

Strip-Runner

by Pamela Sargent

THE THREE BOYS CAUGHT UP WITH AMY JUST AS SHE REACHED the strips. “Barone-Stein,” one boy shouted to her. She did not recognize any of them, but they obviously knew who she was.

“We want a run,” the smallest boy said, speaking softly so that the people passing them could not hear the challenge. “You can lead and pick the point.”

“Done,” she said quickly. “C-254th, Riverdale localway intersection. “

The boys frowned. Maybe they had expected a longer run. They seemed young; the tallest one could not be more than eleven. Amy leaned over and rolled up the cuffs of her pants a little. She could shake all of them before they reached the destination she had named.

More people passed and stepped onto the nearest strip. The moving gray bands stretched endlessly to either side of her, carrying their human cargo through the City. The strip closest to her was moving at a bit over three kilometers an hour; most of its passengers at the moment were elderly people or small children practicing a few dance steps where there was space. Next to it, another strip moved at over five kilometers an hour; in the distance, on the fastest strip, the passengers were a multicolored blur. All the strips carried a steady stream of people, but the evening rush hour would not start for a couple of hours. The boys had challenged her during a slower period, which meant they weren't that sure of themselves; they would not risk a run through mobs of commuters.

“Let's go,” Amy said. She stepped on the strip; the boys got on behind her. Ahead, people were stepping to the adjoining strip, slowly making their way toward the fastest-moving strip that ran alongside the localway platform. Advertisements flashed around her through the even, phosphorescent light, offering clothing, the latest book-films, exotic beverages, and yet another hyperwave drama about a Spacer's adventures on Earth. Above her, light-worms and bright arrows gleamed steadily with directions for the City's millions: THIS WAY TO JERSEY SECTIONS; FOLLOW ARROW TO LONG ISLAND. The noise was constant. Voices rose and fell around her as the strip hummed softly under her feet; she could dimly hear the whistle of the localway.

Amy walked up the strip, darted past a knot of people, then crossed to the next strip, bending her knees slightly to allow for the increase in speed. She did not look back, knowing the boys were still behind her. She took a breath, quickly stepped to the next strip, ran along it toward the passengers up ahead, and then jumped to the fourth strip. She pivoted, jumped to the third strip again, then rapidly crossed three strips in succession.

Running the strips was a lot like dancing. She kept up the rhythm as she leaped to the right, leaned into the wind, then jumped to the slower strip on her left. Amy grinned as a man shook his head at her. The timid ways of most riders were not for her. Others shrank from the freedom the gray bands offered, content to remain part of a channeled stream. They seemed deaf to the music of the strips and the song that beckoned to her.

Amy glanced back; she had already lost one of the boys. Moving to the left edge of the strip, she fainted, then jumped to her right, pushed past a startled woman, and continued along the strips until she reached the fastest one.

Her left arm was up, to shield her from the wind; this strip, like the localway, was moving at nearly thirty-eight kilometers an hour. The localway was a constantly moving platform, with poles for boarding and clear shields placed at intervals to protect riders from the wind. Amy grabbed a pole and swung herself aboard.

There was just enough room for her to squeeze past the standing passengers. The two remaining boys had followed her onto the localway; a woman muttered angrily as Amy shoved past her to the other side.

She jumped down to the strip below, which was also moving at the localway's speed, hauled

herself aboard the platform once more, then leaped back to the strip. One boy was still with her, a few paces behind. His companion must have hesitated a little, not expecting her to leap to the strip again so soon. Any good striprunner would have expected it; no runner stayed on a localway or expressway very long. She jumped to a slower strip, counted to herself, leaped back to the faster strip, counted again, then grabbed a pole, bounded onto the localway, pushed past more people to the opposite side, and launched herself at the strip below, her back to the wind, her legs shooting out into a split. Usually she disdained such moves at the height of a run, but could not resist showing her skill this time.

She landed about a meter in front of a scowling man.

“Crazy kids!” he shouted. “Ought to report you—” She turned toward the wind and stepped to the strip on her left, bracing herself against the deceleration as the angry man was swept by her on the faster strip, then looked back. The third boy was nowhere to be seen among the stream of people behind her.

Too easy, she thought. She had shaken them all even before reaching the intersection that led to the Concourse Sector. She would go on to the destination, so that the boys, when they got there, could issue another challenge if they wished. She doubted that they would; she would have just enough time to make her way home afterward.

They should have known better. They weren’t good enough runners to keep up with Amy Barone-Stein. She had lost Kiyoshi Harris, one of the best strip-runners in the City, on a two-hour run to the end of Brooklyn, and had reached Queens alone on another run after shaking off Bradley Ohaer’s gang. She smiled as she recalled how angry Bradley had been, beaten by a girl. Few girls ran the strips, and she was better than any of the others at the game. For over a year now, no one she challenged had ever managed to shake her off; when she led, nobody could keep up with her. She was the best girl strip-runner in New York City, maybe in all of Earth’s Cities.

No, she told herself as she crossed the strips to the expressway intersection. She was simply the best.

Amy’s home was in a Kingsbridge subsection. Her feeling of triumph had faded by the time she reached the elevator banks that led to her level; she was not that anxious to get home. Throngs of people moved along the street between the high metallic walls that enclosed some of the City’s millions. All of Earth’s Cities were like New York, where people had burrowed into the ground and walled themselves in; they were safe inside the Cities, protected from the emptiness of the Outside.

Amy pushed her way into an elevator. A wedding party was aboard, the groom in a dark ruffled tunic and pants, the bride in a short white dress with her hands around a bouquet of flowers made of recycled paper. The people with them were holding bottles and packages of rations clearly meant for the reception. The couple smiled at Amy; she murmured her congratulations as the elevator stopped at her level.

She sprinted down the hall until she came to a large double door with glowing letters that said PERSONAL—WOMEN. Under the sign, smaller letters said SUBSECTIONS 2H-2N; there was also a number to call in case anyone lost a key. Amy unzipped her pocket, took out a thin aluminum strip, and slipped it into the key slot.

The door opened. Several women were in the pleasant rose-colored antechamber, talking as they combed their hair and sprayed on makeup by the wall of mirrors. They did not greet Amy, so she said nothing to them. Her father, like most men, found it astonishing that women felt free to speak to one another in such a place. No man would ever address another in the Men’s Personals; even glancing at someone there was considered extremely offensive. Men would never stand around gossiping in a Personal’s antechamber, but things were not quite as free here as her father thought. Women would never speak to anyone who clearly preferred privacy, or greet a new subsection resident here until they knew her better.

Amy stood by a mirror and smoothed down her short, dark curls, then entered the common stalls. A long row of toilets, with thin partitions but no doors, lined one wall; a row of sinks faced them on the other side of the room.

A young woman was kneeling next to one toilet, where a small child sat on a training seat; Amy could not help noticing that the child was a boy. That was allowed, until a boy was four and old enough to go to a Men's Personal by himself or with his father, an experience that had to be traumatic the first time around. She thought of what it must be like for a little boy, leaving the easier, warmer atmosphere of his mother's Personal for the men's, where even looking in someone else's direction was taboo. Some said the custom arose because of the need to preserve some privacy in the midst of others, but psychologists also claimed that the taboo grew out of the male's need to separate himself from his mother. No wonder men behaved as they did in their Personals. They would not only be infringing on another's privacy if they behaved otherwise, but would also be displaying an inappropriate regression to childhood.

