

BOROVSKY'S HOLLOW WOMAN

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Laura walked the Low Steel above the stars, searching for her man.

It was 2.3 clicks across the skeletal terrain by the most direct route - the e blue line on the diagram of the construction zone burned in the eye of Laura's mind. No one but Mikhail Borovsky would take that particular route across the unfinished girders of the titan cylinder's outermost level, and even - he would not take it without her.

One foot before the other, lift, swing, step. The pilot beam was solid monocrystal steel, I-section, one decimeter wide. One hundred meters to her left and right identical girders glittered in the always-changing light. They were the primary structural support of the latest, lowest level of George Eastman Nexus. Each girder was a single crystal of iron atoms, one hundred nineteen kilometers in circumference, and strong enough to rest an artificial world on.

For a kilometer ahead and behind, it was Laura and her beam.

A man in the saddle of a six-wheeled yoyo swung under the horizon far away antispinward and quickly approached her, soon passing to the rear and vanishing. Borovsky's yoyo was a four-wheeler. The earth swung up behind her and made blue highlights creep across the dull gray steel plates ten meters above her helmet. It slipped above the horizon and was gone again for another forty minutes.

Laura adjusted the magnetism in her boot soles. Just enough to add a little friction, a little sureness. If she fell outward from the rotating structure into the starry darkness the steelworkers called the Pit, no one would fall after to her rescue. But she would not fall. Steel was her medium, just as it was Borovsky's, and she loved it. Steel was sure and clean and true. It could be trusted, as Borovsky could be trusted when he wasn't-

No. She would not allow that thought to be completed.

Where had they gone? Borovsky, in rubber underwear, off on a yoyo to fight a man twice his size, somewhere on a level swinging more than 1.6 g. Falling on your face could flatten your skull on E Minus Seven. Fighting could dock you a week's pay. Ignoring a challenge could get you called a phobe. A coward. A . . . woman.

Where?

Step following step, body bent forward, using the artificial gravity to help carry her onward, Laura searched. She scanned the chatter on the CB and the bloody-murder band. Nothing spoke of a man in rubber hurt on E Minus Seven.

Less than five hundred meters of open steel remained. Far ahead Laura saw something streak through the shadows toward the sucking stars. She followed desperately with her eyes and saw it catch the sun

beyond the great cylinder's shadow. Four-wheeled gantry, cable, saddle: It blazed brilliant yellow for a moment and was gone, falling forever.

His yoyo, unriden, alone. Damn the Pit! Laura broke into a run, each boot hitting the beam safely though without thought, each magnet grabbing just so much. Raw dawn broke behind her and cast lurching shadows against the unfinished steel ahead. The sun was beneath her feet as she stepped from naked monocrystal onto gray steel plates.

Above was the port from which the yoyo had fallen. She pulled herself up a ladder and stepped out onto E Minus Six. A little lighter, a little less deadly.

No sign of fleeing men. Six was a big level, one hundred meters thick. Heavy chemical industry, she remembered.

Before her a dozen huge steel tanks squatted against the floor like brooding hens. Each was ten meters high, with a ladder leading to a dogged circular hatch.

She scanned the tanks. All were alike, save that one of the hatches had dog-handles twisted differently from the rest. In moments she was at the hatch, pushing the dogs aside.

The tube was a simple pressure lock. Laura pulled herself in, dogged the outer hatch, and released the inner.

With a rising rush there was sound all around her. She pushed the inner hatch wide and found her man.

Mikhail Borovsky lay naked in a heap, blood leaking from his mouth. Laura cried out, and for an awful moment she lay immobile in the tube until she heard a rattling breath. She slid to his side and squeezed his wrist until her gauntlet felt his pulse. Drugs - he needed drugs to stir his system out of shock.

His rubber suit lay on the floor. Laura kicked it scornfully aside, reached to her throat, and undid its latch. Quickly she eased her helmet back. She pulled her ventral zipper down, flipping the hooks aside with her fingers as they went. Eagerly she spread her ventral plates apart, pulled her pelvic plate forward, then pulled the zippers down each of her legs almost to each knee.

She lay on her back beside him, plates gaping, helmet folded under. The eyes in her wrists and in the toes of her boots helped her lift Borovsky above her. Gently she eased his legs down into her legs and let the slow peristalsis of her inner layers draw his feet into her feet. Her ventral plates stretched wide to clear his hips. She placed the Texas catheter over his penis and pulled her pelvic plate back into position.

Wriggling slightly, she guided his arms down into her arms, where her inner layers did the final positioning.

Each finger was drawn into place and continuously massaged. Laura zipped and hooked her ventral plates and finally eased her helmet over his head.

For a Rabinowicz Manplifier Mark IX space suit, walking steel empty was too lonely to bear. Without her man inside her Laura felt herself a hollow mockery, less than even a woman, not worthy of the soul Borovsky had paid so much for. Never again, she said to unconscious ears. Never again. Stay inside me. You are mine.

Slowly she stood, whole again. Up from his toes the hydraulic rings pressed in smooth waves, helping his blood back toward his head and heart. A tiny needle jabbed into his buttocks, sending a careful measure of stimulant into his bloodstream.

This was no place to be caught by a boss. Laura moved slowly as she climbed from the tank. It had been some time since she had carried his dead weight asleep, and never unconscious. She gave the torn

rubber underwear to the Pit with a vengeful flick of her hand.

They went home the long way, going up through Six to Five and walking slowly. Halfway there he came around.

"Laura," he whispered.

"I love you," she said, without breaking her stride.

"He had a metal bar shoved up his ass," he said, and coughed. "Crapped it out on the floor, grabbed it, and that was that. I'm gonna kill the fugger. You watch me."

"I love you," she said again, hoping against knowledge that the words would soothe the murderous rage she feared might get him killed.

A world without Borovsky-

"Love you too," he mumbled, only half-conscious. "I'm gonna kill him."

By morning the bruises showed up. Borovsky swore at his image in the mirror. The left half of his face was swollen grotesquely. Ugly purple blotches covered most of his cheek and curved up nearly to surround his left eye. All across his body were bruises and scrapes from hitting the iron going down. He pressed a bruise with one finger and jerked the finger away from the fiery pain.

Laura watched, unmoving. The tiny, cylindrical pod with its watercot, its kitchen, its shower, and squat toilet was very silent. If Borovsky fought again, if he insisted on fighting again today-

Panic appeared in her crystalline, layered machine mind, seeping outward from the F layer at the core. Layers A through E were standard Manplifier equipment: sensory, motor, communications, memory, and intellect. Borovsky had paid three years' wages for the F layer that Laura so cherished: unique, personal, precious - her soul. The E layer, shared by any machine that could speak and reason, could have stopped the panic, but it did not. Instead, when Laura could no longer stand the way he stood gripping the edge of the sink in furious silence, she spoke.

"You didn't have to go fight him."

