

An Ordered Rank of Pawns, All Dressed in Grey

Part One

By Ivan Saxby

Scene A1

Date 1990a 14.01 10:25 am 7RT

Medical Section Seven R: Tank Group A PostDecant 03

From **Decantation Team Procedural Files**

3. Besides the normal, non-lethal complications of accelerated or retarded metabolic processes, the decantation process may be complicated, during the immediate post-extraction stage, by sudden consciousness onset. This is an uncommon phenomenon, but, generally, a mild complication, of no special importance.

In a very low number of predicted instances, in connection with sudden accelerated metabolic processes, a critical disorientation might occur. This would probably take the form of panic, hysteria, or aggression, resulting from association with the circumstances of death. If any such pronounced behavior is manifested, immediate supplemental sedation, not to exceed the standard booster dosage, is recommended, followed by a medical team alert. Treatment of this extremely rare situation lies outside the expected expertise of the decantation staff.

Almost all expected instances of sudden consciousness onset will be psychologically benign or short-term, in nature. In the rare instance of full consciousness, with motor control, the decantation team members should refrain from supplemental sedation, and issue a medical team alert only if the subject's behavior appears to pose a psychological or physical danger to the subject. Remain calm and interact with the subject in a calming, cooperative fashion, in benign situations. Restrain any uncontrolled or uncoordinated physical behavior in a careful fashion, and try to distinguish between conscious motor acts and somnambulistic acts.

Exercise caution when responding to the subject's verbal questions, if any. The responses given should be kept short and carefully phrased, without detailed technical description which might alarm or disorient a fully conscious subject. Try to distinguish between a fully conscious subject, and a subject who is making unfocused semiconscious verbal utterances. Responses may or may not be impressed on the subject's short or long term memory, in any case.

In the overwhelming number of instances the subject will overcome the residual sedation effect for a short time only. Sudden consciousness onset will probably last for as little as a few seconds to as much as a few minutes. Be careful to observe the subject's behavior during this short time, to prevent accidental injury resulting from abrupt control loss.

The great majority of cases of sudden consciousness onset will be ephemeral. Opening eyes, minor motor gestures, and short spontaneous utterances, may be conveniently ignored.

He saw white.

It was a soft, indirect white, hard to pinpoint, harder still to identify as anything.

After a moment he attempted to focus but realized, finally, that only one of his eyes was open. Neither ear seemed to be operating; he heard absolutely nothing. This was a strange, pleasant sensation, for a few moments at least.

Then he began to wonder exactly *where* he was.

Reconstructing his previous evening was a difficult task. There seemed to be no handles to grasp, no clues on which to orient, in his attempt to form a picture in his mind. In fact, he suddenly realized that he wasn't quite sure *who* he was.

"My name is . . ." he thought. He was sure that identifying himself was the first, most important, step. It certainly *seemed* like a good place to start. When things went wrong, identifying yourself definitely *seemed* like the kind of thing that would be expected.

As he tried to formulate a plan for discovering his name, the odd peaceful feeling vanished.

A powerful sense that *something was wrong* replaced it.

He had been in an **accident**. The word triggered a dire, fatal attention, in his mind.

A flood of memory opened his head. He suddenly received three separate pictures, none very coordinated, and all somehow unpleasant.

One was Marcie, in a parking lot with a double armload of papers, portfolios and sketch pads, trying to open the side door of her van, dropping her purse in the process. *Who was Marcie?* Why was the picture unpleasant?

The second picture was a young woman, in a loud, crowded bar, on the other side of a small table full of empty glasses, half-full Margaritas, and a large plate of potato skins. She was a pretty blonde with a wan look, dressed in a black tank top and some overlarge primitive beady necklace that didn't seem to fit somehow. What was wrong with her? Why didn't he know her name?

It was easy enough to understand the third picture.

In the third picture his brain was clearly framing the word "**Shit**," in a crisp cartoon bubble. There was a realization that he had just made a horrible *mistake*. It wasn't his life flashing before his eyes; it was only a large tractor-trailer truck.

It was a *very* large truck, a huge, glossy, new truck with two blue-green trailers, sliding rapidly past his headlights in the rain. He seemed to be seeing a flash of graphic black-white-silver letters, that arrowed swiftly toward a silver fuel tank, that came rushing toward his face in a crazy roller-coaster vision, as he realized that the car was responding neither to his steering wheel nor to his frantic brake. It was sliding on the wet pavement, straight for the expanding undercarriage of the truck.

Blink. The truck's right turn signal blinked like a metronome. **Blink.** Wet, through the film of driving water sweeping his windshield. **Blink.** Dry, as his wiper flashed by. **Blink.** The truck was drifting over to fill his entire field of vision.

Four beats of the light.

The first noise was a creak and a snap, as his hood slammed under the chrome tank.

The second noise was a thunder of grinding teeth, as the wheels of the tractor seized his vehicle and wrenched it, down and sideways.

Then there was shattering glass.

Then there was an abrupt change in the whole shape of the car.

Then there was pain.

His left eye popped open, and he was able to turn his head slightly. There was a nebulous woman, in white, standing at his left. At first he thought it was *Marcie*, but then he decided that it wasn't. Behind the woman was a black piece of equipment, projecting over him like a small crane. This unidentifiable apparatus seemed to jut from the left, out of his range of vision, and end somewhere over the middle of his body. There were cables or hoses hanging underneath it, and the woman seemed to glance periodically at LED displays on the side of it. He seemed to be lying on his back, on some sort of examining table. His eye closed again, but he began to hear things, at first in a very broken way.

"...sporadic bursts . . . -logical activity. Normal mainly, but there's . . . buzz, buzz buzzing at buzzing buzz."

"Buzz I administer any buzz-buzz to buzz out the . . . buzz?"

Two female voices, he decided.

His eyes focused only when he stopped trying to focus them.

The two women were pretty. They were neatly and efficiently dressed, in white jumpsuits with short sleeves and flapped breast and hip pockets. There was some sort of grey insignia above the breast pocket, lending them a mildly military appearance. They both had a surprised look, but moved quickly to deal with whatever was wrong.

The one by his left hip was a woman with a vaguely Latin look, Spanish maybe; the one at the foot of the bed, partly hidden by the large bulk of the overhead machinery, was very dark-complexioned. At least, that was his first impression. "Mister — " the closer one began, glancing down, " — Prescott? Please don't strain. Just *relax*. We're just conducting some simple functional tests, and you would probably rather sleep through all of this."

Her accent was an indeterminate American accent, very cultured, academic perhaps. He was never very good at accents. He thought of expensive girls' colleges, up in New England. They had name tags, there, also, but he was unable to get a clear, un-blurred look, with the sporadic reluctance of his eyes.

"I'm JOHN," he introduced himself, with a sense of poor control over his speech mechanisms. "And you're WHO?" His own voice sounded drunken. He tried to focus on the name tag, of the Latin woman, but his effort to make it seem like a friendly overture was a failure.

"I am Montevideo, and my assistant is Coffee, and you, John, have woken up a little prematurely, here. You're *very* tired and I think you could fall back to sleep *very* easily."

"Mon TEE vid DAY oh," he noted slowly and carefully, "is the CAPITAL of — Argentina. No, it's NOT."

"Uruguay, I believe," she smiled. Her face was suddenly a blur; his eyes refused to focus again.

"Uruguay? That's right. This must be a hospital. I can't move." Some extremely unpleasant possibilities were trying to intrude on his consciousness.

"You're *all right*, John Prescott; you're going to be **just fine**," Montevideo's voice reassured him.

"The girl who was in the car with me . . . *I can't remember who she was. I don't know her name, for God's sake!* Is she all right?" A sudden wash of guilt jolted him back to life. Both eyes opened and he shook his head. With some effort he half-rose, half-lurched to a position on both elbows. In this half-sitting posture his head lolled like a drunk's.

"I'm getting some urinary tract activity," Coffee's voice warned from the foot of the bed. *An examination table*, he corrected himself. He couldn't understand what Coffee's statement had to do with him.

He must have actually lost consciousness, he realized, because he woke up — again.

Marcie had been asking him where, in that overpriced shoehorn of a car, he carried his groceries.

The unidentified woman, Melanie(?), Natalie(?), Meredith, maybe (?), was quietly mentioning a bar where they did live Irish folk songs, somewhere on the other side of Atlanta. He remembered the word Limerick.

He'd been thinking that he could slide past that damned truck, on the right, in just a tap of the accelerator.

He had to take a leak, **soon**.

This was embarrassing, and he certainly didn't want to wet the bed.

He waited for a few seconds, until he had checked to see if he could feel his hands and feet. The odd sensation of part-consciousness seemed to relent, and he finally decided that he was more or less in control of everything.

He opened his eyes, sat back up, and dragged his feet out from under the black examining machine and off the side of the table. His first lurch nearly toppled him off the table, into Montevideo's arms.

She had quickly dropped whatever she had in her hands, and caught him by the shoulders, quite smartly, he thought. "Sorry," he sighed, "I was a little shaky there for a second. I didn't mean to fall into you like that."

"That was **quick**, John. You almost landed face down on the floor! I'd really hate to have one of my patients wind up with a broken nose, you know." At close range she gave him a serious, critical look with odd, light brown eyes, in a frame of dark lashes. A very elegant looking woman, he decided. In fact, with her perfect pale complexion, and not-quite-black hair, and her subtle Latin looks, she was extremely attractive.

Looking down suddenly, he realized that he was *completely nude*, and that he was sporting a jutting erection. "God, I'm really sorry. It's just because I have to — urinate — that I look like that. If you could direct me to the rest room, . . ."

"The bladder pressure is peaking," Coffee's voice announced calmly.

"John, you probably can't walk very well, right now. We can take care of your bladder problem, if you'll just lie back down and close your eyes?" There was a questioning reassurance in Montevideo's voice that almost persuaded him to agree. Still, never having been incapacitated in a hospital before, he was not sure about what nurses did with *bedpans*, or other similar devices.

Then he caught sight of what Coffee was detaching from the overhead apparatus.

It was somewhat like a black plastic machine-pistol, with a long hose attached to the stock, and a barrel like the barrel of a small *mortar*. In addition, it had a strange magazine dangling from its far end, and a large rubbery *mouth*, surrounding the whole end of the barrel. For an instant he envisioned some sort of space-marine shotgun, and had a disquieting sheep-to-the-slaughter feeling.

Then she turned and he looked down the "barrel" of it. With one movement Coffee was reaching behind a part of the gaping rubbery mouth, and folding back a ribbed, black, embarrassingly female-looking lip, to expose a soft-looking black cup and a gaping hole, down the barrel, that had an expanding rubber sphincter in it. It looked like a *milking machine*.

"No thank you," he gasped, "you've scared the living sh — , scared me wide awake. I'd rather use the rest room, if you don't mind."

Montevideo gave him a regretful sigh and nodded. "If you feel like trying it, John, I'll assist you to the door." Her glance located the bathroom door for him; it was off the head of the table and perhaps six feet away. That distance certainly seemed possible to him.

He slid slowly off the examining table, carefully testing each leg. "A little assistance might be necessary," he concluded. Montevideo took his arm firmly. His steps were remarkably unsteady; shifting feet was a balancing exercise, that required careful concentration.

At the door, Montevideo reached out and touched a small square panel marked with the functional

designation, "**Toilet.**" The door panel slid noiselessly sideways. "There are three buttons next to the seat, John. When you're finished, push the one closest to the front first, then the second, and then the third. I will be here monitoring your consciousness level. If I think you're losing consciousness, which is entirely possible, I'll try to catch you, before you fall off the toilet."

He mildly resented the suggestion that he would fall off the toilet, but had to admit that the possibility might exist. The fact that the dark grey, rubbery-looking seat was mounted in a counter was somewhat reassuring.

A carefully planned approach situated him on the seat. His weakness astonished him.

He disliked the design of the seat. It was a trifle too high off the floor, rather like a handicapped toilet. The raised grey section in the center of the front reminded him of training potties, for little boys. It was, however, comfortable, and he managed to stabilize himself with the assistance of the sculptured seat shape **and** both hands on the counter. A mundane task like this had never been half so trying.

He suddenly supposed that he was incredibly lucky to be capable of any kind of mundane task.

After what he remembered of the encounter between his sports car and the tractor trailer on I-75, he supposed he was lucky to be alive.

Marcie! A large section of his memory filled itself in quietly. She was the divorced designer with the two boys, the one who had the practical, hard-working attitude toward every project, and the one who avoided the nightly staff meeting at the lounge, over the Margaritas. He had always *liked* her, but she had seemed to come from a regrettably different universe. She might have come from a better universe than the other, higher octane professional *artistes* he competed with, after work.