Amy kept her eyes down, ignoring the other women and girls in the common stalls until she reached the rows of shower heads. Two women were entering the private stalls in the back. Amy's mother had been allowed a private stall some years ago, a privilege her husband had earned for both of them after a promotion, but Amy was not allowed to use it. Other parents might have granted such permission, but hers were stricter; they did not want their daughter getting too used to privileges she had not earned for herself.

She would take her shower now, and put her clothes in the laundry slot to be cleaned; the Personal would be more crowded after dinner. Amy sighed; that wasn't the only reason to linger here. Her mother would have received the message from Mr. Liang by now. Amy was afraid to go home and face her.

Four women were leaving the apartment as Amy approached. She greeted them absently, and nodded when they asked if she was doing well in school. These were her mother's more intellectual friends, the ones who discussed sociology and settled the City's political problems among themselves before moving on to the essential business of tips for stretching quota allowances and advice on child-rearing.

Amy's mother stepped back as she entered; the door closed. Amy had reached the middle of the spacious living room before her mother spoke. "Where are you going, dear?"

"Er—to my room."

"I think you'd better sit down. We have something to discuss."

Amy moved toward one of the chairs and sat down. The living room was over five meters long, with two chairs, a small couch, and an imitation leather ottoman. The apartment had two other rooms as well, and her parents even had the use of a sink in their bedroom, thanks to her father's Civil Service rating. They both had a lot to protect, which meant that they would scold her even more for her failures.

"You took longer than usual getting home," her mother said as she sat down on the couch across from Amy.

"I had to shower. Oh, shouldn't we be getting ready to go to supper? Father'll probably be home any minute."

"He told me he'd be late, so we're not eating in the section kitchen tonight."

Amy bit her lip, sorry for once that her family was allowed four meals a week in their own apartment. Her parents wouldn't have been able to harp at her at the section kitchen's long tables in the midst of all the diners there.

"Anyway," her mother continued, "I felt sure you'd want to speak to me alone, before your father comes home."

"Oh." Amy stared at the blue carpet. "What about?"

"You know what about. I had a message from your guidance counselor, Mr. Liang. I know he told you he'd be speaking to me."

"Oh." Amy tried to sound unconcerned. "That."

"He says your grades won't be good at the end of the quarter." Her mother's dark eyes narrowed. "If they don't improve soon, he's going to invite me there for a conference, and that's not all." She leaned back against the couch. "He also says you've been seen running the strips."

Amy started. "Who told him that?"

"Oh, Amy. I'm sure he has ways of finding out. Is it true?"

"Um."

"Well, is it? That's even more serious than your grades. Do you want a police officer picking you up? Did you even stop to think about the accidents you might cause, or that you could be seriously injured? You know what your father said the first time he heard about your strip-running. "

Amy bowed her head. That had been over two years ago, and he had lectured her for hours, but had remained unaware of her activities since then. I'm the best, she thought; every runner in the City knows about me. She wanted to shout it and force her mother to acknowledge the achievement, but kept silent.

"It's a stupid, dangerous game, Amy. A few boys are killed every year running the strips, and passengers are hurt as well. You're fourteen now—I thought you were more mature. I can't believe—"

"I haven't been running the strips," Amy said. "I mean, I haven't made a run in a while." Not since a couple of hours ago, she added silently to herself, and that wasn't a real run, so I'm not really lying. She felt just a bit guilty; she didn't like to lie.

"And your grades—"

Amy seized at the chance to avoid the more hazardous topic of strip-racing. "I know they're worse. I know I can do better, but what difference does it make?"

"Don't you want to do well? You used to be one of the best math students in your school, and your science teacher always praised—"

"So what?" Amy could not restrain herself any longer. "What good is it? What am I ever going to use it for?"

"You have to do well if you want to be admitted to a college level. Your father's status may make it easier for you to get in, but you won't last if you're not well prepared."

"And then what? Unless I'm a genius, or a lot better than any of the boys, they'll just push me into dietetics courses or social relations or child psychology so I'll be a good mother someday, or else train me to program computers until I get married. I'll just end up doing nothing anyway, so why should I try?"

"Nothing?" Her mother's olive-skinned face was calm, but her voice shook a little. "Is what I do nothing, looking after you and your father? Is rearing a child and making a pleasant home for a husband nothing?"

"I didn't mean nothing, but why does it have to be everything? You wanted more once—you know you did. You—you—"

Her mother was gazing at her impassively. Amy jumped up and fled to her room.

She lay on her narrow bed, glaring up at the soft glow of the ceiling. Her mother should have been the first to understand. Amy knew how she once had felt, but lately, she seemed to have forgotten her old dreams.

Amy's mother, Alysha Barone, was something of a Medievalist. That wasn't odd; a lot of people were. They got together to talk about old ways and historical bookfilms and the times when Earth had been humanity's only home. They dwelled nostalgically on ancient periods when people had lived Outside instead of huddling together inside the Cities, when Earth was the only world and the Spacers did not exist.

Not that any of them could actually live Outside, without walls, breathing unfiltered air filled with microorganisms that bred disease and eating unprocessed food that had grown in dirt; Amy shuddered at the thought. Better to leave the Outside to the robots that worked the mines and tended the crops the Cities demanded. Better to live as they did, whatever the problems, and avoid the pathological ways of the Spacers, those descendants of the Earthpeople who had settled other planets long ago. They could not follow Spacer customs anyway. In a world of billions, resources could not be wasted on private houses, spacious gardens and grounds, and all the rest. Alysha Barone, despite her somewhat Medievalist views, would not be capable of leaving this City except to travel, safely enclosed, to another.

Her mother had, however, clung to a few ancient customs, with the encouragement of a few mildly unconventional friends. Alysha Barone had insisted on keeping her own name after her marriage to Ricardo Stein, and he had agreed when she asked that Amy be given both their names. The couple had been given permission to have their first child during their first year of marriage, thanks to their Genetics Values ratings, but Amy had not been born until four years later. Both Alysha and Ricardo had been statisticians in New York's Department of Human Resources; it made sense to work for a promotion, gain more privileges, and save more of their quota allowances before having a child. They had ignored the chiding of their own parents and the friends who had accused them of being just a little antisocial.

Amy knew the story well, having heard most of it from her disapproving grandmother Barone. The two had each risen to a C-4 rating before Alysha became pregnant; even then, astonishingly, they had discussed which of them should give up the Department job. Only the most antisocial of couples would have tried to keep two such coveted positions. There were too many unclassified people without work, on subsistence with no chance to rise, and others who had been relegated to labor in the City yeast farm levels after losing jobs to robots. Her parents' colleagues would have made their lives miserable if they both stayed with the Department; their superiors would have blocked any promotions, perhaps even found a way to demote them. Someone also had to look after Amy. The infant could not be left in the subsection nursery all day, and both grandmothers had refused to encourage any antisocial activity by offering to stay with the baby.

So Alysha had given up her job. Her husband might be willing to care for a baby, but he could not nurse the child, and nursing saved on rations. Ricardo had won another promotion a few years after Amy's birth, and they had moved from their two-room place in the Van

Cortlandt Section to this apartment. Now Amy's father was a C-6, with a private stall in the Men's Personal, a functioning sink in his room, larger quota allowances for entertainment, and the right to eat four meals a week at home.

