

# Steelcollar Worker

by Vonda N. McIntyre

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The enormous fuzzy balloon bounced from Jannine's fingertips, rose in an eerie, slow curve, and touched its destination. The viddydub forces took over, sucking the squashed ball into place with a loud, satisfied slurp.

"Work always reminds me of that Charlie Chan movie," Jannine said.

Neko, farther along on the substrate, pitched an identical elemental balloon into the helical structure. She had an elegant, overhand throw; she had played ball before she left school, but she was too small to get a scholarship.

"What Charlie Chan movie?" she asked. "Not that I go out of my way to see Charlie Chan movies."

"The one where he's dancing with the globe?" Jannine checked the blueprint hovering nearby, freed an element from the substrate, and moved it into place.

"Do you maybe mean Charlie Chaplin?" Neko said. "The Great Dictator?"

"Chaplin, right." Jannine picked up a third element, tossed it, caught it again, danced on one toe.

Neko tossed an element through the helix. A perfect curve ball, it arced, touched, settled, like a basketball into quicksand. Its fuzzy outlines blurred as it melted into the main structure, still a discrete entity, but pouring its outer layers into the common pool.

"I don't think you'd go too far as a dictator," Neko said.

"I don't want to be the dictator. I want to be the guy who pretends to be the dictator."

She leaped again, twisting as she left the ground. But the system wouldn't let her spin. It caught her and stopped her with hard invisible fingers. She found herself on the ground, with no sensation of falling between leap and sprawl.

"Are you all right? I wish you wouldn't *do* that. Jeez, it makes me nauseous just to watch you."

Jannine picked herself up. Smiling, she glanced toward Neko, but Neko's blurry face showed no expression.

"I'm OK," Jannine said to reassure her coworker. Neko couldn't see her expression any more than Jannine could see Neko's. "Someday the system will handle a spin. How'll I know if I don't try?"

Neko picked up one more of the furry elemental balls and dropped it into place. The elementals scattered at her feet, bumping and quivering, sticking briefly to the substrate or bouncing off. Once in a while, two melded into dumbbell shapes, then parted again.

"The system will handle a spin when you grow a ball-joint in your wrist," Neko said, exasperated. "You *could* read the documentation when there's an upgrade."

"Oh, when all else fails, read the instructions." Jannine laughed. "I don't have time to read the instructions." She wished the company would let her take the manual home, but that was against the rules. You were only allowed to read the manual in the company library.

Jannine and Neko walked down the helix, positioning the elementals, now and again prying one out and replacing it.

A herd of elementals quivered toward Jannine, like bowling balls under a gray blanket. Several escaped and flew off into the sky.

"Warm fuzzies today," Neko said.

"Yeah." Jannine went to the system and asked for cooling. The elementals calmed, settled to the

ground, and reabsorbed their covering blanket. Once in a while, an elemental emitted a smear.

The helix extended out of sight in both directions. Jannine and Neko had been working on this section for a week. Jannine loved watching the helix evolve under her hands. The details of substrate, helix, and elementals changed so fast that a human could alter the helix better than a robot, even better than enzymes.

A flicker in Jannine's vision: the helix and the substrate and Neko vanished.

Jannine found herself in the real world. The couch held her among water-filled cushions, cradling her body.

Quitting time.

The screen of her helmet reflected her face, an image as unreal and distorted against the smoky plastic as Neko's face had been, back inside the system. The screen's color faded. The audio fuzz cut out.

The clamor and bustle of the factory surrounded her: the electronic whine of the system, the subsonic drumming of coolant pumps, the voices and shapes of her coworkers as they got out of their couches and tidied up for the day shift.

With her free left hand, Jannine opened the padded collar that secured her helmet. She raised the mechanism from her head. The noise level rose.

She shivered. The factory was always chilly. Her awareness of her body faded when she worked. She never felt cold till she came out of her workspace and back into a real life. On the substrate, the temperature hovered just above absolute zero. Down there, she always felt warm. Up here, where the laboring pumps only incidentally lowered the temperature a few degrees, she always felt cold.

