

Muchness

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Valerie Hodges looked at the shimmering wall of force between the transformer pillars in the center of the Electromagnetics Lab, and glanced up at her fellow scientists with dismay.

"Why me?" she asked. "Why don't one of you big, muscular mooses go first?"

"Conservation of mass," one of them replied almost too quickly. "You're the smallest and lightest person in the lab. Therefore if something goes wrong, we can pull you back more easily."

"I don't like it." She ran a hand through her short blonde hair, and sensed that her fingers were trembling. "I'm a power technician, not a test pilot."

"You did volunteer," Clyde Sawyer reminded her.

"Well, that was before I saw it." She stared at the insubstantial metallic field, painted on the air and quivering as if seen through heat haze. "You've been very secretive about how the transference system functions. This is the first time I've been allowed in this chamber for six months."

"By necessity," Professor Connor Fitzhugh said, smiling down from his height of six foot three. "We couldn't risk data leaks. No offense, Hodges. I know we could trust you, but we had to omit all or none. We didn't want some other university stealing a march on us. Think of it! If this works, you'll step out of the field into the receiver station four thousand miles away!"

"You're about to make history," Clyde said.

"I don't want to *be* history," Valerie said crossly.

Connor dropped the theatrical air that was his everyday manner of lecturing and became serious. He loomed paternally toward her.

"Val, we can't order you to do this. It's not as if we're asking you simply to stay overtime. We're cognizant of the danger involved. The retrieval system isn't perfect yet, but we can't wait any longer to pass a human through so we can have a sentient report on the transference process. The rats survive, the ones that come back. You've seen them. They're not even too disoriented. Yet we still do not know how the process appears to the human mind. That's vital before we attempt longer transfereces, say to the Moon, or to Mars. We need your help."

His appeal made, he withdrew to a carefully measured psychological distance to let her think. He needn't have been so considerate. Val realized she had already made up her mind to go. The adventuresome streak in her personality was what had pushed her into the sciences in the first place, and the native stubbornness had kept her going through her necessary A-levels and university education even when she'd been actively discouraged, first by her parents, then by the males in her classes and her first jobs who felt threatened by women advancing into their field. Here they were now, asking for her help—as a guinea pig, mind you—but still *asking* her as if she and they were equals. This could work to her advantage. She could demand concessions later on, if she survived. At the moment, she didn't care. The silvery haze drew her. It felt unreal, torn from some other Creation. Its other side was not merely beyond the pillars, but entirely elsewhere in the world.

"How will I know I'm in the right place?" It seemed to Val that Connor exhaled gustily. He was afraid she might back out! She looked him up and down, eyeing the weight that had accumulated on his long frame over the years. *He* wouldn't have to go, unless the notion of less mass was a load of antiquated shoemakers.

"We've postulated that there will be the greatest saturation, the greatest concentration of the field which will draw you in, and form an energy carrier around you. That will disperse on contact with the receiver station, which is synched to the frequency of this one, and deposit you at your destination. This theory seems to be upheld by eyewitness accounts at the far end, in Chicago. It certainly has been upheld in trials here in this facility. You should have awareness of the field. In fact, you may be able to help

yourself reach the terminus point."

Val nodded. "What's the field like that I'm searching for? Does it look like anything? Can I hear it? Will it broadcast any particular frequency?"

The man shook his head. "It does, but it isn't perceptible within the system. Whatever we have tapped into is beyond, or between, our normal ability to sense it. I don't know. Any of the scopes we've sent through with the rats have failed to register any readings whatsoever. The videotapes have all been blank. Whatever we're dealing with here is not something we've yet learned how to make a monitor to detect. That's why we need an eyewitness."

Clyde spoke up, fixing her with his intent, shortsighted gaze. "I've been working by feel. When we sent rats on the short hops between here and the other room, all I can tell you is on the receiving end just before they appeared it *felt* like more." The brown eyes opened up wider, and his pupils dilated. "*More.*"

"More what?" Valerie demanded. "More power?" The man shook his head. "More light? Heat?"

"More. That's all. A sense of *much* rather than *little*. Go towards it, and you'll come out the other end, no worries."

"Brilliant," Valerie said, laughing hollowly. "My life will depend on my being able to distinguish muchness."

"It's not that bad," he said. "The energy carrier will do all the work. I want to warn you that the frequency we are using is not unique. Don't let the carrier disperse. You may end up trapped somewhere other than where you want to be."

