

## Exit Strategy

By K. D. Wentworth

K. D. Wentworth says her current projects include two novels written in collaboration with Eric Flint, *The Torus War* and a sequel to *The Course of Empire*. Her latest story is an unusual look at how difficult the teen years can be.

\* \* \* \*

On Thursday, when the March wind was biting-chill, Charlise put on her best black lace leggings and her new hoodie, then popped down to the Second Life Temple to donate her body.

Dead leaves skittered along the Camden sidewalk and she kicked them out of her way. Her mood was positively foul. That afternoon, she'd gotten back her Sociology paper, "The Division of Labor: How Women Always Like Get the Shaft." At the top of the front page, Mr. Shapiro, her Fifth Hour Soc teacher, had written "Dreary, Polemic, and Uninspired: C-." She'd poured the best thirty minutes of her life into that paper. It was clear now that living was not for her.

A Church of Second Life priest waited in the temple doorway as she trudged past the cut-back rose bushes, dried-out plants, and bare earth of the dormant memory gardens. Above the massive wooden doors, one leaves, one stays had been etched into the gray stone in letters two inches deep.

"So, daughter," the middle-aged man said when she was close enough, "why have you come to us today?" He had massive football-player shoulders and was dressed in the Order's traditional navy blue trousers and shirt. His eyes conveyed the soulful gaze of a basset hound.

"I'm, like, tired of living," she said, unwrapping a piece of Tart Tangerine gum, "so, as your brochure says, I thought I'd give someone more optimistic a chance."

"Admirable," the man said. He folded his hands, which was harder than it should have been because he had huge scarred knuckles that looked like he'd gone more than a few rounds in the fight ring in his day. "Is there a reason for offering yourself at this particular moment?"

Charlise studied the red and blue thread friendship bracelets around her wrist. Amy and Madison had given them to her when they'd all still been speaking to one another. She twisted the thread until it broke and threw the bracelets on the ground.

“Everything sucks,” she said, “trying to make friends and then keep them, when they’re all two-faced bitches, trying to learn the most boring stuff in the universe and then cough it back up for tests just so that one day I can work for practically nothing at some boring job. I’m tired of curfews, rules, fads, boyfriends, parents, especially my dad. Can you believe he even wants to tell me how to wear my freaking hair! You name it—I’ve had it!”

“I see.” His voice was a murmur so that she had to move closer. “Why don’t you come in and we’ll discuss the matter?”

“What’s to discuss?” Charlsie crossed her arms and chewed her gum as though it were her former best friend, Krissi. “And don’t give me that counseling crap! I don’t need anyone to tell me how to make up my own mind.”

“What about parental permission?” the priest said.

His voice tried to hit a soothing note, but it had a gravelly quality. Must have taken a few punches to the throat during those fights. She jammed her hands in her hoodie pockets.

“We can’t—proceed without that,” the priest said patiently.

If her parents got wind of this, they would freak big-time. They had even forbidden her to get her eyebrow pierced. Her dad in particular never let her try anything cool. She practically had to get his permission to change the shade of her nail polish. “I just turned eighteen,” she said, which was almost true—sorta. She did have a fake ID for clubbing that would back her up.

“Then you are indeed a candidate,” he said, standing aside so that she could enter the temple. “My name is Sister Angela.”

Her jaw stopped in midchew. “Sister—?”

“I once was fortunate enough to avail myself of the church’s services,” Sister Angela said. A smile lit up the rough-hewn face. The expression was very nearly sweet in a gruesome sort of way, kind of like being smiled upon by a slavering pit bull. “They gave me a second chance at life.”

\* \* \* \*

“You’re not going to give *my* body to some freaking guy, are you?” Charlsie demanded as the two of them walked back through the echoing nave to Sister

Angela's office. Votive candles in tiny green glass holders were burning in the dim side alcoves and the flames bent double as they passed. The air positively reeked of bayberry. The whole effect was so retro, she couldn't believe it. "That would be just too ... gross."

"Why should it concern you?" Sister Angela said, "since you wish to abandon it yourself?"

"How come you didn't get a female body?" Charlsie said. "How come they stuck you with—" She gestured at the ungainly male form. "—this?"

"I had cystic fibrosis," Sister Angela said. "I was dying from the moment I was born, so I was grateful for continuing life in whatever form it came."