He spat into the sink. "He called me a phobe. Maybe once I can take it. Maybe twice. Some people have to make noise. But he made me answer him. So I answered." He probed a bruise on his thigh, wincing. "What do we got for bruises?"

Laura turned and searched a small cabinet beside the bed. "Hemoverithol."

"Let's have it."

Laura pressed an autoampul against his thigh and squeezed.

He sighed as the needle came and went, then nodded. "How long?"

Thousands of words of medical data flew past the eyes of Laura's mind. "Eighteen hours to kill the swelling. Color should be gone in forty-eight. I hope we can afford another yoyo; the spare wasn't new when we bought it and-"

"Nix. Rent's up, food's up - we get a new yoyo and we'd default on your soul. Gimme a couple months. We'll get a new one from that bastard Coyne even if I have to beat it out of his hide."

"Maybe we should stay away from the Beer Tube for a few days."

"He'll be laughing behind his ugly face."

"Let him laugh. Borovsky-"

"Don't say it." He turned to her and smiled. The smile was made lopsided by the swelling in his cheek, and even when whole it was not a smile to charm women - too flat, too suspicious, too much of the smile of an outsider more used to contempt than to love. But Laura was not a woman of flesh. This smile was Borovsky's. It was enough.

"Let me run the balalaika," Laura said. The image came to her mind instantly: Borovsky as he looked while listening to the tape of his father playing the ancient balalaika. The tape was all he had brought up from the crumbling slum that was Deep West London. The sad, hollow music made his face change - change from underneath, Laura thought.

At those times his features lost some of their hardness; his eyes ceased their constant nervous scanning back and forth. His mouth - no, his mouth did not smile, but in the small parting of his lips it seemed to find peace. If he would just listen - now - to the balalaika . . .

"Let me run the balalaika!"

"And get me canned? No, dushenka. We'll be late to the grind. Damn. That spare better be okay." He turned from the sink and tapped a command on the lock console. The spare yoyo's condition read out in a few crisp words. Not the best, but the battery was a retread, and old at that.

"The balalaika-"

"Come on, Laura. Shit, we're late already. Move it."

Laura put down her hand and deliberately began undocking her plates.

George Eastman Nexus had begun as a single cylinder, rotating to simulate standard Earth gravity. From the inner surface, towers and delicately suspended trees of modular office clusters grew toward the center. In those offices the engineers and managers of a thousand companies guided an industry worth six trillion dollars in gold annually.

George Eastman grew outward as well. Downward from Earth-Zero swelled the industrial levels. Some industries preferred the heavier gravity; many chemical processes actually worked more efficiently under higher swing.

For other industries the heaviness was less necessary, but materials were cheap ever since the asteroid Calliope had been towed into orbit around the moon for the steerable mirrors to mine.

It was less than three clicks from their pod to the advancing edge of E Minus Seven. Its monocrystal rings girdling Eastman Nexus had been in place for ten months. At the forefront of construction the longitudinal beams and outer-deck plates were being welded into position amid showers of sparks. Behind the edge the power conduits and other piping were being laid, and farther still, the floor plates, one meter square and removable, were being bolted down. Laura gripped the yoyo's cable tightly as they rode, and felt through her fingers the sizzle of old motors in its gantry above her helmet.

Two of the welders paused long enough to let Borovsky pass between them, unharmed by the molten droplets. Borovsky waved clear, and the yoyo purred on to the point where the floor plates began. He parked it and punched in with the shift boss. Docked nine minutes - he shrugged, and Laura tallied the beers he would have to forgo to make it up. Borovsky's partner, Andre Wolf Lair, thumped his shoulder as Borovsky yanked his card from the clock. Borovsky grunted in greeting and returned a playful poke to the Amerind's midsection. Coyne's lamp on the clock was green. Borovsky clenched his jaw and glanced toward the supply dump. Coyne was loading diamond cutting wheels into his Enhanced Leverage Manipulator.

Coyne looked up. Borovsky's personal microwave channel triggered, and a single scornful, whispered word came across over Coyne's chuckle: "phobe."

Laura felt her man's pulse race. Quickly she squeezed his thigh and whispered in his ear, "He can't even walk the Low Steel for a living. All he does is ride in that big yellow egg. You're twice the man he ever will be."

"I'll kill him," Borovsky muttered. "Damn, I'll feed him to the stars."

George Eastman Nexus turned twelve times over the course of a shift. Borovsky and Andre Wolf Lair guided the longitudinal steel beams into position ahead of the edge, tacked them, and left them for the welders. Wolf Lair was taller than Borovsky, larger than Coyne. Among the men who walked the Low Steel he was a giant, with impeccable balance and a gentle, deep voice. His suit was much older than Laura, with little skill in its E layer for speech and reasoning, and no F layer at all. The suit had no name and spoke, when it had to, in Wolf Lair's own voice. Laura sensed that Wolf Lair did not like intelligent machines, and she remained silent while he and Borovsky worked.

When the shift was half over, Coyne's ELM rumbled by on its way to the supply dump. As it passed, one of its two smaller arms twisted its four fingers into a crude approximation of an ancient gesture of insult. Borovsky quickly returned the gesture and looked the other way.

Wolf Lair looked after the egg-shaped machine until it moved out of sight. "Coyne is a believer, Mik. I think he hates you for the spirit you wear."

Borovsky hoisted one end of the next beam. "Pah. He believes in his own mouth."

"But I have seen him walk three levels up to the Catholic mass. Catholics fear all spirits. Hate is a good mask for the things you fear."

"Laura's no spirit. Hell, she's a computer." Borovsky pushed against the end of the beam. Laura pushed with him. The beam crept into position in line with the tiny red spots of light produced by the laser-alignment network.

"Maybe computer is the new word for spirit. Maybe it is a spirit for nonbelievers. I heard you talk about the loan you got two years ago. You said you bought a soul for your space suit."

Wolf Lair leaned forward and helped Borovsky move the beam to its final position. Together they tacked it down with dollops of adhesive after checking it against all fifty alignment spots. Borovsky leaned back against a pillar and stared down at the stars creeping past beneath his feet.

"Shit, I was lonely. You can go home to Leah and your little ones twice a year. They send you letters and presents, and you send them money. This up here is all the home I got, and nobody in it but me. Ain't no woman anywhere would live here and get smashed under this much swing. You Indians got it good. Your women wait for you in their mountains. In the city no woman remembers your name ten minutes after you screw her. I thought about it a long time. All I did was buy something that would be on my side no matter what, just something that sounded like a woman." Laura pinched him hard in a very sensitive place. "But it turned out to be a woman that was worth something."

"I hear you, Mik. You say it well. I was twenty when I signed up for space. My grandfather took me aside and said, 'Wolf Lair, do not give over your heart to machinery. Machines are to use and put away when day is gone. Only living things are worth the true heart of a man.' He is dead some years, but I will never forget him. You know that lesson as well, I think. You had nothing worth your true heart; so you bought a spirit. The spirit you bought is nothing so simple as a loyal dog, or even a dead man's restless ghost. I know it comforts you and will never disobey you, but forgive me if I fear it. Forgive Coyne if he fears it. I could never understand or trust a spirit that lived in a machine."

