

Get Serious

a novel by Rachel West



[written for National Novel Writing Month 2014, in Lincoln, Nebraska, USA. Submitted in 2017 for entertainment purposes via rachelwestbooks.com under creative commons sharealike/attribution license.]

[The author disavows any and all claim to specialness or staggering originality. The author acknowledges her ideas to be a cultural inheritance built by countless generations of laborers in the arts and sciences. This inheritance is chiefly transmitted orally, between friends, over a beer or two when we can afford it. The author hereby offers up to the cosmos an artifact rendered within the scope of the author's own unique hormonal environment.]

Chapter One

"Day" was about to dawn on Platform 9, but not literally.

The blue planet Earth still hovered visible in the viewing window of the Wing 2 Lounge enclosure, where Customer Service Agent Adam Omnibus stood drinking his morning coffee. The Earth, nearest of the three celestial markers, would soon vanish from the viewing window, leaving only the extreme seriousness of the outer cosmos. *In the Orbits, we keep our eyes outward, our chins up.*

Adam liked to rise early and glimpse the shining dome of Earth. Sometimes he stood for hours monitoring the empty walkways of the Platforms. In the distance was the Hub that connected to the other Wings, and sometimes from the Lounge you could see things happening out there. You might glimpse someone standing in the Lounge of Wing D, looking back at you.

He sipped from the cup of coffee in his greyish hand, his skin the greyish complexion of a man whose genetics were still Earth-adapted; one of the last leavers, still missing the light of Sol. But he wasn't watching the Earth, exactly, nor was he fondling dim memories of a childhood spent walking on its surface. He was just keeping an eye on it.

"Watching for Platform Snakes?" It was his co-worker Malgam Morn, a new agent (she'd been there five years) with much potential.

Adam forced a laugh. "Of course not." He swallowed, meaning to say more, to appear confident, but he was pulled up short as usual, as though he had somehow given himself away. Malgam intimidated him, in spite of her youth. She, of course, was born on a Platform, and it showed in everything about her. Her parents had been early leavers, those glorified happy folk who went to pioneer the Orbits, making way for the Resourcers to leverage Earth's natural ecosystems, to relieve the burden. You could certainly see those genetics at work in Malgam, who was sweet, serene, intelligent, prepared for anything. She had never broken down on a service call, not even once. Adam knew she would inevitably surpass him in skill no matter how hard he worked. Fortunately the concept of competition was no longer a part of human life out here, as The Main Opinion constantly reminded them. Not that Adam paid much attention to the daily updates anymore, even though it was a requirement of his job to do so. Any knowledgeable agent was aware that the Main Opinion hadn't changed in quite some time. Things were peaceful.

"Your anniversary is coming up," Malgam noted. "I have it in my datebook. It's a big one this year. They'll give you another star for sure."

"The stars," Adam sighed. "Breakfast with me?"

"Sure."

They crossed the room to the food dispensary where he filled a bowl with plain fat-fortified yogurt. Its consistency mirrored his own.

Malgam's wrist-newser was twinkling gently as it responded to her psy-queries. Adam assumed she was diligently re-absorbing the information in the daily updates, or maybe she was just gossiping on the social networks. Adam's personal philosophy was that the wrist-newser was a defilement of the mental environment, and that in order to rise to the heights as a Customer Service Agent it was important to begin your shift with an empty head, free of biases, free of weight, even free of the Main Opinion, which it was his job to reinforce. He felt a reluctance today. Perhaps it was the longing he got as he stared at the red jewel-like node embedded in the crown of Malgam's head, only visible when the person was bowing to you or, as now, just not paying attention. The node was symbolic as well as functional. It housed her interface with the System and its technological controls; positioned at the crown of the head, it symbolized human advancement. Adam wondered if his was still red, or if he had improved himself sufficiently to reach blue, green, even yellow... He couldn't help it; he liked the color red, especially now, staring at Malgam's jewel like it was a window into her nature. As if, inside her cranium, were some warm, safe place.

After breakfast he proceeded to meditation room six, passed through the outer door and began his morning meditation. He favored this room out of habit only. They were all identical. He left his shoes and uniform neatly in their designated places in the antechamber before stepping into the small ovoid room beyond. Its dark leadish walls gleamed softly. The floor's padded surface was a complementary shade of grey, providing some contrast so that one felt oriented in the space.

Adam settled himself on his knees and closed his eyes, took a few deep breaths in preparation. The many thoughts and concerns of the day ahead were crowding his mind like some kind of collage. He had only to look at it head-on, and detach. Recognize the part of himself that was separate from it; from his duties; from his great and high stature; from the opinions of anyone, even Malgam, even himself. Not only separate, but of a completely different substance. An unchanging, untouchable substance. Nothing. And it was breathing. A miracle.

After only a few short minutes, twenty at most, the lights would go up again gradually. He would open his eyes and resume his duties, his ego, hoist it all back up like a brave man and go to his desk. Sometimes he wished the darkness would go on longer, that he could effortlessly slip into a permanent union with it. Would this be enlightenment? But that was not the goal; enlightenment was not really encouraged. He was only here to

steady his mood and enhance his productivity, not to abandon himself and the world. As he came back into his active state he analyzed his feelings, always making a kind of note as if he was going to talk to someone afterwards and describe what he had learned. It was never much. And today he felt that even though he had performed his meditation correctly, he was not at peace. His training told him to accept this, too, but for some reason it was hard.

I just don't want to go out there, he thought. That's the risk of these wonderful meditation chambers. They're the only god damned place you can go to be alone. Maybe he should limit himself to group meditations, as some did, perhaps wisely. The idea made Adam shudder. With a heavy sigh he got up from his kneeling position and went into the antechamber to put his uniform and shoes and everything back on. It was time to go. He'd be late if he lingered here. Besides, someone else was probably waiting for their turn. It wouldn't do to deviate too much from the schedule. The shifts were constantly rotating and delays caused unnecessary stress. Why, after all, did Adam always insist on getting up early, as if to get first dibs on everything? There was no need here for such competitive thoughts. Not when everyone was provided for, not when time was perfectly budgeted...

Over on the well-lit, distraction-rich side of the Customer Service office, where they put the beginners and those who responded well to high stimulus, was Malgam, with her friends, chatting amiably. Far on the other side of the room, in the dim and soundproofed quadrant, was Adam's desk. He occupied the place of greatest honor. It was the quietest, the plainest, the most isolated. Other desks had all kinds of junk stored and stacked alongside the telequipment: mementos, cheat sheets, inspirational posters... Some of the desks were shared by the part-timers and trainees. These were often the messiest, to the constant chagrin of the bay steward assigned to keep the unit clean and organized. There at the round-table station, fewer than usual of the Group Workers had arrived on time, but those who were present were gaily greeting each other as they logged on to their stations.

At his own station now, Adam took a breath before initiating his favorite set of memory and concentration games. At his level he was no longer required to use his down time this way, but allowing oneself to become distracted or lulled was never a good idea.

The machines could sense his tension today and kept prompting him to relax his shoulders. If the computers noticed that he was in a bad state, they might take his calls away or place him on rest. That would be embarrassing.

He tried to let his mind go to that place of self-assured quiet which his environment and his training were designed to promote. He breathed regularly; he tried to relax. Now the screen began to dim, signaling the imminent arrival of an incoming call. Adam felt

strangely relieved.

"This is Adam at Platform Nine. State your request at will."

"I'm Nena. I'm calling to inquire about the status of my finance account. Is it okay? I can't stop thinking about it and I have this terrible fear that it's not okay, that I've spent all my credits."

"Of course I can help you with that. Do you wish to provide any further detail or should I go straight to your account to confirm it?"

"It's just the rumors. I can't bear the thought of being Empty. Like that poor woman on the News. They say it was some kind of error but maybe there are still terrorists around, you know, and someone of my stature could so easily be targeted. Why can't they just send us quarterly statements or something like in the old days?"

"I can read to you the Declaration Of Noncompetition and amplify on some of its tenets for you if you'd like."

"None of that claptrap today."

"I wish I could reassure you in some other way, Nena. You know it's quite stressful for you to be constantly calling Customer Service to confirm what you already know to be true, what we all know to be true."

"Then just confirm my account."

"One moment please."

Adam had already matched the provided Customer ID with the Financial Account corresponding to that number. Of course it was Green.

"Your status is Green, Nena. You are completely in the clear. You do realize—" Adam referred to the brief on the procedures unique to that Platform— "that it is nearly impossible to spend the allotment granted to Class G individuals such as yourself. You are expected to behave freely and contribute generously in all your pecuniary interactions." Fortunately Adam was used to getting calls from Platforms 12 through 20, where they were conducting various administrative experiments with the idea of "credit." It was thought that doing away with shopping altogether would create mass depression. It was funny, though, how many odd little things seemed to come with it. Outside the so-called Credit Sector no one had talked about terrorism in any serious way for— but he was getting distracted, and the customer was getting irritated.

"Please don't scold me like that. I don't call you people for a sociology lesson."

"I only remind you of your Freedoms, Nena."

"Thank you. That's all I need today."

The call ended. Ludicrously easy. Unsatisfying. She wouldn't even indulge him with argument. Those sorts of money-neurotics could be a downright nuisance. Damn. Now he was tense, spiteful. This was horrible. He looked at his timeclock with dread. That call had barely eaten up five minutes. Plus he might have lost a point or two for the reflective hesitation he'd displayed. Back to the games and the self-monitoring, the doubt, the back-and-forth about whether to take his first break before even a quarter of the shift had elapsed, before he'd been at his station for even an hour. This was completely retrograde. He had no choice. He had to excuse himself now.

He logged out, stating his rationale as: Unusual Restlessness - proceed immediately to counseling.

Counseling Hall J, session already in progress. He logged in at the door and joined the others in the circle. The session leader for the day, who Adam recognized as Miron Pearce, an old hand but jittery on the phones, looked up and seemed surprised and nervous to see Adam. Adam rarely resorted to counseling, rarely left his post except at scheduled times, but it was not unheard of, either. Miron's reaction embarrassed him. Adam tried to relax anyway. He was here to improve. He knew the routine.

The girl to his left had been speaking when he entered and, as tradition dictated, had not paused to acknowledge him and had done her best to continue without interruption. "I just don't fit in at Pod Four. I want to be with my friends again. We worked well together, naturally."

"The separation process is difficult," Miron agreed. "We all know the reasons so I won't stress them again. We all know that the circumstances in which we find ourselves are under only limited control by ourselves. I feel compassion for you, Andrea. Your feelings are completely normal. If you do wish to take steps to create a change I refer you to the employee manual, but for now we are here in support, pure and simple."

The girl wiped away a tear, seemed mollified. "I yield," she said softly.

"Does anyone have a comment on the previous item?" Miron asked. No one said anything. Adam would be out of turn to ask her to repeat everything she'd already said,

and though he was somewhat curious he didn't wish to impose that on her. He remained silent too. "I ask us all now to close our eyes for the span of eight breaths," said Miron, "and then we will ring the bell of closure so that a new topic can come before us." Adam closed his eyes. He felt the desire to be next, to get this over with. He suppressed it. He would sit and he would listen, like everyone else. No matter how unbearable the prospect seemed.

In the silence of eight breaths he thought *Well, it has to be the snakes. Paranoia gets to everyone in a different way. That freak on the phone who was sure she was out of money. Me, staring at the Platforms in the wee hours. If only—*

Miron rang the bell of closure. Everyone opened their eyes

"All right," said Miron, a calmed smile overtaking his face as he took a self-comforting deep breath. "Thank you all for bearing with me; I wasn't expecting to draw Leader today. But we can come to that in turn. Let's show our lights, please, and we'll see who's next."

Everyone bowed so that Miron could see the jewels on their heads, which were wired in to a security switch in the body's central nervous system. The computer in the Counseling room could then extrapolate the most beneficial order of topics based on everyone's state of mind and content of mind. Sometimes the Leader would use his own judgment but Adam knew Miron wasn't likely to do that, he was not an out-of-the-box thinker, no matter how many times the system tripped him up over the years.

"All right," Miron called out, "are you receiving your prompt to speak and do you accept your turn?"

"Yes," said the young man directly across from Adam, with the green jewel which was vibrating visibly. Adam didn't know this man. "As there are some in the room who I have never met, I will tell you now that my name is Thias. I look forward to learning about you and I thank Andrea for what she has shared."

He coughed.

"Yes, I'm somewhat new to the Platform. I am still getting used to how things are done here on Nine. I was transferred because I was somewhat out of step on Seven, where the methods are a bit more free-form. There was bullying. Well, I considered it bullying but I was assured repeatedly by my superiors that it was a test meant to bolster my self-protective instincts. I honestly think those practices are highly abusive and have never seen any evidence that they work."

There were nods of assent.

"As you know, Thias, we don't do much of that around here, but it's not my place to condemn the experiments of other governing bodies," said Miron, very earnestly. The man really was a true believer.

"So I do feel better now," Thias continued, "but I have no friends, still, and I'm extremely sexually frustrated and have a lot of lingering trauma. I frankly hate spending my days helping other people with their inconsequential problems. Honestly, most of them seem like a complete waste of time. I'm not helping anyone. And I'm the one who needs help. Who do WE call?" He said this with an imploring look and an exasperated gesture round the circle. Adam looked around, people seemed aroused by the speech, uncomfortable. He felt it, too.

Miron smiled serenely. "Yes, young man, these are valid concerns which we all share or have shared at some point in our lives. No one is immune. And we all have needs. Needs, and drives," he said with a wag of the finger, as if to emphasize the difference, "which by their very nature are insatiable. We do our best here to avoid extremity but part of our practice is accepting what is present in our nature. Go on."

Thias smiled. The affirmation was doing the trick, but he wasn't satisfied yet.

"Of course I read the employee manual thoroughly. I just can't accept my role. My ultimate responsibility to be emotionally independent. To resolve these conflicts myself. How can I? I need someone. I need help. Why can't someone see that?"

"Ah, yes, the longing for rescue."

A kind of panic seemed to creep around the edges of the young man's features. Adam looked away.

"There is no rescue," Miron said. "There is nothing else. There is only here, where we are. No one can take us anywhere else. We take the journey that is inside us and we do it alone."

"Damn your bullshit!" someone exclaimed suddenly. It was Andrea, who was standing up now. Miron would not have wanted this to happen in one of his sessions. He was going to need help. "Miron," Adam interjected, "I volunteer to Co-Absorb." Miron's face was stricken, but he nodded. Miron and Adam moved to stand in the the center of the circle.

"Now is the point in the ceremony when the ritual sacrifice must be made," Miron said solemnly. "The aggression, the grief, must be released. Myself and Adam are here to listen, to absorb. We offer no resistance, no refusal, no argument." Together, they closed

their eyes.

It was only Andrea at first, standing there in the circle half-bent at the waist, her eyes closed, tears streaming, her voice a moan at first, growing louder as others joined. "This isn't right! I shouldn't have been forced to come here and I can't deal with the damned silence! This counseling is useless!"

And now it was Thias, too, and soon Jen and Ippex.

"You have no authority! You're just as brainwashed as the rest!"

"I need exercise!"

"I need air to breathe!"

"I feel dead and isolated here. Why are we here?"

"I hate answering phones!"

Soon the Auto-solvers kicked in and began activating the harmonics. A feeling of grace and safety began to penetrate Adam as the overhead light beamed down on him softly, darkening the room around him and Miron. The shouts and howls were being gradually neutralized, changed into sweet, bell-like tones, and as a result of biofeedback the participants of the counseling circle were quieting down. Charged ions and additional oxygen wafted into the atmosphere on timed release. Andrea suddenly grasped Thias's hand. The room was quite dark now, with just Miron and Adam standing in a pillar of glimmering light, radiating serenity. The ritual was working. Adam felt almost like he was being erased, wonderfully erased, back where he belonged: serving.

It wasn't what he had come for, not what he had had in mind, but perhaps it was better. As Adam watched Thias and Andrea walk out of the room hand-in-hand, their interpersonal problems perhaps soothed by the physical contact, he felt restored. He had made a difference. The system had worked, for them, for him.

Miron, however, was sitting on the ground, legs folded, his shoulders shaking.

"I hate doing that, Adam, I absolutely can't bear it."

"Maybe you should seek transfer to another Platform. Where none of this—"

"I've been on so many. I've tried everything."

Adam sighed. It was bad not to help his suffering friend, but what could he say? He, too, was profoundly drained by the process of Absorption.

"Would you like to get lunch with me?" Adam asked. "After a session like that I don't think we should go back to work, perhaps not until the evening shift."

"Yes. Yes, you're right. Lunch and a nap will cure all."

The two men went back to the food station and dining area. Adam wasn't very hungry but chose some energetic foods and some stimulating coffee, hoping these would have a solidifying effect upon his mood. Miron joined him at the table with only a dish of melon and some tea.

"I'm in for a good sleep after this," the older man said, wearily. "I had such nightmares last night, and I've been so achy lately. I think I need a new mattress for my bunk. Might upgrade to a level four, these old bones of mine need it."

"You could even put in for a suite before too much longer."

"I honestly wouldn't want that. I'd be useless without the others, they keep me attached to the routine. I love them, the way they bustle about in the morning. I don't want any more peace and quiet. I spend too much time in the struggle."

"I think I know what you mean." Adam was confident that when the time came and he had earned his place in a private suite, he would be every bit as regular and dependable as he was now, at the youngish age of thirty-two. He'd be that way til he died, or til he lost his faculties, at which point he would gracefully retire to a place in Care and wait to slip away, surrounded by his assigned Guides. He didn't plan to have family. Adam found it hard to imagine but there were rumors that some Platforms were still exhibiting population growth by natural procreation. Oh well, more Customers, more Callers, more Accounts to balance. With the Earth at maximum output there was a job for everyone and plenty of room to expand as long as you didn't need the feeling of solid ground under your feet. *Too many of us now to ever go back. Now we adapt or die, and it won't be pleasant to die out here of madness.* Platform Psychosis: Adam knew in his heart it was real. One day it would reach even here, and then no amount of positive ions and positive thinking would save them. They all knew it, too. These poor young people. *Maybe a few more generations down the road we'll be fully space-adapted, none of this will seem unreal anymore. After all, it is real. It is real hydroponic grass. It is real Created Gravity.* Adam looked across the table. Miron was a good companion. He didn't mind being quiet. It was clear, though, that he didn't enjoy the eternal search for balance. He just wanted to hang on, poor fellow.

Adam spent much of the afternoon walking the halls of the Platform, looking at people, gazing out windows. He felt serene again, but knew it was best to be patient, to allow himself time. He had plenty of hours logged on his station. No one would accuse him of slacking. Plus his overwork meter would start ticking back down, reducing his chance of being put on rest for routine health. Adam liked to make his own decisions, even if it was within rigidly defined parameters. Today when he sat back down at his station he wanted his vital signs to be in perfect order, his mind perfectly ready. Full of good cheer. The sort of man who deserved to display two stars on his epaulet. An example to all. Not an outsider, not an Earthist, not a weirdo or a paranoiac.

Chapter Two

As he passed Gymnasium G he saw Malgam shooting hoops with a younger woman. He paused to watch them, marveled at their speed and grace. The other woman had a fierce expression on her face. It was good of Malgam to help her release the obvious tension. Malgam herself seemed in a state of transcendence and was playing very well. Adam felt a sort of pull, as he often did when he watched athletic people engage in sport. It was an avenue of expression that he felt was not open to him. One of the rare times he would feel hesitation and doubt. As if he wanted to join in, but couldn't. Perhaps it was just the way their bodies moved, and looked, reminding him that he himself was not physically fit, was merely adequate in his functioning. Nothing in his lifestyle stressed his organs unduly; they would continue to operate. The machines were satisfied. But he did not possess beauty.

Adam turned away and resumed walking. He had begun to become bitterly aware of the precise amount of time that had elapsed since he had had sex with anyone, sex of any type, as it was recommended for most people to seek and receive sexual attention and connection regularly in order to promote optimum function of the central nervous system, and to maintain social order. Damn, damn, damn all these rules, even a man like Adam couldn't be in complete compliance. He'd once sat in a counseling session where the leader, a beautiful older woman, had said wisely and from the heart: "The rules are impossible to follow. That is by design. We must come to terms also with our own imperfectability, and learn to strive anyway, to never give up. Even though we can never complete the task we must take joy in the fact of incompleteness." So this was part of it. Sure is a tricky game, forever fooling with madness and grace. In space. Time to get serious. The evening shift would begin soon. Adam could still get a few hours on the lines. He was ready.

Afternoon shift was filing out of his sector. Everyone looked all right, like they'd had a good day, save one or two who may have had a little more handed to them than they were prepared for, and were now unsure if they'd Resolved well. Adam knew that feeling from the old days, and it was hard. Nothing harder than self-doubt. He was thankful that he rarely felt that anymore. Maybe it meant he wasn't taking enough risks. Oh well, no time for risks now, at the moment it was his job to be steady.

