

# SEMPER AUGUSTUS

Nancy Kress

**Nancy Kress is the author of thirty-three books. Her work has won six Nebulas, two Hugos, a Sturgeon, and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award. Her fiction has been translated into sixteen languages, none of which she can read. In addition to writing, Nancy often teaches at various venues around the country and abroad, including a semester as guest lecturer at the University of Leipzig, an intensive workshop in Beijing, and the annual two-week workshop Taos Toolbox, which she teaches with Walter Jon Williams. Like much of her writing, Nancy's most recent work, *Sea Change* (2020), is about genetic engineering. In "Semper Augustus," however, she is concerned with something else: the future of a United States in which automation has profoundly affected the nature of work.**

## I.

The trucks stood in a ragged row in gray October rain. Beyond them a lurid red light blinked on and off: TR CK STOP EAT SHOWER FUEL SLEEP. The girl lumbered into the lot, rain sliding over her huge belly, and smiled sourly. "Trick stop," she said to no one. Then another pain came and she bent over, gasping.

When the contraction passed, she took tools from her duffel. Bypassing the self-driving vehicles with their e-locks, she chose a large, dented truck with a cab, one transom window, and red letters:

### BRENNAN HOUSEHOLD MOVING

#### The Personal Touch for Long-Distance Moves

Deftly, the girl picked the lock and peered into the truck. Cardboard boxes, furniture covered with cloth pads and roped to the sides of the truck, oversized plastic bags. Some space left, but not enough to pick up another household's belongings. Grunting, she hauled herself inside and pulled the door closed.

In the dim light from the transom, she broke open a big plastic bag. Her pains were coming faster now. She tossed sofa pillows, knitted throws, and a child's bed-spread on the narrow floor space, pulled off her pants, and lay down.

"The personal touch' . . . aaahhhhh!"

Twenty minutes later, the cab door slammed and the truck began to move.

Labor was neither too hard nor too long. The baby was born amid blue-and-gold

tasseled sofa pillows, blood and amniotic fluid soaking the Disney princesses on the bedspread. The placenta followed. The girl tied off and cut the umbilical cord. She pulled a corner of the spread over the baby, not touching the child. It didn't cry, just stared at her from unfocused eyes under a wisp of brown hair.

The girl slept. But when she woke, she wrapped the child in a clean blanket from her duffel. A note was already pinned to the soft cotton, giving a name and address in Tacoma, Washington, followed by a sketch of a raised middle finger.

The baby didn't wake. The girl's face creased with emotion, gone in a moment.

The truck rolled on through the night. At dawn, it stopped again and the cab door slammed. The girl waited three minutes, opened the door, and looked out. The truck stood in a diner parking lot in a mostly deserted strip mall.

Perfect.

She climbed out, leaving the truck door ajar. Without looking back, she walked along the sidewalk until she reached a row of dark houses with sagging porches and peeling paint. Walking hurt, but not as much as she'd expected. She called Uber. Her phone glared with huge letters that filled the screen: ALIENS APPROACH EARTH. Another stupid internet hoax. Anyway, who cared? A ride was nearby.

Her body suddenly lurched and she sank to the curb. It was a huge effort to rise just before the Uber driver saw her.

She left her phone buried in a clump of weeds. Those things could be traced. Anyway, she'd gotten from Uber the only information she needed: her location, just outside of San Francisco. She must have slept longer than she thought as the truck rolled from Tacoma through Washington, Oregon, California.

They were going to have a hell of a time with the birth certificate.

\* \* \*

Jennie's earliest memory was falling. She toddled into Gramma's bedroom and discovered that she could pull herself up on the old blue chair. From there, she could haul her small body to the top of the dresser. So high! She leaned out to see what else she could do. A yank on the knobby thing below her, and a drawer opened. Jennie reached in and grabbed something just as the entire dresser teetered forward.

She screamed. The dresser fell. In the tiny, shabby room there was space for it to fall only forty-five degrees before it hit the bed. Jennie pitched forward onto the bed, followed by three small drawers raining underclothes and socks. Gramma rushed into the room. "Jennie!"

The little girl wasn't hurt but she was terrified. She'd done a bad thing. Gramma's face made that clear. She started to cry.

Gramma bent her arms across her chest. "Let that be a lesson to you not to go where you don't belong. Now stop crying, you aren't hurt."

Jennie stopped crying. Gramma didn't unbend her arms. Jennie, still scared, did the only thing she could think of: say what Gramma said. If Gramma said it, it must be good, and maybe then she would unbend her arms.

"Leb wat be a lebbon be oo nob go ear oo doon bewong. Nou stob cry oo arb urb!"

It didn't work; Gramma's face got the terrible squinch that meant Jennie did another bad thing. Then, abruptly, her face changed. She said, "What did I say to you? Tell me again."

But Jennie was too terrified to speak.

Gramma sat on the bed. She took Jennie in her lap, something she almost never did, and said, "Tell me again, Jennie, what I just said to you."

"Leb wat be a lebbon be oo nob go ear oo doon bewong. Nou stob cry oo arb urb!"

Gramma stared at Jennie. Then she said, "First shift starts work at 6:00 A.M., second shift at two o'clock, graveyard shift at ten-thirty, for continuous coverage. Say it, Jennie."

The child's face creased. She knew they were words, but she didn't know those words. Saying Gramma's words was a bad thing, but Gramma wanted her to say them. She didn't know what to do.

"Say it, Jennie."

"Fear bif barber ab bicks ayem becon bif ab boo oaklock grabeyear bif ab ben birdy for conbinoos cabbage. Bay ib, Jennie."

Gramma said more words, Jennie babbled them back. Gramma's face didn't un-squinch. The words to repeat got longer and longer. Finally Gramma made a whistling noise through her nose and put her hand on Jennie's arm.

"Listen to me. Listen good, little girl. You can't ever do that again, not with my words or anybody else's. Do you understand? Anything different can be used against you, and you already—*anything*."

Jennie said, "Libben—"

"No, no, don't say my words. Don't say anybody's words!"

Jennie went mute.

Gramma sighed. "I don't mean you can't talk. Never mind, I'll explain it when you're older. Come with me now, it's lunch time."

Lunch. Gramma's face un-squinted. Jennie was forgiven. Only then did she see that she still held what she'd snatched from Gramma's drawer: a picture. Now it was all wrinkled. Gramma would be mad at her again. She tried to smooth out the wrinkles.

"Give me that," Gramma said, sounding more tired than mad. That was good.

Gramma smoothed the picture. Jennie saw a pretty girl with long purple hair—Jennie's favorite color!—blue eyes and a very red mouth. Somebody had used the wrong crayons on the picture. Gramma said suddenly in her maddest voice, "Your mother."

Her mother? Like in the book *Are You My Mother?* The child's eyes, a watery pale version of the girl in the picture's vivid blue, grew huge. Gramma stood to straighten the dresser, still holding the picture.

"Mine!"

Gramma turned. Her face squinted up again, but she said, "Why not?" She tossed the picture on the bed.

\* \* \*

There were bad people in the world, which was why Jennie couldn't ever go outside. It wasn't safe. And not only bad people—bad things-that-weren't-people who came from a star. Aliens. The aliens took away Gramma's job in a factory. Jennie wasn't sure how aliens could do that, or what a factory was, or why other children could go outside. Jennie saw them from the upstairs window in her bedroom, running down the street, saying bad words, chasing balls or fighting. She wanted to go outside, too, but Gramma was firm. "Nothing but trouble out there. I know. You don't. And you remember what I told you?"

"Yes." She didn't even repeat what Gramma told her, because that would be doing what she wasn't supposed to do. She'd been told so often enough. She said, "But why can't I—"

"No."

Gramma didn't go outside, either. Food and clothes and lightbulbs were brought to the door by drones. That was always exciting; a drone flying up and dropping a package. Gramma knew on the computer when it was coming and she picked it right up before bad people or bad aliens could steal it.

When something broke, Gramma tried to fix it. If she couldn't, they did without. Somebody threw a rock through the living room window, and Gramma nailed a big board over it. The TV broke and after that they watched movies on the computer.

Jennie loved movies, with cartoon characters or real people doing wonderful things *outside*. Gramma watched the news, which was boring. Also, it made Gramma mad.

"Damn Likkies," she said, even though that was a word that Jennie wasn't allowed to use. "Damn them to hell, and the government, too. This newest welfare cut don't leave enough for one person to live on, let alone two. If I didn't have my savings . . . well, do—"

Jennie knew the next part, which was always the same. In her mind she said it along with Gramma: "Do what you have to, but be prepared for the shit you get doing it. You remember that, Jennie."

"Yes, Gramma. But Gramma—I want to go outside."

"No. And don't ask again."

Often Jennie looked at the creased picture of her mother. One day—scared but already, at five, knowing enough to not show it—she worked up courage to ask. "Where did my mom go?"

She was surprised that Gramma answered. "Somewhere safe. Cora always lands on her feet. Or on somebody else's." She looked harder at Jennie and her face softened slightly. "She went to California. She didn't take you, but she'd be happy in California. She always liked the Beach Boys."

Jennie saw the softening, but missed the sarcasm. She didn't know who the Beach Boys were, but after that she pictured her mother on a beach like the ones in movies. Her mother was jumping high in the air, purple hair waving in the wind, and landing gracefully on her feet, surrounded by a pack of boys who were keeping her safe.

Emboldened by this picture, Jennie pushed harder. "Where's my daddy?"

Gramma was done with softness. She snapped, "I don't know and maybe Cora don't neither."

Jennie nodded. That was a good answer because it seemed to leave the whole question of her father up to her. She grew up one of the beach boys into a man and added him to the picture in her mind, jumping alongside her mother, the two of them holding hands beside tall blue waves.

Someday she would find them.

Gramma sighed. "Now go clear the kitchen table like I already told you once."

\* \* \*

Jennie was seven. No more drones delivered things, because now Jennie was big enough to stay in the house alone while Gramma went out to shop. Besides, drone delivery was too expensive.

The news blared from the old computer. Jennie played on the floor beside the kitchen table, building scarred wooden blocks into a house for a family of tiny ghosts made from scraps of an outgrown tee. She wasn't allowed to do much on the computer, but she could see some movies, and one had a lot of ghosts that snatched a little girl through the family's TV. Fortunately, Gramma's TV was still broke, so Jennie was safe.

Gramma shifted in her chair, which meant her back ached. Jennie stood up. "Gramma, do you hurt?"

Gramma didn't answer. She stared at the computer. Abruptly she turned to Jennie, her forehead all wrinkled. "Were you listening?"

"Sort of," Jennie hedged.

"What does that mean?"

Jennie couldn't explain. Gramma tried. "Does it mean you weren't paying attention but you heard so can repeat what the newsman said anyway? The way I heard you repeating every last word of *Charlotte's Web* yesterday?"

They never talked about this. Gramma said not to talk about this. Jennie didn't know what to say.

"I asked you a question, Jennie. Can you repeat what the newsman said?"

Jennie nodded. Her stomach began to jump.

“How much of it?”

“All.”

“Do it.”

Jennie’s stomach jumped harder. What was Gramma doing? But an order was an order—another thing Gramma said a lot. Jennie began.

“The NBC Evening News with Brandon Mills. Welcome to our viewers on the West Coast. In a major development today, the Terran-Lictorian Friendship Association announced a major acquisition from our interstellar trade partners. A consortium of Americans and Chinese, the first since the Lictorians landed in China seven years ago, will test Lictorian Q-energy fields for possible development and international manufacture. Q-fields are invisible barriers that can stop anything short of ICBMs. They are expected to be a boon to the physical security of buildings and events, preventing the kind of terrorist attack that last month destroyed the lobby of 40 Wall Street in New York and caused structural damage to the building. This historic agreement marks the first time that—”

“That’s enough,” Gramma said. Her chin fell forward. “Do you know what all that means?”

“No,” Jennie said.

“It means more fucking safety for the fat cats and less for us.”

Fat cats? There hadn’t been any cats in the news.

Gramma straightened. “What it means to you, Jennie, is that you must never, ever tell people that you remember every last word you hear and can repeat them. *Never*. Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” Jennie said, although she didn’t. Who would she tell? She never went outside. She was only allowed to use the computer to watch things Gramma said were safe.

“Now you have to see one more thing. You aren’t going to like it, but you have to see it.” Gramma hesitated. “Come closer.”

Jennie did, and Gramma put her arm around her. That scared Jennie more than any words. Gramma almost never touched her. Turning Jennie so she could see the computer, Gramma hit the keys.

The face of a little girl appeared on the screen, smiling and holding a doll. She had curly brown hair and gray eyes. Her front tooth was gone, just like Jennie’s. A man’s voice, not Brandon Mills, said, “Marie Celeste Smith disappeared from her Tumwater home two days ago. Today police found her mutilated body in woods along I-5 near Bucoda.”

The picture changed to the little girl lying on a pile of leaves. She had no clothes on, her face was bloody, burns covered her skinny legs, her mouth twisted open. “Police have no suspects, but—”

“Turn it off!” Jennie cried. Gramma did.

“What . . . who . . . why did you—” Jennie tried to get free, but Gramma held on. Her hands were unusually gentle, but there was nothing gentle in her voice.

“I showed you that so’s you know what can happen. In a blink, just like that. It’s my job to keep you safe, Jennie. Not like . . . it’s a dangerous world out there.”

“I hate you!” Jennie blurted, appalled at herself even as she said it.

“Maybe so,” Gramma said calmly, “but you won’t later on. You’ll learn what I’m trying to spare you.”

Jennie didn’t understand, not any of it. She whispered, “I don’t hate you. I don’t. I’m sorry. Only, *why*—”

“Because you’re eight. Law says you have to go to school.”

“School? For real? School?” The reading and math programs she played with on the computer showed children at school.

Gramma didn't answer that. Instead her face sagged and she said, "I won't fail again. I won't."

\* \* \*

On the way to school, Gramma held Jennie's hand. Other children walked with their mothers or fathers, but they were smaller than Jennie. Older kids ran in packs.

Jennie looked at everything—she was outside! She touched the trunks of trees, the straggly grass coming up through the sidewalk, the sidewalk itself. At the end of her street, most of which she'd never seen no matter how much she twisted to peer from her bedroom window, was a bigger street with no trees. Weeds grew in empty lots; one house was just burned and blackened wood; two of the houses had boards nailed over all the windows. Kids came out of those houses, too.

They passed a park, and Jennie held Gramma's hand tighter. The park was not like the ones in movies. It had garbage on the ground and dropped needles and people sleeping. One man lying on his back with his mouth open looked dead until he suddenly snored. Jennie smelled shit.

They turned another corner, and she blinked. A low building surrounded by a metal fence, bushes and flowers, walls gleaming white with a glowing blue sign: MAR-SUPIAL TECHNOLOGIES. A copter landed on a paved area with no cracks and four people got out, three women and a man, in the kinds of clothes that people in movies wore to "business."

Gramma said, "Keep moving, Jennie. No, don't touch the fence! It's electric and you'll get a nasty shock. Come on, *walk*."

"But what is that place?"

Gramma stopped tugging at Jennie's hand. "Okay, I guess you need to know some things before you start school. I should of said it before. The aliens, 'Lictorians' the government calls them, have all kinds of fancy tech. They landed in China, so the Chinese got the tech and then sold some of it to companies in America. All that means is rich people got richer, like always. But this time, way way richer. And those of us on the bottom lost more and more jobs to the Likkie robots and AI and super-trains and all the rest of it. I used to have a good factory job at Boeing, before automation. Between the Likkies and your grandfather, I lost everything. And welfare just gets less and less. So now you understand."

Jennie didn't. What grandfather? What was "bo-ing" and how did Gramma lose "everything"? What everything? But she knew from Gramma's tone that was all she was going to get. Still, she risked one more easy, yes-no question.

"Are there robots in that building?"

"Probably. And they're run by the likes of those managers you just saw get out of the quadcopter. Those people didn't never expect to be working in a neighborhood like this. But this God-forsaken town wasn't quite so bad when Marsupial built here for the low land taxes, and the commute from Seattle wasn't so bad. But nothing gentrified like they expected. So now we got the high-tech fat cats working side by side with the people they put out of work. There's more of these tech giants the other side of your school, to the north."

Three older kids threw stones at the fence. It crackled and a spark flew from one stone. Then a loud bell rang and the kids raced off.

"Don't ever let me catch you doing something stupid like that," Gramma said. "You keep your head down and stay out of trouble, you hear?"

"Yes, Gramma." *Trouble*. A picture of the dead little girl never really left Jennie's mind. *Marie Celeste Smith disappeared from her Tumwater home two days ago. Today police found her mutilated body in woods along I-5. . . .*

It would be better to be dragged into the TV by ghosts.

\* \* \*

“She’s eight?” the lady behind the counter said. “Nearly nine? Why didn’t you enroll her earlier?”

Gramma said, “Law says eight years old. She’s still eight until October. Why would I send her earlier to someplace dangerous as this?”

Jennie didn’t think Lemberg Elementary School looked dangerous. It looked thrilling. The office had bright paper leaves taped to one wall. A long red-and-yellow sign hung in the hall between closed classroom doors: WELCOME BACK TO ANOTHER EXCITING YEAR OF LEARNING! Someone had written in a corner FUCK LERNING. But everything smelled clean, and a teacher carrying a big stack of books with torn spines smiled at Jennie over the top book.

The counter lady wasn’t smiling. “She’s too old for first grade. She’ll be nearly three years older and bigger than the other children.”

“Yes,” Gran said. “Better able to protect herself.”

Jennie said, “I can read.”

The counter lady didn’t look impressed.

“Real good,” Jennie added. “I read books on the computer. And I do math and know science from online shows!”

The counter lady called for another lady, as old as Gramma but with bright red hair, who took Jennie into a small, crowded room and gave her a tablet to read and then some math problems on paper. She asked a lot of questions. Jennie was nervous, but the tests weren’t hard and the lady was kind. When they were done, Gramma still waited in the office. The lady said, “She did very well indeed. Placement should be third grade, in the annex.”

Gramma wasn’t happy. “She don’t have enough writing.”

The red-haired lady spoke to Gramma, and Jennie thought her voice sounded sad. “She has enough for this school, even in the annex program. Although I’m afraid standards aren’t what they should be.”

Gramma said, “They never were.” She turned to Jennie. “And you—you should of stayed in first grade where I wanted you. You just made it harder on yourself.”

The counter lady said stiffly, “I’m sure Jennie will be fine. We maintain careful discipline at Lemberg Elementary.”

“And that’s why you got metal detectors and two cops patrolling the hallway? Of an elementary school?”

“Mrs. Flint, I really must object to—”

“Bye, Jennie. Behave yourself, and don’t take any crap.”

