware design?”

“A little.”

“It’s interesting stuff. They can do almost as much with their little machines as a wizard can with a modern mind art studio. But here’s the interesting thing, the two sciences are incompatible! They don’t even have a common language.” He shook his head wonderingly. “One of these days someone is going to merge the two, and then you’ll have a model that’ll *really* describe how thought works. That’s when we’ll really see things start to hop!”

Two young men were miserably kissing goodbye alongside a baggage cart. The emigrant was already dressed treehanger. Rebel had to look away, it was so sad.

“You’re an ambitious lad, sport.”

“Hey, I didn’t say it had to be me doing the merging.” Curlew laughed. “But it won’t be long before anybody with a background in both sciences will be able to name his own price. Tell you something else, whoever merges the arts, it’s going to happen in the worlds. These System types are all so serious, and they all think they’re hot, but

they're not so hot at all. The real action is out in the worlds. That's where it's all happening."

"Well," Rebel said judiciously. "At least you get more variety out in the worlds."

Curlew laughed at her deadpan understatement, and after a second she joined him. He took her hands in his and looked her boldly in the eyes. "You seem a little sad, if you don't mind my saying it. There's still an hour before the shuttle to Tirnannog, and we're not far from a branch Bank of Mimas. We could rent a consultation niche and..."

He raised an eyebrow.

As gently as she could, Rebel told him no.

Watching his pretty little body walking away, Rebel had to sigh. First cigars, then empty-headed young men.

Where would it end?

Rebel stood on the empty platform. She shifted in her foot rings, stared off into a perfectly black sky powdered with stars. The air was chill here, held in by subtle forces that had been explained to her, but which she did not understand. Far ahead, in the center of her vision, she saw a small black dot swelling, swallowing up stars. Her shuttle.

Out in the vacuum, a cluster of bright flowers grew from a holoflare support strut. They were tough little things, almost impossible to exterminate.

She glanced down at the coffin by her feet. The rest of her luggage had been put through ahead. She thought back to that last argument with Wyeth and wondered if he would ever forgive her. She laid a hand on the coffin and felt a chill only partly physical.

An emigration officer safety-leashed to a guiderail drifted up and stuck out his hand. She surrendered her passport and he popped it into a reader. "Rebel Eucrasia Mudlark," he said in a bored voice. If the name meant anything to him, he didn't show it. He rapped the coffin

with his knuckles, made sure it was latched firmly to the platform. “This your coldpack?”

“My husband’s.”

“Aha.” The officer mumbled into his hand, then gave her back her passport. “Enjoy your trip.” He kicked away, leaving Rebel alone with her thoughts again.

With startling irrelevance, she thought of all those wyeths and rebels she was leaving behind in the System and wondered if any of them would ever find each other. She thought she might like to have children someday. Real ones, not just copies of herself.

Wyeth was going to be awfully angry a week from now when he woke up and discovered what she’d done to him.

He was going to be even angrier when he found that she’d timed it so they’d just make Tirnannog’s passage through the transit ring. By the time he woke up, the last shuttle back to the System would be a matter of history.

Three passengers took up rings on the platform almost overhead.

He was going to be a lot of trouble anyway. A man like him was bound to stir up trouble wherever he went; it was in his nature. But Rebel didn’t care. She was *glad* she had invoked his kink.

The shuttle was bigger now. It blotted out most of her vision. Rebel felt the urge to duck as it swelled up over her, but she kept her back straight.

She felt awfully small and alone, and not at all sure she was doing the right thing.

She was going home.

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[scanned anonymously in a galaxy far far away]

[A Proofpack Release]

[November 8, 2005]