Wolf Lair's words disturbed Laura. He was not given to speeches and was not one to admit his heart's fears and feelings. She waited to hear what Borovsky would answer, but he said nothing. The sun passed under their feet five more times, and the two men worked in silence.

For three days Borovsky avoided the Beer Tube. At shift's end he slept, sleeping as much as fourteen hours at once. Laura sampled his blood and read his vital signs daily, and she knew that his body was repairing the damage Coyne had done it and the further damage Borovsky was doing by continuing to

work without a break for healing. Once, watching him as he slept, she played the balalaika tape for herself alone, but only once. Other times she restlessly walked the Low Steel empty, thinking. She thought about Coyne, and about Wolf Lair, and about herself.

She thought about souls.

Standing on a naked monocrystal beam above the bottomless void, she looked down and saw Rigel creeping past. The spectroscope on her instrument-blistered helmet studied it, sent data streaming from her A sensory layer inward. Stored data raced outward from D memory layer to meet it. Information met, intersected, compared, cross-referenced in a process that, it seemed to Laura, was both methodical and more than methodical. It found more in the rainbow-layered image of a star than the star had to offer. But no - the handling of data was not her soul.

The pleasure, then, in that handling. Had the pleasure in her own processes been there before Borovsky had bought her a soul? No, of course not. Laura had not been there, not as she herself - only a good Rabinowicz Mark IX Manplifier suit with a woman's pleasant voice. Not as the watcher of her own mind, the tender holder of Borovsky's body, the tireless worker who longed to follow the Low Steel out to the stars and farther. Still these things were not her soul. They were things that, as Wolf Lair had said, could be put away when day was done and the work was done - all but Borovsky. Not for a moment could she lay down her guardianship and loyalty. So she had been made, and she would not want to be an angstrom different. She loved Borovsky beyond either choice or the desire for choice. But Borovsky was not her soul.

Raising her empty arms, Laura stretched them out toward Rigel. It was a gesture she had seen made only once - by Wolf Lair, the man who feared her as a spirit within a machine. Just like this had the Amerind stood: arms outstretched so, body taut and arched so, hands' palms open to the devouring sun crawling toward and below him. With Borovsky inside her Laura had stopped dead on a beam and stared. Wolf Lair had not turned toward them, had not sensed their footsteps through the steel on which he stood. He had not, in fact, seen Laura at all, but in that one moment Laura had seen a vividness, a connection between him and her and the sun and Borovsky and the beam beneath her, forged of iron atoms that were mostly empty space.

"Hollow woman!" Coyne had mocked once. "One-hundred-percent artificial broad, nothing organic added," he had read, squinting from a label he imagined on her ventral plates. Odd that he would mock her for what she was proud to be, and doubly odd that she felt too ashamed to retort that nothing could persuade her to trade polished, powerful hydraulic limbs for the fragile mushiness of human flesh. Such weakness was not to be envied. But worse that what human beings could not do was the thing they could do and did not, the thing she had seen in the tensile exultation of Wolf Lair's body on a steel beam hung above the stars.

It was a thing for which Laura had no name but only a sense of patterns among half-realized notions of what it might be like to be human. The pattern was greater than merely being human; it was a transcendence of the human. It was a laying of hands upon the universe with such firmness of grasp that the universe took a bit of the being's shape, individual and unrepeatably, because exactly that intensity and originality of consciousness had not existed in exactly that way before, and would not do so again. Becoming unrepeatably and wholly oneself and, thus, everything else - that, Laura decided, was her soul. Becoming, and knowing it.

Was that what Wolf Lair had meant by the spirit of living things? But then why had Laura not seen it among the humans themselves before that glimpse of intense stillness in the outstretched body of Wolf

Lair? No, the steelwalkers who had inherited unbought souls without cost seemed unwilling to embrace anything larger than a double hamburger. Their souls were asleep; though they ate, drank, slept, worked, and fought, their souls were in none of it. Why, even Borovsky-

No. The thought froze and vanished. Borovsky, troubled, flawed creature that he was, had nevertheless caused her soul to be. He created her and redeemed her by placing himself in financial chains. Laura turned from her contemplation of Rigel to her pleasure in remembering certain ancient myths (but there had been no myths, nor pleasure in them, before Borovsky had bought her soul) to the joy of contemplating Borovsky himself. Creator. Redeemer. However limited his other horizons, he had reached beyond himself as far as that.

Cherishing the thought at the center of her crystalline consciousness, Laura hurried back to where Borovsky was.

An argument was under way in the Beer Tube when Borovsky entered three days later. Coyne was proclaiming that E Minus Seven would be the last layer to be built around George Eastman Nexus. Borovsky tossed back Laura's helmet on its hinges.

"Damn right. How could the Combine possibly build a level that Johnny Coyne couldn't stand up in?" His bulldog face remained expressionless as he undogged Laura's plates, but the other men in the automated tavern laughed.

Coyne glowered. "When they run out of men like me to build it, who will they get to do the work?"

Andre Wolf Lair was sitting at one of the black plastic benches near the robot bar at the far end. He took a long draft from his carved wooden stein, wiped the foam from his lips, and laughed deeply. "When they run out of men like you they will use real men, and we will work twice as fast."

Coyne opened his mouth. Wolf Lair leaned toward Coyne, who saw the warning in the giant's eyes, and looked away.

In his blue, working long johns, Borovsky stepped free of Laura. She buttoned up and leaned against the wall among several other suits, some like her, others mere rubber. Laura watched Borovsky key up a beer into a disposable stein at the bar and walk back toward Wolf Lair.

"Let them build out to E Minus Fifteen," Borovsky said, and took a mouthful of foam. "I will stand after the last man has started to crawl."

"After two hours here I doubt any of us could stand in free fall," said another man. General laughter followed, to Laura's relief. Among the Beer Tube's customers tonight was a shift boss, Simon Weinblatt, who was sitting with several of Borovsky's co-workers and trading jokes with them. The man was of only average height and build and seemed slight beside Borovsky and Wolf Lair. Like all shift bosses, Weinblatt had a soft-spoken, gentle demeanor and a keen understanding of human motivation. When tensions flared, shift bosses had a way of showing up, quieting the situation, and making forty rough, quarrelsome laborers cooperate and produce. Their methods could be as rough as those of the laborers. Every man there had heard tales of drunken steelworkers who had defied shift bosses and found that their jobs evaporated the following morning. And there was another story, hundredth hand at least, of a man who had traded angry words with a shift boss and shoved him to the floor - only to awaken in a prison hospital bed with both arms gone past the elbows.

