

SUNLIGHT OR ROCK by John Kessel

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In Mayer colony, Erno lived in the Hotel Gijon, on Calle Viernes, in a two-by-three-meter room barely high enough for him to stand up in. The room contained a gel mattress, a false window, and a thousand bugs. He assumed that anything he said or did in the hotel was being recorded for later perusal, but in fact Erno could not imagine why anyone would care what any of the residents of Calle Viernes did.

Most likely the bugs were the remnants of some jackleg enterprise that had failed. Some would-be entrepreneur had seeded self-replicating monitors throughout the colony, hoping to sell the spy service, or the idea of the spy service, or protection against the spy service. The thing had fallen through, and now unless you lived in the park and could afford scrubbers, you dealt with the bugs.

Erno sat up on the edge of the gel mat, cross-legged, trying to get himself moving. Too much wine last night. He stared out the window at an earth landscape: sunrise over forested mountains, pink and blue sky with streaks of white cloud, river in the valley catching silver fire from the sun. In the distance an eagle circled above the cliffs. Erno took a deep breath of Mayer's slightly sour air and relaxed the muscles in his back and shoulders. The eagle froze dead in mid-glide, the foliage in the trees stopped moving—then the bird jumped back and repeated its swoop: a glitch in the ancient image generator.

Erno had been watching this stuttering eagle for six months now. After ten minutes he stretched to his feet, shook the bugs from his arms and legs, applied probiotics to his groin and armpits, and drew on his stiff overalls. He drank the ounce of water left in the bulb by his bed and ate the leftover soycake from last night.

Outside his room he ran into Alois Reuther, who lived in the next room. Alois, about to scuttle through his door, raised his left arm in greeting. It looked completely normal. The last time Erno had seen him, Alois had sported a glittering metal hand with six digits and a special manipulator.

"New hand?" Erno asked.

“The newest,” said Alois. He swiveled the hand 360 degrees and extended his index finger twenty centimeters. The fact that the hand looked like flesh rather than a machine was unsettling. “Watch,” he said. Alois touched his finger to the dim light fixture in the ceiling and the light brightened immediately.

“Nice,” Erno said, completely repulsed. Alois had replaced much of his body with obsolete devices. His eyes were multifaceted lenses, his left arm was made of pink pseudo-flesh over a titanium armature, and servos in his legs clicked as he walked. The fingers of his flesh hand were stained yellow from the cigarettes that he smoked, imported from Clavius. His shabby blue suit, worn at the elbows, reeked of stale smoke, and every night Erno could hear him coughing through the thin wall that separated their rooms. Some of the other residents claimed that Alois had done hard time in Shackleton, others that he had a fortune stashed away in some secret account. Erno doubted it.

Alois shrank his finger and held his hand out for Erno to shake. Erno hesitated, then took it. The hand felt like warm flesh. Alois grinned fiercely and would not let go. “Look,” he said.

When Erno looked down at their grasped hands, he saw that Alois’s little finger bore a silver ring—the same ring that Erno wore on his own pinkie. Startled, he let go of Alois’s hand, and the ring on Alois’s finger gradually subsided into the flesh. Erno touched the ring on his own finger. It was the only thing he had from his mother. He always wore it turned around so that the turquoise stone sat toward his palm, making it look like a plain silver band—less chance for the inhabitants of Calle Viernes to notice he had anything of value.

“Perfect mimicry!” Alois said. As abruptly as he had engaged Erno, he turned and placed the new hand against his doorplate. The door flipped open and Alois hurried through it into his room.

Alois was only one of the eccentrics who lived in the hotel. On the other side of Erno lived Brian, an evolved dog who worked as a bonded messenger. One floor down the narrow stairs lived a couple of dwarfs who went by the names of Tessa and Therese, each only a meter tall. At first Erno thought their stature was a freak of nature, until the concierge told him they were an abandoned genetic mod that had been tried at Tycho, engineered at half-size to reduce the load on resources. But the mod never caught on, and Tessa and Therese were left to live in a world of giants. They earned their living selling pornographic vids that they produced somewhere in the e-swamp at the north end of the colony. Erno bought one and found it pretty hot. On disk, they had the ability to convey by expression and pose the desperate need to have a penis inserted somewhere, anywhere, into their bodies, immediately. Nothing strange about that: what was strange was to see that ability translated into money, something that he had heard about back home but never understood. Now, alone in a place where the sexual rules were all upside down, he understood it better. He was ashamed to admit how easily he had become a consumer.

The concierge was already at her desk when he hit the lobby. “Good morning, Mr. Pamson,” she said. “Your rent is due.”

“Tonight, Ana,” Erno said. “I promise.”