Her parents would have been foolish to give up a chance at all that. How useless it would have been for Alysha to hope for her position at the Department; they would have risked everything in the end.

The door opened; her mother came inside. Amy sat up. Her small bed took up most of the room; there was no other place to sit, and Alysha clearly wanted to talk.

Her mother seated herself, then draped an arm over Amy's shoulders. "I know how you feel," she said.

Amy shook her head. "No, you don't."

Her mother hugged her more tightly. "I felt that way myself once, but couldn't see that I'd be any better off not trying at all. You should learn what you can, Amy, and not just so that you'll be able to help your own children with their schoolwork. Learning will give you pleasure later, something you'll carry inside yourself that no one can take from you. Things may change, and then—"

"They'll never change. I wish—Things were better in the old days. "

"No, they weren't," her mother responded. "They were better for a few people and very bad for a lot of others. I may affect a few Medievalisms, but I also know how people fought and starved and suffered long ago, and the Cities are better than that. No one starves, and we can, generally speaking, go about our business without fearing violence, but that requires cooperation—we couldn't live, crowded together as we are, any other way. We have to get along, and that often means giving up what we might want so that everyone at least has something. Still—"

"I get the point," Amy said bitterly. "Civism is good. The Cities are the height of human civilization." She imitated the pompous manner of her history teacher as she spoke. "And if I can't get along and be grateful for what I've got, I'm just a pathological antisocial individualist. "

Her mother was silent for a long time, then said, "There are more robots taking jobs away from people inside the Cities. The population keeps growing, and that means people will eventually have even less—we could see something close to starvation again. The Cities can't expand much more, and that means less space for each of us. People may lash out at an occasional robot now, since they're the most

convenient targets for expressing resentment, but if we start lashing out at one another—” She paused. “Something has to give way. Even that small band of people who hope the Spacers will eventually let them leave Earth to settle another world know that.”

Amy said, “They’re silly.”

“Most would say so.”

Amy frowned. She knew about those people; they occasionally went Outside to play at being farmers or some such thing. She could not imagine how they stood it, or what good it did them. A City detective named Elijah Baley was the tiny band’s leader; maybe he thought the Spacers would help him. He had recently returned from one of their worlds, where they had asked him to help them solve a crime; maybe he thought Spacers could be his friends.

Amy knew better. The Spacers had only used him. She thought of the Spacer characters she had seen in hyperwave and book-film adventures. They were all tall, handsome, tanned, bronze-haired people with eyes as cold as those of the legions of robots that served them. In the dramas, they might be friendly to or even love some Earthpeople, but in reality they despised the people of the Cities. They would never allow Earthfolk to contaminate their worlds or the others in this galaxy. They might use an Earthman such as Baley, but would only discard him afterward.

“What I’m trying to say,” Alysha said softly, “is that change may come. Whatever disruptions it brings, it may also present opportunities, but only to people who are ready to seize them.” Amy tensed a little; this was the most antisocial statement she had ever heard from her mother. “It would be better if you were prepared for that and developed whatever talents might be useful. When I worked for the Department, I knew what the statistics were implying—it’s impossible for even the most determined bureaucrat to hide the whole truth. I could see—but I’ve said enough.”

“Mother—” Amy swallowed. “Are you going to tell Father what Mr. Liang said?”

Alysha plucked at her long, dark hair, looking distressed. “I really should. I’ll have to if I’m called in for a conference, and then Rick will wonder why I didn’t mention it earlier. I won’t if you promise you’ll work harder.”

Amy sighed with relief. “I promise.” She hoped she could keep that vow.

“Then I’ll leave you to your studying. You have a little time before Rick gets home.”

The door closed behind Alysha. Amy reached for her viewer and stretched out. Nothing would change, no matter what her mother said. Whatever Amy did, sooner or later she would, as her friend Debora Lister put it, wind up at the end of the line. She would be pushed to the end of the line when her teachers began to hint that certain studies would be more useful for a girl. She would be forced back again when college advisers pointed out that it was selfish to take a place in certain classes, since she would not use such specialized training for a lifetime, as a boy would. If she moved up the line then, she would only be pushed back later, when she married and had her own children.

She could, of course, choose not to marry, but such a life would be a lonely one. No matter what such women achieved, people muttered about how antisocial they were and pitied them, which was probably preferable to outright resentment. She would have to live in one of the alcoves allotted to single people unless she was lucky enough to find a congenial companion and get permission for both of them to share a room.

Alysha had wound up at the end of the line long ago, although later than most, and she had a loving husband to console her, which was a good thing. Even couples who hated each other would not willingly separate, lose status, and be forced into smaller quarters. Of course Alysha would hope that Amy might move up the line; she had nothing else in life except her husband and daughter.

A fair number of women were like Alysha. Sublimated antisocial individualism—that was what a textbook-film Amy had scanned in the school library called it. Many women lived through their children, then their grandchildren, hoping they would rise yet knowing that there were limits on their ambitions. Their transferred hopes would keep them going, but they would also be aware that too much individual glory would only create hard feelings in others. That was one reason her parents refused to flaunt the

privileges they had earned and used them reluctantly, with a faintly apologetic air.

Men had different problems, which probably seemed just as troublesome to them. Some men cracked under the strain of having a family's status resting entirely on them. The psychologists had terms for that syndrome, too.

Amy saw what lay ahead only too clearly. Perhaps she shouldn't have viewed those book-films on psychology and sociology, which were meant for adult specialists. Her parents would eventually have the second child they were allowed; except for tending to Amy and her father, and being sociable in ways that eased relations with neighbors and her husband's colleagues, there was little else for Alysha to do. Small wonder many women even had children to whom they weren't entitled. When Amy was grown, her mother would be waiting for the inevitable grandchildren, and transfer her hopes to them. What a delusion it all was, pretending that your children wouldn't be swallowed by the hives of the City while knowing that this was the way it had to be.

Happy families, as the saying went, made for a better City; mothers and wives could go about their business feeling they were performing their civic duty. Amy's mother would cling to her, and then to her children, and

If this was how knowing a lot made people feel, maybe it was better to be ignorant, to settle for what couldn't be changed.

She folded her arms over her chest. She still had one accomplishment, and no one could take it from her; she was the best strip-runner in the City. She wouldn't give that up, not until she was too old and too slow to race, and maybe that day would never come. If she made a mistake and died during a run, at least she'd be gone before she came to the end of the line. Her parents could have another child, maybe two, and the loss of one life would make no difference in a steel hive that held so many. She could even tell herself that she was making room for someone who would not mind being lost in the swarm.

The psychology texts had terms for such notions, all of which made her feelings sound like a disease. Perhaps they were, but that was yet another reason not to care about what happened to her on the strips

"Amy Barone-Stein," the hall monitor said, "a person is looking for you."

Amy glared up at the grayish robotic face, a parody of a human being's. She did not care for robots, and this one, with its flat eyes and weirdly moving mouth, looked more idiotic than most. "What is it?" she asked.

"Someone outside wishes to speak to you," the robot said, "and has asked me to bring you there. "

"Well, who is it?"

"She told me to give you her name if I were asked, or if you told me that you did not want to meet her. It is Shakira Lewes. "

Amy's mouth dropped open. Debora Lister moved closer to her and nudged her in the ribs. Shakira Lewes had not run the strips in years, but Amy had heard of her. Kiyoshi Harris claimed she was the best female runner he had ever seen, and her last run, when she had led three gangs from Brooklyn to Yonkers and lost them all, was still legendary.