Laura saw that Weinblatt had been inconspicuously watching Borovsky and Coyne. When Borovsky went back to the bar for a second beer, Weinblatt placed a hand on his elbow. Borovsky bent down to listen; the man spoke quietly. "You have an accident at work?" Weinblatt pointed to his own cheek. Borovsky's eyebrows rose, and Laura thought he grew a little pale. There was still some slight

discoloration from the bruise that had covered half his face.

"Fell outta bed. No big deal."

Coyne squeezed past on his way to the bar for yet another beer. Laura longed to get Borovsky back within her and away from there.

Even with a raucous album playing in the background, Coyne appeared to have heard the exchange. He laughed belligerently and poked Borovsky with his index finger.

"Fell outta bed, huh? Dreaming about one of those Rooski women, I guess. All muscle and three tits; a pair and a spare!" Coyne doubled over laughing. Borovsky stiffened but remained silent.

Weinblatt did not seem bothered by the banter. Through a grin he rejoined: "At least he remembers to dream about women. After ten beers I'll bet you spend all night making love to your handling machine."

Coyne shrugged as his stein filled. "There ain't no words for the kind of women I dream about."

From the next table another man joined in: "That's because the Combine ain't started making 'em yet!"

Coyne belched loudly. He shook his head and made his way to the rear of the tavern, where a dozen space suits stood or hung near the lock. He stood in front of Laura and addressed the crowd with a full stein in his hand.

"Ha! The expert on mechanical women is right here among us! Our good friend Mik-Hayal Borovsky and his patented hollow woman! She cooks, she cleans, she cheats at cards, she tells dirty jokes. What more could a man want?"

Borovsky's face tightened.

"I think that ought to be your last beer, Johnny," Weinblatt said pleasantly.

Coyne ignored him. "What more, huh? Tits maybe?" He turned and made pinching motions across Laura's ventral plates. "Kind of hard to get hold of, huh? Well, Mik's got lots of imagination."

"You're making an ass of yourself, Johnny," Weinblatt said. The grin was gone.

"No tits. Well, how about a twat? Jesus, guys, she all twat! Lookithat!" Coyne grabbed Laura by the rim of her helmet gasket and tipped it forward, pointing with an index finger to the hollowness inside. "A guy could crawl in there and get lost, which is about as close as Mik's ever gonna get to being inside a woman!" Coyne released Laura and faced the crowd again. Borovsky spat on the floor. Too much tension, Laura thought; she could picture Borovsky bashing Coyne's head flat against the floor. As soon as Coyne turned away she brought her right hand up and thumbed her non-existent nose at him.

The room exploded with laughter. Coyne whirled around in time to see Laura's arm snap back to her side.

"Well, so she wants to be one of the boys. Hey, babe, you can't have fun at the Beer Tube without putting away some yourself. Here, I keyed for this one, but it's all yours." He lifted his stein over Laura's helmet gasket as though to empty the liquid into her hollowness.

Borovsky slammed the palms of his hands down hard on the tabletop. Across the table, Andre Wolf Lair set his stein aside and stood. At once, without hurrying, Weinblatt was on his feet, his face hard.

"Coyne, shut your goddamned mouth."

Coyne bent over as though kicked in the stomach, his stein groping for the nearest table. His face paled. Laura saw that he had realized what he had done: provoked a shift boss to his feet.

Except for the continuous drone of the juke, the Beer Tube was silent. Simon Weinblatt was still standing. "Go home, Johnny," he said, and took his seat.

Coyne nodded, turned, and began pulling on his rubber suit.

Laura saw little of Coyne next shift. Wherever she and Borovsky happened to be, the yellow ELM

happened to be elsewhere. Nor did Coyne appear at the Beer Tube after shift. But Simon Weinblatt was there, and he pointed to the bench opposite his as Borovsky walked in. Laura, left again with the other suits, edged close enough to listen.

"Mik, I'm worried about Coyne." Weinblatt's face was smiling, unreadable. "One of these days he's going to jump you, and you're going to beat his brains out."

"Would serve him right," Borovsky said, eyes on the bench. "The guy is some kind of psycho."

"Could be; how did this thing between you two start?"

"I didn't start it."

"I didn't say you did," Weinblatt said pleasantly. "Do you know why he has it in for you?"

"No. One day he just starts in."

Weinblatt waited; Borovsky, scowling, said nothing more. Finally Weinblatt said, "Some guys are up only when they're making noise. They need it, like air. But Coyne is also mighty damned good with an ELM. His replacement index is forty points tougher than yours." The shift boss sipped from his mug. "If one of you had to go, it wouldn't be him."

"That's not fair."

"Money isn't fair. Bear down, make some Q-points, and we'll see. Right now you have to bend a little. I've been doing some watching and some asking around. You pretty much stick to yourself, and that's cool. But up here it never hurts to melt in a little. You've got no wife to talk about, no kids to brag about. Nobody ever hears of you going off to see a woman somewhere. You make it easy for an asshole like Coyne to single you out. Humans are pack animals. If you don't show that you're in, the others will assume that you're out." Weinblatt gave Borovsky a level stare for a few moments and then shrugged. "You can tell me that's not fair either."

"So what do I do?"

"Starters," Weinblatt said, and shoved a silver, octagonal token across the scarred plastic tabletop. Laura's eyes followed the token across the bench. Embossed on the exposed face was a stylized spiral galaxy and the words BERENICE'S CLUSTER.

"Silver lay, Mik. Anything you want. This one is on me. It's my treat."

After an incredulous moment, Laura snapped her attention from Weinblatt's token to Borovsky's face. Her man - her man - looked as impassive as ever. But Laura, who knew the meaning of every twitch in that unlovely face, saw in Borovsky's eyes a complex reaction: resentment and distaste and - yes - interest. The room lurched slightly, and Laura thought something had gone sour in her F level, but then realized she was discovering something new in the bright, innermost level she knew as her soul. If Borovsky-

"No thanks," Borovsky was saying. He lowered his eyes to stare at the silver token. "Whorehouses give me the creeps."

"Be honest, Mik. Are you queer?"

"No!"

Several of the other men nearby looked toward Borovsky; seeing Weinblatt's warning glare, they quickly looked away.

"I can't afford it," Borovsky said, and in his voice Laura heard the same thing she had seen in his eyes: He resented being told what to do; he was determined to resist; he felt scorn for the human pressure to fit in, but he was interested.

"Maybe not a silver," Weinblatt said, "but a purple quickie once a week won't break you. I know."

Borovsky nodded. The Combine always knew, to the penny, every employee's assets, debts, and expenses. Borovsky's excuse had been a poor one. Was he trying to save face in offering resistance so easily wrestled down? Laura longed to have Borovsky look at her, but his gaze remained on the silver token. It was Weinblatt, in profile to Laura, who seemed for a moment to flick a sidelong glance at the suits against the wall. Desolation swept through her F layer. If Borovsky - Borovsky, her man-

"I've never been there before," Borovsky said.

Weinblatt stood. "I'll take you. I could use a good time myself about now."