\* \* \*

For the first time she could remember, Gramma was wrong. There was no crap. The “annex” was a little building behind the regular school. The kids here looked cleaner and the posters on the wall weren’t torn or scribbled over like in the big building. Jennie carried the pencil and notebook she’d been given in the office and stared at the roomful of children seated at tables that didn’t match. So many children in one place! It made Jennie feel shy.

The teacher, a slim brown woman with dreadlocks that Jennie instantly coveted, welcomed her warmly. “I’m Ms. Scott, Jennie. You can sit at that table there with Imani and Lucy and Rosita.”

The table, covered with graffiti and knife marks, wobbled when Jennie sat down. One of the girls, dark brown eyes shining, whispered, “Hi, I’m Imani Jones. Welcome to the class. We’re all illegal.”

Illegal? Against the law? Gramma told Jennie to stay out of trouble . . . but the school had put her here! And how could a school be illegal?

“Imani,” Ms. Scott said, “do you have something you’d like to share with the whole class?”

"No, ma'am, I do not!" Imani grinned, and Ms. Scott shook her head, smiling.

"Terrell, will you pass out the math books?"

Jennie was enchanted. The math books were so worn that some pages had fallen out and been carefully inserted in the proper sequence. Imani and Lucy smiled at her; Rosita just looked down at her hands.

Jennie had never seen anyone as beautiful as Lucy, not even in movies. Lucy had black curling hair and huge green eyes. Next to her, Rosita and Imani looked as plain as Jennie felt. She'd never thought about her looks before, but instantly she hated her brown hair in two tight braids, her pale skin, her pale blue eyes. Beside Lucy, everyone else disappeared.

But when the math lesson began, Jennie realized that Imani never disappeared. She whispered funny jokes that made Jennie giggle, she helped Lucy with division, she tried to get Rosita, who neither smiled nor answered, to trade pencils. Several times Ms. Scott told Imani to be quiet. Each time, Imani said, "Yes, ma'am," and then went on doing exactly what she'd been doing before.

At recess, Jennie sat on the steps of the annex while Ms. Scott watched kids playing a disorganized and contentious game of soccer. Imani sat beside her. "You're smart. That's good. I am, too, I think we should be friends."

"Okay," Jennie said, thrilled all over again. A friend!

"Lucy, too. You can help me help her. She's smart but she don't get math."

"Okay," Jennie said again. Imani seemed to be arranging her life. "What about Rosita?"

"She don't never say anything. Anyway, she'll be gone soon, gang stuff in her family, and we don't need none of that."

Jennie was startled by the casual dismissal of Rosita. "But—"

"Trust me on this," Imani said, with such authority in such a grown-up phrase that Jennie was silenced.

Imani began to explain the class to her. "See, we're the smart class. Nobody supposed to separate kids by smartness, and no teachers will admit that's what this is, because maybe it's against the law or something, but it's true. To be in Ms. Scott's annex you gotta be very smart and want to learn and not destroy our books and not break her rules. She got a lot of rules. And you also got to be a person who won't bring no trouble to the annex. But it's the best third grade and the safest, 'cause nobody starts nothing in class, or they out."

Jennie digested all this. "But what if I break a rule and I don't know I'm breaking it?"

"She gives you more than one chance. And anyways, you don't look like nobody that's gonna make trouble. Do your work and don't diss nobody and stay away from the gangs and you can stay. You want to stay?"

Jennie said, "Yes! I do!"

Imani nodded. "Good. I'm the smartest one in the whole class. I can tell you what to do."

"Thank you," Jennie said. She meant it. Accustomed to being told what to do, she felt grateful.

But later, as a boy collected spelling books so faded that the title was illegible, he whispered to Jennie, "Don't let Imani boss you."

Jennie looked up at him, confused, but he'd already moved to the next table.

\* \* \*

Jennie loved school. It wasn't like schools in old movies, with music and art and a gym. Here the paper was flimsy and doled out carefully, the whiteboard chipped and cracked, recess the only exercise. No computers. But everything was orderly and interesting, and Ms. Scott was strict but not as strict as Grandma, so that was okay.

She discovered that Imani was wrong; Imani wasn't the smartest kid in the class. That was a short, skinny boy named Ricardo Lopez who never answered questions unless Ms. Scott called on him, and then his answers were always right. He finished his "seat work" before everyone else and then sat quietly reading a succession of books brought from home. Real books, not on a tablet. He read books at recess, too. Once, when Imani had decided to lend her boisterous bossiness to the endless soccer game and had dragged Lucy into it as well, Jennie, who didn't like soccer, sat down next to Ricardo.

"What are you reading?"

He looked up, inspecting her carefully. "You're the girl that got a hundred on her science test, right?"

"Yes." Documentaries about science had been among the programs Gramma allowed on the computer; Jennie had watched hundreds and could repeat all of them word for word. Although of course she never did.

"What's your name?"

"Jennie." They'd been in this class of twenty-seven students for a month, and he didn't know her name?

Ricardo considered. "It's a history book on the Tudor dynasty."

Jennie had never heard of the Tudor dynasty. "Can I see?"

Again he considered her carefully. Finally he said, "You won't understand it."

She didn't like that. If Ricardo was the smartest kid in the class, Jennie and Imani came next. "How do you know?"

Ricardo handed the book to her. "Don't lose my page."

Jennie read: *Others faced much more peril. The Act of Succession transformed the definition of treason. To refuse to swear the Oath of succession which supported the Act was to deny that King Henry was now head of the Church. That denial sought to deprive the king of his title, and the penalty was death. Among the victims were Bishop John Fisher and Thomas More, although each followed a different path to the headsman's axe.*

Ricardo was right; Jennie didn't understand it, not even some of the words. Awed, she handed the book back to Ricardo.

He said simply, "I'm a genius."

She fumbled for words. "Shouldn't you be . . . aren't there . . . I don't know . . . special schools for geniuses?"

"Money," Ricardo said. "I'm lucky to be with Ms. Scott."

"Where did you get that book?"

"My father. Since the library closed, he buys them at a used-book store near his work."

A father, and one who bought books. Well, Gramma had always gotten Jennie books, too, online. *Little Women* and *Charlotte's Web* and *Dinosaur Ages* and *A Child's Book of Astronomy*. Good books . . . but . . .

"Do you . . . is history your favorite subject?"

"Yes. I—"

"Jennie!" Imani loomed over them. "Come with me! I've got something to tell you!"

Ricardo lowered his eyes to the book. Imani pulled Jennie to her feet and then away. "Don't talk to him. He's too weird."

"He's a genius," Jennie said.

"Oh, and he told you so? Uh huh, yes ma'am, you believe everything anyone says."

Did she? Jennie didn't know. Certainly Imani knew more about everyone in the class than Jennie did: who in their families had been arrested, or died of overdoses, or just "run off." Imani bossed everyone and knew everything.

By October, Rosita had vanished from school.

\* \* \*

Gramma walked Jennie the eight blocks to school every day and the eight blocks home. At first, Jennie was glad; the older kids pushing into the main building, yelling insults at each other and trying to steal each other's stuff, scared her. But in mid-October, when the trees on her street flamed with color and the air smelled crisp and delicious, Jennie objected. "I can walk alone. Or with Imani and Lucy."

"Imani and Lucy live in the opposite direction."

How did Gramma know that? "I can walk with Ricardo."

"And that skinny little twerp will just spring into judo kicks and defend you, right?"

Jennie suddenly made a connection. "You snooped on everybody. On the computer."

Gramma wasn't embarrassed. "'Course I did. I want to know who you know."

"It's snooping!"

"You don't know what you're talking about. If I'd snooped more years ago, everything would be different. What have I always told you?"

Jennie said nothing.

"Say it," Gramma ordered.

"No! Because you shouldn't snoop on me!"

They reached MARSUPIAL TECHNOLOGIES, now protected by a Q-energy shield. Three boys and a girl amused themselves by throwing each other against the impenetrable slick wall and sliding down it. "No fair!" one yelled. "It was my turn!" He punched another boy.

Jennie stalked in silence beside her grandmother. She fed her grievance, adding more kindling, creating a blaze. She wasn't a baby anymore! She was nine now and tall for her age and sort of strong. And she was the second—or maybe third—smartest kid in the special class for smart kids. She could take care of herself. Gramma was just—

They had reached the weedy park full of needles and garbage. A large man rose from the sidewalk and shambled, barefoot, toward them. His pale eyes looked filmy, the pupils huge. He whined, "Hey, lady, spare some change?"

Gramma took Jennie's hand and pulled her along.

"Just change for . . . I'm bad off, lady."

Gramma kept walking.

All at once the big man was in front of them. "Don't be all high 'n mighty, you ain't any different from us, you and your pretty little kid I oughta—"

He reached for Jennie. She saw his hand, every bit of it in sharp detail: the dirty pale fingers thick as bananas; the veins of his wrist, ropy with scars, when the sleeve of his jacket pulled back; the grease smears on the sleeve. She smelled him. His hand closed on her braid. *Marie Celeste Smith disappeared from her Tumwater home two days ago. Today police found her mutilated body in woods along I-5. . . .*

An explosion, louder than thunder. The man let go and leapt backward. "Jesus!"

Gramma held a gun.

The man ran away. Jennie stared at her. "You . . . it—let's go home!"

"No," Gramma said calmly. "I fired a weapon. There are surveillance cameras over there. We have to wait for the cops to come and clear me. This gun is registered. I didn't break no laws."

And then, sharply, "You see how it is, Jennifer. Do what you have to but be prepared for the shit you get doing it."

\* \* \*

Gramma continued to walk Jennie to and from school. Sometimes Jennie and Imani were jeered at by other kids: "Hey, smartass! How much is two plus two?" Jennie ignored them, but Imani would shout back, "Not surprised you don't know, dumbass!" Once this resulted in a fight behind the annex. It was two girls against Imani,

but Imani won. Jennie tried to help by hitting one of the other girls on the back, but Jennie just got knocked down. Imani fought in silence, kicking and gouging and scratching and punching. Eventually the two kids ran off. Jennie staggered to her feet. "I'm sorry I didn't help more!"

"It's okay. I don't need no help." Imani grinned with bloody lips. "You aren't a fighter. You're my sidekick."

Jennie glowed.

In November, Gramma's computer stopped working. Gramma couldn't fix it. Jennie said, "Are we going to get another one?"

"Have to. But not as good, and we're going to be eating rice and beans this winter."

The rice and beans were distributed at the Food Bank, which wasn't a bank because nobody working there had any money either and the food was free. Jennie knew Gramma hated going there. "I don't take charity from the government," she said, which made no sense because wasn't charity good? Didn't it mean that the government cared enough about you to see that you weren't hungry?

For the first time, Jennie asked, "Where does our money come from?"

"Savings, mostly. No pension from Boeing, corporations don't do that no more. Some welfare, which was cut again by 10 percent last month. I'm not old enough for Social Security, which won't exist by the time I get there. Barely exists now."

Jennie was frightened. "But how will we get money? Are you going to get a job?" Ricardo's father had a job, and so did Lucy's mother, who cleaned rich people's houses. Blingasses, Imani called them, but if Jennie said that word, Gramma would say "Language!" and slap her.

Gramma said, "Jobs are disappearing fast. Faster. Robots."

"Lucy's mother—"

"I know, Magic Maids. And then who would take you to and from school?"

So it was because of Jennie that they were so poor. She hadn't had new clothes in a long time; as Jennie grew, faded and mended jeans and tops turned up on her bed. With Jennie in school, she suddenly realized, Gramma could go other places and buy those shabby clothes Jennie had complained about. And that trip to the dentist when Jennie's tooth hurt so bad she couldn't sleep and the dentist had to pull it out—that must have cost money, too. All at once she felt ashamed. Their poorness was her fault.

"Don't you think like that for half a minute!" Gramma said, her face fiercer. "I made my own choice to keep you, and the state of this country isn't your fault."

"But—"

"We live this poor because I'm trying to not touch my savings until we absolutely have to. And that's all you need to know. Subject's closed. Go do your homework. Now."

Everyone was always telling her what to do.

The new computer looked both used and insubstantial, like a flattened-out tin can. But when Jennie turned it on late one night, sneaking out of bed after Gramma was asleep, she found a site that Gramma must have blocked on the old computer. Maybe the new computer didn't have blocking software.

Jennie stayed up until her eyes would no longer stay open, watching YouTube. She saw cats chasing their tails, people dancing and singing, girls putting on make-up, gymnasts and chefs and interviewers. But she also stumbled on videos taken in schools. She glimpsed computers that had a little stage on which three-dimensional games and lessons appeared. Gramma's computer couldn't play holos. She saw computers that unfolded like a piece of cloth, cell phones everywhere, machines she couldn't name. In some classrooms, kids were learning to program robots.

Jennie turned off the computer and crept to bed. She'd been so proud of being in the annex class with Ms. Scott. "You're as good as anybody," Ms. Scott often told her students, "and don't let anyone tell you different."

*I'm as good as anybody*, Jennie told herself fiercely. She got back out of bed, turned on the light, and took out the wrinkled picture of her mother. Her mother had left her; Jennie's clothes were used and patched; she didn't have a father like Ricardo's to buy her books. She couldn't fight like Imani. Gramma's computer was old and limited and even to have that, they were going to have to eat government rice and beans for dinner. But she was as good as anybody.

Just a lot poorer.

\* \* \*

In February, walking home from school in frosty air that turned Gramma's ears red, an explosion shredded the air. People stopped and glanced wildly at each other. Even the roughest sixth-grade boys stopped taunting each other and fighting and yelling; they turned, silent, toward the sound. Several blocks away, smoke rose into the air in a dense, black cloud.

Imani, who was coming home with Jennie for a sleepover, said, "That's the robot factory on Edmond Street!"

Sirens began, wailing loud but not louder than the second and third explosions. More black clouds.

"What is it?" Jennie said. "What happened?"

"They blew it up," Imani said. "Didn't they, Ms. Flint?"

"Who?" Jennie said. "Who?"

Imani, always happy to be in the know, said importantly, "It was T-boc, wasn't it, Ms. Flint? I know it was. Wasn't it?"

"Probably," Gramma said. And then she added something Jennie didn't understand at all.

"So it's started. Finally." Her hand reached for Jennie, startling her.

"It's started."

\* \* \*

## II.

By the time Jennie was in sixth grade, she knew all about Take Back Our Country, even though her teachers never discussed it in class. Imani said that was because the teachers didn't want to know whose family was T-boc, in case the FBI came and talked to the teachers and threw them in jail to rot forever. But Jennie watched the news every night with Gran and now instead of boring her, the news frightened and confused her.

And she remembered, word for word, every single sentence the newscasters said. She just didn't know who to believe. At recess, kids talked about it. Now that they were twelve and the oldest kids in Lemberg Elementary, nobody bothered them when they stood around on the asphalt and argued in the thin March sunshine.

"They're terrorists, plain and simple," John said. "They blow up buildings by remote because they hate America and all that the Lictorians have done for us. All the robots and AI and clean energy and shit. The police fight T-boc to get them to stop killing innocent people."

Imani's dark eyes glittered. She shoved her face within inches of John's. "Yeah? You see any robots in this shit-hole school? You see any AI or fancy energy? The Likkies traded that technology to the blingasses with enough money to make and sell things to each other, and then the blingasses get richer and we get more forgotten and worse off. T-boc's trying to fix that. You got a cell phone, Johnny-Boy, 'cause your father still got a job, but you see a lot of cell phones in this school? You see a lot of anything?"

What Jennie saw was a fifth grader doing a drug deal through the fence with a

gang runner no older than he was. She turned her back.

John said, "It's wrong to destroy property and injure innocent people! Three workers got hurt in the GM bombing!"

"Three people who sat on their fat asses to run a whole robotic *factory* while the people who used to work there starve outside the gates! Those three traitors deserved to die!" Imani was so mad that spittle formed at the corners of her mouth.

Lucy, who always followed rules, glanced at the teacher on duty and said, "Talk softer."

John took a step backward. "Careful, Imani. You sound like you been brainwashed by T-boc propaganda."

"You sound like a fucking idiot who don't know what he's talking about!"

A quiet voice came from behind Jennie. "Neither of you knows what you're talking about," Ricardo said. He held a book, one finger marking his place. "You don't understand what's happening because you have no sense of history."

Imani sneered, "And you're going to give us one."

"Yes," Ricardo said. He was still skinny, but he'd grown taller, almost as tall as Jeff Stone, who was the handsomest boy in the sixth grade and who was rumored to already have had sex with some eighth-grader in the middle school.

Ricardo said, "It's classic Marxist warfare, displacing the social-rights warfare of twenty years ago. That was about civil rights and inclusion, and it cut across all classes. This is a return to economic classes at odds with each other."

"Oh, stop showing off and shut up," Imani muttered, but Ricardo went on as if she hadn't spoken.

"The rich have on their side capital and the means of production. The poor have numbers and labor. But what's new this time is the Lictorian wild card, because their robots and other tech make labor more and more unnecessary, while Q-energy and automated security drones protect the ruling class. Their mistake is not providing a basic universal income, decent schools, and health care. The modern equivalent of bread and circuses. That might satisfy people enough to forestall the revolution, which can't succeed."

The other three stared at him. Finally Lucy said, "My grandmother Lemberg was poor even before the aliens came."

"That's true," Ricardo said.

Imani demanded, "So which side of this 'revolution' are you on, genius?"

Ricardo opened his book. "I'm not."

Jennie spoke up. "But what do you feel about this?"

He looked at her. His eyes were brown, like rich soil. He said nothing.

John said, "Jennie asked you a question!"

Ricardo said calmly, "And I declined to answer it."

Another silence. Then Imani said, "Someday you'll have to answer it and say which side you're on, or I'll make you say."

Ricardo said nothing. The bell sounded to end recess.

Kids streamed back into the building, pushing and yelling, seemingly as eager to return to the school as they'd been to get out of it. Teachers, some grim and some pleading, stood at the doorways, reprimanding and breaking up shoving matches. Two uniformed school cops stood with them.

Jennie hung back until the worst was over. The third grade of the Gifted and Talented program still occupied the annex; her class had been kept together but had a room in the main building, which was constantly being vandalized, patched, and vandalized again. There were not enough books, no electronic teaching aids, barely enough markers for the cracked whiteboard. Jennie heard a rumor that Mr. Dugan bought their paper himself. But Mr. Dugan was a wonderful teacher, and Jennie still loved school.

To her surprise, Ricardo hung back in the schoolyard with her. Imani, who usually went everywhere with Jennie, had stalked off, trailed by Lucy. Jennie hoped Imani wouldn't decide to pick a fight with Ricardo. She'd half kill him.

Ricardo said quietly, "I know what you can do."

Jennie froze. Did he mean . . .

"When Mr. Dugan asked you that question about mitochondria, you answered him with the exact words he said two weeks ago when he introduced cells. The exact words. And you've done it before."

"No, I haven't."

"Yes, you have. You don't repeat passages from the textbooks, only Mr. Dugan's words. But don't worry, since you seem to want it secret, I won't tell anybody. But if you really don't know what you are, google 'variation two of selective savant memory.'"