She unbuckled the cuff around her right wrist and freed her hand from the magnetic control.

Wiggling her fingers, clenching her fist, shaking her arm, she slid out of the couch. All around her, her coworkers stood and stretched and groaned in the cold. She unplugged her helmet, wiped it down, and stowed it. She wished she owned one, a helmet she could impress her own settings in and paint with her own design.

Neko crossed the aisle and joined her. "Brownie points tonight," Neko said.

She moved smoothly, easily, with none of the stiffness everyone else was feeling. She moved like her nickname, Neko, cat.

"A bonus, huh?" Jannine said. "Great. We make a good team."

They'd fallen into the habit of chatting for a few minutes after work while they waited for the crush at the exit to ease.

But instead of replying, Neko stared at Jannine's control couch, at the manipulator that reduced the motions of Jannine's hand to movements in the angstrom range.

"Did you notice what it is we're making?" Neko said.

Up on her toes, Jannine shifted her weight from one foot to the other, bouncing in place, trying to get warm. The day-shift people came into the factory, moving between the hulking shapes of the couches.

"Yeah, I guess," Jannine said. "I wasn't paying attention. Just following the blueprint. Some vaccine, same as usual."

"Let's go." Neko strode away, her hands shoved in her pockets. She moved as gracefully as she did down on the substrate, where gravity could be tuned and made a variable.

Jannine hurried after her. She waved across the factory at Evan, the day-shift worker who cohabited her couch. But this morning, she didn't wait to talk.

She followed Neko through the security checkout. They were nearly the last ones out, but waiting had saved them standing in the crowd. Jannine's life gave her plenty of lines to stand in.

Jannine thought the security system was stupid, a waste of time. No one on the production floor had access to anything that they could carry away. Except the helmets. You'd have to be awfully stupid to try to walk out with a helmet, however tempting it would be to take one for your own.

Jannine shoved her I.D. into the slot. She waited. The computer checked her, passed her, and rolled her I.D. back. At the same time it emitted a slip of paper, thrusting it out like a slow insolent tongue. It beeped to draw her attention.

Ignore it, she told herself. She wanted to, but Neko had seen it. If Jannine left the note, Neko would

wonder why, or, worse, retrieve it for her and give it to her and expect Jannine to tell her what it was. Neko might even read it herself. Jannine grabbed it, glanced at it, and shoved it into her pocket.

"What's up?" Neko asked.

Jannine shrugged. "Nothing. Busybody stuff. 'Eat your vegetables.'"

"Sorry." Neko's voice turned cool. "Didn't mean to be nosy." She turned and walked out of the factory and into the new day.

*Damn!* Jannine thought. She wanted to try to explain, but couldn't think of the right words.

She hurried to catch up, blinking and squinting in the bright sunlight. When she'd arrived at work at midnight, rain had slicked the streets. Now the air and the sky were clean and clear.

"Want to get a beer? I'm buying."

For a second she was afraid Neko would turn her down, keep on walking into the morning, and never talk to her again. Neko strode on, shoulders hunched and hands shoved in her pockets.

Then she stopped and turned and waited.

"Yeah. Sure."

Finding a place that served beer at eight o'clock in the morning was no big deal near the factory. A lot of the workers, like Jannine, came off the substrate with nerves tight, muscles tense. In reality, she'd spent the last eight hours lying almost perfectly still. But she'd felt like she was in action all the time. Her work felt like motion, like physical labor. Somewhere, somehow, she had to blow off the tension. Beer helped. If she drank no more than a couple, she'd be able to pass the alert at midnight, no problem.

She slid her hand into her pocket and crumpled up the note. A couple of beers would let her stop worrying about that, too.

"Jannine!"

"Huh? What?"

Neko shook her head. "You haven't heard a word I've said." She pushed open the tavern door. Jannine followed her out of the sunlight and into the warm, loud gloom. They submerged in the dark, the talk, the music.