“I promise too. I promise, if your door won’t open for you tonight, I will not open it for you.”

“I don’t promise unless I mean it,” Erno said.

“*Claro*. The deadly Mr. P.”

He could not pay the rent. Anadem Benet had loaned him cash for two weeks now. Perhaps it was that he was an immigrant from the Society of Cousins, and she liked quizzing him about life in what she persisted in thinking was a dictatorship of women. The first time she had seen his penis, she’d asked him why it wasn’t bigger. She had the idea that Erno had been born in a male harem, genetically engineered to give sexual pleasure. Erno’s descriptions of everyday life among the Cousins only disappointed her. “Cousins are a gender-differentiated anarcho-social democracy,” he insisted, “not a role-reversed sexual tyranny. The founders were women *and* men; first chair Nora Sobieski said—”

“So why were you exiled?”

“I—I made a mistake. Because of it, someone died.”

“Ah.” It was the only time he had ever impressed her. The deadly Mr. P. Maybe that was why she had let him ride so long. Anadem claimed she came from one of the wealthiest families on the moon, graced with pre-natal mods that gave her lightning intellect and catlike balance. It was only through an unlikely series of investment reverses, and the malice of her great aunt Amelia, Anadem allowed, that she had come to manage the Hotel Gijon. Erno found the story hard to reconcile with her lank hair and spotty skin, and as for preternatural balance, the only evidence Erno had seen of that was when she dodged out the back of the lobby whenever Felix Menas came down Calle Viernes looking for her.

Erno headed up the boulevard. The Mayer lava tube had been sealed with foamed basalt when it was pressurized seventy years earlier, and painted with white titanium dioxide. But where Erno lived the last paint upgrade had to have been thirty years before, and the alleys were draped in shadows. Calle Viernes, along with Calles Sabado and Domingo, was one of these short side streets. Hotel Gijon stood at the street’s far end; one wall of the building was constructed of the face of the lava tube. Across Calle Viernes were another flophouse and a RIOP rental shop; next to it a loan shark and a gambling arcade, and on the corner the Café Royale.

As the boulevard wound its way through the heart of the lava tube, in places it broke into a flight of broad steps or ramps to negotiate rises or falls in the natural floor that the colony designers had deliberately retained. That, and the fact that the older buildings were decorated with red, blue, and yellow ceramic tiles, gave the place its old European look. The vistas were broken by the curve of the gray stucco buildings. Above, from the bright roof with its nest of catwalks, heliotropes fed sunlight down. From the roof of the hotel you could see a considerable way down the tube through hazy, high-CO2 air until it twisted away, a ten-kilometer-long city stretched inside the hollow snakeskin that ancient lunar vulcanism had discarded several billion years ago.

The first place Erno had gone after he had been exiled from the Society of Cousins had been the scientific station at Tsander, but all they had there was a battery of radio and gamma ray telescopes and a crew of Aspergered scientists. There was no work for an undocumented eighteen-year-old biotech apprentice. But he accessed the Lunar Labor Market and managed to snag a job with Dendronex Ltd. in Mayer, in the Lunar Carpathians.

Erno had heard little about Mayer among the Cousins. Founded by the EU in 2046, the colony been taken over by free marketers in the Lawyers' Coup of 2073. Here, Erno's lack of a citizenship wasn't a problem; when the economy was humming, immigrants like him kept labor costs down. He busied himself as an assistant on a project for adding prion linkages to Human Growth Hormone. It was mindless work, and he wondered why Dendronex was even interested in this, since HGH was a glut on the market and medically questionable anyway. Three months into his job he found out why when it was revealed that Dendronex was a shell corporation for an AI pyramid; in the ensuing market panic, sixteen associated corporations failed, and Erno was on the street.

With the financial chaos, work became scarce. The rail gun was still in operation sending satellites to low earth orbit; the only other work there was in a factory producing cement building-struts, and in colony services. So every day Erno would go to the labor pool and sit in the ward room with dozens of others hoping to be hired for day work. Since Erno had no membership in the colony corporation, he was paid in e-cash, one ducat a day. The labor pool took 20 percent off the top. He kept the remainder on his bracelet, bought protein bars and, when he could afford it, an apple or two, in the shop at the end of Calle Sabado. Tony, the owner, pestered Erno about sex among the Cousins. Did Erno miss the sex with his sisters?

"I didn't have sex with my sisters," Erno told him.

"Why not? Were they ugly?"

"Cousins don't have sex with relatives."

"You can tell me the truth. I'm no bigot, like these others."

“Trust me, we don’t. I mean, there’s no actual law against it, but cultural imperatives don’t need to be codified in law. The Society of Cousins isn’t just about sex, it’s a matter of—”

“Sure, Cuz. Want to buy a lotto ticket?”