"You should have gotten a refund, maybe even sued." Charlsie flounced through a door in the back of the church as directed, and then another to the left, finding herself in Sister Angela's poorly lit office. Books, mostly steamy historical romances, were piled on shelves, soap opera gossip magazines heaped in the corner next to a computer desk. The room smelled faintly of Chanel #5 and distant machinery vibrated beneath the floor.

"We don't charge for our services," the sister said. "We operate on donations. No one knows what form they will be given until they go through the process and then wake up on that blessed morning to take up their second life." She smiled broadly, revealing chipped teeth. "We feel that it's best to let God choose for us."

"Well, God sure enough must have been pissed at you," Charlsie said. Sister Angela's nose looked as though it had been broken any number of times. "Were you like a big-time sinner?"

"I think you're getting off the point," Sister Angela said, taking the chair behind a well-worn desk. Her hands were again folded, but her battered male face looked like it would like to take a swing at Charlsie. Old habits probably died hard. "You're certain you want to enroll in the Donation Guild?"

"Guild?" Charlsie said. "I don't want to join anything. I just want to give my body away so I can be like—at peace."

"In order to do that, you have to become an acolyte in the Guild," Sister Angela said. She opened a drawer and pulled out a handful of paper forms. "Just fill these out, then we'll go on from there."

\* \* \* \*

Jeeze, Charlsie told herself as she struggled with the Application Essay, this was worse than applying for college. All she wanted to do was off herself in a way that would make those conceited skanks back at school really jealous. None of them would ever have the nerve to do what she was doing. That was for sure.

“Reason(s) for wishing to disincorporate?” the form asked.

Charlsie had never seen that word before, but obviously it meant “die.” Why couldn’t they just come out and say so? Were they trying to confuse her?

“Everything sucks,” she wrote laboriously, then added, “And Everyone.” Including the Church of Second Life, she thought rebelliously, but didn’t write that.

“Hobbies?” the form asked.

She threw the pencil down and crossed her arms. Sister Angela looked up from her computer monitor. “Having trouble?”

“What does it matter if I have hobbies?” Charlsie said. “I’m trying to die here, not post a bio on MySpace or get a date for Prom.”

“We find that the body retains muscle memory, after the original personality is wiped,” Sister Angela said. “So it helps to have a file for the new owner. That way he or she knows if they might become a watercolor painter or a seamstress, a dancer or an excellent horsewoman.”

“Oh.” Chagrined, Charlsie picked up the pencil again and went back to the form. After “Hobbies?” she wrote “tattoo artist,” “bungee jumping,” and “sky diving.” She’d never done anything of the sort, but she didn’t see how it would hurt her body to give those a try after she was gone. It might as well go out and live a little. She certainly never had. Thanks, Dad, for seeing to that.

“Allergies?” the form asked.

“None,” she wrote, though she was allergic to shellfish and strawberries. Let the next occupant find out the same way she had, by trial and error. No reason why they should have it any easier than a born person.

“Sexually active?”

“Very,” she wrote, though she hadn’t actually gotten around to the deed

yet. She'd always meant to, though. Intentions counted. Everyone knew that.

Charlsie worked her way through the rest of the questions much faster thereafter. It was a lot easier, she found, if you just made the answers up, and by the end, she was pretty much enjoying herself, which hadn't happened for a while.

Sister Angela collected the papers and squared up the edges by tapping them on her desk. "Fine." The weathered male face beamed at her. "I'll have these entered into the computer and we'll see you tomorrow, same time."

"But—" Charlsie said. Her face heated. "I was counting on biting the big one today."

"Oh, we never proceed that quickly," Sister Angela said, taking Charlsie by the elbow. "The gift of a body to a dying person is sacred. We don't want anyone doing it on impulse."

"This is so totally screwed up!" Charlsie muttered to herself as she drove her clunker Tempo across town to another dreary pot roast dinner with the 'rents. A girl couldn't even off herself when she wanted. Just as she'd thought, everything in this so-called Vale of Tears really did suck.

\* \* \* \*

After dinner, the pot roast lay in her stomach like lead. She didn't do her homework. She didn't pick up her discarded clothes, put away her clean laundry, or make any attempt to straighten her room. No point in bothering with any of that stuff if you were planning on exiting forever tomorrow. Instead she watched old movies on the television in her bedroom until what her mother called "the wee hours." One, a black and white flick, *The Big Store*, starring three maniacs called The Marx Brothers, made her laugh until tears rolled down her face.

The next morning she slept in and let school go on without her. That ho' Krissi could lord about the halls all she wanted with her posse, which admittedly contained every one of Charlsie's former friends. She just snuggled under the covers until midmorning when hunger and Nature's call finally drove her out.