Neko slipped through the crowd toward the bar. Jannine, head and shoulders taller than her friend, had to press and sidle past people.

Jannine joined Neko by the wall, put her I.D. into the order slot, grabbed a couple of glasses, and drew two beers. The tavern charged her and returned her I.D. Neko retrieved it for her and traded it for one of the beers.

"Thanks!" Neko shouted above the racket. Four or five people were even trying to dance, there in the middle of the room where hardly anyone could move.

Jannine looked around for a table. Stupid even to hope for one. After work she preferred standing or walking to sitting, but Neko obviously wanted to talk. They weren't supposed to talk about work outside the factory.

Somebody jostled her, nearly spilling her beer.

"Hey," she said, "spill the cheap stuff, OK?"

"Hey yourself, watch it."

She recognized the guy: two couches over and one down. Jannine didn't know his name. Heading back to the order wall, he emptied his glass in a gulp. She felt envious. He could drink like that all morning. She'd watched him do it more than once. He always passed the alert when midnight rolled around.

"Neko!" She caught Neko's gaze and gestured. Neko nodded and followed her.

Jannine pushed her way farther inside, holding her glass high. She passed the bouncer. She knew one was there, out of sight in the small balcony above eye level. She'd come in here four or five times before noticing any of the people who kept an eye on the place. The balcony, upholstered in the same hose-down dark fabric as the walls, blended into the dimness, unobtrusive. The bouncer let the artificials take care of everything but trouble.

Jannine reached the hallway.

"Wait--" Neko said as Jannine slid her I.D. into the credit slot of a private room.

The door ate the I.D. and opened.

"What for?" Jannine crossed between the equipment and set her glass down on the small table in the corner. "Hardly spilled a drop," she said.

Neko hesitated on the threshold.

"Come on, it's paid for," Jannine said.

Neko shrugged and entered. "Yeah, OK. This is kind of extravagant, but thanks." She shut the door, cutting out the din, somebody yelling at somebody else, a fight about to start. After work, your body was geared up for action, and your brain was too tired to hold it back.

Jannine drank a long swallow of her beer, then made herself stop and sip it slowly. She was hungry. She ordered from the picture menu on the back wall.

"Want anything?"

"Sure, OK." Neko sounded distracted. She pushed a couple of pictures, barely glancing at them, then sat at the table and leaned on her elbows.

Jannine swung up on the stationary bicycle and started to pedal. It felt good to get rid of the physical energy she had been holding in all day. Sweat broke out on her forehead, under her arms.

"Did you see what we were making?" Neko said again.

"If I'd stopped to think about it, we wouldn't have done such a long stretch and we wouldn't have gotten any brownie points." Jannine tried not to sound defensive. "Besides, I was worried about the warm fuzzies."

"It wasn't natural," Neko said. She drained her glass, put it down, and raked her fingers through her shoulder-length black hair.

Jannine laughed, relieved. "I noticed *that*," she said. "I thought you meant something important. Jeez. Nothing we build is natural. If it was natural, we wouldn't need to build it."

"But we weren't using the regular base pairs. We were using analogs."

"Yeah. So?" Jannine wondered if Neko, too, had been set up to test her. "I build what they tell me. It isn't my job to design it."

Continuing to pedal the bike, she wiped sweat from her face with the clean towel hanging from the handlebars.

"It must be something dangerous," Neko said stubbornly. "Something they don't want out in the world. Yet. So they make it with synthetic nucleics. So it can't reproduce."

"It isn't dangerous to *us*," Jannine said, confused by Neko's distress. They were building a set of instructions. Neko knew that. Being scared of it made as much sense as being scared of a music tape.

"I don't mean *now*, I don't mean yet. But later on when they use it. Whatever it's coding for could be dangerous to us the same way it could be dangerous to anybody."

"I think you're being silly. They always start sterile, till they're sure about the product."

An artificial stupid pushed through the hatch in the bottom of the door, rolled inside, slid their food onto the table, and backtracked. The hatch latched with a soft *snick*.