The rush into the building was almost over. The principal walked toward them. "Jennie, your grandmother is here in my office. She wants you right away."

"Why does—"

"I don't know, but she says it's urgent. Come."

Jennie followed Ms. Ridley, who strode almost faster than Jennie could keep up. The principal looked both anxious and determined, but she always looked that way. Once Jennie had overheard her say to Ms. Scott, "And this is an *elementary* school. Think of what the middle and high schools have to contend with, after hormones kick in."

Jennie was already worrying about next year at Harriet Tubman Middle School. Would she and Imani be in the same class? Would the illegal Gifted and Talented program ("elitist, undemocratic, deprives average children of better minds to imitate") even exist?

Then she saw Gran's face and knew there was something bigger to worry about than middle school.

"Get your coat," Gran said, "and all your homework."

"Why do—"

Ms. Ridley tactfully moved to her office door.

"No need to leave, you," Gran said harshly, "it'll be public soon enough. Jennie, we're going to Seattle. Your mother is on trial for attempted murder."

\* \* \*

Jennie didn't understand, not any of it. And Gran wouldn't explain.

"My mother? My mother tried to kill somebody?"

"That's what she's charged with." They stood in the cold in front of a 7/11 with rusting and empty gas pumps, waiting for a bus. Gran held an ancient suitcase, Jennie a plastic bag with some clothes and toiletries. Jennie shivered in her nearly outgrown jacket. People carried suitcases, cranky children, a bicycle, a crate of chickens or vegetables to sell in Tacoma. No one spoke. On the ground beggars slept against the store wall, and in the air quadcopters and drones flew to the shielded tech centers, but both were too common a sight to interest Jennie.

Besides, she felt sick with questions, none of which her grandmother would answer. Where had Jennie's mother been all these years? Did Gran know where she'd been and not told Jennie? Who had her mother tried to kill? Why were Jennie and Gran going to the trial? Gran must be spending her savings on this mysterious trip, yet she didn't seem to care about what happened to Cora. Gran's only words about her daughter had been, "She'll probably get what she deserves. If there's any justice. Although usually there isn't."

Shocked, Jennie had fallen as silent as Gran. The whole way to the courthouse in Seattle, she looked out the window.

And that shocked her, too. She knew from Ricardo, still consuming history like he was an addict, that fifty years ago Lemberg had been one of the logging towns

southeast of Tacoma. Then the timber industry had declined. “Multiple causes,” Ricardo had said in the voice that made him sound more like a teacher than even Mr. Dugan. “Over-logging of old-growth forests, mechanization, federal regulations that created national forests and protected endangered species. In 1990 alone, fifty mills closed. Logging financed everything here: roads, schools, law enforcement. The region never recovered. It—”

“Oh, put a lid on it!” Imani had said. “Come on, Jennie and Lucy, let’s do something else beside listen to this windbag.” Imani, who got straight A’s, liked to pretend that she wasn’t interested in anything that tasted of school.

Lucy, in a rare act of defiance, had said, “I think I’ll listen just a little bit more.”

Ricardo talked on about logging. In a rare mention of her past, Gran had told Jennie that both Jennie’s grandfather and her great-grandfather had been loggers. “What were they like?” Jennie had asked, and Gran had turned away, saying, “Do your homework.”

But if Lemberg was poor, Jennie realized as she stared out the bus window, she had no name for what Tacoma and then Seattle were. Some sections of the cities looked like the war zones in her social studies book. Others were a sea of tents with people sitting between them amid garbage and small fires. Still others were tall buildings linked by bridges high above the road, at ground level shimmering with Q-energy shields. Alien technology. She craned her neck to try to see into the buildings. Men and women hurrying, large wallscreens, guards with guns.

To keep out Jennie and people like her.

Eventually, she fell asleep, waking when Gran said, “We’re here.”

\* \* \*

“You said I was going to the trial!”

“I never said that,” Gran said. “And don’t you yell at me, young lady, or you’ll regret it.”

“You brought me all this way and I have to stay here?” *Here* was a coffin hotel room, two bunks on top of each other with two feet of bare floor and a shared row of lockable toilet stalls down the hall.

“You have to stay here.”

“I want to get out! I want to see my mother!”

“No. A murder trial is no place for a child.”

“I’m twelve!” Jennie cried, frightened at her own defiance even as she raised her voice to a shout. “I’m not a child! Why did you bring me here if I’m just supposed to stay in this shitty room?”

“Don’t you use that kind of language to me!”

“I’m sorry,” Jennie said. “But I’m going to my mother’s trial.”

“You are staying right here with that schoolwork your teacher gave you. I didn’t spend down my savings on this trip to have you disobey me, Jennifer Flint. I brought you because it isn’t safe for you to stay alone in Lemberg.”

“I could have stayed with Imani!”

“No. That house isn’t safe any more. Imani’s oldest brother just joined the Red Eagles.”

Imani hadn’t said that Michael had joined the Tacoma gang. Why hadn’t Imani told her? Jennie’s hurt must have shown on her face because Gran said, “Nobody tells everything they know, Jennie. Nobody.”

“You don’t tell me anything! Did you know where my mother was? All these years? Did she try to see me and you wouldn’t let her?”

“No to both questions. I didn’t know where she was until I heard about this on the news, and she never sent messages to me. Or to you.”

Jennie sagged back onto the bunk.

"Lock the door behind me," Gran said. "I'm going to wait in the hall until I hear the click. And remember what I told you about not going to the toilets when anybody else is in the hall."

Alone, Jennie pounded both fists on the wall. That hurt, so she sat on the bunk and tried to calm herself enough to think.

Twenty minutes later, she put on her jacket, opened the door a crack to check the hallway, and ran as fast as she could to the lobby, where an armed guard loitered and a clerk worked at a high desk behind bulletproof glass. "I'm going out," Jennie told the guard. "Just around the corner to that coffee shop, and then I'm coming back. I have a room here with my grandmother. See, here's my key."

The guard, too bored to be amused, said, "Knock yourself out."

Jennie's knees trembled as she left the building, but the coffee shop was two doors down. Even so, an insect roaster on the sidewalk yelled a curse at her when she didn't buy anything. At the coffee shop, a guard stopped her at the door. "Are you a paying customer?"

Bewildered, Jennie stared at him. How could she be a customer when she'd never been here before?

The guard's face softened. "You got money to buy something, miss?"

"Oh! Yes. Yes, I do. Coffee and . . . the sign said there are computers to use?"

"A dollar for ten minutes. Plus the price of coffee."

Jennie had ten dollars, hoarded from four years of birthdays. She drew the money out of her pocket and held it up to the guard. What if it wasn't enough?

He smiled. "Go on in. And listen—what's your name?"

"Jennie."

"Listen, Jennie. You be careful here in Seattle. Don't go roaming around these streets."

"I will," Jennie said. How did the guard know she wasn't from here? "Thank you."

The guard sighed and let her pass.

Jennie bought the cheapest coffee and gave the clerk (was that the right word?) three dollars. The coffee shop, clean and bright and mostly deserted, had three computers. "Number three," the clerk said. "I just turned it on. Timer's running." He looked harder at Jennie. "It's voiceware, miss."

Jennie had been afraid she wouldn't know how to use the computer—what if it had holographic projection or AI or something? But Google was still Google. It said, "What can I find for you?"

"Variant two of selective savant memory."

The computer was silent. The coffee clerk appeared beside her. He said, "Repeat your request and then say 'brief info' or 'longer version' or 'academic' or whatever you want. Then say 'read' or 'voiceware.' The system won't do images or video. Management is some kind of religious type and don't want porn in here." He made a face "That's why we're closing next month."

"Thank you," Jennie said. The timer in the corner of the screen ticked away her seconds. The clerk went back to his counter.

"Variant two of selective savant memory. Brief info. Voiceware."

Google said, "Savant syndrome is a condition in which someone with significant mental disabilities demonstrates certain abilities far in excess of average. The skills at which savants excel are generally related to memory. This may include rapid calculation, artistic ability, map making, or musical ability. In 2020, variant two selective savant syndrome was identified by Dr. James Li. Variant two savants demonstrate the memory of traditionally identified savants, but without the accompanying mental disabilities. As of today's date, sixteen selective savants have been identified, two of them displaying echomemory."

Jennie said, "Echomemory. Brief info. Voiceware."

"Echomemory is the ability to repeat verbatim the words of others, with or without understanding their meaning, including auditory input from earlier in life. Unlike echolalia, echo memory does not interfere with the ability to communicate normally."

Jennie took a sip of her coffee. It tasted terrible. Her shaking hand spilled some on the table. She wiped it up with a flimsy paper napkin. The clerk was serving someone else, not watching her. All three computer screens faced away from the room. The other two had no customers.

Jennie said softly, "Cora Flint. Trial for attempted murder. Seattle, Washington. Brief info. Read."

She read the information and said, "Longer version."

Cora Emily Flint, 32, no fixed address, had been arrested on March 12, 2037, for shooting a man in a room of the luxurious Galaxy Hotel in Seattle, Washington, with a gun registered to the victim. Surveillance equipment had registered the shot and hotel security had burst into the room, restrained Jennie's mother, and turned her over to Seattle police. The victim was Carter Wells Allingham, 56, of 16 Terrace Archology, Bellevue, founder and CEO of Imagery Tech. He had been taken to a hospital with abdominal injuries, recovered, and returned home. In deposition, he'd said that he'd hired a woman calling herself Tiffany Cherry as a prostitute for the night and taken her to the hotel. The alleged shooter had refused to say anything at all. The trial had begun yesterday with jury selection. The prosecutor had produced witnesses attesting to the defendant's history of both prostitution and drug use. The defendant had not taken the stand. The defense attorney assigned to her by the state had produced no witnesses. Closing arguments were scheduled for this morning.

A trial transcript thus far was available, but Jennie's time ran out.

She rose, knocking over the rest of her coffee. The coffee clerk brought a mop. "Are you all right, miss?"

"Yes," Jennie said. "No. I'm fine."

She walked unsteadily out the door, the half block to the hotel, through the lobby and up to her room, without actually seeing anything. She locked the door and sat on the bunk.

Gran had known it, all of it. That Jennie's mother was a prostitute, that she killed a . . . Jennie's mind fumbled for the word . . . a "john," that Cora had refused to say why. Had she known Carter Wells Allingham before? How had she met him so that he could pay her to do . . . that?

Years ago Imani had told Jennie and Lucy all about sex. It sounded messy and disgusting; why would any girl want a boy's penis shoved up her, pumping out pee? And Imani said the first time hurt because the penis had to break something in the girl. Jennie, still pencil-straight and skinny, silently vowed to never ever have sex.

And her mother had . . . for money . . . did Cora shoot him because it hurt and he wouldn't stop? But it wasn't Cora's first time; she'd had a *baby*, Jennie. Maybe Carter Wells Allingham had refused to pay her, afterward. Or was it because of the drugs?

A history of prostitution and drug use.

Jennie trudged over and over the same tracks in her mind, arriving nowhere. Hours passed. She tried desperately to not cry because Gran would see her red eyes and maybe guess that Jennie had disobeyed her. But when Gran finally arrived, she said only, "Put on your coat. We're going to visit your mother."

"Visit . . . now?"

"Now is the only time there is. Cora was convicted. She'll go tomorrow to the prison at Gig Harbor. She wants to see you."

"Me?"

"Put on your coat."

It was too much. Jennie wanted to scream, to cry, to go numb. She wanted to see her mother, she didn't want to see the woman described in the trial. Her mother was laughing on a beach somewhere, purple hair waving in the wind, with the Beach Boys. Jennie had learned years ago how silly that image was, but she never forgot it.

She was a variant two selective savant. Whatever her mother said to her would remain, word for exact word, in her mind forever. Even though her mother was on the way to prison and Jennie would never see her again.

She put on her coat.

\* \* \*

Cora's hair was no longer purple, only the same dead-leaf brown as Jennie's. Otherwise, she looked the same as in the wrinkled picture in Jennie's drawer at home, still with bright blue eyes and a pretty face. Through a plastic shield she stared without expression at Jennie, who did not know what to say.

"Hi . . ." Hi what? Mom? Mother? Cora? Jennie had no words for this stranger who was on her way to prison for attempted murder.

Gran said, "Okay, you've seen her. We're going."

"Not yet," Cora said. "I have something to tell her."

Gran said, "Cora, you promised."

Cora laughed. Jennie bewildered, looked from one woman to the other. Promised what? Tell her what?

Gran said, "You don't want to say nothing that will put your daughter in danger."

Cora said, "Give me some credit, *Mom*. But you never did, did you? Not me or Grace. For anything."

Grace? Who was Grace?

Gran said grimly, "Cora . . ."

"Shut up, old woman. Jennie, here's what I want to tell you. Make better choices than I did. Life is long, and any crap you do will follow you around forever. Got it?"

"Yes," Jennie said, because she didn't know what else to say.

Cora laughed again. It was the ugliest sound Jennie had ever heard. "'Do what you gotta but be prepared to take shit for it,' right? She still says that?"

"Yes," Jennie said again.

"Poor little rat," Cora said. "Well, doesn't look like you're going to be gorgeous. Maybe that will help."

Jennie, stung, said, "I'm not gorgeous, but I'm not ugly."

"Feisty underneath. Too bad. Well, I'm out of it." She stood and turned.

Gran said with sudden anger, "You were never in it."

Cora didn't turn back. "Bye, Jennie. But one more thing: I stayed off the sugarpop while I was preggers with you. I stayed off the whole time. For you. Guard! I'm done here."

Gran said nothing on the way to the hotel to collect their things, nothing as they waited for a night bus, nothing when they boarded for the trip back to Lemberg. Her expression never changed, not even to answer when Jennie twisted in her bus seat to ask, "Who is Grace?"

"Nobody," Gran said. "And don't ask again."

"But—"

"You heard me."

"What will happen to my mother?"

"Whatever happens to people in jail. But Cora's tough. Like you."

Jennie was tough? She set this aside to examine later; right now, her questions and her bewildered anger were enough to handle.

"Is she—"

"No more questions, Jennie."

“I have a right to know things!”

“While you’re under my roof, you don’t have no rights that I don’t give you.”

“You’re not fair! Nothing is fair! I want to get away from here!”

“When you’re eighteen you can do whatever the hell you want.”

“You don’t even care!”

Gran turned away, her back stiff and her face blank.

But at home, Jennie woke from exhausted sleep and through the thin walls of their house, she heard the terrifying sound of Gran weeping.

\* \* \*

### III.

By the time Jennie was fourteen, the country was at war.

She, Ricardo, Imani, and two other boys stopped outside school to gaze at plumes of smoke rising on the horizon. “Eleventh Street,” Imani said. She always knew. “They don’t have no shield yet.”

Jennie winced, hoping no one had been hurt. Sirens started and swelled, and drones of various kinds flew toward the smoke.

T-boc had grown strong, organized, and—depending on one’s viewpoint—was either creating a genuine revolution or conducting terrorism that would eventually burn itself out. Most large corporate headquarters and some enclaves of the rich were shielded by Lictorian Q-shields, bought from the Chinese. Armed drones exploded against the shields with much noise and fury but no damage. But there was no way to use the alien shields to protect enormous factory complexes, or supply and distribution trains and ships, or agribusiness farms. All these were the regular targets of suicide attacks without actual suicide. Drones blew up facilities or started massive fires, were instantly traced and those who fired them arrested, after which they disappeared. Executed without trial, tortured for information, imprisoned somewhere—no one knew.

The rumor was that kamikaze drone-firers never gave the government any useful information because T-boc was organized in small cells, and those who fired drones, or attacked corporate bigwigs who’d ventured out of their enclaves, were both ignorant and expendable volunteers.

T-boc hackers occasionally succeeded in taking over either a factory’s operating systems or a broadcast channel. With the former they caused havoc; with the latter they sent out set pieces about class warfare and calls for political action. These events were short-lived. The rich had cyberexperts, too. They also controlled Congress, most state political machinery, and the military.

So far. Most military grunts came from the unemployed, often their one way out of poverty.

“That’s T-boc’s weakness,” Ricardo said. “And anyway, they attack the wrong enemy.”

“Who should they attack, genius?” Imani said. “China, because that’s where Likkies went first?”

“No,” Ricardo said. “The aliens themselves.”

“Can’t be done. You never heard of Q-shields, a smart guy like you?”

“There might be ways.”

“Oh, right, and you know what they are. You also know the answer to the billion-dollar question, why the Likkies even came to Earth in the first place?”

“Stop it,” Jennie said. “Both of you. Let’s just get to class!”

This was the hardest part of middle school: getting to the safety of the two classrooms set aside for the gifted and talented program. Unlike elementary school, middle

school was infested not only with bullies but with junior gang members. Most of the Red Eagles ignored the "g-and-t wimps," who neither fought nor dealt drugs, because if they did, they were no longer in the program. However, sometimes individual Eagles, bored or just flexing muscle, amused themselves with vicious attacks. A girl named Summer was molested. Ricardo took a knife slash in his thigh. Lucy, with an older brother in the rival Seattle Skulls, never went anywhere without a phalanx of boys around her. Terrell, big enough to usually be left alone, had been cornered on the way home from school and beaten badly.

After Terrell and Summer, the class stuck together, no matter who did or didn't like whom. They also tried to stick close to the two cops who patrolled the halls, but that wasn't always possible. Once inside the classroom, they were safe from both the gangs and the resentment of other students who knew by now that the best teachers, plus whatever electronic equipment was available, went to that locked and guarded classroom.

They had two dated but functioning computers. A microscope. Even a holoprojector, although it tended to malfunction often.

Jennie knew how lucky they were. She also knew how unlucky the g-and-t program was next to the schools that rich kids attended. But, unlike Ricardo, she didn't think about it often. She was immersed in her school, her life, and it was intensely absorbing to her.

"I said," Jennie repeated, louder because Ricardo was still going on about T-boc, "we need to get to class! We have a math test, remember."

Ricardo said, "We also have a war, remember? Jennie, you're the least political person I know."

She retorted, "That's probably true, given how few people you know."

Imani laughed. Ricardo hung around with them, or with no one. Jennie thought it was probably because nobody else was willing to put up with his know-it-all lecturing.

In their classroom, she spotted Lucy, surrounded by four boys who shoved each other to stand close to her. Lucy dated no one. "I have to concentrate on my education," she said. To Jennie this sounded sensible and adult, but Imani only snorted.

Jennie rushed over to Lucy and blurted, "Oh, I like your hair!"

"Thanks," Lucy said. She waved dismissively at the boys, who moved reluctantly away. "Do you think I cut it too short?"