There was an air of calm now; who knows if anyone will even call? Dinner and socialization hours were taking place on most of the platforms, people tended to resolve things between themselves, to put their worries aside and hopefully find their needs met. No hunger, no isolation. Maybe everyone was just fine tonight. Wouldn't that be a miracle?

He sat down in his chair and adjusted his posture, letting feelings of energy and alertness flow up and down his spine. He turned on his screen and entered his login code. He

attached the sensor node to the jewel on the crown of his head. The computer responded to his presence and his status with a warm tone of approval and reward which activated his pleasure centers slightly.

He reviewed a few pages of general statistics for the sector. It had been a busy day. Especially in Malgam's unit. When he had seen her away from her desk she was probably helping a younger recruit blow off steam after a tough call. One meltdown resulting in secondary agent completing Resolution in a somewhat emergency manner. May require follow up. Follow up assignment pending.

Who would be stuck cleaning up that mess, repairing the damaged confidence of a caller who couldn't get their answer straightaway? Probably some mid-level, with superfine interpersonal skills. Not Adam. He was only called in when there was need for detailed and fast analysis, quick reflexes. He couldn't improvise in any emotional way, which was what it took to talk people down, to apologize or whatever. He was only adequate at that. No one could excel in every aspect of Customer Service.

A call was coming in. Adam dismissed all feelings of ego, of reward-seeking, dismissed even his confidence. He had to become a beginner again, humble, ready to embrace the overwhelming nature of another human soul, no matter what absurd question it was about to ask, what stupid thing it was about to say and expect him to respond to.

"This is Adam at Platform Nine. State your request at will."

"I'm dying."

Simple statement, but how to diagnose?

"My sensors are reading that all your vital signs are within safe parameters." He looked again. "You don't even show signs of adrenaline increase. Are you quite sure?"

"But I am. Dying."

"We are all mortal. That doesn't have to be cause for concern."

"I suppose not."

"Do you feel concerned about mortality?"

"As you say, there is no adrenaline present. I seem to be unafraid. But the circumstances here..."

"You're located on Platform 5K."

"Yes."

Adam shuddered. They did strange things on Platform 5K. That far out. There was still lots of reproduction happening, too, and at least one wing had gone into quarantine pending a tribunal to determine whether Feudalism was taking place and whether that experiment was benefiting its participants. Adam would have to consider encoding the information he was about to receive and submitting it to the case file.

"I see that your wing of Platform 5K is adjacent to an Area Of Interest. Does your concern relate to that?"

"It's very confusing. My mother lives in Wing 4 and I haven't been able to see her or communicate with her to tell her I'm dying."

"I'm sure she knows."

There was a sigh of something like contentment on the line.

"For what it's worth," Adam continued, unsure where that insight had come from, "though I cannot perform a detailed diagnosis from my station, all indicators show that you are in relative safety. There is no sign of dehydration or malnourishment or vital dysfunction. I can assign a doctor to call on you, perhaps assist you in finding an appropriate counseling group, perhaps on another Platform." He paused. "You don't have to stay there."

"Can we just talk for a minute?"

"Of course. I must ask: are you suffering from isolation? Depression? Would you like me to view your work and leisure record so that I can make further recommendations for areas of improvement?"

"No, thank you. How was your day?"

They always thought they'd be the first to ever ask. Always thought they could save themselves by saving him. Some agents were very good at aiding this kind of catharsis, could convincingly burst into tears of gratitude for the caller's generous concern, but not Adam.

"My day was, well, up-and-down," he said. It wasn't that he didn't enjoy the chat, of course. Many times he had had wonderful conversations with callers. Truly wonderful.

He was open to it. It was therapeutic enough, and sometimes the point could be got round to by that route.

"That seems only natural," the caller responded.

"I didn't get much work done today."

"Well, what's so great about work, anyway?"

"A valid point." He found himself unsure how to proceed. With a few clicks and gestures he pulled up a cross-referenced list of inspirational quotations from all the ancient texts. He searched "what's so great about work" and waited for the results.

Meanwhile the caller was still talking. "I find it's mostly bullshit, all the stuff they preach to us. I know it's probably different where you are but out here they have us working really hard. Mostly stuff that doesn't seem important, considering. They try to tell us the System is a lie and that we don't really have full automation, that the only way to earn your survival is to be a hard worker."

"May I address you by your name?" Adam asked, emotion rising up.

"Yes, sure."

Adam read the name from the screen. "Inga. Your local government is lying to you. I am absolutely obliged to tell you that."

"I know. But really, how can I trust you? Say I'd bought in to the so-called lies that are being put about over here. Of course they come with the assurance that any statements to the contrary are lies, that any evidence given to support those statements is fabricated. I mean it's really what you choose to believe, isn't it? And you simply choose whatever supports the worldview you're already attached to."

"There are certain inalienable truths."

"You'll never convince me of that, Adam. Not out here."

The call was terminated. Christ. What was going on? Usually Adam was prepared for those sorts of epistemological arguments. It was vital to be able to answer such basic objections to the new way of life, the new way of truth. He couldn't for the life of him remember his training. He couldn't remember what he'd said the last time someone asked him for proof of anything.

The machine was lagging. There seemed to be an error. He canceled the search and reset his system, tried to put it out of his mind.

Almost immediately a new call filtered in.

With evening shift all but over, Adam signed off his workstation and went to a privacy booth in the Lounge to regroup. It was "private" in the sense that it was one chair at one desk. Paper and pen were provided, to encourage reflection and list-making. Adam sat down. The room was abuzz with the low murmur of conversation. Everyone seemed happy. He got out a piece of paper and looked at its blank surface, a blankness begging to be filled, like one big endless blaring question. What Do You Want? What Do You Think? Anything? He felt a terrible desire for a cup of coffee, felt he couldn't start and couldn't continue til he'd had one, but he dreaded losing his seat. He looked around for help. "Malgam!" he cried out, catching her eye as she walked past with a small group. She came over immediately, visibly excited that he had summoned her.

"Can you please bring me a cup of coffee? I can't get up from here without breaking my concentration. I'm feeling quite strange. I'd really appreciate this right now."

"Well, of course I will. I'm sorry to hear you're out-of-sorts."

"It was a strange day."

"They come to us all. It could be a positive sign of change. Wait right there, I'll be back in a flash."

She pivoted and strode vigorously to the drinks station. He watched her as she touched the jewel on her head, signaling to the beverage dispenser to dispense the coffee into one of the plain white cups provided. She was very careful, very methodical. Somehow she was even able to walk back to him just as quickly without spilling.

"Here!" she said with pleasure, setting the cup down on his table. "I'll leave you now but please, call me anytime. Come by my quarters if you want. My bunkmates are really relaxed about visitors, they mostly just stay in their beds in isolation or study. We could even sit in the parlor together and not be disturbed."

"That does sound nice. I am sure one day I'll find my way there but it might not be soon. I'm very edgy today and I don't think..." he trailed off, wondering. Now they were just staring at each other. "I'd just like to be alone. Thank you for the coffee."

Unfazed, she merely smiled and, with a nod, again turned and strode away, her long,

steady body carrying her like some magical ideal of living form. Of course he should go to her but oh it would be a long, long time before he ever would. Why was that, anyway?

He drank the coffee and looked down again at the blank paper. It was that same gleaming, slightly uncanny off-white substance that marked it as part of the System, something the System provided. Get Serious. Get serious about coffee, get serious about paper and pens. Get serious about your thoughts, Adam.

He wrote:

I am overweight. This is terrible. This is a shame to the System which provides me with all possible avenues to ideal health. Just look at Malgam. Just LOOK at her. I could be like that. If I were free of my hangups. The resources are there.

He sat back in his chair, sipped the coffee. At least here he could enjoy himself in a certain amount of space. The one-chair table implied a boundary that was universally respected. But there were only ten of them in here, so you knew after a while people would be waiting for their turn.

Platform Nine had been one of the most successful Platforms, ever since its inception. The long history of peace, improvement and high approval ratings had resulted in its being chosen to house the relocated Call Center, a very important branch of the Central System, where all its messages were reinforced to the willing. Not to be confused with the Outreach Center, where messages were generated and transmitted, willing or not. Outreach answered only to the System itself, and these were the sorts of people who convened the Tribunals, commissioned and oversaw Data Analysis, didn't actually do anything except get the work out to the right people. That was everything. Beyond that there was remarkable flexibility. Too much flexibility, one might say, but that was subjective. Nobody agreed about how things should be run, no one ever would, so Freedom had been established. Maybe Adam didn't get everything he wanted all the time, maybe he resented the pressure to get out of his seat and get back to mingling with the collective, but all in all he had it pretty good. If the final question was *Does it work?* he had to admit it worked for him. It must be working. He, Earth-born, had been elevated to the top of his field, just by being himself while continually striving for betterment. Just by fitting in. It was hard not to wish that the System would just make everyone live *this* way. He hated to think of what life on the other Platforms must be like. Although, seeing how virtually anything was possible...

He put the paper he'd been writing on into the recycler attached to the table. It was immediately reduced to undifferentiated matter to be recycled, into more paper, more coffee mugs.

From my words, my requirements, he thought.

He began to feel a kind of spiritual claustrophobia, thinking about how tomorrow would be the same as today if he let it. It was possible to be brave and just walk through the endless tunnel.

One of his most respected senior coworkers had entered the room and was standing alone with a cup in his hand, looking seasoned and majestic and calm. The cup probably contained liquor. Frey was the man's name and even though he was everything Adam could not be, as a man, Adam knew he was superior to Frey in at least one aspect. Frey had been around for years doing reasonably good work but had never earned a star. It was as if he didn't want one. And he always seemed sad, visibly sad. Adam felt comfortable approaching him. After all, if Frey had wanted to be alone there were places available at the one-chair tables. Social engineering: the great gift of the System.

"How was it today, Frey?"

The man with prematurely greying hair smiled his usual sad yet dashing smile. "Yes, Adam, a day like any other."

Adam nodded, felt something unpleasant like jealousy in his mind, wishing he too could carry off this simple dignity that did not come off as coldness...

"What's that you're drinking?" Adam asked.

"Why it's nothing but a good old whiskey and soda."

"What do you think of the alcohol rationing?"

"I suppose it's fair. And it's not as if it's arbitrarily enforced. I'm lucky, though. My physical revealed no addiction tendencies so my allotment has stayed high."

Adam shook his head. "I haven't even gotten my allotment yet. I haven't had a drink since they announced the rationing, anyway."

"It makes good sense. The stuff is expensive to produce safely, to consistent standards."

"Yes. And it can be so disruptive."

Frey gave Adam a strange, dubious smile. "My opinion is that enforced sobriety disrupts human society more than occasional drunkenness would. Alas, my opinions are not on the Grand Council's agenda."

Adam always had to struggle not to stare at Frey. Whereas Adam had the grey, maladapted affect of an Earth-born, Frey was unusual in that he had a moustache. A fetching moustache. He took lots of vitamins to maintain his sexual distinctiveness. Adam thought this was ultimately a losing battle, considering the research on testosterone levels in simulated-light environments. A man with a sense of self, a sense of himself as a man... It was a delicate question.

After Frey had finished his drink he gave Adam a nod before walking back out of the Lounge and disappearing down the corridor. Adam stood a while longer surveying the Lounge so that they would not have to re-encounter each other.

Chapter Three

When he reached his bunk the display on his minidesk read 22:55, just like every night, with no planning on his part.

He lay on his side in his curtained enclosure, listening to the soft breathing and rustling of his bunkmates in their own beds, playing with their possessions, working at their minidesks. He shared the cabin with three other persons. He felt that, out of all the people on the Platform, he knew these three the least well.

He thought it must be Yan who was home at the moment; he could hear her softly singing to herself. Perhaps she was recording a message to her child who had recently been placed in a School for the Gifted. The school was located on a Platform not far away but still, Adam knew when relocations happened the feeling was one of irrevocable separation. It was always said to be temporary.

He took out his private log headset and placed it over his face. With practiced ease he inserted the vocal transcription node deep into his trachea until it rested near his larynx. He slid the eyepiece into place and began to record his daily journal.

"This place is my only sanctuary. In the dark and quiet of my bed I feel like things are...reasonable. I am as always grateful for these things which I can depend on."

The machine flawlessly translated his soundless speech into words on the screen over his eyes. It was comforting; he felt understood.

"I feel like I'm in a process of physical decay even though I act in accordance with regulation. Regulations are either inadequate or inadequately tailored to individual needs. My needs. Are we expected to become uniform? Is my genome being weeded out?"

His throat felt dry. *Damn*. He always forgot to have a snack and drink before starting.

"I now feel restless and I don't want to take this damn thing out of my throat and start again." He sighed. "Okay. Continuing. Physical decay. I feel like my natural drives are disappearing. Like I am in a process of choosing whether I will be a body or a mind."

He wanted to rub his eyes but his hand bumped into the visor.

"Perhaps this is better taken up in counseling. I went there today, by the way, but I just ended up co-absorbing since Miron has no confidence or vitality left. The poor man..."

He gagged on the node, then gave up and disengaged the module. He took up his blue-reader and opened up the entry that had just been transcribed there. Looking at the words

printed on the screen, he felt somehow dubious that they were the same ones he had just spoken. Should he take this in to a doctor, as evidence of an oncoming deranged state? This looked suspiciously like depression.

When his eyes opened again slowly in the mild and familiar dark, the clock on his minidesk said 05:40. He felt good, ready to become active. It was the same as every morning.

He climbed down from his bunk as quietly as he could, sat for a moment comfortably in the common area looking at the virtual window which displayed an appropriate scene of the local star rising over Earth, viewed from the moon. It was less disorienting than the first virtual windows which too often placed the viewer planetside, looking at a beautiful yet nauseatingly unfamiliar sunrise over the Sangre De Cristo mountains in Former North America. None of that had any relevance to today's Platform inhabitants and was probably a threat to serenity. Space is Space. Get Serious about Space.

As he walked out into the corridor he saw one or two vague figures, some jogging, some just walking who knows where, trying to get a jump on the day, or perhaps suffering from a bout of insomnia. None of them were known to him. There were enough people on this Platform that he could meet someone new each time he walked out his door. It was still surprising year after year. Then again, new people arrived all the time. He walked toward the Lounge. The lights in the hallways were still low; the morning alarm wouldn't go off for another hour or two. Adam looked forward to his morning coffee and the excitement of a new day. Someone ran by him, breathless, muttering to herself. She had the posture of one who was exercising, arms bent at the elbows, keeping pace, but the sounds she was making... Perhaps she was trying to disguise her perturbed state by performing some acceptable activity. Anyway she was gone already; he hadn't had time to try to ask her what was wrong. If only they would raise these ceilings. The walls here absorbed and cushioned sound but did nothing to diffuse the uncanny.

Adam reached the Lounge and took his cup of coffee over to the broad observation window that showed a remarkable view of the human world. Out that window Platforms stretched into the far distance, glimmering darkly, some showing little hints of distinctiveness like decorations placed during space walks, different lighting schemes; one far below seemed to be flashing, pulsing rhythmically as though a constant party were going on. And below all that, you could see the glow of the Earth. Brighter than ever, a paradise. Completely free of humans, it was now one big energy-producing system. Wind, solar, geothermal, bioprocess, chlorophylaments, natural siphoning and mineral recycle... A handful of technicians still lived down there, so he was told, in wildness and isolation, monitoring and maintaining the non-exploitative derivation systems. Policy promised that no one was allowed to stay more than five years and plans

were in place to eliminate even those temporary positions and replace them with solar-powered automatons.

Adam could only look down with longing from his place beyond the atmosphere. *That's where I was born*, he used to say to himself.

He suddenly became aware of someone standing right at his shoulder. He looked. It was the girl he'd seen running in the corridor earlier. Her face was frozen in a horrible wide-stretched stare, the classic mask of Platform Psychosis.

Before he could do anything besides drop his coffee she was slamming his head against the observation window. She had the superhuman strength of the Psychotic. Her bulging eyes seemed to be staring past him, out the window, her jaw clenched, her lips peeled back.

Assistants arrived almost immediately to pull her away. No doubt her node had alerted them to the symptoms of a violent episode; Adam was fortunate she hadn't removed it in an act of self-mutilation, as some advanced sufferers had been known to do just before going on a fatal rampage.

He was now lying sunken on the floor, wedged against the wall, inwardly convulsed with waves of psychic pain; physically he was somewhat numb. Or was it the other way round? He wasn't sure. A muscular male Assistant was crouching near him, taking care not to get in his face as he asked Adam the standard questions.

"Adam Omnibus, Service Agent Number 24601, please acknowledge. Are you all right?"

"No, I'm not! Is she?"

"She's being taken to the medical center. We've had our eye on her since this morning. Amazing how fast it comes on. Sir, my readings indicate that your body is in no immediate danger of failure. Would you like to be taken to an examination center or a safety room, perhaps? Personnel are on call to help you."

"Thank you. I..." he choked. He could think of nowhere he wanted to go. Safe? Images of dark, leafy things, warm, furry things, were overwhelming his mind, but then the notion of personnel being on call dragged him back. He had to help them discharge their duties. "What's your name?" he asked the Assistant.

"Oren Bu-wen, Assistant. HPA-assessor, safety specialist."

"Oren. You seem like a nice guy."

"I'll stay with you as long as you require me."

"Yes, please. I'd just as soon sit here."

"Very well. I'll send for some tea for you." Oren signaled to a woman who had been standing unobtrusively nearby; she went away with an air of controlled urgency and job satisfaction.

"Do you always get up this early?" said Oren.

"Yes; do you?"

"I work the overnight shift."

"I see. I hope I'm not keeping you late."

"It lasts until morning shift, the same time your department begins its operations. It's not so bad, really."

"How could it be? With personality testing and Freedom."

Oren smiled wryly. "I hope today's incident won't sour you further on our way of life. Personally I think this is the best—"

"The best we can hope for."

"You're an Earthist, aren't you?"

Adam looked up in alarm, tried to hide his emotion. He stammered, "Really, I— I don't think that definition strictly applies—" He stopped, not wanting to resort to propriety or dissembling, not with this kind man.

"Please don't worry," said Oren. "It's not a crime to have these feelings, Adam." Oren reached out and touched his shoulder, gently but firmly, a kind of test. Adam's body relaxed slightly and he felt a flush of heat in his face. Oren was clearly reading his reactions. He maintained physical contact for just over three seconds and then withdrew his hand, all his movements entirely confident and efficient. And it had helped. Adam felt better. They were making eye contact now. A feeling of intense quiet fell over him and he wondered if he was being hypnotized or if he were just feeling an unaccustomed rush of oxytocin. He needed to get out more.

Oren smiled. "I've heard a lot about you, actually. We Assistants are kind of in awe of the Service Agents. I don't want to make you uncomfortable or expose myself to accusations of flattery but I hope you realize how much your efforts here are appreciated and needed."

"Do you think so?"

"Personally I know little about what you guys do. I mean, there's not as much communication between departments as there could be. Just imagine. If we knew more about each other and our respective situations, it could only help us do our jobs. As it is, I feel as if I only interact with people when an emergency has occurred. You must feel similarly. I understand you answer calls, deal with every kind of distress and every kind of question."

"Since the abolition of information technology."

"From most of the Platforms, yes. I'm fascinated, frankly, to learn what everyone is doing. The sheer variety of modes of living that are possible, even in space."

"All unified under Freedom and the System."

"It won't last," said Oren. "I suppose I'm an Earthist, too. Even if that means basically having a death wish."

Adam felt shocked. He hadn't had a conversation this good in months, maybe years. Not even with Malgam. She was far too cheerful, in that particular way of a Platform-born optimist, stars in her eyes.

He was starting to forget about the attack, even to feel glad it had happened. He touched his throat.

"There will be bruising," said Oren. "She had all the symptoms. The immense strength. The mask-face. It's terrible. I'm glad we've only seen a few cases so far."

"It's already here?"

"It's not a disease that spreads by contact, Adam. It just happens. How are you feeling?"

"Better than I have in ages, frankly."

"I'd give you advice but really there's no way to entirely avoid the pitfalls. You must know that as well as anyone."

A pair of sandal-clad feet appeared in Adam's field of view. He looked up. It was Malgam, making her cautious approach. "Adam, are you hurt?" she asked. She glanced at Oren for some indication of what to do. Oren maintained a neutral posture and said nothing, deferring to Adam.

"There was an incident," Adam said. "Someone became disturbed and attacked me."

She crouched down and joined their floor-level intimacy. "My god, your throat. And a huge bump on your forehead. I know I shouldn't pry, but it has to be Platform Psychosis. No one here is violent. Physically."

Adam knew that Oren couldn't officially comment. "In my opinion," said Adam, "yes. But don't worry."

"You shouldn't feel obligated to go to work today," said Malgam, firmly. A dispersal of obligation. As opposed to anything resembling a direct suggestion.

"No," Adam said. "I have to. I can't stomach two bad days in a row."

A dark look passed over Oren's face and Adam felt a deep inward shudder. He turned his attention to Malgam. "At least it's still early. I have time to check in with a doctor. Are you doing standard shifts today?"

"Yes," she answered.

"Would you have lunch with me?"