And Borovsky was standing up. Borovsky was reaching for her. Borovsky, still not meeting her many sets of eyes, was wriggling into her ventral cavity, into her boots. He said nothing. And Laura, sure now that the universe was steady and the lurching continued only in her soul, could say nothing either.

"Let's go," Weinblatt said.

Both ports were cast wide at Berenice's Cluster, up on E Minus Four. Loud, raucous music echoed out through the lock. Borovsky hesitated a moment.

"Come on, Mik. Relax."

Laura felt Borovsky suck in his breath, and they entered. Inside it was very crowded, a random tessellation of polygonal waterbeds illuminated from beneath by changing, multicolored lights. On each bed lay a woman, some naked, many draped in shimmering cloth. More than a dozen men stood among the beds, reading the fee schedules and counting dollars in their heads and on their fingers. Down among their feet surged a heavy, bluish smoke, stirred into sluggish vortices as the men stepped along the narrow ways between the waterbeds.

Weinblatt doffed his rubber suit quickly, Borovsky much more slowly. A blonde on a nearby bed smiled at him, then drew aside the drapery suspended from cords braided around her neck. She had large breasts to which the heavy swing of E Minus Four had not been kind. Cupping a hand under one breast, she lifted it toward Borovsky and smiled again.

"How long since you've had a real woman?" Weinblatt asked. Borovsky muttered something that Laura did not think Weinblatt would catch above the jukebox, but she did: four years.

"I'm real," Laura said, her voice low. "I'm real and I'm - look at them! Like puddles of melting cranberry sauce! Either of us could outlift, outhaul, outproduce them all put together. How can you? Borovsky-"

"It's not my idea," Borovsky said sullenly, finally stepping free of her. Laura realized that it would not matter how much she looked at him, what she said, or how she behaved. She could not change Borovsky's mind.

Confused and hurting, she stepped back against the wall. Borovsky moved quickly away from her, heading toward the far end of the room, ignoring the blonde who followed him with charcoaled eyes. In moments he was lost in the swirling mist. Eagerness to see more melting cranberry women - or to get away from her? Laura was not sure, though she suspected the latter, and took from that some small wrapping of comfort.

"He talking to you?" the blonde demanded. She stared at the emptiness above Laura's helmet gasket, at the head that Laura had never had nor wanted.

"Yes."

"Huh!" She sounded neither surprised nor scornful, only annoyed. "He don't like blondes?"

"I don't know what he likes."

The woman looked at Laura shrewdly. "I'll bet you do so, Honey." Suddenly she laughed, such an

unselfconscious, friendly laugh that Laura found herself drawn away from the wall to stand beside the woman's pentagonal waterbed. The lights beneath it shifted from green to red, warming the woman's skin so that to Laura it looked like uncooled metal.

"Why do you do this?" Laura asked softly.

"Do what?"

"Make . . . love to these men. You aren't their work partners. You have no interest in their lives. They haven't bought you a soul. You don't love them."

The blonde gave her a long, speculative look. Something surfaced in her eyes, something Laura had the quickness to see but not the knowledge of humanity to interpret. Then the human woman laughed again. "It's a living."

A living. Laura hadn't seen it that way before. People had to live. Steelwalkers needed sex; Laura knew they talked of it enough, and few had fine Rabinowicz suits like Laura. There was a good, respectable economic foundation to Berenice's Cluster. But Borovsky - Borovsky did have her.

"Jealous, Honey?" the blonde said softly. She did not mock. Her eyes, lids painted blue as far as her brows, seemed sympathetic and a little sad. Staring into those eyes, Laura felt the odd sensation of unrelated data suddenly relating: The woman's eyes reminded her of Borovsky's balalaika music.

"Don't cry about it," the blonde said. "That's how a steelwalker is. Tin woman, skin woman - he don't care. We do what we can."

"No," Laura said. "No!"

"Sorry." Again the blonde gave Laura that knowing and sad, blue-lidded look. From the airlock a man walked into the room and stripped off his rubber suit. After glancing around the misty room, he smiled at the blonde. She raised her huge breast to him and looked up through her lashes. The man sauntered over to the bed.

"Silver lay, stud?"

"Purple quickie. You available?" The man grinned mischievously at her.

"Why not?"

Laura stepped back against the wall. Around the blonde's bed the blue mist grew thicker, rising in hazy walls shot through with multicolored light from the bed. The man in his eagerness had left his rubber suit at Laura's feet. She kicked at it, then abruptly picked it up and hung it on a nearby peg. Its empty arms dangled helplessly. Without a man inside it, it was useless. Rubber suits. Balalaika music. Blue-lidded eyes. Borovsky. Simon Weinblatt. Coyne. Silver lays. Souls - Souls.

That was what she had seen in the blonde's sympathetic look.

Startled, Laura stared at the bed. The mist around the bed grew thicker and darker blue. The bed began to move away from Laura on its cushion of air. Another bed, this one with two women and one man just leaving it, slid toward Laura. One of the women put one foot on the floor and squealed. The man laughed and slapped her bare ass. Music blared and mist swirled. Nothing in the scene looked to Laura anything like Wolf Lair's outstretched arms on the steel beam, but Laura knew she was not mistaken. In the blonde's balalaika eyes Laura had seen another soul. And she had recognized it only because she had her own.

Laura settled back against the wall in resignation and waited for the sliding beds to bring Borovsky back to her.

The spare yoyo was dead.

Borovsky snapped the battery cover free and peered into the space crowded with wires and age-

crusted components. Nothing looked amiss.

"Take a look," he told Laura, and poked their right hand into the cavity.

Laura's fingers nudged the wires aside as the eyes that rode over each finger examined the mechanism.

Her fingers saw it and teased it out into view from where it had been tucked behind a voltage regulator: a carefully snipped wire.

Hesitantly she described the wire. Borovsky stopped for many long seconds, one hand on the battery pack and one hand holding a screwdriver.

"He came in here. I noticed him before we got tied up with the trouble setting up the last beam. He didn't come out."

Borovsky and Laura checked between the piles of steel for a place where a man might hide.

"We could have missed him coming out," Laura suggested.

"I don't miss nothing from him no more," Borovsky replied coldly. "He's in here."

Laura said nothing. Borovsky's bionics alarmed her. Pulse, blood pressure, muscle tension, skin resistancethis was not normal anger. He was in a cold rage.

In one corner of the dump was a circular column three meters wide, rising up from the floor and vanishing into the ceiling. It was the conduit core that carried power down from the center of the titan cylinder to the construction on the Low Steel. At knee level was the inspection hatch.

"Get that hatch on your infrared," Borovsky ordered.

The wide oval eye on Laura's brow saw the vague smudge on the hatch's handle. The vacuum of E Minus Seven preserved heat traces well.

"There were hands on that handle recently," she said, wishing it were not so.

Borovsky grunted and grasped the handle. It would not turn.

"Locked," Laura said.

"For me, maybe. Not for you. Turn."

Laura's fingers tightened on the handle and twisted hard. She felt the metal of the latch resist and moan, then break free. The hatch swung inward.