The woman in the bar! She belonged to a punctuated series of memories, a series that was defined by a form. Fill in the blanks. Her name was irrelevant. He needed social ornaments, of short duration, to keep up his membership in the club.

The car was good enough for his current position. When the firm landed the **really big** contract and he moved *upstairs*, he'd probably need a Porsche. He'd also need to learn to play golf.

He had killed her. The woman was almost certainly dead, and his whole life-style was the murder weapon. She had been a perfectly real human being, who met a status-driven junior designer, at a high-priced trendy bar, and she'd mistaken him for someone **real**. She got into his ornamental, motorized ego, one night, and let him demonstrate the whole pointless thrill of it all. Then she was dead.

Some part of his mind had recorded the warning, "Don't fall off the toilet!"

He snapped back into focus and quickly corrected his dangerous slant to the right.

"Three buttons. Front one first. Push buttons." He spoke almost out loud, to keep himself conscious. He slid his right arm close enough to depress the button with his thumb and keep his balance at the same time.

The first button caused a noise that sounded like a flush but much quieter.

The second button nearly jolted him from his precarious perch. Startling streams of water erupted from the toilet's inner recesses and sprayed his whole private anatomy. The rubber bulge in the front of the seat erupted like a shower head between his thighs. It was very efficient. He had the unpleasant sensation of someone shocked by a loud, obnoxious, trick cushion.

"You could have warned me that your hospital was the only one in the Western Hemisphere with bidets, Montevideo," he whispered to the closed door.

Before pressing the third button, he steeled himself for *anything*.

The third button directed some vaguely *tingling* streams of warm air at him. He dried almost miraculously fast.

He wondered when toilets, like this one, had been designed. As an architectural designer, he felt he should know things like that. He looked at the button panel and noted that it seemed to be very efficiently sealed against moisture, and recessed just enough to prevent any accidental comedy. The seat design actually seemed to have some sort of human architecture concept behind it. It was quite an advanced model, he suspected.

He looked carefully upward and saw no source of light in the brightly-lit bathroom. This was extremely curious. The whole room had a generic soft-white look, about a hundred watts, he expected, but

there were no visible light fixtures. He tried to figure out where the indirect lighting panels were hiding. It was extremely clever, he thought. Lighting design was often part of his job, and he couldn't recall anything like the completely concealed arrangement in this bathroom.

There was also an unusual quality to the corners and edges of the walls. They were soft. He seemed to recall that dust-free rooms, in specialized laboratories, had specially rounded corners that prevented the collection of particles. The tiny rounding made the room's edges slightly hard to see, blurring the definition of the place, in a relaxing way. This facility was certainly equipped in a thoughtful, spare no expense fashion, John mused.

Inconveniently, he began to fall asleep again.

He woke up with Montevideo's arms lifting him onto her shoulders. "I'm back. I'm sorry," he announced, "put me down and I'll try to walk back to the table."

Montevideo partially lowered him. "I'll let you *help*, John. I barely caught you before you toppled, head first, onto the floor, *again*, and I don't want to risk your falling flat on your face."

Back at the examination table, he had the sudden conviction that he could never succeed in getting onto it, himself. The signals sent by his brain, to his body, were mere shadows of what he needed in order to function. "I may need you two to help me get on the table," he admitted, ashamed.

Montevideo turned him around and caught him about the waist. With a quick movement, he felt himself sag and, just as suddenly, rise to a seated position on the table, with Montevideo's other arm under his thighs. She turned him about, easily, and lowered his head. As drowsy as he was, he was quite impressed. She didn't seem to have any difficulty picking him up, by herself. She was not a particularly large woman, nor was he a particularly small man.

"You must keep in pretty good shape," he told her.

"Have we had about enough adventures, for this morning, John?"

"Who would've thought that going to the *john* would be like climbing Mount Everest?" He shrugged.

"Try and get some more sleep, John. Your central nervous system has a little *catching up* to do."

After a few seconds of silence he turned to Coffee, and looked carefully at her. She seemed to be busy scanning something which he couldn't see, on the far side of the hanging black apparatus. He caught her eye and she smiled.

"What year is it?" he asked her.

"1990a," she answered. She wasn't exactly black, he noted. She had sharp, possibly Arabic features. Her skin color was a coffee brown and she had hair that was actually a shade lighter than her skin, and relatively straight. She was an undefinable physical type.

"My accident was in 1989," he told her. "What does the 'a' in '1990a' stand for?"

Coffee looked suddenly concerned.

"It means the first half of the year," Montevideo interrupted, "it's just an administrative thing."

John nodded. "I see."

After another second he turned back to Coffee. "Who's President of the United States?"

"Ronald Reagan," she guessed.

"George Bush," Montevideo corrected her.

"Who won the Super Bowl while I was *out*?" he asked Montevideo, with a faint smile.

Montevideo now looked somewhat suspicious of him. "That's *football*, isn't it?" She smiled, and shrugged. "We have a really rigorous schedule, and we don't really get a chance to see many of the local games, or the ones off the — television."

"I know *that* one," Coffee grinned. "It was somebody named *Montana*, who beat somebody named Denver. The tech assistants were talking about it."

"God, I hate the '49ers," he sighed.

Thinking backwards, with some difficulty, John wondered when he had ever heard anyone use the expression "*off* the television," before. Certainly, it wasn't the way anyone in Atlanta ever referred to television.

Coffee thought for a minute, and added, "I think the '*49ers* were there, too."

"Probably," John agreed. He looked slowly back and forth between Coffee and Montevideo, and then looked up at the ceiling.

"Where are you hiding the fluorescent fixtures?"

Montevideo and Coffee quickly exchanged completely blank looks.

"You know," he explained, "the *light bulbs*."

Montevideo shook her head. "I'm sorry, John, but I don't really know anything technical about lighting fields. I just know how to program them, that's all."

"Are we in Kansas?"

Montevideo looked at him, in puzzlement, and then her face revealed a sudden memory. She shook her head, and smiled.

She left her occupation, closing panels on the overhead device, and walked back to John's side. "Okay, it's time for the patient to go back to sleep, for a little while. He needs the rest. You'll be wakened in an hour or less, and you don't want to be exhausted, do you, John?"

"Okay, doctor. I'll take a little nap. Actually, I'm having a lot of trouble avoiding it."

"Good!" She ruffled his hair lightly and then bent down, toward his ear. "Don't tell anyone I told you so, but — I don't think we're in Kansas any more, Toto."

He nodded.

Scene A2

Date 1990a 14.01 11:10 am 7RT

Medical Section Seven R: Tank Group A PostDecant 05

A woman, in a white jumpsuit, reached down and touched the shoulder of the patient, on the examining table. The tall man, similarly dressed, standing next to the woman, nodded. A second woman, in a slightly different white jumpsuit, with black and grey collar and pocket flaps, stood quietly, on the opposite side of the table.

The patient was covered with a light blue sheet stretched up to her armpits. She appeared short and well-built, in contrast to the others, who were all fairly tall, and more slender. The patient had a shoulder length mass of quite dark, loosely crimped hair, fanning out about her face. Her face was pleasant, rounded, with large eyes and dark eyebrows, and her neck and shoulders were similarly soft in contour, though far from fat.

When the medical examiner shook her shoulder lightly, the patient's eyes fluttered open. They were deep brown eyes which animated her face, instantly. For a moment she stared wide-eyed at the ceiling, and then blinked rapidly.

"Do you feel like waking up, Ms. Silverman?" the examiner asked quietly.

"I don't know. Am I late for anything?" The patient asked, in a mildly nasal New Yorker's accent. There was a slightly amused overtone in the sound of her voice, and she grinned.

The man chuckled mildly and spoke. "No, you're not late for anything, and you shouldn't be in any big hurry, for an hour or so, until your basic neural functions are operating smoothly on their own, Ms. Silverman. Now that you're awake, we need to ask you a few short questions, and conduct some minor tests, to check your reactions and your awareness."

"Shoot."

"Can you give me a few facts about yourself? Your first name, your last city of residence, your last occupation, perhaps?"

"I thought you were supposed to ask me how many fingers you were holding up, first. Oh well, I'm Linda Silverman, and I come from Brooklyn, and I just quit my last job at the Long Island Transit station, because I'm taking classes over in Manhattan, and I needed some part-time work over there. I've got applications in, though. I was trying to get a job at the Strand bookstore, but they didn't need anybody last week, and this is probably going to blow the hell out of my father's medical insurance, isn't it?"

The man chuckled. "Slow down, Linda. May I call you Linda? I'm Bill Robbins, and I'm a Medical Technician. here. You can call me Bill; this is a very 'first-name' kind of place."

Linda looked intently at Bill Robbins. He was a tall, somewhat scarecrow-like man, with an angular face and a shock of slightly unruly, straw hair. His eyes were slightly different shades of blue, and the smile lines running up to his eyes gave him a reassuring look. He had a notebook-sized black object under one hairy arm.

"Did I pass the shrink test?" Linda asked.

"With flying colors, Linda. Your mind is obviously operating at top speed. I'm from Nebraska, originally, and I can barely keep up with you."

"Everybody from New York talks fast," Linda apologized.

Bill Robbins turned to the first woman. "This is Lonnie, and she's our head Sensory Physiology Technician. On your right side there, is Courtship. She's the Medical Service Technician, and she'll help you get dressed, and so forth. Lonnie's got a couple of tests to run, before she has another appointment."

"Shoot," Linda shrugged.

Lonnie, a smooth-faced brunette, with penetrating green eyes, pulled another notebook-sized object from a shelf on the examining table, beneath Linda. Linda regarded the object with serious eyes, in a bit of a squint. "I'm going to be testing your eyes and ears very briefly, Linda," Lonnie began.

Linda sat up on the table and looked around the room. The general roundedness of her face was continued to her waist. She had smallish, smooth hands and large, fairly circular breasts. Her waistline was neither pinched nor padded.

"I can conduct these tests with you lying down, Linda, if you feel unsteady," Lonnie remarked.

Bill scratched his neck, momentarily. "If," he cleared his throat, "the presence of a male doctor is at all disturbing to you, I can let you get dressed . . ."

"Oh," Linda shrugged. "I got a male *gynecologist*. Anyway, nobody gets excited about short fat women, so I should care, right?"

At that point Linda looked down. She placed her hands on her waist and pinched, and then looked up again. "God, I must've lost *thirty* pounds! **Thanks!** You could've extracted twenty more while you were at it, but hey, it's a start!" She grinned.

Lonnie held the examination device near Linda's chin, in one hand, and ran a stylus-like object around Linda's head, pointing at various points, and making various semicircular sweeps with it. Linda watched the displays, on the device's flat display front, flicker.

"Tricorders, huh?" Linda smiled faintly. "Nifty."

Lonnie plugged the stylus back into a socket on the notebook's side. "Not nearly as nifty as a tricorder, I'm afraid." Bill and Courtship laughed softly. Lonnie punched a few keys on the small keypad, at the bottom of the notebook's display. "Linda, would you cover your left eye and try to read the screen for me?"

A line of very small, plain black letters formed, in the pale grey display.

"AQFW," Linda said, very softly.

"Now the right eye."

"AOEIN." Linda rubbed her eyes thoughtfully, poking briefly at her lower lids with a curious pressure. Then she sat back and looked at the insignias on the jumpsuits. "**Medical: Recruit Decantation Staff: Robbins, BILL,**" she read aloud, and, turning to Lonnie, "**Black, LONNIE.**" then she poked at her eyes again, and craned around to look at the second woman's insignia. "**Medical: Section Seven R: Silver, COURTSHIP,**" she read there. "You don't look Jewish," she said to Courtship, and turned back around.

Lonnie suppressed a mild laugh, and nodded. "Okay, now your ears, and we'll be done!" She punched a few more keys, and detached another probe from the opposite side of the notebook.

"I guess you did more than surgically extract a hundred and fifty Hershey bars from me, huh?" Linda grinned, and raised one eyebrow at Bill.

"Pardon?"

Linda shrugged again, but looked around very intently at the three medical personnel, and at the room. Lonnie put the probe near her left ear. "Please count the noises you hear."

After a moment Linda announced "Five, and the last one could homogenize brain cells, if it was any louder."

"Now the other ear,"

After a pause Linda said "Six."