She lit up. "Yes, I'd love to!"

He smiled. She'd be his saving grace today. He could face it now. And as Oren said, there was no significance to the attack. Collateral damage of the nihilism and hopelessness...

In the doctor's office Adam sat in a comfortable chair, facing the doctor's chair, which matched. The doctor, known to Adam as Doctor Ta, did not sit in the chair at first but stood near his computer console appearing to puzzle over some documents. After a moment, he said "Please forgive me, Adam. I haven't given you proper attention and you've been patiently waiting in my office for several minutes now."

"I imagine you're concerned about the girl."

"She's not my case, but yes. Right now, let's focus on the immediate question of you."

"I suppose the best thing would be for you to just double-check what Oren said—"

"The Assistants mean well," Doctor Ta shook his head, "but you mustn't take their information for surety. Their instruments are limited and they are far too often to be found operating on intuition." He coughed, shook his head, began to pace regally around the room. "I am here to run a full and reliable diagnostic check on you, your body chemistry, your internal systems. It is easy with the right tools to ensure that everything is working within parameters." He sighed, assumed a somewhat limp posture, went thoughtfully to the porthole window. "I told them, damn it, I told them to watch her." He turned and regarded Adam appraisingly. "I'm not supposed to tell you this, of course, it's a trade secret. But we compare notes on all of you, using anonymous code names of course. It's necessary, in my opinion, when we are all trapped together like this. We have to learn to be watchful, to share information. They've gotten so damned lazy. It's like they don't even care."

"Who?" Adam asked. "The other doctors?"

Ta seemed not to hear him, had resumed staring out the porthole.

A standard diagnostic involved inserting microneedles into key points in the patient's body (usually this was fairly painless but it gave Adam the willies), extracting blood cells and fluids, running them through an exhaustive rapidfire battery of tests, and returning them to the body. "Spit-shined, as I like to say," Doctor Ta said, cheerfully, as he hooked Adam up. They were required to explain the procedure each time, even if they only did so in the form of metaphors. Fortunately Adam rarely went to the doctor more than once a year. His node was also plugged in, sending detailed records of the electrical activity inside his brain, to be compared with previous readings. Any anomalies which might point to disease or disturbance would be noted on the readout. The doctor was good, and thorough, and had done it all in under two minutes, with a minimum of the squirmy discomfort Adam associated with the procedure. It felt strange having your cells extracted, enhanced with antiviral patches and reintroduced to your system along with a solution of vitamins and god knows what else.

"Doctor, do you have any advice for how I might shed these extra pounds?" Adam asked, mostly to make conversation and distract himself from the uneasy feeling of being drained and doped.

"Your BMI is well within safe parameters, Adam," the doctor said distractedly, focusing on the calibrations and the first incoming readings from Adam's cellular material. "And everything here is looking good so far, too. Any symptoms? Any pain from your injuries?"

I can input some dopamine precursors to help you."

"No, thank you." He thought of Malgam. Perhaps she could help him raise his dopamine levels.

Adam left Doctor Ta's office with a clean bill of health and a cool feeling in his veins. He could almost feel the tissue in his neck, skin and muscle healing themselves. Time for his immune system to shake off the cobwebs and have a bit of a field day. He went straight to his workstation, bypassing meditation. Mortal combat is a surefire way to acquire at least momentary mindfulness of the vibrant quality of living.

When lunch time came around, he found Malgam sitting at a table for two in the Lounge. Something was on the table in front of her. Not food, but a book. Adam went to her and sat down. "I brought this for you, Adam," she said, handing him the book. "I thought it might help."

Adam examined the cover. The author was Candy Barnes. The title was *Ultimate Transcendence In The Green*. It had been printed in the 24th Century by SpinYang Publishers, based in what used to be Hong Kong, and several other branches with place names that didn't mean anything to him. Candy Barnes. Certainly seemed like a pseudonym. But then again things were still pretty Eurocentric in those days.

"She wrote many great books that still have relevance today, but this one—" Malgam reached out and tapped it with her finger. "This one helped me the most."

"What is it about?"

"It was assigned as part of a course I took as a child, when I was starting down the path to qualify for this job. You probably got your primary education on Earth."

"That's right. We didn't rely much on books and if we had, I doubt this would have been allowed at my reading level. You must have been in a gifted program."

"Yes, but you know things were different on the Platforms then. Very competitive. But this book is approachable to anyone. It's a good introduction."

"To what?"

"Alternative methods. Stuff they won't even teach here anymore. They think they've got the System streamlined so that it works for everyone, but you know and I know that that's impossible. You'd never have maximized your potential the way you have if you followed all their rules, right?"

"Their? Rules?"

"You know, the System, the philosophy particular to the Call Center and certain other high-priority ops departments, where they think they need to keep us in check. Emotionally. Physically."

She now reached across the table and touched his wrist. It seemed she had some hidden depths.

"Malgam," he breathed. "Gifts, touch, all these high concepts. It's all so sudden"

"It always seems that way. But it was inevitable."

"These alternative methods as you call them. Are they Earthist methods?"

"They are by their nature self-guided and therefore tailored to the individual; but that's not important right now."

Her hand stroking his wrist. Was this it? The permanently delayed moment?

"What is the connection between us?" Adam asked, staring at her hand on his hand.

"We are all connected," said Malgam. "Do you assume I'm putting you above someone else? Don't worry, you needn't feel singled out or pursued."

"I often wondered why you seemed so content to stay at an entry level," Adam murmured as something began to dawn on him.

"Yes, I am content. For now. My sense of purpose is stable and unalterable, not dependent on my status as an Agent. I try to help the people who are here. I am recovering from trauma, too. And a lot of people here are more deluded than you think."

"I haven't... been with anyone... in a long time."

"You're with all of us. All the time." She smiled. "No matter what happens. We won't be lost. There is nothing to lose, Adam." She leaned across the table and kissed him on the mouth. "I'll go with you," she said. "To your quarters."

That was what he wanted. To take her into his warm safe bed and draw the curtain... They were holding hands as they walked out of the Lounge. No one looked up to see them together and he was a little disappointed.

They climbed up into his bed and knelt on the cushioned surface, slowly undressing, placing their clothes on the adjacent shelf. It was a small space but adequate for all needs. The designers had had this eventuality in mind. It was a little sad to note that while it was easy to have sex here, two people could not comfortably sleep here. And yet it was wonderfully impossible not to be close to her, not to be warm and enveloped in softness, almost a full-body anticipation of the moment when he would... He was mentally walking himself through the procedure, which was complex: place his penis at the opening of her vagina and very gently press the head through the soft inner lips, having allowed ample time for lubrication... He had of course spent time in his formative years learning to elicit and recognize the complex stages of arousal in both men and women, but to see it—! She was flushed, her pupils dilated, her mouth slightly open. He moved his finger to the introitus of her vagina. The soft lips greeted his fingertip with a kind of pull he wouldn't have thought possible. Such subtle musculature. Such fine control.

"We didn't use protection," he said as they lay together afterwards. The words felt a little funny, like he was drifting backward into a solid state.

"At least there's no chance of disease," she said. "Following you as closely as I have I was absolutely sure of it. No one is more routine about their medicals than you." She laughed and nudged him. "And while I doubt you've kept close tabs on me, I can assure you I am exceedingly healthy."

"I know the system is very rigorous." That wasn't quite what he was concerned about, though. Was she sterile? Was he? The physicals they were subjected to weren't always 100% accurate on that fact. Reproduction had become less and less predictable the more they had tried to regulate it. As if some mystical force were involving itself.

"I forgot your book in the Lounge," he said.

"No, I picked it up. It's right here." It was on the shelf, under her underwear. It would smell like her, now. Adam had no idea women could smell like that. Few of them even seemed able to grow body hair anymore. Looking at Malgam she was like everyone else til you got her clothes off. She was completely inconsistent, thank god.

"I think it best we go our separate ways just now," she said. "Some people experience cortisol and prolactin spikes after intense orgasm." She smiled and stroked his face, then broke eye contact and began to dress. "I wouldn't rush back to work right away. Take your time and enjoy life. I am going to listen to some music."

"Goodbye, then," he said. "Wait—"

She had started climbing down but stopped and looked at him. She climbed back up so as not to give the impression of waiting to get away.

"Should we discuss the emotional implications of this?"

"Absolutely," she said, "but I think we should take the time to have the emotions first. Don't worry. I'll be around. Call if you need me. Just not for a couple hours."

She smiled. He nodded, released her. She climbed down from his bunk and a moment later he heard the door close softly. He was alone again. His bunk smelled quite different and he almost didn't want it to go away, though he knew the air filtration systems would soon kick in and the nanites were already at work retrieving all the dead hairs and skin cells and various other material for recycling. It was a bit of a ticklish thought. Back on Earth people had always had a terror of the tiny unseen things. Especially in one's bed. Science forced one to get used to it, and then went ahead and added the nanites to mix of microthings. Even now, Adam realized, his own sperm cells were probably striving to unite with an egg cell inside of Malgam. It may well be a lost cause. The cells themselves were unmotivated and vestigial thanks to genetic engineering, only one of a vast array of choices available to the responsible human. Malgam probably had a cyborg uterus for all he knew, which she could control with her conscious mind. They didn't go over this stuff in health class.

His aware experience was just a set of symbols for all these things. It could not comprehend itself or what it represented. Adam wondered what that book would be about. He didn't feel like reading it now.

Leaving his bunk room he headed in the direction of the shared hygiene area. Once inside the wash-pod Adam pushed the audio button marked Cosmos, which meant complete silence. He began to dial in his choice of scents and wash cycles. High-pressure jet for his scalp and an overall hot submersion for the rest of his body, with massaging bubbles. An herbal but clean aroma was present as the chamber rapidly filled to chest height with recirculating, churning, slightly foamy water. The scalp wash began. "Wash away all grief, all grasping." He murmured the traditional bathing prayer he had learned for bittersweet times. "Invigorate me with purpose." Within a few minutes the water would start to cool and cease its churning. 30 minutes at most. A ration of pleasure. "I accept my nature. I accept my body. I accept cleansing and healing and I am entirely awash in love and pure joy. There is nothing for my mind to do."

Yes, he thought, *have the emotions. See which ones persist. Enjoy it. After all, there's*

more to life... He realized things had somewhat been building to this; he had designed his life that way by going so long between physical contacts, as if it were his intention to create drama, peaks and valleys where there might otherwise be none. How else would an Earth-born man have access to the rhythms of life?

This was all part of his programming from the day he'd been taken out of his home on Earth and prepared for life in space. The initial training was nonspecific and mostly physical, getting him used to the artificial gravity and the recycled air, to eating off plates made from his own dead skin, to encountering space-born people. The more the System began to solidify its plans for him the more specific his training became. Finally he was shipped off to Platform One, where his primary education was conducted. Mostly children lived here, working together in small groups. Slowly they were integrated into larger and larger societies, trained to empathize in a more general way.

No one knew yet how long humans could go without standing on some planetary surface, how long they could stand looking out their windows at nothing.

He was glad he had ended up on Platform Nine. In its way it was the most basic and the most orthodox, closest to the central philosophy which emphasized peace and meditation and nonattachment. It had been built up in him piece by piece, so that he could rely on it. From a fully physical, emotionally reactive Earth child, to this. The System was a nurturing one. It had prepared him.

He decided to participate in shared meditation tonight. Perhaps all he needed for full participation and idealization was to spend less time alone, to open himself to more connection. Maybe more relationships. Funny. He was supposed to be spent, satisfied, but instead there was a kind of reawakened and persistent craving... He would need to seek continuous guidance.

He returned to the Lounge to relax for a while longer, tried not to think about the waning of his logged work hours. A man couldn't continue in the same mode forever. Allowance had to be made for the need to grow.

Soon he would receive a second star and it would herald the dawning of a new era in his life. Maybe he would become more athletic, more balanced. There's no way the system would penalize him for such achievements even if he was less of an overachiever on the phones. Though he'd been consistently rewarded for this overachievement, there had always been hints of concern from his computers and his physicians, a sort of collective shake-of-the-head over his obvious stagnation. He was not facing the struggle head-on; he was numbing himself. There were other things besides sex, yes, but there were other things besides work, too.

"Well, look at you!" It was Miron, coming towards Adam who was sprawled somewhat languidly on a couch; Adam had been unaware of his posture until he felt Miron's eyes on him. Abruptly, self-consciously, he drew his legs together and sat up straight. "You're certainly looking well this afternoon," said Miron, "and I'm so surprised to find you away from your workstation!"

"You really needn't remark on every little deviation from habit," Adam muttered. Seeing worry and dawning hurt on Miron's face, he gestured for the older man to sit with him. "I mean that in the utmost kindness, as I'm sure your comments were also intended. Forgive my harshness."

"No, no, you're right. It was awfully close to teasing. Oh well, you know how jealous people can be. I'm no exception. We all give each other a hard time now and then, it's all due to insecurity."

"No need to apologize."

"I wasn't apologizing, merely discussing. May I continue to dwell on your uncharacteristic state of, how shall I put it, happiness?"

Adam frowned. "Am I not characteristically happy?"

"You? Oh, no. Not at all."

"I see."

"Any hint of change, you must admit, is most exciting. Any change. Anywhere."

"Well, you know. I'm not the most social person. I rarely experience the pleasures of physical contact with other people. Perhaps I'm oversensitized or maybe I'm just congenitally oversensitive and that's why I've avoided it."

"You did it, you finally did it, didn't you?"

"Did what?"

"You had sex with Malgam! The poor girl has been waiting for you to notice her practically since she got here. So many years ago! I couldn't imagine how you could manage to ignore the opportunity to be with such an exemplary person!"

Adam tried his best to be tolerant of Miron's voyeuristic needs. "I am happy that you can

apparently derive such personal pleasure from reflection upon my life, and I am grateful for your empathic concern for me." That was certainly one way of putting it.

Miron sighed. "Human beings are like the old gods to me. They are too often symbols, dramas I watch unfold for my own edification, as if they might explain myself to me."

"Most poetic."

"But silly. I hope I haven't disturbed you too much."

"Please make yourself at ease, Miron. It's the least I can offer and yet, strangely, it seems to be all I can offer."

Miron nodded sagely. "You're on to something, there."

Suddenly a loud and unfamiliar tone blared over the rarely-used PA system; everyone gasped and looked up in the direction of the sound even though of course there was nothing to see.

"Adam Omnibus, you have been awarded a special audience with Head Of Service at your earliest convenience."

This of course meant 'immediately.' Miron looked stricken, staring at Adam as though he were staring at a condemned man. "I'm sure it's nothing serious," Adam said. "Try to calm yourself, for god's sake." He got up and walked in the direction of the lift that would take him to the administrators' offices. Aside from administration everything on the Platform was on a single level so as not to impose hierarchical structures, at least among those who were intended to be equal.

Chapter Four

Adam had no desire to be a manager and certainly not an administrator, though he had to admit he was always awed by the atmosphere on the second level. It was so small, just a hallway with a reception area and a few offices. It was quiet. Administrators even had their own sleeping and dining quarters. Wouldn't they get desperately lonely? Wouldn't this arrangement encourage some kind of madness?

Adam felt sure it was Ogi who would have summoned him, having latched onto god knows what minor deviation from form. Ogi resented Adam's constant advancement and feared for his own position, no matter how many times Adam refused promotion to management. "Adam Omnibus checking in," Adam muttered to the receptionist, another grey, maladapted personage who had probably had this job too long. She was gradually melting into a pool of fat and sadness, all but merged with the machine. They probably couldn't have dislodged her if they'd wanted to.

When she spoke, her surprisingly musical voice issued from an unmoving face that never once looked up. "When you hear the buzzer," she said, "enter the room with the flashing light."

He stepped back from her desk to stand and wait. There were chairs available but he wanted to maintain a sense of stature.

It was cold in here, too. This couldn't be right. These were terrible conditions. He wondered if the people who worked on this floor got to control the temperature, the pace of work... If so... He waited a long time. There was no one else there. There was no sound anywhere, no sign of activity. He was certain he was being kept waiting intentionally. He stood firm in a comfortable and stable position, asserting his sense of health, strength and vitality. He wouldn't allow himself to be rattled. Even though this was so obnoxiously inconsistent and arbitrary. Not to mention a waste of his time. Right now someone less experienced than Adam was probably answering an important call.

Finally the buzzer sounded, faint and echoey and far-away. What kind of antiquated system were they using up here? It felt like some kind of bizarre, disorienting test. His eye located the blinking light above door six, down the hall to his right. He proceeded calmly, knocked, turned the handle.

Seated there at a small, grimy desk was old Ogi himself. Fatter than ever. Not so much grey as... oddly shimmering white, kind of like the recycled-matter products that supplied the Platform. It was probably just malnourishment, bad skin care, or some strange new fashion. "You asked for me?" Adam said, standing erect, his hands behind his back. He realized he had assumed a vaguely military stance, which he didn't like.

"Please, sit," grumbled Ogi.

Adam was pleased to have an opportunity of adjusting his posture, so he sat down. He found himself mirroring Ogi's authoritarian, leaned-back, steepled-finger pose. Ogi sized him up distastefully for several moments, growled softly then folded his hands on the desk in front of him. He cleared his throat.

"You are aware, of course," Ogi began (his voice, like the receptionist's, was strangely resonant and clear), "that you are due for your Second Honor, in appreciation for your years of top quality service."

"Yes," said Adam.

"Your work records have been transmitted to me in preparation for this event, and they have given me cause for concern. Do you have any idea of what I speak?"

"I can't say that I do," Adam said, trying to project a hint of defiance.

"You have been extremely slack in your work hours the past few days, have logged far fewer than your ordinary number of Resolutions."

"And yet far more than the average."

"Second Honor is not for an 'average' worker. We would not like to present an inconsistent example for your coworkers by awarding you when your performance has been so variable."

"I have been committing more hours to self-improvement so that I can deliver even better work in the long run."

"That sort of rethink would perhaps best be saved for after your Second Honor is secured, if you truly care to receive it."

"My only concern is for the quality of my work."

Ogi smiled. "You felt your work would suffer if you did not, as you put it, commit more hours to self-improvement? Are you having personal problems that may affect your performance as well as the workload of your coworkers?"

Adam sighed, trying not to lose his countenance halfway through this futile examination with its foregone conclusions. "Honestly, two days of slightly-reduced work hours hardly constitutes—"

"You know perfectly well that it is not solely up to you to evaluate your work. Self-monitoring is of course our first line of defense against slack operations, but when that fails—"

"Fails? If it had come to that I would have received a written warning, an alert from my workstation, some notification of reassignment or compulsory counseling. If I were at risk of losing my commendations I know what the official procedure is and this is not part of it."

Ogi narrowed his eyes. "There are subtle ways, Adam. You do not know everything. You have never been an administrator. You are privy only to the information designated to your station."

"And you've never been a member of the Central System. You're just as much a functionary as I am. And beyond that, there's—" He stopped. He swallowed. He was out of his depth. Also he had possibly gone too far in reminding a superior of their own insignificance. Besides, he was clearly giving the man exactly what he wanted by getting this frustrated.

"As a man coming up on his Second Honor, a man who has never passed that milestone, you should not be so confident that you know what lies before you. This meeting may be vital to your advancement, Adam. Or your lack thereof."

The distant buzzer sounded; involuntarily Adam turned to look. Ogi chuckled.

"You may go," he said. "I have all the information I need and I trust that you will look to your work."

Adam met the man's eyes and held his gaze for as long as he could bear. He couldn't keep from looking down as he obediently got up to leave.

Damn, thought Adam as he returned to the lift. He tried a polite nod to the receptionist as he passed her but she seemed oblivious.

They couldn't have done a better job of suppressing my elevated wellness levels if they'd intended it.

He shouldn't take his advancement for granted, true. But did he really care? Maybe the proper "example" would be to really screw things up. This was a sobering thought and he did not like it. It was easier to stay on the path. Ogi was quite right to imply that.

If only he had some sense of self outside of his work record, he wouldn't feel so easily manipulated. Alas.

It was annoying to know that everyone in the Lounge as well as his wing had heard his summons, as if the System didn't already know exactly where he was, as if they couldn't have sent a dispatch to him privately. They had chosen to broadcast it simply to humiliate and draw attention to him. Then again, most everyone who knew him knew he was due for his Second Honor and would probably assume it was related to that.

Malgam would have heard it, too; where was she? Still avoiding him? Finished with him forever, now that she'd—?

Come on. He didn't need her. Twelve hours ago he'd been a free man, he was still free now. Well, maybe not free, but certain things didn't burden him and they needn't now.

He reported to his office and connected himself to his computer. It lit up slowly, its screen a gentle, soothing purple color as if it wanted to commiserate with him for what it knew he had been through. "It's your fault," he muttered. "You snitched on me. I can't believe you. Haven't I given this company everything? I take one little break, do one little thing for myself, all within the fucking parameters. This is what I get for taking your advice." He poked the screen with his finger, making the plasma quiver. The screen dimmed slightly, as if he had hurt it. Damn them for making these things so emotional. "Can we get to work now?" He opened up a battery of concentration games and they resonated pleasantly as he worked with them. He felt a growing intensity, though, a fear lest he make mistakes or be anything less than extraordinary. Before Ogi had become his boss, Adam had been accustomed to firm but constructive guidance; Ogi behaved differently, vigilant for threats, for danger, for competition. A call was coming in. Adam took a deep breath. "Trust me," he said to the computer. "I can do this." He answered the call.

