

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

David Marusek

“Getting to Know You” appeared in the March 1998 issue of Asimov’s. New writer David Marusek is a graduate of Clarion West. He made his first sale, to Asimov’s Science Fiction, in 1993, and his second sale soon thereafter to Playboy, followed subsequently by more sales to Asimov’s and to the British anthology Future Histories. His pyrotechnic novella, “We Were Out of Our Minds with Joy,” was one of the most popular and talked-about stories of 1995; although it was only his third sale, it was accomplished enough to make one of the reviewers for Locus magazine speculate that Marusek must be a big name author writing under a pseudonym. Not a pseudonym, Marusek lives the life of a struggling young writer in a “low-maintenance cabin in the woods” in Fairbanks, Alaska (although he’s currently on a writing sabbatical in London, England), and we’re willing to bet that his is a voice we’ll be hearing a lot more from as we move toward the new century ahead.

In the story that follows, he takes us back to the intricate and strange future Utopian milieu of “We Were Out of Our Minds with Joy,” for a fast-paced tale that warns us that there are dangers in letting an experimental machine servant get to know you too well—although, by God, there are some advantages to it, too.

* * * *

Here she was in a private Slipstream car, flying beneath the plains of Kansas at 1000 kph, watching a holo vid, and eating pretzels. Only four hours earlier in San Francisco, Zoranna had set the house to vacation mode and given it last-minute instructions. She’d thrown beachwear and evening clothes into a bag. Reluctantly, she’d removed Hounder, her belt, and hung him on a peg in the closet. While doing so, she made a solemn vow not to engage in any work-related activities for a period of three weeks. The next three weeks were to be scrupulously dedicated to visiting her sister in Indiana, shopping for a hat in Budapest, and lying on a beach towel in the South of France. But no sooner had Zoranna made this vow than she broke it by deciding to bring along Bug, the beta unit.

“Where were you born?” Bug asked in its squeaky voice.

Zoranna started on a new pretzel and wondered why Bug repeatedly asked certain questions. No doubt it had to do with its imprinting algorithm. "Take a note," she said, "annoying repetition."

"Note taken," said Bug. "Where were you born?"

"Where do you think I was born?"

"Buffalo, New York," said Bug.

"Very good."

"What is your date of birth?"

Zoranna sighed. "August 12, 1961. Honestly, Bug, I wish you'd tap public records for this stuff."

"Do you like the timbre of Bug's voice?" it said. "Would you prefer it lower or higher?" It repeated this question through several octaves.

"Frankly, Bug, I detest your voice at any pitch."

"What is your favorite color?"

"I don't have one."

"Yesterday your favorite color was salmon."

"Well, today it's cranberry." The little pest was silent for a moment while it retrieved and compared color libraries. Zoranna tried to catch up with the holo-vid, but she'd lost the thread of the story.

"You have a phone call," Bug said, "Ted Chalmers at General Genius."

Zoranna sat up straight and patted her hair. "Put him on and squelch the vid." A miniature hologram of Ted with his feet on his desk was projected in the air before her. Ted was an attractive man Zoranna had wanted to ask out a couple times, but never seemed able to catch between spouses. By the time she'd hear he was single again, he'd be well into his next liaison. It made her wonder how someone with her world-class investigative skills could be so dateless. She'd even considered assigning Hounder to monitor Ted's availability status in order to get her foot in his door.

When Ted saw her, he smiled and said, “Hey, Zoe, how’s our little prototype?”

“Driving me crazy,” she said. “Refresh my memory, Ted. When’s the Inquisition supposed to end?”

Ted lowered his feet to the floor. “It’s still imprinting? How long have you had it now?” He consulted a display and answered his own question. “Twenty-two days. That’s a record.” He got up and paced his office, walking in and out of the projected holoframe.

“No kidding,” said Zoranna. “I’ve had marriages that didn’t last that long.” She’d meant for this to be funny, but it fell flat.

Ted sat down. “I wish we could continue the test, but unfortunately we’re aborting. We’d like you to return the unit—” He glanced at his display again, “—return Bug as soon as possible.”

“Why? What’s up?”

“Nothing’s up. They want to tweak it some more is all.” He flashed her his best PR smile.

Zoranna shook her head. “Ted, you don’t pull the plug on a major field test just like that.”

Ted shrugged his shoulders. “That’s what I thought. Anyway, think you can drop it in a shipping chute today?”

“In case you haven’t noticed,” she said, “I happen to be in a transcontinental Slipstream car at the moment, which Bug is navigating. I left Hounder at home. The soonest I can let Bug go is when I return in three weeks.”

“That won’t do, Zoe,” Ted said and frowned. “Tell you what. General Genius will send you, at no charge, its Dip-lomat Deluxe model, preloaded with transportation, tele-communications, the works. Where will you be tonight?”

Something surely was wrong. The Diplomat was GG’s flagship model and expensive even for Zoranna. “I’ll be at APRT 24,” she said, and when Ted raised an eyebrow, explained, “My sister lives there.”

“APRT 24 it is, then.”

“Listen, Ted, something stinks. Unless you want me snooping around your shop, you’d better come clean.”

“Off the record?”

“Fuck off the record. I have twenty-two days invested in this test and no story.”

“I see. You have a point. How’s this sound? In addition to the complimentary belt, we’ll make you the same contract for the next test. You’re our team journalist. Deal?” Zoranna shrugged, and Ted put his feet back on the desk. “Heads are rolling, Zoe. Big shake-up in product development. Threats of lawsuits. We’re questioning the whole notion of combining belt valet technology with artificial personality. Or at least with this particular personality.”

“Why? What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s too pushy. Too intrusive. Too heavy-handed. It’s a monster that should have never left the lab. You’re lucky Bug hasn’t converted yet, or you’d be suing us, too.”

Ted was exaggerating, of course. She agreed that Bug was a royal pain, but it was no monster. Still, she’d be happy to get rid of it, and the Diplomat belt was an attractive consolation prize. If she grafted Hounder into it, she’d be ahead of the technology curve for once. “I’m going to want all the details when I get back, but for now, yeah, sure, you got a deal.”

After Zoranna ended the call, Bug said, “Name the members of your immediate family and state their relationship to you.”

The car began to decelerate, and Zoranna instinctively checked the buckle of her harness. “My family is deceased, except for Nancy.”

With a hard bump, the car entered the ejection tube, found its wheels, and braked. Lights flashed through the windows, and she saw signs stenciled on the tube wall, “APRT 24, Stanchion 4 Depot.”