Lonnie nodded again. "You're doing fine, Linda. You're doing 100%! I've got to get to my next appointment, now." Lonnie tucked her notebook device under her arm, smiled reassuringly at Linda, and nodded to Bill, before moving to a wall panel. She reached out and pressed a finger to a small panel on the wall. Linda watched as the wall panel slid, almost noiselessly open, and then slid, almost noiselessly shut, behind Lonnie.

"Is anything wrong?" Bill asked tentatively.

"Nothing at all," Linda smiled. "Well, actually, I should be asking for directions, to the little girl's room."

"Ah," Bill nodded, with no seeming embarrassment. "Courtship will take you over there," he pointed in the direction of another wall panel, "and show you how to use the facilities."

Courtship had glided to Linda's side, and took her arm as she slid off the table. Linda wavered for a second, and steadied herself. As she recovered her bearings, she looked closely at Courtship. Courtship had a striking face; it was photogenically sweet, pale, lightly freckled in a small area about the nose, and finely proportioned. She had a mass of very fine blond hair, and extraordinarily pale blue eyes.

"I could've used a nose like that one," Linda smiled at Bill, poking a friendly finger at the tip of Courtship's nose. She took a few careful steps and balanced successfully. Courtship released her arm.

Courtship smiled politely. "Here," she said, "Follow me. The bathroom is a little different from what you're used to, I think." Courtship's voice was equally striking. She had a near-lilty soprano, with a very soft and firm tone that caused Linda to show mild surprise.

As she walked slowly toward the door next to Courtship, Linda paused briefly and looked down her flank. She squeezed the sides of her buttocks and turned one foot outward to look, momentarily, at the inside

of her knee, with another mildly serious expression.

The psychologist finished punching a few keys on his notebook and looked half-sideways as Linda padded back up to the table and hopped back up on it. He laid the notebook down on the table and looked frankly at her, as if checking for any sign of embarrassment. She looked directly back and raised one eyebrow.

"Linda," he began, "There're a few things I need to tell you — about your body, and a few other things as well, but you can get dressed first, if you like."

"Shoot."

"Well, you may be a little wobbly at the moment but . . ."

"Wait," she interrupted. "Can you tell me how long it'll be, before I can dance, and play Mozart again?"

"It may be a few days before you get back to full normal, Linda, but you'll be able to do all those things within a week or less, I imagine . . ."

"Nifty! *I've never been able to dance in my life.* I was the complete embarrassment of my Folk Dance group, for two years, until my father decided he'd rather have me be the complete embarrassment of my piano teacher, for a year after that." She smiled curiously at Bill.

"Okay, okay," Bill laughed, "I take it back. It'll be a little longer before you can dance, then . . ."

"But I guess I can throw those contact lenses out the window, though? This is the first time in my life I've seen anything but fog, without 'em."

Bill raised his hands and nodded. "Yes, you can, Linda."

"Well," she sighed heavily, "You certainly fixed a few things, after I *fried myself*, with that hair-dryer. Still, I don't know. I didn't sign anything. I'm *sure* of that! So, take it all back! Put me back in the test-tube, and, *this time*, fix me right. When I come out, I want to look like *her*." She pointed at Courtship, who pouted in concern.

"Ah —" Bill hesitated.

Linda laughed, somewhat oddly. "I'm just kidding. I'll settle for the economy model make-over. Hey, look!"

She slid back on the table and stuck both bare legs straight out in front of the surprised psychologist. Bending at the waist, she extended a hand and tapped each toe, one by one. "This is also the first time in my life I've ever been able to touch my toes like that! Not only *that*, but check this out!" She closed her eyes and stuck an arm out sideways. Slowly and deliberately, she bent her elbow and pointed to her nose.

"Your coordination and flexibility may have improved somewhat, Linda . . ."

"Yeah! I ran my clumsy-ugly test, in the bathroom, and scored higher than I used to when I cheated. Nifty! Working at 100% is sure neat for someone who was lucky to break fifty yesterday." She smiled. "Maybe that wasn't exactly *yesterday*, though."

"Not exactly," Bill agreed.

"Well, right now I won't whine," Linda shrugged. "Actually, *I love my nose; I love my toes!*" She repeated her brief toes exercise. "After falling into the bathtub with the hair dryer, *and* the phone, I guess I'm lucky I *have* a nose, *and* all ten toes. You don't know how many times my father told me not to take the hair dryer into the bathroom! He was sure I would wind up electrocuted some day. He'll be really surprised to see me now, won't he?" She looked straight at the psychologist, whose eyes flickered downward. "Or, will my father be surprised at all?" she asked.

"I'm glad you have a fine sense of humor, Linda," Bill said, quite seriously, "Because I really have a few things to tell you that . . ."

"Okay," Linda interrupted again, turning to Courtship. "What have you got for me to wear? I don't want to get the doctor excited." Bill raised one hand in mild exasperation, but smiled.

Courtship, after a moment's hesitation, produced a neatly folded bundle of clothing from beneath the table. She laid it beside Linda and lifted grey briefs from the top of the pile. "These are cut slightly differently from other panties," she observed, "They're cut lower in the front and fit just over the crest of the hipbone. They won't shift around uncomfortably."

"Not only nifty, but sexy," Linda grinned. She stuck out her legs and slipped her feet through the leg openings at full extension, smiling. She got off the table to snap the waistband around her hips. "I might as well enjoy bikini bottoms while I can. My aunt always used to tell me that fat doesn't forget." She looked at

Bill. "Before, it made no difference which end was the front, on *me*."

Courtship produced a collared but sleeveless undershirt.

Linda grimaced and shook her head. "*Women like me need bras*. Didn't you notice the comical jiggle when I walk? If you've got big boobs, and you're under five foot six, people laugh when you jog."

Courtship shook her head. "It's okay," she said, "Everybody wears these. They have a lot of support, really. Try it on."

Linda donned the shirt skeptically, stretched its chest out and tugged on the armpits experimentally. Then she hopped up and down. Her bust line bounced, but only slightly. "**Super** nifty. What's this stuff made out of? I've got a cousin of my father's in the Garment District, and he doesn't have any Ladies' Undergarments like this. The color's pretty nothing, but I know a lot of plump girls who would **die** for comfy things like these."

"It's a *stressed* polymer with a programmed bias," Courtship explained helpfully.

"*Real* nifty. How do they do that?"

Courtship shrugged and shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I don't know much about synthesis, but I do know they do it during the fabric fitting stage."

"I like the seamless edges a lot, too." Linda snapped the waistband of her bottom again. "I bet smooth edges like this prevent having your underwear engraving your plump little skin."

"Oh yes," Courtship smiled, "The edges have no more stress than the middle, and that prevents constriction marks."

Bill cleared his throat. "You're a very perceptive individual, Linda."

"Thanks. That was one of my best points! Also the big brown eyes and the big boobs. I had a problem, though; I was more than the sum of my good parts. Put big brown eyes and big boobs on a very perceptive eggplant, and send her to the beach. **See** what you get. I hope you don't have chocolate here."

"Well — *synthetic* chocolate."

Courtship unfolded a grey jumpsuit, with a black collar and black pockets.

"Sure it'll fit me?" Linda asked. There was an amused twinkle to her eyes.

"Oh yes," Courtship shrugged. "Actually, this is the loose fit version, which most people prefer. If you want a snuggler one, you can substitute for a tight waist, later."

Linda stepped into the jumpsuit and hoisted it over shoulders. It seemed to stretch a bit, though the fabric was generally taut. "**Gotcha!**" she laughed. "This is a *man's* jumpsuit! The synthesizer goofed."

"They're all the same, Linda," Bill shrugged.

"No, no, no," Courtship interjected. "It's a *right-handed* jumpsuit. The fasteners are easier to register if you have your preferred hand on the underside. You use your other hand to push it together from the top."

Bill scratched his head and spread his hands. "I never knew the difference."

"I used to wear my father's shirts around the house. They were like tents, and I could hide like a slob in them. Men are leftovers; their shirts close with the left side over the right," Linda commented. "I guess I'll have to relearn that one, eh?" Courtship ran her finger smoothly up Linda's midline and the jumpsuit welded itself together along a centimeter-wide band.

"Cross between Velcro and Zip-lock bags?" Linda asked.

"It's something like 'Velcro,' I understand," Courtship nodded, "but it's actually a reversible polymeric bond. You can't pop it open, unless you rip it from the tab at the top. Everyone calls it 'Velcro,' but it's not really." Courtship reached over to Linda's waistband and pulled the middle out. "See? The bottom detaches in a circle, too." Courtship circled Linda and separated her top and bottom, with one finger. "It'll take a little while to get the hang of this," she warned, and pasted the waistband back together at Linda's navel. "Watch." She stood to Linda's right side and tugged her pants' waistband upward, until it overlapped the shirt band. "It only joins if you match the edge of this band to the same edge of the other. If you don't get it right, it stays separate." She circled Linda in the opposite direction and the two halves of her suit became one again. "You can wear the pants separately, with a belt, or use the shirt as a jacket," Courtship smiled.

"Pretty **snazzy**," Linda smiled. "I was a tights and dumpy dress girl, with sweaters and hats and big baggy purses. How long do you think I'll be able to fit into this upbeat uniform, before I need the extra loose fit?"

"You'll probably fit it for — quite a while, Linda." Bill was obviously trying to intrude.

Courtship handed Linda a pair of black socks. They had a stretchy, extremely finely woven 'grain'

which resembled the strange weave of the underwear, but were much thicker, especially at the soles. Linda examined them briefly, before slipping them on her feet.

"I'm really sorry about the shoes," Courtship apologized. "There was a little mixup. One member of your group wound up in a different section, and the shoe order somehow got tagged onto *him*, I don't know how, and we didn't get any shoes down here. But you all should have them in a few hours."

Linda laughed merrily. "So there *was* a goof! I'm glad to hear it. I can live without the shoes for a while."

"Why don't you sit down again," Bill suggested. "We should talk."

Linda sat on the examination table and let her stocking feet swing idly, before looking up at the psychologist seriously. "Okay," she sighed. "Shoot!"

Bill cleared his throat.

"You know," Linda smiled, "I couldn't help noticing a few things. You aren't much embarrassed by naked dumplings like me, are you? Been doing this for a while?"

Bill actually showed a tinge of color. "About four years, but . . ."

"And you know, most women love to help dress up other women but they'd *never, never* talk about support and fit, in underwear, in front of a man!" She looked briefly at Courtship. "You know what I think?"

"What, Linda?"

"I think that, when I fell into the bathtub, I took out the electricity to half the building. The super probably had to do *something*, because his soap opera got zapped, and the beer would get warm if he couldn't get the 'fridge back on. My poor father probably got home and had to let the electricians into the flat, and found poor Linda, flat on her back in the bathtub with her legs sticking up in the air like a dead cow."

Bill's eyes flickered downward briefly and he raised a hand to interrupt.

"My father," Linda sighed, "poor man, in the midst of all this, he called my uncle in the funeral business, right away. Uncle Chaim would've known exactly what to do. It's a shame, but maybe it's just as well. She was somewhat of a disappointment, Linda was. Nice family, weird kid. In other words, I'm *dead*, aren't I?"

"Yes."

"At least the Linda Silverman I knew from childhood is dead, right?"

"Yes."

"I also think that I didn't beam up to Star Fleet in a transporter accident." Linda grinned. "You don't have any unicorns saddled up under the oak tree outside, either."

"No, but . . ."

"So," Linda concluded, "either my hair-dryer accident messed up your dimensional tractor beam, and I got here by mistake, or I won the lottery, and here I am, part of the Parapsychic Heroes Force, whether I like it or not. *I'm never going home, am I?* This is a parallel dimension, or a parallel afterlife, or something like that, and I can't get home from here can I?"

"No, I'm afraid that would be very difficult — and hard to explain. This body you're in is a kind of idealized clone — of you, at an optimal age and physique . . ."

"It's okay, don't get me wrong, but *optimal* is going a little too far . . ."

"*Shhh!*" Bill ordered her, very gently, "you may be experiencing a little panic right now, Linda. It's bound to be a bit disturbing, but *hang in there* for me. You *are* in a kind of dimensional afterlife, as you put it, but it's not like anything you've been led to expect. The afterlife our collective mind has shaped has a lot of strangeness to it, but also a lot of pretty mundane things in it. The independent *images* our minds generate aren't too comfortable with heavens and hells, at least not right away."

He took a deep breath and continued. "This, however, isn't the *normal* place you'd go to when you die. We *selected* you for a special project. If you feel ready, you and a number of others are going down to a meeting, where you'll get more information on our Organization. Are you okay, Linda?" He reached out and held her shoulders.