"You're going to shotgun me toward the field, and count on the right receiver to attract me, although you don't know exactly how it does it."

"That's about the size of the shoe. Will you wear it?"

Valerie studied their faces. They hoped, and they were scared, too.

"I suppose so," she said slowly. "Ever since I was a little girl listening to my mother read storybooks, I've wondered what much of a muchness was. I see I won't find out unless I go and experience it for myself. None of you seem to know what it is."

They accepted her agreement with the solemnity of graduates being conferred the degree of Doctor of Medicine by the Chancellor of the University. At once she was a goddess, offered any favor within their power lest she withdraw her blessing from them.

"D'you want a chair, Val?"

"How about a drink?"

"I'll feed your cats tonight. Do you want me to stay over with them?"

That question caught her attention as she was reaching for the proffered lab beaker full of orange soda. "How long am I going to be gone?"

Connor cleared his throat. "If this was a textbook trial, perhaps a matter of minutes. But no one has written the textbook yet."

"Real science." Clyde straightened his glasses on his short, upturned nose and leered at her. Connor ignored his subordinate's levity.

"The transference will be instantaneous, but our counterparts in Chicago are to run a full medical examination on you and complete a debriefing, which may take several hours. Should all go as planned, they'll send you back here at once. Any questions?"

She glanced at Douglas Viernes, her coworker at the power console. He nodded as if to say that he would take care of their department. Valerie shook her head.

Suddenly, instruments appeared, and the scientists poked, prodded, measured, weighed, estimated, and noted. "Aren't you going to get out calipers and measure my fingernails?" Val asked.

Startled, Fitzhugh turned, about to issue an order, then aimed his fishy gaze at her. "Young lady, that's not funny."

Valerie shrugged.

"It may be the last joke I tell."

"No graveyard humor here, please." Clyde hustled his narrow form through the crowd of technicians around her, and threw a heavy white cloth over her head.

"Wear this, and keep it cinched. The panels are made of Kevlar and treated with a coating of high-grade reflector, in case you run into anything. At the speeds you'll be traveling, all purely theoretical of course, contact with even a minute piece of matter could result in, er, damage. This should protect you; if it doesn't, nothing can."

"It's a pinafore," Valerie said, spreading her hands downward over the long, white skirts. No wonder the men were so eager to have her go instead of one of them. They'd look complete fools in what to her was a mere encumbrance. The straps settled heavily on her shoulders, and she felt the weight of armor for a short time until the garment was adjusted to spread the mass evenly over her torso. She yanked on the sleeves of her lab tunic to keep them from bunching up underneath. "A combat pinny. My gran would approve. She was a fierce old one."

Fitzhugh straightened the straps and patted her on the shoulder. "In the absence of normal sensation, you'll be subject to random neural firings during the transition. One of the reasons we have chosen you is that your psychological profile suggests you can handle sensory deprivation. You have a strong grasp of identity."

Valerie gulped, nodded, and waited. Connor smiled. "Just remember all you can, even if it doesn't make sense. Our counterparts in Chicago will debrief you, and then send you straight back to us."

"With luck," Clyde said. "Thank you, lass. Good luck."

The heavy hum felt hypnotic, drawing Valerie in as she moved closer to the shining field. She could see herself reflected perfectly in its silver surface, as in a looking glass. Compared with the others' images behind her, she was tiny, almost childlike. The heavy white skirts that hung below her knees made her seem smaller still. For a moment, she felt vulnerable. Then the sense of helplessness made her so angry with herself it propelled her forward. As the sweep second hand on the lab clock passed six P.M. precisely, Clyde nodded to her. She stepped through the looking glass.

The static electricity that enfolded her body as she passed through the barrier crushed down tight, constricting her breathing. She knew she was getting smaller and smaller and smaller...

Consciousness returned with the same drowsy feeling she had when waking up from a vivid dream. Her eyelids weighed heavy when she blinked them. She focused her eyes to make sense out of the grayness that surrounded her. It didn't coalesce into anything, but remained a deceiving, free-form mass. She covered one eye. No, altering her depth perception didn't help.

"Well, I'm sitting on *something*," Valerie said out loud.