Jannine swung off the exercise bike and wiped her face again. She took the lids off the plates and pushed Neko's dinner, or breakfast, toward her.

"Do you mind if I have another drink?"

"Go ahead." It was polite of Neko to ask, since Jannine's I.D. was in the slot. But she should've known she could have whatever she wanted.

Jannine broke open the top of the chicken pie she'd ordered. Steam puffed out, fragrant with sage. When she had a night job, she liked to eat breakfast before her shift, in the evening, and dinner after, in the morning.

"How can you work out and then eat?"

Jannine shrugged. "I don't have a problem with it. I'm going to eat and then work out, too."

Neko preferred dinner at night and breakfast in the morning. She had a couple of croissants and an omelet spotted with dark bits of sautéed garlic.

"No hot date today?" Jannine said.

Neko drank half her second beer and pushed her food around on her plate.

"I'm not really hungry," she said. "I guess I'll go on home."

"I thought you wanted to talk. That's why I got the room."

"I wanted to talk about the helix, and all you want to say about it is 'No big deal.' So, OK. So maybe we're building them a nerve toxin or some new bug."

"What do they need with a new bug? There's plenty of old bugs."

"Right. So it's no big deal. So forget it."

"Maybe we're building some new medicine."

"I *said* forget it." Neko pushed the plate away and stood up.

"If it was anything bad they'd classify it, and we'd never work on it. I don't even have a security clearance, do you?"

Neko didn't reply.

"Do you?"

"No. Of course not. I mean..." Neko looked embarrassed. "I guess I used to but I'm sure it's expired by now."

"Why did you have a security clearance?"

"If I could tell you that I wouldn't've had to have it!" Neko said. "I've got to go." She downed the last of her second beer and hurried out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

Jannine watched her through the room's transparent walls till she disappeared. She was surprised by Neko's weird reaction.

"Sorry," she said to the walls. "Didn't mean to be nosy."

She ate her dinner, more because she'd already paid for it than because she still felt hungry. For the same reason, she lifted weights for a while and pedaled on the bike till her hour ran out. She got down, retrieved her I.D. before she got charged for more time, and left the private room for the ASes to clean.

The tavern was still crowded, but quieter. She made her way through it without bumping into anyone.

Outside, the sky had clouded up. It looked like more rain. Jannine trudged toward home. At her last job, her coworkers had created a complicated system of intramural sports. There was always a team to join, or a team that needed a substitute. Any warm body would help. They welcomed a warm body who was a halfway decent player. At this job, though, her coworkers went straight to the tavern or straight home, or did something with some group that didn't include Jannine.

Maybe it's getting time to move on, she thought. But she didn't want to move on.

Morning rush was over; the streets were quiet for daytime. In the middle of the night, when she came to work, delivery trucks created a third rush hour.

The mist grew heavier. The droplets drifted downward. The rain began. It collected in her hair. Damp tendrils curled around her face.

Her apartment was nothing special: a one-bedroom, the bedroom tiny and dark and cold. It always smelled musty. Not quite mold. Not quite mildew. But almost. Jannine looked at her unmade bed. She imagined crawling between the cold, wrinkled sheets.

"Shit," she muttered, and returned to the living room. She turned on the entertainment console and flipped through a hundred channels on the TV, fifty channels per minute, leaving them all two-d. Nothing interesting. She should've rented a movie. She could call something out of the cable, but it took too long to work through the preview catalogue, even on fast forward. All those clips of pretty scenery or car chases or people making love never told her what the movies were about. Usually the clips were the best part anyway. She left the remote on scan and tossed it onto the couch. The TV flipped past one channel, another.

Jannine went to take a shower. As she went through the pockets of her sweat-damp clothing, she closed her fingers around the note.

"Shit," she said again.

She smoothed the crumpled paper, staring at it, afraid to find out what the black marks said. Maybe it was too damaged to be read.

She dug the reader out of the closet, shoved the note into it, and listened.

"This evening, please report to room fifteen twenty-six instead of your usual position. Regular hourly

wage will apply-- "

Jannine shut off the reader, pulled the note out, and flung it into the sorter.