Linda nodded and took him by the shoulders. "I *am* a little hyperactive, Bill, but you got it all wrong. I didn't start reading science fiction novels like a maniac, at the age of eight, for my health, Bill. This is like my *birthday*, and Chanukah, and Christmas, and the New York Public Library, all rolled into one, with *chocolate* on top. *What took you guys so long to find me?*"

She had a certain amount of moisture in her eyes as she gave both Bill and Courtship short, intense hugs.

Scene A3

Date 1990a 13.05 12:03 pm NT (14.01 12:03 pm 7RT)

Medical Section Seven MT: Tank Group A PostDecant 02

“You’re full of shit!” the tall dirt-blonde man on the table spat.

“If you please, Joe — Mr. Davis, if you prefer. I know this may be difficult, but . . .”

“Difficult, my **ass!**” the man on the table growled, in a rural Southern voice, with high overtones.

“Please, Mr. Davis, trust me to the extent of calming down and seeing what happens — with an open mind . . .”

“Listen to me! *Fuck* your open mind! I don’t give a shit about being *dead*; I figure it’s a pretty likely event for most of us. But *this*,” he swept one arm around the room and pointed viciously at his own chest, **“ain’t my idea of dead.** This is some kind of fuckin’ *game*, you’re playing with me.”

The man with the notepad computer waved his hands, helplessly, and turned to his assistant, an East-Indian looking woman, and shook his head. “I knew I should have insisted on them sending up a Recruit Team shrink! Look, *Mr. Davis*, I’m **not** the right person to deal with this situation, I’m afraid. But let me try to explain again. It may help, a little.

“Number one: you’re not in the right department right now. I’m sorry, but your name is Joseph *Jefferson Davis*, and we have an operative named Joseph *Jamieson Davis*. Somehow, someone decided that **he** was **you**, and his — pattern — got filed in the Tanks down in Seven R, under the assumption that there was a mistake. Are you following me?”

“Suuuuuuure,” Davis crooned, smiling.

“Okay. Now **you** got sent here, by the System, because your spot was occupied, and his wasn’t. Does that make sense to you? It’s a screw-up. This almost never happens, I assure you, but, then again, how often are you going to be filing two *Joseph J. Davis*’s in different Tanks, in the same Section, at the same time?”

“Well, Mr. Pistollini, it may be a ‘screw up’, but you and Pancho, here, haven’t fucked up one of your lines yet,” Davis drawled. “How much does the CIA, or the CDC, or the DDD, pay slick bastards, like you, to play magic space doctors?”

“I’m Pastellicci, Mr. Davis, and ‘*Pancho*’, here, is **Panch**, which is Hindu for ‘five’, I believe.” The doctor showed more than a slight sense of exasperation, but a glance from the woman seemed to calm him. “Okay, okay. I think it would be best to invite you to go along to the orientation meeting. Wouldn’t you like to get out of this room and get a little more information, Mr. Davis?”

“Yeah, I’d like to leave . . .”

“Good, good. Then let’s . . .”

“... but I’m leaving on my own, asshole!” Davis abruptly spun off the table and elbowed quickly backwards, between Pastellicci and Panch. Once clear, he reached the door panel in two strides, and stabbed at the control square.

Nothing happened.

Before the others could reach him, he punched the control square with a savage, underhanded jab and kicked the door panel — hard.

Nothing happened.

“I need some Security, about now. Send me the first one you find,” Pastellicci’s voice announced, seemingly to the air. Davis glanced at the notepad computer, to identify the button he had pushed.

As Panch walked deliberately at him, Davis’ eyes flickered from her slightly upraised hand to the control square. He grabbed her wrist and swung her palm toward the unyielding panel.

“I guess it’ll open for *you*, Sugar,” he growled.

Somehow, halfway to the hand pad, her wrist was no longer in his hand. She had *twisted* somehow, and slipped loose, with alarming ease.

Instead of him, holding her, it has her, holding him. She had a firm grip on both of his elbows and a knee hooked between his legs, and she was lifting him, with her head in his chest.

Robbed of contact with the floor, he floated backwards, perched on her head and knee. He found

himself pinned against the wall, with Panch gripping his elbows and looking calmly into his eyes, with a note of sympathetic concern. Somehow, she'd been remarkably gentle about it. He'd slid there with his tail bone riding on her raised knee; she'd managed to avoid his scrotum, handily.

After a heartbeat, his knee slashed convulsively upwards, into her crotch.

The knee never connected. Her raised ankle slid into the space between her knee and groin, and his blow simply flew wide, outside her hip. He was in danger of losing his balance, but recovered quickly. When his foot sliced back to the floor, Panch was already standing on it. Both of his feet were pinned to the floor under the balls of her feet. He raised an eyebrow appreciatively.

"I'm **amazed**, Pancho. You got me stapled to the wall, *bitch*." He shrugged, and assumed a resigned expression.

Smiling, his head shot out at her forehead.

He found his chin on her shoulder, and her cheek next to his. "Joseph," she said quietly, "If you try to bite me, I'll probably have to lay you on the floor, pretty hard. I don't want to hurt you, okay?" Leaning back, Davis managed a half-shrug of reluctant agreement, but a malicious smile played over his face.

"Okay, Pancho, you got me by the balls. But **hey!** You're a tough little bitch, but this ain't your job. Who the hell ever heard of a combat *candy-striper*?"

Panch's face flickered, in an apparent attempt to decipher his idiom. Her dark face was well-formed, smooth, and intelligent, but there was odd confusion written on it.

He lowered his voice to a whisper and put his face near hers. "Your pal Pasteurini sure ain't getting *his* hands dirty, fuckin' with me, Pancho, so why should *you*? You don't look like the right *color* to me, so what do you owe the goddamn CIA? Why'nt you let me wiggle out of this, and paste your little paw on the door lock, so I can get a running start before the feds get here?"

Panch still seemed slightly uncertain of the meaning of his words.

"Come **on**, bitch!" he whispered urgently. "Let me out a' here and I'll be real nice to you. If I make it past the bloodhounds, you and me can meet up sometime. We'll take out one of those *suites* in your uncle's Motel Nineteen Ninety-Five, over in Georgia, and you and me can have a rematch. We'll get naked and wrestle on the bed. I might even let you win. What the hell, **chocolate** ain't my favorite flavor, but with tight little tails, like you, I ain't religious about it. What d'ya say, **babe**?"

Panch's expression was even more mystified than before.

Pastellicci cleared his throat. "My name is **Pastellicci**, Mr. Davis. I think I mentioned that earlier. My hearing is excellent. I actually completed all my combat training with at least a 'C-plus,' but I rapidly gravitated to the Medical Section, and let it all slip, I'm afraid. Of course, in your state, I could still **wipe your ass**. Oops! I'm sorry. That wasn't too sympathetic, was it?"

Pastellicci shrugged, and continued. "It's a good thing for you that *Panch* is playing with you. She's a natural, and she's *gentle*. She's dealt with emergency injuries and pain situations, extensively, and she can put a hundred kilo man on a table, faster than you can whistle 'Dixie,' *buddy*. She doesn't need my help. Also, there's one more thing I should tell you; your attempt to enrage her with racial and ethnic remarks, and crude sexual suggestions, would probably not cause her to slip up, **even if she understood what you were saying**. She doesn't have an uncle with a motel in Georgia. She doesn't know where Georgia is, and she probably never heard of a motel."

Panch laughed.

"Listen, **Gerald**," she smiled, "I'm well aware that Georgia is a state, a section, of the United States, and I'm pretty sure it has mountains, and is somewhere near the Atlantic Ocean. Also, a **motel** is a kind of housing thing, near a road, where people in cars pay money to sleep. Nahls also run off to motels to hide from their wives and have sex. Don't you think tahns watch **television**?"

Pastellicci shrugged. "I stand corrected. I was just trying to help."

"What I *don't* understand is why I would have an *uncle* who would own a motel. I also don't recognize the word *candy-striper*. Joseph\ uses very unusual espressions."

Davis sneered. "You sure as shit got top grades in bullshit, Pancho. What am I supposed to believe?"

That you're a goddamn *alien*?"

Panch finally appeared mildly annoyed. "I am a *tahn*. I am not an *alien*; I am as biologically human as you are. I just didn't get *born* on *your* Earth; I came from *here*."

Davis whistled and shrugged. "Why don't you two give it up? I'm nailed. What do you want, an *Academy Award*?"

"Our Security Op has arrived," Pastellicci announced gratefully as the door slid open.

Davis stared. "*That's* the goddamn *cop*?"

An objective observer would have found little to separate the new woman's physical attractiveness from that of Panch. In very different ways, both were regular-featured, well-formed and proportioned women. The new woman, however, was a taller, pale white brunette, and she obviously appealed to Joseph Davis. His eyes swept her from ankle to face in a serious, raised-eyebrow study.

The Security Operative was a tall, athletic woman. Despite the fairness of her skin, she was unblemished and anything but frail. She was elegant-faced, with sharp green eyes. "What are you doing with a Recruit here, in Seven M?" she asked Pastellicci. "I thought they had their own medical staff."

"It's a long story," the psychologist groaned. "He's having a rough morning, Op. So are we."

The Security woman was casually uniformed. Her light brown jumpsuit jacket was unfastened; it hung over a darker brown, seamless garment, that seemed looser than a body suit, but tighter and more elastic than a pair of slacks and a blouse. She wore soft-soled grey boots, that came to just above her ankles. It was not a threatening uniform, but various objects and ornaments gave her a loose image of authority. A small microphone, dull metallic grey, hung on a cord under one collar flap; a few circular badges of rank, or service, decorated her short sleeves; and a broad belt draped itself slantwise around her hips. A notepad computer hung from the left side of the belt, and a large black flashlight-shaped object dangled from the right.

Davis' eyes dwelled, for a second, on the latter object.

"*Actually*, Pancho," Davis drawled, "I'm sorry I tried to kick your ass. Under normal circumstances I don't beat on women, but you were in my way, you understand? But, right now, you pinning me to the wall is getting' *boring*. Let me up; I want to go wrestle with the cop."

"Is he intoxicated?" The Security Operative surveyed Davis casually.

"No. He's just been decanted," Panch answered.

"*You mean, for the first time?*"

Panch nodded seriously.

"Let him up," the Security woman directed. "I don't think he's going to pose a serious threat."

Panch released Davis and stepped back off his feet. He straightened up and readjusted his jumpsuit, before stretching his feet alternately.

Panch stepped to the table and picked up Pastellicci's black notepad computer. She handed it to the Security woman. "This is Joseph Davis, our recruit. I'm Panch, the Head Service Tech in Seven M, and this is Gerald Pastellicci; he's the Medical Psych' Tech for Section Seven M."

"Constellation," the Security woman identified herself. She scanned the text on the notepad with rapid, jumping eye motions and handed the notepad back to Panch. "How did you get *him* here?"

Pastellicci sighed. "We got him nine months ago, without knowing it. When they figured it out this morning, they decided that it would be easier to send a kilo of clothes up here, than to send a metric ton of Tank down there, I guess."

Constellation nodded. "I guess your introduction to the Organization wasn't entirely pleasant, Mr. Davis."

"It was downright *entertaining*, Sweetheart. I nearly busted a gut, *laughing*."

"I see. Are you recovered from your fit of amusement?"

Davis made a rapid lunge toward Panch, yelling "*Boo!*" Then he turned toward Constellation.

Something in the Security woman's casual stance seemed to deter him. He stopped.

"If you're considering using the object on my belt as a weapon. Mr. Davis, I should warn you that it's keyed to me personally, or to any Security Op with a live link," she tapped the microphone device. "It wouldn't work for you. It's also shielded with high impact absorption polymer which makes a nice cushion. If I stood still and let you beat me over the head with it, you wouldn't do very much damage to me."

“And just what’ll it do to *me* if I get out a’ line with you? Some kind of *taser*? You going to juice me up and rattle my wisdom teeth?”

“It’s not *electrical*, exactly. It’s called an AWIG, an Alpha Wave Interference Generator. It’s considered a defensive device, not a weapon. I’ve actually had very few opportunities to use it, Mr. Davis. On those few occasions, at its *lowest* percentage, it causes belligerent drunks to develop an instantaneous desire to sit down, or sometimes lie on the floor. They seem to lose track of whatever was bothering them, and become very cooperative. Some of them actually take a nap.”

Davis reflected for a moment and flicked his eyes resignedly. “Well, I just woke up a while back. I suppose I don’t need a nap. Where do we go next on this little picnic?”

“That’s a good question. Do you have any suggestions, Gerald?”