Mom and Dad always took her younger brothers to school on their way to work and left the house before she did, so they wouldn't have any idea that she'd stayed home. She stumbled into the gleaming stainless steel kitchen and reached for the Slim-Fast bars in the pantry, but then realized, if she were going to vacate this body, there was no reason to obsess about her weight anymore. So, instead,

she breakfasted on Vanilla Fudge Ripple ice cream, two bowlsful in fact, then showered for twenty solid minutes with no one about to yell at her about emptying the hot water tank.

When it was time to go back to the temple, she dressed carefully in her favorite denim miniskort and a lacy teal tunic (the one her dad totally loathed), cut low to reveal assets which she really didn't have. That would soon be someone else's problem, she thought airily. She was moving to a higher plane where great boobs were no doubt issued as standard equipment.

At the temple, Sister Angela's ugly mug was waiting with someone else, a fragile old woman with flyaway white hair, haphazardly pinned up as though she employed a hyperactive two-year-old as a beautician. The Order's navy blue pants and shirt hung on her like grocery bags.

"Charlsie, it's good to see you again!" Sister Angela said.

"Jeez, you don't have to sound so surprised," Charlsie said, shivering in the spring air. She really should have worn her freaking jacket with the little mirror spangles, even if it didn't go with this outfit. "I said I would be here."

"Seventy-five to ninety percent of all initial applicants never return," the old woman said in a quavery voice. "Most people are impulse applications who change their minds once they cool down and think the matter through."

"Charlsie, this is Father Andrew," Sister Angela said. "Our head priest."

\* \* \* \*

"No way!" Charlsie said, her head reeling.

The two Second Lifers had persuaded her to come inside the temple to get out of the sharp wind. "It often affects people like that, my dear," the old man/woman said, patting her cheek with a withered hand. "It's a perfectly normal reaction—nothing to be ashamed of."

"Is this a perv hangout?" Charlsie sank onto a polished wooden pew and breathed in the scent of lemon oil. "You're going to hand my body over to some old fart?"

"We prefer the term 'seasoned soul,'" Sister Angela said. "And, remember, God does the selecting. Otherwise, we as imperfect humans might be inclined to play favorites. It's a bit like buying a lottery ticket. Some are big winners, others

are just good for another ticket so you can play again, and some frankly are not much of a prize at all.”

“‘Tis a glorious thing to lay down your life for another,” Father Andrew said in his piping old-lady voice, “just as Christ laid down his to redeem us all.”

“Yeah, well Christ didn’t have to think about some old geezer parading around in his body after he bit the big one, wearing his favorite hoodie or stuffing his bra.”

“Charlsie, I’m sensing serious reticence here,” Sister Angela said. “This choice may not be for you.”

“You think?” Charlsie bolted onto her feet and gazed around the peaceful sanctuary. Somewhere in the background, machinery hummed. She could feel it vibrating up through the stone flag floor. “I don’t know. I was really planning on like—you know—going.”

Father Andrew’s eyes were as beady as a bird’s. “Why don’t you participate in the Donation Guild for a few days, maybe even a few weeks, before you make up your mind? It could bring you a measure of peace, either way.”

And, because she couldn’t think of any alternatives, she found herself saying yes.

\* \* \* \*

Charlsie went back to school the next day, having already intercepted one call to her mother from the Principal’s office, wanting to know if she was sick. She ignored Krissi and Amy and Madison who giggled and whispered and rolled their eyes as she walked by. They didn’t matter. No one did. She had something else in her life now, something secret and important. None of those air-brains could say that.

And since she wasn’t burdened with friends or a social life anymore, she found herself with a lot of time on her hands. When she wasn’t working at the temple, she wound up doing some of her homework out of sheer unadulterated boredom. It was strange, but the more of it she did, the easier it got. Sometimes, now, she actually understood what the teacher was saying in class, even in Trig. It was a startling, rather heady feeling.

She did meet new people at the Second Life Temple, Phillip who was forty-one and miserable, having just lost his IT job—again, and Marsha, in her

fifties, who was going through her third divorce and had this teensy problem with alcohol. There were Sherry and Alex and Roger and Stacey and Reg, each with his or her problems, just some of the many miserable souls haunting the dim hallways of the temple complex. Most were eager to share their stories, but she shied away from getting close. There was no point, because, like her, they were all on their way Out.