She *was* the best, Amy told herself; I'm the best now.

"Oh, Amy," Debora said. "Are you going to talk to her?"

"Might as well."

"You'll miss the Chess Club meeting," the blond girl said.

"Then I'll miss it."

"I'm coming with you," Debora said. "I've got to see this."

"Miss Lewes requested the presence of Amy Barone-Stein," the robot said. "She did not say—"

"Oh, stuff it," Amy said. The robot's eyes widened a little in what might have been bewilderment. "She didn't say I couldn't bring a friend, did she?"

"No, she did not."

“Then lead us to her.”

The robot turned, leading them past a line in front of a Personal, then through the throngs of students crowding the hall. Amy wondered how Shakira Lewes had made the robot do her bidding. Technically, the hall monitors weren't supposed to fetch students from the school levels except for an emergency, but this robot was probably too stupid to tell that it was being deceived. The robot's back was erect as it marched along on its stiff legs. Damned robots, she thought, taking jobs from people. The hall monitors had once been human beings.

By the time she and Debora reached the elevator banks, a small crowd of boys and girls was following them. They all clambered aboard after the robot and dropped toward the street level. When they emerged from the school, Amy saw more boys clustered around a tall, dark-skinned woman with short black hair.

“Ooh,” Debora whispered. “Maybe she wants to challenge you.” Amy shook her head and motioned at the robot's back. A robot could not harm a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm; to this creature's simple positronic brain, possible harm would certainly include strip-racing.

“Amy Barone-Stein,” the robot said in its toneless voice. “This is Shakira Lewes. “

The boys stepped back as Amy approached. The woman was slender enough for a runner, if a bit too tall; most runners, like Amy, were short and slight, able to squeeze into even the smallest gaps between passengers during a run. Shakira Lewes had a perfect, fine-boned face; she looked a lot like an actress in a historical drama about Africa Amy had recently viewed. She wore a red shirt and black pants that made her long legs seem even longer. The boys were staring intently at her. None of them had ever looked at Amy that way, not even after hearing about her run against Bradley Ohaer's gang.

“You may leave us,” Shakira said to the robot. The hall monitor turned and went back inside. The woman sounded as arrogant as a Spacer; Amy looked up at her, filled with admiration and hatred. “I've heard about you,” Shakira continued. “I'd like to talk to you.”

Amy stuck out her chin. “What about?”

“Alone, if we could. “ Alone meant walking among the crowds, standing on a strip or localway to talk, or, if one was lucky, finding an unoccupied chair or bench somewhere.

Amy said, “If you've got something to tell me, say it here.”

“She's going to challenge,” someone said behind Amy; she looked around. Luis Horton was with the group; he'd been mad at her ever since she beat him on a long run up to the Yonkers Sector. “She's going to challenge,” Luis repeated. “Maybe Amy can't take her.”

Amy said, “I can take any runner in New York.”

Shakira frowned. “I said I wanted to talk. I didn't say anything about running. “

“Afraid?” another boy asked.

Shakira's face grew grimmer. Amy saw where this was leading; the others expected a challenge. Normally, she would have demanded one herself, but something felt wrong. It didn't make sense for this woman, who surely had better things to do, to come looking for a run against Amy, whatever her fame. Shakira had to be out of practice, and would risk much graver consequences as an adult offender if she were caught by the police. Yet what else could she want Amy for? Perhaps something illegal—some illicit enterprise where a boy or girl who could easily shake off a police pursuit might be useful.

Amy shrugged. “Come on, guys. Anybody can see she's too old to run the strips now.”

“I'm old, all right,” Shakira said. “I'm nearly twenty-one.”

“Lewes isn't scared,” Luis muttered then. “Amy is.”

Amy's cheeks burned. They were all watching her now; she even imagined that the crowds passing by were looking at her, witnesses to her shame. “I'm not afraid of anything,” she said. “Make your run, Shakira Lewes—you won't lose me. From here to the Sheepshead Bay localway intersection—unless you're too old to make that long a run.”

Shakira was silent.

“Now! Or are you just too old and tired to try?”

The woman’s large dark eyes glittered. “You’re on. I’ll do it.”

A boy hooted. Even Debora, who would never run the strips herself, was flushed with anticipation. Amy was suddenly furious with them all. She wasn’t ready for this run; she realized now that she had been hoping Shakira would back down. If the woman actually beat her, she would never live it down, while if Amy won, the others would simply assume Shakira was past her prime. She had risked too much on this challenge, and still didn’t know what Shakira wanted with her.

“Let’s go,” Amy said.

“Just a minute.” The woman raised an arm. “This is one on one, between you and me—and I still want to talk to you later.”

“Talk to me after I beat you,” Amy said without much conviction, then followed Shakira toward the nearest strip.

Shakira strode along the gray bands, moving to the faster strips at a speed only a little more rapid than usual. Amy kept close. Most of the boys and girls had already headed for the expressway; they would greet the victor at the Sheepshead Bay destination. Luis and two of his friends were following to study a little of Shakira’s skill before joining the others. There were still some gaps between passengers, but the strips were already getting more crowded.

Shakira showed her moves, increasing the pace. She did a side shuffle, striding steadily, then moving to an adjacent strip without breaking her pace; Amy followed. She did a Popovich, named after the runner who had perfected it, leaping from side to side between two strips before bounding from the second one to a third. She even managed to pull off a dervish. Turning to face Amy, she leaped into the air and made a complete turn before landing gracefully on a slower strip; a dervish was dangerous even on slow strips.

She was good, but Amy knew the moves. Show-off, she thought; the woman was only trying to intimidate her. Flashy moves were more likely to draw attention, as well as wearing out a runner too soon. She followed Shakira onto a localway, then swung off after her, leaving the boys behind. She had caught Shakira’s rhythm, but remained wary and alert; some runners could lull a follower into their pace before doing the unexpected.

They danced across the strips toward an expressway. The crowds were thick on the strip next to the expressway platform. Shakira reached for a pole and swung herself up; Amy grabbed the next pole. The woman’s long legs swung around, never touching the floor and barely missing a passenger, and then she was back on the strip, her back to the wind as she grinned up at Amy.

Amy gripped her pole, about to follow when a few people suddenly stepped to the strip just below her. She caught a glimpse of startled faces as her legs swung toward them; there was just enough space for a landing. A woman swayed on the strip; a man grabbed her by the arm. Amy knew in an instant that she could not risk a leap. Shakira turned, ran past more commuters, stepped to her left, and was gone.

Amy hung on to the pole; the wind tore at her legs. She hauled herself aboard, numbed by the abruptness of her defeat. She had lost before they even reached lower Manhattan; tears stung her eyes.

Someone shoved her; passengers surrounded her. “Damn runners!” a man shouted. Other riders crowded around her; a fist knocked her to the floor. “Get the police!” a woman cried. Fingers grabbed Amy by the hair; a foot kicked her in the knee. She covered her head with her arms, no longer caring what happened to her; she had lost.

A plainclothesman, a C-6 with seat privileges on the expressway’s upper level, got Amy away from the crowd before she was beaten too badly and took her to City Hall. Police headquarters were in the higher levels of the structure; Amy supposed that she would be turned over to an officer and booked. Instead, the detective led her through a large common room filled with people and desks to a corner desk with a railing around it.