“I was hoping we could dump him in Seven R, and forget about him. I was supposed to meet someone for lunch.”

Constellation tapped her microphone. “Put me through to someone in charge of Section Seven R. Tell them I have a lost recruit.” After a few seconds she put a finger to her ear. A small device was visible nestled above her earlobe. “I see.” There was another pause. “No. Acute *depression* would not be an accurate description of Mr. Davis’ mental state. I feel that chronic *aggression* would be a better diagnosis, but I am not a psychologist.” She waited again as an inaudible voice spoke to her. “At the moment, yes. Seven M would seem to be anxious to transfer him to your department.” She tapped the microphone again and turned to Pastellicci.

“You’re in luck, Gerald. They would like their lost boy delivered to them. I have a Security shuttle down on the Concourse. If you’ll come with me, we’ll escort Mr. Davis home.”

Davis looked down the corridor, to the left and the right, as he exited the door, between Constellation and Panch. He seemed to be counting doors and objects to the beat of his tongue clicks. Four sets of opposing doors to his left, one matching door across the hall, three odd, light wheelchairs to his left, and two computer terminals on opposite sides of the hallway to his right, all received a cursory glance.

He paused a second to read the legend on the door control square to his left.

**PostDecant Room 02
Tank Group A
Medical Section Seven MT**

“This way, Mr. Davis,” Constellation pointed, to the end of the corridor on his right.

Pastellicci caught Constellation’s eye and spoke. “Have I, by any chance, met your sister?”

Constellation looked back at Pastellicci. “Possibly, Gerald. Do you mean Nebula? She’s a Technician in the Dental Section over in Two M. Or, you may have met Zodiac. She’s a clerk in the Section Eleven library.”

“Ah, *no*. Maybe another sister”

“Galaxy?”

“That’s the one! I went to a promotional tour and”

“I’m sure she remembers you.”

Panch laughed out loud.

Constellation led them out of the corridor and into an enormous, hangar-like room. Davis’ head turned rapidly left and right, and then upward. They traversed the lowest of three levels of balconies tucked into one corner of the large room. Over a single, plain grey metal railing, Davis peered down into a basement lined with pipes, thick lines, and rows of transformer-like objects.

Up a flight of stairs, they turned down the outer edge of a lobby-like area that occupied a huge platform, that ran the entire length of one long wall. Perhaps a few dozen persons, mostly dressed in white, seemed to be working here. Some sat behind counter-like desks, and others moved in and out of bays, doors, and corridors leading into the wall. Most had an air of concentration, though he noted one group gathered around a table laughing. They held plain tan-colored cups. He smelled the coffee.

“I’m going to report in the office,” Panch noted. “I’ll be a moment.”

Davis leaned on the railing while they waited, looking outward. There was another lobby like this one across the hangar. The floor below seemed partitioned into computer stations and rooms tucked back under the lobby platforms. The middle of the room was filled with large grey machines, in rows and rows. They looked something like huge, tall refrigerators. Long ribs of some sort of grey metal supported the flat ceiling, high above. He looked at the railing carefully. It was shiny, but not extremely so, greyer than steel, and hard. The circular railing was supported, at fifteen to twenty foot intervals, by plain rectangular stanchions. Even at those rather long intervals, there was no give or bend, in the bar, when Davis leaned down heavily.

"Checking out the possibility of bending the bars of your cell," Pastellicci asked, "or just rattling the bars of your cage?"

"Must've cost big money," Davis shrugged. "This is *pretty damned good*, for government work."

They returned to silence. Constellation maintained a loose awareness of Davis, that he confirmed at random intervals. Pastellicci, however, kept a curious eye on the Security woman.

"Sorry I seemed so surprised earlier," Pastellicci remarked to Constellation. "I never thought of your sister as having normal *siblings*."

"She came from a perfectly normal nest, Gerald."

"You must get tired of hearing people ask you about it, hmm?"

"No, not really. Actually, this may surprise you, but I'm the highest *ranking* member of the nest. I was an SRP for only about four months, before they discovered I had more of a talent for pushing people around," She smiled wryly. "I was a better bouncer than a barmaid. An interest in martial arts helped. Much to *my* surprise, I wound up in Security. Once I was there, I found that the routines my team was running were pretty inefficient. They had a bad interface between idiot time and the real world, so I sat down and wrote up a new schedule. Within a year I was a Team Leader. I broke twenty, as the nahls say, within three years."

Pastellicci raised an eyebrow. "Not bad. *I didn't*." Then a puzzled expression crossed his face. "Wait a minute. Galaxy Grey makes *less than twenty*?"

"Plus over a hundred in royalties, a week," Constellation sighed.

"*Oh yeah*, I forgot about being in business for yourself."

"I said I was the highest *ranking* person in my nest — not the highest *paid* one."

"I see. By the way, when do you get off work?"

Constellation shook her head. "Late. I'd love to get together with you, some time, to discuss family resemblances, but I'm on a pretty full schedule. *Responsibilities*. I check in here once or twice a week, to keep up with links, old business requests, and any new problems that may crop up, *like Mr. Davis*. If I see you, maybe we'll have a cup of coffee."

Panch rejoined them. "As long as I'm not overly busy right now, I'll ride with you and help escort Joseph to Seven R," she told Constellation.

"Thank you. I wouldn't want him falling out of the shuttle."

"Say, Panch," Pastellicci asked, "what are *you* doing tonight?"

"Gerald, the Service staff in Seven M *always* has staff heads meet, Monday night, in the cafeteria. It's that dinner-business thing, remember?"

"Oh yeah. That's Twosday for Medical-General. Have I asked you this before?"

"About six times. We've had — dinner — a few times, later in the week, remember?"

Davis grinned at Pastellicci with a malicious, *knowing*, expression.

"Let's go," Constellation waved.

The two lobbies joined at the far end of the huge room in a raised crossing platform, a floor overhead. The smell made Davis' nose wrinkle. He saw tables near the railing, upward, and off to his left. "Hey, *cop!* You passing the cafeteria without stopping for coffee and doughnuts? Your prisoner could use a cheeseburger."

"I'm not really sure I should authorize food for you, Mr. Davis. That may be a medical question."

Pastellicci shook his head. "I really don't know . . ."

Panch interrupted. "The Decant staff usually tells decantees to avoid eating for several hours, until their system 'breaks itself in.' Then they can eat anything."

"Sorry," Pastellicci said, mildly irritated, "the digestive system is not my specialty."

“He’s more interested in the uro-genital area,” Panch observed.
 Constellation shook her head once. “I noticed.”
 Pastellicci granted the two women an annoyed glance.

They took stairs up to the overhead balcony, and exited the huge room through a large rectangular corridor, eventually emerging onto a platform. A grey roadway stretched to their left and right, and Davis’ eye took in the golf-cart-like vehicles, parked at intervals along the platform.

The roadway was roofed with the same linear beam structure as the Medical facility, perhaps thirty feet overhead. The surface of the roadway was a duller grey than the railing, but smoother and shinier than concrete. “I see you keep your street-cleaners busy,” Davis observed flatly. “You all sure are *cleanly* folk, ain’t you?”

The psychologist tilted his head off-handedly. “I wouldn’t eat off the Concourse, but we don’t have a lot of bottle caps and pop-tops laying around.”

“No *pop-tops*, eh?” Davis murmured oddly.

They descended two steps, onto a lower platform which jutted out into the roadway, like a ten by ten dock. Constellation pointed to the larger of two vehicles parked there. “What’s *that*,” Davis demanded, “a fishing boat on wheels?”

The shuttle was perhaps eight feet long and over five feet wide, and had no stylistic pretenses. The cabin was open, two and a half feet deep, and partly surrounded by a small railing. It contained four squarish individual seats, and a small computer terminal mounted on the short front “hood”. Davis surveyed the dark grey box, scornfully.

“Take a seat, Mr. Davis. Watch the rail when you step over it.” Constellation stepped into the cabin and sat in the left front seat. Davis sat behind her. The seat swivelled and tilted. He found a button, underneath it, that lowered the back to a reclining position. He laid back, folded his arms behind his head, and crossed his legs against the back of Constellation’s seat.

“For a person with serious questions about your position, Mr. Davis, you certainly get comfortable in a hurry,” Pastellicci noted.

“Might as well,” drawled Davis, “I might as well try for *comfort*, since this thing sure as hell ain’t built for *speed*!”

“It actually contains twice as powerful transformers as the standard shuttle,” Constellation smiled. “In case we need a fairly rapid response, we can program security shuttles to do 45.”

Davis sat up. “You trying to tell me that this *shoebox* can do 45 miles an hour?”

“45 *kilometers* per hour. The Organization finds metric measurements much more convenient.”

“Shit! And me with a toolbox full of American-only tools! I sure hope you bastards lose, because I ain’t turning in any of my 5/8 inch wrenches.”

Pastellicci sat next to Constellation, and Panch next to Davis.

“Plot me to Seven R, wherever the orientation is going on, and send the message that their delivery is on the way,” Constellation spoke, holding down a key on the reduced computer panel.

A lighted linear chart, approximately a foot square, appeared in mid air above the panel. Moving lights were visible in it. After a few seconds it changed.

“What the hell is *that*?” demanded Davis.

“It’s a holomap of our course. Normal shuttles aren’t equipped with one, but it helps us, in Security, to know where the traffic is.”

“**A heads-up display!** Say, supposing I play along with you bastards. Think I can get one of those for my truck?”

“We do have a few heavier transport vehicles in Transportation,” Constellation noted.

“Maybe he can qualify as a truck driver, then,” Pastellicci muttered.

The shuttle accelerated to a brisk glide, without a perceptible jolt. Davis leaned over the side to confirm that the vehicle had wheels with rubber tires. Aside from a faint humming, the shuttle made no distinctive vehicular noises.

After several docks, and two open, populated bays, the shuttle glided through a rather large hangar

door, and onto what appeared to be a giant circular road, curving out of sight in both directions. The ceiling was even higher than the ceiling in the medical section, perhaps by half.

"We are going to be entering a *shifting station*, Mr. Davis. Some people find the sensation of changing levels disturbing, at first."

The shuttle described a curve directly across the road, into the path of an oncoming shuttle. Davis tensed, but no collision occurred. In fact, none of the others seemed remotely disturbed, and the driver of the other shuttle was facing backwards, talking with another occupant. More surprisingly, the vehicle seemed to be heading directly at a wall.

At the last minute, the shuttle's velocity began to slow, and a door slid open.

The shuttle came to a halt in a large cylindrical room, and the door closed behind them. All doors seemed to open and shut virtually silently. The shuttle **beeped** once, and slowly rotated to face the door again.

Davis squinted at a sign on the door that was quickly mutating into something else, like dissolving letters in television programs. Finally it settled on **RECRUIT-PARK ROTUNDA L2: Security Station 07**.

The door opened and the shuttle glided out and across the roadway and slightly leftward toward a hangar-sized door marked **SECTION SEVEN R**.

...

After dropping off their passenger the shuttle drifted back out of Section Seven R. "God am I glad that's over with," Pastellicci sighed. "That clown is probably the one the memo warned us about, and *I* had to be the one to get him!"

"You don't deal with recruits often, do you?" Constellation asked.

"No, why?"

"*We get the same memo every other year*. Every year, Personnel Operations warns us that there will be a hundred and twenty odd recruits, and **one** of them 'may be an experimental selection,' who 'may pose certain disciplinary or psychological challenges,' to whoever. We're never told who it is." She shrugged. "Davis is definitely **not** the one."

"He certainly seemed like a disciplinary problem to me," Pastellicci burst.

"There's half a dozen recruits who get *that* bad, sooner or later, every year. They get sloppy drunk, they get in a fight, they try to figure out how to escape, they pout for two weeks and dream up conspiracies; it's *no big deal*."

Panch chuckled. "Nahl si nan."

"It seemed like a big deal to me!" Pastellicci groused.

"Davis is going to be a **pussycat**, as they say," Constellation laughed. "Trust me, he's **not** the famous **one**. Actually," she added, "all of those 'experiments' seem to adjust, just like everyone else. I've never heard of any failures yet. All the stuff, about 'persons chosen with conditions that would otherwise preclude inclusion in the program,' might be just something Personnel makes up to keep us on our toes. After all, Personnel never gives anyone a straight answer about anything, does it?"