"No, it's fabulous," Jennie said, not without envy. Lucy's hair hung in one small braid over her eyes with the rest clipped short on one side and long on the other, the style copied from wildly popular actress Alyssa Benfield. Jennie thought Lucy, long-legged and slim-waisted and full-breasted, was even prettier than Alyssa. Anything Lucy did to her hair looked gorgeous.

Imani was pretty, too, in a strong, don't-mess-with-me way. She had an endless supply of make-up, including the waxy gloss that it was fashionable now to spread over one's entire face, reflecting light. Jennie never asked her where she got it.

Jennie knew she wasn't pretty. She wasn't exactly plain, either—just ordinary. Lank brown hair so fine that it slipped out of small braids, would not hold a curl, defied even hair wax unless she used so much that her head ended up a sticky blob. Her pale blue eyes had pale, sparse lashes. She had grown tiny breasts but was still too skinny, too tall, too . . . unnoticeable. The only good thing was that Lucy told Jennie that her walk was graceful, a comment she treasured.

But . . . *"Doesn't look like you're going to be gorgeous. Maybe that will help."*

Her mother was another thing that Jennie never discussed. Nor were her constant fights with Gran, about where Jennie could go (almost nowhere), when she had to be home (before dark, and it got dark by five o'clock in November), who she could be friends with (nobody, if Gran had her way). The more Gran tightened her control, the

more frequent was Jennie's defiance, and the harsher were Gran's punishments. Jennie didn't tell Imani or Lucy about the welts on the backs of her legs. Gran had only done that once, when Jennie and Imani had skipped school.

And yet she knew that Gran loved her and was only trying to keep her safe. Jennie had periods of remorse for the fights, but the periods did not last long before she was again shouting, "It's not fair. I want to get away from here!"

Ms. Sanders said, "Are you girls going to sit down, or are you going to take the math test while standing?"

Jennie blushed and hastily took her seat. Imani laughed. Lucy grimaced; she remained in the G&T program because she worked so hard, but math remained an alien galaxy to her. Sometimes Ricardo tutored her; his presence helped Lucy fend off the boys who followed her around. Imani had a boyfriend who was, impressively, a tenth-grader.

No boy had ever shown an interest in Jennie.

They discussed this at lunch in the back of the classroom while Ms. Sanders frowned over their latest essays and two kids argued over whose turn it was to use a computer. Half the class braved the chaotic cafeteria, which served only soup and bread, but the three girls always brought from home, shared everything, and went to the bathroom afterward in a group before the cafeteria let out.

"Jen, you have to be more aggressive," Imani said. "If you like a boy, go after him."

"There's nobody I like," Jennie lied.

"No? Then why are you always eyeing Karim?"

Lucy became tactfully absorbed in her tiny chunk of cheese. Karim was one of the boys who followed her around. Jennie felt herself redden clear to the roots of her hair.

"That's not true! I don't like Karim!"

"Who, then?"

"Nobody! I told you!"

Lucy said, "Imani, how was your poker game with Tyler?"

Imani giggled. "It turned into strip poker."

Jennie gasped. "In front of all those other kids?"

"Course not, silly. When we were alone." Imani leaned closer. "Guess what? We did it."

"Did it? Sex? Real sex? Did you use protection?"

"Course I did."

"Did it . . . did it hurt?"

"Yeah, a little. But then it felt *great*." Imani looked pleased with herself. "I would get the implant if my mom could afford it, but we can't."

Jennie said, from some combination of envy and dread and longing, "That girl in Ms. Mahmoud's class got pregnant, and she was only *twelve*."

"I'm careful," Imani said, which was probably true. Imani had a strong sense of self-preservation.

Karim strolled over, elaborately casual. "Hey, Lucy."

"Hey, Karim."

"Do you wanna—"

"No," she said sweetly. "I'm talking with my friends."

"Yeah. Cool. No problem." He slouched off.

Jennie tore into her sandwich.

\* \* \*

On a hot August afternoon, when the air was so still that it seemed solid, she had sex with Ricardo in her bedroom while Gran was out. It hurt, and afterward she threw up. While she was in the bathroom, Ricardo dressed and left. Jennie was grateful. The next day, Ricardo went back to reading his books, walking with the

group to and from school, offering his views on politics, history, Lictorians. Neither he nor Jennie ever said anything about what had happened. After a while, she stopped being embarrassed about their sexual disaster.

The friendship was more important than one stupid hour in her bed.

But maybe sex would be different with somebody else? Better? It had to be, or why did Imani, who'd left Tyler for somebody else, like it so much? Did other boys do it differently? Was there something she was supposed to have done?

One more thing to which Jennie had no answers.

\* \* \*

The day after Jennie's sixteenth birthday, she walked home from school with Imani, Ricardo, and Lucy. Yesterday Gran had scraped together the ingredients for a chocolate cake. There were leftovers. The four of them teased Jennie, the oldest of them, about becoming decrepit. Lucy wadded together some bright, fallen leaves and threw them at Jennie; the leaves came apart in flight.

"Ugh!" Jennie cried. "I think there was dog poop on one of those!"

"Really?" Lucy said, "Sorry, sorry, sorry!"

Imani was laughing so hard she bent over. "Baptized with dog turd on the day she gets arthritis! Only you, Jennie!"

Ricardo began to bark-sing "Happy Birthday."

Jennie pretended to pummel Lucy. The air was autumn cool, the sunshine golden, the sky a brilliant blue. She was sixteen. She started to run, just for the sheer exuberance of it, her long thin legs leaping over the cracked sidewalk. "Try to catch me!" The others followed, shouting affectionate insults.

The door to her house, always kept locked, sagged open on one smashed hinge.

Jennie stopped cold, then leapt forward. "Gran!"

Ricardo caught and held her. "Don't go in! They could still be in there!"

Imani pulled out a cell phone and said, "911!"

Jennie broke free of Ricardo. Imani, stronger, tried to grab her but she was holding the phone in one hand, and Jennie broke free and ran into the house.

Gran lay in the kitchen in a pool of blood. She'd been shot through the head. Jennie screamed and knelt beside her. Ricardo and Lucy searched the house. Imani shouted into her phone.

It took the cops forty-five minutes to appear. By that time, Jennie had frozen. All of her was ice, unable to feel or think, unable to do anything but sit on the faded old sofa where her friends had dragged her and stare at the wall. If she moved, the ice would crack and she would shatter into a million pieces.

The cops, when they finally arrived, were gentle enough. They took statements, wrote down everything stolen: the ancient computer, the cash Gran kept in her sock drawer, the wedding ring from her finger. They took pictures of the body and the ransacked house. They asked if Jennie had a crematorium they could contact.

"That's it?" Ricardo demanded. "No forensic team? No detectives?"

"Kid," the older cop said, not as gentle as he'd been with the girls, "we got a terrorist shooting on I-5. Probably T-boc. Priorities."

"Get out," Imani's mother told them. Jennie didn't realize Mrs. Jones was there. When had that happened? There was something wrong with time, or maybe it didn't operate in ice.

She didn't know what happened next. She was at Imani's house, and then in a bed, and the ice had melted into a warm sea. She drifted on the soft waves, and slept. When she woke in the night, Mrs. Jones sat beside the bed in a chair with the stuffing coming out, a cat on her lap. She said something Jennie couldn't hear over the warm waves, now crashing on an unseen shore, and gave Jennie another pill.

Before she went under again, a clear thought rose from the blue haze of sea and

sky: Where had Imani gotten a cell phone?

\* \* \*

Gran had left a box of papers under her bed, in an old detergent box. The robbers had pulled them all out and scattered them on the floor, probably looking for money. Jennie gathered them all up and sat on Gran's bed, neatly covered with the fraying elephant-print quilt that had been there as long as Jennie could remember. Lucy, Imani, Imani's current boyfriend Eric, and two of Eric's buddies waited in the living room. Jennie wanted to do this alone.

Gran's body was gone. The blood was gone. Imani's mother invited Jennie to live with them and go next year to Jefferson High School with Imani, but Jennie was uncertain. Imani's cell phone had come from her brother with the Red Eagles, and apparently so did other small luxuries in Imani's house. It made Jennie uneasy, and Gran would have been furious. She'd tried so hard to keep Jennie away from anything to do with the gangs, to keep her safe.

Also, Jennie didn't like the way Michael looked at her. He wouldn't try anything, not with his sister's best friend . . . would he?

Although what else could Jennie do?

*Cora's tough. Like you.*

Jennie didn't feel tough. Grief gnawed at her mind, hesitated each of her steps, cracked her sleep into shards that pierced her whenever she turned over on the bed Imani insisted on giving up to her. Along with grief came guilt that she and Gran had fought so much the last few years, and resentment that Gran had told her so little. Then came guilt for the resentment. Gran had raised her when Cora wouldn't, had tried to keep Jennie safe, had done the best she knew how.

If only Jennie's ehomemory didn't replay every nasty thing she'd ever said to Gran, word for perfectly recalled word.

She turned to the papers spread over the bed.

Her birth certificate: Jennifer Nicole Flint, born October 25, 2024, in San Rafael, California, to Cora Emily Flint, father unknown.

Gran's birth certificate: Anna Melissa Murphy, born June 16, 1970 in Tacoma, Washington, to Cora Linda Murphy, father unknown.

A birth certificate for Cora Linda Murphy, born May 30, 1954 to Lewis Murphy and Darlene Murphy (Wilder) in Aberdeen, Washington. Jennie's mother was Cora Emily Flint; the trial information had said so. Gran must have named her daughter after her own mother. Had Gran gotten along with her mom better than with her daughter? Jennie would never know.

Another birth certificate: David John Flint, born August 3, 1968 in Aberdeen, Washington.

A marriage certificate: Anna Melissa Murphy to David John Flint, June 12, 1990.

A death certificate: David John Flint, August 1, 1997, cause of death: cancer.

This was more information than Jennie had ever gotten from Gran. Had Jennie's grandfather's medical bills been what Gran meant when she'd once said, "Between the Likkies and your grandfather, I lost everything"?

There was no birth certificate for Jennie's mother; Cora must have taken it with her. But there was a fourth certificate, and Jennie's hand flew to her mouth. Grace Samantha Flint, born January 18, 1991, in Tacoma, Washington, to Anna Melissa Flint (Murphy) and David John Flint.

Gran had had another child beside Jennie's mother?

*Cora saying in jail, "Give me some credit, Mom. But you never did, did you? Not me or Grace."*

And: "Who is Grace?"

*"Nobody," Gran said. "And don't ask again."*

Ricardo opened the bedroom door. "You okay, Jennie?"

"Yes. Go away."

He did, unoffended. Jennie picked up the last item scattered from the detergent box, a manila envelope soft-edged from handling. Her heart jumped when she saw, in Gran's neat block handwriting, CORA. Jennie opened the envelope.

A Valentine, much fancier than Jennie had ever seen: tiny red bows and cloth lace and an embossed picture of a girl in a hoop skirt and a boy in frock coat, kissing. Inside was a sugary love poem that ended, "Be mine forever." On top of the poem was written "To Cora" and on the bottom "Can't wait for the cabin trip tonight! Paul."

A hand-written note on lined yellow paper: "Watch the baby. Back when I feel like it. Cora."

A map—on paper, not digital—with a red line drawn along roads and a big heart drawn in red marker somewhere northeast of Lemberg, in the Olympic Mountains.

Why had Gran saved these things that must have belonged to Jennie's mother? The curt, rude note telling Gran to watch the baby—that baby must have been Jennie. But who was Paul? Was that Jennie's father? They must not have been married if he was sending her a note instead of just planning this trip together. Or maybe he wasn't Jennie's father at all.

"Where is my daddy?"

"I don't know and maybe Cora don't neither."

All at once, it was too much. Jennie couldn't breathe; the room was suffocating her. The room, the papers, everything. "I have to get away from here!"

"We can go to my house," Imani said. Jennie hadn't realized she stood in the doorway.

"No," Jennie said. "Can Michael get a car?"

The girls looked at each other. Jennie knew that Imani noticed the ambiguous verb. Michael did not own a car. The girls never discussed the Red Eagles.

Imani said carefully, "He would want something for it. Would you—"

"Not that," Jennie said.

"Okay," Imani said, blank-faced. "I'll arrange it."

"But I don't want Michael to come with us."

"Harder," Imani said.

"Can you do it? Please?"

"Okay. I'll think of something. But Jenn—where are we going?"

"On a cabin trip," Jennie said.

\* \* \*

When they arrived, there was almost nothing to see.

Jennie, Imani, Ricardo, Lucy, and Eric crowded into the driveway that Imani's brother had "gotten." Jennie asked no questions. She had never been out of Lemberg, and all the way along the potholed highway she stared silently out the window as the rickety, paint-peeling houses gave way to weedy fields and then, startlingly, to an enclave of big gleaming houses with green lawns and flowers, all surrounded by the faint shimmer of Q-energy. "Blingasses," Imani said.

Ten miles later, they passed through another town of deserted houses, burned stores, people squatting in shacks constructed from the charred wood and twisted metal of destroyed buildings. Jennie spoke for the first time in an hour. "What happened here?"

Ricardo, of course, knew. "A big FBI firefight with a T-boc cell a year ago."

"Why do the people stay? And what do they eat?"

"They hunt and fish and raid, mostly. They stay because they're stubborn."

Lucy said, "How many people were killed? Were there kids?"

Ricardo didn't answer. Imani said, "Fucking aliens. And nobody, even blingasses, still figured out why they're here."

Eric said, “The Likkies are wimps. They stay in their Q-shield in China and never fight back. Or even force anybody to trade. Somebody told me that force was against their religion.”

Ricardo said, “There’s all kinds of force,” and after that everybody grew quiet.

The car climbed into the Olympic Mountains, green with pine trees, red and gold with maples. A few drivie trucks passed them, and a few manual cars. After another hour there were no other vehicles.

“We’re almost to the Quinalt Nation,” Ricardo said. “A Native American reservation. They don’t welcome visitors.”

But the car stopped short of the Quinalt Nation. It took them up an unpaved road that became little more than a dirt track and finally disappeared altogether. Yet the car plowed on, crunching small bushes and thick-stemmed weeds, weaving between trees whose branches brushed heavily against the hastily closed windows. It stopped in a clearing beside a small tinkling waterfall. Two cabins stood in the woods, one burned nearly to the ground, the other weathered but intact. Jennie looked at the pile of charred wood and then at Ricardo.

Lucy said, “No, not a fire. This happened a long time ago. Look how soft the burned wood is, just falling apart. And that woodchuck burrow under it is old, too.”

The second cabin was unlocked. Inside was a bed infested with mice, a wood stove with a stack of cordwood beside it, shelves of canned goods, large jugs of water.

Eric said, “I heard about these—hikers’ rest stops. The National Forest built them and kept them stocked, when there was any money and anybody cared. But nobody’s been here for a long time.”

Imani said, “We can take some of these cans home.”

“No,” said Lucy, the rule follower. “That’s not what they’re for.”

Eric said, “Why not? You said yourself that no hikers come here any more.”

“But they might. We’re here, aren’t we?”

Imani, siding with Eric, said, “Don’t be stupid, Lucy.”

Jennie left them arguing and went outside to the burned cabin. Ricardo came up behind her.

Jennie said, “Something happened here.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. But something happened. I . . . hear it.”

He stepped closer to scan her face. “Hear it? How?”

“I don’t know. It’s not part of my . . . you know. ‘Hear’ isn’t the right word. But something happened, and my mother . . .”

“Your mother what?”

Jennie shook her head. “I don’t know.” She wrapped her arms around herself. “I’m cold. It’s not as warm here as in Lemberg.”

Ricardo took off his jacket and put it around her shoulders. The intimate, protective gesture brought sudden tears to Jennie’s eyes, which mortified her.

“Don’t mind me. I’m being weird.”

“You’re entitled,” Ricardo said, in such a detached tone that Jennie was oddly reassured. Detached was good. She wanted detachment for herself.

Instead she said again, “Something happened here, and it involved my mother.”

“Maybe she got pregnant with you here.”

She hadn’t thought of that. “Could be.” And then, “Ricardo, I want to go now.”

“I’ll tell the others.”

Nobody else wanted to leave. Imani and Lucy were still yelling at each other about canned goods. But Ricardo—bookish, ineffective, pedantic Ricardo—somehow persuaded them all into the car, which started back through the mountain forest.

When they reached Route 101, Eric produced from his oversized pockets three

cans of beef stew and one of something called Spaghetti-Os.

\* \* \*

In Gran's house, a woman waited with a man beside her. He held a gun. The woman stood as the five teens, surprised, stopped short in the living room. Eric and Imani tensed and moved in front of the others. Lucy shrank behind Ricardo. Jennie demanded, "Who are you? What are you doing here? How did you get in?"

"No one else is here," the woman said, "just me and my bodyguard. One needs a bodyguard in this incredibly awful place, *n'est-ce pas?* And I have a key."

A key? Jennie said again, "Who are you?"

The woman didn't answer. She was short and stocky, middle-aged, dressed in loose black pants and an elaborate green jacket that seemed to be made of cloth petals, gold wires, and real flowers. Her hair, very short, was dyed an improbable shade of red. She peered around the others to stare at beautiful Lucy. The bodyguard never took his eyes off Eric and Imani. Weapons that Jennie didn't recognize hung at his belt.

The woman said to Lucy, "Are you Jennifer Flint?"

"I'm Jennie Flint! And this is my house!"

The woman shifted her gaze to study Jennie. The study went on a long time. Finally she said, "Well, no, actually the house is mine, as next of kin. But I'm here to rescue you.

"I'm your Aunt Grace."

\* \* \*

"Don't go," Imani said. "Come live with us instead."

"You always said you wanted to get out of here," Lucy said wistfully. "I'd go. And if you don't like it with your aunt, you can always come back here."

Ricardo said, "It's a chance for an education you'll never get if you stay here."

Jennie said slowly, "I don't want to be a burden on your family, Imani. I do want an education. And this house isn't even mine. She has a key from some lawyer I didn't know existed."

Imani said, "She's a—"

"No, she's not a blingass. She works. She told me."

Imani said, looking levelly and defiantly into Jennie's eyes, "Okay, go. But I'll give you my phone number. She looks enough of a blingass to have phones. You can call me if you don't like it, and we'll come get you."

They had never discussed Imani's phone, or the origin of the drivie her brother had produced, or what Michael did in the Red Eagles. But if Jennie could phone her friends, and if they would come get her whenever she wanted . . .

Lucy repeated, "You always said you want to get away from here."

Grace called from the living room, "Hurry up, Jennie, and get your things. On second thought, if they look like what you're wearing now, don't bother."

Jennie went back to the living room. "I have some questions first."

"Oh, *cherie*, not here. I'll answer anything you like in the car, but not in this place. It's worse than I remember."

"Then why didn't you send money to help us? Gran was your mother!"

"For decades I was barely supporting myself. Also, I hated her. You, I didn't even know existed."

The simplicity and directness of this silenced Jennie.