Tony earned more by selling lottery tickets than fruit or anti-senescents. The front of his shop was a big screen monitoring the latest winners. The residents of the Weekend would cycle through the remote celebrity cams: Balls Hakim, Sophonsiba Bridewell, Jun Yamada. Watch him move into his new luxury condo in the park, go shopping with her for clothes, see them have sex with famous people. Everyone talked about the winners with a mixture of envy and pride, as if they were relatives. Felix even claimed to be related to Gudrun Colt, who had won the jackpot three years ago, but if he was, why was he living in the Weekend?

From inside the shop Tony could watch the passersby stop and stare at the screen, and he would make vicious fun of them. Their bovine faces. Their fantasies. “Two kinds of tramps,” he’d say, holding up one finger. “The unfettered, free spirit. Ultimate individual, self-reliant, not owned by anyone.” He held up a second finger. “Then you’ve got the broken parasite feeding on the labors of good citizens, a beggar and prostitute, thief, and hustler. Social deviant who must be controlled, limited, quarantined. They ought to freeze them all and forget the defrost.”

Erno wondered what kind of tramp Tony considered Erno to be. He had a lot of time to think about it, because mostly he had no work. He was what they called “poor.” All the people living in the Weekend were poor, even the shop owners that the other hotel residents spoke of with envy. Tony had stacks of cash, they told him, hidden away. Erno did not know what to believe.

Mostly, being poor was a matter of finding enough to eat and to pay the rent, and then sitting around with nothing to do and not much energy to do it. Poverty was boring. Even though Erno had spent most of his adolescence feeling ignored and underutilized, he had never felt this useless. He sat in the labor pool all morning and the Café Royale all afternoon.

This morning in the street outside the labor pool, a woman in shabby clothes peddled hot biscuits from a cart, and another, no older than Erno’s little sister Celeste, sold jump blood in plastic bags. Inside, forty men and women sat on plastic chairs; some were eating biscuits they had bought outside, others played cards. The muñeco slouched in his cube off to the side with his feet up on his desk; if people tried to talk with him he just opened one lazy eye and cracked a bitter joke. His white shirt and detachable collar were pristine, as if he expected to move up soon, but his demeanor belied that expectation. Down on the Miracle Kilometer, beyond the last pressure wall, the wealthy had their homes in the park. Erno had walked down there one time, ogling the large, clean banks of buildings, the conspicuous waste of water

in the fountains, the lush hanging gardens. The muñeco would never live there. None of them would.

It reminded him a little of the apartments on the ring wall back at Fowler, but at home living in such a nice place was not a matter of having money. And here, even the rich had to breathe the same bad air, and they made people sit in a room waiting for work when they could just as easily register workers online and call them by remote.

Erno joined the crowd before the video wall watching the replay of last night's hockey game against Aristarchus. He sat next to Rudi, an old man he had worked with several times. "Any work today?"

"Not unless you're a dog." Rudi's cracked voice bore witness to too many years breathing agglutinate dust. "Fucking dogs. Who can compete with a dog?"

"Dogs are trustworthy, all right," Erno said. "But people are smarter." He glanced up at the screen. "How'd the Gunners do last night?"

Rudi snorted, which turned into a racking cough. He leaned forward and his face turned red. Erno slapped his back. When the cough at last petered out, Rudi drew a shuddering breath and continued as if nothing had happened, "They're getting paid to play that game? Professionals."

The video, subjective from the POV of Gunners' defenseman Hennessey Mbara, showed him cross-checking an Aristarchus forward into a high parabola out of the rink. The forward bounced off the restraining netting, landed on his feet, and deflected a chest high pass from the center past the Gunners' goalie. The siren wailed. People in the labor pool shook their heads, smiled grim smiles. They stuffed another stick of mood gum and complained about the coach, the strategy, the star forward who was in a scoring slump. The goalie, according to the regulars, had lost all hand-eye coordination.

Erno was still musing over Rudi's comment. "Where does that word come from—'professional'? That makes it sound like, if you claim to be something, that makes you more than someone who just does that thing."

Rudi looked at him sideways. "They're freaks, they get paid big money, and they've got no balls anymore, and they're going to be dead before they're fifty."

"Yes, but what about the word? What does a professional profess?"

"Erno, please shut up."

Erno shut up. He had never gotten used to the way men here considered every conversation to be a competition.

The voice of the muñeco broke in. “I need six certified remote Integrated Object Printer handlers for D’Agro Industries.” The men and women in the room sat straighter in their chairs, the card games stopped. “Frazielo, Minh, Renker, Wolfe, Marovic, Tajik. Have your prods ready.”