Scene A4

Date 1990a 14.01 12:24 am 7RT

Section Seven R: Cafeteria

Karen Jefferson sat in a chair on the right of an irregular arc, at a comfortable distance from her nearest neighbor. The others sat along the semi-circle in closer groups. The assembly was quiet; only a few brief exchanges of muffled conversation passed between persons, here and there along the line; a few scrapes of chairs, rustles of bodies shifting, and an occasional "Excuse me," provided the only other sound.

Apart from Karen, every last one of them was white, unless you made an exception for the man who looked part Oriental — nine and a half whites, and Karen, the one solitary black woman.

She didn't particularly mind the fact that they were all white, since she prided herself in her ability to *get around them*, and get ahead of most of them, but there was a certain discomfort in not having even one other black face to look at. ("Oh well," she shrugged mentally, "you always did function best without too many friends, brothers, sisters, and *motherfucking* men, cluttering up your life.")

She thought it was ironic that *Section Seven* was color-coded **black**. A four-inch band of black, at shoulder height, ran along every corridor. Everyone's pockets and collar flaps were black. The seats and benches she noticed, all had black cushions.

("Black, black, everywhere . . .")

The cafeteria, in which they sat, was paneled in blonde wood below the black line, and had dark *peach*-colored walls, above the black line, and a low, light grey ceiling. There were wide niches on the sides of the room, and paneling, in grey metal, along one end, quite possibly hiding a food service area, temporarily closed off. The other end of the room, to her right, was uncomfortably open to an area that looked like an aircraft hangar, or a parking garage. The tables and chairs were in a neatly efficient stackable style, with several piled behind her. The legs were the same grey metal she'd seen everywhere, a kind of buffed aluminum; the tables had plain blonde wooden tops. Everything was spotlessly clean.

The place reminded her of a brand-new bus station in an urban renewal project.

She couldn't make up her mind whether it was comfortable or depressing. At any rate, she found it extremely unusual, to be in such a cleanly mundane setting, within a totally unbelievable high tech environment. She'd seen computer monitors positioned discretely around the area, like phone booths. There was even one inside the cafeteria. Apparently, the place had been visited by some Silicon Valley Johnny Appleseed.

The one totally normal element, in all of this, was the **waiting**.

She **hated** waiting, and always had. Waiting was an agony inflicted on her by anyone who felt the desire for exercising some tiny, worthless bit of cheap power. If it wasn't **racial**, it was **sexual**; if it wasn't some arrogant bastard with official status, it was a bad-tempered receptionist who needed an ugly little dose of control. ("Nine-tenths of the waiting in the world is just 'Kiss-my-ass' **attitude**. And they wonder why **I've** got the shitty attitude.")

Karen had already passed the point of waiting when her teeth clenched, and her sense of pride told her to ignore any practical motivation for continuing. An hour was approximately the limit. Thereafter, one said "**Fuck it**," and walked **out**.

Unfortunately, there was no "**out**," here.

The person in charge of this gathering, like almost everyone else, was white.

This woman, named "**Wednesday**", kept up intermittent chats with the group, while they waited for a lost twelfth member of their group to arrive. The topics were non-informative. When asked a direct question, the woman flashed a 24-carat smile and said, in so many words, "Wait!" (Karen suspected that any group, of more than three people, was always expected to wait for something. If there was no reason to wait, a reason to wait would have to be invented.)

This "Wednesday" bothered Karen, in some odd way. She reminded Karen of a pretty, young, television sit-com mother, somewhat more street-smart, but generally antiseptic. She had a black uniform with a grey collar and trim (the exact reverse of the recruit uniforms), and circular badges on her short sleeves. The badges were black, bordered with grey, and had white letters that identified her as **Section**

Seven R Personnel. Above the badges were simple rectangles of white, that identified her as a **Supervisor**. Although *attractive*, like all the staff females Karen had seen thus far, her average height, her neat proportions, and her perfect features, all combined to leave Karen with a taste of plastic in her mouth. Her name tag, over her left breast pocket, gave her name as **Violet, WEDNESDAY**. (“What the hell kind of name is *Wednesday Violet*?” Karen asked herself. “*Wednesday* is bad enough, but the two weird names, together, sound like something cooked up by an idiot, for a bad spy movie.”)

There was another uniformed woman, sitting pleasantly to the side, looking alert and official. She was practiced in official patience, Karen could tell. She was taller, lighter in hair and eyes, and a bit sharper-featured than Wednesday, but in some way she seemed part of the same **set**.

At long last, the mislaid member of the group arrived. Wednesday smiled, and walked toward the open end of the cafeteria, to greet him. Three uniformed persons simply pulled up in a boxy vehicle of some sort, and dropped off the new arrival, *in the dining room*, oddly enough. Having an apparent road running so close to the eating area, and an area with couches and a television screen on the other side, seemed quite strange. The place was something like a drive-in house. (“Drive-in bedrooms?” Karen wondered.)

There was something about the new arrival that suggested two things to Karen.

First, he walked in a pretentious swing, hanging loose, and sometimes flipping his head sideways, he pretended not to be looking at anything, and he gave her a look that she recognized. He gave her a look that said, “*Nigger*.” She wasn’t likely to enjoy this guy, much.

Second, besides her, he was the only person in the group that was obviously not mostly “sold” on the wonders of being dead and transported to some high-tech Boys-and-Girls Scout Camp. She supposed she might have to coordinate in some way, eventually, with this *asshole*.

As if she’d *planned* it perfectly, Wednesday pulled up a chair for him, and planted it uncomfortably close to Karen, smiling maternally. “Have a seat, Mister Davis, and we’ll get the proceedings rolling,” Wednesday directed the newcomer.

“*Why not?*” he **drawled**.

(“God! The bastard is from *Texas*, or *Mississippi*, or some other shit-kicking cowboy-boot hole,” Karen groaned.)

He picked up the chair and slowly moved it a foot farther away from her. She was quite glad.

Assuming the center of the circle, Wednesday beamed. “Now I want each of you to stand up and state your **name**, what you want to be **called**, and say a word or two about yourself. *Okay?*” She pointed at the man at the other end of the group.

He got up hesitantly. (“Mr. Lame,” Karen thought.) He was a singularly average white man, with nothing particularly impressive about him, in any way.

“I’m William Johnson, I — William, that is, I — I taught history.” He mumbled. Karen revised her opinion, slightly. The totally average man was now the Mumbling Professor, in her mind.

The sharp blonde woman, next to him, was on her feet, the very instant this unremarkable William sat down. “Paula Hampton. I have a *complaint* to make,” she announced. “These average shoulder-length *hairdos*, for the ladies, are just *not* me. I *certainly* hope we have a stylist in the house!” The woman was quite snide, but Karen could barely repress a snicker. “As for anything to *share* with the group, well, I’d really like a little more information, myself. This has been a bit of a shock to me.”

(“No shit, Blonde Bitch,” Karen agreed.) The woman was moderately pretty, but not as perfect as Wednesday. She had a big chest and a passable face, but her chief asset was her smug air.

Paula sat down, demurely, and smiled prettily at Wednesday.

The next to stand up was the Pretty White Boy.

“I’m John Prescott, *John*, naturally, and I’m from Atlanta, and I — guess — I *used to be* an architectural designer, an interior lighting and graphics designer, actually,” he shrugged. “The money was pretty good and — I had a sexy car.” He butted his fists together, shrugged, and sat down.

“Tell me, John,” Paula interrupted, “Don’t you think this cafeteria could *use* something, design-wise?” Karen smirked. The Bitch was moving right along. She was associating herself with the pretty people, at the first possible opportunity. Karen found John to be the prettier of the two, though; he was a real looker in his

light-eyed brunette way, and he had a smooth voice. The women must've melted at his feet.

John looked slightly uncomfortable. "Actually, I was thinking that it was quite — clean and functional — interesting in its own way." Then he tapped the person next to him. The man was moderately large, and quite homely. With an extraordinary nose, close-set eyes, and a low forehead, he almost suggested the Neanderthal. His rise was even more awkward than the first man's.

In a low, extremely quiet voice he mumbled "Frank Mittellanders."

("The Gentle Gorilla," Karen dubbed him.)

Frank shuffled hesitantly and looked down, as if in deep thought. A moment of silence prompted the short woman, next to him, to stand up and take over. Frank sat down, gratefully.

Karen decided that she looked more like a girl than a woman, somehow. She had a mass of black curly hair that was nearly the equal of Karen's. With her doll-cute face and big eyes, she was somewhat of a Greek, or Italian, Shirley Temple. ("The Bitch was right about one thing," Karen thought, "I've got to rid of this damned Afro-do") Standing, the girl was clearly the shortest person in the room, but she made up for it with a figure that would have inspired many of Karen's male acquaintances to interested rudeness.

The short woman's entire body seemed to be charged with a little excess excitement.

"I'm Linda Silverman," the woman smiled.

("Oh **Lord**," Karen corrected her thoughts, "Mi-**yammy** Beach!")

"I'm from Brooklyn, and I'm probably the only damned New York Jew here, right?" She received a few polite laughs, but no raised hands. "I was taking classes in Manhattan, and **unemployed**, but I had a number of applications in, *honest*."

This got a few more laughs from the captive audience. Linda nodded and sat down, giving the Chinese fellow, next to her, a winning smile.

("Should I call her Susie Sunshine, or just Tits?" Karen wondered.)

The next person had a squarish, Oriental face, and a moderate build, that seemed to suggest China, but the wavy hair and sharper nose refined the suggestion to Chinese-Anglo for Karen.

"I'm Tom, uh, Thomas Li, an' I was in the Arm' Forces," he said quietly.

("There's a funny accent. American, but not one I recognize. You're the Chinese Puzzle, Li," Karen informed him, soundlessly.)

The next man needed no prompting. He was big, and he got up with a flourish and a broad grin. He had a jolly, brown-haired Santa Claus look to him, as he towered over the others.

"I'm your friendly Frederick Fox," he announced in a big, resonant voice, "Fred, Freddy, used to be **Fat** Freddy, but I lost at least a bag of cement someplace since the last time I checked. I'm experienced in a variety of occupations, but I like General All-Around Fun Guy best, and — I hope I can get some of you interested in a friendly game of poker sometime, or bridge, or gin — few pennies a point to make things interesting — looking forward to this new experience."

("Whoa! The Colorful Asshole.")

The man beside him had an intriguing look, a fine featured British head, with dark hair and intense eyes. He could've posed for a picture of Robin Hood, Karen imagined. The image quickly shattered. He jerked upright and launched into a breathless *oration*, in an incredible, penetrating monotone that rocked Karen back in her chair.

"My name is Barrington Alworthy and my principal activity recently has been programming what we refer to as 'drivers' for adapting the commercial compact disc to home computer protocols in a way that eliminates some of the speed and definition problems that have been causing difficulties with the current generation of microprocessors such as a tendency to jump or display graininess and other symptoms of the inability of the microprocessor's clock speed to keep up with the data stream of a CD-ROM device and we've been having a lot of success with this problem by developing ways to filter out the unchanging bits and averaging out other bit changes in a way that can fool the human eye into seeing an almost video quality representation in applications like games with fixed backgrounds and . . ."

Fat Freddy interrupted the stream of utterly intonation-less words, with an abrupt tug on the man's arm. Wednesday raised her hand and smiled graciously. "That's **fascinating**, Barrington! We really must move on at the moment, but I'd *love* to hear more later. Our holographic simulations sometimes seem a little grainy, and this may be an area of interest to you."

“Praise Allah! I can’t fucking breathe when one of those human machines gets rolling,” Karen gasped to herself, in utter relief. “Listen, Bro, I nearly attacked one of your friends at the university when he backed me into a stairwell, so stay back. I don’t know what gene gave you all voices that drill holes in plywood, but don’t point it at me.”) Karen had no nickname for this oddity; with a name like Barrington, what purpose would a nickname serve, she wondered.

The second, much less showy, blonde got to her feet and smiled awkwardly. Then she did something that irritated Karen mildly; she tugged at the rear of her pants as if she was adjusting a dress.

“I’m Joyce, Joyce Rachel Wright, and I used to study Psychology, and then I got married, and then I got divorced,” the woman paused to check if anyone was disturbed with her, and finished, “— and then I was a receptionist in an office building, with lawyers and accountants and that kind of thing. No big deal.”

She sat down and got small again.

(“You Poor Thing,” Karen sneered.)

There was now only one person between Karen and her own introduction, so she paid little attention to the Italian Yuppie who introduced himself as Matt Milanese, a lawyer. Then he caught her attention for a second or two.

“I should tell you that I’m tempted to *sue* over the loss of my moustache,” he joked, “which was a source of great personal pride to me. The pain and suffering alone, — ” he trailed off with a snort.