"She beat me and imprisoned me, all the while I lived here. If she was better to you, well, that's very nice. Now, for the last time—are you coming away with me?"

Ricardo said, very low, "You can go to college."

She heard the longing in his voice. He wasn't thinking of Jennie's education but of Lemberg High, where he and Lucy and Imani would go next year. It had no sequestered Gifted and Talented program, only violence and drugs and the gangs and teachers who had mostly given up.

It would be hard to leave Lemberg. But harder, maybe, to stay.

*Cora's tough. Like you.*

Grace said, more gently, "Jennie?"

"I'll go with you," Jennie said. "Thank you."

\* \* \*

#### IV.

"I left home as soon as I could," Grace said. "Mom and I fought like . . . oh, the printer's fabbing the first dress. We'll have you out of those terrible clothes in just a few minutes."

Jennie didn't know what to answer, so she just watched the 3-D printer hum softly in the strange, rich room: Grace's "workroom."

"My designs are just starting to sell to simply everybody," Grace said, "after simply decades of work. Amarantha Talcott-Byers bought a pair of buckeyepaper pants! Imagine!"

Jennie couldn't. She had no idea what buckeyepaper was, or Amarantha Talcott-Byers, but explanation was not Grace's style.

She hadn't explained the sudden appearance outside Seattle of lush green fields tended by robots. Grace didn't know who owned the agribusiness, or where the robots came from, or what the crops were. Even at the tremendous speed of the luxurious drivie, which whooshed past things so fast that they blurred but without jolting its passengers over the many potholes, Jennie recognized corn. Although these tall, straight plants, heavy with ears still unharvested in late October, were nothing like the spindly ones people tried to grow in Lemberg. All Jennie could get out of Grace was an airy wave of her manicured hand and a vague, "Genemod. Or maybe alien tech."

She said slightly more when they drove over a bridge above a shining river. "That used to be a polluted mess, you know. Alien biotech just cleaned it right up. So lucky!"

"Did you . . . are you . . . do you work with alien tech?"

"My work! Oh, no, *cherie*—your grandmother didn't tell you anything, close-mouthed old bitch . . . no, you don't like that, do you? Sorry, I won't do it again since you're mourning the old—well, I guess people can change. I certainly did! But Mom knew I was trying to become a fashion designer because for a while, not right away but later, I did make duty visits. Sporadically, anyway, you know how it is. But, no, I didn't get alien help . . . well, maybe a little through my first husband. I started my line with the money left me by my second husband, God curse his hateful bones."

And that was all the personal or family history Jennie could get from Grace. All she would say about Jennie's mother was that she'd been awful, spiteful, and bratty, "making my duty visits home even worse than they would have been, until I just stopped them altogether. A terrible person. Cora's in prison, you know."

"I know."

"I'm sure she deserved it, she—oh, *cherie*, there I go again, I am sorry! But Cora hated me, and I'm afraid it was mutual."

Grace seemed to hate a lot of people—her dead husbands, her mother and younger sister, other designers, most of her customers. It had taken Jennie only a few hours to realize that Grace's flighty manner and affected speech were deliberate, masking a much more complicated person.

Well, Jennie herself was different underneath than on the surface. Lucy, following every rule and worrying that she might break one, nonetheless had the grit to keep herself in a program difficult for her. Imani's steady loyalty went hand-in-hand with a dangerous recklessness. And Ricardo, the antisocial nerd, was the only one who'd

ever noticed Jennie's ecomemory.

Jennie tried again. "Tell me more about my mother, please."

"Nothing to tell, *cherie*." But then, with venom, "She's the reason I stopped going to visit. All our *mommy* cared about was Cora, Cora, Cora. I never counted. Once I did loan Cora money, after I had some, just to spite Mom. Cora probably spent it on drugs and booze. Although later she could always get money from men, with her looks. Luck of the genetic draw. But I'm the successful one, aren't I? Now don't ask me about her again."

In bed that night, repeating Grace's words, seeing her anger about her much younger sister and the jealousy that so clearly underlay it, Jennie felt astonishment. It all looked so much like any of her classmates' pained fury when a teacher or a handsome boy favored Lucy, as all of them inevitably did. Exactly the same.

Astonishment gave way to an unsettling question. Cora was so much younger than Grace, and Gran's husband had died after just seven years of marriage. So who was Cora's father? Did Gran have a lover?

Jennie couldn't imagine it. But she vowed to remember that people were more complicated than they looked.

\* \* \*

It wasn't just Grace that astonished Jennie. Everything did.

The house stood in an enclave of other houses, some new and some old. Grace's was old: "Built in the late Triassic, *cherie*. But *c'est la vie*." Long and narrow, it stood on a hillside of much larger homes, the whole surrounded by a wall of shimmering Q-energy. The enormous houses had columns and porticos and added-on sections that, Grace said, were offices: "No one wants to commute who doesn't have to—getting shot at is so difficult." A few houses were enormous, surrounded by gardens tended by robots. Robots also followed around the children who played freely on elaborate equipment, running and shouting on their way to the small private school.

Grace's house was one long room, plus two tiny bedrooms and two bathrooms. The long room was jammed with mannequins, computers, three-D printers, tubs of plastic and metal, bolts of cloth, rolls of wire, tables cluttered with objects and machines Jennie could not even name. The house had a kitchen, but Grace never cooked. Dinner was delivered daily from Chef of Chefs by a transportbot, a distant and stupider cousin of a drivie. The kitchen held only coffee, yogurt, and a green drink made of seaweed that looked awful and tasted delicious. "Super-nutrients, *cherie*. Yum!"

"Is it from the Likkies?"

"No. Homegrown. And we don't use that vulgar word here, *cherie*. The Lictorians are the best thing that ever happened to Earth."

"But—"

"There really isn't any 'but,' you know. Their tech has just saved the environment, revitalized trade, brought us the safety of Q-shields, made everything cheaper due to automation."

Grace's tone had changed completely; she'd become a different, sterner person. The fake French and scattered manner had disappeared, soft snow melting off rock. But Jennie didn't give up. "All that put a lot of people out of work. Most people."

"Oh, well, there's always a winnowing out of those people, the less fit ones, isn't there? Or didn't that school teach you Darwin? When I was there, it was all creationism. I'm so sorry you had to attend such a backward and barbaric school. But you're here now. Take off that unbelievably ugly garment, and put on this dress." She held out the dress from the 3-D printer.

Jennie thought of the Gifted and Talented program at Lemberg. Of Ricardo reading his beloved history books, and the sacrifices his father made to buy them. Of Gran, scraping and scrounging to buy an old computer for the news, to buy ingredients for a

birthday cake, to spend precious money to attend Cora's trial.

*Those people.*

*Backward and barbaric.*

"Oh," Grace said, "I've offended you again. I'm sorry, *cherie*. I just have to watch my tongue, don't I? We're doing tact, not truth."

Jennie blurted, before she knew she was going to say anything at all, "Why are the aliens on Earth?"

"To trade, of course. The dress—"

"But humans don't have anything good enough to trade for all . . . all this."

"Jennie," Grace said, "do I look like an alien? How should I know what they want? Supposedly they're collecting Chinese art, or something. Now please, I designed this dress especially for you!"

"I'm sorry," Jennie said, awkwardly and insincerely. What was she sorry for? She didn't know. It was all too bewildering.

She turned her back and slipped out of her loose jeans and patched top. Her underpants were faded but not yet stretched out. She was so small-breasted that she'd never needed a bra. The dress felt odd, light on top but stiff at the hem, which hit just above her knees. She looked into one of the room's ubiquitous mirrors and blinked.

Although Grace said the dress was made of plastic, it looked like cloth, a deep blue flower-printed cloth with a lustrous sheen. One shoulder had bunched-up cloth that made a flower; the other had small cut-outs that wandered from neck to hem. The bottom of the dress was a narrow, heavy but flexible ring of gray plastic.

"It's not done, of course. The cut-outs will be backed with buckeypaper in, I think, peach. Yes, definitely peach. And the bottom will be wired."

Jennie had no idea what Grace was talking about. She looked taller in the dress, and sort of . . . elegant?

Grace lifted the thin mane of Jennie's lank hair. "You know, with the right cut and color, and your pale coloring and negligible build, you should aim for the ethereal, floating-above Earth look . . . yes. Oh, *mon Dieu*, I've got a fabulous idea!"

"What?" Jennie said, absorbed by her image in the mirror. She didn't look pretty, exactly—she would never be Lucy—but she looked interesting. Different. The cut-outs in the dress embarrassed her, but Grace had said they'd be filled in with . . . something.

Grace said, "Walk across the room, turn, and come back."

"Why?"

"Just do it, *cherie*."

Jennie did. Grace said, "Good enough. And you can learn. You don't know this—and how could you, living in that backward—oh, sorry again—living in Lemberg, but live runway models are coming back. Everyone is getting bored with those tiresome androids, let alone holo-projections. Buyers want to see clothes on someone not perfect, someone *new*. That could be you, Jennie. Military is out, and you're an entirely different look, pared down and . . . let me see your bones. Yes, good bones under that odd face."

She took Jennie's face in her hands and turned it this way and that. "Yes, with very pale makeup, or maybe even barefaced except for the eyes . . . But this bright blue is wrong for you. I'll reprint the dress. We can start with the Bellevue Enclave Regional Show, next month. But we need to work hard every day until then, and you can't gain even an *ounce*."

"You mean . . . me? A clothes model?"

"Yes, you, Jennifer Flint! No, you need a new name, and it can't be mine. Too incestuous. We'll think of something that fits."

"But, Grace—you said I could go to school."

"The only school in the enclave goes up to eighth grade, and you're older than that,

non? Older kids board at some prep school in Seattle. It's very expensive, and I'm not rich, you know. But if you really want to go . . . however, I just got you, *cherie*, and don't want to lose you so instantly! If you become my in-house model and are successful, you can be with me and earn money for both of us. Win-win! We'll split your fees 60/40. In my favor, of course. I'm the designer."

Money.

Money that she, Jennie, could earn. She could send some to Imani, to Lucy, to Ricardo. Imani could separate herself from whatever involvement she had with the Red Eagles. Ricardo could buy books. Lucy—who knew what Lucy wanted, except to get out of Lemberg. They all wanted that. And maybe if there was enough money . . .

"How much does a model make? If I'm successful, I mean?"

Grace told her.

Anger flashed through Jennie. That much wasted on showing off dresses, while in Lemberg . . .

The anger didn't show. She was learning.

"Fifty-fifty, Grace. I'm the model."

\* \* \*

Jennie walked the runway, a temporary wooden platform in a hotel ballroom in Bellevue, Washington. The sparse audience sat on gilt chairs: "Mostly local buyers and Microsoftie wives but don't worry, *cherie*, there are plenty of remote watchers, and what really counts is the digital buzz." Jennie had no time to worry; she was too busy remembering all Grace's instructions: "Smile faintly, everyone is bored with military fierceness. Look enigmatic and floaty, but not too fragile. You're a wispy cloud with the potential to be a thunderstorm."

Looking like a wispy, possibly lightning-laden cloud was not easy, especially with camdrones buzzing overhead and on both sides of the runway, behind an audience she didn't dare look at.

"She's *real*," someone in the audience said.

"I think . . . yes, she's very fresh . . ."

Weren't they going to look at the dress? To Jennie it seemed miraculous, weird, and vaguely embarrassing. The top was made of light, cream-colored "vat-grown leather" sewn in long, irregular strips. The leather was threaded with invisible copper wires sheathed in polymer sleeves. A tiny, hidden battery shifted the colors of the polymers within a very narrow range of cream colors. The same hidden battery powered the slight breeze that kept her short skirt in light, subtle motion. Her legs were sheathed in cream "spray-on-clothing" above bare feet. Grace had dyed her lank hair white and cut it short with one long curled tress down her back. She wore no make-up on her pale skin, but her light blue eyes had been painted so that they somehow looked enormous under six sets of white eyelashes.

She was a cloud, she was the wind in the cloud, and when at the end of the runway—this was the embarrassing part—she flipped up her skirt, the panties underneath were a mottled, threatening gray.

"Aaaahhhh?" went the audience. But they leaned forward.

Backstage, Grace's assistant hustled Jennie into her next outfit while two androids took their turn on the runway, showing off a different designer's clothes. Jennie found the androids creepy, moving like humans but their facial expressions subtly off and their polymer faces too perfect. Grace studied her mobile, grinning. "Seventy-eight favorable response! And climbing!"

Jennie walked the runway again. She felt the interest of the crowd and heard someone say, "Who is she?"

"Grace Flint Designs."

"No, the model."

“Oh . . . the program says ‘JJ.’”

Jennifer Jason, the name Grace had given her. This time she wore wide, loose pants in pale apricot, a simple bandeau, and delicate silver necklaces. The pants floated around Jennie, although Grace had told her to change her walk. “Long strides, with confidence! For this one, contrast is all. And remember to make your turn at the end of the runway *very sharp*.”

Jennie did. The abrupt motion released a cloud of scent like leaves after rain. Jennie had pointed out that no one watching remotely would smell the perfume, but Grace had only smiled.

“That’s the point, *cherie*. Make them wonder what they’re missing. That microbial fabric is utterly new.”

“Aaaaahhhh!”

The next two models weren’t even there; they were holoprojections from designers who had not made the trip to Bellevue. Jennie’s confidence grew with each outfit. For her last turn on the runway, she picked out a man in the audience, looked straight at him, and lowered her head to look up at him through her lashes, as she’d seen Lucy do.

Everyone turned to see whom she was targeting.

When the show was over, three live photographers galloped backstage, where camdrones weren’t permitted. “JJ! Look this way! Turn your head to the left! What do you want to say to our viewers?”

Grace hustled Jennie into a small anteroom, closed the door, and hugged her. “Fabulous! I knew it! Data mining said everything was absolutely ripe for a change, and I’m going to be it!”

It seemed to Jennie that she, not Grace’s clothes, had been what people responded to. But Grace must know this business. Jennie felt a little dazed. It was too much, too fast. Too different.

“Do I have to talk to reporters?”

“No! You say nothing! You’re enigmatic, elusive, unattainable. People think they can pin you down, but no one can.” She looked thoughtful. “Maybe you should fail to show up for a few bookings. Not right away, but eventually.”

“I want to show up,” Jennie said firmly. “I want the money.”

“Now that is the sort of thing you *don’t* say! You are above monetary concerns.”

Nobody was above monetary concerns. Jennie did not say this. As long as she got paid, as long as she could both save money and send some to the friends she loved, she would do whatever Grace told her to. Not talking to reporters was a relief. She was sixteen and she knew she didn’t understand this world, but she could learn to use it.

*Cora’s tough. Like you.*

“Grace, when do I get paid?”

\* \* \*

Grace loaned her out. She walked runways in Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, British Columbia. Designers flew her, always accompanied by Grace and two assistants, in luxury that Jennie hadn’t known existed. Her picture on fashion sites. Robocams and live photographers photographed each of her carefully rationed, completely silent appearances.

“JJ! JJ! Turn this way!”

She modeled clothes in spidersilk, in metallics, in microbial fabrics, in burlap (a market failure), in wool so fine she felt naked. She modeled clothes that changed color, that heated or cooled, that opened coded e-locks, that talked or played music, that projected electromagnetic auras (another failure—it blurred the lines of bodies too much). She modeled clothes that did nothing but hang there, in exquisite and expensive folds of embroidered fabric, durable and organically grown and guaranteed not to fade.

"JJ! Look here!"

No matter what the garment or fabric, Grace kept Jennie's look the same: pale, ethereal, fresh, elusive. Jennie always wore the same make-up, although with different hairstyles. She was a brand.

"JJ!"

Other designers began to use live models, first a trickle and then a flood. None of them achieved Jennie's popularity.

One night, when the lines around Grace's eyes were particularly pronounced and her lids drooped with exhaustion, Grace said abruptly, "It won't last, you know. It never does."

"I know," Jennie said. Her aunt continued to underestimate her. She had researched models on the state-of-the-art computer in her room, going all the way back to someone named Gia seventy years ago. Gia had come to a bad end. Over the nearly two years Jennie had been with Grace, she'd lost both her nervousness and her dazzlement about the life she was leading. She didn't tell Grace what she now thought: Fashion was ridiculous.

But Grace had always been kind to her. Jennie didn't want to hurt her aunt's feelings.

And Jennie's bank account continued to grow.

\* \* \*

"Lucy! How are you?"

"I'm good." Stiff, distant. Lucy's face on the screen, more beautiful than ever, didn't smile.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." And then, obviously forced, "How are you?"

"Good. Well, too busy. I . . . something here isn't right."

Lucy said nothing.

"Can I speak to Imani?"

"She's not here."

Jennie sat down. She'd been pacing in her bedroom, excited to finally make this call. Usually she spoke to her friends every week, and in Lemberg they gathered on Tuesday nights to talk to her.

Cell phones were the first thing she'd sent Lucy, Imani, and Ricardo, from that first precious paycheck. She'd talked to at least one of them every night. Gradually it became twice a week, then once. The talks became shorter, less informative. Jennie sensed that talking about her life with Grace sounded like bragging, so she said little, listened more. That made them say less. They must have seen her online, however. Did they think she was as silly as she thought fashion was? Did they resent her life? She didn't know how to ask.

"Lucy, I know I missed a week talking to everybody, but you wouldn't believe how busy Grace keeps me. And I have a tutor instead of high school and she keeps me incredibly occupied, and then I have to go to New York to do Grace's fall collection, only—"

"You're going to New York?"

"Well, yeah, I have to because—"

"And you haven't once come to Lemberg?"

So that was it. "Grace won't let me!"

Lucy laughed, an ugly sound coming from that lovely face. "You're almost eighteen. And rich. You can't come to visit?"

Lucy didn't understand. Fall was hectic. Spring was impossible. Grace needed her. Jennie's tutor was brutal.

Lucy said, "Forget it. And don't send any more money. You don't need us, we don't need you."

"I need you! I do!"

"You don't even know what's happening in the real world!" Lucy started to cry.

The sound of a door opening, then closing, and Ricardo's face appeared on the phone. "Jennie?"

"What's going on? Tell me, please!"

"She's upset. We're all upset. Imani's brother Michael and her mother are both dead."

A huge tremor ran through Jennie's body, leaving her too weak to sit. She lay back on the bed. "Was it . . . was it the gangs?"

"Nobody knows except maybe Imani, and she left town before the cops could get to her."

Jennie couldn't get her brain to work. It refused to produce connections, so that each fact stood separate, floating in a void. Imani disappeared. Kind Mrs. Jones dead. Michael, who'd gotten the drive that took Jennie to the mountain cabin where her mother had maybe conceived Jennie.

She said, "I'll be there tomorrow." She had a full schedule, but screw that.

"No," Ricardo said. "Don't come."

"Why . . . what . . ."