She sat at the desk, feeling miserable and alone, as the plainclothesman took her name, entered it in the desk computer, called up more information, then placed a call to her father on the communo. “You’re

in luck,” the man said when he had finished his call. “Your father hasn’t left work yet, so he’ll just come over here from his level and take you home. “

She peered up at him. “You mean you aren’t going to keep me here?”

The detective glowered at her. He was a big man, with a bald head, thick mustache, and brown skin nearly as dark as Shakira’s. “Don’t think I haven’t considered detaining you. I shouldn’t even be wasting my time with you—I have a very low tolerance for reckless kids who don’t care about anyone else’s safety. You could have started a riot on that expressway—maybe I should have left you to the tender mercies of that mob. Do you know what can happen to you now, girl?”

“No,” she mumbled, although she could guess.

“For starters, a hearing in juvenile court. You could get a few months in Youth Offenders’ Level, or you might get lucky and be sentenced to help out in a hospital a few days a week. You’d get lots of chances to see accident victims there.” He pulled at his mustache. “That might do you some good. Maybe you ‘ll be there when they bring in some dead strip-runner who wasn’t quick enough. You can watch his parents cry when the hospital makes the Ritual of Request before they take any usable organs from the corpse. And you ‘ll have deep trouble if you ever misbehave again.”

Amy squeezed her eyes shut. “Stay here,” the man said, even though she hardly had a choice, with the common room so filled with police. She sat there alone, wallowing in her despair until the detective returned with a cup of tea; he did not offer anything to her.

He sat down behind the desk. “Will you give me the names of any runners with you?”

She shook her head violently. Much as she hated Shakira, she would not sink that low.

“I didn’t think you would. You’re not doing them any favor, you know. If they meet with accidents or end up hurting somebody else, I hope you can live with yourself.”

The detective worked at his desk computer in silence until Amy’s father arrived. She glanced at his pale, grim face and looked away quickly. The formality of an introduction took only a moment before the plainclothesman began to lecture Ricardo Stein on his daughter’s offense, peppering his tirade with statistics on accidents caused by strip-runners and the number of deaths the game had resulted in this year. “If I hadn’t been on that expressway,” the man concluded, “the girl might have been badly roughed up—not that she didn’t deserve it. “

Her father said, “I understand, Mr. Dubois.”

“She needs to learn a lesson. “

“I agree.” Ricardo shook back his thick brown hair. “I’ll go along with any sentence she gets. Her mother and I won’t go out of our way to defend her, and we probably share some of the blame for not bringing her up better and supervising her more. You can be certain there’ll be no repetition of such behavior. “

“I imagine you’ll see to that, Mr. Stein—a solid citizen like you.” Mr. Dubois leaned back in his chair. “So I’ll do you and your wife a favor, and let Amy here off with a warning. She’s only fourteen, and this is her first offense—the first time she’s been caught, anyway—and Youth Offenders’ Level is crowded enough as it is. But she’s in our records now, and if she’s picked up again for anything, she goes into detention until her hearing, at which point she’ll likely get a stiff sentence.”

“I’m grateful to you,” Amy’s father said.

“Listen to me, girl.” Mr. Dubois rested his arms on the desk. “Don’t think you can lie low for a bit and then start strip-running again. We know who you are now, and you’ll be easy to spot. Not many girls run the strips.” He glanced at her father. “I think I can count on you to keep her in line. Wouldn’t do your status any good to have a criminal in the family.”

“You can count on me, Mr. Dubois.”

Amy’s father did not speak to her all the way home. That was a bad sign; he was never that silent unless he was enraged. He left her outside the Women’s Personal and went on to the apartment.

She dawdled as long as she dared inside the Personal, then dragged herself down the hall, filled with dread, wondering what her parents would do to her. They would have discussed the whole affair by

now, and her mother had probably mentioned the guidance counselor's earlier message.

They were both sitting on the couch when she entered; there was no use appealing to her mother for some mercy. The two rarely disagreed or argued in front of her, and in a matter this important, they would present a united front.

She inched her way to a chair and sat down. She would not be beaten; her parents did not believe in physical punishment. A beating, even with all the bruises the expressway riders had already left on her, might have been better than having to endure her father's harsh accusations and talk about how humiliating her offense was for all of them. She hadn't thought of them at all, of how upset they would have been if she were injured. She hadn't thought about how her pathological display of individualism might damage Ricardo's reputation at work, or her mother's among their neighbors. She hadn't considered how such a blot on her record might affect her own chances later, or reflected on the danger she had posed to commuters. She hadn't thought of the bad example she was setting for younger children, and had completely ignored her father's earlier warning about such activity.

By the time her father had finished his lecture, repeating most of his points several times, it was too late to go to the section kitchen. Her mother sighed as she folded their small table out of the wall and plugged in the plate warmer; her father grumbled about missing the chicken the section kitchen was to serve that night. They had been saving their fourth meal at home this week for Saturday, when Ricardo's parents were to visit with a few of their own rations; Amy had ruined those plans, too.

Amy pulled the ottoman over to the table and sat down as her mother sprinkled a few spices she had saved over the food. Her father took a call over the communo, barked a few words at its screen, then hung up. "That was Debora Lister. He moved the two chairs to the table, then seated himself. "I told her you couldn't talk."

Amy poked at her zymobeef and broccolettes listlessly. Just as well, she thought. Debora would only be calling to tell her what had happened when Shakira showed up, alone and triumphant, at Sheepshead Bay.

"You won't be taking any calls from your friends for a while," her father continued. "I'll notify the principal at school that you're not to leave school levels except to go directly home, and a monitor will note when you leave, so don't think you can wander around during the return trip. When you're not in school, you'll stay here except for going to meals with us or to the Personal. And in your free time, when you're not studying, you'll prepare a report for me on the dangers of strip-running. You shouldn't find the data hard to come by, and you'll present it to me in a week. " Ricardo took a breath. " And if I even hear that you've been running the strips again, I'll turn you in to the police myself and demand a hearing for you. "

"Eat your food, Amy," her mother said; it was the first time she had spoken.

"I'm not hungry."

"You'd better—it's all we have left of home rations for this week. "

She forced herself to eat. Her father finished his food and propped his elbows on the table. "There's something I still don't understand," he said wearily. "Why, Amy? Why would you do such a thing? I thought you had more sense. Why would you risk it?"

She could bear no more. "I'm the best." She stood up and kicked back the ottoman. "I'm the best strip-runner in the City! That's all I'll ever do, it's all anybody will remember about me! I was the best, and now they've taken it away!"

Her father's gray eyes widened. "You're not sounding very repentant, young lady."

"I'm sorry I lost! I'm sorry I was caught! I'm sorry you had to come and get me, but I'm not sorry about anything else!"

"Go to your room!" he shouted. "If I hear any more talk like that, I *will* raise a hand to you!"

Alysha reached across the table and grabbed his upraised arm as Amy fled to her room.

Her life was over. Amy could not view matters any other way. The story had made the rounds quickly. She had lost to Shakira Lewes and been picked up by the police; Luis Horton was doing his

best to spread the news. A hall monitor noted the times she left the school levels and reminded her, right in front of other students, that she was expected to go straight home; a few boys and girls always snickered.