“Seriously,” he asked, sitting down, “is this permanent?” He pointed at his lip. “I used to have a lot more hair on my chest, too. I’m naked for God’s sake!”

Wednesday again interrupted. “I’m **sorry**, I didn’t explain! *Paula*, there are indeed hair stylists, and after the initial training week you’ll be able to visit one. You’ll find they’re good, and reasonably priced. That’s a definite plus, because you won’t be getting too many credits, at first. *Small stakes poker*, Freddy,” she cautioned the Fat Man, “and I might play myself, occasionally. I enjoy poker. *Matt*, the hair tracts, on parts of all of your bodies, are *inhibited*, at first, for convenience and sterilization, but, at a slightly higher, but affordable, cost you can visit a cosmetic technician, and have the tracts of your choice genetically enabled. Is everyone okay with hair, now?” Wednesday grinned and pointed, with her open hand, to Karen.

Karen stood up slowly and prepared her crispest pure-white newsroom voice.

“Karen Jefferson. **Karen** works for me. I guess you’re the only Jew, Linda,” she smiled faintly, “and I’m, *apparently*, the only Eskimo, so don’t feel bad.” No one laughed; she had no intention of hearing any laughter. She sat down.

(“I just wanted to let you all know that I don’t need any interracial social support, clowns,” Karen added silently).

The last one was the latecomer. He did not rise. “Joseph Jefferson Davis,” he said flatly. After a pause he readjusted his seat slightly. “I hope the hell they serve beer here, or I’ll be **pissed**.”

Wednesday seemed to allow the generally negative tone of Karen’s and Davis’ remarks to settle, somewhat, before resuming her winning smile. “You’ll be pleased to know that several varieties of beer are included in the recreational beverage menu. Organization alcohols have been engineered to prevent long-term addictive and degenerative problems, but, you’ll be pleased to know, that they *are* intoxicating, but they **do** cause **hangovers**. I think *that’s* intended to discourage over-consumption.” She turned to Joe, and looked moderately apologetic. “The bad news is that the beer is not free, like coffee, tea, and juice. On **your** allowances you may have to choose between gambling and drinking, by late in the week.”

Karen leaned closer to Davis and whispered. “You know, my mother told me that the motherfucker she hung with, before I was born, was named **Davis**. That would’ve made me Karen Jefferson Davis. *Do you suppose we’re brother and sister?*”

She enjoyed the look of discomfort on his face, but only for a moment. A broad smile replaced it quickly. “Hell, that’s *possible*. My daddy always said that *brown sugar* was worth a try, once in a while.”

“But,” Karen blinked innocently, “my *mother* was the **white** one.”

A faint tinge of color appeared on Davis’ cheeks, but the smile never disappeared. “You are **one little** comedian, ain’t you, Mama?”

“Just bringing a little smile into our lives, Redneck.”

Wednesday let the few scattered, whispered remarks die down and raised her hand. “Okay, people. We need to get down to business before we feed you. I’m going to turn the meeting over to our liaison from Recruit Headquarters, to give you a very brief description of your situation. After lunch you’ll have a chance to read more detailed information. This is **Kyra**. She’ll be your tour guide for the next few minutes. *Listen carefully*. There are a few things she has to say that *won’t remind you of home*.”

The tall blonde stood up and came forward. (“Another face full of smiling teeth,” Karen noticed.) She had an odd face, pretty, but doll-like and small for her height. Her voice, by contrast, was steady and deep for a woman. The black uniform leant her a casual authority.

“You have all heard the term **Organization** by now. It’s what we call ourselves. All of our service personnel and operatives, in many careers, are equally treated in terms of opportunity and responsibility in the Organization, once past the recruit phase.” Her caveat brought faint murmurs from the group. “Advancement in the Organization is by merit. Authority is measured by capability. Though we generally regard ourselves as ‘good,’ we are *not* a democracy. Decisions are made by persons of the appropriate rank; **you don’t vote**. You may not even know who sent the order. You will have a classification level and you’ll be given all the information you need, *at that level*. I feel that you *American* recruits, in particular, need to know this, *up front*, as you say.”

“We are involved in many *Operations*, basically designed to research and promote as much stable and peaceful development, in our operational areas, as possible. The **operatives**, who work in these areas, may be involved in hazardous missions, including military operations. Our operations are often in less chronologically and technologically advanced areas, and operatives are often working with the tools of the time period.”

Linda raised her hand. A look of encouragement from Kyra invited her question. “Is that something like the ‘Prime Directive’?”

(“A trekkie as well!”)

“That’s not a completely inappropriate analogy,” Kyra nodded, “but it isn’t entirely correct, either. Although there is a considerable Organization population, we are vastly outnumbered by the ‘natives,’ and we are *not* a ruling body, *nor* are we anything like a League of Nations. The social and political reality, *out there*, is enormously complex. Those of you who become operatives will probably work in small, self-sufficient teams, and your most strenuous efforts may amount to no more than *pointed suggestions* in the larger milieu.” After a pause, Kyra added, “You may be interested to know that we have research teams in contact with a planetary satellite in the Delta Pavonis system, uninhabited, I’m afraid, but there is a primitive race of intelligent beings on the planet below.”

Karen yawned, but she saw the interest flicker on several faces, besides Linda’s.

“However,” Kyra raised her hand slightly, “the vast majority of our operations take place in the ‘Penumbra and Fringe’ of the afterearths. I don’t think you’ll be involved in any *interplanetary* operations right away; most of our planetary geologists are assigned to Section Twelve. Our influence in the afterearths is broad. We cover almost every culture to some extent, and that’s over an effective period of chronological/technical time of *fifteen hundred years*, from cultures like those from about 350 A.D. to the middle 1800’s, a very large milieu.” At the continued interest in the eyes of the recruits, she smiled. “You are all here to be trained as operatives, who will function in this larger milieu.”

“Before you ask, I will tell you that *describing* the larger milieu to you would be a monumental task. I’m not about to attempt it in any detail. The **Root Earth** is dimensionally parallel to a cascade of interconnected reflections of itself, which we call *afterearths*. The whole structure is *anything* but tidy. We generally theorize that a *perpendicular* set of dimensions interacts with us, and the tension is the driving force behind the phenomenon we call **time**. We get our power from this interaction. There’s a bit of quantum theorizing, which I personally don’t completely understand, that says that one set of dimensions is **full**, except for a few holes, and that the other is **empty**, except for a few particles. One is us, the other is completely out of our field of possible experience, but where they *touch*, everything changes **constantly**. The change is irreversible; once it gets started, ‘time’ keeps going in the same direction. Also, each change spawns other parallel changes. This may be the ‘Big Bang,’ but it isn’t limited to three dimensions.”

She made a serious pause.

“The activity, that you call **thinking**, is a complicated series of changes that also creates dozens,

or hundreds, of layered reflections of itself. We call the close physical layers of your mind the **root image** of your mind. There are hundreds of structured layers below that, which we call **afterimages**. Some may call this collective image a 'soul.' When you 'die', your collective image loses touch with the physical body that created it, and was partially created by it. *That's not the end.* That collective image will shape itself into another body, lower down in the cascade of afterearths. If you weren't **here**, that's where you'd be, right now. Your collective image would be slowly searching out a comfortable level to get interactively 'solid' again. So," Kyra smiled, "we've saved most of you a lot of aimless readjustment, which can be painful, I understand."

No one in the group spoke. Karen let the ideas lay in her head, untouched, for a few moments. She reserved a pinch of salt. A few of the others seemed enthralled. The computer fanatic seemed oblivious to the concepts. ("That's not his field," Karen sneered.) The Redneck was openly skeptical.

Kyra continued. "Our Personnel section constantly samples a large number of collective images. We can find them because they have very long **tails**, like comets. They sample these tails for evidences of desirable traits, such as 'Problem Solving Arrays' and 'Adaptive Interaction Networks.' We 'tag' the ones we like. When you drive your car off a cliff, there's a quantum shift in the structure of your Vertical Component, and **we reel it in, like a fish**. We provide a cloned body it likes, and, presto," she clapped her hands, "**Here you are.**"

"You all keep any interesting videotapes?" Davis asked.

"No," Kyra shook her head, "we obtain a very detailed analysis of **what** you are, but not much at all about exactly **who** you are, **Joe**."

"What qualities, exactly, made you choose us?" the handsome designer asked.

"I don't know, John."

No one else asked any questions.

Kyra raised a finger and made a sharp stroke in mid air. "I have to leave the cosmic area now, and get back to the mundane. You've all been analyzed as members of a potential operative group, and you will be receiving an extensive physical and mental training course. *I'm sorry, but you have no choice in the matter.* Once you were brought here, the decision had already been made for you. Some effort is made to seek out persons who, we feel, will adapt quickly and willingly to the 'world' the Organization offers. Most of you will probably like it here. This may not always be the case, at first, and we **require** your cooperation. This is a course of hard work, of up to a year's duration, and it may well be difficult to appreciate, at first."

This pronouncement burned Karen. There was an authoritative undertone in the feminine voice. It went along, perfectly, with the casual black and grey uniforms. Karen thought of Nazis, subjected to an image consultant's interference, adopting more casual clothing design, to project a "kinder, gentler" impression.

"Let me see if I understand this," Karen smiled pleasantly. "You're telling us that we're all *dead*, and that this **Organization**, of yours, swiped our brain waves and stuck us here, to work our asses off for a year or so, for purposes unknown, for persons we don't know, *completely* against our will, with **no** choice in the matter and . . .," she paused, still smiling, ". . . and we're supposed to like it?"

Kyra cocked her head thoughtfully and nodded.

"Yes," she announced.

Karen kept the smile frozen on her face. The Redneck seemed ready to lean in her direction. ("Don't poke me to get my attention, bastard. I'm in no mood for you.")

"By the way," Kyra raised her hand and swept the circle, with her most significant friendly smile, "We've located your shoes!" She pointed to the open bay behind the group, where a redheaded woman hoisted a white container onto the dock. "Tinder will now pass out the missing footwear."

Tinder was a cheerful looking woman in a black pair of jumpsuit pants and a white undershirt. Freckles emblazoned her cheeks and arms. She set the white carton down on a table and popped it open; its top flap was secured with the same sort of polymeric strip as the jumpsuits.

("Velcro heaven," Karen groaned to herself. "Discover something cute and apply it to everything from zippers to box tops. No class.")

The redhead proudly displayed a pair of rubber-soled footwear that looked a lot like running shoes. She looked at the sole, peeled something off it, and said, "Li?" Li raised his hand, and Tinder delivered his shoes.

The applause, and the glances at wiggling socked feet, completely destroyed Karen's *edge*. She accepted a pair of grey shoes, with black fastening flaps, and stared smouldering at them.

At that instant the redneck did what Karen feared he would. His fingers poked her sharply in the ribs.

She let the anger bring her right hand up, ready to put the heel of her palm into his nose.

"Let's you and me bust out of this place tonight, woman," he whispered. "It's all a crock of *shit*. We're really in Cincinnati, y' know."

She pressed her finger against her lips and let the anger flow out.

"Why Cincinnati?" she asked. "I've been to Cincinnati. How about L. A.? I've never been there."

"You wouldn't like Lower Alabama," he drawled.

She could tell that the Redneck was having second, and third, thoughts. She, herself, was beginning to believe part of this weirdness. It all seemed too complex to be completely phony.

"Maybe we should wait a couple of days and examine the guards' routines," she suggested with a shrug.

"Yeah. You're right. You check out the other guards. I'll try to find out when Blondie goes to bed, and what kind of underwear she sleeps in."

A quick glance sideways told her that the bastard was checking her for a reaction. There would be none.

"Her *ass* was designed by the same commercial studio that designed her dental work," she informed him.

"I gotta hand it to 'em," he grinned, "some of those New York bastards don't do half bad."

"Shithead," she smiled.

Kyra resumed control of the meeting briefly. "I promised you a brief introduction, and that you have received! I will be returning next Monday, after lunch, to take some questions and impressions from you. Until you have had at least a week to let this settle in, I don't feel that my saying much more will be of any great value."

She then turned to Wednesday and grinned. "There's one more thing, though. Normally, your supervisor would be telling you this but, well, Wednesday is *special*. The Organization is artificially situated in the afterearth complex so that our time bears an exact two to one ratio to the root Earth. Other levels have various complicated quantum times, but we prefer *some* simplicity. That's why you'll hear about **1990a** and **1990b**. We *do* have twelve informal *months*, of exactly thirty days, with the extra tacked on at the end, in **Festival Days**, five or six of them, depending on if it's a leap year."