Each day, they met at the temple, then put on the navy blue robe of an acolyte and took care of the housekeeping chores in order to free up the priests for more important work. As time went by, they began instruction on how to tend the vast network of computers in the underground complex beneath the temple itself. This was where personalities of the dying were downloaded into the servers and where donated bodies had their suicidal personalities chemically wiped.

There was some disagreement, she learned, as to whether consciousness was actually transferred or merely duplicated. That was obviously a big deal to the supplicants, though it really didn't figure into her end of the situation.

Sometimes, Charlsie would get a glimpse of one of the dying when they applied for a new body. They came in droves, many more than the temple could serve. All of them met Sister Angela and Father Andrew, so Charlsie supposed they understood the risk they were taking in this grab-bag style exchange.

The acolytes were not permitted to mingle with supplicants, though. Sister Angela said the church didn't want to influence potential donors unduly. If you wanted to lay down your body, you should do it for the right reason. Unlike some of the antiquated religions taught, the Church of Second Life didn't consider it a sin if you didn't want to live in this world anymore, but on the other hand, it was selfish to throw away a perfectly healthy body when so many desperately ill people could put it to good use.

It turned out that one of the acolytes, Phillip, was quite good at hacking computer files, having acquired a lot of experience during what he termed his "misspent youth." He'd already scanned the Second Life code and had a theory that the Church's prized random selection algorithm wasn't quite as random as it was supposed to be. The sexes got switched, he said, when matching new personalities to donated bodies rather more often than chance should indicate.

One night the acolytes all went out for pizza after their shifts and Phillip reported that he'd learned by reading supposedly secure files that Sister Angela's body had once been Bill "The Bomber" Atkins, a notorious prize fighter who'd killed three men in the ring. Father Andrew's bird-like form had been donated by



Maria Selves, a famous anthropologist who had inadvertently wiped out an entire Amazonian culture by exposing them to the flu virus. Each had compelling reasons for wanting to leave the world behind, but it was getting harder each day for Charlsie to remember why she wanted to go.

At home, her detachment led to quieter evenings and less arguing with her two younger brothers. To explain where she went after school each day, she told the 'rents, Charles and Anna, that she had a part-time job down at Burger King. That kept them off her back, and they seemed to think she was finally becoming more responsible. What a laugh.

One day, though, about three weeks after Charlsie had enlisted in the Donation Guild, she had just ducked into the locker room to don her blue robe when her dad stuck his head through the door.

"Charlsie?" He stepped inside, still wearing his suit and red-striped tie from work, looking around, dark hair mussed, obviously aghast. "I thought you were up to something, but I was hoping it was only drugs! What are you doing in this place?"

"I ... work here," she said, her heart hammering.

"These people are notorious nut cases!" he said. "Everyone knows that! Get your stuff. We're going home!"

"I can't," she said, thrusting her arm into the blue robe's sleeve. "I have to work my shift. They're counting on me."

"You don't have a shift," he said, crossing the room to take her by the arm. "Not anymore!"

"Is there a problem?" Sister Angela's sturdy form appeared in the doorway.

"No, Sister," Charlsie said, freeing her arm. "He was just leaving."

"That's no *sister*!" her dad said.

"Inside, she is." Charlsie sighed. "Just go home, Dad. We can talk about this later."

Her dad whirled upon Sister Angela, hands fisted. "She's underage! I'll sue you people six ways from Sunday!"

“Charlsie?” Sister Angela said with a note of disapproval.

“I’m eighteen—almost,” Charlsie said, her voice fading on the last word.

“I told you to get your stuff!” her dad said.

“No,” she said, surprising herself. With trembling fingers, she buttoned up her robe. “Like it’s my life and I can do what I want with it. And right now, what I want is to work my freaking shift!”

“These people will *kill* you!” he said. “They’ll flush your personality out of your brain like yesterday’s dead goldfish, then hand your body over to some stranger!”

“No, we won’t,” Sister Angela said, “not if she isn’t of age.” Her battered male face glanced at Charlsie.

Her father loosened his tie as though he was ready to go ten rounds with Sister Angela. “Well, she’s not!”

The two men regarded one another. Her father had a temper, but he’d never been very physical. Charlsie bet Sister Angela could take him. “Just because I’m not of age doesn’t mean I can’t volunteer for the Donation Guild,” she said. “I’m not breaking any rules by just working here, am I?”

“No,” Sister Angela said quietly.

“I *am* old enough to drop out of school,” Charlsie said, facing her father, “and I will, unless you let me keep my job!”

“No, you won’t!” Her father seized her arm and dragged her out the door.