She greeted questions from her friends, even Debora, with a scowl, and soon no one was speaking to her outside of class. Nobody dared to bring up the run, or to tell her what the Lewes woman had said when she arrived at the destination. There was the inevitable conference with Mr. Liang and her mother, and an additional embarrassment when the guidance counselor learned about the report she was preparing for her father. She delivered the report over the school's public address screens, forced by Mr. Liang and the principal to repudiate the game; she cringed inwardly whenever she thought of how the students who had viewed her image must be laughing at her. Time inside the Youth Offenders' Level couldn't have been much worse.

After three weeks, her parents eased up a little. Amy still had to come home directly from school, but they allowed her to do schoolwork with friends in the subsection after supper. News of her downfall had been replaced by gossip about Luis Horton's successful run to the edge of Queens against Tom Jandow's gang. Her friends were again speaking to her, but knew enough not to mention Shakira Lewes.

She was ruined, and it was all that woman's fault. She dreaded the daily journeys along the strips, when she sometimes glimpsed other runners and recalled what she had lost. She could no longer hear the music of the strips, the rhythmic song in their humming that urged her to race. She was already at the end of the line; the last bit of freedom she would ever know was gone. She would become only another speck inside the caves of steel, her past glory forgotten.

Amy left the elevator at her floor with Debora, then suddenly stiffened with shock. Down the hall, Shakira Lewes was loitering outside the Women's Personal.

"What's she doing here?" the blond girl asked. "I don't know."

"I never told you," Debora said, "but when she finished the run, she—"

"I don't want to hear about it." Amy took out her key when they reached the door, determined to ignore the woman. Hanging around outside a Personal was the crudest sort of behavior.

"Hello, Amy," Shakira said.

"Haven't you caused enough trouble?" Amy snapped. "You don't belong here."

"But we never had our talk. This is the first chance I've had to find you, and I was pretty sure you'd be stopping here after school."

Amy gritted her teeth. "Now I can't even go and take a piss in peace."

Shakira said, "I want to talk to you." She lowered her voice as three women left the Personal.

"Tonight, after supper, alone. "

Amy's fingers tightened around her key. "Why should I talk to you?"

Shakira shrugged. "I'll be at the Hempstead G-level, at the end of the Long Island Expressway. Get off and cross the strips to G-20th Street. I'll be standing in front of a store called Tad's Antiques—think you can find it?"

Amy felt insulted. "I know my way around. But I don't know why I should bother. "

"Then don't. I'll be there by seven and I'll wait until nine. If you don't show up, that's your business, and I won't pester you again, but you might be interested in what I have to tell you." Shakira turned and walked toward the elevator before Amy could reply.

Debora pulled her away from the Personal door. "Are you going?" she asked.

"Yes. I've got to find out what she wants."

"But your parents told you not to leave the subsection. If any of their friends see you—"

"I'm going anyway. I have to go." She would settle matters with the young woman one way or another.

"To the edge of the City?" Debora whispered.

"She can't do anything to me on the street with people around. Deb, you have to cover for me. I

can tell my parents I'll be at your place. I don't think they'll call to check, but if they do, tell them I went to the Personal. "

"If my father doesn't get to the communo first."

"I'll just have to take the chance," Amy said.

Debora let out her breath. "She may want to challenge you again. What'll you do?"

"I'll worry about that when I get there." She had already made her decision. If Shakira wanted another run, she couldn't refuse, and she'd make sure some of the boys she knew were waiting at the destination as witnesses. Whatever the risk, it was a chance to restore her lost honor.

Amy was on G-20th Street by seven-thirty. Shakira, as she had promised, was waiting in front of the antique store, which had an old-fashioned flat sign in script. There weren't many stores in the shabby neighborhood, where the high metallic walls of the residence levels seemed duller than most, and no more than a few hundred people in the street. Amy felt apprehensive. Sections like this one were the worst in the City; only badly off citizens would live here, so close to the Outside.

Shakira was gazing at an attractive display of old plastic cutlery and cups in the store window. Inside the store, the owner had made one concession to modern times; a robot was waiting on the line of customers. "Didn't take you long to get here," the woman murmured.

"I shouldn't be here at all," Amy said. "I'm not supposed to leave my subsection, but my parents think I'm with a friend. " For once, they hadn't asked too many questions, and had even seemed a little relieved that she would be gone for the evening. "I told them I'd be back by ten-thirty, so say what you have to say."

"I didn't want to make that run, but you insisted, and I still have my pride." Shakira looped her fingers around her belt. "Then, once I was running, old habits took over. Maybe I wanted to see if I still had my reflexes. "

"You must have had a good time bragging about it later."

"I didn't brag," Shakira said. "I just met the kids and told them to go home. I said it was tough shaking you, and that you were one of the best runners who ever tailed me."

Amy's lip curled. "How nice of you, Shakira. You still beat me."

"I saw what happened, why you didn't jump back on the strip. Some runners would have risked it anyway, even with less room than you had. They would have jumped, and if a couple of people got knocked off the strip, too bad. I'm glad you aren't that antisocial."

"What do you want with me, anyway?" Amy asked. A few women stopped near her to look in the store window, but she ignored them; even in this wretched area, people wouldn't be crass enough to eavesdrop.

"Well, I heard about this girl, Amy Barone-Stein, who could run the strips with the best of them. I still know a few runners, even though most of my college friends would disapprove of them. I thought you might be a little like me—restless, maybe a bit angry, wondering if you'd ever be more than a component in the City's machine."

Amy stepped back a little. "So what?"

"I thought you might like a challenge."

"But you said before that you didn't want to make that run."

"I'm not talking about that," Shakira said. "I mean a real challenge, something a lot harder and more interesting than running strips. It might be worthwhile for you if you've got the guts for it. " Amy took another step backward, certain that the woman was about to propose a shady undertaking. "You see, I'm part of that group of Lije's—Elijah Baley's—the people who go Outside once a week. His son Bentley is an acquaintance of mine."

Amy gaped at her, completely surprised. "But why—"

"There are only a few of us so far. The City gives us a little support, mostly because of Lije—Mr. Baley—but I suspect the City government thinks we're as eccentric as everyone else does, and that

we're deluded to think we can ever settle another world."

"Why bother?" Amy said. "The Spacers'll never let anyone off Earth."

"Lije left, didn't he?"

"That was different, and they sent him back here as fast as they could. I'll bet they didn't even thank him for solving that murder. They'd never let a bunch of Earthpeople on one of their worlds. "

"Not one of theirs, no." Shakira leaned against the window. "But Lije Baley is convinced they'll allow settlers on an uninhabited world eventually—maybe sooner than we think—and that they'll provide us with ships to get there. But we can't settle another world unless we're able to live Outside a City."

Amy shook her head. "Nobody can live Outside."

"Earthpeople used to. The Earthpeople who settled the Spacer worlds long ago did. The Spacers do, and we manage to—for two or three hours a week, anyway. It's a start, just getting accustomed to that, and it isn't easy, but any settlers will have to be people like us, who've shown we can leave a City. "

"And you want me in this group?" Amy asked.

"I thought you might be interested. We could use more recruits, and younger people seem to adapt more quickly. Just think of it—if we do get to leave Earth, every single settler will be needed, every person will be important and useful. We'll need people willing to gamble on a new life, individualists who want to make a mark, maybe even folks who are just a little antisocial as long as they can cooperate with others. You could be one of them, Amy."

"If you ever leave."