The laborers named all checked in at the window, ran their forearms through the scanner, and were let through the bubble where they would be hustled by cart out to their posting. They left a score of grumbling unemployed in their wake. Behind Erno, one of the card players threw in her hand, the cards sliding across the table and floating slowly to the floor. “I’ve had enough for today,” the woman said.

The room began to clear out—this late in the day there was little chance of any other work coming in. Erno stood, stretched his legs, touched Rudi on the shoulder and left. The old man just sat there. Erno couldn’t imagine a worse place to be at Rudi’s age than the waiting room of the Mayer labor pool. Unless it was the debtor’s freezer.

He wandered back toward the Weekend. When he got there, rather than continue on to the hotel, he slid into a seat on the patio of the Café Royale, a small patch of level concrete a couple of meters square, with yellowed fiberglass tables and tube chairs. The other buildings of Calle Viernes had grown up around it, leaving the café a little pit in the shadows. For ten centimes you could buy a tumbler of wine and sit and talk with the other unemployed. From the back came the smells of yeastcake and fried onions that made Erno’s stomach growl. An onion sandwich cost a quarter.

Erno counted his change. He had exactly seventy-two centimes. He poked the coins around the palm of his hand, his finger gliding over the raised profile of Friedman on the two quarters, Smith on the two dimes, Jesus on the two pennies. He ordered a wine and watched the sparse traffic on the boulevard: pedestrians, electric carts, messenger dogs.

A trio of loiterers at the next table were arguing. “They make big money on earth,” insisted one of them, slender and with orange hair.

“Earth! You couldn’t stand up for ten minutes on earth,” said the burly one with the shaved head.

“GenMod takes care of that,” the third said. “Denser bones, better oxygenation.”

These guys didn’t have the money to buy new slippers, let alone therapy. As Erno listened to their aimless blather, Luis Ajodhia came by and sat at his table. Luis was tall, slender, and wore tight silver pants and a loose black shirt. When he smiled, his wide mouth quirked higher at one corner than the other, and his eyes closed to a

squint. When Luis asked him for money after the first time they slept together, Erno didn't understand what he was talking about.

Today Luis leaned in toward him and whispered in Erno's ear. "I've got a business proposition."

"I'm not a bank, Luis."

"You only need forty ducats to get in on this."

Erno laughed. "I don't have forty ducats."

"Don't kid me. You came here with money, Cousins money."

"In that you are mistaken."

"You don't have forty? So how much do you have, sweet boy?" Luis tapped his long fingers on the scarred surface of the table.

The men in the emigration conversation were still going. "The Polity on earth knows how to run a society."

"Yes, they run things. That's the problem. *Laissez faire* for me."

"You go one step outside the standard here and the corporation will let you *faire* in the freezer."

"I'm not afraid of the freezer."

Besides his now sixty-two centimes, Erno had only the one ducat thirty on his bracelet, which he owed Anadem. "What's the proposition?"

Luis looked at him through those squinted eyes, as if assessing whether Erno was worth his confidence. "I know who's going to win tonight's hockey game."

"And how do you know this?"

"I spent last night at the Hotel Serentatis with the forward for the Aristocrats. He told me that the Aristocrats were going to throw the game."

"Why would he tell you that?"

"I have means of persuasion, dear boy. The odds are running 6-1 against the Gunners."

"And if the Gunners lose?"

“They won’t lose. I know this, Erno.”

“And now that you’ve told me, I know too. What do I need you for?”

“You need me because I know the bookies, and can get the best odds.”

As Erno and Luis haggled, Alois Reuther twitched by the café. He wore his blue suit and puffed nervously on a cigarette in his new left hand. The three men who had been arguing immediately got up. “Alois, old friend,” said the shaven-headed man. “We’ve been waiting for you. You need to come with us.”

Alois’s lenses rotated as they focused in on the men. He attempted to push past them. “No, I don’t.”

“*Au contraire*,” said the orange-haired man, putting his arm around Alois’s shoulder and guiding him toward the alley behind the café. “Mr. Blanc worries about you.”

“Your finances,” said the first. “And your health.”

“For instance, this hand,” said the third, taking Alois’s hand in his. “Has it been properly attached?”

With that they disappeared around the side of the building. In a minute came sounds of a beating. Erno got out of his seat. Luis did not move.

Nor did anyone else in the café. Erno circled around to the alley and saw the three men crouched over Alois’s body in the shadows. “Hey!” Erno shouted. “Stop!”

The men looked up indifferently. “Where is it?” one of them asked the other, who was kicking around the trash in the alley.

“I don’t know. It bounced over here, I thought. Why did you have to take it off?”

“Just find it.”