"This is Adam at Platform Nine. State your request at will."

There was silence at first, a crackling. God, of course. Now the hardware was going haywire somewhere. He would wait a few more seconds and then run a diagnostic. Suddenly, "Hello," sputtered the caller.

"This is Adam at Platform Nine," he repeated. "State your request at will."

"Hello."

"Yes, hello. This is Adam at Platform Nine. State your request at will."

"This is... Cookie."

"State your request, Cookie." The computer didn't seem sure where the call was originating from; finally it settled on Platform 72. Odd. A glitch.

"I want a cookie."

"I cannot assist you in that matter. If you would please—"

"I want a cookie."

"You may not be aware of this but there are severe penalties for prank-calling Customer Service. You are tying up a line that could be used for vital information exchange."

"I'm sorry. I misspoke. Please, help me."

"State your request."

"Please, check my account."

"Verify your identity please by focusing on your second-level passcode."

"Cookie."

"No, don't say it, hold it in your mind. Damn it. Please tell me 'cookie' isn't your second-level passcode." If so he would have to assist this person in assigning a new one. Surely the system would never have accepted a cookie for a security passcode.

"I'm sorry. I'll concentrate."

"Are we..." He really didn't want to go through the passcode assignment process today, especially not with this person who didn't seem to understand. He'd let it slide this time. "Okay. Your second-level passcode: just hold it in your mind for ten seconds and don't say anything."

The computer successfully verified the passcode identification. It felt like a small miracle.

"All right. I have accessed your account and you are still at code green. You are authorized to spend today." This person was a Level X, on a very small credit allowance. There was no indication on the account that the person had spent any of their credits in quite some time. Adam felt fairly certain that there was some kind of confusion here, an

error, either that or someone was intentionally wasting his time. Perhaps the higher ups were testing him again. The computer flashed at him to draw his attention, having sensed that he was wandering. Great, more points lost. "Did you hear me?" he said. "Your account is perfectly green. I suggest you go get yourself something nice. Something that'll really make you happy." What was he even saying right now?

"Happy!" the caller exclaimed.

"Yes, happy," Adam repeated. Don't rush it. Got to really do this. It was up to the caller to declare the matter resolved.

"Thank you!" said 'Cookie'. Sounded satisfied enough... Nothing more seemed forthcoming.

"Is there anything else?" Adam asked, in spite of himself.

"No one is here," the caller said. The line went dead.

Adam sat there for a minute, unsure what to do and baffled by the apparent failure of the hardware. Cautiously he marked the matter Resolved. "All right?" he asked the computer, which was resuming its game program without further comment either way.

He couldn't help questioning himself as he continued, trying to focus on the games. He hadn't verified whether or not the passcode had been a problem. He wasn't a security expert. Whoever the person was, they should have had an Identity Agent assigned to them, to monitor and ensure the health of their credentials. The Agent would know how to work with them to keep them protected regardless of their needs. Probably it was nothing like that. The system may also be acting strangely, or perhaps he himself was being unclear. Or maybe it was the language drift.

Adam looked up from his desk, tried to see over the wall of his cubicle, tried to pick up some smattering of conversation from the Pod. It seemed quiet. He could hear keystrokes and hushed speech. Someone out there was working. He felt a little lonely.

Sensing this, the computer segued into a facial-recognition game, one that required Adam to identify the emotion displayed in a series of images. He was shown people in different situations and postures, some interacting, some just faces. There was a positive bias today; no one seemed to be angry or in conflict. Soon he was enjoying it, identifying Love. Trust. Unguarded. Aroused. Laughing. Playful. Intrigued. Co-operative. Malgam. Malgam? He blinked. Had that been Malgam's face? Perhaps she'd volunteered her likeness for the program, but that shouldn't have been allowed. It was distracting and would create bias if the faces were people the test subject knew... Maybe it was just

someone who looked like her. He took a deep breath. What if *everything* went haywire? What would he do? Kill himself? Get angry and indignant and insist that it wasn't happening? He would have to cope with it like everything else, so why get angry now? Why let the slightest thing rattle him? Gift exchange. Sport. Intimacy. Serene. Confident. Thank god, another call.

"This is Adam at Platform Nine. State your request at will."

"I'd like to apply for a new job, please."

This person seemed lucid and calm. Adam rejoiced inwardly. "I can't complete that process with you, but since we are speaking together I can help you compile your initial request to be submitted to the governing body of your Platform."

"Yes, let's do that."

He opened a blank transfer request form which immediately auto-filled with the caller's identity data. Some of it he would have to enter manually to ensure that it was current.

"Please confirm: What is your current job?"

"PA Constant Music Programmer."

He hadn't heard of such a thing. Must be an experiment particular to that Platform.

"Describe your job responsibilities."

"I monitor the moodlets of a random sampling of Platform inhabitants and I program music to arouse or depress emotional states. At my discretion."

"Are you responsible for the entire Platform or just one wing?"

"The entire Platform, now. I was good at it. Productivity increased 9% in my wing while I was programming."

"I'll note that in the Distinctions section of your form. What is your reason for seeking reassignment?"

"I'm the only one who has to be acutely aware of it, but the music is terrible."

"Are there procedures in place to rotate you out of this responsibility?"

"No. They just put me up here and closed the door."

That didn't seem right, either. Adam soldiered on with the form. "I'll be sure to mark that into the notes section. Is there anything else I should include?"

"If possible I'd like to know who writes this stuff. I suspect it's not a person."

The line crackled again as if it were about to go dead; Adam made a few frantic keystrokes to reroute the signal and keep it going so he could complete the form. That was close.

"Great. We're almost done. I just need to transmit a copy of this form to you and to your supervisors. A copy of the form must remain in your possession. If for any reason your supervisors fail to take action, it is your responsibility to follow up. You can call this number and ask for me. I will retain your case file for ninety days, after which it will be automatically destroyed and we will have to start over." He transmitted the documents; they went through with no problem. He felt surprised.

"Thank you!" said the caller.

"Thank you." Adam ended the call. Most definitely Resolved.

At the first rest interval of the night shift, Adam logged off and left the office. The corridors were quite dim and serene now. Most people were in bed or strolling about in their diaphanous evening clothes, taking the air, such as it was.

He went to the Lounge, picked up a cookie and a cup of tea. He sat on the communal couches arranged around the big viewing window. There was no view at this hour. Earth was mostly blocked by Platform Three in its current orientation. He peered off into space to try to catch a glimpse of the Moon, to see if the manufactories were visible. He wasn't sure if they were still manned, or if they were fully automated now as scheduled.

"Got in trouble with the higher ups, old boy?" It was Frey, good old Frey. He sat down next to Adam. As usual he held a cup that gave off the vaporous aroma of whiskey. He had to have hacked his node to up his allowance. Adam felt strangely approving of this. Also strangely relieved that someone had mentioned the PA call.

"They're just testing me. They know I'm due for an Honor." He found that the pride in his voice was mostly bluff at this point; he didn't care.

"They can be stingy about those. Maybe they're right to be. Can't just hand out the stars right and left or nobody'd have anything to aspire to."

"I suppose." Adam sipped his tea and inhaled the mixed perfume in the air they were sharing, scents of anise, whiskey and Frey's cologne. Something as extravagant as that cologne would have cost a few credits and had probably been shipped from a luxury living Platform. It might even have a brand. A natural ingredient. Adam hadn't bought anything in ages. Not even an extra session in the baths. "Actually I think it quite arbitrary," he said, returning to the topic of his harrassment (as he now considered it) by the higher ups. "Most disorienting."

"A little disorientation is good for one. We're not in heaven, after all. Everything comes crashing down eventually."

Adam laughed. "An amusing image. All those Platforms falling out of the sky."

"Back to Earth."

"Causing massive devastation, naturally." *Here we go again*, Adam thought. With Frey, the topic always seemed to turn retrograde, and Adam always felt the same thrill when it did.

"Oh, no, my friend. These flimsy old Platforms are designed to burn up in the atmosphere, 100%."

"You sound dubious."

"The material burns pretty cold," Frey shrugged, "but sure, it'd cause a minor fluctuation planetside. No species can disappear from the cosmos without some kind of shockwave. Comforting, isn't it?"

"I try not to think about it."

"So, what's that you're reading?" Frey asked.

"Reading?"

"That book you've got there."

Adam looked where Frey was pointing, realized that *Ultimate Transcendence In The Green* was sitting beside him. He had no memory of retrieving it from his bunk.

"Well, it's something Malgam gave to me. I haven't looked at it yet."

"That girl has some interesting ideas," Frey said. "Make sure you keep your feet on the ground when she's around."

"Do you know her that well?" He struggled to keep the jealousy out of his voice. How absurd. Simultaneously he now felt suspicious the book was some kind of joke between the two of them. The feeling passed quickly.

"We've spent time together here and there. She's not a recluse like you, Adam. She actually has time for friends. Lots of friends. Everyone loves her. She may not do much actual work on the phones but it's no secret she's given a lot of comfort around here. People say she knows something she won't talk about, something about the System. Personally I think she's a spy from Central."

Adam laughed. "That's a good one."

"I always thought you two were close; did she ever tell you anything?"

"We are close, but not in that way. We don't go into details."

"You help each other live in the moment, I suppose." Frey grinned, his moustache twitching over the rim of his glass.

"You could say that." Adam felt ready for this conversation to end. Now he was glad he had the book. "I think I'll go to the Library and read for a bit."

"There's a place to go when you want privacy," Frey laughed. "Don't know why we've even got one, who even reads books anymore when it's all on the wrist-newser?"

"The wrist-newser is no way to read," Adam said, shaking his head as he got up to leave. He felt at home having this argument again, it was another recurring theme in the song of their acquaintanceship. Frey was always the devil's advocate when it came to technology; Adam was the Earthist who could summon up sentiments of great simplicity. Theirs was an old-time relationship, full of purely ceremonial conflict.

Chapter Five

When Adam reached the Library it was, indeed, empty.

There were shelves stacked with various media, and somehow they were always neatly arranged and all was free from signs of neglect. It must have been someone's job to keep the place orderly and clean, though Adam had never seen this person or witnessed them in action.

There was an array of chairs placed around a gently ovoid window which most of the time afforded a good view, uncluttered by Platforms.

He sat in one of the chairs. It was low and comfortable. He felt nervous about opening the book so for a good long moment he looked around and savored the serenity of his surroundings. The only thing that could improve this place would be a hinged door, one that could be closed at least.

He felt a strange sense of vertigo as he looked down at the book in his lap. It was an old-fashioned hardbound paper book, nothing more. Its title was stamped into the plasticky leatherish cover which was, of course, green in color. The author's name was featured in smaller type below. All the letters were embossed with worn-off gold-colored ink.

Ultimate Transcendence In The Green
by Candy Barnes

That absurd name again. He opened it and began to read.

there's a lot you don't know, even about yourself.

if you're a woman you will find yourself especially short of guidance because neither physical nor spiritual science has prioritized female bodies for many centuries. that is about to change, but change will not come fast enough for you.

if you're a man you are most likely caught up in a surfeit of theories about yourself, all passing themselves off as biological facts. there's the lore. the legends. the archetypes. the ancestors. many strict and unforgiving patterns. and then come the new ways that creep in to threaten what you falsely assumed was your identity.

if you are neither man nor woman the wisdom that most pertains to you has long been blocked. it is ancient and it is of the future, for we are still trapped in a punishing age of dualistic thinking.

but those who know themselves to be outsiders have a head start and will leave the rest in their dust.

none of us are served by common knowledge.

the old ways will never forgive, never acknowledge change, for they are dead. if you read them as though they are alive they will continue to insist that you act out obsolete models conceived by people that could never have imagined a being such as you are. only the living can forgive. only the living can adapt. only the living can perceive. Begin now to perceive. Remember even this text is dead. Only you are alive.

I was in life an inconsequential person but I will tell you what I know.

Do not be concerned if my words are strange to you. They are densely encoded. They will alert you to this fact as you read, but the words will not and cannot inform you of everything they may contain. I cannot even claim permanent control of them due to language drift. Fortunately a protective spell has been placed over this book to avoid deep trouble coming into your life as a result of your inevitable misunderstanding. I recommend you take a moment right now to believe this.skr Your belief will bring this protection into the present.

The next page was blank. Adam shut the book, harder than he meant to. He looked around at the Library, instinctively afraid he might have disturbed someone. It was somehow even quieter than before. It seemed late.

When he got up to walk out of the room his feet sank into the floor in a most disorienting way. He looked down and saw he was standing on a soft green carpet of some strangely familiar substance that was like nothing he'd ever experienced in the Platform environment. Greens and yellows, blades and tendrils rising from the floor— Plant life! Such as one might find in a wild meadow... on Earth. He had memories of such places, from his childhood. The sensation was keenly familiar and filled him with bolts of joy. Looking up, however, he saw he was still in the Library, the small, close room. There seemed nowhere to go, only this paradox. He approached the wall. It had an ornate and shifting pattern that didn't match the overall design of this Platform's habitations and workspaces. He didn't remember noticing it before. He reached out to touch it and it gave under the pressure of his finger, wavered like a curtain. It, the wall itself, was made of something like fabric, or tissue. He slipped his hand between its folds and felt a breeze on his fingers, saw light pouring through from the other side.

He opened his eyes in darkness, in the familiar smell and texture of his bunk. Some kind

of dream he'd just had. Disturbing. Grass beneath the feet. The forbidden desire.

"Time," he muttered quietly. His clock illuminated itself and showed the hour to be 05:40.

In spite of the strange dream he felt calmer than ever. He had his coffee in the Lounge and watched the empty maintenance walkways as usual. He thought he saw some small shivery movement out there but even if he did, what would it prove? He felt he had bigger concerns now, more immediate than the possible existence of any space cryptids. He was concerned about his job and relationships. It all seemed to be leading up to something. He wanted to read that book again but knew it was dangerous to indulge anything that felt like a craving.

"Good morning." It was Malgam, at his side again, like always. Impulsively he reached out and touched her shoulder. It was so good to have her close by.

"Good morning," he said.

"It's so peaceful today."

"Yes."

"Did you begin the book?"

"I did, actually."

"I hope you enjoy it. Will you come over to the small couch with me?"

They sat down on a small couch, placed their coffee cups on the low table in front of them.

"Thank you," she said, "for yesterday."

He just smiled and forgot to say anything.

"I enjoyed it very much," she said.

"As did I." In fact he couldn't even begin to say what it had meant to him. "I feel alive again."

"I hope you can also realize how dangerous that is. You got called up to Admin, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"They have ideas about how they want us all to live and work. Naturally they fear any change. They want you to keep doing your job."

"I intend to."

"I'm sure you do. However, they'll be extremely critical now, especially if you show any signs of personal growth."

"I thought we were supposed to seek personal growth."

"Seek, not achieve. Anyway, they'll probably forgive you as long as your performance is consistent with past expectations."

"You seem worried."

"Nothing good comes of special attention."

"The System isn't here to hold us back, Malgam. It wasn't designed that way."

"True. It wasn't designed that way. Things change, though. Think of Earth History. Every system of government eventually becomes oppressive. Every institution established for the good of mankind eventually starts preserving itself at the cost of mankind."

"Malgam, that's not true. The cycle was broken when we left the closed ecosystem, restored it to its balance. There's no more competition. No need for the rise and fall of empires now that we can feed everyone."

"Just be careful," she said sadly.

"About yesterday," he said.

"Yes?"

"You said we could talk, once we had spent some time separately."

"Thank you for respecting my boundaries. I needed some time to experience the implications."

"And?"

She smiled. "I would very much like to keep seeing you, Adam." She touched his face.

"I agree! I mean, I would like that, too." He was pleased, involuntarily moved closer to her. "I'm not sure we completely understand each other, though."

"Of course not."

"I don't want you to think that I'm—"

"Adam, one thing I do believe in is non-attachment. Now more than ever. I mean, the way things are going in this world. There are things you don't know yet. And even if it was all as it appeared, we would still have to lose everything eventually. I am prepared to love you unreservedly, but that's all. I know where I'm going and eventually I will go somewhere you can't follow." Straightening her posture, she withdrew from the overlap of their zones. She reached for her coffee, took a sip, then propped her feet on the table. "Let's just enjoy this, shall we?"

"Yes. Yes. Absolutely." He was glowing. He didn't care what she'd said up to now. She loved him, he loved her, and they were together.

"Do you still watch for the Platform Snakes?"

He laughed. "That was just a silly obsession."

She sipped her coffee. "Is that so wrong?"

Life would be good now, he thought, as he headed to work after his coffee date with his new lover. He'd never felt this way before. Life would be good, not just adequate. He would be happy, not just successful. With her, getting to see her, getting to touch her, having someone in his life who was more than just a casual acquaintance or colleague... He had something to do besides succeed at work. Screw the stars on his epaulet.

When he signed on to his workstation he found a message alerting him to an unresolved case file. Damn. He'd forgotten to follow up on that Platform 106 case. Suddenly he was bothered by a glaring fact: there was nothing he could do that would be of any concrete use. All he could do was compile and submit unverifiable data. Alphanumeric sequences with no tactile correlaries, no basis in... All the same, he'd damn well better be seen to be doing his job. It wasn't his fault, this was how things worked and he didn't plan on being the one left holding the hot potato... He sighed. *Gotta just get this off my desk. That's all.*

Allegation(s): Medical malpractice.

Subject's records enclosed.

Action: Standard Procedure. All physicians who have had contact with Subject must turn over all notes pertaining to this case for Central review. Determine if appropriate attention was or is being given. Ruling within 10 Business Days.

Compiled by Agent 24601. Agent submitting this report is not a physician. Agent affirms no opinion on the matter. Agent has no relevant qualifications or experience.

Subject must protest within 90 days if other action is desired. After 90 days all case files are void and must be resubmitted for fresh consideration.

Easy enough. All boilerplate. Again his hand trembled slightly as he marked the issue Resolved. He was starting to fear his computer's opinion of him.

Finished with his data entry, he put himself on call. A transmission came in almost immediately.

"This is Adam at Platform Nine. State your request at will."

"What is your name?" the caller asked.

"Adam."

"Hi, Adam."

"What's your request?"

"I want you to crash your operating system."

Adam sighed. "Be immediately aware that it is a serious infraction to prank the Call Center. As for seditious comments of a particularly dangerous nature like the one you just made, you are allowed one warning before you will receive a yellow flag on your personal record. Why would you say that?"

"Because I can see through your charades."

Adam started checking boxes to prepare for the inevitable non-res. Delusional. Paranoiac. Uncooperative. Possibly hungry. Spurious. "I'm here to help," he said. He'd at least try not to trigger an investigation.

"Can you help me with my homework?"

"Are you a child?" Adam sighed in frustration, rubbed his forehead. He wasn't supposed

to ask demographical questions, but calls from people under twelve just weren't supposed to be routed here. Now he'd had two questionable incomings and was starting to feel mixed up. "I can request a tutor for you if you'd like."

"What math question did I ask?"

"What is the nature of your homework?"

"A chair is meant to be sat upon. That is the nature of a chair."

"I am obliged to terminate this call if no direct request can be articulated to me. An Advocate will be made available to verify your full participation." He put in a work order for an Advocate to report to the caller's location or residence within 24 hours, minimum possible risk alertness. "Citizen?"

"Appalling. Your callousness is appalling."

That could be construed as a threat of complaint. Adam decided to press it. "Do you wish to make a complaint concerning my handling of the call?"

"I would never do that."

"You are within your rights."

"I have no rights."

"This is my third and final solicitation for you to state an actionable request."

"Don't be afraid."

Adam terminated the call. As he had taken appropriate action by sending the Advocate, he confidently marked the issue Resolved, with... notes. Something strange was going on. He doubted his superiors would do anything about it. They were certainly alert to any failing on his part but not to a failing of the System as a whole; that was not really their job, was it?

Time to get out of here, he thought idly. He had no real intention to quit so early or even take a break, but next thing he knew, he was in the Library again.

Somewhere within himself he knew something was wrong, not with the System anymore, but with him. Perhaps not it was not even wrong, exactly, but it was certainly different and that was unsettling. He couldn't remember how he had come to be in the Library but

on the surface of his awareness was a tremendous sense of purpose, gladness. He must have come here intentionally, must have intended to do what he was doing: look at the books.

What did they give us to read?

Somehow he was not surprised or disturbed to find no titles on the spines of the books, and no words on the pages, either; in fact he was no longer in the Library at all. The light had gotten dimmer. The air was moist. Like he was in the baths. It wasn't the baths, or the Library; he was somewhere Real, and he could hear something. Instinctively he knew it was the sound of something running through the forest towards him.