She'd avoided this test twice already, once by pretending she never received the note and once by calling in sick. She couldn't afford another sick day. Maybe tomorrow she could pretend she'd forgotten about the instructions. Once she hooked into her helmet, maybe they wouldn't bother her. She was a good worker, always above average. Not too far above average.

Jannine wondered what she had done, why she had to take a test.

She should've started looking for a new job as soon as she got the first note. But she liked working on the substrate. It was fun. She was good at it. It paid well. And despite Neko's worries, the company mostly produced crop fortifiers and medicines.

If she got away with forgetting the message-- she didn't believe she would, but if she did-- she'd have a week or so to look for new work before her employers realized they were put out with her. Maybe then at least they'd fire her without making her take the damn test.

Leaving her clothes strewn on the floor, Jannine climbed into bed, pulled the cold covers around her, and lay shivering, waiting for sleep.

\* \* \*

At midnight, Jannine arrived at work and pretended it was an ordinary day. She checked in and played through the alert without paying any attention to it. When she passed, it congratulated her for a personal high score. Seeing how far up the ladder she'd run the testing game, she cursed under her breath. She hated to stand out. It always caused more trouble than it was worth. If she'd been less tired, less distracted, she would've paid attention and kept her results in the safe and easy and unremarkable middle ranges.

That's what I get for lying awake all night, she thought.

She reached out to cancel the game and use her second try. She'd never canceled a game before. That, too, drew the attention of the higher-ups.

"Good score."

Jannine started. "What-- ?"

An exec, in a suit, stood at her shoulder. She couldn't remember ever seeing an exec on the production level. Sometimes they watched from the balcony that looked out over the work floor, but hardly ever during the graveyard shift.

"Good score," he said again. "I knew you could go higher than you usually do. You got my note?"

He smiled, and Jannine's spirits sank.

"Yeah, well, thanks," she said, not really answering his question. "I better get to work."

"You *did* get my note?"

She saw that this time she wasn't going to get away with pretending she didn't know what he was talking about. He could probably whip out security videos that showed her taking the note, glancing at it, shoving it in her pocket. From three angles.

"I completely forgot," she said. "Is it important? My teammate's already waiting for me."

"We brought in a temp. Come along; we mustn't put this off again."

Jannine was scared. A temp was serious business, expensive.

Reluctantly, she followed the exec out of the alert room. They passed through sound effects and bright electronic lights. Jannine's coworkers played the games, proving they were fit to do their jobs for one more day.

Nearly late, Neko hurried toward her favorite alert console. She saw Jannine and the exec. She stopped, startled, looking as scared as Jannine felt. Behind the exec, out of his sight, Jannine shrugged elaborately and rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. She tried to communicate: No big deal, see you later. She wished she could make herself believe it. Her hands felt cold and her stomach was upset.

The exec's I.D. opened a door that Jannine had never been through, that she'd never seen anyone use. The exec entered the elevator.

"Come on," he said, smiling again. "Everything OK?"

"Where are we going?"

He pointed upward. That was no help. The building was twenty stories high. Jannine had never been above the production level.

She entered the elevator. The doors closed behind her. She stood there, waiting, looking at the exec. She didn't know what else to do. The upward motion made her feel even queasier. Her ears popped. The elevator stopped. The doors opened behind her.

"Here we are." The exec gestured for her to turn and precede him out.

He took her down a carpeted hall. She hardly noticed her surroundings. Photos hung on the wall. Fields and forests, she guessed, but out of focus, weird pastel colors. Some upper-class fad.

The exec opened another door.

A dozen people sat at blank computer terminals, waiting. One machine remained free.

"Right there," the exec said. "Get settled, and we can start."

Jannine didn't recognize anyone in the room.

Everyone else is new, she thought. They're applying to work on the substrate, and there's a new test to get the job. What did I do to make them think *I* should have to take it? Somebody must have noticed something. Now I'm screwed.