She gave up trying to get free and just rode in his gray van in thin-edged silence, huddled against the passenger door. There was peace at the temple, weird as that sounded. She liked working there, sweeping and polishing, hanging out with the other volunteers, entering data into the servers. She had the lowest error rate of all the new acolytes. Father Andrew said so. That meant something. She’d never been the best at anything before.

“It’s a cult, Charlsie,” her mother said that night after her little brothers, Eric and Tom, had been sent to their rooms. “There was an exposé on *Entertainment Tonight* just last week! In spite of what they claim, they don’t save those sick people. The brain patterns are duplicated, not transferred. The original personality

still dies.”

“Besides,” her father said, sweeping his arm around the living room with its home theater sound system, Mega-High-Def TV, and the latest in computer gaming technology, “why on Earth would you want to kill yourself? You have a loving home, a generous allowance, a bright future.” He had a desperate gleam in his eye. “What could be so wrong with your life that you’d want to abandon it to some stranger?”

“We’re signing you up for counseling,” her mother said, “and you *will* go!”

\* \* \* \*

“So you want to kill yourself?” The shrink leaned forward in his chair, looking expectant. His fingers played with a cigarette lighter, flipping the top up and down, up and down. Dr. Fusselman was ferret-faced and fortyish, all edges with narrow dark eyes that followed her every move as though he were stalking her. His spacious blue-carpeted office had dumb fake trees scattered about like she was supposed to be fooled into thinking they were outdoors. He even played birdcalls on a sound system hidden in the wall somewhere.

Over by the window, fish swam in a huge tank, darting around submerged rocks over and over, looking trapped. The air reeked of carpet cleaner. She’d been coming here two days a week for three weeks, the financial equivalent of a Florida vacation for the entire family, her mother reminded her at every opportunity.

“No, I don’t want to die, not anymore.” Charlise sighed because he started every session with the same stupid question. She examined her tangerine-polished fingernails. Who was taking her shift down at the temple? Sister Angela had promised to teach her how to download a supplicant’s personality, which would have been awesome. Now, she’d never get to do it. “Will you just give it a freaking rest?”

“I can’t help you if we don’t get to the root of the problem,” the shrink said. His bushy eyebrows quirked. His voice lowered. “Let’s dig a little deeper today. I know you’re hiding something. Have you ever been—abused?”

“Eeuw!” She sat up straight in her chair.

“Something drove you to that kind of desperation,” the shrink said. “Are you having an affair with one of your teachers, or does someone come into your bedroom at night?” His eyes narrowed even further, which she hadn’t thought possible. “Is it your father?”

“You are totally gross!” She bolted to her feet, then tottered a bit on the spike heels she’d worn to cheer herself up. “I can’t do this anymore!”

“Charlsie, sit down,” he said, as though disciplining a wayward dachshund.

She fled out his office door, past his goggle-eyed secretary, who looked a bit like a fish herself. There were even more fish in a tank in the waiting room, big splotchy ones with blubbery lips. This guy had a real thing for scales and fins, she thought as she snatched her jacket from the coat tree. He should get help.

Outside, she pulled off her shoes and then ran for a block, dodging pedestrians on the sidewalk, old ladies and young mothers with strollers, startled sparrows feasting on a dropped hot dog bun, a stray cat. She finally stopped with a stitch in her side beneath an old oak. Even though it was overcast and cold, sweat poured down her temples. She blotted her face on her jacket sleeve. This was all just too lame. Maybe she couldn’t remember why she’d wanted to off herself in the first place, but new reasons were rapidly surfacing.

Her feet still hurt from wearing the tight shoes, but the sidewalk was freaking cold, so she put her heels back on. Her father would drop by the office in half an hour to pick her up, and when he got there, the shrink was bound to rat on her. There would be more trouble at home. They might even try to send her to that stupid boarding school in Pennsylvania they’d been threatening. Things had been so much more peaceful when she was just quietly arranging her death. Too bad she hadn’t succeeded.

A maroon city bus loomed at the end of the street and she realized she was close to the bus stop. On a whim, she dug in her purse for change. She had maybe an hour before her father caught up with her, just enough time to check in down at the temple and see how things were going these days.

\* \* \* \*

Someone had been working in the gardens, she noticed as she walked up. Debris had been cleared, the earth readied for new beds of flowers in a few weeks, once it warmed up a bit. She saw a figure in the distance and hurried. Was it Sister Angela?