Now he was running, too. Everything here green, hot, wet. He was struck in the face with branches. He was bleeding. He was stumbling. He was being chased! He had to succeed, had to run and dodge and evade the assailant. He was not afraid but joyful. *God, if it catches me... what bliss. I will be torn apart.*

And then it was gone again. He was staring out the observation window now, as always, looking down on the maintenance walkways of the exterior Platform. Before he could even wonder what had just happened, something else happened. In a flash, there and gone, he saw a quivering rush of Life go swimming over the walkway of Wing B. They shimmered, their color changing in waves, a rapid bioluminescent spectrum. They moved in just the way Platform snakes were said to move when they were swarming, but much faster than he had imagined. They were beautiful. He dropped the coffee he hadn't realized he was holding.

"My god. They're really out there," he murmured, dizzy, incredibly dizzy.

"Who's out there?"

It was Miron, Miron was at his side. He was not dreaming anymore. Adam recovered himself, looked down at the spilled coffee then back at Miron. "Nothing," he said. Miron continued to stare anxiously out the window, trying to see whatever Adam had seen. Adam wished he would go away.

"What was the deal with management the other day?" Miron said, his abstracted eyes still peering out into space suspiciously. "They're promoting you, right?"

"Yes, that's it," said Adam. What was going on? Was this conversation really happening? How had he even gotten here?

"That's good," said Miron. "I was worried for a while. Didn't want to hear of you getting in trouble. Couldn't imagine a reason! Sometimes I get a little paranoid about those higher ups. Think they do all these random checks and stuff just to throw us off. I think they're just jealous that we are the ones with the useful jobs."

"Everybody's a little paranoid about something," Adam said. Miron had distracted him so effectively he could barely hold onto the reality of what he'd just seen. A week ago, Adam only knows what kind of behavioral episode it would've triggered, this Platform snake vision. He had bigger worries now. No wonder the snakes wait to appear to him when he was least likely to take action against them... Could they be sentient? Maybe they were telepathic somehow, maybe they were sending his dreams.

"I know it's silly." Miron was still talking. "You know, it's odd. They've stopped bringing new people here. Have you noticed? Those two who were at the counseling the other day, they're the last I have seen in over a month. There used to be turnover. Do you suppose the higher ups are preparing to downsize here, let some of us die off unreplaced?"

"Wouldn't that be something? Funny, I was just thinking about that." Adam's blood pressure was settling now; he'd happily allow the unreality to go away. "Yes, I was just thinking, how we would have negative growth if not for all the new hires."

"The other Platforms must be awfully prolific. Unless they've stopped growing too and that's why..."

"You'd think they keep sending anyone they had who was qualified. This Platform is too important."

"That's what they tell us," Miron sighed, "but honestly, I don't know who we are working for. All the calls I get lately are just more and more insane."

Adam sighed. "You too, huh?"

"Well," Miron laughed, "let's not be so gloomy first thing in the morning eh? How's your lady friend?"

"Did you ever have anyone, Miron?" Adam was truly curious. "I am so inexperienced. In the relational part of it anyway."

"Of course, yes, they tell you all about the practical bits and pieces of putting bodies together..." Miron trailed off, as if he would abandon the inquiry. "No," he said finally. "I have no wisdom for you." He laughed. "Why do you think I am so curious about your love life? It's practically too late for me to have one of my own. Sometimes I worry the

whole world will just gradually wind down til it stops. It gives me hope to see young people doing normal things."

"Doesn't feel normal," Adam murmured. *Or young.*

"Not everything can be solved."

"She gave me a book. I wonder if she means it as some kind of coded message."

"She gave you a gift?"

"I don't know. Perhaps."

"A rare thing. We all have so little."

"We need little. Gift giving is retrograde."

"That nonsense. Don't look for answers anywhere but within yourself."

A gentle alarm bell sounded. "Attention, citizens of Wing B" said a soft voice over the PA. Again? "Good morning! A reminder: Today we celebrate an important anniversary for Adam Omnibus, Customer Service Agent. Five years ago, on or about this date, he received his First Honor and as his performance has been exemplary and steadily improving, according to standard procedure he will be awarded his Second Honor in a ceremony today. Attendance is not compulsory but work duties will be relieved between the hours of 13:00 and 14:00 today so that all may enjoy the ceremony and congratulate our coworker. Message ends."

"Wow!" Miron exclaimed, and slapped Adam on the back. "So today's the day! Congratulations! Let me be the first!"

"Well, then yes, thank you!" Adam felt more disoriented than ever. Today was the day. He knew everyone would want to stand near him this morning and observe him on the phones, should he deign to clock in, which of course he would. And then there would be the cake, and rum punch, and everyone would fall silent as some official (it would most likely be Ogi) permanently affixed the second star to Adam's epaulet. The whole notion made him want to go to his bunk and hide.

"Well, are you going to go about your routine like an ordinary shmoe, or are you going to live it up today?" Miron asked.

"I... will set a good example," said Adam. "I should go to meditation."

"Excellent idea." Miron waved him off with adulation and pride. It made Adam very sad for some reason. He left his spilled coffee cup on the floor and walked away, toward the meditation chambers.

As he settled his naked body into the soft, clean, cushioned floor of the chamber, he knew it would be a struggle to achieve peace and quiet today. He had programmed the chamber for thirty minutes of silence and darkness (anything longer would require a special override; with some measure of consoling hope he wondered if maybe Second Honor recipients got extra priority). Thirty minutes wasn't much but today he would have to concentrate hard in order to bear it. His thoughts were flying. His central nervous system was excited and he was emotional over what had already transpired: the snakes, the promotion, loving Malgam, all of it. He hadn't seen Malgam in quite a few hours. He wished she were less independent.

The room darkened. He settled himself, closed his eyes.

He found himself back in the forest. Not just in his fantasies or his thoughts. Really there. His feet were in the mucky grasses again, his bare toes crinkling the leaves and detritus and earth. He was still naked, as if he had been beamed here directly from the meditation chamber.

Remembering what had happened last time, he was alert: a predator might be on its way. But nothing seemed to happen. There was birdsong, and light shining through the canopy, nothing else.

"Where am I?" he called out. "Who keeps bringing me here against my will?"

He felt silly for imagining anyone would answer. This was not a simulation. He was truly alone. He began to walk. It was hot. His feet were tender and the rocks and sticks hurt him.

Though the scenery was apparently without any kind of landmark, structure, or distinguishing feature— just trees and more trees— he soon got the feeling that he was going in circles. A rather small circle at that. He wasn't getting anywhere. He began to think he could detect the depressions in the earth where his own feet had just passed.

The lights came up in the meditation chamber. He opened his eyes, breathing heavily, fatigued as if he had been walking for hours.

As he got dressed he began to wonder if he should visit Doctor Ta to get himself checked out. Maybe there was some sort of ancient neurotoxin hiding in that book, some kind of mold or activated virus. Maybe it was affecting Malgam. The book could be a big hoax or even a trap, designed to brainwash people with strange language, retrograde ideas and embedded poisons, with magick.

No one made a big deal of him when he entered the Pod, but after he had settled in to his workstation, logged on and completed the routine checks and clearances, people quietly began to gather around him in anticipation of his first call of the day. He tried to be composed even though he knew it was bound to be a bad show. He didn't want to be cynical or ungrateful to these innocent people, but he had barely had time to pull himself together following a major hallucination... He would simply do his best. It wasn't his place to suddenly start telling everyone that things were falling apart.

He sensed Malgam behind him. She put her hand on his shoulder, allowed him to return her touch. He felt comforted. *At least someone sensible is here*, he thought.

He was racking up big points on an attention game and really impressing everyone when the screen dimmed itself to transition to his first call. *Here we go*.

"This is Adam at Platform Nine. State your request at will." He could hear a few people tittering very softly with delight behind him.

There was some interference on the line. "Be proud of not believing in Jesus," the caller said. No name or biographical information was displayed, but sensors were picking up extremely regular vital signs along with some environmental data. But this was odd. It kept switching between Condition Normal and Extreme Heat.

"Do you have an emergency?" Adam asked.

"What do you like to eat?"

"No, not a personal question about me; something you need."

"What is two plus two times eighty?"

"320. I am not a calculator."

"But you aren't human either, are you?" the voice scoffed.

"I can assure you that you are speaking to a human. I am prepared to process any—"

"I can assure myself that I didn't."

"Why did you call?"

"My house is on fire."

There were stifled gasps and murmurs from the assembly. Adam was concerned but dubious. Malgam stood nearby in a formal but confident posture that reassured him. He glanced at her and nodded, one seasoned agent to another, but her eyes were calmly set on his screen.

"I see no clear indication of danger in my environmental readout," Adam said to the caller, "but I will contact your emergency services immediately." He did so; like clockwork they responded, somewhat faster than normal. He'd barely had time to click Send.

"I see some reason to think that," the voice was saying, still calm.

"Are you in danger?"

"Yes, why do you ask?"

"Emergency services are on their way."

"They're all in boxes, too. I'm a computer."

Suddenly Malgam's hand shot out from behind him and terminated the call. She shut down his workstation completely, using an emergency override keystroke Adam didn't even think she had clearance for. Everyone exclaimed in shock and protest. Adam took off his headset and turned to look at her. Everyone was looking at her.

"It's Resolved," she said. "I'm sorry, everyone. I had to stop it."

She turned and left the room.

"Oh, Adam!" said Andrea. "You were doing just fine!"

Adam felt the urge to run after Malgam, but he made himself pause for a moment and think of other things besides the overwhelming emotional magnetism of love.

"That was strange," said a man standing behind him somewhere, whose voice was familiar but whose name Adam couldn't recall. "The call, I mean. Has anyone else been

getting stuff like that? Like they're totally messing with us."

There were some murmurs but mostly people looked down, not wanting to talk about it.

"I'm upset," Andrea said softly. "She shouldn't have interfered like that, that's very bad. It spoiled everything."

"Please don't worry," Adam said. He stood up. It was time to comfort everyone. "Don't worry about Malgam and don't worry about me. Don't worry about anything!" He coughed. "Look. Maybe something strange is going on with the System, or the other Platforms. Maybe we're being tested. Who knows? But we are here because we know how to work within difficult situations. We are used to absorbing the confusion of the world. We take care of ourselves. We purge the confusion. We flow within it like fish in a river."

A river. Someone laughed uncomfortably.

"You know, flow. Energy flow. We don't put up obstructions, we don't ask questions." He shook his head. He was failing here. "Anyone want to join me for coffee?" he said finally. "I am, after all, the superior Agent in this Pod, and it's my special day. I'm sure no one will be punished for obeying me." He smiled all around at them. They seemed comforted. This wasn't really like him but he was compelled by the situation to show leadership. He walked away from his workstation and everyone followed him meekly out of the Pod.

They sat at a large round table with their coffees in cups in front of them. Some clutched the warm mugs, others sat with their hands at their sides, in their laps, palms-down on the table, in various attitudes of discomfort. "This is nice," Adam said. "We should do this more often." He paused, maintained composure as his brain spun frantically in search of words. "You know, I don't think I've met all of you formally. Can we introduce ourselves?" He stood up. "I'm Adam Omnibus, getting my stupid star today. I hope I'm not milking it too much." He sat down. Everyone laughed softly. On cue, the person seated clockwise next to Adam stood up, and soon Adam had all their names and ranks filed away in his memory. He felt more secure somehow, more ready. "Thanks for doing that," he said.

Miron stood up abruptly, compelled by some heroic spirit. "I'd like to propose a toast. A coffee toast." He laughed. "Is that okay with everyone?"

All the people at the table were warming up, smiling, looking to Miron now.

"I propose a toast: to us. No matter what happens. I've been here longer than anyone and

I've never seen a braver bunch of people. I wish the higher ups would praise you more but I regularly take the time to review the stats on the various Pods here and we are consistently the highest-performing group on the whole Platform."

Could that be true? Adam thought Miron was getting a bit carried away. But he was grateful that the toast hadn't been in his honor. It was a good gesture, very good.

Everyone applauded and said "To us!" then sipped their coffee.

"Mm," said Andrea. "It's good today."

"It's the same every day," said the man next to her, Lute.

"How could it change?" agreed Eltinfos, the middle aged woman directly across from Adam. "It's all recycled waste."

"Gross," said Andrea.

"Haven't you ever fielded these questions with callers?" Eltinfos probed, sipping her coffee. "What do you say to them?"

"I tell them to refer to their Human Rights briefing," said Andrea. "It describes exactly how all this is achieved."

"It's propaganda," said Eltinfos, setting her cup down, a gathering tension in her shoulders.

"Well, aren't we supposed to direct them back to the Main Opinion?"

"I try to give them the *best* information I can." Eltinfos folded her arms.

"Your computer just lets you say whatever you want?" The pitch of Andrea's voice was faltering as it was rising, fading away to a squeak.

"You've got a lot to learn," Eltinfos muttered, looking away. She seized her coffee cup and drank, failing to hide the slight tremor in her hand. These people weren't used to having arguments with one another.

"We all have a lot to learn," Miron said, comfortingly.

"Yes," agreed Adam, not sure it was his place to Resolve this. It was a good conversation they were having. The impulse to disarm it, to stop it, was overwhelming. Maybe he was

Management material after all. "Well," he said, "this isn't a counseling session, but we can still speak freely. Is everyone having unusual activity on their lines?"

No one seemed eager to speak.

"I mean, I just want to give you guys a chance to help each other. There's a lot of combined knowledge and experience here."

"What's the point, anyway?" said Eltinfos. She was holding her coffee with both hands, staring at it. "They're all abandoned."

"What?" Andrea hissed.

"All the Platforms. Haven't you guessed?"

"Eltin," said Miron softly. "That's really very disturbing. What have you heard?"

"Nothing. In my position I used to get constant Message updates from the Main Office. I used to get feedback on unusual calls. I've stopped even trying with them. They ignore me. Don't get me wrong. I don't doubt they're out there. Someone is, someone in the System. But I'm sure they're hiding something. From us, specifically. And what could be the explanation for how none of the calls lately make sense?"

"Maybe it's just social disorder. Bad situations on some of the Platforms. I mean these things come in rashes," Miron said. "They always have."

"That's true. But it feels so different this time."

"Unsubstantiated. Rumor." Andrea was holding herself and looking angrily at the table. "I only got here a couple months ago. My Platform was fully functional when I left. Explain that!"

Eltinfos shrugged. The table went quiet. Adam wished they were in a counseling room. There was no harmonic disruptor here to make everything seem peaceful again, no positive ions and oxygen to get them high. There was no ceremony to do. He just had to let it be.

"Well," he said after several minutes, "let's go back to work."

They got up without any hesitation, resignedly filed over to the dish station and dropped their cups down the hole to be sterilized or vaporized or ejected straight into space, whatever it was that those machines really did. Eltinfos was right; the Human Rights

briefing certainly glossed over things. And who knows how much technology had advanced since it was written? The Briefing hadn't said anything about keeping itself up to date.

Adam was starting to feel like he would never want to put in a full day of work again. He really wasn't looking forward to more of the same on the lines. Nevertheless he logged back on to his terminal and tried to suck it up. More calls came in, nothing of interest, nothing satisfying, just more of the same confusion.

Finally it was time for the ceremony. The computer wanted to be the first to alert him. It did so with a cordially worded alert message that appeared on his screen: "Congratulations. Your Second Honors ceremony is about to begin. You may proceed to meeting room D. It has been a pleasure being your computer. Be aware that you may be given the opportunity to be relocated to a new workstation; I hope you will choose to return to this one." That hadn't happened five years ago when he'd gotten his First Honor. What odd little rituals the computers were developing.

He did as instructed and went to meeting room D, adjacent to his Pod. He was a few minutes early so that Ogi could pat him on the back and prepare him. It was his duty to be good. They both knew that.

"It's really nothing. But you will be asked to give a speech. I recommend you stick to a simple word of encouragement for your coworkers. No need to get fancy. Then I'll affix your star. Excited?"

"Oh, sure."

"Yes. The stars are nice, aren't they? So fetching. You realize you also gain increased security priority, don't you? You can enter any wing on the Platform now and have full and extended access to recreational zones 24 hours a day."

"No, I didn't realize that."

"That's why we're careful who we trust with these."

"Well, I'm honored."

"Don't blow it."

Adam was surprised Ogi hadn't found more threatening things to say. But the day was young. Adam drifted towards the punch bowl and got himself a little cupful. It didn't taste very good. He didn't like being alone in the room with Ogi. The man didn't like to move

much; he just remained at his post by the podium, shuddering gently as if he wished to sit but would not. The ceremony was always done with everyone standing at full attention. Fortunately it would be brief.

People soon began filing in. They eyed the buffet table with interest as they lined up in an orderly semicircle, filling the front of the room first. Adam and Ogi stood behind the podium, waiting. In the back of the room Malgam suddenly appeared. She was smiling encouragingly at Adam. He felt his strength return.

"Well, then," Ogi said. "Shall we start?" He drew himself up as best he could and, mustering an officious bluster loud enough for the whole room to hear: "We are here to honor our longtime co worker Adam Omnibus, Customer Service Agent, who receives his Second Honor today. Once his star is affixed he may use the title Customer Service Agent With Distinction, and may enjoy all the honors and privileges associated therewith. Adam, please say a few words for us to remember on this occasion!" Ogi stepped aside.

Adam came to the podium. He looked at Malgam. She seemed to be warning him of something; her stony expression bade him be cautious. He looked around the room for the tall figure of Eltinfos; she was not there.

"Our post is a challenging one," he began, gripping the podium to still his shaking hands. "We are honored by the System's trust in us. We will be the last to turn aside from duty. We will be here providing full System support to every single Citizen who needs it, til the bitter end!"

He glanced at Ogi, who did not look pleased. Adam didn't know what to say. What did he really know about the situation right now? Again he was being called to lead.

"We are the ambassadors of calm and order. We look to ourselves, and each other, to create and perpetuate an atmosphere of utter confidence. No matter what occurs." He coughed. "I know strange things have been happening lately, everyone."

He heard Ogi grunt disapprovingly.

"We can only trust in the System. For it is us. And we are it. Thank you." He turned away from the podium abruptly, went to the middle of the stage and stood in a solemn posture, just waiting for Ogi to get it over with. He did not want to see Malgam's reaction.

Ogi approached with the glittering fabric star and the small flat iron that was used to permanently bind it to his uniform. No eye contact was made while the star was affixed, but Adam could feel the heat of the iron near his face and despaired that he was in this man's power. Ogi stepped back, faced the audience, gestured grandly towards Adam. His

new star was shining and flashing in unison with his old one. Everyone applauded. He felt tears rise to his eyes, struggled to contain them. It seemed very foolish now, to have waited for this moment. He mourned his past self, the one that had had so much faith, had never been prepared to face this much confusion and doubt. He hoped no one would ask him where he saw himself in five years.

Chapter Six

Afterwards it was cocktail hour. Hors d'oeuvres, punch, tiny cups of what might have been alcohol. How grand. How generous. Everyone congratulated him but no one had more than a word or two to say, all caught up in their own thoughts. Soft music played. Finally Malgam appeared, took him by the elbow and pulled him aside gently.

"That wasn't a bad speech," she said. "You seemed so unsure, though. Were you watching Ogi?"

"I was."

"Has he threatened you in some way?"

"Not exactly. A few days ago he implied I was not worthy of Second Honor."

"He made sure you got it anyway. Interesting."

"What should I do?"

"Just stay calm for now. Read your book. Do your job. They're afraid you know something, or suspect something."

"I do."

"They're probably hoping to buy you off with this, get you back in the fold. You have that choice, Adam."

"What alternative is there?"

"It'll come to you. For now, there's little help I can offer. I would dearly like to be with you again, but I'm afraid it's too dangerous. They think I'm a bad influence."

"Perhaps you are, at that."

They laughed softly, sadly.

"I'm sorry, Adam, I wish we had more time. I wish we were in a position, well, the sort of people who just have fun. Doesn't seem like the case in this life. Soon I'll send you a message."

Back at his workstation, alone, he pored over the book. *Ultimate Transcendence In The Green*. If anyone appeared, to question him, he'd say he had forgotten to attach his node

to the computer after logging on, resulting in a timeout or some anomaly. They'd believe anything right now. With his new security clearance, perhaps he could manipulate the System even more. For now, he had no ideas of his own and was desperate for another path to show itself.

writers in the early days of this age toyed with concepts they would be ashamed of in future incarnations. glamorizing drug use and suicide and damaging sex, the suffering of others, dimmed and diluted. it was called realism then but we now recognize many different shades of what can be called reality, as well as a more "realistic" understanding of the artifice inherent in all communication,skr particularly fiction, where there should never have been a doubt! Even the grimmest most unflinching take on so called reality is still pure fantasy, the figment of a deranged fever dream.

that which has been transmitted in secret through the ages remains secret.

the intent of this book is not to put down the arts or any other human endeavor but rather to liberate them. at some point we desire to tell a new story. in a dark age, lightness emerges as revolution. Have you experienced this yet? What story are you telling?

This is terribly outdated, Adam thought, terribly irrelevant to my current circumstances.