The job test she'd taken a few months ago was all physical. It was still hard to believe she'd found such a job, with such a test. She hadn't known how to figure out a safe middle score, so she'd come out near the top of the group. She had always been athletic. Not enough to go pro. She'd tried that, and failed.

She approached the computer terminal warily. She stared at it, disheartened. Its only interface was a keyboard.

"I don't type," she said. She spoke louder than she meant to, startling several of the others, startling herself. A nervous laugh tittered through the room. Jannine turned toward the exec. "I told them, when I applied, that I don't type!"

"That's all right," he said. "You won't need to. Just tee or eff."

She sat down. She began to shiver, distress and dismay taking over her body with a deep, clenching quiver.

The chair was hard, unyielding, uncomfortable. Jannine wished for her reclining couch, for the familiar grip, the helmet and collar and imaginary reality.

The screen blinked on. She flinched. She ground her teeth, fighting tears of rage and frustration. Her throat ached and her eyes stung.

"Any questions about the instructions?" the exec asked.

No one spoke.

"You may begin."

The screen dissolved and reformed.

I should have been looking for another job a month ago, Jannine thought angrily, desperately. I knew it, and I didn't do it. What a fool.

She stared at the keyboard. It blurred before her. She blinked furiously.

"Just tee or eff." One of those. She searched out the T, and the F. She pressed the T. On the screen, the blinking cursor moved downward, leaving a mark behind.

She pressed the T twice more, then varied the pattern, tentatively, with the F. The blinking light reached the bottom of the screen and stayed there. The patch of writing behind it jumped upward, bringing a new blank box beneath the blinking square. She pressed the keys, faster and faster, playing a two-note dirge. Her hands shook.

She touched the wrong key. Nothing happened. The system didn't warn her, didn't set her down as it would on the substrate, made no noise, made no mark. Jannine put one forefinger on the T and the other on the F, and played them back and forth. All she wanted to do was finish and go back to work. If they'd let her.

The screen froze. Jannine tried to scroll farther down. Nothing happened.

She shot a quick glance at the exec, wondering how soon he would find out she'd crashed his system. He was already looking at her. Jannine turned away, pretending she'd never raised her head, pretending their gazes had never met.

But she'd seen him stand up. She'd seen his baffled expression.

Paralyzed at the terminal, she waited for him to find her out.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes," she said.

"You finished very quickly," he said.

She glanced up sharply. Finished?

The test ought to go on and on till the time ran out, like a game, like the alert, games you couldn't win. You were supposed to rack up higher and higher scores, you were supposed to pretend it was fun, but you were judged every time against the highest score you'd ever made.

The screen had stopped because she'd reached the end of the test.

The *end*.

Amazing.

The exec looked at the screen over her shoulder, reached down, pressed a key. The screen blinked and reformed. Jannine recognized the pattern of the beginning of the test, and she thought, *Oh, god, no, not another one.*

"You're allowed to go through and check your answers," the exec said. "Plenty of time before the next section. Don't you want to do that?"

One of the other test-takers, still working through the questions, made a sharp "Shh!" sound, but never looked up.

"No," Jannine said. "I'm done. I don't want to go through it again. Can I leave now?"

"I really think you should work on this some more. It's for your own good."

"I don't want to!" Jannine shouted. "Don't you understand me?"

"Hey." The test-taker who'd shhed her sat up, glared, saw the exec, shut up, and hunched down over the test.

The others continued to work, without a glance at Jannine or at the exec.

"I understand *what* you're saying," the exec said. "I don't understand why. You do fine on the alert, so it isn't test anxiety, but your score on this is terrible."

Jannine felt spied on. He'd been watching her answers as she chose them.

Angrily, she rose. She was taller than the exec, and bigger.

"I'll tell you why," she said. "Why is because I don't want to take your stupid test." She knew he was about to tell her she'd failed, she couldn't work here anymore, she was fired. "I quit!"

She pushed past him, heading for the door. She was halfway down the hall before he recovered from the shock and came after her. She'd hoped he'd just write her off, let her go and be done with her. She hoped he'd spare her more humiliation.