But when she got closer, she found it was Phillip, the IT guy, dressed in the navy shirt and trousers of the Order rather than an acolyte’s robe. He was perched on a stepladder, patiently cleaning a stained glass window portraying the downloading of an ecstatic personality. “What’s up?” she said from below.

He looked down. "Sorry?" There was no sign of recognition in his gaze.

"Dude, I know I've been gone," she said, "but it hasn't been that long. Found out any more goodies about Sister Angela's past?"

"I—think you must have known my—body—before," he said, climbing back down the ladder. His movements were awkward and he fumbled at the rungs. "I haven't been—myself—very long."

His affect was entirely changed. It was like he was shorter, rounder, even younger. He regarded her with zero recognition. Phillip had donated, she realized suddenly. A chill swept over her. This was someone else entirely looking out through his hazel eyes.

"My name is Brother Shawn," he said, putting down his Windex bottle and roll of paper towels. He wiped his hands on his pants, then held one out. "My parents have moved out of state and I don't know if I want to live with them anymore, so for now I've joined the Order."

She shook his hand with a sense of numbness. Phillip was gone. The two of them would never dig through the files for confidential information again or go out for a late snack with the other acolytes. Anger surged through her. She'd known better than to make friends here, but then she'd gone ahead and done it anyway. Spaz-brain!

"I had leukemia," Brother Shawn was saying, "since I was six. None of the therapies worked and believe me, we tried them all. I had chemo, radiation, and then a bone marrow transplant. I would get better, but then it kept coming back. In the end, the doctors said I had two months, maybe less, when my parents finally let me come here."

"How old are—were—you?" she asked.

"Fourteen," he said. "This—" He waved a hand at his pudgy forty-year-old body. "—well, it's going to take some getting used to. It creeps me out seeing this old dude's face staring back from the mirror. I mean—look at me! He didn't take very good care of himself."

*One leaves, one stays*, she thought. That was the Order's creed. The impact of its meaning swept over her. Offing yourself was for-freaking-ever. Somehow, she hadn't quite processed that before.

“Just keep telling yourself ‘Each day is a gift,’” Sister Angela’s rumbly voice intoned from behind. “You’ll soon settle in. Welcome back, Charlsie.”

“I can’t stay,” Charlsie said, turning. “My dad is bound to catch up with me. I just slipped away to see how things were here.”

“Proceeding normally,” Sister Angela said. Her heavy boxer-arm draped over Brother Shawn’s new shoulder. “Phillip declared himself ready to go last week and we concurred. After processing, we presented his body and then the random selection algorithm downloaded Shawn.”

“I’ve been waiting three years,” Shawn said, “though inside the computer, you can’t tell it’s taking that long. One minute, you’re puking your guts out, afraid to share air space with anyone because your immune system’s flat-lined, and the next, you’re in a new body.” He smiled shakily and regarded his spread fingers. “The good thing is that, even though this one has some serious miles on it, nothing hurts anymore. I can go roller blading again, maybe even try snow boarding and surfing.”

“God knew when the time was right for you to take up new flesh,” Sister Angela said. “He picks better than we ever could for ourselves.”

A familiar gray van screeched up in the parking lot. Doors slammed. Voices shouted in the distance. Charlsie glanced over her shoulder. It looked like both her dad and the shrink were hot-footing it through the church parking lot. Abso-freakingly great.

“Charlsie, get away from those lunatics!” her dad yelled, waving his arms frantically.

“Guess I have to go,” she told Sister Angela. She glanced at Brother Shawn’s shy smile trying to plaster itself on Phillip’s older face with mixed results. “I was never really going to do it, though. I see that now.”

“That was pretty much understood,” Sister Angela said. “Most people your age don’t really want to lay down their body when they come to us. They’re just confused and unhappy. They need a chance to think, a kind of cooling off period.”

“I’d still like to volunteer though,” she said.

Footsteps were pounding closer.

“The work is hard,” Sister Angela said. She rasped her fingers over her five

o'clock shadow thoughtfully. "Everyone who comes to us is in pain, either physical or mental. The people with whom we work closest often choose to leave this world and it's always difficult to see them go. Phillip was very dear. In fact, he delayed his departure several days because he insisted on completing the scheduled maintenance on all our servers before he left us. I will miss him."

"I'll sue you within an inch of your sorry lives!" her father was yelling. Dr. Fusselman, the shrink, lurched along in his wake, breathing hard, evidently not in nearly as good physical condition, which wasn't saying much. Her dad had never been one for working out.

Brother Shawn glanced at the approaching men, his brows raised. "What—?"