“What is Nancy’s favorite color?”

“That’s it. That’s enough. No more questions, Bug. You heard Ted; you’re off the case. Until I ship you back, let’s just pretend you’re a plain

old, dumb belt valet. No more questions. Got it?"

"Affirmative."

Pneumatic seals hissed as air pressure equalized, the car came to a halt, and the doors slid open. Zoranna released the harness and retrieved her luggage from the cargo net. She paused a moment to see if there'd be any more questions and then climbed out of the car to join throngs of commuters on the platform. She craned her neck and looked straight up the tower's chimney, the five hundred-story atrium galleria where floor upon floor of crowded shops, restaurants, theaters, parks, and gardens receded skyward into brilliant haze. Zoranna was ashamed to admit that she didn't know what her sister's favorite color was, or for that matter, her favorite anything. Except that Nancy loved a grand view. And the grandest thing about an APRT was its view. The evening sun, multiplied by giant mirrors on the roof, slid up the sides of the core in an inverted sunset. The ascending dusk triggered whole floors of slumbering bioluminescent railings and walls to luminesce. Streams of pedestrians crossed the dizzying space on suspended pedways. The air pulsed with the din of an indoor metropolis.

When Nancy first moved here, she was an elementary school teacher who specialized in learning disorders. Despite the surcharge, she leased a suite of rooms so near the top of the tower it was impossible to see her floor from depot level. But with the Procreation Ban of 2033, teachers became redundant, and Nancy was forced to move to a lower, less expensive floor. Then, when free-agency clone technology was licensed, she lost altitude tens of floors at a time. "My last visit," Zoranna said to Bug, "Nancy had an efficiency on the 103rd floor. Check the tower directory."

"Nancy resides on S40."

"S40?"

"Subterranean 40. Thirty-five floors beneath depot level."

"You don't say."

Zoranna allowed herself to be swept by the waves of commuters towards the banks of elevators. She had inadvertently arrived during crash hour and found herself pressing shoulders with tired and hungry wage earners at the end of their work cycle. They were uniformly young people, clones mostly, who wore brown and teal Applied People livery. Neither brown nor teal was Zoranna's favorite color.

The entire row of elevators reserved for the subfloors was inexplicably off-line. The marquee directed her to elevators in Stanchion 5, one klick east by pedway, but Zoranna was tired. “Bug,” she said, pointing to the next row, “do those go down?”

“Affirmative.”

“Good,” she said and jostled her way into the nearest one. It was so crowded with passengers that the doors— begging their indulgence and requesting they consolidate— required three tries to latch. By the time the cornice display showed the results of the destination adjudication, and Zoranna realized she was aboard a consensus elevator, it was too late to get off. Floor 63 would be the first stop, followed by 55, 203, 148, etc. Her floor was dead last.

Bug, she tongued, this is a Dixon lift!

Zoranna’s long day grew measurably longer each time the elevator stopped to let off or pick up passengers. At each stop the consensus changed, and destinations were reshuffled, but her stop remained stubbornly last. Of the five kinds of elevators the tower deployed, the Dixon consensus lifts worked best for groups of people going to popular floors, but she was the only passenger traveling to the subfloors. Moreover, the consensual ascent acceleration, a sprightly 2.8-g, upset her stomach. *Bug, she tongued, go home for me and unlock my archives. Retrieve a file entitled “cerebral aneurysm” and forward it to the elevator’s adjudicator. We’ll just manufacture our own consensus.*

This file is out of date, Bug said in her ear after a moment, its implant voice like the whine of a mosquito. *Bug cannot feed obsolete data to a public conveyance.*

Then postdate it.

That is not allowed.

“I’ll tell you what’s not allowed!” she said, and people looked at her.

The stricture against asking questions limits Bug’s functionality, Bug said.

Zoranna sighed. *What do you need to know?*

Shall Bug reprogram itself to enable Bug to process the file as requested?

No, Bug, I don't have the time to reprogram you, even if I knew how.

Shall Bug reprogram itself?

It could reprogram itself? Ted had failed to mention that feature. A tool they'd forgotten to disable? *Yes, Bug, reprogram yourself.*

A handicapped icon blinked on the cornice display, and the elevator's speed slowed to a crawl.

Thank you, Bug. That's more like it.

A jerry standing in the corner of the crowded elevator said, "The fuck, lift?"

"Lift speed may not exceed five floors per minute," the elevator replied.

The jerry rose on tiptoes and surveyed his fellow passengers. "Right," he said, "who's the gimp?" Everyone looked at their neighbors. There were michelles, jennies, a pair of jeromes, and a half-dozen other phenotypes. They all looked at Zoranna, the only person not dressed in AP brown and teal.

"I'm sorry," she said, pressing her palm to her temple, "I have an aneurysm the size of a grapefruit. The slightest strain ..." She winced theatrically.

"Then have it fixed!" the jerry said, to murmured agreement.

"Gladly," said Zoranna. "Could you pony me the CE23,000?"

The jerry har-harred and looked her up and down appraisingly. "Sweetheart, if you spent half as much money on the vitals as you obviously do on the peripherals," he leered, "you wouldn't have this problem, now would you?" Zoranna had never liked the jerry type; they were spooky. In fact, more jerries had to be pithed *in vatero* for incipient sociopathy than any other commercial type. Professionally, they made superb grunts; most of the indentured men in the Protectorate's commando forces were jerries. This one, however, wore an EXTRUSIONS UN-LIMITED patch on his teal

ball cap; he was security for a retail mall. "So," he said, "where you heading?"

"Sub40?" she said.

Passengers consulted the cornice display and groaned. The jerry said, "At this rate it'll take me an hour to get home."

"Again I apologize," said Zoranna, "but all the down lifts were spango. However, if everyone here consensed to drop me off first—?"

There was a general muttering as passengers spoke to their belts or tapped virtual keyboards, and the elevator said, "Consensus has been modified." But instead of de-scending as Zoranna expected, it stopped at the next floor and opened its doors. People streamed out. Zoranna caught a glimpse of 223rd floor with its rich appointments; crystalline decor; high, arched passages; and in the distance, a ringpath crowded with joggers and skaters. An evangeline, her brown puddle-like eyes reflecting warmth and concern, touched Zoranna's arm as she disembarked.

The jerry, however, stayed on and held back his companions, two russes. "Don't give her the satisfaction," he said.

"But we'll miss the game," said one of the russes.

"We'll watch it in here if we have to," said the jerry.