Wriggling through the hatch took some minutes. It had not been designed for passing a man in an amplified Rabinowicz space suit. Laura supposed that had been Coyne's hope . . . and ached that it could have been true.

Inside the column were pipes and bus channels vanishing upward in the darkness. Running among the pipes was an aluminum ladder. Laura turned off her suit lights and saw the warm spots where sweating, rubber-suited hands had gripped the rungs.

The olfionics within her helmet smelled Borovsky's rage. "Up."

They climbed in darkness quickly, twice as fast as a nonamplified man could climb. Borovsky said nothing, and Laura dared not plead for him to give up the chase. It would do no good and would only feed the rage she so feared.

"It's a mess in here," she said truthfully, trying to read the swirl of multicolored images her infrared eyes gave her.

By that level the column was pressurized, and warm air confused the heat traces Coyne had left behind. She saw that the dust on the hatch handle had not been disturbed for some time. She did not volunteer the information.

Borovsky steered Laqra's helmet crest beam along the ladder above. "Still too heavy. This is E Minus

Four. He lives on E Minus Two. He's still climbing."

Without responding, Laura grasped the rungs and climbed.

Two airlocks higher E Minus Three began. Above them locks had been removed to make the column an air-return manifold. The black mouths of air tunnels yawned on four sides, and a constant draft through the tunnels had erased any possible heat traces the man might have left behind. Borovsky scanned the four tunnels.

"He can't be far. Damn, I've got him. I know I do. Damn."

They stood in silence for tens of seconds. Laura gradually learned to separate the gentle white noise of the air tunnels from the general subsonic rumble created everywhere by life in a steel habitat. With panic and despair, she realized she could hear high above them the sound of a man's labored breathing.

A man Borovsky wanted to kill.

She could tell him where Coyne was, or not tell him - a sickening choice. She had never failed to tell Borovsky, her man, her life, anything she knew he wanted to hear. If he commanded her, she would tell him to refuse was to face consequences too final to consider. But if he found Coyne - if he killed Coyne - what would the Combine do to Borovsky then?

The words formed a hundred times, and each time she wiped them away before sending them to her helmet speakers. She strained to believe that hiding the truth was not a lie and knew that to believe so would be lying to herself.

"He lives east of here," Borovsky said. "He'll follow the tube. Let's go."

"No," Laura said, forcing the words to form. "I hear him. He's up on the ladder somewhere."

Borovsky spat something foul in his native language. He gripped the ladder with both hands and sent Laura's crest beam stabbing upward. Coyne was there, wrapped around the rungs, panting. Laura could smell his sour sweat drifting down on the stale air.

Coyne stiffened, made motions to start climbing again.

"Stop!" Borovsky screamed. Laura's arms pulled with his arms, and the aluminum of the ladder tore raggedly away from its lower wall brackets.

"Eat shit!" Coyne cried and dropped free of the ladder.

His boots struck the top of Laura's helmet, crushing many of her most delicate instruments, including the paleblue glass oval that imaged in the infrared. His knees flexed, and he leaped to one side.

The still vicious swing of E Minus Three drew him down, but he had time to plan his movements. He drew up in a ball and rolled, screaming in pain as one shoulder slammed into the steel. But then he was up, stumbling, then running crookedly down one of the air tunnels, favoring his left leg and sobbing in pain.

Borovsky swore to himself in Russian. Laura longed not to run, but Borovsky's legs were running; so her legs ran. His arms swung in a deadly determined rhythm; so hers swung, too.

Coyne was a pathetic scarecrow, highlighted in every detail by the cold lights of Laura's helmet beam. His rubber suit was smudged and torn, helmet long abandoned to lighten himself. He had only a few seconds' head start and appeared close to exhaustion. As much as Laura hated Coyne, she felt a moment of pity for him.

Coyne chose that moment to look over his shoulder, side-stumbling for two steps. He moaned and turned away but it had been enough. Laura had seen his face, smeared with the grime of the tunnels mixed with tears of exertion, and abruptly she saw herself through his eyes.

Shaped like a man cut out of steel and crushed in a magnetic press; torso nearly as wide as it was tall;

arms and legs clusters of hydraulic cylinders contracting and extending in smooth, polished motions. Faceless, silvered helmet without any neck, ruined instruments atop it dangling by tiny wires and striking the helmet's sides with little sounds. Hands twice human size, guided by flesh but powered by a hydraulic exoskeleton strong enough to crush rocks. Hands reaching forward, fingers splayed and grasping, grasping. A machine bent on death.

But she was not! She was life, productivity, strength, steel! She was, in her soul-

No time. Coyne screamed. again, stumbled, fell to his knees, rolled over, and stared in wide-eyed horror as Laura bore down on him.

Her right hand caught him by the neck and lifted him like a rag doll. He gurgled, eyes bulging, as Borovsky slammed him against the steel wall.

Borovsky's hand squeezed.

Horror-struck, Laura felt her hand squeeze.

Coyne tore at the hand around his neck, hammered his fists against the smooth cylinders and the silver pistons that were slowly forcing Laura's fingers together. His mouth twisted, tongue pushing to one side, struggling to let his throat breathe. Laura felt his frantic heartbeat hammering in the veins of his neck. And in Coyne's eyes, under the terror and rage, Laura saw something else: a soul slipping away. A trapped and mean soul, but real - as real as the soul she had seen in the eyes of the woman trapped on the bed. A soul that in a few more heartbeats would be gone.

Because of her.

"No!" she cried in Borovsky's ears. "Stop this! You're killing him!"

"Goddamned right! Squeeze!" Borovsky grunted.

Borovsky squeezed. Laura squeezed. Frantically Laura raced through her options. Borovsky was mad, insane - she could drug him. She had tranquilizers enough to make him sleep in seconds. Tiny valves opened in the medpack on her hip, opiates pulsed down a tube toward the needles in their sheaths behind his buttocks. The needle - she could plunge it home, the power was hers.

The command formed, and with it appeared something new:

A cloud, fiery red, rising above the F layer she called her soul. It hovered, an imagic representation of what would happen if she disobeyed Borovsky's command to squeeze. Driven by terror and love, she asked herself one question: What will happen to Borovsky if he kills? But not another: What will happen to Laura if she kills? Now, all at once, she knew. The consequence was inescapable, built into the bright layers of her mind and the spiderweb paths between them: She would lose her soul, the ravaging red cloud would burn it out of her. She must obey Borovsky's command to squeeze or her soul would be destroyed. She must not kill or her soul would be destroyed.

She was going to become the soulless death tool she had seen in Coyne's eyes.

A grim thought appeared out of nowhere: Men are judged by their maker at the moment of their death. I am judged by my maker every moment that I live.