A cloud of security midges was accumulating over their heads. Their tiny loudspeakers all spoke in unison, making an odd AI chorus: “In all disputes, entrepreneurs must relate to one another with complete transparency. Wait here until the settlement agent arrives.”

The bald man reached into his blouse pocket and tugged out a card. He held it up to the monitors. “I have accumulated a Social Deviance Credit,” he announced.

“And your colleagues?”

The small man flashed his own card. But the orange-haired man did nothing. The bald man confronted him. “What? Don’t tell me you’re out of SDC.”

“Okay, I won’t tell you.”

“Fuck!” said the small man.

“Fuck,” said the big man. “I don’t know why I married you. Let’s go.” They straightened and pushed past Erno into the street.

“Why are you—” Erno started.

“Mind your own business,” the tall man said as he shouldered past.

Erno knelt over Alois. His shirt was torn, his leg was bent funny, and his hand had been torn off. A trickle of blood ran from his scalp, but he was breathing. Erno ran back to the café. Luis was talking to the manager. Erno returned with a wet towel and held it to the unconscious Alois’s head. In fifteen minutes a bored settlement agent came by and loaded Alois onto an electric cart.

“Is he going to be all right?” Erno asked.

“Was he all right before this?” the agent said.

“Where will you take him?”

The agent ran his reader over Alois’s good arm. “He’s insured. I’ll take him to Holy Dividends HMO.”

“What about the men who beat him?”

The agent calmly surveyed Alois’s semi-conscious body. “On the violence scale, this probably isn’t outside of one standard deviation. You want to make a statement?”

“Uh—no.”

“Good day, then.” The agent climbed onto the cart and drove away, Alois’s handless arm dangling off the side.

Luis emerged from the bystanders and pulled Erno back to the table. “So, are you done wasting time? This information is only valuable until game time.”

“They just beat him up.”

“You don’t have anyone who’d like to beat you up?”

Not yet, Erno thought. But next week he could be Alois: if he paid all he had against his rent, he wouldn’t have enough left to feed himself. He couldn’t even sit in the café unless he bought something. Maybe he could put Ana off with one ducat on account, but any way he looked at it, in another week he would be destitute.

He could sell his possessions. He had the spex he had brought with him from home. He had his good suit, some other clothes. A few tabs of IQ boosters. “I can maybe raise some money.”

“Go do it. I’ll meet you back here at 1600. I’ll have to lay off the bets at a couple of different bookies or somebody will figure out something’s up. We need to get the money down by 1800. By midnight we’ll be counting our winnings.”

Erno left the café and went back to his room. He got the boosters from his drawer and stuffed them into an inner pocket. He put on his worn slippers, then folded his good ones up inside his suit, and tucked the suit under his jacket with the spex, hoping he could get them past Anadem. He left the hotel for the pawnshop.

The front of the shop was filled with racks of plasma shirts, boots, spex, jewelry, sex implants, toys; in the back were older and odder items: paper books, mutable sculptures, ugly lamps, antique drugs. A little boy sat on the floor playing with a wheel on a wire armature. Several other people were ahead of Erno, waiting for their moment with the woman behind the counter. Erno sat on a bench until his turn came. He went up to her and laid the suit and slippers down. Beside them he put the spex and the boosters.

With her index finger she pushed the spex back toward him across the counter. “Worthless.”

She picked up the suit by its collar, shook it out. It had been one of Erno’s prized possessions back at Fowler, dark synthetic silk, cut to look just like a dress suit of the mid-twentieth century. She laid it back on the counter, ran her fingers along the lapel. She looked up at Erno. “Two ducats.”

“Two ducats! You can’t find a jacket like that anywhere in the colony.”

“That, my friend, is not an argument in its favor.”

Erno sighed. “All right.” He pulled off his bracelet. “Take this, too. I’ve got one-thirty on it in cash.” He hesitated, rotating his mother’s ring on his finger. Finally he pulled it off and set it on the counter. “How about this?”

It looked so small, sitting alone there. The man behind Erno leaned over his shoulder to see. The silver setting of the ring shone in the soft light; the turquoise was rich blue.

The proprietor held the ring up to the light. “This is earth turquoise?”

“Yes. My mother’s family came from New Mexico. That’s on earth.”

She gave him a withering look. “I know that.” She put the ring back down. “I can give you twenty ducats.”

Erno picked the ring up. “No, thanks.”

“Thirty. That’s as much as I can offer.”

“Forty,” Erno said.

After a moment the woman nodded. Reluctantly, Erno handed her the ring. “Keep it in a safe place. I’ll be back to get it later tonight.”