Kyra then paused and pointed at Wednesday. "In terms of weeks, however, *there is no such thing as a Wednesday*." Wednesday tilted her head and acknowledged this remark with a faint smile. Kyra grinned again. "We have a *ten day week*, with the fifth day and tenth days being partial holidays. The names of the days are simply Fiveday, Sixday, Sevenday, and so forth, **except** that everyone seems to call Oneday, **Monday**, and 'Twoday' is *officially Twosday*, which avoids a lot of confusion. The day after Twosday, however, is just plain old Threeday. My friend Wednesday, here, was simply demoted from a calendar date, although she does fine in her current job."

At that, Kyra made her promised departure.

("About time!" Karen sniffed, "I was getting really tired of you.")

Wednesday stepped back into the circle.

"Actually, a ten-day week, with part of Fiveday and Tenday off, is not so bad once you get used to it. By the way, I have **never** thought of myself as a *weekday*. Besides what Kyra told you, which is pretty simple, you will still run into a few time problems. Section Seven is on what we call **Night Time**. Sections One to Six are on **Day Time**. That's easy. When it's midnight here, it's noon there."

Karen considered this announcement carefully. The implication was easy to grasp; a snort from the right told her that Davis had reached a similar conclusion.

Before continuing, Wednesday raised both arms in a gesture of annoyance. "*Unfortunately*, it's not

that simple for us, in the Recruit Training department. First of all, we are actually on *staggered time*. Section Seven Recruit time really is regular Night Time, but if you go to Section Eight Recruit areas it'll be *two hours later*. If you go to Section Six Recruit areas it'll be *two hours earlier*. That way, one of our instructors can show up at one, run a three and a half hour class, take a shower, make some notes, and pop over to section Five, **at one o'clock**, and do it all over again. Got that figured out?"

Several people nodded, but Karen thought she saw a few people wrinkling their foreheads in mild confusion.

"Well," Wednesday admitted, "It got *worse*, several years ago. Transportation and Security were complaining that having all twelve sections of recruits loose, and roaming the grounds, on Tendency, was too much for them to handle. So **now**, if it's Tuesday here, it's Wednesday, in Section Eight Recruit areas, and Monday, in Section Six. That way, no more than forty or fifty recruits can *escape* at once."

Some laughed. Several had expressions of mild amazement or annoyance, now.

"Our recreation area is on Recruit Time also. In order to figure out what time a concert in the Park's Section Ten, on Friday, at noon, **really takes place**, in **our** time, will require the use of a computer. Fortunately, we have a lot of computer terminals, and you can easily get the computer to tell you what time and day it is, not only in Recruit Time, which is sometimes called *fantasy land* time, or *idiot* time, but also in regular Night Time and Day Time, which is often referred to as *real world* time. If you get confused, we'll be happy to help. I spent the first year of idiot time checking my computer, ten times a day, to find out where I was at. I **realize**."

Karen sighed. Presuming that the Organization really contained twelve sections, Wednesday's strange data suggested that the Organization was fully functional, *twenty-four hours a day*. The data also suggested that the Organization was not operating, directly, on a regular cycle of day and night.

On cue, as if to prevent any serious questions, the grey paneling, at the inner end of the cafeteria, slid back to reveal the food service area Karen anticipated. With a wave of her arm, Wednesday beamed, "And now, a little late — I'm **sorry** — *lunch!*"

An aroma permeated the cafeteria, as a subtle change in the light rendered the room a little redder and darker. With a showman-like ease, Wednesday took command of the gathering and organized a quick translation of the area into a banquet hall, with recruits unstacking and repositioning tables and chairs, at Wednesday's concise commands and gestures.

("You **do** have the right moves for getting the **children** all lined up in a row," Karen grudgingly admitted.)

Karen situated herself at the far end of the row of tables, nearest the open roadway. Somehow she wasn't overly surprised to see Davis at her right; some reluctant connection had been established between them. The presence of the Pretty Boy, John, across the table from Davis, *did* surprise her. John appeared to have chosen that seat a little reluctantly; the others had seemed anxious to avoid close contact with her and Davis.

Wednesday next introduced the food service personnel, Maryland, Hadassah, and Natalie. It hardly surprised Karen, at all, to note that all three women were stamped from the same set of molds as every other woman staffer she had seen. ("Are **all** the service personnel women?" she wondered. More importantly, "Are they all young, *pretty* women?")

It was Wednesday, herself, who set the tall clear glass of beer in front of Davis. "Was *Budweiser* a good choice, Joe?"

Davis took a tentative sip. He raised one eyebrow and reflected. "Where do y'all get *Budweiser* in the **afterlife**?"

Wednesday smirked. "It's a synthetic imitation, Joe. How is it?"

Karen noted Davis' struggle not to smile. "It'll do," he rumbled.

("The way to a Redneck's heart," Karen sneered inwardly. "She's pushing your buttons, Redneck.")

Maryland's hair was a bit longer, darker, and curlier than Wednesday's, and she had a more tanned complexion, but her size, build, and eyes were a close match, as was her delivery. For a brief moment, Karen thought she caught a suggestion of Negroid features in Maryland's face, but she soon dismissed the

idea. She was just a darker white, she concluded. The one named Hadassah had a Jewish look, perhaps, and the smallest one, Natalie, might have been French. Still, there was some kind of pretty *sameness* about all of them, that seemed to be more important than possible racial or ethnic traits. (“Where did they find these people?” Karen wondered. She envisioned some sort of casting agency, carefully selecting women who fit some peculiar standard of pleasant appearance.)

As she listened to the kitchen staff go on about synthesized food, Karen found some difficulty staying awake. “**Almost** anything you want,” the Food Service Head promised them, with the exception of an excess of hot spice. “It’s too early to challenge your untried digestive system,” Maryland explained, with the same maternal wisdom and voice as Wednesday. (“Don’t fuck with the cook,” Karen warned herself, “even inmates need to cultivate good relations with their cafeteria staff. I don’t need indigestion, on top of everything else.”)

The food, when it began to arrive, was passable. Karen tasted her lasagne carefully. (“It comes in squares; it sounds like something a synthesizer can deal with.”) She couldn’t determine for certain if the flavor was, in any way, different than the *normal* range of lasagnes, and decided not to waste time joining the others’ debate on the texture and quality of the meal.

Davis’ reaction was predictable. “Fried chicken *usually* come in brown and white **squares** around here?”

Apologetically, the one named Hadassah (“Was that a Jewish name? Cute nose, not too big; huge brown eyes. Good looking; big surprise.”) attended to Davis.

“It’s a standard portion dimension,” she explained. “It takes a special synthesizer to imitate things like bone and skin. In the cafeteria here we can get only about four or five basic shapes; rectangles, cylinders, sheets, balls, and variations of those. How does it taste?”

“It’s **dry**,” Davis shrugged. “The black-eyed peas look like *frog eggs* and the mashed potatoes feel like baby food.” Hadassah’s tragic expression mollified Davis, somewhat, and he relented. “The beer’s just fine, though. Can I get another one, Sugar?”

(“They pushed another button, Redneck. They’ll have you perfecting your manners in no time,” Karen decided.)

On Karen’s left hand, John was the model of polite interest. He complimented the petite Natalie on the different tastes of the cheeses in his manicotti. (“. . . or some other Italian thing with a fancy name for pasta in circles, squares, or bow-ties.” Karen shrugged mentally. Beyond spaghetti, lasagne, and ravioli, she lost interest in Italian culinary designations. “Some North African tribes have fifty different words for camel shit,” she recalled.) John’s question succeeded in eliciting the information that the cafeteria had about fifty pre-programmed cheeses. Holes in Swiss cheese were easy; ricotta and cottage cheese were a little harder; a passable crusty Brie, with a semi-fluid core, was texturally difficult, but Natalie claimed that the flavor was good.

Farther down the table the one called **Barrington**, with the exasperating **voice**, kept up a steady stream of questions on the programming of different densities, graininess, and other qualities into the various foods around him. Steak was programmed with thicker, less cohesive, and shorter tubular grain than chicken, for example.

John tried, intermittently, to strike up a conversation with her.

“**Barrington** certainly has a lot of *curiosity*,” he observed, in Karen’s direction.

Karen granted him a grimace and rolled eyes. (“I’m not interested in small talk with you, Pretty Boy.”)

Undaunted, John continued. “Have you noticed that it seems possible to **blank him out** if you look elsewhere and concentrate on some other thought? It might be my imagination, but there seems to be some mild sound dampening in here.”

This comment forced Karen to think for a second. “Maybe,” she shrugged. “If so, they could use more of it,” she concluded, and turned away. (“Okay, Pretty Boy. I’ll *consider* talking to you — **later**.”)

More than anything else, though, Karen found herself observing the **helpful** behavior of the staff women. Something struck her as odd about it.

“Hey, Redneck,” Karen whispered. “Do you notice anything **peculiar** about Wednesday and the other wardens around here?”

"Most of them have fair to great tits."

Karen exhaled in a hiss. "Yeah. Well, now that you've gotten past the important stuff, isn't there anything **else** that strikes you as unusual?"

"Nice **asses**, too; but I suppose that ain't what you're talkin' about. Yeah, mama. They **are** pretty damned strange, or *at least they want you to think they are!*" Davis took a sip of beer and smacked his lips. "The way I figure it, there sure as hell **is** something strange going on. I just ain't ready to believe that it's the same kind of strange they're telling us it is."

"There's something **different** about them, and I can't quite figure out what it is."

Davis raised one of his squarish pieces of imitation chicken, and used it as a pointer. "Okay, Mama, here's something I heard. They call themselves **fans** or **toons** or something like that, and they **say** that they were born here, wherever the hell **here** is. It's possible. They might be *breeding* their own *genetic* wonders." He hesitated and made a scowling face. "They're *strong as hell* and *faster than shit*. This little Hindu number, not much bigger than our little Jewish American Princess, kicked my butt. It didn't even raise a sweat on her."

Karen considered his comments. "All I've seen, thus far, is about a dozen of them, and a space that could be crammed into an Air Force hangar."

"**Dream on, Mama,**" he growled. "I saw fifty or a hundred of 'em, two, three miles of road, and three or four floors worth of shit, with **lots** of fancy hardware. It's **underground**, no question about it. There are places big enough, I think. There's a big tunnel in Omaha, I hear. Might be a salt mine in Louisiana, or even a goddamned hole in South Africa. God knows, but it's **big**."

"I was afraid of that," she murmured.

At that point John leaned closer to Karen and cleared his throat. "Excuse me, but, if you're discussing the — ah, **strangeness** of this place, there are some really odd things, everywhere."

Karen looked pleasantly interested. ("Like what, Pretty Boy?")

John shrugged apologetically. "I really wasn't eavesdropping, but I noticed the two of you looking around, and you both seemed a little suspicious about this whole set-up, and — well, it's pretty suspicious in a lot of ways."

"Name a few," Davis drawled.

John looked down at his plate. "I've never seen food processed like this, for one, and take the *lighting*, for another."

"*Lighting*? What about the lighting?" Karen asked.

"*Where does it come from?* At my architecture firm I designed interior lighting. You know, lamps, lighting panels, indirect lighting, mood stuff, all of that. *There aren't any lighting fixtures of any kind, anywhere in this place, that I can find.*"

Karen looked around and nodded. Davis leaned back in his chair and surveyed the ceiling.

Finally Davis turned down to his plate again. "Fiber optic *shit*. They got pipes around the corners or something. What's the big deal?"

"*Light doesn't flow around corners, Davis,*" Karen sneered.

"Exactly," John nodded. "If you look, you'll see a faint shadow under the table and under your plates. That tends to suggest overhead lighting — diffuse. It's also on the red side, and a little slanted — from the open road end, inward. Unfortunately, *there's nothing up there, for the light to be coming from*. It's cute. I'd call it a Late Afternoon Siesta light; I just want to know where it's coming from."

"Maybe the air has some kind of gas in it that's charged, or something," Karen speculated.

"If so, it seems like we'd see a **mist** or something. No, I'm afraid it's something else. It's some kind of **field effect**, complete with a direction that can be programmed in. I heard one of the Orientation people refer to a lighting field, and I'm beginning to believe it."

"Like a **goddam force field**?" Davis asked softly.

"Exactly," John nodded again. "It makes me wonder what other tricks they know. My scientific background is not spectacular, but I suspect the ability to program an area with an energy field implies a good deal of control over *something* scientifically unusual."

The three glanced briefly at each other before returning to their meals.

("Curiouser and curiouser," Karen thought.)