If this was an elaborate joke played by the fellows in the lab, using ether and a sensory deprivation tank, she was determined not to let them get a laugh on her. She disentangled her hands from the folds of her "combat pinny" and felt the surface under her. Rubbery but not slick, flexible but not pliable, it was made of the same stuff as the air, but thicker. It moved by itself, too, changing in texture and topography. As she tried to get to her knees to stand, she toppled over into a shallow pit that hadn't been under her left hip the moment before. Gasping, Valerie rolled onto her belly. The gray formlessness changed into swirls of color and raised up high beneath her feet, precipitating her down a slope that ended sharply in a low protrusion like a garden wall. She fell forward, catching herself on her spread palms. Sparks flew out from beneath her hands, and she noticed a faint glow around her fingers. Her whole body was enveloped in a second skin made of light. Valerie's heart began to pound. No, the experience wasn't a joke; it was real. Connor Fitzhugh didn't have the budget to create an environment like this. She was on the other side of the door, the first human being to follow the lab rats to oblivion, or to Chicago, if she could find her way there.

She forced herself to calm down. Swiftly, before the terrain could change again, she clambered to her knees, and thence to her feet. Standing on one foot was easier for keeping her balance at first, until

she thought of keeping her heels very close together. This usually unstable position perversely permitted less chance of losing her balance than a legs-apart stance. And now that she was standing, where should she go? Connor Fitzhugh said that she would find herself instantaneously in Chicago. Since that was palpably untrue, she had to find her own way to the receiver site. She scanned the panchromatic landscape. But would she have to walk all the way to Chicago?

Muchness. She thought of Clyde's shamefaced grin as he tried to describe to her a sensation that involved none of the normal five senses. What did he say? More. Where was *more*? Which way should she go? She tried to open herself to any input, any direction, where something made her feel different from the other ways, and, closing her eyes, spun in a slow circle.

Suddenly, she knew. There it was—as if a light breeze brushed against her skin, but on the *inside*. The muchness was at a great distance off to her left. Leaping off the slowly gathering mound underneath her feet, she strode swiftly off toward the light touch with a surge of joy, knowing she was heading the right way. The landscape seemed to share her elation, forming a series of mounds like stepping stones that reached up one at a time to meet her feet. She felt a rush through her body each time she swung her leg forward, as if each step encompassed miles. Within the protective bubble of energy, her body kept changing shape. Sometimes she had dozens of legs, all wanting to go in different directions.

I'm making history, she kept telling herself. *I am about to do a new thing no one else has ever done before.*

As a technician, Valerie wondered about the source of the light. Within a singularity traveling thousands of miles per second, she shouldn't be able to see, yet the area around her was lit in some way. Everything was suffused with a neutral light. She cast no shadow, not between her fingers or under the hem of her skirts, not even underfoot. Ahead of her, now to the left, now to the rear, was a node of the matter that made up the terrain, but it felt different to her from the rest. The skin of light around her brightened in intensity, but even without that clue, Valerie knew that here was muchness. She moved toward it, excited. What should she say to the scientists in Chicago? Would she have to grow larger again? The terrain parted into a kind of trough, leading her down toward a wall, where the light inner touch called to her joyfully.

Something did not feel quite right. Valerie knew it even as she passed through the grayness.

One foot set down more forcefully than she intended upon a polished length of wood. To her right and left were dozens and dozens of bottles. She had come in through the mirror over the rear bar of a tavern of some kind, though not English. By the unmistakable noise of traffic coming in the open door, the urban styles of dress and the depressed expressions of most of the patrons sitting on stools around the room, she guessed she must be in New York City.

The humming carrier around her was still intact, but it felt as if it might dissolve at any moment. Whatever had generated the feeling of muchness had pulled her here by mistake. Perhaps this was the destination of some of the lab rats that had never come back to Oxford.

A man looked up from his glass as the bartender leaned over to pour. His eyes widened as he saw the small blonde scientist in her protective pinafore, and he blanched.

"Never mind. I've had enough," he said, pushing the glass away with haste. He threw a few bills onto the bar and hurried out the door into the midday hubbub.

Valerie took a moment to get her bearings, and plunged back into the field. It closed around her again, almost nipping at her heels.

That experience was worrying. Valerie wondered what would happen if she stepped out of the field in the wrong place and let the static dissipate. Would the resulting inequality tear her apart? The swirls obligingly showed gaping red and white and rotted brown. She felt ill, but her stomach was somewhere above her head and behind her about six yards. At such a remove, it didn't interfere greatly with her thought processes.