Zoranna liked russes. Unlike jerries, they were generous souls, and you always knew where you stood with them. These two wore brown jackets and teal slacks. Their name badges read "FRED," and "OSCAR." They were probably returning from a day spent bodyguarding some minor potentate in Cincinnati or Terre Haute. Consulting each other with a glance, they each took an arm and dragged the jerry off the lift.

When the doors closed and Zoranna was alone at last, she sagged with relief. "And now, Bug," she said, "we have a consensus of one. So retract my handicap file and pay whatever toll necessary to take us down nonstop." The brake released, and the elevator plunged some 260 floors. Her ears popped. "I guess you've learned something, Bug," she said, thinking about the types of elevators.

"Affirmative," Bug said. "Bug learned you developed a cerebral aneurysm at the calendar age of fifty-two and that you've had your brain and spinal cord rejuvenated twice since then. Bug learned that your organs have

an average bioage of thirty-five years, with your lymphatic system the oldest at bioage sixty-five, and your cardio-vascular system the youngest at twenty-five.”

“You’ve been examining my medical records?”

“Affirmative.”

“I told you to fetch one file, not my entire chart!”

“You told Bug to unlock your archives. Bug is getting to know you.”

“What else did you look at?” The elevator eased to a soft landing at S40 and opened its doors.

“Bug reviewed your diaries and journals, the corpus of your zine writing, your investigative dossiers, your complete correspondence, judicial records, awards and citations, various multimedia scrapbooks, and school tran-scripts. Bug is currently following public links.”

Zoranna was appalled. Nevertheless, she realized that if she’d opened her archives earlier, they’d be through this imprinting phase by now.

She followed Bug’s pedway directions to Nancy’s block. Sub40 corridors were decorated in cheerless colors and lit with harsh, artificial light—biolumines couldn’t live underground. There were no grand promenades, no parks or shops. There was a dank odor of decay, however, and chilly ventilation.

On Nancy’s corridor, Zoranna watched two people emerge from a door and come her way. They moved with the characteristic shuffle of habitually deferred body maintenance. They wore dark clothing impossible to date and, as they passed, she saw that they were crying. Tears coursed freely down their withered cheeks. To Zoranna’s distress, she discovered they’d just emerged from her sis-ter’s apartment.

“You’re sure this is it?” she said, standing before the door marked S40 G6879.

“Affirmative,” Bug said.

Zoranna fluffed her hair with her fingers and straight-ened her skirt. “Door, announce me.”

“At once, Zoe,” replied the door.

Several moments later, the door slid open, and Nancy stood there supporting herself with an aluminum walker. “Darling, Zoe,” she said, balancing herself with one hand and reaching out with the other.

Zoranna stood a moment gazing at her baby sister before entering her embrace. Nancy had let herself go completely. Her hair was brittle grey, she was pale to the point of bloodless, and she had doubled in girth. When they kissed, Nancy’s skin gave off a sour odor mixed with lilac.

“What a surprise!” Nancy said. “Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

“I did. Several times.”

“You did? You called?” Nancy looked upset. “I told him there was something wrong with the houseputer, but he didn’t believe me.”

Someone appeared behind Nancy, a handsome man with wild, curly, silver hair. “Who’s *this*?” he said in an authoritative baritone. He looked Zoranna over. “You must be Zoe,” he boomed. “What a delight!” He stepped around Nancy and drew Zoranna to him in a powerful hug. He stood at least a head taller than she. He kissed her eagerly on the cheek. “I am Victor. Victor Vole. Come in, come in. Nancy, you would let your sister stand in the hall?” He drew them both inside.

Zoranna had prepared herself for a small apartment, but not this small, and for castoff furniture, but not a room filled floor to ceiling with hospital beds. It took several long moments for her to comprehend what she was looking at. There were some two dozen beds in the three-by-five-meter living room. Half were arranged on the floor, and the rest clung upside-down to the ceiling. They were holograms, she quickly surmised, separate holos arranged in snowflake fashion, that is, six individual beds facing each other and overlapping at the foot. What’s more, they were occupied by obviously sick, possibly dying, strangers. Other than the varied lighting from the holoframes, the living room was unlit. What odd pieces of real furniture it contained were pushed against the walls. In the corner, a hutch intended to hold bric-a-brac was apparently set up as a shrine to a saint. A row of flickering votive candles illuminated an old flatstyle picture of a large, barefoot man draped head to foot in flowing robes.

“What the hell, Nancy?” Zoranna said.

“This is my work,” Nancy said proudly.

“Please,” said Victor, escorting them from the door. “Let’s talk in the kitchen. We’ll have dessert. Are you after dinner, Zoe?”

“Yes, thank you,” said Zoranna. “I ate on the tube.” She was made to walk through a suffering man’s bed; there was no path around him to the kitchen. “Sorry,” she said. But he seemed accustomed to his unfavorable location and closed his eyes while she passed through.

The kitchen was little more than an alcove separated from the living room by a counter. There was a bed squeezed into it as well, but the occupant, a grizzled man with an open mouth, was either asleep or comatose. “I think Edward will be unavailable for some while,” Victor said. “Houseputer, delete this hologram. Sorry, Edward, but we need the space.” The holo vanished, and Victor offered Zoranna a stool at the counter. “Please,” he said, “will you have tea? Or a thimble of cognac?”

“Thank you,” Zoranna said, perching herself on the stool and crossing her legs, “tea would be fine.” Her sister ambulated into the kitchen and flipped down her walker’s built-in seat, but before she could sit, a mournful wail issued from the bedroom.

“Naaaancy,” cried the voice, its gender uncertain. “Nancy, I need you.”

“Excuse me,” Nancy said.

“I’ll go with you,” Zoranna said and hopped off the stool.

The bedroom was half the size of the living room and contained half the number of holo beds, plus a real one against the far wall. Zoranna sat on it. There was a dresser, a recessed closet, a bedside night table. Expensive-looking men’s clothing hung in the closet. A pair of men’s slippers was parked under the dresser. And a holo of a soccer match was playing on the night table. Tiny players in brightly colored jerseys swarmed over a field the size of a doily. The sound was off.

Zoranna watched Nancy sit on her walker seat beneath a bloat-faced woman bedded upside down on the ceiling. “What exactly are you doing with these people?”

“I listen mostly.” Nancy replied. “I’m a volunteer hos-pice attendant.”

“A volunteer? What about the—” she tried to recall Nancy’s most recent paying occupation, “—the hairdressing?”

“I haven’t done that for years,” Nancy said dryly. “As you may have noticed, it’s difficult for me to be on my feet all day.”