If you are thinking you definitely need to get away from your computer, you are correct. More than you will ever know.

Maybe it was time to try out his new security permissions. He took up the book, slunk away from his workspace. He stopped by his bunk to tuck the book safely under his mattress, unsure why he was now so determined to hide it.

In all his years on this Platform, he had never been allowed to visit the other wings. Even though their functions were all thematically related, the normal person was not encouraged to move freely from section to section. Only those with security clearance or important business could pass. The head-nodes contained all clearances. At least, he had been told so. The borders were mapped out clearly for you; you had no reason to test them. Who knows if they even have the alarm systems they claim to have? He'd never know now. He had permission.

From the Hub it was possible to enter different parts of the Platform. The gateway was at one quiet end of the Lounge; most people seemed to simply forget it was there. He couldn't help but feel he was losing privilege rather than gaining it; how nice it would be to forget about the idea of the gateway. He also felt increasingly visible as he passed through the Lounge of Wing B, what with with his stars and the strange behavior he was

about to exhibit. Gone, too, was the comfortable neutrality of his surroundings, its homeyness. The gateway pinged quietly as he approached, acknowledging his right to enter. The transparent door slid open and he passed through into the empty connecting passage.

He wondered why there should be locked doors at both ends of a sealed passage. The answer was pretty obvious once the door closed behind him and he noted the discomfort it caused. The walkway was lighted but transparent. It felt like a long way to go, out there in the silence between the wings. He tried to think calmly.

The Hub would be the place where the Distinguished Agents would gather, if there was such a place. Looking across from the Wing B Lounge he had never seen a soul in the Hub. No one seemed to be there now, either, but he could get a closer look at the amenities.

Finally he reached the Hub and entered. *If I had had any expectations*, he thought wryly, *I would now be experiencing disappointment*. There were some outdated-looking workstations here, presumably for research or for leisurely networking; there was a food dispenser similar to the one in the Lounge; there was a pleasantly unobstructed view, but as ever there was nothing special to see outside. The most startling thing about it was how empty it was, how alone he felt. He could hear an unnerving whistling sound, like air escaping, or like wind. Whatever it was, it certainly gave one the urge to move on.

He selected the gate to Wing C. There was another empty, silent tube to walk through, and then the entryway to the counterpart Lounge. As he walked towards the Lounge he could see a few people seated in there, looking about the same as the people of his own wing. They'd be surprised when he came in, but no doubt they would behave with decorum. If he was lucky he wouldn't have to talk to anyone. He could assume an air of entitlement and walk through like some kind of official.

From inside the Lounge he could hear a faint high vocalizing coming from his left: the sounds of children. They must have some kind of nursery. He went over to look. Peeking around the doorway, he saw a woman in a rocking chair reading a book while several children played on the floor around her. A Childcare Professional? In the Call Center, of all places, providing service to the service providers. Why not? The citizens of Wing C had apparently determined that this was a necessity that could not be automated. He wondered if they had had to go through a long procedure to establish this room.

"Excuse me," he said, standing in the doorway.

The woman looked up. "Yes?"

"I'm... I gained my Second Honor today."

"You don't look like you're from around here," she remarked.

"I'm authorized to tour your wing of the Platform."

"I understand."

"What exactly do you do here?"

"Same as all the other wings, I imagine."

Adam found himself wondering why she didn't stand up, or salute him, or something.

"We don't have any children in Wing B," he said.

She shrugged, unimpressed. "Well, I guess this is where all the parents ended up, then. It only makes sense to consolidate."

"How many children do you have here?"

"More, recently. Lots of people moved here over the past couple months. Good thing we had room. Did they build on to your wing as well?"

"We are—" he swallowed, confused— "strictly limited to the space we have." Adding on to the Wing? When could that have happened? How was it possible?

She shrugged again. "Anyway, this is fascinating but I can't converse with you for too long. I am on duty."

"Of course." He moved away, on down the corridor. He came to what looked like a Library, similar to the one in his wing, except that this one was bustling with people. They appeared to be doing all kinds of research. Some were talking to one another in animated tones, some appeared to be reciting or composing poetry.

He approached a young man who was sitting by himself at a table, looking at a book.

"You read here?" Adam said to him.

"Write a lot, too."

"Why? What for?"

The man looked up and squinted at Adam. Adam watched his eyes fall upon the stars on Adam's epaulet. He then looked back at his book, probably now convinced that he was being tested. "It's considered a form of synthesis, to help the higher ups understand the information we're processing here, through the Call Center."

"Tell me, are you receiving weird calls lately?"

"Yes, and we've been spending extra time in here researching and interpreting that. Are you joining this team?"

"I'm from Wing B."

"You're cleared to move freely. That must be nice."

"I'm not sure what I'm supposed to be doing."

"Well, you'll probably get in trouble for coming over here without being assigned. I had a buddy who was Second Honor. He always said it was a total gimmick, a way of testing suspicious characters." The young man eyed Adam with a somewhat droll expression. Adam felt awkward.

"Well," he said, "that does seem to be the way things have been going lately. What happened to your friend?"

"He was eventually reassigned and no one's heard from him."

"Another Platform?"

"Oh yes. Way out, too. They said it wasn't a punishment." The young man looked back to his book, suddenly quiet. After a moment he coughed, then said, "What's Wing B like? I hear that's where all the smartest Agents are. They do things by the book."

"That's true." Adam took another glance around the room. He wanted to leave the Library, felt unsure whether he wanted to explore any more of this strange place. There was not as much consistency as he had anticipated. He excused himself in what he hoped was a polite way.

After making the return trip through the silent corridors and airlocks, he finally stood once again in his own Lounge. He felt dizzy. There was nothing familiar any more. He was tired of encountering people.

He went to the elevator and brought himself to the Administrative Floor.

The Receptionist was there. He went straight to her desk in spite of his natural revulsion. "Who can I see for news of the outside world?" he asked.

"Where is your wrist-newser?"

"I don't use it."

"Then that's really your own problem."

"What have you heard?" he asked her. "What's the story behind all the weird calls we've been getting here?"

"Sunspots."

He glared at her, but she never looked up from her screen. "That's it?" he said.

"I don't read every little item that comes through my newser, either. Do you expect your superiors to waste time on details which you apparently feel are beneath *you*?"

"How do you stay abreast of the Main Opinion?"

"Trust me, I know the Main Opinion. Also, it won't have changed in months."

"They're busy with something."

"Don't sow dissension up here. I'll call some Assistants to remove you if you don't return to your designated area and stop bothering me."

He wasn't even sure what he hoped to gain by talking to this woman, and she didn't seem likely to admit him to see anyone more helpful. He got back in the elevator and returned to his workstation in defeat.

Once there he spent some time attempting to seduce his terminal into taking him to a news and views aggregator. It wasn't working. This was probably foolish; instead of granting him access, all his new clearance level did was log everything he attempted to do, probably reporting it directly and instantly to Ogi.

Suddenly a chat box opened in the middle of his screen. He had never seen this before. The username simply said AUTH.

>>AUTH: this chat has been initiated to assist you with your inquiry.

Adam would have preferred to ignore it, but he couldn't seem to navigate away from the text box. *Might as well see what happens*, he thought.

>>Cust.Ag**24601: What inquiry?

>>AUTH: we have monitored unusual activity on your terminal. please confirm identity.

Adam knew what they were asking for: his private ID text key. This sort of authentication was almost never used and was famously unrememberable, even though each citizen had one assigned to them and could, technically, be called upon to provide it at any time. There was the hint of severe consequences. He chuckled to himself. They expected to catch him this way?

>>Cust.Ag**24601: 44xIhH308li

>>

>>

He waited some time for the system or whatever to respond.

"You don't have to let them waste your time like this," came Malgam's voice from behind him.

He swiveled round in his chair, somehow both startled and relieved. Looking up at her, he felt like he was about to sheepishly explain that he had been flailing around aimlessly for the past several hours, only succeeding at getting himself in more trouble.

"Don't volunteer information. Don't respond to them. There's only a slight chance anyone will ever read your messages but either way, you're just letting them suck you into their web of illusion."

"I really didn't have anything better to do."

"It's all happening very fast, Adam," she said. "I'm sorry. This is very sensitive, very difficult."

Adam supposed it was.

"It's never easy," she continued, her gaze drifting away from him, "breaking through the last of what we want to believe in—"

"Why did you want to make love with me in the first place? Answer that much," he blurted out. She seemed surprised for a moment but smiled.

"I wanted you. It's quite simple, Adam. And I wanted a child. Your child."

"What?" he exclaimed, suddenly very conscious of the people around them in the neighboring Pods, quietly pretending to mind their own business as always.

"I am leaving here, Adam," said Malgam. "I'm going to steal a transport. You're going to help me. The higher ups already know; I could never have prevented that."

Adam was aghast. "Then how do you expect to succeed? What have you done?"

"I waited until we were sufficiently cut off from Central. The higher ups didn't anticipate any of this and have been scrambling to consolidate control, but they failed. They have no weapons or whatever, no means of ultimately stopping me, so all I had to do was see through their illusions and walk straight out of here."

"You're insane."

She laughed, shook her head. "I'm quite serious, Adam. They have no way to stop me, or any of us. Haven't you noticed how flimsy this all is?"

"They're closing the noose on me minute by minute, that's what I've noticed!"

"It's a mind game, nothing more. Read your book. Nothing will happen to you, Adam. Nothing. When you're ready to help me, we will succeed. We can both leave, if we like."

"Where will you go?"

"I plan to check the other Platforms for survivors. Then I'll go from there. Once I've seen with my own eyes—"

"*Survivors?*"

"Yes, most of the Platforms were purged. Ours can't be, since we've got the last administrators and operators. Plus, not only that, but look around: we have the last peaceful believers, too. Central was hoping to just rebuild, starting with us, and never let us catch on. Population's been going up here but they're keeping it a secret."

"*Purged?*"

"The unrest was too severe. It happened in a variety of different ways, but one by one all the Platforms were either abandoned or purged. Everyone executed. Life support cut off. Some people escaped, either back to Earth or to the Moon, to investigate there."

"The manufactories?"

"Yes. They'll reprogram them to build new things, perhaps moon habitations are already in place. Few of us are ready to return to Earth yet. Still too much respect for the Law. Earth can't support our numbers, they always said. Now, we're endangered."

He shook his head. "It can't have happened that fast!"

"What's at stake anyway, Adam? You had completely lost your sense of purpose here, before I ever started telling you these things. Before there was even a hint."

"I can't listen to this. My god, if people are being purged... We could be next!"

"True, but for now they need us to keep things—" she rolled her eyes, a gesture he'd never seen in her before— "*going*. Time is limited. If they figure out how to isolate the Administrative floor's support systems from ours, then we may have problems. You know, the past few weeks all we've been doing is helping them test their new AI. Training our replacements."

"Damn them!"

"Don't worry, Adam. You've seen how things are in Management; they have no actual abilities. It'll take them a good long while to accomplish anything on their own." She reached out, petted his hair. "You'll feel better once you get past this phase. You'll feel great, in fact. We'll be living the dream. Real Freedom lies just on the other side of this fear. I can't wait. I'll be flying around in space in my very own transport, no boundaries anymore. No job. Anything can happen. We can start over."

Adam couldn't speak anymore. Anything Can Happen. He felt something crack in his chest; love for her came pouring out, filling him up. For the first time in his life, he realized, he was thinking he might have a future.

skrsome of us connect but most of us are lost. what common thing remains in the rarefied distant future with its mutilations making us unrecognizable to ourselves: the measurable heartbeat as measure of all things. we will not fail here.

The heart is most important as a symbol. We will draw near to it again and again seeking

its significance. Our age is a palpitation. The future is death. Death is also a symbol. The heart passes through cycles of death and life constantly: contracting, relaxing. The unbeating heart is dead, but for the heart life consists in constant alternation between positive and negative state, a pulse. Yes and No. Animated and still. the blood in the heart is dead without the oxygen supplied by the lungs; the lungs need the life-blood provided by the heart; the lungs operate in a cycle of their own. This is an example of interconnectedness and constant change. the lungs do not worry about the heart, the heart does not worry about the lungs, but they are at all times in passionate, vital, inextricable connection. They have no choice but to strive, to alternate, to go back and forth forever; they do not expect to rest. their purpose is to go back and forth between contraction and rest; inhale and exhale; back and forth, forever. Why should a person expect to arrive at a stable condition when a person is wholly composed of on-and-off blinking elements? All life requires constant exchange between contrasts. All life is interpolated with death, so much that the two are in effect one. Forgetfulness flows from being; consciousness moves constantly through its own destruction as fleeting thoughts, ideas and even personalities come and go. We think of this process as having an end in death. it was once so, if only metaphorically. try this experiment:

Procedure for opening the heart

which is to say

trusting the self to radiate and interpenetrate with the rest of the system

the body, loved ones, enemies, the universe as pieces of a machine which contact and separate in eternal back-and-forth, constituting duality from multiplicity, oneness from duality

Place hands over chest, notice warmth where previously was cold.

Realize you didn't know the cold was there.

Ask an assistant to command you to weep in front of them.

Realize it is pitiful to require such permission, realize how pitifully broken are the pieces of your chest where the heart should be.

Realize the heart is in there, too, plunging in and out of wholeness.

If necessary just imagine it until it comes to pass.

Meditate with extreme thankfulness upon your own death, the moment when you will require no more permission.

Open your eyes, glad to see whoever is there.

Chapter Seven

Adam lay in his bunk that night, thinking. He had spent time reading the book and then laid it aside and was now gazing into the soft grey fabric that lined his bunk. She had made an interesting calculation, by simply deciding, from no evidence he could see, that she was immune to any sort of retaliation— or that any particular aspect of their shared reality was, in fact, genuine. She would need him to help her steal the transport, no doubt. It was conceivable that he could do that.

He would wait, for some kind of sign. He would make a sign. Himself.

There was a chapter, somewhere in the book, that was just a list of images. He turned to it. It went on and on and it was all profoundly alien; he could barely picture any of it.

*an abandoned letter found In your front yard on a winters day
icicles that have grown too large
a large dictionary
a car crash: the dirty blue car and the shiny grey car in the middle of an intersection,
tiny cubes of glass everywhere like smashed ice
a refrigerator full of colorful bottles.skr like in a gas station, fills you with dread and
longing
meeting at an airport
clouds of smoke*

Was Malgam really pregnant, of all things? Had she implied that or said it? She'd get away from here and their child would have a life, that was the idea. It would not grow up the way he did, forced into a life interpenetrated with machinery. Their child would never gain the head-node. It would be free, intact. Its emotions would be secret. It would go where it wanted. Where it could, anyway.

If only he could dream. He could get away from here and it would cost him nothing. The book didn't say Overthrow Society, the book didn't say Steal A Transport And Run Away.

*People on their front porch on a summer evening, one plays the guitar
An ice cream truck
A skyscraper with the sun behind it; if you move a little you will slip out of its shadow
and into the sun; the sun blinds you and the building disappears.*

He put on his headset and opened a channel to hers, hoping she was somewhere she would see the notification. While he waited he gathered his thoughts. One thought was that he was looking forward to never using this headset again.

Finally her icon appeared before his eyes.

"All right, prove it to me," he said, watching his words type themselves out, as though they were emerging from his mouth as text. As though he did not exist at all.

"Prove what?"

"That they won't try to stop us. Let's do it. What do you need from me? Where are the transports?"

"They are at the far end of Wing D. You might still have access but I won't be able to get through."

"What should I do?"

"Go there and get the transport. Bring it to the emergency airlock."

"The airlock? No one goes out there except maintenance. That's not a possible means of escape."

"It is if you park close enough."

"I can get us walksuits."

"That's a good idea. Try. Though I very much doubt it will be possible."

"Give me three days. I will get everything together. But Malgam—"

"Yes?"

"I'm not coming with you."

"I didn't think so."

"I have to stay here and see it through. I have to help these people."

"If something happens, and you can't help me—"

"Nothing will stop me."

"Your own salvation comes first," she said. "Do you know where the walksuits are kept?"

"They're with the maintenance supplies, which I presume only the maintenance people

can access. Maybe if I speak with—"

"There aren't any maintenance people anymore."

This pulled Adam up short. He didn't know what to say. "Oh, come on."

"Well, when was the last time you saw anyone out on the walkways?"

He was sure that he'd once seen people out walking on those Platforms, the maintenance walkways where lately he'd been watching for Snakes. But when? He didn't know anyone outside of Management who wasn't a Customer Service Agent, and their only duties were to sit in front of the computers taking calls. No one had the dignity of a manual skill. They really were alone out here. He only hoped all the walksuits hadn't been confiscated or destroyed.

"Your own salvation comes first," she repeated.

Even the higher ups in Admin probably had forgotten about the walksuits and the old obsolete cleaning and maintenance equipment. It had all been packed away in case of emergency or in case of power shortages that never came.

In the back corner of the Library there was a door, a locked closet. With an actual keyhole. He couldn't immediately think how to bypass it, so he wandered back into the rows of bookshelves as if trying to divine a solution. He came upon a small computer terminal with a scrolling message on its screen: Access Library Catalogue Here. Catalogue Only. No System Access.

No system access. Then perhaps the system could not access him.

He sat down and hit Enter on the keyboard. The scrolling message disappeared and a small search box displayed in its place. Adam typed How To Pick A Lock.

An hour later he was standing before the opened closet, having found in the Library the manual to the very same lock-and-key mechanism used in the door. He was now gazing at a selection of brooms, vacuum cleaners and other ancient tools; some were electric and some human-powered. Also in the closet: the desired walksuit. But only one. Surely that wasn't up to safety codes; he had expected at least two. It would have to do. Hopefully he could give this one to Malgam so that she could escape via the emergency airlock; he'd have to be able to access the Transport from the dock in Wing D.

"Ah—" came a voice behind him; Adam exclaimed from shock and fear, whirled round,

clutching a broom as if to use it as a weapon. Behind him he saw only Miron.

"You scared me to fucking death," Adam whispered. He eyed Miron, wondering if he needed to fear betrayal at his hands.

"So you got into the maintenance closet," Miron said, interested. "Going to do some old-fashioned Spring cleaning?"

"Spring cleaning?" The phrase sounded so peculiar. "Is it... Spring?"

Miron shrugged. "You know, Adam, you've inspired me. Seeing you take up paper-reading made me want to pick up a book myself. I came in here to browse. I just found the strangest thing. Half the books in here have the same title."

"Don't tell me."

"It's the same one Frey's been carrying around, but he said he got it from you. *Ultimate Transcendence In The Green*. Frey said it was a romance. I think I'll give it a try!"

"Don't," Adam said, turning to face the man full-on. "There's something wrong with it."

"Well it seems to be getting very popular around here. It was pretty strange to find copies scattered all through the Library, not even in order! Suppose someone's planting them?"

Adam couldn't imagine anyone having one copy of a real book let alone several. "This would be a pretty ineffective place to disseminate anything of importance. No one ever comes here."

"Seems someone comes here. You and I are here."

"Quite frankly I wouldn't be surprised if they were just... breeding."

"Like snakes in a brush pile."

"Stop using those words, Miron. I've got to go." He dodged around the old man and headed for the exit, still holding the broom, and the one walksuit.

He didn't know why he'd taken the broom and he felt silly carrying it as he hurried down the corridor towards his bunk. Suddenly the PA crackled; he heard a cough as someone prepared to speak. God, not again. "Adam Omnibus, you are invited to the Upper Deck to discuss a matter of some importance—" It was Ogi himself speaking. That couldn't be a good sign. He kept walking til he reached his bunk. Once there he concealed the walksuit

under his mattress and then stood holding the broom, trying to figure out what to do with it. Again the PA came on. "Adam Omnibus to Administrative Floor immediately." Damn. Maybe if he went, acted compliant... Anyway if he kept avoiding their summons they'd just ramp things up faster, start sending Assistants after him. Still carrying the broom, he left his quarters, nearly bumping into Frey who was just on the other side of his door.

"It's kicking off," Frey said anxiously. "I was coming to see you. I heard them calling you. Thought I could help."

Adam couldn't take this as a personal compliment; no doubt Frey had just been waiting for his moment to rebel. "Don't put yourself at risk," Adam said. "I'm going up there now. I have assurances that I won't be harmed."

"It's true they're weak," Frey said as if to himself. Adam glanced down; he was holding *Ultimate Transcendence In The Green* in his hand.

"Here, take this." Adam shoved the broom toward Frey's chest. "Give me that book." Frey took the broom, handed over the book, looking baffled. Adam broke away and headed for the lift; on the way he tossed the book to the floor and kicked it behind a recycler.

The receptionist had gone; no one was there. The grey halls merely resounded the empty sound of the heating and cooling ducts. Down the hall Adam could see one red light gently pulsing, which he figured was the closest he was going to get to any formal directions. He proceeded to the door and turned the handle.

Inside sat Ogi at his desk. His eyes were already fixed on Adam with a glow of malevolence. How vivid everything was suddenly in its unpleasantness. A paper file folder, of all things, sat on the desk in front of Ogi in a place of ominous significance. Whatever Ogi was about to lay on him, Malgam was right, it had to be a ruse. They really must have nothing if they were trying to frighten him with a file folder.