She remembered something else Fitzhugh had said just before she went in. In the absence of normal sensation, her brain would play out images to have something upon which to focus. In other words, she'd

see what she expected to see, or wanted to see. Could she create her own scenery, to amuse herself while trying to find the correct receiver? She homed in on the next feeling of muchness, then, drawing on childhood memories of a family holiday in the New Forest, filled the empty spaces around her with the images of a pleasant beech and oak forest, with a hard-packed dirt path underneath her feet winding its way amidst the trees toward her destination.

For the first time, distinct sounds arose around her: birdsong, the rustle of deer in the neighboring undergrowth, the creaking of old fences, the light whistle of wind, the snap of twigs and leaves. Valerie enjoyed her make-believe world, sustaining it as best she could, pummeling her memory for details of the long walks she and her father had taken. She populated her forest with shy deer, the odd fox, a wild sow and her piglets. A pair of equestrians paced her on a parallel path at her left hand, posting up and down on their tiny saddles, tightly braided steeds trotting along at a businesslike pace. They soon crossed in front of her, and departed to the right. Their hoofbeats resounded hollowly, and faded away to a distant sound like heartbeats. Valerie waded the shallow water of a ford, hearing the pum-pum, pum-pum, pum-pum long after they were out of sight.

The noise persisted, taking on a haunting quality. Valerie wondered if the horsemen were returning, but it no longer sounded precisely like hoofbeats. The forest closed overhead, forming an arch of long, thin fingers of black. Valerie started to fancy she could see red eyes aglow in the underbrush. Her heart began to beat with the rhythmic pounding. Suddenly terrified, she broke into a run. Branches opened and closed, steering her into paths that were ever narrower and darker. Her world was closing around her, driving her at its will, away from the muchness, away from sanity and safety. Twigs tore at her hair and white dress. She crossed her arms tightly and bent her head to protect her face as she ran. A lonely howl rose from the woods, and she shrieked in terror.

Her own shout made her come to her senses. Valerie skidded to a halt, and forcefully put aside the fairy-tale fear. It had crept up from her subconscious with the good memories, and she would banish it.

"This is *my* reality!" Valerie shouted. One by one, the pairs of red eyes blinked out like lights switching off. The black branches receded, melting away into the usual gray-ness. Her beautiful, green forest opened at the top like curtains drawing back, falling away, dissolving, until she stood there alone, a small, determined figure in white.

"There," she said firmly, planting satisfied fists on her hips. Connor said they'd chosen her because she was sane, didn't he? She'd cleared away all the holiday folderol, and nothing remained but the gray terrain. Pinpointing the muchness afresh, she strode forward.

No more pretty pictures, no more imaginary wolves, Valerie vowed. I am in charge. I will get my job done, and get it over with.

But something was not quite right.

"If I am in full control of this reality," she said out loud, staring at the humpbacked path before her, "then why can't I make those footprints go away, too?"

The trail led away from her. Huge, dark, triangular pads, with five, no, eight toes on each foot. Small, three-cornered depressions in the plastic ground at the front of each toe suggested long, sharp claws. What on Earth was out there? Fitzhugh certainly didn't say anything about the space in between the fields being inhabited by anything. For all the scientists knew, it was nothing more than a postulatium, a pause between disappearing into one mirror and coming out of the next. She knew now that that theory wasn't true, but certainly there had never been evidence of other *beings*, with huge feet and long claws. She measured her foot against one of the prints, and found it barely covered one of the toe-marks. The creature must be enormous! She wished she knew anything about tracking, to tell whether the beast ahead of her went on four feet, or two, and whether its walking upright was a good thing or not.

To her dismay, Valerie realized the track was going in the same direction she was headed. She saw no reason to court danger. She veered away to the left at approximately thirty degrees to the muchness and trotted forward through the polychromatic hummocks and hillocks, keeping an eye open.

To her horror, the steps came around to meet her—not the tracks, but new footprints. They formed

one after another, their pace matching her heartbeat. She skidded to a stop as the gray terrain buckled under her feet, then sent a hill hurtling upward between her and the invisible menace. The prints pattered across what would have been her path and trotted away. The landscape itself had saved her from encountering whatever it was.

As soon as the invisible beast had created enough distance between them, Valerie slipped around the convenient hummock and trotted in the opposite direction, but not before patting her rescuer gratefully.

"Thanks." Was it just her imagination, or did the hummock rear against her palm like a friendly cat?

Her equilibrium began to restore itself. Valerie cast about for the feeling of muchness. The sensation of saturation manifested itself not in her eyes or nose or ears, but somewhere between them inside her head. The receiver site was close. Another dozen paces or so, and she would be in Chicago.