“I won’t be here. Come in the morning, when we open.” The woman offered him a cash card, but he insisted on currency. She counted out four fabric ten-ducat bills, each with its video of the Heroic Founding Speculators on its face, and a few singles and change; Erno stuffed the money into his pocket and fled the shop, almost tripping over the boy on the way out.

Back at the café, Luis was waiting. “Have you got the money?”

Erno looked around the café to make sure no one was watching, and put the bills on the table. He took the coins from his pocket, reserving only a quarter. It came to forty-six ducats and ninety-eight centimes. “How much have you got?” he asked Luis.

“Twenty-three ducats.”

For a moment Erno was annoyed; why was Luis coming to him for money when he couldn’t even match what Erno contributed? But then he got over it. They both were taking a chance, and it didn’t matter who took the bigger. At 6-1 he would clear 281 ducats. That would make all the difference in him getting out of the rut that was the Weekend

Luis scooped up the bills. “Right is right, then. I lay this off, and when we win I give you 225.”

“What?” Erno said. “Should be more than that.”

“Ten percent for information, and ten for risk,” Luis said.

“What risk?”

“I got to lay this off at three different bookies, my son. I try to lay it off all at one and people going to notice.”

It was after 1600. “Then we better hurry.”

“You wait here.”

“Luis, I trust you but I’m not crazy.”

Luis protested, but gave in. They first went to a shop that Erno had always thought was a virtuality center. He watched through the doorway, and ten minutes later Luis came back smiling, with a tag. “Twenty-five down on the Gunners, at 6-1.”

The next place was in the colony center, the business district with the efficient shopfronts and mentally-augmented security. Luis left him at an arcade and went into a gold-fronted building of algorithmic design that dated back thirty years or more. Erno wandered around the plaza reading the quotations inlaid into the pavement. He stood for a while on “In the state of nature, Profit is the measure of Right,” by someone named Hobbes. He was loitering on “I don’t believe in a government that protects us from ourselves—Reagan,” trying to avoid the gaze of the security midges, when Luis returned. This time he was not so cheerful. “I could only get 4-1. Bastards are too upscale to give odds.”

The third bookie was a single person, a large man in a black jumpsuit standing on the street outside the warehouses near the railgun airlocks. Erno insisted on going up with Luis. The man smiled when he saw them. “Luis, my oldest and best friend. Who’s your mark?”

“My name is Erno.”

The man’s smile grew very broad indeed. He had a video tooth. “What can I do for you?”

“Need to lay down some money on tonight’s game,” Luis said.

“It’s late. They drop the puck in twenty minutes.”

“You want our money or not?”

“I always want your money, Luis.”

“So it is. We’ve got twenty ducats we want to put on the Gunners.”

The man arched an eyebrow. “Entrepreneurs. I’ll give you 2-1.”

“Two to one?” Erno started.

“Been a lot of bets in the last hour laid on the Gunners,” Black said. “Must be some access of team spirit, I think. Odds going down like a horny Cousin.”

“Shit, team spirit. You can’t—”

“2-1, Luis, declining as we speak. Maybe you want to bet a different game? I can offer 7-1 on the Shackleton game.”

Luis pulled the bills out of his pocket. “No. We’ll take it.”

Erno was calculating what the reduced odds would cost them. He was going to say something, but Luis had already handed over the cash and received the tag.

“See you after the game,” Luis said.

Black nodded, and smiled. “I’ll be here, darling—” His tooth gleamed rose, then blue. “—if it should prove necessary.”

On their way back to the café, Erno asked Luis, “What was that about? 2-1?”

“The word must be out. Too many people must have bet the Gunners.”

“You shouldn’t have bet that last twenty.”

“Relax. We still double our money. We’re just lucky we got to the other bookies before the odds came down.”

Erno bit his tongue. The whole thing smelled. He felt in his pocket for his last quarter. No rent. No job. His mother was dead and he’d pawned her ring.

They went back to the café and ordered two wines. Erno let Luis pay. By the time they got there the first period had started: they watched on Tony’s front window across the street. The Gunners were skating with more energy than they had showed in a month. They spent as much time in the Aristocrats’ end of the rink as in their own, a distinct novelty. They scored first, on a blue line slapshot. They kept the Aristos off balance with brutal fore checking. Erno sat on the edge of his seat. At the end of the first period, during a power play, the Gunner forward leapt over the crease, soaring over the defender who was trying to check him. The center slapped a shot into the air that the forward deflected with the blade of his stick over the goalie’s right shoulder into the net. The arena exploded with cheers. Erno leapt out of his seat, flew three meters into the air; Luis caught him coming down, swung him

around and hugged him. The sudden physical contact startled Erno; he realized he had not been touched by another human being since the last time he and Anadem had had sex.