"Wait!"

He was mad, now, too, and wanting to take it out on her. She could hear it in his voice.

"You're a valuable employee," he said. "We think you have a lot of potential."

He baffled her. "Can I go back to work?"

"What's wrong with you?" His voice rose. "What do you have against being promoted?"

So that was what this was all about. A management test. Not a test to keep working on the substrate.

"Who asked you?" she said, furious. "Who *asked* you to promote me?"

He stopped short, confused.

"You can take the test again."

"Why can't you just leave me alone?"

"Will you to talk to me about this?" The exec rocked back on his heels and folded his arms and looked at her. "Do you... Do you need help with something?"

Jannine hated the pity in his face, the pity that would turn to contempt.

"I quit! I said I quit and I mean I quit!" She fled into the elevator. When the doors closed, she was



shaking.

The elevator halted at the production level. The doors opened. Instead of the quiet, cold workspace, each person in a couch, no noise but the pumps and the high-pitched hum of the electric fields, Jannine walked into midmorning break. Everybody milled around, drinking coffee and eating junk food, stretching and moving.

She crossed the floor without stopping. She hoped no one would notice where she'd been, or notice she was leaving. The best she could hope for now was to get away clean.

"Jannine!"

Jannine's shoulders slumped. If she'd just disappeared, she never would've had to tell Neko what had happened. But she couldn't keep walking, not when Neko called to her.

"Where have you been? Where are you going?" Neko hurried to her side. "Are you OK? Was it the alert? You never fail the alert! How late did you stay out this morning, anyway?" She grinned. "I'm sorry I was so grumpy. Are you done with counseling? Can you come back to work?" She lowered her voice, whispering, confidential. "The temp is really good. I think he wants to work here. Permanently. He's even got his own equipment. Are you in trouble?"

Jannine wanted to explain, but she had no idea how. She wanted desperately to get out of here.

"I quit," she said.

"You-- what?" Neko stared at her, stricken, then awed. "You quit! Because of what I said? Is that why you had to go to counseling? How did they find out? Jannine... Oh, you're so brave!"

"Brave?" Jannine said, baffled.

"I ought to walk right out the door with you!"

"No," Jannine said. "No, you shouldn't, that'd be dumb." Neko thought she was leaving because of the company's products. That was OK, because Jannine couldn't explain why she'd quit. It was too complicated and too embarrassing. But she couldn't let Neko quit, too. Not if she was going to quit because of what she thought they might be building. Not if she was going to quit to be in solidarity with Jannine. That would make everything, even their friendship, a lie.

"Do you mean it?" Neko said. "That's such a relief! You won't be mad? Did they know I-- ? I can't quit, Jannine, I'm awfully sorry. I can't afford it, I need this job..."

Jannine felt betrayed. That made no sense. She didn't want Neko to quit. Hell, she didn't want to quit, herself. She would've felt awful, she would've felt guilty, if Neko had tried to leave with her, and she would've tried to talk her out of going. No: she *would* have talked her out of going, no matter what she had to tell her. No matter how much she had to tell her.

The lights blinked: end of break. Everyone had to get back to work. The temp would be in Jannine's couch.

"It doesn't matter," Jannine said. "I have to leave."

"I'll walk you to the door."

"Why?" No one was supposed to leave the floor during work hours. "You'll be late. You'll lose points."

"I don't care!"

At the checkout, the barrier gave Jannine her I.D. It refused to hand over Neko's. Neko hesitated. She could come through the barrier. But she'd have a hard time getting back to the floor: security, explanations, maybe even counseling. A lot of lost points.

"It doesn't matter," Jannine said, disappointed despite herself. "Stay here."

"Well... OK, if you're sure..."

Jannine went through the barrier. It closed again behind her.

"We'll get together," Neko said. "For a drink. Sometime. OK?"

Without turning back, Jannine raised her hand in a final wave.

The exit opened. She walked out onto the rain-wet street, into the darkness.

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