"Did you encounter a delay of some kind? I know you weren't at your workstation taking any important calls," Ogi said, his all-knowing eyes slotted with satisfaction. "Then again, perhaps it's just as well you're not on the lines much these days." Ogi drummed his fat fingers in the file folder but did not make a move to open it or in any way reveal its contents. Adam smiled to himself as he looked down at his supposed superior. This man was so behind the curve, smugly anticipating a victory that would never be his.

One thing Ogi did have, however was an intra-Platform dispatch transmitter. It sat there on his desk, quietly murmuring its reports, orders, interdepartmental queries... another psychological tactic no doubt. Yet Adam found himself straining to hear it.

"Yes," growled Ogi. "Your handling of the Platform 106 matter." He tapped the file folder again. "You've been sloppy lately, and now your carelessness has a body count." This would clearly have been the time, dramatically speaking, to open the folder. It remained under his fingers, purely a prop. "Don't worry. I'll explain it all. I have all the information... available to me. In fact, I have all information about everything you do."

"I assumed."

"Starting with this matter. Platform 106. 'Malpractice,' to use your phrasing."

"Yes?"

"The individual in question has died, needlessly."

"I completed and submitted the report according to regulations."

"And you're satisfied with that, are you? You feel your duty is done once you click that Resolved button, do you?"

"My job description explicitly states that it is. Also, I don't believe for a moment that the individual you refer to even exists, or ever existed."

This seemed to take Ogi by surprise, but he betrayed it with only the slightest flinch. "Tell that to her relatives."

"As I'm forbidden to discuss the matter, I don't think I will."

"Why did you go poking around in Wing D? Barely a moment after I bestowed upon you your Second Honor. What were you looking for there?"

"I understood I was within my rights."

"You Agents and your legalistic mindset!" Ogi pounded the desk with his fist, startling Adam slightly.

"If I have transgressed or failed in any way you wouldn't be beating around the bush like this. You'd strip me of my responsibilities. But you need me..."

All the while Adam's attention was repeatedly drawn to the dispatch transmitter. Voices were speaking back and forth in increasingly emphatic tones but he could not as yet make out the content.

"I suppose you mean to eventually incite some kind of rebellion," Ogi said, his fingers steeped over the ersatz evidence.

"Rebellion against what? There's nothing to rebel against. There is no system. It's completely broken."

Ogi laughed. "How have you become so... convinced of this so suddenly? I wonder. Perhaps you've been socializing a bit too much. Or with the wrong people."

"Perhaps."

Ogi shook his head. "Your fall from grace has been precipitous."

"Sir," Adam said, "I am reaching towards grace."

Ogi pounded his desk again. "Madness. Psychosis! I see little option but to have you committed for medical observation before you perform some act of violence. Perhaps it's contagious, eh? After your run-in the other day..."

He could hear the intercom now. *"Assistance to the Lounge; Assistant and Agent are in contact; Agent is attacking with a broom."*

Adam leaped up from his seat.

"Your insurrection is already bearing the fruit of violence!" Ogi sputtered after him as Adam ran from the room.

Fly, the book had said. Fly free of it all. Stop even looking for the path. Find yourself, even now, at your destination.

This is the story of a woman who wanted to tell skranother woman that she wanted to be with her. Why was this so hard? They'd known each other for years but due to circumstances in the past things always felt awkward and uncertain. No amount of little clues on her part could bring about ease and love. And yet the feeling was always there.

Possibly this inaccessibility, this pain, was part of the charm. The source of a convenient obsession.

The woman had many fears.

The woman had many doubts about herself and couldn't stop expressing them, in gestures, in poems, in floral arrangements. She had no heart, no access to its power to

burn away shadows with fierce truth. I have this friend, she would say, evasive.

Her path was laid out for her in verse, in inverse. She could not walk this path. Walking was not appropriate. She could not crawl without dragging her belly and breasts in the mud and making herself feel unappealing.

Fly. Fly free of it all. Stop even looking for the path. Find yourself, even now, at your destination.

One day she found her friend by the pond where people often went to be alone.

I know my words and actions have never shown you my true heart, she said.

Her friend saw her reflection in the pond. Their eyes met. At this moment they both realized that they were not two people at all, but one person, searching for her own heart. The heart opened, and illusion was blasted away. The infamous Identity was foiled again and Peace reigned for a time.

"Stop!" Adam cried out as he passed through the doorway into the Lounge. Oren the kindly Assistant was struggling with Frey, trying to subdue him. Adam saw Frey strike Oren in the face with the broom handle; Oren staggered back, holding his eye. Frey was now brandishing the broom at the mob who had gathered; they looked on anxiously. "Adam!" Frey said, seeing his friend there. "Thank god you're all right. They called you up, I thought I was going to have to come get you!"

"As you can see, I'm completely fine. What are you doing?" Adam was at Oren's side, trying to examine his wounds. "Are you all right, Oren?"

"I think so," Oren said. He allowed Adam to look at his face. "Is the socket broken?"

"I don't think so. But you'd better get to Doctor Ta."

"No good," Oren said. "Ta's disappeared. All the medics went off in a transport without permission. We assume he's with them. You didn't know? Yesterday they were all missing, so was the transport."

"How many transports are there?"

"Two," said Oren suspiciously. "Why do you ask?"

Don't abandon us, too, that's what he means. "What do you think," Adam said desperately, "That I want to be trapped here forever? With things as they are? We're all

going to have to run away eventually." He surprised himself with the sudden certainty of it. Meanwhile Frey had collapsed nearby in a chair. He was massaging his forehead. He had laid the broom down at least. The atmosphere was still very tense after the violent outbreak. As if they feared some intervention.

"Is he Psychotic or not?" someone asked. "He'll have to be subdued, if so."

"He may be," said Adam. "So may I."

Malgam pushed her way through the crowd and ran toward Adam.

"I thought you were already gone," he said into her ear as they embraced.

"Nope, the medics ran off, not me. I had no idea they were even planning it. But I hope they'll do the right thing. I hope they're going to help the others."

"What about us?"

"We are fine," she said. "Oren's injury is superficial, and the rest of us are completely fit. The fittest humans left, I'd say. We're on our own."

Malgam went over to Frey. Adam joined her at his side.

"I knew something was wrong with me," Frey said. "For the longest time I've known I didn't belong here."

"Were you really coming to rescue me?" he asked Frey.

"I was just lashing out," Frey said. "Once I found out there were no people out there, no one needing my help, I lost my sense of purpose."

"Who told you?" asked Malgam.

"Come on. We all know. It got around. Like we just realized it, almost simultaneously. And now? What can we do?"

"Anything we want," said Malgam.

"He's lying!" someone shouted. Adam looked around. It was Andrea. She was standing before the mob in a commanding posture. "Don't you see? He's just lazy! Can't hack it anymore and he wants to invent this ridiculous story to convince us all to be like him."

She looked like she was about to order the others to string the three of them up. Adam waited to see if her training would allow her to do that. She had whirled round to face them, her eyes fierce and righteous.

"Why are you doing this?" she hissed.

Malgam stood to face her. "The world of trees and blood is our world." She was quoting the book.

We are the fallen seeds that scatter in the ground and struggle with the conditions. skrStruggle and grow. Piercing the world, and the sky, reaching up instinctively...

"You're an Earthist, that's what you are," Andrea said. "And you want us all to give up and die and take the planet with us."

"Everything dies," said Malgam. "Everything changes. This place has fallen apart."

"I'm surprised," Andrea said. "I thought you were ambitious, Malgam. I thought you were going to help us all become a great team doing good work for our customers. Now you want to quit."

"I just want to go somewhere else."

"Excuses. Lies. Psychosis is a lie, too," Andrea declared, turning back to the mob. "It's just an excuse to get off work and externalize feelings the individual was unable to control! If they had been consistent with the program and stayed focused there would be no attacks, no struggles of any kind! Competition is over!"

"Perhaps," said Malgam. "But the struggle is not over. I have to go now." She walked right past Andrea. The crowd parted for her. Then they turned back to Adam, waiting.

"She won't even engage in debate," said Andrea. "Doesn't that prove she's a coward? She has nothing to back up her opinion, nothing but emotionalism."

"What's the point?" said Frey, looking up from his reverie. He folded his hands between his knees. "I don't care what you all decide to do." He got up, walked to the center of the room and sat down on the floor. "I am making my stand right here. I will go into a deep meditative state and remain there for as long as it takes. If I die, I die. I can't carry on in my life not knowing what to do, and I won't participate in any more lies." With that, he closed his eyes.

The room was silent. It was confusing, the sacred inclination not to disturb someone in

meditation, but this was usually done privately or in a dedicated space with a group, not here.

Adam crouched down and examined the man's face, noted his breathing. He had gone very deep, and quickly, with the ease of an experienced and determined practitioner. No way to interfere with that. Adam stood up and left the room. The others followed, all dispersing back to their bunks or workstations.

In his bunk Adam linked himself to his private log headset. Swallowing the throatpiece brought tears to his eyes but then again perhaps they were just tears of emotion.

"It's the middle of the day, in the middle of a workweek. I can't help feeling that I— or We— Or something— has taken from these people their only means of support. The ideological reason for continuing their lives. The cognitive dissonance will be that much more pronounced for them, now that so many of their respected peers are apparently renouncing law and order and embracing a future of chaos. I have no idea what to say to anyone. I have no idea what awaits. I am as angry as any of them, to have the world pulled out from under me. I feel foolish for ever having been so invested in something so flimsy that it was blown away by seemingly nothing. What do we even know? Suddenly our hearts have changed, that's all."

He paused.

"What's the proper word for what Frey has done? He's left us all and gone into himself. Is it right or wrong?"

Suddenly Malgam entered his bunk, having climbed up silently. "Can you get me the transport?" she whispered. "Is your access still good?"

He tried to speak; forgot the node in his throat. Carefully he extracted it, but then all he could say was "I don't know."

"Try. Now."

"What's happening?" He reached out to touch her face. She touched his hand, held it there.

"I can feel myself wavering," she said. "I have to go, while I still have the strength. I am pregnant, Adam. It's nearly accomplished. If I can get away there will be a child, a child who can be free. None of this stuff." She touched her head-node, flicked the slippery tube of the log headset with disgust. That gesture communicated much; he felt her urgency.

"Yes," he said. "I'll try."

It would have been so easy for the medics. They had unlimited access to every zone. The higher ups wouldn't even have begun to think about curtailing or intimidating them. Ogi might be in considerable distress with no one to monitor his lifesigns but himself. The thought amused Adam but wasn't helping him figure out the likelihood of getting the transport to the emergency airlock so that Malgam could board it. If he couldn't access Wing D he would have to try his luck on the maintenance walkways, in a flimsy space suit that hadn't been quality-tested in god knows how long.

He reached the entryway to Wing D, looked down the long corridor. No one was there. Would he try to pass? He didn't even know what would happen if his access was denied. He walked forward. The door opened just like all the others had. He kept going, unsure even where he would find the airlock and the transport waiting.

Candy Barnes's voice was with him often now. He felt like the words had taken on a personality all their own and were speaking to him. She had lived in a time of overpopulation, limited resources. If only she could somehow confirm what he was wondering now, about the fate of the species, even the existence of people out there... He couldn't believe what he had heard, that they were simply being killed.

No, something else is happening, too. It is us. skrWe have always been there, to Rescue you.

I can't carry on, he thought. "Which way to the Transport dock?" he asked a woman who was passing by, her eyes on nothing. She looked up, questioningly. "Are you escaping?" she whispered.

"No. Not me. I'm staying. But others are going. Would you like to go?"

"I... I just don't know anymore."

"Walk with me, if you like. What's your name?"

"Evelyn."

"Where is the transport, Evelyn?"

"The transport was always out back behind the Library. I assume it's still there. Are you an Agent?" she asked.

"Yes, I am. I just got my Second Honor."

"You poor man. I do feel sorry for you young people who were just reaching the prime of your life and now everything's thrown into question. I wish we had been able to keep things going longer for you."

"It's not your fault." Adam frankly wished that whoever had devised this ridiculous sanctuary had spent their efforts on something else.

"Do you really think they're abandoned?" Evelyn asked. "All those people are simulated?"

"I don't know," Adam answered, truthfully. "That's what we're going to find out. Those of us who are going away from here."

"What will you do, if you don't leave?"

"I don't know that, either. Maybe my time is over, maybe I will just hang out and watch over things."

"What kind of life is that? Without purpose?"

"I suspect there are purposes beyond traditional employment."

Evelyn just laughed at that. "We haven't been traditionally employed for so many years, young man. We've been parts of the life-machine. That doesn't mean we're not productive."

"Human life. There is more to life than human life. All that stuff down there on the planet could get on very well without us, that was the whole idea of moving out here."

"Are you people Earthists? Are you going back down to repopulate?"

"I'm not going." Because I don't want to face that question, he realized.

They reached the Library, passed through its door to find it deserted. Adam instinctively went to the back of the Library where he figured he'd find the Transport lock. In just the same position where the maintenance closet was located in his own Library, there was a different sort of door, with keycard access. He supposed the medics must have keycards in addition to their head-nodes. They used every type of lock here.

He turned to Evelyn. "Do you know anything about these locks?"

She shook her head. "Certainly not; it's not in my access group."

"Evelyn," he said, reaching out to touch her shoulder, "it's been nice to meet you. Don't feel you have to stay with me. Don't risk yourself if you don't approve of what I am doing."

"I hardly see that it matters."

Evelyn stood watching Adam fiddle with the door for several minutes. He tried and failed to find any books on getting past the keycard access point. His luck seemed to have run out. "No matter," he said cheerfully. "I'm sure something will turn up."

After all, he still had the walksuit. He had been hoping not to have to try it out, but of course it was always going to come to this. No... There was still a chance. Still some research to do. He could find another way.

People are never right about what others are thinking.
We err in assuming we are all different, and we err in assuming we are all alike.
Contact with technology. Biological effects. Class. Some things are inherited and some things are acquired.skr These things are in many ways trivial but they are also defining. Without them we would all be one consciousness. In our day to day lives we are irreconcilably different and it is no use denying this. The common parts are so deep that we cannot use them to connect except in circumstances of extreme abandon.

Someone somewhere is arbitrating for you.

Passing into the Lounge, Adam glanced at Frey. Still there, motionless, like a human gravestone.

"You see what he's doing," came Miron's voice, startling Adam. The old man was sitting on a couch near the doorway to the Hub, his eyes upon Frey. Adam looked at him, he seemed to be emitting a vague glow. He looked different.

"I think I see it," Adam ventured.

"It's like in the book. He's waiting to be rescued."

"Oh, no. Hardly. It's—" And yet Adam couldn't be sure of the meaning of anything. "I think he is in direct confrontation—"

"Oh yes, that is the surest path, the surest way to get their attention."

"Attention?" Adam came and sat by Miron, gazed intently into his face. Miron kept just staring toward Frey. "Whose attention?"

Miron smiled at the question. "I thought you had your eye on things for us. I thought you'd be the first to figure everything out."

"And you've figured it out, have you?" Adam said gently.

As if he were quoting, Miron put his hand on his heart and his other hand in the air and began to declaim. "Something moving in a strange way in the corner of your eye." He looked at Adam, a knowing expression on his face.

Adam frowned, waited for him to go on. Miron gestured towards Frey.

"Ascending towards grace: This means acknowledging the folly of your dogma and releasing the ferocity of the heart."

Adam looked back at Frey. "I suppose there is something ferocious about it."

"Don't worry," Miron said. "Malgam will get away. You have your job and she has hers, just like always. Everyone always does their job. I'm going to get some ice cream."

Miron got up and went towards the dispenser. Adam had lost all sense of what he had been about to do. He sat down in Miron's place.

Chapter Eight

Adam found himself spending many hours in the Lounge watching Frey. There was no observable movement. When Adam wasn't there he spent the rest of his time patiently trying to decide how to get through the keycard access, a byzantine mix of the physical and digital technologies. No one had stored any information magnetically in several generations.

He even searched even the index of *Ultimate Transcendence In The Green* (the index was almost as convoluted as the main text and didn't always accurately reflect the contents; Adam assumed the index was composed mostly of oblique references and could serve as a means of partially decoding the hidden meanings). The section on Access was interesting if not practically helpful.

Access. Only when it is denied do we even have the opportunity to grasp the spaces that are free and open to us. It is a matter of contrast. Obstructions must be thrown in our way and we must overcome them. Practically speaking, Access becomes relevant in several major examples. Access to reproductive freedom. Access to food. Access to other people's bodies for the purposes of harming or using them for various exploitative purposes: labor or reproduction or gaining the satisfactions of touch. Access is not the proper understanding for interpersonal contexts because it implies a gaining rather than an interchange.skr

One must not take this issue of access lightly. When you open the door there is a howling void on the other side which you will have to face. But you cannot stay penned in between locked doors. You will find a way through, if you have to break the barriers down with your own body and lose yourself in the process.

This particular door, the literal door to the Transport dock, to which the medics had the only literal key and had run away with it, would not yield even if he bashed himself against it for hours, physically, emotionally or otherwise. He had studied it carefully. Perhaps it was just the wrong point of access.

Having read the schematics that were on file he had learned that there was a mechanism inside this all-important door that would trigger the release of a molten polymer which would seal the door permanently, making its mechanism inaccessible to any further attempts to break through it. It seemed terribly cruel, and unsafe. The transports were little but life pods for those with the right to escape, a privilege none of them had, it seemed.

During his time in the Lounge he observed Malgam sitting by herself, also watching Frey. She had nothing with her, no book, no wrist newser, no paper, no coffee. It was as if she were watching over Frey, biding her time. Sometimes she was absent and Adam

suspected she was back in the Pod helping those who chose to continue working. Adam was curious what went on there. Many arguments, no doubt. Or maybe they were all playing games, beneficial games to improve their empathic reflexes. Maybe they were sitting in the community work areas discussing philosophy. Adam did not want to go there. He had his task laid out for him.

Miron had been acting most strangely of all. Adam had never seen him so calm. He never came up to Adam anymore with his importunate nagging; only gave him kindly glances from across the room. Adam felt he must have some kind of plan of his own; this worried him.

Coming back from the Library in frustration yet again, Adam wished with all his heart that he could have good news for Malgam. He felt ashamed at his inability to help her. Things seemed to have come to a standstill because of him; in the Lounge all was as before. Frey was there. Malgam was not there, was off somewhere exercising or caring for someone. Others, recognizable but not known to him personally, had their heads bowed over their tables, entirely focused their wrist-newspapers or whatever hushed conversations they were having. No one had noticed what Adam noticed suddenly as he went to take a seat by the viewing window where he had spent so many mornings watching the walkways for the slithering Snakes:

Miron was out there.

Adam blinked, face-to-face with a difficult perceptual fact. Miron was out there, on the maintenance walkway, just sitting, almost a mirror-image of Frey. Whereas Frey was sitting safely on the floor of the Lounge, in the life-supported, gravity-normative environment they all took for granted, Miron was outside. Unprotected. Just sitting there.

Adam got the walksuit out from under his bed and began to put it on in terrified haste. He could have wept, hated himself for not having examined the suit before, not having even practiced putting it on. Now he had to waste precious time in here, struggling with it. He was an idiot. He was the most useless person who had ever existed. He was the one with the vital piece, and he had hidden it away and not used it. In fact, he had probably kept someone more competent from having it. Everyone had trusted him, yes, because he had presumed to lead, presumed to use his Second Honor status which was as nothing... He was still in bad shape, too. He would probably die if he attempted to go out there, even if he did manage to get the suit properly sealed.

He ran back to the Lounge, his eyes and face red and splotchy with effort and emotion. "Don't anyone say a fucking thing to me!" was all he could say to anyone who was

looking, and he said it at full volume with more conviction than he had ever said anything in his life. People stepped aside as he limped toward the emergency airlock. There was a sound of general weeping behind him but no one tried to stop him.

Unlike the Transport dock, no security clearance was required to use the airlock because it led nowhere. The double sealing mechanism prevented any risk of depressurizing the common areas, therefore it wasn't considered a safety hazard. Only once had Adam overheard someone complaining about the airlock, saying that it encouraged suicidal ideation. All Adam had to do was push and hold a button and the inner door obligingly opened for him. He closed the inner door behind him and heard it seal.

What if they were all hallucinating anyway? What if it was some kind of trick to lure him out, to create a real death, to get rid of the last walksuit... He looked out the viewport. He could still see Miron. He got dizzy again looking at the walkway out there beyond the door, the metal grating, the empty space all around.

He looked down, saw the little lights blinking green on his boots, a big phrase written on the tops in a strangely festive font: VACUUM-ACTIVATED MAGNETS! indicating their promise to hold him down magnetically if he entered the vacuum of space. He had no idea how this suit worked, what the boots were supposed to do, if he was supposed to take any additional steps to even turn the apparatus on fully.