“You see!” Luis shouted, kissing him. What a strange place this was. Sex was rationed, money was rationed, sex was worth money, and money was sexy. Erno thought about what he would do with his winnings. After getting back his ring he would go to the clinic and make sure Alois was all right. And then he would, one way or another—even if he had to pay for it—what did they call it?—“get laid.”

Thirty seconds into the second period the Aristocrats scored. The second period was fought out at mid-ice, with few clear shots taken by either team. It began to worry Erno that the Aristocrats were playing as well as they were. They did not look like a team that was trying to lose. When he mentioned this, Luis replied that probably it was only a couple of players that were in the bag for the game.

“Why didn’t you say that before!”

“What did you expect? It doesn’t take a whole team to throw a game, Erno. A couple of key plays will do it.”

In the third period the Aristocrats put on a furious rush. The puck ricocheted off the dome of netting; flying passes deflected by leaping front liners ended on the blade of a forward just hitting the crease, and only inspired goalkeeping by the Gunner netminder kept his team ahead. Five minutes in, the Aristocrats executed a three-carom shot off the dome that was slapped into the corner of the net by a lurking forward. A minute later they scored on a fluke deflection off the skate of a defenseman. Aristos up, 3-2.

Falling behind seemed to inspire the Gunners, and they fought back, putting several good shots on net, that the Aristocrats’ goalie blocked. Erno could not sit down. He paced the café, hitting the concrete so hard with each step that he floated. When the clock hit ten minutes remaining he turned to Luis and said, “I can’t stand this.” He left and hurried down to the arena, hoping to get inside. But though the doors were open a uniformed chimera stood outside.

“Can I get in?” Erno asked.

“One ducat,” the chimera said. His ears were pointed, his pale face smooth as a baby’s, his ancient brown eyes impassive as agates. His uniform sported green lighted epaulets and a matching fluorescent belt. Attached to the belt was a stun baton.

“Please,” Erno said. “There are only a few minutes left.”

“You may enter if you have credit.”

Erno could hear the crowd inside, shouting, occasionally cheering. He paced back and forth, staring at his feet. If he had any credit he could just walk through the door. But his bracelet was gone. He had given everything he owned to Luis Ajodhia. How could he have been so stupid?

Suddenly a huge roar burst from the arena doors. He ran over to the guard. “What is it? What happened?”

The chimera cupped a hand over his ear. “The Gunners tied the game. A wrap around goal.”

“How much time is left?”

“Two minutes and fifty-two seconds.”

“Please. Let me in.”

“No.”

Erno walked in circles. His scalp tingled and his ears rang. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. *Please score*, he thought. *Please score*. He looked up at the roof of the lava tube. The air was hazy here, the light from the heliotropes dimmed down to twilight. High up on the catwalks a couple of kids were screwing.

Erno kicked the pavement with his frayed slipper. Cheers came from the opened door. Erno could imagine the crowd, standing now, shouting, shaking their fists at the players. The last two minutes were taking an eternity. If they went to overtime, Erno did not think he could stand it.

Then came a huge gasp, an oceanic groan, punctuated by shouts and cries of anger, even despair.

A couple of minutes later the first of the people began to exit the arena, cursing, arguing, laughing bitterly, or completely silent. As she passed him, Erno heard one woman say to her surly companion, “Well, at least they played a good game.”

Luis was not there when Erno got back to the cafe. Erno snuck back into his room and threw himself onto the gel mat. He lay on his back with his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling. Three bugs were fixed motionless up there, microcams trained on him. No one, he reminded himself, cared enough to be watching. The ceiling was made of regolith adobe, so old that it probably had been constructed by people instead of RIOPs. Those swirls and grooves, laden with dirt, had been brushed into the surface by some long dead hand. How many people had lain in this room and stared up at this ceiling? How many had been as broke as Erno?

How many people had shouted rage and frustration at each other in this room, how many had made love here, how many children had been conceived, how many plans made and abandoned?

Well, he had to plan now. First thing he had to plan was how to get his things out of the hotel without Anadem seeing him. If he tried to carry a bag out, she would know at once that he was jumping. Which meant that he could take only what he could wear.

There wasn't much left anyway. He stripped and put on his two remaining shirts, and his jacket, and shorts beneath his trousers. He began sweating, and he felt like a fool, but in the mirror he didn't look too absurd. He stuffed his notebook into one pocket, his spex into another. He still had his quarter, his last money in the world.

Outside his room the light that Alois had made miraculously brighter by his touch that morning had burned out. One floor down he heard laughter coming from Tessa and Therese's room. When he hit the lobby he found Anadem sprawled on the chaise in her office.

"Your rent!" she called.