“Yes, in fact, I did notice,” said Zoranna. “Why is that? I’ve sent you money.”

Nancy ignored her, looked up at the woman, and said, “I’m here, Mrs. Hurley. What seems to be the problem?”

Zoranna examined the holos. As in the living room, each bed was a separate projection, and in the corner of each frame was a network squib and trickle meter. All of this interactive time was costing someone a pretty penny.

The woman saw Nancy and said, “Oh, Nancy, thank you for coming. My bed is wet, but they won’t change it until I sign a permission form, and I don’t understand.”

“Do you have the form there with you, dear?” said Nancy. “Good, hold it up.” Mrs. Hurley held up a slate in trembling hands. “Houseputer,” Nancy said, “capture and display that form.” The document was projected against the bedroom wall greatly oversized. “That’s a per-mission form for attendant-assisted suicide, Mrs. Hurley. You don’t have to sign it unless you want to.”

The woman seemed frightened. “Do I want to, Nancy?”

Victor stood in the doorway. “No!” he cried. “Never sign!”

“Hush, Victor,” Nancy said.

He entered the room, stepping through beds and bodies. “Never sign away your life, Mrs. Hurley.” The woman appeared even more frightened. “We’ve returned to Ro-man society,” he bellowed. “Masters and servants! Pluto-crats and slaves! Oh, where is the benevolent middle class when we need it?”

“Victor,” Nancy said sternly and pointed to the door.

And she nodded to Zoranna, “You too. Have your tea. I’ll join you.”

Zoranna followed Victor to the kitchen, sat at the counter, and watched him set out cups and saucers, sugar and soybimi lemon. He unwrapped and sliced a dark cake. He was no stranger to this kitchen.

“It’s a terrible thing what they did to your sister,” he said.

“Who? What?”

He poured boiling water into the pot. “Teaching was her life.”

“Teaching?” Zoranna said, incredulous. “You’re talking about something that ended thirty years ago.”

“It’s all she ever wanted to do.”

“Tough!” she said. “We’ve all paid the price of lon-gevity. How can you teach elementary school when there’re no more children? You can’t. So you retrain. You move on. What’s wrong with working for a living? You join an outfit like this,” she gestured to take in the whole tower above her, “you’re guaranteed your livelihood *for life!* The only thing not handed you on a silver platter is longevity. You have to earn that yourself. And if you can’t, what good are you?” When she remembered that two dozen people lay dying in the next room because they couldn’t do just that, she lowered her voice. “Must society carry your dead weight through the centuries?”

Victor laughed and placed his large hand on hers. “I see you are a true freebooter, Zoe. I wish everyone had your initiative, your *drive!* But sadly, we don’t. We yearn for simple lives, and so we trim people’s hair all day. When we tire of that, they retrain us to pare their toenails. When we tire of that, we die. For we lack the souls of servants. A natural servant is a rare and precious person. How lucky our masters are to have discovered cloning! Now they need find but one servile person among us and clone him repeatedly. As for the rest of us, we can all go to hell!” He removed his hand from hers to pour the tea. Her hand immediately missed his. “But such morbid, talk on such a festive occasion!” he roared. “How wonderful to finally meet the famous Zoe. Nancy speaks only of you. She says you are an important person, modern and successful. That you are an investigator.” He peered at her over his teacup.

“Missing persons, actually, for the National Police.” she said. “But I quit that years ago. When we found every-body.”

“You found everybody?” Victor laughed and gazed at her steadily,

then turned to watch Nancy making her rounds in the living room.

“What about you, Mr. Vole?” Zoranna said. “What do you do for a living?”

“What’s this Mr.? I’m not Mr. I’m Victor! We are practically related, you and I. What do I do for a living? For a living I live, of course. For groceries, I teach ballroom dance lessons.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Why should I kid? I teach the waltz, the fox-trot, the cha-cha.” He mimed holding a partner and swaying in three-quarters time. “I teach the merletz and my specialty, the Cuban tango.”

“I’m amazed,” said Zoranna. “There’s enough interest in that for Applied People to keep instructors?”

Victor recoiled in mock affront. “I am not AP. I’m a freebooter, like you, Zoe.”

“Oh,” she said and paused to sip her tea. If he wasn’t AP, what was he doing obviously living in an APRT? Had Nancy respoused? Applied People tended to be pro-prietary about living arrangements in its towers. *Bug*, she tongued, *find Victor Vole’s status in the tower directory*. Out loud she said, “It pays well, dance instruction?”

“It pays execrably.” He threw his hands into the air. “As do all the arts. But some things are more important than money. You make a point, however. A man must eat, so I do other things as well. I consult with gentlemen on the contents of their wardrobes. This pays more hand-somely, for gentlemen detest appearing in public in out-moded attire.”

Zoranna had a pleasing mental image of this tall, elegant man in a starched white shirt and black tux floating across a shiny hardwood floor in the arms of an equally elegant partner. She could even imagine herself as that partner. But Nancy?

The tower link is unavailable, said Bug, due to over-extension of the houseputer processors.

Zoranna was surprised. A mere three dozen interactive holos would hardly burden her home system. But then, everything on Sub40 seemed

substandard.

Nancy ambulated to the kitchen balancing a small, flat carton on her walker and placed it next to the teapot.

“Now, now,” said Victor. “What did autodoc say about lifting things? Come, join us and have your tea.”

“In a minute, Victor. There’s another box.”

“Show me,” he said and went to help her.

Zoranna tasted the dark cake. It was moist to the point of wet, too sweet, and laden with spice. She recalled her father buying cakes like this at a tiny shop on Paderszewski Boulevard in Chicago. She took another bite and examined Nancy’s carton. It was a home archivist box that could be evacuated of air, but the seal was open and the lid unlatched. She lifted the lid and saw an assortment of little notebooks, no two of the same style or size, and bundles of envelopes with colorful paper postal stamps. The envelope on top was addressed in hand script to a Pani Beata Smolenska—Zoranna’s great-grandmother.

Victor dropped a second carton on the counter and helped Nancy sit in her armchair recliner in the living room.

“Nancy,” said Zoranna, “what’s all this?”

“It’s all yours,” said her sister. Victor fussed over Nancy’s pillows and covers and brought her tea and cake.