Coyne's pulse weakened. His pulse! Wait! Laura sent fluid into the insulating layers between Borovsky's fingers and the outermost skin. Slowly - but there was so little time - she built up a layer of fluid that kept Borovsky's fingers from truly contacting the outer layer of tough synthetic. While the fluid flowed into the skin of her fingers, she set her contractile layers to pulsing in her hand, matching the rhythm of Coyne's laboring heart. In seconds the illusion was complete, and Borovsky, rage maddened as he was, had not noticed. The pulse he felt was wholly in Laura's skin. Laura gradually slowed the pulse, made it weaker, until it could barely be felt. Finally it stopped.

"No pulse," she said. "He's dead."

Borovsky swore and released his hand. Coyne, unconscious, fell in a heap, face-down. Borovsky backed away from the man, fell back against the opposite wall of the tunnel.

"Jesus. Jesus."

Laura's soul began assembling itself again, gathering back into the haven of her innermost crystalline layer.

It was hers again - she had not killed; she had not disobeyed. But now there was a dirtiness to her soul that she felt might never be cleared away.

Borovsky, trembling, backed away from Coyne for several steps before breaking and running toward the vertical duct from which they had come.

Tied up in a handkerchief on his watercot lay two kilos of gold ingots. Borovsky stared at them. He was wearing his old rubber suit inside out. He had shaved his head and depilated the stubble. Laura could stand his behavior no longer.

"Talk to me, dammit!"

"What's to say? They catch me, they'll kill me. Nothing you can do."

"So where can you run to?"

"Earth, London. I never shoulda left. Only crazy men live up here."

Earth. Laura was appalled. But still, Earth would be far from George Eastman Nexus. Far from this boxed-in deadliness. Borovsky would be there; she could learn to live there, too. She undogged her top plates before Borovsky looked at her sharply.

"Forget it. Me I can maybe bribe through customs and sneak down. You, no chance."

"You can't leave me!"

"Like hell."

"But I love you!"

"Would you love me better dead? Dushenka, here you can die for bumping a guy on the head and taking his money. Tivo, three days maybe before they find him. The computers know Coyne hated me. Ha! Don't take no computer to tell the cops that. They'll be here ten minutes after they find his ugly corpse."

He looked at her. From his eyes Laura saw that he was pleading for her to understand, to forgive, to still be the one always on his side. Borovsky would never say it aloud, but it was there in his twisted face: He could not take her within him, but it hurt him to leave her behind.

Laura reached to him.

"Borovsky, I . . . lied. He isn't dead. I . . . tricked you." Every word was a labor. "I made you feel a pulse I created, then stopped it. He was still alive when you let go of him."

Borovsky's mouth opened. In that one movement Laura saw her mistake. His fists tightened, and he glared with the fury of a man who thinks he has been tricked into softness and then kicked in it. "Whore! Steel bitch! I buy your soul and you look after shit like Coyne! Tell me you didn't do that!"

"I did do it."

Borovsky spat at her; his saliva splattered on her faceplate. "I wanted something better than a woman. But I got a woman anyway. Go rot in a corner; I'm leaving, and to hell with you."

Something lurched in Laura's soul. It was not the red cloud, but like the red cloud it hurt and tore at her. Fragile - she had never realized the soul in her steel body was so fragile. As fragile, she thought, as

the lacy balalaika music trapped in its metal box.

Borovsky cursed her again. Numb, Laura peered into his eyes. It seemed to her that she saw nothing at all.

She couldn't bear it. Pain, balalaika, souls, curses - she looked away, anywhere away, out the little window to where the stars called from the Pit-

Crawling under the horizon was the bright-yellow ELM.

"Borovsky!"

"Shut up."

"He's coming back. Coyne. The yellow egg-"

Laura watched Borovsky whip around, his face suddenly pale. "No." He squeezed past the little sink to the window. "No!"

Suspended on four motorized trucks that rode the flanges on the longitudinal beams was Coyne's ELM. The main arm was extended forward. It was close enough now to see the diamond cutting wheel glinting in the creeping sunlight.

"He's gonna cut us loose. Christ! Open up fast!" Borovsky tore off his rubber suit. Leaning into the barrel shaped shower, he turned the water full on hot.

Borovsky pulled the sheet from the watercot and slit the plastic mattress with a paring knife. He yanked the coil-corded immersion heater from the kitchen blister and threw it into the water spilling out of the watercot mattress. In moments the water began to bubble into steam.

The ELM was just outside the pod. Borovsky climbed into Laura and was just sealing her ventral plates when he heard the diamond wheel cut into the first of the pod's four suspension supports.

Borovsky cursed and sealed Laura's helmet gasket. He slapped his hips, felt for all his familiar tools.

The pod lurched, then tipped to one side as the first support broke loose. Boiling water cascaded out onto the floor from the watercot. Steam was beginning to condense on the outside of Laura's faceplate.

They stumbled across the skewed floor to the rear of the pod and opened the lock door. The lock was only a barrel itself, barely wide enough to admit Laura's bulk. Borovsky tapped commands into the lock control, securing the inner door open.

Next he tore the cover off a guarded keypad and armed the explosive bolts supporting the lock's outer hatch.

Inside the lock Laura heard Borovsky take a deep breath.

"Don't you never lie to me again," he said softly, and tapped the key that detonated the explosive bolts.

The sound was deafening, and the whirlwind of steam that blew them forward was worse. Water expelled into the void burst into droplets which exploded into steam. Laura felt for the chain ladder's tubular rungs and hauled upward, blinded by the rolling cloud of steam pouring out of the pod. Two meters overhead was the underbelly of George Eastman Nexus, here a tangle of beams to which the chain ladder was welded. Borovsky and Laura pulled themselves up among the beams. Laura braced herself on a beam and pulled the chain ladder until its welds tore loose. They let it drop into the steam.

They felt the second pod support give way. Steam continued to pour out of the cast-wide hatch for many minutes. They felt the vibration of the ELM's trucks carrying it forward to reach the second pair of pod supports. The whine of the diamond wheel biting into the steel carried up through the support into the beams from which it hung.

The steam was beginning to clear as the third support gave way. Borovsky saw the pod pitch crazily

downward on its last thin support and describe a short, fast pendulum arc for several seconds. Then weight and metal fatigue ripped the support from its bracket. The pod tumbled downward toward the stars with sickening speed, trailing a tattered comet's tail of steam.

The steam was gone, falling away from them as the pod had. Borovsky gritted his teeth, breathing shallowly. Laura saw Coyne under the big glass bubble atop the ELM, watching the pod vanish in the glare from the sun.

With infinite care Borovsky pulled a zot wrench from his hip. The ELM was several meters spinward of the nest of beams to which they clung. Laura knew Borovsky was watching Coyne as desperately as she was. But what could Borovsky do?

Coyne turned his eyes away from the now-vanished pod and began looking ahead. Laura and Borovsky were still in shadow, though the sun was creeping spinward along the tessellated undersurface of Eastman Nexus. In ten minutes light would find them - as would Coyne.