"If you come here, this will be a media riot. Right now it's just another gang shooting. The cops'll go through the motions and turn back to chasing T-boc. But if you come, reporters will start digging and force law enforcement to dig, too. And they'll hunt down Imani and attract death threats and all the other online garbage to the rest of us. Don't come here."

"But I—"

"Don't come. And don't call. Not for a long while."

Ricardo knew what his words were doing to her. She saw it on his thin face, saw in his eyes behind the lens implants that Jennie had paid for, heard it in his voice, deeper now and sad with compassion. No good to her now.

Nothing was any good now.

Carefully, as if her fingers might break or the phone might, she ended the call. The whole rest of the night she lay, still in her clothes, on top of her bedcovers. She didn't sleep. She didn't think. She was pure emotion: misery and loss and regret and a simmering anger that, as the night progressed, contracted itself into a hard ball inside her, durable and organically grown and guaranteed not to fade.

\* \* \*

Jennie's popularity peaked. There were fewer bookings, less online buzz. The new sensation was a sixteen-year-old Russian émigré with a straight-on stare that could ignite forests, and suddenly fashion was all about Cossack, with an ironic twist. Sales of Grace's designs fell off with the acceleration of free fall.

"That's the business," Grace said, shrugging. "We had a good run. And there's still one more show. New York."

"Yes," Jennie said. She'd heard nothing from anyone in Lemberg. The pain never went away, but during the day she hid it well. She was learning to hide a lot of things well. She owed that to Grace.

*Do what you have to, but be prepared for the shit you'll get doing it.*

Jennie searched online for Ricardo. She found nothing for him, nor for Imani or Lucy. Had they used some of the money she'd sent them to buy software that masked their online presences? Probably. Any hacker could get around those masks, but Jennie was no hacker. She gave up.

She did learn more, from Grace's occasional bitter comments, about Gran's treatment of Grace. Gran had been harsh, even harsher than with Jennie, and Grace remembered the harshness as deliberate cruelty. That and her jealousy of Cora, so much prettier, even when Jennie had seen her in jail. Grace had chosen to remember

only the bad things about Gran. Jennie wanted to remember it all, bad and good. Gran had been harsh but not brutal. She'd been trying to keep Jennie safe, as she had not been able to do with Cora. Gran had been a whole person, not the caricature that Grace had made of her.

Just as Jennie was not the caricature her ex-friends apparently made of her, or the one the fashion blogs did.

*"JJ's tiresome, dated look of faux aloofness."*

"When New York is done," Jennie said to Grace, "I want to take the college admission exam for special students and go back to school. I think I can get a scholarship to University of Washington, and I can afford the rest. You won't have to pay for anything. I'm deeply grateful to you for everything, Grace, but I need to get away from here."

Grace said, "Well, I knew you'd turn on me eventually. Everybody does."

"I'm not—"

"Do whatever you want, Jennie. It's no business of mine. You can leave right after the New York show."

"Grace, don't be so—"

"I'm not going to discuss it any more. Especially not when you sound just like my mother."

\* \* \*

In New York, Jennie saw her first alien.

For nearly two decades, the Lictorians had rarely left China, where they'd first landed. They "traded" their highly selective tech with Chinese firms and left it to them to sell it to the rest of the world, with the result that China was Earth's leading economy, strongest military power, and most advanced society. The Lictorians didn't seem to care about the international imbalances they'd created, or the income inequalities within countries. They did say that if China, or any other nuclear party, began an international war, they would end it. No one wanted to find out what that meant.

The "art" they collected showed neither discrimination nor interest in learning about Terran cultural history. In return for immensely profitable scientific advances, they acquired butterflies embroidered on silk, Ming vases, six inch high terra cotta warriors of the kind sold to tourists, a Cezanne that had found its way to a rich Singapore entrepreneur, a plaster bust of Jackie Chan, a gold Buddha, an amateur drawing of what was presumed to be the Lictorian ambassador, machine-made statues in inferior jade. And now one of them was coming to New York, upon its (his? her? their? no one knew) request, to watch fifty designers present their fall line in Skylight Clarkson Square.

The huge, ageing space was being renovated. Fashion Week, a tradition formerly in decline, was now the most fought-over ticket in the United States. Two weeks earlier, hard-liner President Blake Castleman had been inaugurated; tickets to see an alien watch models went for more money, more bargaining and chicanery and pleading and log-rolling, than the inauguration. Politicians who could not tell a drop waist from a flutter sleeve wanted to attend. Security, which included a Q-energy wall around five blocks of SoHo, cost billions. Residents, galleries, restaurants were all evacuated, compensated, and rehoused for three days.

After the show, the Lictorian would make its first visit to the White House to discuss establishing a Lictorian embassy in the United States. The president wanted the embassy in D.C. The Lictorians wanted it in San Francisco, presumably because it was closer to China.

President Castleman was reported to be offended.

Everyone who could not score a ticket to Clarkson Square was furious.

The NYPD was frazzled with preparation.

The fashion world was electric with rumors.

The other two models with Grace said they felt sick to their stomachs with nervousness. Jennie was calm. She was leaving the business. She didn't care about the clothes being shown. She was curious to see a Lictorian, but the alien had nothing to do with her life or her uncertain future.

*"Jennie, you're the least political person I know."*

*"That's probably true, given how few people you know."*

If he'd left Lemberg, by now Ricardo probably knew a lot more people than Jennie did. For two years, Grace had kept her isolated and "safe," as Gran had done before her. College would be different.

In New York, Grace and her models were searched so thoroughly that even Jennie, accustomed to changing outfits backstage in front of a crowd of milling people, was embarrassed. The youngest girl burst into tears during the body-cavity search. Their luggage and the entire fall collection went through security procedures that further frenzied Grace. "Be careful with that . . . no, you can't . . . don't you understand that there are electronics in that dress? No, you can't!"

They did. It took a whole day before everything was cleared, loaded onto a giant copter, and flown to SoHo. None of Grace's assistants had been allowed to make the trip; Grace would have to share FBI-approved make-up artists, hairdressers, and emergency tailors with the other forty-nine designers.

Rumors said that the Lictorians would buy someone's entire line and have it adapted to their alien bodies. No, they would buy everyone's line for a museum on their home planet. No, they wouldn't buy anything, just gaze at the clothes. No, they weren't interested in the clothes at all, they were studying high-caste social rituals—didn't you ever hear of anthropology?

Jennie walked the runway. She wore a floaty, thin dress of lilac spidersilk, invisibly wired with movement-sensitive gestures. A flick of her wrist turned on the light display lining the sides of the runway; a turn-out of her lean hip started music playing. It was an old idea, and Jennie's was an old look. Grace had clung to the pale, enigmatic elusiveness with exaggerated eyes, and it bored the audience.

Looking straight ahead, she didn't see the alien in the audience. At the end of the runway, as Jennie made her turn, the spidersilk dress floated out behind her and chimed softly.

Bolts of electricity shot out from the light installations beside the runway. Jennie's dress caught fire.

Instantly, not thinking, she tore it off her body. Some of the other models on the runway and audience in the first row were not so lucky. The model walking behind Jennie screamed as she struggled with the jeweled buttons of a fitted, Cossack-inspired jacket. Jennie, naked except for her panties, knocked the girl down and rolled her, putting out the fire.

People screamed and shoved, trying to get away from the runway. The sparks had stopped, but acrid smoke made a haze of the room. Jennie, leaping from the stage to help another smoking person, landed beside the alien, its head enclosed in a plastic bubble. The Lictorian was tall, with head, arms, and legs. (Ricardo telling her "It's an optimum symmetrical design, you can see it in all kinds of mammalian species.") The arms ended in tentacles. Bald, wide eyes, no nose, no lips on its slit-like mouth. It wore a long, loose white robe thick enough to hide anything underneath. All this Jennie noticed in the brief second before it said to her, "The machinery was hacked."

Incongruously, Jennie laughed: this alien from some unknowable culture could recognize computer hacking! Later, she was deeply ashamed of that laugh in the midst of pain and chaos.

The FBI asked about it when they "debriefed" her about what the alien had said to her, what she'd said back, everything she'd seen, even though surveillance was

ubiquitous. "Why did you laugh?"

"I don't know."

"Was it your impression—help me here, Jennie—that the alien had known about the hacking before it occurred?"

She had no idea what the alien had or had not known. It was unnecessary to talk to her—unnecessary to talk to any of the models or audience or organizers, because seconds after the hack ended Fashion Week, the government's cyber-experts had traced the source and arrested two men, eighteen-year-old Jeremy Strople and twenty-two-year-old Albert Selby. Both software wizards, they were T-boc.

Jennie, shaken, flew back to Seattle with Grace and the other two models. Grace was torn between elation at the publicity and fury that part of her collection had been destroyed. "I hope those T-boc turds are executed!"

They were. The new President Castleman took full advantage of the "terrorist attack that puts anyone, anywhere, in danger even in your own homes." His hardline Congress declared martial law. The superbly trained and outfitted United States Army would make war on T-boc.

Strople and Selby gave up the names of the other members of their T-boc cell. The liberal press screamed that torture had been used. T-boc, which had grown stronger and more numerous each year, had been conducting terrorism in the United States for nearly a decade. Castleman made an example of the hackers.

He instituted public execution, and the two were hanged on live TV.

The following month, Jennie began the spring quarter at the University of Washington in Seattle. Grace kissed her perfunctorily and turned back to her sketching screen without a word.

\* \* \*

## V.

Jennie loved college. So many people, so much interesting information, so much ease of acing tests. She remembered everything word-for-word that any teacher, any audio program, and Ricardo had ever said to her. She listened to her textbooks and the contents were hers. The campus was beautiful.

And shrunken. College enrollment everywhere was low in a country where half of adults had lost their jobs to automation and alien tech. Without a rare scholarship, only the well-off could send their children to a school like UW. Entire buildings on campus were closed. Everyone not tenured had been let go, replaced by software equipped with machine learning. Cultural and sporting events were kept to a minimum. The university concentrated on science and engineering programs, where it could obtain government and corporate grants.

Jennie was a film studies major.

She knew she was smart enough for the STEM programs, but she had zero interest. Movies, on the other hand, had always fascinated her. She'd watched everything Gran had allowed and their ancient computer had supported, mostly old film. At Grace's, the world of contemporary and holo movies had occupied Jennie's few spare hours.

"Film?" said Mike, whom she'd met on her first day. Freshmen always formed quick alliances, panicked at having no friends. Most such cliques didn't last, but a month into the quarter, Jennie still took meals and study sessions with Mike, Deirdre, Ava, and Cole, none of whom recognized her as a Grace Flint Designs model. Or without family. Or careful with her money, which none of them were. Jennie knew they continued to accept her because she was intelligent, dressed like them (Grace's legacy), and listened well. They were also intrigued by the enigmatic quality she had perfected as JJ. Jennie

looked as if she had secrets (she did), and in their courteous, indirect way, they wanted to know what those secrets were. All five of them met daily for lunch at The Place, a private restaurant within the shielded UW Enclave.

“Why film?” Mike repeated. “If you want to be an actress—” he sounded doubtful “—why not the drama department?”

“I don’t want to be an actress. I’m not sure yet what I want to do in film, but something.”

“Okay,” Mike said, still doubtful. He took a bite of his sandwich.

“I might want to make a movie about the Lictorians.”

Ava laughed. “Like *Star Savior*? God, that was terrible.”

Deirdre said, “I thought it had some good moments.”

Cole said, “Outweighed by heavy-handedness. Not to mention really bad performances. You’d think that our aliens had wiped all traces of acting talent.”

Deirdre protested, “You have to admit that Ryan Gosling was good.”

“Ryan Gosling is ancient and should retire.”

They began to argue about Ryan Gosling. Mike still studied Jennie. He said, “Jennie—no offense, but people who get films made usually have aggressive, tough personalities.”

*Cora is tough. So are you.*

Jennie gave him her enigmatic, JJ smile.

Annoyed by her silence, Mike said, “Besides, the world doesn’t need another preachy film about how wonderful the Lictorians are. We already know that.”

Cole said, “Maybe her film won’t be preachy.”

Mike turned stubborn. “There’s nothing new to be said about the Lictorian miracle. They saved the country, yes—but truth alone doesn’t make good movies.”

Deirdre said, “You should write a part in it for Ryan Gosling.” She made a face at Cole.

“Sure,” Mike said, “he could be the doddering old man who spouts pap about how we all should just hand over our money to the unwashed masses, until there is no more money to hand over and capitalism is destroyed.”

“No,” Ava said, “make him the inept T-boc killer taken out by the Army before the title even comes up.”

“He’s still too good-looking to be T-boc,” Deirdre said. “Too clean-looking. You need an ugly, mean-looking actor.”

They began to suggest actors. Jennie said, “I might want to make a movie from T-boc’s point of view.”

Abrupt silence.

She continued. “Not exclusively, of course. But balanced. Giving both sides.”

Mike said flatly, “There is no other side.”

“I don’t mean that T-boc was right.” *Her dress catching fire, the model behind her screaming as Jennie rolled her on the runway and the girl’s dress smoked and burned.* “I just meant that movies, like literature, are stronger when both sides are shown having strong motives. Like . . . T-bocs are desperate to find a place in an economy that’s shut them out, and . . .”

“So they blow up that economy?” Mike’s eyes drilled into hers.

“I only meant—”

“To give T-boc *any* voice is to give them credibility,” Ava said. She stood. “I have a class.”

Jennie knew Ava’s schedule. She had no class. “Ava, please don’t—”

“My family is flying down to San Francisco for the opening of the Lictorian embassy,” Ava said. “You’re going, too, aren’t you, Cole? Are you going, Jennie? Was your family invited?”

Jennie said nothing.

"Probably not," Ava said. "If you're defending T-boc scum."

"I wasn't—"

"Leave her alone," Cole said. "She was talking about movies, not real life. She wasn't defending T-boc. And you don't even know what her hypothetical movie would be like."

Ava said, "I know ungrateful stupidity when I hear it. Line up every single T-boc against a wall and shoot 'em all. Along with anyone supporting them." Ava stalked off.

Cole turned to Jennie. "She'll get over it, Jennie. She lost a brother to a T-boc raid, you know."

"I didn't know," Jennie said.

"Of course you didn't." Cole took her hand.

"Oho," said Deirdre. And then, "It's okay, Jennie. I'll talk to Ava."

Mike took another bite of his sandwich.

Deirdre said, "Well, whatever you guys think, Ryan Gosling is still hot. I *like* older men."

\* \* \*

Jennie and Cole became lovers. He was experienced and skilled, and she discovered that sex could feel good—very good. That it could be fun, filled with jokes and laughter and light conversation during spooning after orgasm. But always light—Cole applied his natural sarcasm to superficial topics, or else exaggerated serious topics so much that they became superficial. He was funny, sexy, and as elusive as Jennie herself, but she didn't sense in him anything to be elusive about.

Sometimes she wondered what Ricardo was doing now.

Mike and Ava still accepted her in the group because Cole and Deirdre did. Still, she had fun. Life with the rich looked different from this side of the runway. They traveled to Victoria, Canada, for the weekend. They coptered to the Cascade Mountains and hiked and camped for four days, the most luxurious camping ever; robots carried their gear, set up their plastiform tents, and were prepared to defend them from any bears that happened to be hungry. At one point, a transportbot carried Ava, who was small and tired. Around the campfires, talk swirled around Jennie of a life she hadn't had: prep school and hyperplane trips to Europe and exotic sports: lacrosse and tennis and horse racing. Jennie had never even seen a horse.

Jennie said little. But by the campfire, Cole held his arm around her. The air had been sprayed with one of the products owned and manufactured by Cole's family, an aerosol embedded with nanochips that stayed suspended for hours, giving off signals that repelled insects. "You wouldn't believe," Cole said, "what we have to pay to the Chinese to license the Lictorian tech."

The cold mountain air smelled of pine. Overhead the summer triangle glittered: Deneb and Vega and Altair. The mountain lake, cleansed as part of the Lictorian-tech environmental cleanup, gave a shining reflection of the waxing moon.

The group sang camp songs that Jennie had never heard. They passed around a bottle of twenty-year-old Scotch. Later, in their tent, she and Cole made tender and only slightly drunken love. In the morning, the sun dappled the forest trail. It was the most beautiful thing Jennie had ever seen.

Summer ended. Too soon, the autumn quarter drew to a close with frantic studying. Jennie got used to the sight of Cole in his AR study cubicle, grabbing at the air as he took down invisible notes from an invisible wall or reached for an app on a shelf that was not there. He laughed at her using just an old-fashioned tablet with audio capacity, and she gave him her enigmatic smile.

But Cole was not stupid. He said to her, the night before her final in Evolution of

Holography, “The way you study—you’re a selective savant, aren’t you. For echomemory.”

*“You can’t ever do that again, not with my words or anybody else’s. Do you understand? Anything different can be used against you, and you already—”* But Gran’s words had been so long ago, and what difference could it make now?

“Yes,” Jennie said. “I am.”

“Why do you hide it?”

“I just don’t advertise it.”

Cole shrugged, losing interest, and went back to his virtual cubicle. Ten minutes later he ripped off his glasses. “Fuck it! Fuck them!” He sprang up and pounded the wall.

“What is it? What happened? Are you all right?”

“No, I’m not all right! It’s not all right! T-boc just attacked my family’s bot factory!”

“But . . . isn’t it Q-shielded? You told me—” Cole wasn’t listening to her. He was on his phone, shouting to someone else.

Jennie said to her tablet, “Breaking news.”

Q-walls circling the Rippleton Bot Factory in San Jose rose fifty feet but were open on top to air, birds, and weather. More than once, T-boc had tried to send bomb-equipped birds over the walls, but automatic security equipment identified and shot down the birds as easily as it shot down drones.

Corporate security equipment could not shoot down a heat-seeking military-grade missile.

The missile had gone over the wall and into the fully automated factory, destroying it completely. The only person inside, the factory supervisor, was dead. The missile had already been traced and three T-bocs arrested. All this had happened in seven minutes.

Cole was still on the phone, his voice now deadly cold. “I told you that we should spend the extra money for a domed shield.” Jennie hadn’t realized he was so involved in the family business. But he was twenty-one, a business major, an only child—the heir. She had never put that together before, that Cole would inherit what the group irreverently called “the whole Rippleton shootin’ match.”

News kept flooding her tablet. The dead factory operator was Fazal Bussard, forty-three. He had a wife and two children. Damage was estimated at ten billion dollars. The grade of missile suggested either that T-boc had cooperation from some segments of the Army or else had bought weapons from international arms dealers. The three people who fired the missile, two men and a woman, were all in their twenties. One made a public statement: “We expect to die, in order to make others free of the stranglehold of alien-driven tech capitalism. People are starving. Bring Basic Universal Income!”

UBI. Jennie had heard it before, found it everywhere online, occasionally seen it even in old-fashioned graffiti scrawled on walls within the shielded university enclave.