Shakira smiled. "What have you got to lose by trying?" She paused. "Do you have any idea of how precarious life inside this City is? How much more uranium can we get for our power plants? Think of all the power we have to use just to bring in water and get rid of waste. Just imagine what would happen if the air were cut off even for an hour or two—people would die by the hundreds of thousands. We'll have to leave the Cities. They can't keep growing indefinitely without taking up land we need for farming or forests we need for pulp. There'll be less food, less space, less of everything, until—"

Amy looked away for a moment. Her mother had said the same thing to her.

"There isn't a future here, Amy. " Shakira moved closer to her. "There might be one for us on other worlds. "

Amy sighed. "What a few people do won't make any difference. "

"It's a beginning, and if we succeed, others will follow. You seemed to think what you did was important when you were only running the strips. " The young woman beckoned to her. "Here's my challenge for you. I'm asking you if you'll come Outside with me. "

"With those people?"

"Right now. Surely a strip-runner who used to risk life and limb isn't afraid of a little open air."

"But—"

"Come on."

She followed Shakira down the street, helpless to resist. The woman stopped in front of an opening in the high walls. Amy peered around her and saw a long, dimly lit tunnel with another wall at its end.

"What is it?" Amy asked. "

An exit. Some of them are guarded now, but this one isn't. There really isn't any need to watch them—most people don't know about them or don't want to think about them. Even the people living in this subsection have probably forgotten this exit is here. Will you come with me?"

"What if somebody follows us?" Amy glanced nervously down the street, which seemed even emptier than before. "It isn't safe."

"Believe me, nobody will follow. They'd rather believe this place doesn't exist. Will you come?"

Amy swallowed hard, then nodded. It was only a passageway; it couldn't be that bad. They entered; she kept close to the young woman as the familiar, comforting noise of the street behind them grew fainter.

Shakira said, “The exit’s at the end.” Her voice sounded hollow in the eerie silence. Amy’s stomach knotted as they came to the end of the tunnel.

“Ready?” Shakira asked.

“I think So.”

“Hang on to me. It’ll be dark Outside—that’ll make it easier for you, and I won’t let go.”

Shakira pressed her hand against the wall. An opening slowly appeared. Amy felt cold air on her face; as they stepped Outside, the door closed behind them. She closed her eyes, terrified to look, already longing for the warmth and safety of the City.

A gust of wind slapped her, fiercer than the wind on the fastest strips. She opened her eyes and looked up. A black sky dotted with stars was above her, and that bright pearly orb had to be the moon. Except for the wind and the bone-chilling cold, she might almost have been inside a City planetarium. But the planetarium had not revealed how vast the sky was, or shown the silvery clouds that drifted below the black heavens. She lowered her gaze; a bluish-white plain, empty except for the distant domes of a farm, stretched in front of her. Her ears throbbed at the silence that was broken only by the intermittent howl of the wind.

Open air—and the white substance covering the ground had to be snow. The wind gusted again, lifting a thin white veil of flakes, then died. There was space all around her, unfiltered air, dirt under her feet, and the moon shining down on all of it; the safety of walls was gone. Her stomach lurched as her heart pounded; her head swam. Her grip on Shakira loosened; the pale plain was spinning. Then she was falling through the endless silence into a darkness as black as the sky...

Arms caught her, lifting her up; she felt warmth at her back. The silence was gone. She clawed at the air and realized she was back inside the tunnel. She blinked; her mouth was dry. “Are you all right?” Shakira felt her forehead; Amy leaned heavily against her. “I got you inside as fast as I could. I’m sorry—I forgot there’d be a full moon tonight. It would have been easier for you if it had been completely dark.”

Amy trembled, afraid to let go. “I didn’t know,” she said. “I didn’t think—” She shivered with relief, welcoming the warmth, the faint but steady noise from the street, the walls of the City. She tried to smile. “Guess I didn’t do so well.”

“But you did. The first time I went Outside, I passed out right after taking my first breath of open air. The second time, I ran back inside after a few seconds and swore I’d never set foot Outside again. You did a lot better than that—I was counting. We must have been standing there for nearly two minutes.”

Shakira supported her with one arm; they made their way slowly toward the street. “Can you walk by yourself?” the woman asked as they left the tunnel.

“I think so.” Shakira let go. Amy stared down the street, which had seemed so empty earlier, relieved at the sight of all the people. “I couldn’t do that again, Shakira. I couldn’t face it—all that space.”

“I think you can.” Shakira folded her arms. “You can if you don’t give up now. We’ll be going Outside in two days. You’ll have to wear more clothes—it’d help if you can get gloves and a hat.” Amy shook her head, struck by the strangeness of needing warmer clothes; the temperature inside never varied. “It’s winter, so we’ll only take a short walk—we won’t be Outside very long. I’d like you to come with us. I’ll stay by the exit with you, and you needn’t remain Outside a second longer than you can bear. Believe me, if you keep trying, even if you think you can’t stand it, it’ll get easier. You may even start to look forward to it.”

“I don’t know—” Amy started to say.

“Will you try?”

Amy took a deep breath, smelling the odors of the City, the faint pungence of bodies, a whiff of someone’s perfume, a sharp, acrid scent she could not place; she had never noticed the smells before. “I’ll try.” She drew her brows together. “My parents will kill me if they ever find out. I’ll have to think of

an excuse”

“But you must tell them, Amy.”

“They’ll never let me go.”

“Then you’ll have to find a way to convince them. They have to know for two very good reasons. One is that it’ll cause trouble for Lije if kids come Outside without their families’ permission, and the other is that they just might decide to join us themselves. I’ll come by your place for you, so you’ll have to tell them why I’m there. You can give me your answer then. “

“There’s something else,” Amy said. “That Mr. Baley—he’s a detective. When he finds out I got picked up, he may not want me.”

Shakira laughed. “Don’t worry about that. I’ll tell you a secret—Lije Baley was a pretty good strip-runner in his day. I heard a little about his past from my uncle and another old-timer. He won’t hold that against you, but don’t say anything to the others about it. “ Shakira took her arm as they walked toward the strips. “We’d better get home.”

Amy glanced at her. “You wouldn’t want to try another run?”

“Not a chance. You’ve had enough trouble, and you’ve got more to lose now. Maybe some dancing, but only if there’s room, and only on the slow strips.”

The sturdy walls of her Kingsbridge subsection surrounded Amy once more. She had nearly forgotten the coldness, the wind, the silence, the terrible emptiness of the Outside.

Yet she knew she would have to go Outside again. The comforting caves of steel would not always be a safe refuge. She would have to face the emptiness until she no longer feared it, and wondered how the City would seem to her then.

She waited by the apartment door for a few moments before slipping her key into the slot. Her parents might be asleep already, and she could not tell them about this event at breakfast in the section kitchen. She could tell them tomorrow night, and would try not to hope for too much.

The door opened; she went inside. Her parents were still awake, cuddling together on the couch; they sat up quickly and adjusted their nightrobes.

“Amy!” Her father looked a bit embarrassed. “You ‘re home early.”

“I thought I was late.”

He glanced at the wall timepiece. “Oh—I guess you are. I hadn’t noticed. Well, I’ll let it pass this once. “

Amy studied the couple. They seemed in a good mood; her mother’s brown eyes glowed, and her father’s broad face lacked its usual tenseness. She might not get a better chance to speak to them, and did not want her mother finding out from Mrs. Lister at breakfast that she hadn’t been at Debora’s.