As she neared her exit point, she understood exactly what Clyde meant by a sensation of "more." The glow suffusing her body intensified, crackling with an opalescent St. Elmo's fire. Valerie sustained a similar elation, her mood improving with every step. Suddenly, she slammed into an invisible obstruction. She was propelled five paces back and flat onto her rump.

Valerie sprang up, fists balled by her sides, ready to defend herself.

Before her, something began to take shape. It was only a transparent outline at first, but swiftly limned in details like a chalk picture or a piece of computer art composed of hideous green and brown scales. Not only did it have four legs, as she had at first suspected, but it walked upright, too. *Six* limbs. And wings. And thousands upon thousands of fangs, *rows* of them. It snarled fearsomely, lowering its deadly jaws within inches of Valerie's face. She cringed, spun on her heel, and began to run. One of its long arms stretched so that a claw headed her off. She revolved three quarters of a turn, saw only ugliness most of the way round, then dashed toward the only opening, which was fast closing because another claw had entered the picture from the other side.

The ground, which had been her friend before, lowered her swiftly out of the circle of the beast's arms, but the monster stuck down an eight-clawed foot, catching Valerie under her bottom just before she sank out of reach and propelling her upward. The beast caught her against its scaly chest and snorted in her face. She struggled against the steel-strong muscles, too angry to be terrified. Its breath smelled of decayed fish and sour coffee grounds. She wrinkled her nose.

"Wh—what do you want?" she gasped. It growled again, looming toward her, sniffing and snorting. It didn't seem eager to kill her, so perhaps it was intelligent.

"What do you want?" she demanded, louder, throwing her head back so all of gray creation could hear her. "I insist that this reality make it possible for you to understand me!" The atmosphere around her changed, ever so slightly. The beast grunted out some slimy polysyllables. The gray air altered again, and Valerie felt herself change. She grew a little taller, and she had to spit out excess saliva that flooded her mouth.

"You're not going to make me like you!" she sputtered.

She pictured herself as she had last seen her reflection in the lab: human, smooth-skinned, and far less juicy. The beast could dry up; she wouldn't.

They vied for dominance in a strange battle of wills, until the beast's eyes narrowed. It hissed, "Enough!"

Valerie didn't know if it spoke English or she suddenly understood Monster, but they were communicating at last.

"What do you want?"

"Completion," it growled. "Conclusion. Symmetry. You are unbalance. Fix!"

"How can I give you conclusions?" Valerie asked. "Do you want scientific theories? Logic problems?"

The beast regarded her greedily. "Energy. Must start and finish—like your life."

"If you let me finish my mission, you'll have a conclusion. A complete arc of energy."

"Not see beginning or realize end. Want experience of symmetry, here, *now*. You conclude, I drink. Otherwise, I conclude you." It moved closer, sniffing its wedge-shaped nose up one of her arms and down the other. No escape. She was going to die. Valerie surreptitiously wiped the damp mucus off her skin with a fold of her skirts. The beast raised its head suddenly and roared in her face. Valerie jumped backward, then braced herself as a thought occurred to her.

"What if I tell you a story?"

"Eh?"

"A story. An experience; um, does it matter if it's real or not?"

"If begin at the beginning, and end at the end, then stop, no difference."

"So a fictional account is all right? It will do?"

It nodded greedily.

Valerie clawed at her memory for a fairy tale, or any kind of a story she could remember from beginning to end. Her nerves were interfering with her concentration. Not surprisingly, her mind was blank. At her hesitation, the beast moved closer to her, with saliva gleaming on its fangs and dripping down out of the corners of its complicated jaws. She blurted out the first thing that came into her mind, an echo from the distant years of childhood.

"Once upon a time, there were three bears." While she recounted the adventures of the ungrateful Goldilocks ransacking the home of three nonoffensive ursines, Valerie had the growing urge to burst out into hysterical laughter. The last thing she'd have imagined on the way to work this morning was telling bedtime stories to a scaly monster.

Goldilocks was routed, and the bears had their home again. Valerie shakily stated, "The End."

The monster nodded its huge head. It seemed pleased but not at all satisfied. Its moist, rubbery lips spread back, revealing rows of sharpened molars that went almost all the way to the back of its skull. Hastily, Valerie snatched another tale from memory, Andersen's "Little Match Girl."