She rose. “Cole, I think I should go now.”

He didn’t seem to hear her. Jennie let herself out.

\* \* \*

Of the three terrorists arrested, at least one of them gave the government agency—there was some public confusion over which government agency it was, since the interrogation was classified—the location of a T-boc cell. Before dawn, tanks surrounded a small hamlet in Skagit County north of Seattle. Once serving local farmers before they were forced out of the market by agribusiness equipped with multi-purpose bots, the hamlet consisted of sixteen houses, a convenience store, abandoned diner, and boarded-up feed store.

Drones demanded that everyone leave the hamlet, hands up, barefoot and in thin,

close-fitting clothing. Someone in the diner shouted that they were not leaving and that there were children in some of the houses. The person demanded an uncensored internet link.

The link was used to publish a long UBI manifesto. The word "T-boc" was not mentioned. Press drones appeared; live reporters raced to the scene.

The government repeated its demand once more. The answer was another manifesto.

The Army sent in fighter bots. They were met with a torrent of gunfire.

Jammers blocked the press drones before a drone dropped a firebomb that took out the entire settlement.

Almost immediately, President Castleman went on TV. He said the cowardly T-boc terrorists who murdered Fazal Bussard during the Rippleton Enterprises attack had provided information leading to the identification of a dangerous T-boc cell. The cell had been planning the destruction of downtown Seattle. The U.S. Army had sent bots into the cell to rescue the children being held hostage there, but the suicide T-bocs had chosen death for those innocents. T-boc had engaged in a firefight with the Army, endangering the brave men and women serving their country, who had had no choice but to defend themselves. Seattle had been saved.

No one believed a word of this. It didn't matter.

Jennie, sitting on the bed in her dorm room, watched the actual raid on Skagit, recorded live via the only press drone to escape jamming. After the fire rose to the sky, she played the recording again. And again.

Cole pinged her. "We got the bastards!" The rest of the group joined in, exulting.

The fire still burned. There was one quick view before the feed disappeared. Jennie was sixteen again, in a drivie on her way to find the mountain cabin that was Jennie's only link with her mother, passing another town with deserted houses, burned stores, people squatting in shacks constructed from the charred wood and twisted metal of destroyed buildings. *"What happened here?"*

*"A big Army firefight with a T-boc cell a year ago."*

A rogue newslink put up pictures of the people in the Skagit settlement. *How quick*, Jennie thought numbly. She'd had no idea that was possible.

She'd had no idea about a lot of things.

*"Jennie, you're the least political person I know."*

*"That's probably true, given how few people you know."*

Natalie Newman, 38, a stocky red-haired woman in a worn jeans jacket.

Ava pinged: "Too bad there were only forty-two people in that settlement."

Jordan Trujillo, 20, scowling beneath a wispy mustache.

Deirdre: "It's too bad they're dead. Prevents us from seeing them hang."

Elizabeth Hannah Frodle, 6, grinning in a pink tee.

Mike: "I think it's better this way. Barbecue T-boc! Yum!"

Ava: "One less town of sub-humans."

Antoine Rushman, 4. Black eyes and smooth brown skin.

Cole: "Jennie, are you there? Did you see it?"

Alexander Earl Rogers, 52, an air of authority even in what looked like a police mug shot.

Cole: "My dad says the insurance will pretty much rebuild our factory. So if you're worried about me, don't be."

Annie Marie Chapman, 24, and infant, name unknown.

Cole pinged: "Jennie? I see that you're online!"

Jennie froze the picture of Annie Marie Chapman and her baby. She stared at it. Annie looked pinched and hungry, but she smiled tenderly at the child, who looked like a wrinkled red beet.

Ava: "Guys, there's a big celebration at the fountain. Let's go!"

Mike: "Meet you in ten."

Finally Jennie pinged.

"I'm not coming, Cole. I want to get away from here."

\* \* \*

## VI.

Lemberg had changed in three years. All the tech companies had left. Grace had sold Gran's house, or maybe the people living there were squatters. Jennie didn't care. She did care that Imani's house, once so vital and warm, stood deserted and vandalized.

Strangers lived in Ricardo's house. Lucy's stood empty.

Eventually Jennie found Eric. When he opened the door, unshaven and overweight and holding a wailing infant, Jennie barely recognized him. He said flatly, "JJ."

"Not any more. Eric, I—"

"What do you want?"

"I'm looking for Imani. Do you know where she is?"

"She disappeared two years ago. You were told that."

The baby vomited on his shoulder. Eric ignored it, unfriendly eyes on Jennie.

She said, "Ricardo?"

"Gone. His dad died."

"Lucy?"

"Gone."

"Gone where? Please, Eric, I . . . I need to know. I'm in trouble."

She didn't know why she said that and instantly knew she shouldn't have. Eric looked at the drive on the deeply pot-holed road, at Jennie's sleek haircut and new jeans, and laughed. "*You're* in trouble?"

She remembered why she'd never liked Eric, why she'd always wondered why Imani had let his once-potent sexual charms overrule his essential coarseness.

Jennie didn't back down. "If you know where Lucy or Ricardo is, please tell me."

"What's it worth to you?"

So that's the way it was. Jennie said, "Name a price."

"A hundred dollars."

"Can you take a credit transfer?"

"Of course not, stupid. Cash."

It was all she had with her. She took the bills from her pocket and waited. The baby, empty of vomit, had stopped wailing and settled into the mess on Eric's shoulder. Was the baby his? Probably. And he would never get out of Lemberg.

He said, "Lucy's somewhere in Tacoma, working at a place called Your Emergency Fixed."

Jennie handed him the money.

Eric said, "How do you know I'm not lying to you, just making up shit?"

"Because I knew you back then. You were a lout but not cruel."

For just a moment, something flashed in Eric's eyes: pleasure maybe, or shame. But all he said was, "You've changed, Jennie."

She didn't make the obvious retort, despite the hundred dollars. "Bye, Eric."

He watched as she got in the drive and it took her away.

Your Emergency Fixed occupied a converted house in a residential area of Tacoma not protected by Q-shield but not noticeably shabby, either—among the last

middle-class neighborhoods. Online ads said the firm dispatched both bots and people to instantly deal with everything from a burst water pipe to a forgotten anniversary present that must be shopped for and wrapped within the hour. Lucy was one of their "specially trained, around-the-clock dispatchers ready to spring into action to meet your needs!" Jennie guessed that the customers were not big corporations, who had their own go-fers, but smaller businesses and middle-income wage earners. At least, what was left in those two categories.

She stood on the sidewalk, gazing at the house. Small, two-story, in good repair, the sign prominent but not garish. She took a deep breath and went in.

Lucy, even more beautiful, sat behind a desk facing the door. An array of bots stood in an adjacent room.

"Lucy," Jennie said, and thought that if Lucy replied as Eric had, calling her "JJ" with contempt icing her voice, Jennie might actually cry. But Lucy stood, came around the desk, and hugged Jennie. She said softly, "It's good to see you."

"And you. I . . . can we talk?"

A computer beeped. Lucy said quickly, "I get off in an hour. Come back."

When Jennie did, a man sat behind the desk, saying cheerfully into his phone, "Of course we can fix that!"

Lucy and Jennie walked down the street. Lucy seemed more guarded now. "Don't you have a bodyguard?"

"No. I'm not JJ anymore, Lucy. Not a model. I'm washed-up at nineteen. *Passé*. Old-hat, yesterday's discard. Or, to put it another way, free at last."

Lucy's mouth quirked. "Okay, so tell me why you're here. Eric said you're in trouble."

So Eric could have coughed up Lucy's phone number. Jennie let it go.

"I told Eric I'm in trouble because . . . well, I guess I am." She didn't know how to explain. For so long she had hidden everything about herself.

Lucy said, "Are you broke? Maybe I can find you a job, although the market—"

"I'm not broke," Jennie said. "It's . . . I lived in Grace's enclave, then I went to college at UW for two quarters. I was dating Cole Rippleton when the Rippleton bot factory blew up . . . no, Lucy, don't harden up like that, it was a mistake! All of it was a mistake! Those people, you have no idea how they think. Not unless you've spent time with them. It isn't just that everybody unemployed and poor are useless to them, it's that they think they—we—should all be left to starve, or just eliminated." *Barbecue T-boc! Yum!* "They think we're subhuman, and I know enough history to know what can happen when a defenseless group isn't even considered human anymore."

Lucy said carefully, "You almost sound like T-boc yourself."

"I don't know . . . they've killed, but not tiny kids or entire towns."

"You're looking for Imani, aren't you?"

"Yes."

They stared at each other. Jennie saw Lucy considering, calculating, weighing pieces of information against each other. Before she could come to a decision, Jennie plunged in.

"Imani disappeared over a year ago. Michael's murder and their mother's—it wasn't really gangs, was it? He was connected somehow to T-boc, and now she is, too."

Lucy said, "I didn't say that."

"No. You didn't. But you know where Imani is."

Lucy said, still careful, "I can reach her."

"Then will you tell her I'm here? That I want to meet? She and you and Ricardo . . . those years . . ." She couldn't go on.

Lucy said, "All right. I'll send her a message. But I can't promise that . . . oh, Jennie, I missed you!"

Jennie slept on the floor of Lucy's one-room apartment. In the morning Lucy shook

her awake. "Come on, get your bag. We're leaving now. All your electronics stay here."

Jennie rubbed her eyes. "Yes. Sure. Can I—"

"No. Just brush your teeth and use the toilet. Three minutes."

Lucy told Jennie to summon a drivie. Jennie didn't point out that if this was supposed to be a secret trip, nothing was more public than a drivie's use log. Lucy knew that. She said, "Do you have enough money for a long trip?"

"Yes, but . . . where are we going?"

"San Francisco. Can you afford it?"

"Yes, but . . . Imani is in San Francisco?"

"No," Lucy said. "Ricardo is. Don't mention either of them the whole way. We are just touring. I took leave from my job."

Jennie put her hand on Lucy's arm. "Lucy . . . I can afford to fly us there. Truly."

Lucy's expression was a mixture of emotions, none of which Jennie wanted to see on Lucy's lovely face. In Lucy's eyes, Jennie had just become JJ, one of them, the same "them" Jennie had denounced last night. In Lucy's eyes were doubt, fear, anger. Lucy was risking so much.

"Don't think that," Jennie said. "I'm still me. You *know* me. We all were . . . friends."

Such an inadequate word for the huge connection that Jennie meant.

But maybe a more grandiose word would have failed. Lucy nodded.

They flew to San Francisco and took a drivie to the University of California at Davis.

\* \* \*

If Lucy looked the same, in three years Ricardo had changed into a stranger. Tall and finally broad-shouldered, he had grown . . . not handsome, but arresting. *Intense*, Jennie thought, his brown eyes spear-point sharp, his chin lifted warily. But then, hadn't he always been intense?

They stared at each other, and she wasn't sure what she felt, or why.

His apartment, one room crammed with bed, desk, Insta-Bake, boxes of cheap kelp meal, also held another person. She sat quietly on the bed, hands in her lap. Rosy skin, blonde hair badly cut, cheap pants and top in an unbecoming green. The top had stiff frills and wide shoulders, neither suited to her big frame. Mentally, and against her own will, Jennie redressed her in Carol Shane for Marc Jacobs.

God, she wished she could stop doing that. Grace had trained her too well, too long.

"Well," Ricardo finally said to Jennie, "look at you."

"No," Jennie said. "Don't. You won't approve of what you see."

He smiled, and the stranger became Ricardo. He said, "This is my girlfriend, Sarita."

"Hi," Jennie said. Girlfriend?

Sarita nodded, not meeting Jennie's gaze. She reminded Jennie of the way Ricardo used to be: withdrawn, not really present.

Lucy said, "Sarita and Ricardo are both studying history."

"I remember," Jennie said. "Do you . . . do you like UC Davis?"

"Yes," Ricardo said.

Jennie couldn't think of anything else to say. This was awful. Nothing like she'd imagined. What had she imagined? She didn't know. But not this wariness, this barrier—outright hostility would have been better.

Ricardo began to talk, and even as he sounded like himself, it was as if he spoke to her through a wall. "My concentration is European seventeenth-century. That's when it all began, you know—with the Enlightenment. Ideas of self-determination, scientific inquiry, reason over blind faith. Not that humans didn't behave as irrationally as ever. Do you know about tulip mania in Holland?"

"No," Jennie said, almost adding, *And I don't care*. Disappointment filled her mouth with bitterness.

"Flower growers were breeding tulips, all monochromatic, until one mutated and

'broke,' which meant the petals displayed two colors. All of the Netherlands went mad, speculating in bulbs, searching to propagate a tulip as gorgeous as the queen flower, the *Semper Augustus*. Trading in tulip futures reached frenzied heights. Huge fortunes were made and lost, and some losers committed suicide. It was societal madness."

"Ricardo—"

He continued as if she hadn't spoken. "And you know the ironic part? The 'break,' the multi-colored tulip petals, was caused by a *virus*. It switched off and on certain genes that suppressed part of the coloration, but also eventually sickened the line."

Ricardo was watching her closely. Why? She grew angry. "I don't want to—"

"And Sarita is concentrating on current events—history in the making. Did you know, Jennie, that the alien embassy opens in San Francisco in another month?"

She snapped, "I know. I'm not an idiot, Ricardo. People I know—knew—were invited."

"The Lictorians are collecting art and animals all over California, here, just as they did in China. Did you know that?"

All at once anger deserted her, leaving desolation. This wasn't Ricardo, her Ricardo. She said, "I'm not interested in tulips or art collections or the embassy. I wanted to...to catch up with old friends."

"Do you still display echomemory?"

She gaped at him. That had been a secret, and she never thought he . . . this place must have had cameras because everywhere did, and his girlfriend was listening, why would he—

Lucy, who'd moved behind Jennie, said, "Body indicators for anger, followed by a quick drop-off into depression. No detected deception."

Jennie whirled around. Lucy stood holding a small device inches from the back of Jennie's head. Jennie said, "You *scanned* me?"

"Brain waves and pheromones both," Ricardo said. "You're not lying about why you're here. And you can speak freely here—she's wearing a jammer that can take on the pathetic dorm security."

"Lucy is—"

"Not Lucy."

Sarita stood up from the bed. She was almost as tall as Ricardo. In one fluid motion she pulled off her face and hair.

"*Imani!*"

Jennie rushed forward to hug her, but Imani stood immobile as stone. Confused, Jennie stepped back.

Imani, too, had changed. Still muscular, she looked older than Ricardo or Lucy. Her brown eyes flicked with contempt over Jennie's pink silk sweater and vat-grown leather pants. Finally Imani said, "Hello, JJ."

So that's how it was. Jennie met Imani's contempt head-on. "I'm not JJ any more."

"Really? What are you now?"

"An old friend, with a big question to ask you."

"Don't count on getting an answer. I know what your life is now, and who you spend it with."

"I'm not with them now, am I? And you guys with your scanner—you just determined I wasn't lying and so probably I'm not government or corporate—because that's what that little drama was about, isn't it? I left that life. And I never aided anyone to harm the—"

"Just by living with them you harmed us. Just by being part of that structure that tramples us down every day. You know what that structure is doing now, Jennie? You know about the torture and the raids that burn whole towns and the military reprisals? You know about mamas trying to feed their kids on a dollar sixty a day per child? You know how hard the blingasses and Likkies are pushing us further down

into shit and mud?”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“Huh,” Imani snorted. “Here in your pretty clothes and smug stupidity.”

“Oh, fuck that, Imani! Obviously I don’t have a monopoly on smugness—or stupidity! Look at you, thinking I’m just some blingass toady, thinking I’m not Jennie Flint because of my damn clothes! You think I don’t follow the news? You think I don’t feel anything about what’s going on in this country? And you think I can’t tell what I’m looking at, can’t put together what’s happening here in this very room? That’s a hugely expensive scanner Lucy used on me, way beyond what any of you can afford. Or need. Ricardo is jabbering at me about tulips ‘breaking’ due to a virus and asking about my echomemory—you think I don’t guess that he’s got some kind of theory about it? You can pull off your *face*, Imani, like casually taking off a balaclava, and your clothes can jam any transmissions in and out of this room. You’ve got military cooperation. You’re T-boc, and Lucy and Ricardo are civilian sympathizers.”

The other three were silent. Imani, her hands still white in what must be a covering of the same molded synthetic skin as her discarded face, lifted one arm slightly, let it fall again. Her eyes never left Jennie’s face.

Jennie said, “I’d already guessed that you’re T-boc, Imani. And you guessed why I’m here, or you wouldn’t have risked showing up to meet me. To test me. What I saw in my life with the rich turned my stomach. It’s wrong, and I came to see that I had to get away.

“I want to join T-boc.”

\* \* \*

## VII.

War was nothing like Jennie had imagined. At least, not her war.

Somewhere there were T-boc attacks on corporate and government buildings. Somewhere kamikaze T-bocs were arrested, given quick and foregone military trials, tortured for information and executed. Somewhere some officials and citizenry protested and fought back legally in the courts. Somewhere raids on T-boc cells ended in fire fights and bombs. Jennie saw none of that, not so much as an assault rifle.

Her war consisted of living in a single room in a shabby house in what was once a middle-class neighborhood and going to work every day for an online company that sold straw items, baskets and sandals and totes and wall hangings, imported from South America. Woven Dreams (“All Handmade! Highest Quality! Drone Delivery in Greater Seattle Within Hours!”) was a legitimate company, riding the trend among the rich for authentic artisan objects made by poor peasants they could believe they were helping, peasants living in places they wouldn’t have dreamed of visiting. On the ground floor, three employees dealt with a varying frenzy of delivery trucks, outgoing and fully licensed delivery and mail drones, online ordering, efficient packing.

After months of dutifully unpacking shipments from Mexico and repacking deliveries, Jennie said to the dangerous rebel beside her, a middle-aged man in a wheelchair busily logging orders on his computer, “I’m going upstairs for a bit.”

Tim smiled faintly, as if he’d expected this, and nodded. “Knock yourself out. See you in five minutes.” Chrissy, packing woven totes, laughed.

Jennie scowled at them and climbed the stairs to the second floor. This was where the war was happening. And this was where Drew would be. Her heart began a slow, steady thud that annoyed her a lot.

It had been half a year before Jennie met the other eight people in her cell: six months of off-site careful questioning, surveillance, and testing: biological, psychological, virtual

and IRL. They needed to be sure of her, and sure that "JJ" would not attract too much attention. Jennie could have told them that wouldn't happen—nothing was of less interest than a has-been model. She'd understood the necessity of the testing and had borne it patiently. Irina, a psychologist in her sixties whom Jennie trusted immediately, worked beside Drew on Jennie's indoctrination. During those six months, she'd seen Drew almost daily.

He was in the film room, studying what Del had just created on a small holostage. Jennie watched for a minute, grimaced, and spoke. "Drew, can I see you for a minute?"