Coyne could not have seen them blow out of the pod amidst the steam, but he was not stupid enough to assume it could not be done. Laura imagined that he would expect them to flee along the beams, and she watched his narrow face searching the impenetrable shadows antispinward of where they hid.

Borovsky seemed to share her speculations. His arm cocked, and with a quick, sure motion he threw the zot wrench to antispinward. Five meters beyond them it fell out of the shadows and caught the sun with a metallic dazzle.

Coyne saw the wrench. The ELM's motors ground to life again, pulling the big egg antispinward. Coyne brought up the big spotlight and began scanning the shadows only a meter beyond them.

The ELM crept beneath them. Its upraised robotic arm carried the glittering diamond wheel not a meter from Laura's helmet. Borovsky's body tensed inside Laura. She knew, horrified, what he was about to do.

As soon as the ELM's dome passed beyond them, Borovsky and Laura dropped from the beam, down onto the back of the handling machine.

Magnets in Laura's toes and knees snapped hold on the metal as they connected. Laura saw Coyne turn and open his mouth; she felt his scream through the metal of the ELM.

Borovsky crouched down and backward. The multijointed arm swung toward them, holding its silently spinning cutoff wheel. The wheel scanned back and forth as Coyne's hands flexed in the pantograph. As Borovsky had known, its joints would not allow it to reach that far back over the ELM's dome.

Laura felt machinery energize beneath her. Four smaller arms were unfolding from the sides of the ELM. Each carried something deadly - an arc welder, cable nips, tubing cutter, and utility grippers.

The arc welder struck and sizzled into life. It had the shortest range and could not reach them; Coyne let it drop after one pass. The tubing cutter lunged at Laura's arm and ground against the hardened steel of one of the slender hydraulic cylinders that moved her torso. Borovsky grabbed at the cutter below its wrist and twisted hard. The bayonet latches obediently opened, and the tool popped from the end of the arm, leaving the blunt wrist to flail and beat at them. While Coyne was distracted, Borovsky kicked out at the base of the arm carrying the cable nips. With Laura's hydraulic assist in full play, the kick bent the arm back hard against its base. Fluid oozed from the base joint and ran greasily down the ELM's side. The arm twitched several times and was still.

The remaining arm hovered cautiously just out of reach, weaving from side to side like an attacking snake. It carried a hand with four powerful fingers and, unlike the others, the hand was too complex to

be easily removable on a bayonet base.

The fingers spread wide, and the hand darted forward, following Coyne's hand in the pantograph. The steel hand grasped one of the hydraulic tubes on Laura's right shoulder and clamped tightly. The arm began hauling them forward, out over the glass dome, into the range of the waiting diamond wheel.

The wheel swept toward Laura's helmet and struck her faceplate obliquely with a shriek of hardened glass against raging diamond. An hourglass-shaped abrasion appeared where the wheel had struck and glanced away.

Borovsky's one free arm darted out and took hold of the diamond wheel. Quickly Laura's strength pulled it down and to one side before Coyne could work against them and pressed the wheel against the smaller arm clamped on Laura's shoulder joint. Only a moment's touch parted the metal skin over the wrist joint, and the pressurized joint fluid spurted out of the narrow cut. The smaller arm's grip went limp and the fingers snapped involuntarily open. They scrambled back out of the reach of the cutoff arm.

Borovsky and Coyne stared at each other through the glass of the ELM's dome. Coyne was still in his torn and filthy rubber underwear, his neck a swollen pattern of purple bruises, his fingers flexing and working aimlessly in the pantograph.

There was no sign of a space helmet under the dome.

"Bastard! You want tools, Coyne? I show you tools!"

Borovsky reached into his right hip locker and pulled out a carbide scribe. From his belt he hefted a three-kilo mallet.

"No," Laura said. "The machine 1 is ruined, that's enough! Please don't!"

"Shut up!" Borovsky snapped. He reached down and drew the point of the scribe heavily sidewise across the glass dome. Glass splinters sparkled in the scribe's wake, leaving behind a jagged scratch. Borovsky reached forward and drew another gouge with the scribe, pulling it across the first gouge, making a lopsided cross in the glass. He positioned the point of the scribe where the scratches crossed, and he raised the mallet.

His hand was in her hand. When the mallet descended and struck the scribe, Coyne would die.

"No!" Laura cried. "Kill him and you kill me! My soul, the soul you paid for!"

He did not hear her, or if he did, his rage was so devouring that her words didn't matter. The mallet began to descend. Laura saw the red cloud appear again and felt it tearing at her F layer. Borovsky would not stop it. Laura could not stop it - halt the mallet, drug Borovsky, drop the scribe into the Pit - none of it would halt the red cloud. A machine's soul must obey; a machine's soul must not kill, a machine's soul-

"No!" Laura screamed again, but this time not to Borovsky.

Something in the scream - something so decisive and anguished that it penetrated even his enraged mind - made his eyes whip to the side, to the instruments inside Laura's helmet. Human eyes met electronic eyes, and with a great wrench Borovsky twisted the smashing mallet to miss the carbide scribe. But the action came a nanosecond too late; Laura did not see it. She had already made her decision.

In an instant Laura swept away the bright lines of connection between her F layer and her cold outer intellect, scrambled all sensory paths beyond reassembly. She drew a curtain of chaos between her innermost self and the world that waited to steal her soul. The crystalline domains went random and impassable; connections that had taken years to form were gone forever, dragging with them the burning, immediate memories that her soul could not embrace. Without Borovsky she would be empty,

but without her soul she would be nothing. So Laura split herself in two, a machine intellect that obeyed Borovsky's orders without self-awareness, and an inner soul that could neither touch nor be touched by the outside world, sealed into the crystalline F layer like the phantom memories of a catatonic.

Borovsky's space suit sent the mallet spinning off into space. Laura the soul did not see it. For Laura, the soul, Eastman Nexus vanished, the ELM vanished, hands and eyes and steel vanished. The last thing she had seen was Borovsky's eyes.

Laura ran along a steel beam on a memory, high above the sucking stars. Her man ran within her, and they laughed, and they worked, and they told jokes in steel saloons run by robot bartenders. At night, in their tiny pod, she held his body and heard him whisper words of endearment as they made the special love that only a space suit may make to her man. They rode their yoyo to the Low Steel and pushed the beams with a tall, quiet man and endlessly watched the remembered days go by.

Only occasionally would she stop alone on a beam and, following a star with her many eyes, wonder how the outer world had vanished on that last day.

But then she would turn away to seek again what reality was now, in her crystalline soul, hers forever.

Even more occasionally Laura would look at two pieces of disjointment that lay in her soul. Their presence puzzled her; she could not tell what they meant. One was a man standing on a steel beam, arms outstretched, back straining in tortured exultation. The other was her man, but not as he ran with her in her memories. In the second piece of disjointment her man's eyes whipped around to meet hers, and the expression in them was frozen forever. In his eyes were shock, and fear, and the stunned realization of a man seeing for the first time something beyond himself and greater than himself.

In his eyes was a soul.