"Don't ask, dude," Charlsie said. She rolled her eyes. "Believe me, you don't want to know."

Her father rounded the last empty flower bed. "You can't—you can't—" He wrenched at his tie, then leaned over and braced his hands on his thighs, fighting for breath.

"Need to hit the gym once in a while, Dad?" she said.

"I—told you—to stay away from this place!" he said in explosive spurts, his face red.

"I'm not doing anything wrong," she said. "I just came to see my friends."

Tottering up on spaghetti legs, Dr. Fusselman propped himself against the stone wall of the temple. His head drooped back, his eyes closed. His suit jacket hung open and she could see his heaving paunch. "These people are not your friends!" he said, looking like he might barf. She moved prudently out of range. He shook his head. "They just want to take advantage of you!"

"At least *they* don't freaking charge money while they're doing it!" she said. "You know, if I have to look at those stupid fish one more time, I *will* off myself!"

"Charlsie!" Her father seized her arm.

She jerked away. "I got over it, you know, wanting to bite the big one. It was just one bad day, weeks ago, but you keep throwing it in my face!" She glared at her dad and the shrink. "Now, you've got me thinking again that leaving might not be such a bad idea after all!"

“This is your fault!” Her father turned upon Brother Shawn.

The new Brother backed away, knocking over the Windex bottle. The roll of paper towels unwound down the sidewalk.

“Stop it! You’re scaring him!” Charlsie said. “He hasn’t done anything wrong.”

“This whole thing is a sick, sick scam!” her father said. “I’m going to see that these perverts are put out of business!”

“Hel-lo? This is a *church*,” Charlsie said. “You can’t just make religion go away because you don’t like it!”

Sister Angela cocked her head, studying his florid face. “Many lay people do not agree with what we offer, but I sense that this is something more,” she said softly. “You told us that Charlsie was underage, so you know we can’t accept her. Why does what we do here still frighten you so much?”

Dad grabbed for Charlsie’s arm again, but she backed out of reach. “Answer the question, Dad,” she said.

He stared at her, wordless.

There was something in his eyes, something terrified. She suddenly remembered how easily he’d found her in the locker room even though it was in the back of the temple. He’d gone straight to it. No one had shown him the way. “You’ve been here before,” Charlsie said.

“I—” His overheated face paled.

Dr. Fusselman turned to look at her dad. “Charles?” he said.

“It had to have been before my time, and I’ve been here eleven years,” Sister Angela said. “I don’t recognize you.”

“I do,” Father Andrew’s chirping old-lady voice said.

“You can’t have her!” her father cried, then seized Charlsie and pulled her to his chest. He was holding her too tight, and she could feel his heart beating wildly beneath her cheek.



“Charlsie wasn’t eligible,” Father Andrew said. “You, better than anyone, should know that. We take only those of sound mind and legal age who are determined to leave this world, and even for those we provide time to change their minds.”

Charlsie turned in his arms and looked up at his panicked face, trying to put the pieces together. “Dad, did you try to donate when you were my age?”

“Actually, he’s an upload,” Father Andrew said, “one of our earliest, and a great success too. Our failure rate was much higher then. We were much encouraged by his, or should I say her, case.” The old-lady face smiled gently. “We haven’t heard from you since the day you walked out of the temple, Charlene. Have you had a good life?”

“You don’t understand,” her father said. “When people know, everyone looks at you like you’re a freak, like you cheated somehow and have no right to be walking around.” He gazed over Charlsie’s shoulder at the temple. “They say you’re not real, just a copy of someone who died. Even my own parents couldn’t deal with it. They buried my old body and refused to see me. I had to leave home at nineteen, start all over again, become someone totally new.” He shuddered. “The thought of seeing another person walking around in Charlsie’s body—”

Light began to creep in around the tattered edges of Charlsie’s brain. *Charlene*. So her old dad was sugar-and-spice on the inside, pink instead of blue. The stupid grab-bag effect again. These people really should do something about that random assignment thing. “Does Mom know?” she asked.

“No.” His (her?) voice was a strangled whisper. “I was afraid, even if you just worked here, you would come across my name in the records, that you’d learn what I was.”

She thought of Phillip cheerfully hacking into restricted files. The parental unit had a point. Sooner or later she’d have probably found out.

“Charles, it’s obvious you still have a number of unresolved issues,” Dr. Fusselman said. He brushed at his disordered hair, then pulled out a PDA and activated it. “No wonder Charlsie was at risk. I think this calls for family therapy sessions, maybe three times a week?”