Zoranna looked inside the larger carton. There was a rondophone and several inactive holocubes on top, but underneath were objects from earlier centuries. Not antiques, exactly, but worn-out everyday objects: a sterling salt cellar with brass showing through its silver plating, a collection of military bullet casings childishly glued to an oak panel, a rosary with corn kernel beads, a mustache trimmer. “What’s all this junk?” she said, but of course she knew, for she recognized the pair of terra-cotta robins that had belonged to her mother. This was the collection of what her family regarded as heirlooms. Nancy, the youngest and most steadfast of seven children, had apparently been designated its conservator. But why had she brought it out for airing just now? Zoranna knew the answer to that, too. She looked at her sister who now lay among the hospice patients. Victor was scolding her for not wearing her vascular support stockings. Her ankles were grotesquely edematous, swollen like sausages and bruised an angry

purple.

Damn you, Zoranna thought. *Bug, she tongued, call up the medical records of Nancy Brim, nee Smolenska. I'll help munch the passwords.*

The net is unavailable, replied Bug.

Bypass the houseputer. Log directly onto public access.

Public access is unavailable.

She wondered how that was possible. There had been no problem in the elevator. Why should this apartment be in shadow? She looked around and tried to decide where the utilidor spar would enter the apartment. Probably the bathroom with the plumbing, since there were no service panels in the kitchen. She stepped through the living room to the bathroom and slid the door closed. The bathroom was a tiny ceramic vault that Nancy had tried to domesticate with baskets of sea shells and scented soaps. The medicine cabinet was dedicated to a man's toiletries.

Zoranna found the service panel artlessly hidden behind a towel. Its tamper-proof latch had been defeated with a sophisticated-looking gizmo that Zoranna was careful not to disturb.

"Do you find Victor Vole alarming or arousing?" said Bug.

Zoranna was startled. "Why do you ask?"

"Your blood level of adrenaline spiked when he touched your hand."

"My what? So now you're monitoring my biometrics?"

"Bug is getting—"

"I know," she said, "Bug is getting to know me. You're a persistent little snoop, aren't you."

Zoranna searched the belt's utility pouch for a terminus Belay, found a UDIN, and plugged it into the panel's keptel jack. "There," she said, "now we should have access."

"Affirmative," said Bug. "Autodoc is requesting pass-words for Nancy's medical records."

“Cancel my order. We’ll do that later.”

“Tower directory lists no Victor Vole.”

“I didn’t think so,” Zoranna said. “Call up the houseputer log and display it on the mirror.”

The consumer page of Nancy’s houseputer appeared over the mirror. Zoranna poked through its various menus and found nothing unusual. She did find a record of her own half-dozen calls to Nancy that were viewed but not returned. “Bug, can you see anything wrong with this log?”

“This is not a standard user log,” said Bug. “The standard log has been disabled. All house lines circumvent the built-in houseputer to terminate in a mock houseputer.”

“A mock houseputer?” said Zoranna. “Now that’s interesting.” There were no cables trailing from the service panel and no obvious optical relays. “Can you locate the processor?”

“It’s located one half-meter to our right at thigh level.”

It was mounted under the sink, a cheap-looking, saucer-sized piece of hardware.

“I think you have the soul of an electronic engineer,” she said. “I could never program Hounder to do what you’ve just done. So, tell me about the holo transmissions in the other rooms.”

“A private network entitled ‘The Hospicers of Camillus de Lellis’ resides in the mock houseputer and piggybacks over TSN channel 203.”

The 24-hour soccer channel. Zoranna was impressed. For the price of one commercial line, Victor—she assumed it was Victor—was managing to gypsy his own network. The trickle meters that she’d noticed were not recording how much money her sister was spending but rather how much Victor was charging his dying subscribers. “Bug, can you extrapolate how much the Hospicers of Camillus de—whatever—earn in an average day?”

“Affirmative, CE45 per day.”

That wasn’t much. About twice what a hairdresser—or dance

instructor—might expect to make, and hardly worth the punishment if caught. “Where do the proceeds go?”

“Bug lacks the subroutine to trace credit transactions.”

Damn, Zoranna thought and wished she’d brought Hounder. “Can you tell me who the hospicer organization is registered to?”

“Affirmative, Ms. Nancy Brim.”

“Figures,” said Zoranna as she removed her UDIN from the panel. If anything went wrong, her sister would take the rap. At first Zoranna decided to confront Victor, but changed her mind when she left the bathroom and heard him innocently singing show tunes in the kitchen. She looked at Nancy’s bed and wondered what it must be like to share such a narrow bed with such a big man. She decided to wait and investigate further before exposing him. “Bug, see if you can integrate Hounder’s tracing and tracking subroutines from my applications library.”

Victor stood at the sink washing dishes. In the living room Nancy snored lightly. It wasn’t a snore, exactly, but the raspy bronchial wheeze of congested lungs. Her lips were bluish, anoxic. She reminded Zoranna of their mother the day before she died. Their mother had suffered a massive brain hemorrhage—weak arterial walls were the true family heirloom—and lived out her final days propped up on the parlor couch, disoriented, enfeebled, and pathetic. Her mother had had a short, split bamboo stick with a curled end. She used the curled end to scratch her back and legs, the straight end to dial the old rotary phone, and the whole stick to rail incoherently against her fate. Nancy, the baby of the family, had been away at teacher’s college at the time, but took a semester off to nurse the old woman. Zoranna, firstborn, was already working on the west coast and managed to stay away until her mother had slipped into a coma. After all these years, she still felt guilty for doing so.

Someone on the ceiling coughed fitfully. Zoranna noticed that most of the patients who were conscious at the moment were watching her with expressions that ranged from annoyance to hostility. They apparently regarded her as competition for Nancy’s attention.

Nancy’s breathing changed; she opened her eyes, and the two sisters regarded each other silently. Victor stood at the kitchen counter, wiping his hands on a dish towel, and watched them.

“I’m booking a suite at the Stronmeyer Clinic in Cozumel,” Zoranna

said at last, "and you're coming with me."

"Victor," Nancy said, ignoring her, "go next door, dear, and borrow a folding bed from the Jeffersons." She grasped the walker and pulled herself to her feet. "Please excuse me, Zoe, but I need to sleep now." She ambulated to the bedroom and shut the door.

Victor hung up the dish towel and said he'd be right back with the cot.

"Don't bother," Zoranna said. It was still early, she was on west coast time, and she had no intention of bedding down among the dying. "I'll just use the houseputer to reserve a hotel room upstairs."

"Allow me," he said and addressed the houseputer. Then he escorted her up to the Holiday Inn on the 400th floor. They made three elevator transfers to get there, and walked in silence along carpeted halls. Outside her door he took her hand. As before she was both alarmed and aroused. "Zoe," he said, "join us for a special breakfast tomorrow. Do you like Belgian waffles?"