He looked back into the Lounge once more. They were all watching him. He had to do it. He turned around, his hand reaching for the handle of the outer door.

He felt a brief blast as the door opened and the last of the air escaped around him. That was it. He was completely exposed now. He heard a few beeps and clicks near his face. The suit was automatically doing something. He was holding his breath, getting light headed. He waited for the sensation of his blood boiling or escaping out of his ears, his eyes bursting or whatever was supposed to happen. A few moments passed. He found he was relatively comfortable, at least not in the agony of imminent death or suffocation. He closed his eyes and attempted an inhale. There was air. Oxygen. The suit was working. He looked at Miron again to orient himself, to make sure he was still sitting there. He was, with a god damn smile on his face, at that. Adam was out on the walkway now. The boots were anchoring him well enough. Their little green lights were flickering and glitching out in a most disconcerting way. He walked with childishly slow and halting steps, badly nauseated by the sensation of being held down by only a weak magnet at his feet while the rest of him bobbed loosely. He looked up. Earth was floating in the distance above his head. He looked back at Miron. Even if this figure he was walking towards now was just the dead husk of Miron's body, what was holding it to the surface of the walkway? Nothing, unless he had put some magnets in his underwear. Sounded like something Miron would do.

Adam felt a thin warm sensation running down over his upper lip, tried to touch his face and felt foolish as his gloved hand crinkled against the clear plastic of his suit. He flicked his tongue out to taste; it was blood, all right, but he supposed it was the least he could expect in these extreme conditions. He was only a few yards from Miron now. Suddenly the old man opened his eyes. Adam froze as he locked him with that same old gentle gaze.

"Come on over here," the man said.

Adam resumed his progress towards Miron, who kept looking kindly at him. Adam let his gaze drift along the walkway beyond. Some distance, half a mile maybe, he could see a silvery round shape, with a dim bluish illumination. A few yellow lights seemed to mark the way towards it. It was the Transport. Should Adam walk right past Miron and go get it? How much time could he possibly last out here in this suit?

"Calm down," Miron said. "No use taxing the walksuit. Breathe slowly. Get your heartrate down."

"How am I hearing you? And what the fuck are you doing out here?" Adam said as he reached Miron's position. He stood over him, at a loss.

"I'm being rescued."

"Fuck you, old man! How dare you put yourself in this position just to get... what? Attention? To get me out here risking my life?"

"No, no, Adam, not from you."

"There's no possible way this is happening."

"Indeed. Aren't you impressed? The things they're capable of."

"Who is they? Who are you waiting for out here? How—"

"You'll see them in a moment. Don't worry. They won't touch you if you're in that suit. If you're not ready. They understand you have things to do. They know all about you."

"You are sitting in the vacuum of space."

"You are standing in it."

"I have protection!"

"So do I!"

"You're a fool. You've always been. You were never even any good at your job." Adam looked around, flapped his hands at his sides, exasperated. Then he panicked and felt his suit, afraid he might damage it with his careless gestures. Still alive. "What makes you so god damned special..."

"Oh, don't worry, mister Second Honor," Miron said, a chuckle in his voice. "I'm not special."

Adam went quiet. What was he even saying? He felt sobs, tears, his whole being was quivering in some kind of childish hurt he couldn't even name. "Please don't tell me you're leaving. I don't know how but... you can't."

"It's all right, little guy. You'll be all right."

Just then Adam swore he felt a breeze... He closed his eyes and briefly experienced a vision, a land of grass, blue sky; wind was moving his wispy hair about his face, stirring the skin of his earlobes, the most tender and simple sensation... When he opened his eyes it was still just the Platform, black space, gleaming blue planet in the distance, and Miron... but there, at the edge of the walkway, the Snakes appeared, a wobbling, swarming mass of color seeming to come from nothing. Miron was still looking at him, his smile utterly confident in spite of Adam's dawning horror. The Snakes plunged towards them. Adam looked down as the stream of snake parted around him, flowing around his feet without touching him. He looked back to where Miron had been. The stream was flowing over the shape of the man's body, completely engulfing it with shimmering, shining, swarming, pulsing color. Adam couldn't be sure if they were individual creatures or some kind of single undulating mass. It was beautiful. Almost immediately, its shape and the shape of the man subsided; like a stream drying up it flowed down and away and was gone. Miron was gone, too.

Adam looked around, thinking maybe he would see the mass moving along the walkway, or flying away into space. There was nothing, nothing at all.

He found his hands slowly moving to the zippers of his suit. He turned around to look back toward the glassy bubble of the Lounge. Everyone was standing there with stricken faces. He had never seen such amazement.

He closed his eyes. There was blood on his face, and the remembered scent of grass and atmosphere floating somewhere inside his head. He had been on that planet, up there,

Earth. He was born there. He looked up and marvelled at it for a moment.

He let his hands return to his sides. He looked ahead and started walking again, toward the far, far end of the Platform, the outer tip of Wing D where the Transport waited. He wasn't a total fool after all. At least he had skimmed the Transport manuals that had been provided for his perusal in the Library. No way to know if the information was up to date necessarily but at least he had a vague notion of where he might be able to port himself in and how he might begin to try piloting it.

He looked over his shoulder. Malgam was visible in the crowd. She was smiling. On he went.

Jumping Into Space

Before you get caught up in a perception of threshold, consider first

Your perception of contrast between two states

Your growing awareness that all contrast is purely a contrast between symbols

By now your experiences have led you to this awareness

Especially if you have achieved that milestone we deal with here: a leap of faith

Be glad. Congratulate yourself.

Even in losing everything you lose nothing, and you are about to gain everything through the bold venturing motion that is the entire essence of life as you embody it.skr

Your foot has no fear in it: let it go ahead. Your heart will follow. Your heart is connected to everything and benefits from everything.

The magnetized soles of his boots sucked soundlessly along. Each step involved tugging himself loose and reattaching himself, each time with the instinctive feeling that tugging loose would result in flying loose, never finding solid footing again. Any moment the magnets could lose their polarity. Something could go wrong. Would he die? Would he be taken by those creatures? If he made it back inside, he would have time to consider these things, but not now. Suck. Suck. Suck. Inching forward along the bluish metal grating. Green glow of his system indicators... He wished he could hear some sound besides the pumping and whirring of his suit, and his slow but desperate breathing.

He ran his hand along the wall of the habitation as he walked onward, close now to the airlock. Would the life support systems be ready to go? Could he stop relying on the suit? He was deeply fatigued and his nose continued to drip blood. Lightheaded. But almost there. It was really quite safe. He could start to make out the external features of the Transport. It had a serial number, some markings to indicate various portholes, locking mechanisms, moving parts. Fortunately he knew that the dock also served as a recharging station, so the battery should be fully charged.

Once he reached the Transport he had to release his grip on the railing and climb up onto

the craft's slick whale-back. He had to do this by attaching the soles of his feet, the only area that was sufficiently magnetized for his liking. This was somewhat terrifying; his natural inclination was to use his hands and knees but without magnets they would find no purchase and he could lose his connection to the Platform, could easily launch himself on an endless trajectory into nowhere with only the slightest ill-thought motion. Feet first, then. Like climbing up a wall... Up and over a hill... WARNING flashed a display on the top. CABIN WILL BE DEPRESSURIZED. ALLOW TWO MINUTES FOR LIFE SUPPORT TO RESTABILIZE AFTER ENTRY. *Fair enough*, Adam thought. The hatch opened. His pounding heart leaped with joy at the thought of being inside somewhere, anywhere, even a tiny, depressurized Transport cockpit he wasn't sure how to drive. At least if the life support systems could come online he'd have a little time to relax and think and figure it out. He slipped himself through the narrow hatch and down into the cockpit, closing it behind him. It was completely dark now, save for one illuminated readout that seemed to be indicating a countdown. He hoped it was a countdown to all systems coming online; might as well expect that. One green light, blinking. One green light, steady. A second green light, blinking. Two green lights, steady. Yes, this was good. Finally the lights came up softly in the cabin and he looked around. It was not what he had expected. The colors were warm and the textures were soft. A small robotic arm came out of a panel in the wall and extended itself slowly towards him; it had a sealed plastic chamber at its end, which appeared to contain some sort of food. The food chamber opened itself. Graham crackers. Water. A fast-acting vitamin pill. My god, he really had a chance now! He unzipped the hood of his suit and peeled it off, ventured to take a breath. Yes. Air. Gratefully he reached for the snack and consumed it with joy, his spirits lifted. Someone really had thought of everything.

What is Ultimate Transcendence?

We may one day realize that the meaning of all tradition wisdom reaches its full expression in the literal knowledge that each of us exists within their own reality, that is like a bubble, a closed system as the Earth itself was once thought to be. One bubble. One reality. One timeline, repeated over and over and over. One little soul swimming around forever in its own juices which get cloudier and cloudier and cloudier over the ages, grimy with repeated experience and reinforced assumption, til our view of the outside is entirely obscured and our ability to thrive is severely compromised. There was a time when a lifespan had its beginning and its end. Its origin was in the One; its end was the One. We came from nothing and returned joyfully to it, again and again, renewed and refreshed and in balance. Over time more and more human souls (and presumably others) have gained a calcified shell that protects them from Death, and also from the One. Souls have become trapped in their own eternity and this has destroyed balance.

This is of course not true. Remember you are receiving these words from the past, technologically, symbolically. This is only an allegory.

Nothingness is able to become sentient easily. That is, after all, what we are. Nothingness created itself into the form of purposeful Rescuers, capable of dissolving the soul shell

and rescuing the cell from its illusion. Rescue and rejoining.
Perhaps Reincarnation will become possible again. Perhaps the Universe will regain its pulsing health, its arteries cleared of the plaque of Mortal Fear.
Everyone gets his wish. So many of us wished for immortality without being thoughtful about its form. This is the trouble of Great Power without Awareness,skr without Imagination.
I say to you Fear Not: the cycle will be broken and one by one we will be freed, offered new choices.
I would like to know what form the Rescue takes in your Bubble.
I do not know what to expect in my own. I would like to see Dragons with eyes of glittering pearl.

Having refreshed himself he returned his attention to the control console. He almost laughed, it seemed so simple all of a sudden. One button to activate the guidance and propulsion systems, another button to disengage docking clamps, fuel linkages and airlock gateway, a third button to push off, and a little wheel to steer. Each one marked Step One, Step Two...

Step One. He pushed the button. Fresh and easy, the systems roused themselves and blinked their affirmation. ONLINE AND OPERATIONAL. WAITING.

Step Two. He pushed the button. He felt a wavering feeling as the craft gently released its grasp on the side of the Platform. The machine had no hesitation in its letting go. It now floated in space as easily as a whale in the sea.

Step Three would fire the engines. He must be ready to guide them. He put one hand on the steering wheel and Pushed the button. Positive acceleration. More fear. But it was all right. Very slow. He had control. He would go very, very slowly. Soon the people back in the Lounge would see the floating Transport come around the corner and back toward the Emergency Airlock. The final challenge would be to link it up correctly. Nothing could be taken for granted here, even as good as this ship was. He didn't want to expose the Lounge to depressurization or compromise the craft's life supports due to an incomplete lock. And Malgam, if she was pregnant, shouldn't have to endure any trauma whatsoever that might put her or the fetus at risk. It was important to her; and after all the death and vanishment and falling apart, a successful pregnancy would seem to signal hope. He wanted to give her all the hope it was possible to give her.

The craft was in full float, gently propelling itself along the course he was steering. He was actually free, safely flying free of the Platform. He tried to remember what it had been like for him when he first came here, when the spacecraft docked and he passed through the airlock for the first time. Could this thing take him all the way back to Earth, through the atmosphere? Malgam perhaps planned to trip about between Platforms

gathering information, maybe eventually end up at the Moon to try building better ships, maybe even habitations. Maybe the Moon really could be colonized. They'd always talked about it. Adam couldn't help envisioning just another dead place with people running around aimlessly in life support tunnels. There had to be a better way. This book was right: the book pointed the way to what was truly human.

For a world that is enjoyed, not just endured.skr

Final stage. Step Five. The button looked like some kind of translucent plastic with a light inside, would start to flash when the craft was in range for docking.

So close now to the Lounge and its port. He could see everyone inside watching him with amazement, some of them seemed unspeakably joyful as he drew near. Some were jumping up and down and clapping their hands. Who knows what they thought was going to happen next. The translucent docking button began to flash. He pushed it. A placard illuminated saying : AUTO DOCKING, PLEASE RELEASE STEERING WHEEL. Rushing, hissing, beeping, adjusting. The craft maneuvered into position and he heard the suction sound of the airlock sealing. PLEASE WAIT FOR ALL CLEAR SIGNAL. He waited. The green light over the door began to pulse welcomingly; the door slid open and he felt none of the tell-tale shifts in pressure, felt no crisis in his body, the vacuum was still at bay, his environment was still correctly composed. He was looking out the door of the Transport into the matching door of the Platform. It was open for him. He got out of his seat and crawled (the ceilings weren't high enough to stand) to the door and through it.

People rushed towards him as if they wanted to be first to touch him, to see if he were real. Malgam stood aloof from reveling devotees who crowded Adam. He made eye contact with her, then gently pushed through the gathered crowd who gladly let him pass.

"Adam. Poor Adam. If only we had a doctor to clean you up. Let's go to the infirmary and look for some supplies."

"I probably just need soap and water to get this blood off me. I feel fine. The bleeding has stopped. I'm safe."

"That was amazing, what you just did."

"Did you see Miron?"

"The snakes took him. Yes. We saw it all."

"He spoke to me."

"Spoke?"

"The whole thing is difficult to explain. Maybe it doesn't matter. I'm ready to rest for a while."

The two of them walked arm in arm out of the Lounge, leaving everyone else behind to chatter. As they went they passed Frey, hardly noticing him. The events that had transpired had had no visible effect on him.

"Take me to the Library," he said softly to Malgam. Adam wondered how many more times they would walk together.

In the Library, they sat and enjoyed the comfortable chairs in their peculiar antiquated style, high backs and cushions. Adam thought he would like to see more of this sort of thing in the future.

Chapter Nine

There was silence for a while, as if they were afraid to start the conversation they knew had to come. Adam wondered if it even mattered, if there was anything they could say. It was just some sort of ceremony. Was it a ceremony he needed, in order to have closure? She knew he loved her. She knew what she needed to do, knew he wouldn't argue with her, so what else was there? They just sat together in silence, occasionally exchanging gentle smiles. After a while he fell asleep in that chair, exhausted, his feet up on the silly little ottoman with its matching green leather.

He thought he had a dream where she leaned close to his face and said "Adam, I'm leaving now. Thank you for what you did. Thank you for helping me." The smell of grass, a fresh breeze, her kiss.

When he woke up he knew the Transport was gone, and Malgam with it. What he didn't expect was to find Frey gone as well, missing from his place in the center of the Lounge where he had been encamped for so many days, no apparent change in his condition... Adam felt strangely relieved to find him gone.

Over the following days he made a few attempts to contact Malgam or Frey, to confirm whether they had really left and where the Transport might be. He couldn't get any response when he attempted to locate and hail the Transport. He wasn't even sure if the computer system was designed to do that, but he had the Transport's comms code and did his best with what he knew.

Eventually he abandoned his workstation activities and began spending most of his time in the Lounge, sitting in a relaxed position on his favorite couch, drinking coffee or tea and just watching the people, most of them young, not intimates of his. There were a few he recognized, of course, from the days and days of shared space, but no one that needed him, no one that cared for him or sought him out. He felt retired. It was not unpleasant.

One day he finally encountered Oren at the coffee dispenser.

"I wonder how long the recyclers will keep chugging away," Oren said grimly as he filled his cup. "We've taken all this for granted for so long. Who could be responsible for keeping it running?"

Adam didn't have the answer, so he didn't attempt to speculate. "I'm content to trust in the status quo," he said. "I do have the sense that I could leave any time."

"Let the snakes take you like they took Miron, you mean?"

Oren was looking into Adam's eyes with an unreadable expression. Adam couldn't tell

what he thought of it all.

"Why did *you* stay, Oren?" Adam asked.

Oren looked back at his coffee. "Afraid, I guess."

Adam nodded. "I hope you'll soon see that there's no need for that. Even I feel... strangely optimistic."

"Why?"

"I'm confident this is all basically an illusion. I think I've passed the main obstacle." Which was it, though? Walking in space or letting go of Malgam?

"I suppose" Oren said, "that this whole Platform is just a projection of your own brain, and all the people in it are aspects of yourself, and the Rules and Laws are the shit you made up to organize your decision-making process which would otherwise, you feel, be impossible to navigate."

"Hm," said Adam. "I doubt it."

Being Yourself

It involves a plunging forward.

The main thing to be overcome is the double-talk, the second-guessing, projecting other than true will and selfless essence. The essence of all being is unspeakable beauty. That is where you will end up, the more you can be true to yourself.

You, a finite being, are a combination of the best and worst things: the idea is to keep the struggle to a minimum and let yourself feel free in your own will for much of the time. To maximize that comfort and effectiveness of flying and soaring forward along the arc Nature meant for you.

To keep the struggle from negatively affecting those who depend on you, and those to whom you would set yourself as an example.

Let your true love or true indifference shine through and good will be maximized; evil neutralized; even if at the start it appears you are not doing as you ought.

When in doubt, return to the heartbeat.

The flame behind the eyes: burning white, burning blue: that is your soul and you alone perceive its qualities.

Learn to touch and recognize that flame. Tolerate no fanning of it, no smothering of it, no mimes and no mockery. It is sacred and free and will burn away all falsity just by being itself. Patience is required, as it takes much time.

What do you suppose waits out there for you? If you should decide to wake up from all

this,skr chisel through your wall of confusion and find yourself alone with the light? Is it people you've been striving to connect with, is it their problems you've been trying to solve? I bet you've met with no success at all. There's a law in that. You've always known you weren't going to be satisfied by just knowing you did your duty. You'll have to complete your process of magical thinking and start making it literal.

My day is just beginning, Adam thought, staring once again out at the Platform where he had seen Miron depart. He had not seen the Snakes again. No one had. Perhaps they had come for Miron alone. There had been no disturbances. Everyone was seeming to calmly move forward with their lives, whatever they might be. They all had a decision to make; Adam had a decision to make. What would start happening here in this place? Ogi was still up there somewhere skulking around, no doubt trying to regain control. Maybe it was over for him, if indeed there was no more guidance from Central, no more Main Opinion to push and to defend.

People like Malgam were out there trying to rediscover the real world, trying to rescue other humans and connect with them, bond together and become something again somewhere. Adam couldn't go with them. He had adapted, his humanity was taken and trained away. It couldn't come back, surely. Nothing could rehabilitate a man so unified with his obsolete purpose. He had had a job. But then there were those dreams. Dreams of lying on a grassy hillock under some trees, languid or in some kind of death, surrender, unthinking embodied rest in a place that felt like home. A place that changed with the seasons and carried him in its cycles. The world would die. When he thought of the warlike times in which the writer Candy Barnes had lived, he wanted to believe there was a process in place, that it wasn't all death and lies. They had had something out here, for a time, a false hope... Or maybe they had what they had always had. Their humanity, their short lives, where they'd eat and sleep and love and search for answers.

What had Malgam meant when she said she knew he would survive? He had survived that particular challenge, yes, which he undertook for her benefit. Maybe it wasn't survival but some kind of transcendence. Ultimate Transcendence. Malgam, flying around in the world of the living, using her womb as a portal for souls. Seemed plenty dangerous.

When you finally reach the unbridgeable gulf, new priorities emerge. This is part of your questioning nature and protects you from perpetual grief as things fall away. As people turn out to be other than what you wanted.

What would you say if someone was listening? Anything but a prayer? Talk about your day? Keep asking til the real thing comes through.

I invite you to laugh with me. Laugh with someone. You might find it then. Laughter

breaks up the crust, invigorates the inner light. skr

As you face that formidable emptiness, you're learning what it was like for all those people who tried to get to know you. That blank stare of yours. That refusal to access anything. That inability to love.

I am an old soul. Some can say that with pride but as I have just revealed to you some souls become old because of their cunning and fearful determination to survive. They are the ones who become trapped in a cycle, find themselves crashing against the protective boundaries they themselves have created. So I sit here in struggle. I hope you are young. Perhaps you can send word back to me, help me encounter the miracle that evades me. The miracle of Ultimate Transcendence.

Adam had stopped wearing his epaulet; had entirely removed the top of his uniform, going barechested in spite of the initial embarrassment. He had hardly seen his body in years. It remained mushy, shapeless and grey but there was some new life in it, the blood was flowing and the spirit was shining. He had been on track to become that same sickly color Ogi had, becoming one with the Platform gradually, no longer flesh and blood at all.

The atmosphere in the Platform was becoming a microcosm of the whole system as it was meant to be: freedom, experimentation, new and ever-changing expression. Less rigid adherence to procedures. The wings were no longer secured, if they had ever been; people came and went, sharing everything. None of them treated him like he was special. Adam did not miss his marks of distinction. He displayed only his ruined and vulnerable physiology, so that others might pity him, and take warning.

The End.