“Oh, get real!” Charlsie said, freeing herself. “Nobody wants you here. Whatever’s wrong, we’ll fix it ourselves! Go back to your freaking office and feed those lame fish.”

“But—” The shrink’s mouth gaped in a credible imitation of a dying flounder. “If we’re dealing with gender reassignment on top of everything else, we should definitely get to the bottom of this.”

Her father flushed. “I don’t want to be a ‘this,’ anymore!” His hands were fists. “Just—send me a final bill.”

Fusselman buttoned his pinstriped suit jacket, though he missed a button and got it crooked, then set out for the parking lot. Charlsie watched him go with a sense of relief.

“Brother Shawn,” Sister Angela said, “I think the windows on the south side of the church need your attention.”

“Oh, yeah, like sure thing, Sister.” He collected the Windex and paper towels and headed around the side of the temple.

Charlsie shivered as the spring wind gusted. “Come inside, both of you,” Father Andrew said. “It’s cold out here.”

For a second, Charlsie thought her father would bolt. His eyes were fearful, his expression haggard, like he’d stayed up night after night worrying about just this.

“No matter what anyone said, you didn’t do anything wrong,” Sister Angela said. “The person who donated your body no longer wanted to live. It was a sacred gift.”

Her dad hunched his head, as though expecting a blow, then darted into the shadowy church. Inside, light flooded down through the stained glass windows so that red, green, blue, and gold danced like living jewels on the flagstone floor. “They’re not even—my kids,” he said brokenly, sinking into the nearest gleaming pew, “Eric, Tom, and Charlsie. They came from *this* body. I have no right to them. They belong to *him*, whoever he was.”

“Then that’s how you’ve honored your donor.” Sister Angela’s rugged form knelt before her dad, staring up into his stressed-out face.

Father Andrew nodded. “One Leaves, One Stays,” he said in his high quavery voice. “He didn’t have the strength to face the future, but you did, Charlene. You created a family and brought three children into the world. That’s a marvelous legacy.”

“Jeez, do you think you can get out of being my dad that easily?” Charlise said. “Like I know I can be a pain, but—!”

“I was afraid some part of you knew all along,” he said. “I thought what I did all those years ago led you to the temple, that maybe you even inherited the desire to commit suicide from this body. It was all my fault.”

“You decided to live,” she said, “when you could have given up and died.” She thought back on her reasons for coming here. They seemed vague and unimportant now, like thoughts some other person had been thinking, and a very silly one at that. “This is a good place. They do good things for people.”

“Only two percent of those who initially approach the Church of Second Life ever donate their bodies,” Sister Angela said. “That’s a much lower percentage of deaths for our contacts than suicide prevention hot lines report, and those who are determined to go help someone in desperate need by their passing.”

“It’s the ultimate in recycling,” Charlise said. “How can that be bad? Reduce, reuse, and all that! You saved a perfectly good body from going to waste.”

Father Andrew patted her dad on the shoulder. “Charlene, I think it would do you some good to volunteer in the Donation Guild,” he said. “If you experience the work we do, perhaps then you could make peace with yourself.”

“Call me Charles, please,” her dad said. “Things are complicated enough. I haven’t been Charlene for years.”

“You know,” Charlise said, “like we could be a father and daughter team, working here together.” She glanced up at Sister Angela and Father Andrew. “And I still want to learn how to download personalities. Sister Angela promised!”

Father Andrew looked her dad in the eyes. “Charles?”

Dad sighed, staring down at his clenched hands, and for a stomach-wrenching moment, she thought he was going to refuse. Things would go back to the way they’d been, boring and stupid and pointless. She’d been clueless to think it could be any different. Old dogs couldn’t learn new tricks, even ones walking around in someone else’s discarded body. Everyone, it seemed, but her knew that.

“All—right,” her dad said as though he had to force the words out. “I’ll—give it a try.”

“Awesome!” Charlsie said and threw her arms around his/her neck. In her mind, she was already planning the weeks to come. They would sweep the flagstones together, polish the pews, wash windows, enter data, and download applicants into the computers to give them another chance at life. Maybe she could even learn to upload personalities into newly donated bodies. That would be creepy and fascinating all at the same time.

And, now that she really understood where her father was coming from, she might even be able to persuade Dad-Charlene to go to the mall with her. They could bond big-time while picking out earrings and cosmetics. What did it matter if no one at school would speak to her? She and her Dad would be homegirls forever.

That would totally rock.