“Um. “ Amy cleared her throat. “I have to talk to you. “

Her father looked toward the timepiece again. “Is it important?”

“It’s very important.” She went to a chair and sat down across from them. “It really can’t wait. Please—just let me talk until I’m finished, and then you can say whatever you want.” She paused. “I wasn’t at Deb’s. I know I wasn’t supposed to, but I left the subsection.”

Her father started; her mother reached for his hand.

“Not to run strips, I swear,” Amy added hastily. She lowered her eyes, afraid to look directly at them, then told them about her first meeting with Shakira, the run that had ended in disaster, the encounter on the street in Hempstead, what Shakira had said about the group that went Outside, and the challenge she had met that night by facing the open space beyond the City. She wasn’t telling the story very well, having to pause every so often to fill in a detail, but by the time she reached the end, she was sure she had mentioned all the essentials.

Her parents said nothing throughout, and were silent when she finished. At last she forced herself to raise her head. Her father looked stunned, her mother bewildered.

“You went Outside?” Alysha whispered.

“Yes.”

“Weren’t you terrified?”

“I was never so scared in my life, but I had to—I—”

Her father sagged against the couch. “You deliberately disobeyed us.” He sounded more exasperated than angry. “You lied and told us you’d be with Debora Lister. You left the subsection to meet a dubious young woman who’s a damned strip-runner herself, and—”

“She isn’t,” Amy protested...She doesn’t run any more, and she wouldn’t have with me if I hadn’t insisted—I told you. That was my fault.”

“At least you’re admitting your guilt,” he said...I let you have your say, so allow me to finish. Now she wants you to traipse around Outside with that group of hers. I forbid it—do you hear? You’re not to have anything more to do with her, and if she calls or comes here, I’ll tell her so myself. I’ll have to be firmer with you, Amy. Since you can’t be honest with us about your doings, you’ll be restricted to this apartment again, and—”

“Rick.” Alysha’s voice was low, but firm...Let me speak. If joining those people means so much to Amy, then maybe she should.” Ricardo’s face paled as he turned toward his wife...I know she disobeyed us, but I think I can understand why she felt it necessary. Anyway, how much trouble can she get into if a City detective’s with them? They seem harmless enough.”

“Harmless?” her husband said...Going Outside, deluding themselves that—”

“Let her go, Rick.” Alysha pressed his hand between both of hers...That young woman told her the truth. You know it’s true—you can see what the Department’s statistical projections show, whether you’ll admit it to yourself or not. If there’s any chance that those people with Elijah Baley can leave Earth, maybe it’s better if Amy goes with them.”

Amy drew in her breath, startled that her mother was taking her side and confronting her father in her presence. “You’d accept that?” Ricardo asked...What if the Spacers actually allow those people off Earth—not that I think it’s likely, but what if they do? You’re saying you’d be content never to see your daughter again.”

“I wouldn’t be content—you know better than that. But how can I cling to her if she has a chance, however small, at something else? I know what her life will be here, perhaps better than you do. I’d rather know she’s doing something meaningful to her somewhere else, even if that means we’ll lose her, than to have to go through life pretending I don’t see her frustrations and disappointments. “

Ricardo heaved a sigh. “I can’t believe I’m hearing you say this.”

“Oh, Rick.” She released his hand. “You would have expected me to say and do the unexpected years ago.” She smiled at that phrase. “How conventional we’ve become since then.” She gazed at him silently for a bit. “Maybe I’ll go with Amy when she meets that group. I should see what kind of people they are, after all. Maybe I’ll even take a step Outside myself.”

Her husband frowned, looking defeated. “This is a fine situation,” he said. “Not only do I have a disobedient daughter, but now my wife’s against me, too. If my co-workers hear you’re both wandering around with that group of Baley’s, it may not do me much good in the Department.”

“Really?” Amy’s mother arched her brows. “They always knew we were both a bit, shall we say, eccentric, and that didn’t bother you once. Perhaps you should come with us to meet Mr. Baley’s group. It’d be wiser to have your colleagues think you’re going along with our actions, however odd or amusing they may find them, than to believe there’s a rift between us.” Her mouth twisted a little. “You know what they say—happy families make for a better City.”

Ricardo turned toward Amy. “You’d do it again? Go Outside, I mean. You’d actually go through that again?”

“Yes, I would,” Amy replied. “I know it’ll be hard, but I’d try.”

“It’s late,” her father said. “I can’t think about this now. “ He stood up and took Alysha by the arm as she rose. “We’ll discuss this tomorrow, after I’ve had a chance to consider it. Good night, Amy. “

“Good night. “

Her mother was whispering to her father as Amy went to her room. Her father had backed down for now, and her mother was almost certain to bring him around. She undressed for bed, convinced she had won her battle.

She stretched out, tired and ready to sleep, and soon drifted into a dream. She was on the strips again, riding through an open arch to the Outside, but she wasn't afraid this time.

The City slept. The strips and expressways continued to move, carrying the few who were awake—young lovers who had crept out to meet each other, policemen on patrol, hospital workers heading home after a night shift, and restless souls drawn to wander the caverns of New York.

Amy stood on a strip, a sprinkling of people around her. Four boys raced past her, leaping from strip to strip; for a moment, she was tempted to join their race. She had come out at night a few times before, to practice some moves when the strips were emptier, returning to her subsection before her parents awoke. More riders began to fill the slowest strip; the City was waking. Her parents would be up by the time she got back, but she was sure they would understand why she had been drawn out here tonight.

Her parents had come with her to meet Elijah Baley and his group. The detective was a tall, dark-haired man with a long, solemn face, but he had brightened a little when Shakira introduced her new recruits. Amy's mother and father had not gone Outside with them; perhaps they would next time. She knew what an effort it would be for them, and hoped they could find the courage to take that step. They would be with her when the group met again; they had promised that much. When she was able to face the openness without fear, to stride across the ground bravely as Shakira did, maybe she would lead them Outside herself.

She leaped up, spun around in a dervish, and ran along the strip. The band hummed under her feet; she could hear its music again. She bounded forward, did a handstand, then jumped to the next strip. She danced across the gray bands until she reached the expressway, then hauled herself aboard.

Her hands tightened around the pole as she recalled her first glimpse of daylight. The whiteness of the snow had been blinding, and above it all, in the painfully clear blue sky, was a bright ball of flame, the naked sun. She had known she was standing on a ball of dirt clad only in a thin veil of air, a speck that was hurtling through a space more vast and empty than anything she could see. The terror had seized her then, driving her back inside, where she had cowered on the floor, sick with fear and despair. But there had also been Shakira's strong arms to help her up, and Elijah Baley's voice telling her of his own former fears. Amy had not gone Outside again that day, but she had stood in the open doorway and forced herself to take one more breath of wintry air.

It was a beginning. She had to meet the challenge if she was ever to lead others Outside, or to follow the hopeful settlers to another world.

She left the expressway and danced along the strips, showing her form, imagining that she was running one last race. She was near the Hempstead street where she had met Shakira.

The street was nearly empty, its store windows darkened. Amy left the strips and hurried toward the tunnel, running along the passageway until her breath came in short, sharp gasps. When she reached the end, she hesitated for only a moment, then pressed her hand against the wall.

The opening appeared. The muted hum from the distant strips faded behind her, and she was Outside, alone, with the morning wind in her face. The sky was a dark dome above her. She looked east and saw dawn brightening the cave of stars.