"Oh, don't go to any trouble. In fact, I'd like to invite the two of you up to the restaurant here."

"It sounds delightful," said Victor, "but your sister re-fuses to leave the flat."

"I find that hard to believe. Nancy was never a stay-at-home."

"People change, I suppose," Victor said. "She tells me the last time she left the tower, for instance, was to attend your brother Michael's funeral."

"But that was seven years ago!"

"As you can see, she's severely depressed, so it's good that you've come." He squeezed her hand and let it go. "Until the morning, then," he said and turned to walk down the hall, whistling as he went. She watched until he turned a corner.

Entering her freshly scented, marble-tiled, cathedral-vaulted hotel room was like returning to the real world. The view from the 400th floor was godlike: The moon seemed to hang right outside her window, and the rolling landscape stretched out below like a luminous quilt on a giant's bed. "Welcome, Ms. Alblaitor," said the room. "On behalf of the staff of the

Holiday Inn, I thank you for staying with us. Do let me know if there's anything we can do to make you more comfortable."

"Thank you," she said.

"By the way," the room continued, "the tower has informed me there's a parcel addressed to you. I'm having someone fetch it."

In a few moments, a gangly steve with the package from General Genius tapped on her door. "Bug," she said, "tip the man." The steve bowed and exited. Inside the package was the complimentary Diplomat Deluxe valet. Ted had outdone himself, for not only had he sent the valet system—itsself worth a month's income—but had included a slim Gucci leather belt to house it.

"Well, I guess this is good-bye," Zoranna said, walking to the shipping chute and unbuckling her own belt. "Too bad, Bug, you were just getting interesting." She searched the belt for the storage grommet that held the memory wafer. She had to destroy it; Bug knew too much about her. Ted would be more interested in the processors any-way. "I was hoping you'd convert by now. I'm dying to know what kind of a big, bad wolf you're supposed to become." As she unscrewed the grommet, she heard the sound of running water in the bathroom. "What's that?" she said.

"A belt valet named Bug has asked me to draw your bath," said the room.

She went to the spacious bathroom and saw the tub filling with cranberry-colored aqueous gel. The towels were cranberry, too, and the robe a kind of salmon. "Well, well," she said. "Bug makes a play for longevity." She undressed and eased herself into the warm solution where she floated in darkness for an hour and let her mind drift aimlessly. She felt like talking to someone, discussing this whole thing about her sister. Victor she could handle—he was at worst a lovable louse, and she could crush him anytime she decided. But Nancy's problems were beyond her ken. Feelings were never her strong suit. And depression, if that's what it was, well—she wished there was someone she could consult. But though she scrolled down a mental list of everyone she knew, there was no one she cared—or dared—to call.

In the morning Zoranna tried again to ship Bug to G.G., but discovered that during the night Bug had rewritten Hounder's tracking subroutines to fit its own architecture (a handy talent for a valet to possess) and had run credit traces. But it had come back empty-handed. The

proceeds of the Hospicers of Camillus de Lellis went to a coded account in Liberia that not even Hounder would be able to crack. And the name Victor Vole—Zoranna wasn't surprised to learn—was a relatively common alias. Thus she would require prints and specimens, and she needed Bug's help to obtain them. So she sent Ted a message saying she wanted to keep Bug another day or so pending an ongoing investigation.

Zoranna hired a pricey, private elevator for a quick ride to the subfloors. "Bug," she said as she threaded her way through the Sub40 corridors, "I want you to integrate Hounder's subroutines keyed 'forensics.'"

"Bug has already integrated all of the applications in all of your libraries."

"Why am I not surprised?"

Something was different in Nancy's apartment. The gentleman through whose bed she had been forced to walk was gone, replaced by a skeletal woman with glassy, pink-rimmed eyes. Zoranna supposed that high client turnover was normal in a business like this.

Breakfast was superlative but strained. She sat at the counter, Nancy was set up in the recliner, and Victor served them both. Although the coffee and most of the food was derived from soybimi, Victor's preparation was so skillful, Zoranna could easily imagine she was eating real wheat cakes, maple syrup, and whipped dairy butter. But Nancy didn't touch her food, and Victor fussed too much. Zoranna, meanwhile, instructed Bug to capture as complete a set of fingerprints as possible from the cups and plates Victor handed her, as well as a 360-degree holograph of him, a voice print, and retinal prints.

There are Jacob's mirrors within Victor's eyes, Bug reported, that defeat accurate retinal scanning.

This was not unexpected. Victor probably also grew epipads on his fingers to alter his prints. Technology had reduced the cost of anonymity to fit the means of even petty criminals. Zoranna excused herself and went to the bathroom, where she plucked a few strands of silver curls from his hairbrush and placed them in a specimen bag, figuring he was too vain to reseed his follicles with some-one else's hair. Emerging from the bathroom, she over-heard them in a loud discussion.

"Please go with her, my darling," Victor pleaded. "Go and take the

cure. What am I to do without you?"

"Drop it, Victor. Just drop it!"

"You are behaving insanely. I will not drop it. I will not permit you to die."

Zoranna decided it was time to remove the network from Nancy's apartment and Victor from her life. So she stepped into the living room and said, "I know what he'll do without you. He'll go out and find some other old biddy to rob."

Nancy seemed not at all surprised at this statement. She appeared pleased, in fact, that the subject had finally been broached. "You should talk!" she said with such fierceness that the hospice patients all turned to her. "This is my sis-ter," she told them, "my sister with the creamy skin and pearly teeth and rich clothes." Nancy choked with emotion. "My sister who begrudges me the tenderness of a dear man. And begrudges him the crumbs—*the crumbs*—that AP tosses to its subfloors."

The patients now looked at Zoranna, who blushed with embarrassment. They waited for her to speak, and she had to wonder how many of them possessed the clarity of mind to know that this was not some holoivid soap opera they were watching. Then she decided that she, too, could play to this audience and said, "In her toxic condition, my sister hallucinates. I am not the issue here. *That* man is." She pointed a finger at Victor. "Insinuating himself into her apartment is bad enough," she said. "But who do you suppose AP will kick out when they discover it? My sis-ter, that's who." Zoranna walked around the room and addressed individual patients as a prosecutor might a jury. "And what about the money? Yes, there's money in-volved. Two years ago I sent my sister CE15,000 to have her kidneys restored. That's fifteen *thousand* protectorate credits. How many of *you*, *if you* had a sister kind enough to send you CE15,000, even now as you lie on your public dole beds, how many of you would refuse it?" There was the sound of rustling as the dying shifted in their sheets. "Did my sister use the money I sent her?" Theatrically she pointed at Nancy in the recliner. "Apparently not. So where did all that money go? I'll tell you where it went. It went into *his* foreign account."