That didn't really have a conclusion, at any rate not a satisfying one, to her or to the monster. The beast became displeased, and threw back its head in a howl that made the flesh crawl on her body. The muchness seemed to get farther away. Valerie knew instinctively the portal would recede until it was out of her reach forever, and the beast would pick its teeth with her bones. There would be an end. The monster could feed on her conclusion. Fitzhugh and the others in the lab would never know what became of her. She didn't want to die.

She flung story after anecdote after fable at her captor. Each recitation was consumed or discarded, but none of them seemed to be what the beast wanted. Every moment she felt herself being drawn closer and closer to an inexorable doom.

" 'T—'twas brillig,' " she began, her voice weak with fear. The beast neared her, baring rows upon rows of multicolored fangs that seemed longer and more terrifying than ever. It looked like the illustration of the Jabberwock in *Alice*.

Yes, that's what it resembled: a Jabberwock. Perhaps she had given the beast its form when she perceived it.

In that case, the nonsense poem by Lewis Carroll should serve well.

" 'Did gyre and gimble in the wabe. All mimsy—' "

Valerie's mind raced ahead of her tongue. It concluded in the same fashion that it began, with the same stanza of nonsense rhyme. The symmetry pleased the mind and the ear—she'd never thought of it in that way before. Energy begins, energy builds, peaks, dies away, ends. A complete and functional circuit, described in poetry. The beast fed on physics!

The thought gave her strength. When she came to the verses that described the battle, she flung herself back. Surprised, the beast let her go. Valerie flailed one arm like the vorpal sword, slashing and stabbing at the imaginary Jabberwock, while the real one watched her with growing delight. Its tiny eyes glittered, and an endless flood of drool ran down its jowls. A tongue, a heretofore unimagined color that was a murky blend of red, gray, and brown, emerged and swabbed the corners of the beast's mouth. It

was feeding. It was enjoying the meal. Valerie darted in and out, taking both parts of the duel, both hero and foe. Her body changed back and forth between her two roles, drawing her up and out like clawed putty or compressing her into a taut mass that focused on the right hand wielding the sword. In a moment, it was over. Her Jabberwock staggered and fell, vanquished.

Exhausted, Valerie halted her war dance and took a few steps forward, dropping her imaginary weapon.

" ' 'And hast thou slain the Jabberwock? Come to my arms, my beamish boy! Oh frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!' " he chortled in his joy. ' "

Trying to reproduce the same tones she had used, she recited the last verse. She watched the monster warily, wondering if it would pounce as soon as she was done.

" '... All mimsy were the borogoves, and the mome raths outgrabe.' "

As the last word rang on the cold, gray air, the beast dislimned, fading away into insubstantiality, leaving behind only an awful smell and a half-heard phrase.

"Balance of open and close!" it hissed.

Valerie closed her eyes and breathed a silent prayer of thanksgiving. As if in answer, she felt the muchness approach. It floated toward her, enveloping her. With certainty she knew that the match was right this time. Before she could properly explore the sensation, she felt herself growing bigger. Bright lights glared in her eyes, and voices burst upon her ears like exploding skyrockets.

"Ms. Hodges! Right on time!" A rangy, red-haired man, almost the opposite number to Connor Fitzhugh, grabbed her arm and helped guide her through the portal. He had to be Dr. Ewing. She had made it to the other side of the mirror at last. The room had a high ceiling lined with a blinding array of fluorescent rods, humming in tune with the silver field behind her. A clock on the wall read fourteen seconds after twelve.

"Welcome to Chicago!"

"Boy, right on the tick. We just hung up with Professor Fitzhugh."

"How do you feel?" A handful of men and women clustered around her, patting her shoulders and shaking her hand.

"My God," exclaimed a woman wearing a white lab coat and an alarmed expression. She looked Valerie up and down. "How'd you gouge the Kevlar like that?"

Valerie looked down at her shredded pinafore and burst into laughter. "Beware the Jabberwock, my son! The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!"

"Huh?"

"Pay no attention to her," one of the men said, with a grin. "She's just been through a lot."

"More than you'd ever imagine," Valerie said, throwing up her hands helplessly. "I can't think where to begin."

"Tell us all about it," Ewing said, smiling broadly. He gestured her toward a bench. The woman in the white coat put on a stethoscope and pushed it down the back of Valerie's pinafore. "We want to know everything."

"It's quite a story," Valerie said, settling back with her white skirts around her knees. "I'd better begin at the beginning. All good stories and circuits work that way. Travelers through that portal"—she pointed at the shimmering, featureless mirror—"would do well to keep that in mind."