"Back in five minutes!" he said, saluting her as he walked out. He hurried down to the café hoping to find Luis. Night was falling: the heliotropes were masked. Music blared from the back—staccato drums and pipes, a song he remembered from home, the popstar Cloudsdaughter's "Sunlight or Rock." The café was crowded, talk was loud. But when he asked around, Tony said Luis had not been there since the afternoon.

Suddenly the weight of the day, and of the last six months, came down on Erno so heavily that his knees buckled and he sat down on the pavement. He put his head in his hands. Through the buzz of conversations came Cloudsdaughter's sweet, mocking voice:

But you were sadly mistaken

And the truth came as a shock

About which one was stronger

Sunlight or rock.

He looked down the alley where Alois had been beaten. Anadem would not have him beaten, he reckoned. He'd just starve, be arrested, put into the freezers until some enterprise paid his way out as an indentured worker. Erno blinked his eyes quickly to keep back the tears.

Something moved in the shadows. In the alley, a dog was nosing around. Erno lifted his head, got to his feet, and went back to the dog. It was his neighbor Brian. “What are you doing here?” he asked it.

The dog raised its narrow white face. “Good evening, sir,” it growled. “I smell something.”

Something moved, scuttling beneath discarded papers. There were few small animals in this colony, not even birds—not in this misbegotten place, where they didn’t even have a real ecology, just people. Brian tensed, ears laid back. “Stay!” Erno said, grabbing the collar of the dog’s shirt. He reached forward, pushed aside the paper, and there, clenched into a fist, found Alois’s artificial hand.

“Can I have it?” the dog whined piteously.

“No.” Erno reached into his pocket, pulled out his last quarter, and slipped it into Brian’s breast pocket. “Good dog. Buy yourself a biscuit.”

The dog looked uncertain, then raised its ears and walked away, nails clicking on the pavement.

Erno poked the hand with his finger. As soon as he touched it, it twitched away. In the dim light Erno could make out that the wrist was sticky with some fluid that might have been blood but was probably something more complex. This was not some cheap servo. It had independent power and rudimentary intelligence.

Erno cornered the hand, picked it up and shoved it inside his shirt. It stopped moving, but it made a bulge that he hid by holding his arm against his side. It was warm. He could feel the fluid against his skin.

From Calle Viernes he went down to the Port Authority. The station was not busy at this hour, except for passengers waiting for the night train and aphasics preparing to bed down in dark corners. On the board were listed the bi-weekly cable car to Rima Sitsalis, another to Le Vernier, and the daily maglev to the southern colonies—Apollo 12, Hestodus, Tycho, Clavius, all the way down to Shackleton. A ticket to Shackleton cost sixty ducats. He didn’t even have his quarter.

But he did have Alois’s hand. A hand in which Alois had invested a great deal, maybe more than was immediately evident. The portal would read any standard credit chip.

Erno walked over to the entrance to the maglev platform. He stood up straight, tried to act like he knew exactly where he was going, and had not the slightest worry in the world. A businessman passed through the portal ahead of him. Erno fell behind. He held his forearm against his side, pressing the hand inside his

shirt against his belly. As they approached the portal, the fingers of the hand began to move. Erno did not flinch.

He passed through the portal. The hand, under his shirt, froze. He strode down the tube, and felt the air pressure change as he moved through the lock to the train waiting in the airless tunnel. He stepped into the maglev. The telltale at the door flashed green, and Erno was through.

He moved down the aisle of the car, checking out the compartments as he passed. Most of them were occupied by people who looked no more prosperous than Erno. He slid open the door of an empty compartment and took a seat by the window. Against his belly he felt the warmth of the artificial hand. Alois had stashed at least sixty ducats in there—how much more besides? He wondered what Alois was doing at that moment. He had probably been mustered out of the clinic as soon as they'd patched him up. Back at Hotel Gijon, could he even open the door to his room?

Ten minutes later, the doors closed, the umbilicus pulled away, and the train began to move. They passed out of the dark tunnel into the bright lunar day, and, as the maglev swooped up into the Carpathians, the earth, in its first quarter, swung into sight high above them. Erno still was not used to it; on the cable trip from Tsander he had been fascinated to see the planet rise above the horizon as they came from the farside to the near. That first sight of it in reality, only months ago, had seemed pregnant with meaning. He was moving into a new world. And it hung there still, turquoise and silver, shining with organic life, as it had hung for several billion years. It was strange to imagine a world with air and water on the outside, where you could walk out in shirtsleeves, even naked, where the sun shining down on you was not an enemy but a pleasure. But whose gravity would press a lunar-bred boy like Erno to the ground and leave him gasping.

He leaned his head against the train's window, the light of the old earth throwing shadows on his face, and fell asleep.

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