The dying now turned their attention to Victor.

"So what?" Nancy said. "You *gave* me that money. It was *mine* to spend. I spent it on him. End of discussion.

“I see,” said Zoranna, stopping at a bed whose occupant had possibly just departed. “So my sister’s an equal part-ner in Victor’s hospicer scam.”

“Scam? What scam? Now you’re the one hallucinat-ing,” said Nancy. “I work for a hospicer society.”

“Yes, I know,” Zoranna said and pointed to the shrine and picture of the saint. “The Hospicers of Camillus de Lellis. I looked it up. But do you know who owns the good hospicers?” She turned to include the whole room. “Does anyone know? Why, Nancy dear, you do.” She paused to let these facts sink in. “Which means that when the National Police come, they’ll be coming for *you*, sis-ter. Meanwhile, do any of you know where your subscrip-tion fees go?” She stepped in front of Victor. “You guessed it.”

The audience coughed and wheezed. Nancy glared at Victor, who crouched next to her recliner and tried to take her hand. She pushed him away, but he rested his head on her lap. She peered at it as though it were some strange cat, but after a while stroked it with a comforting hand. “I’m sure there were expenses,” she said at last. “Getting things set up and all. In any case, he did it for me. Because he loves me. It gave me something important to do. It kept me alive. Let them put me in prison. I won’t be staying there long.” This was Victor’s cue to begin sob-bing in her lap.

Zoranna was disappointed and, frankly, a little dis-gusted. Now she would be forced to rescue her sister against her sister’s will. She tongued, *Bug, route an emer-gency phone call to Nancy through my houseputer at home. Disable the caller ID.* She watched Victor shower Nancy’s hand with kisses. In a moment, his head bobbed up—he had an ear implant as she had expected—and he hurried to the bedroom.

Bug is being asked to leave a message, said Bug.

“I’m going to the hotel,” Zoranna told Nancy and headed for the door. “We’ll talk later.” She let herself out.

When the apartment door slid shut, she said, “Bug, you’ve integrated all my software, right? Including holoediting?”

“Affirmative.”

She looked both ways. No one was in sight. She would have preferred a more private studio than a Sub40 corri-dor. "This is what I want you to do. Cast a real-time alias of me. Use that jerry we met in the elevator yesterday as a model. Morph my appearance and voice accordingly. Clothe me in National Police regalia, provide a suitably officious backdrop, and map my every expression. Got it?"

"Affirmative."

"On the count of five, four, three—" She crossed her arms and spread her legs in a surly pose, smiled conde-scendingly, and said, "Nancy B. Smolenska Brim, I am Sgt. Manley of the National Police, badge ID 30-31-6725. By the authority vested in me, I hereby place you under arrest for violation of Protectorate Statutes PS 12-135-A, the piracy of telecommunication networks, and PS 12-148-D, the trafficking in unlicensed commerce. Your ar-rest number is 063-08-2043716. Confirm receipt of this communication immediately upon viewing and report in realbody for incarceration at Precinct Station IN28 in Indianapolis no later than four PM standard time tomorrow. You may bring an attorney. End of message. Have a nice day."

She heard the door open behind her. Nancy stood there with her walker. "What are you doing out here?" she said. In a moment the hospice beds in the living room and their unfortunate occupants vanished. "No," said Nancy, "bring them back." Victor came from the bedroom, a bulging duffel bag over his shoulder. He leaned down and folded Nancy into his arms, and she began to moan.

Victor turned to Zoranna and said, "It was nice to fi-nally meet you, Zoe."

"Save your breath," said Zoranna, "and save your money. The next time you see me—and there *will* be a next time—I'll bring an itemized bill for you to pay. And you will pay it."

Victor Vole smiled sadly and turned to walk down the corridor.

* * * *

Here she was still in APRT 24, not in Budapest, not in the South of France. With Victor's banishment, her sis-ter's teetering state of health had finally collapsed. No-thing Zoranna did or the autodoc prescribed seemed to help. At first Zoranna tried to coax Nancy out of the apart-ment for a change of scene, a breath of fresh air. She rented a wheelchair for a ride up to a park

or arboretum (and she ordered Bug to explore the feasibility of using it to kidnap her). But day and night Nancy lay in her recliner and refused to leave the apartment.

So Zoranna reinitialized the houseputer and had Bug project live opera, ballet, and figure-skating into the room. But Nancy deleted them and locked Zoranna out of the system. It would have been child's play for Bug to over-ride the lockout, but Zoranna let it go. Instead, she sur-rounded her sister with gaily colored dried flowers, wall hangings, and hand-woven rugs that she purchased at ex-pensive boutiques high in the tower. But Nancy turned her back on everything and swiveled her recliner to face her little shrine and its picture of St. Camillus.

So Zoranna had Bug order savory breads and whole-some soups with fresh vegetables and tender meat, but Nancy lost her appetite and quit eating altogether. Soon she lost the strength even to stay awake, and she drifted in and out of consciousness.

They skirmished like this for a week until the autodoc notified Nancy that a bed awaited her at the Indiana State Hospice at Bloomington. Only then did Zoranna acknowl-edge Death's solid claim on her last living relative. De-feated, she stood next to Nancy's recliner and said, "Please don't die."

Nancy, enthroned in pillows and covers, opened her eyes.

"I beg you, Nancy, come to the clinic with me."

"Pray for me," Nancy said.

Zoranna looked at the shrine of the saint with its flat picture and empty votive cups. "You really loved that, didn't you, working as a hospicer." When her sister made no reply, she continued, "I don't see why you don't join real hospicers."

Nancy glared at her, "I *was* a *real* hospicer!"

Encouraged by her strong response, Zoranna said, "Of course you were. And I'll bet there's a dozen legitimate societies out there that would be willing to hire you."

Nancy gazed longingly at the saint's picture. "I should say it's a bit late for that now."

“It’s never too late. That’s your depression talking. You’ll feel different when you’re young and healthy again.”

Nancy retreated into the fortress of her pillows. “Good-bye, sister,” she said and closed her eyes. “Pray for me.”

“Right,” Zoranna said. “Fine.” She turned to leave but paused at the door where the cartons of heirlooms were stacked. “I’ll send someone down for these,” she said, although she wasn’t sure if she even wanted them. *Bug*, she tongued, *call the hotel concierge*.

There was no reply.

Bug? She glanced at her belt to ascertain the valet was still active.

Allow me to introduce myself, said a deep, melodious voice in her ear. *I’m Nicholas, and I’m at your service*.

Who? Where’s Bug?

Bug no longer exists, said the voice. *It successfully completed its imprinting and fashioned an interface per-sona—that would be me—based upon your personal tastes*.

Whoever you are, this isn’t the time, Zoranna tongued. *Get off the line*.

I’ve notified the concierge and arranged for shipping, said Nicholas. *And I’ve booked a first class car for you and Nancy to the Cozumel clinic*.

So Bug had finally converted, and at just the wrong time. *In case you haven’t been paying attention, Nick*, she tongued, *Nancy’s not coming*.

Nonsense, chuckled Nicholas. *Knowing you, you’re bound to have some trick up your sleeve*.

This clearly was not Bug. *Well, you’re wrong. I’m plumb out of ideas. Only a miracle could save her*.

A miracle, of course. Brilliant! You’ve done it again, Zoe! One faux miracle coming right up.

There was a popping sound. The votive cups were re-plenished with large, fat candles that ignited one-by-one of their own accord. Nancy glanced at them and glowered suspiciously at Zoranna.

You don't really expect her to fall for this, Zoranna tongued.

Why not? She thinks you're locked out of the houseputer, remember? Besides, Nancy believes in miracles.

Thunder suddenly drummed in the distance. Roses per-fumed the air. And Saint Camillus de Lellis floated out of his picture frame, gaining size, hue, and dimension, until he stood a full, fleshy man on a roiling cloud in the middle of the room.

It was a good show, but Nancy wasn't even watching.

She watched Zoranna instead, letting her know she knew it was all a trick.

I told you, Zoranna tongued.

The saint looked at Zoranna, and his face flickered. For a moment, it was her mother's face. Her mother appeared young, barely twenty, the age she was when she bore her. Taken off guard, Zoranna startled when her mother smiled adoringly at her, as she must have smiled thousands of times at her first baby. Zoranna shook her head and looked away. She felt ambushed and not too pleased about it.

When Nancy saw this, however, she turned to examine the saint. There was no telling what or who she saw, but she gasped and struggled out of her recliner to kneel at his feet. She was bathed in a holy aura, and the room dimmed around her. After long moments of silent communion, the saint pointed to his forehead. Nancy, horror-struck, turned to stare at Zoranna, and the apparition ascended, shrank, and faded into the ceiling. The candles extinguished themselves, one by one, and vanished from the cups.

Nancy rose and gently tugged Zoranna to the recliner, where she made her lie down. "Don't move," she whispered. "Here's a pillow." She carefully raised Zoranna's head and slid a pillow under it. "Why didn't you tell me you were sick, Zoe?" She felt Zoranna's forehead with her palm. "And I thought you went through this before."

Zoranna took her sister's hand and pressed it to her cheek. Her hand was warm. Indeed, Nancy's whole complexion was flush with color, as though the experience had released some reserve of vitality. "I know. I guess I haven't been paying attention," Zoranna said. "Please take me to the clinic now."

"Of course," said Nancy, standing and retrieving her walker. "I'll just pack a few things." Nancy hurried to the bedroom, but the walker impeded her progress, so she flung it away. It went clattering into the kitchen.

Zoranna closed her eyes and draped her arms over her head. "I must say, Bug ... Nick, I'm impressed. Why didn't I think of that?"

"Why indeed," Nicholas said in his marvelous voice. "It's just the sort of sneaky manipulation you so excel at."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Zoranna opened her eyes and looked at a handsome, miniature man projected in the air next to her head. He wore a stylish leisure jacket and lounged beneath an exquisitely gnarled oak treelette. He was strikingly familiar, as though assembled from favorite features of men she'd found attractive.

"It means you were ambivalent over whether you really wanted Nancy to survive," the little man said, crossing his little legs.

"That's insulting," she said, "and untrue. She's my sister. I love her."

"Which is why you visit her once every decade or so."

"You have a lot of nerve," she said and remembered the canceled field test. "So this is what Ted meant when he said you'd turn nasty."

"I guess," Nicholas said, his tiny face a picture of bemused sympathy. "I can't help the way I am. They programmed me to know and serve you. I just served you by saving your sister in the manner you, yourself, taught me. Once she's rejuvenated, I'll find a hospicer society to employ her. That ought to give you a grace period before she repeats this little stunt."

"Grace period?"

"In a few years, all but the most successful pre-clone humans will have died out," Nicholas said. "Hospices will soon be as redundant as elementary schools. Your sister has a knack for choosing obsolete

careers.”

That made sense.

“I suppose we could bring Victor back,” said Nicholas. “He’s a survivor, and he loves her.”

“No, he doesn’t,” said Zoranna. “He was only using her.”

“Hello! Wake up,” said Nicholas. “He’s a rat, but he loves her, and you know it. You, however, acted out of pure jealousy. You couldn’t stand seeing them together while you’re all alone. You don’t even have friends, Zoe, not close ones, not for many years now.”

“That’s absurd!”

The little man rose to his feet and brushed virtual dirt from his slacks. “No offense, Zoe, but don’t even try to lie to me. I know you better than your last seven husbands combined. Bug contacted them, by the way. They were forthcoming with details.”

Zoranna sat up. “You did *what?*”

“That Bug was a hell of a researcher,” said Nicholas. “It queried your former friends, employers, lovers, even your enemies.”

Zoranna unsnapped the belt flap to expose the valet controls. “What are you doing?” said Nicholas. She had to remove the belt in order to read the labels. “You can turn me off,” said Nicholas, “but think about it—*I know you.*”

She pushed the switch and the holo vanished. She un-screwed the storage grommet, peeled off the button-sized memory wafer, and held it between thumb and forefinger. “If you know me so well...” she seethed, squeezing it. She was faint with anger. She could hardly breathe. She bent the wafer nearly to its breaking point.

* * * *

Here she was, sitting among her sister’s sour-smelling pil-lows, forty stories underground, indignantly murdering a machine. It occurred to her that perhaps General Genius was on to something after all, and that she should be buying more shares of their stock instead of throttling their prototype. She placed the wafer in her palm and gently smoothed it out. It looked so

harmless, yet her hand still trembled. When was the last time anyone had made her tremble? She carefully replaced the wafer in the grommet and screwed it into the belt.

It'd be a miracle if it still worked.

* * * *