He turned, and the slow thud in her chest revved, a drivie engine taking her nowhere. He was tall, mid-forties, dark brown hair and hazel eyes—no factual description captured the magnetic field he radiated. Everyone in the cell sprang like iron filings around him. Jennie was fascinated and troubled by what was, when she tried to analyze it dispassionately, only hyper-masculine confidence and smiling charm. Whatever it was, only Irina seemed immune.

He never touched or flirted with anyone.

"Sure," he said, without taking his eyes off Del's holostage production. "Meet you in the break room in two minutes."

She went across the hall and poured herself a cup of the wretched coffee. Ads for Woven Dreams, both hard-copy and screen shifters, relieved the shabbiness, but not much. Someone, probably Del, had left a pile of dirty dishes in the sink.

Briefly, she thought of the kitchen bots and exquisite lattes at Grace's.

Across the hall, in what had once been a master bedroom, Yasu frowned at her array of computers. When Yasu was online, which was nearly every waking moment, she wouldn't notice if the building collapsed, as long as it left the floor space holding her equipment and bed. She left her room only to dart across the hall for more coffee.

Drew came in, sat down across from Jennie, and fixed her with the gaze that now said she was the only focus of his attention, the most important thing in the world.

*Lies, lies.*

"Jenn, I know what you want."

*No, you don't.*

"You want," he continued, "more responsibility, something more exciting to do to help the rebellion. You're tired of working downstairs."

He was half right, so she nodded.

"Will you believe me if I say that every recruit comes to this point, undervaluing the important contribution you're making here? Woven Dreams, and you, are absolutely critical to making it possible for us to hide in plain sight."

"I know that, Drew. Will you believe me if I say that I can do more, can make a bigger contribution?"

He leaned across the table. She could smell him, an inexplicable outdoorsy smell of pine and leather. "What do you think you can do, Jennie? Learn to shoot and fight as well as Lawrence and Imani?"

"No." Imani had taken Jennie to a public shooting range, but it had been hopeless. Imani and Lawrence were gone most of the time on missions never explained to Jennie.

"Do you have computer skills like Yasu's?"

"No." Yasu was a genius both at hacking and at undetectable internet connections, propaganda posted through encrypted, anonymous servers. This war was, in great part, a cyberwar, and every cell had a Yasu.

"You're smart," Drew said, "and you could probably help with Irina's work training new recruits. But we have Irina."

"Don't play with me, Drew. No matter how much concern you show doing it. I'm not a child."

He blinked; she'd surprised him. She'd intended to surprise him. "I know I'm not a

psychologist like Irina, and I don't know enough history and political philosophy to do indoctrination. But I do know a lot, and you just said I'm smart—smart enough to know that the posts and holos and flash clips Del creates for our propaganda are crap.”

He regarded her with enough consideration to be flattering. Finally he said, “And you have the digital skills to do better ones?”

“You know I don't. I couldn't create the files. But I can write the scripts, and a lot better than Del can. Look at this.”

She brought up on her phone one of Del's Facebook flash clips, a generic avatar talking ponderously about the need to back “any and all actions to take back our country.” Yasu had fittted the post with whatever hackers used (Jennie didn't know) to get around whatever surveillance-and-tracking software the government now used (which she also didn't know).

She said to Drew, “Del's flash clip is only twenty seconds, and even so I nearly fell asleep watching it. Now look at this.”

She played the clip she'd been working on for three nights. The production values were primitive; that needed Del. But the digital voice-over, compelling and urgent over unobtrusive music and still pictures, said, “These are the faces of only some of the children—United States citizens, all—killed by their government in illegal attacks on what they assumed, often without proof, were T-boc outposts. Elizabeth Hannah Frodle, 6. Antoine Rushman, 4. Chelsea Parker, 2. Ravi Lloyd, 4. Kristin Wang, 5. Is this what you think your government should be doing? Really? Is that what your conscience says?”

The clip ended. Drew's eyebrows furrowed. “It's effective, yes. But it doesn't say what T-boc is fighting for. It doesn't say we're right.”

“No, because the people who think we're right already know what we're fighting for, and they don't need convincing. This is aimed at people who can see both sides of the equation and need a push to decide about T-boc.”

Drew said levelly, “There is no other side of the equation.”

She had heard those same words before, from Mike. For a second something flickered uneasily in Jennie's mind. But she plowed on. “No, but not everybody's thinking has got there yet. This clip, and posts I can write, will help. Del can produce them. You can bring in another recruit—there must be more somewhere, working with Irina—to take my place downstairs.”

“Let me see it again.”

Jennie played the flash clip, holding her breath. She saw a dozen mistakes in her film—pacing, background color, photo editing, sequence . . . She could do so much better, using everything she'd learned from two quarters at UW and her lifetime movie obsession, if only he would give her the chance!

“Okay,” he said finally. “You get a two-month trial writing and producing with Del. I'll tell him so, because he isn't going to like it. But you have talent, Jennie. Bravo.”

A part of her mind registered that he couldn't really recognize talent or he wouldn't have let Del produce until now. But the thought was lost in the warm glow of his words, as well as in simple and sudden lust. He was smiling at her, his hard body leaning toward her across the dirty table. . . .

*Kiss me, Drew.*

But he didn't. She said, “I'd like to start with Del now.”

\* \* \*

Irina brought in a new recruit to replace Jennie downstairs at Woven Dreams, a young man named Carl. She had only one exchange with Carl. He said, “I like your flash clips. You seem to implicitly recognize that not every rich person is an monster.”

She said, “Thanks.”

After two months, Carl disappeared. “Not suitable after all,” Drew told everyone.

"HQ will place him elsewhere. " Jennie barely noticed. She was too busy writing flash clips, learning how to help Del produce them, creating internet posts for Yasu to insert into the feeds of targeted users. Del was sullen with her, but Jennie didn't care. She was doing something important for the first time in her life, something that mattered. Images drove her: mental pictures of what power could do, going all the way back to the tortured body of little Marie Celeste Smith. To burned towns near Lemberg and in Skagit County. To hungry children and slashed government welfare and government torture and public hangings and Mike's words: *Yum! Barbeque T-boc!* She believed in Take Back Our Country. They, too, had killed, but not indiscriminately and in a good cause. T-boc was just.

And Drew approved of her work.

She seldom saw Imani, gone most of the time. "Where do you go?" she asked, but Imani only shook her head.

"Around."

"Is it because electronic messages can be hacked so you carry T-boc communications in your head?"

Imani smiled and put her finger to Jennie's lips, turning the finger playfully like a key.

But Imani was at Woven Dreams late one afternoon in August during Jennie's second year there. Jennie sat writing an internet post clear enough to convey the need for revolution but subtle enough not to be government censored. At least, not immediately censored.

"Jennie," Imani said, and at her tone, Jennie looked up. "There's something you need to see."

"What? Where? I'm in the middle of—"

"Now. On the news. I recorded it." She held out her phone and a cubic mid-air holostage, six inches on a side, sprang out.

A prison with concrete walls, raised guard towers, a perimeter fence. An avatar glowing in the top right corner said, "Today's daring prison break at the Gig Harbor Correctional Facility for Women in Washington State has authorities puzzled for several reasons. Surveillance footage is not available, but NewsNow! has recreated the drama from eyewitness reports. All power suddenly failed, including back-up generators, just as a fleet of drones descended from high atmosphere."

A clutch of tiny, fast drones appeared on the holostage, flying directly at the guard towers. Guards fired, then fell to the ground. A clear plastic bubble appeared in the middle of the fleet and descended below the prison walls.

"What's that?" Jennie said.

"Watch."

The holo switched to a recreation of a bleak prison yard: grassless, three large and scarred picnic benches, concrete and wire. Six tiny figures fell to the ground, senseless. The clear bubble scooped up one of them and rose rapidly into the sky, along with the drones. The entire sequence began to repeat as the avatar talked on while the holo played over and over.

"—tracking until the drones landed and were taken into custody. However, no trace was found of the escaped prisoner. Authorities have not commented on the escape, but sources inside the prison say that no one was harmed. All corrections officers and the other five inmates in the prison yard revived without damage. Experts that NewsNow! spoke to say that the weapon that stunned them, the rescue vehicle, and the means to cut power to the facility are all unknowns. The name of the kidnapped prisoner has not yet been officially released, but inside sources identify her as Cora Emily Flint, sentenced to ten years for attempted murder. It's not known whether Flint was targeted for this strange escape or was scooped up at random. We

go now to—”

“Shut it off,” Jennie said. “Did T-boc kidnap her?”

“My guess is no. Why would we? Anyway, we don’t have that kind of tech.”

“The government? No—they could just get an official order to release her to whatever agency wanted her. But why would they want her?”

“No idea. And there’s nothing we can do about it. I just thought you ought to know. You’re so busy making up news that I don’t know if you ever watch it. Jenn . . . do you want to talk about her?”

“No. She abandoned me about five minutes after I was born. And the one time I saw her, after her trial, she wasn’t exactly motherly.” *“Poor little rat. Well, doesn’t look like you’re going to be gorgeous. Maybe that will help.”* “I always wanted your mother, Imani.”

“I know. I was lucky. Until she was shot.”

Jennie hugged her friend. They stood there a long moment until Imani said, “I have to go.”

“Sure.”

Jennie bent toward her desk, but the words and graphics on the screen were blurry with salty tears.

\* \* \*

Drew frowned at Jennie’s screen. She’d just previewed for him her latest flash clip. “A little mild, don’t you think, Jennie? Can you ramp it up a bit?”

“Ramp it up . . .”

“Make it less namby-pamby.”

“I don’t think I—”

“This is a revolution, for Chrissake, not a college research paper on fairness! Revolutions are violent.” Then, after a moment, “Don’t look like that. I’m sorry. You do good work. But we’re stagnant.”

Who was “we”? Jennie and Del? This cell? All of T-boc? Things nationwide had been quiet for a few months.

Suddenly Drew reached for her hand. An electric thrill ran through Jennie. He said, “You see it, don’t you? You must, you’re smart and perceptive. We’re not doing enough, and so we’re losing.”

“Drew,” said a voice from the doorway, “am I intruding?”

Irina. Drew dropped Jennie’s hand and turned to the older woman. “No, not at all. What is it?”

“I brought the new Woven Dreams worker. She’s downstairs.”

“Well, if you’re done vetting and orienting her, put her to work.”

“You should greet her,” Irina said, but she didn’t move.

Jennie looked from Irina to Drew and back again. They were staring at each other. The air in the room had grown taut as stretched wire. Jennie didn’t understand.

Finally Drew said levelly, “Fine, Irina. Whatever you want,” and shoved his way past her. Jennie heard him clatter down the wooden staircase.

“Irina, what was that all about?”

Irina said, “Ideological differences,” and shook her head. Her gaze sharpened. “He was reprimanding you when I came in. Why?”

“He says my work is too . . . too mild. Not violent enough.”

“Do you think it should be more violent?”

“I don’t know,” Jennie said. She liked and admired Irina. Neat and spare in an old-fashioned jumpsuit, her gray hair in a bun, Irina was smart, kind, and sure of herself in a different way from Drew. She worked with T-boc but also had a clinical practice. Irina was good at reading people. Jennie had the uneasy feeling that Irina knew more about Jennie than she’d ever said.

"Violence gets attention," Irina said, watching Jennie closely, "but it backfires if it doesn't seem both just and proportional."

"What's proportional to wiping out an entire starving town with kids in it? Or torturing T-boc heroes?"

"Nothing. That's the point, Jennie. Because their acts are so monstrous, ours need to be measured in response. Violent enough to get attention and show we're serious, not so violent that we alienate people in government and industry who might be, or be made into, allies for T-boc."

"Nobody in government or industry is our ally."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Yes."

"You're sure that people are that one-dimensional?"

Jennie hesitated, then found her footing again. "It isn't individuals, it's the system that's one-dimensional, in favor of profit and power and nothing else. You told me that in my orientation!"

"Yes. And I said T-boc was fighting to change the system, fighting in every way possible and just. The difficulty always is defining 'just,' isn't it? And in not demonizing every person on the other side simply because they're so wrong. Have you ever read Eric Hoffer?"

Jennie hadn't, but Ricardo had. Complete recall of his conversation about the moral philosopher rose in Jennie's mind.

Irina said, "You already know what I'm going to say."

Jennie set her lips and shook her head. How come everyone else found her "elusive," but Irina could almost read her mind? Was that what learning psychology did for you?

Irina quoted the same Hoffman line that Ricardo had: "Mass movements can rise and spread without belief in a God, but never without belief in a devil."

"They are the devil!"

"Their system is, yes. As we are their devil. But originally T-boc—"

"Okay, I greeted the new worker," Drew said, pushing into the room past Yasu and her empty coffee cup. "Now can you let Jennie and me get back to work?"

Irina didn't move. "Drew, what happened to Carl Winter?"

"That's not your concern. Now leave!"

Irina went. Drew smiled and focused his gaze on Jennie. The smile looked forced, but his eyes had the usual you-are-the-most-important-person-in-the-world gaze. "Irina and I have always squabbled, but she's an important member of the team. Now, Jennie, about your work. You need a break to sharpen you, and it. I'm sending for Imani and Lawrence. I want you to go with them on an operation. Not a kamikaze raid, of course.

"HQ is ordering something new."

\* \* \*

"Did you see that movie with Haijun Li?" Imani asked. "He's beyond gorgeous!"

Jennie said, "Not yet."

She felt a fool. This fake conversation, going on since they boarded the ancient BART train, was necessary cover. So was the cheap sparkly dress she wore, Imani's ugly-fashionable baggy pants and tight top, and Lawrence's bad knock-off of a trendy-last-year shirt. They were three young people going to dance at a toke club. They carried saved-up money for this treat, inexpensive phones, fake I.D. As JJ, Jennie had once, on a rare publicity date that Grace couldn't resist, gone to Le Chateau in New York to drink fifty-year-old Scotch and dance with a Saudi prince.

They got off the train and walked through a crowded section of the city that, paradoxically, was safer than San Francisco had been in its 250-year history. Every building, every street, every vehicle had surveillance cameras, supplemented by sensors

under the pavement that recorded the number, speed, and direction of steps above. Plus, Jennie guessed, supplemented by other surveillance she couldn't name.

Young people thronged each intersection. The neighborhood, once industrial, was an incongruous mix of warehouses beside cheap residence hotels beside drive-truck garages beside factories converted to clubs. Delivery drones hummed overhead. Laughter and music spilled out from open doorways. Advertisements, sometimes with patches of missing pixels, shimmered on the sides of buildings, sprang up in holo from sidewalks. Tokes, drivies, V-R parlors, casinos, a v-game tournament: BIG PRIZES!

Imani paid the cover charge at the Happy You Club, and they ordered drinks. Imani drank hers and then gulped theirs. Eventually she said, "I feel . . . sick . . ."

Out the back door into the alley, where Imani threw up while Jennie held her dreads off her face. When had Imani, who had an incredible capacity for alcohol, learned to puke at will? Lawrence came outside to check on them and said the most words Jennie had ever heard him string together: "You know you can't drink that much!"

"Yeah," Imani mumbled, and threw up again. She staggered along the alley, the other two following, and fell down a short flight of steps against a cellar window. Jennie and Lawrence shielded her, making concerned noises. Imani unlocked the window with an e-code and rolled through, Jennie and Lawrence still urging her to get up.

A moment later she was back, window locked, staggering to her feet. They supported her while she drunkenly apologized.

And that was the battlefield operation.

Not completely, of course. An hour later, Imani sat slumped in a chair and Jennie danced with Lawrence, who was not a good dancer. In the cellar, a transportbot whose programming allowed only for manual activation awoke. It exited a large sandwich shop on the first floor and trotted, gracefully and stupidly, along the street. Along with others coming and going, it carried a package in its code-locked delivery bay. A roasted-insect seller on the sidewalk tried to grab the bot, which pushed her aside. Halfway across the city, it gave the code to activate a drivie. The transportbot then turned into an alley, sat down behind a trashcan, and self-destructed all its software beyond reconstruction.

This, an illegal action, was picked up instantly by sensors. Police bots raced to the scene. But everything the transportbot knew was gone. The drivie drove the package to an industrial section of town, where the package gave a signal that launched two military-grade missiles from a dumpster. The missiles exploded onto Chair Legs, a small factory making expensive, customized chairs for the new alien embassy. Half the chairs fit human bodies, half Lictorian. The factory, too humble to have a Q-shield, disappeared into flame.

On the train home, Imani put her head on Lawrence's shoulder and cuddled close. Something in her posture, or his, made Jennie realize that this was not just for show: silent, rugged Lawrence was Imani's latest lover. Well, at least Imani was consistent in the type she preferred. Jennie pulled out her phone to look at the news.

It was already there, of course. In what was supposed to be a fully automated factory, sixteen people had been incinerated. A manifesto by T-boc, probably written at headquarters, came online. Five minutes later, wailing relatives of the dead. Five minutes after that, drone shots of a charred body.

*Barbecue T-boc. Yum.*

\* \* \*

"I thought it was a bot factory," Jennie said to Drew. "No people present."

"You thought wrong," Drew said. "No one ever told you it was all automated."

"Those workers weren't blingasses, just normal people trying to make a living! They might have even sympathized with us!"

"Then they shouldn't have been suppliers to the Likkie embassy."

"But Drew—"

"Whose side are you on, Jennie?" His voice was soft, even caressing, but Jennie understood what she was hearing.

She said, "I believe in T-boc, but that doesn't mean—"

"There are no 'buts,' Jennie. None."

She was silent.

"I sent you on that raid deliberately. You're too smart to not have figured that out. You need to understand the organization you're a part of, if you're going to put your talents to use for us. So choose—us or them."

"Us," Jennie said, because the other choice was worse. "And don't ever talk to me that way again, Drew. I'm not a child, and I'm not a traitor just because I don't condone every last thing T-boc does. I'm allowed opinions of my own. Don't forget it."

Surprise in those hazel eyes. Then they narrowed to slits. "I won't forget it."

"Good." She felt triumphant—she'd bested Drew! He had bent to her will!

A moment later, something in his retreating back made her not so sure.

And she'd still helped kill sixteen innocent workers.

\* \* \*

Every night, she had nightmares. She lost weight. Yet, paradoxically, her work became sharper, more urgently compelling about T-boc's aims and why they mattered. Drew approved, and she didn't turn away from his praise and his smiles, but the nightmares increased. They woke her every night, then twice a night, and then she lay paralyzed on her bed from 3:00 A.M. till dawn.

*Do what you have to, but be prepared for the shit you get doing it.* But . . . had Gran ever considered the other people who'd get shit from what you did?

She lost more weight. Food would not go easily down her throat. Drew, unusually agitated and distracted, didn't seem to notice. Irina did.

"Tell me," she said quietly, sitting in the break room with a cup of coffee warming her hands. November cold had crept into the unheated room. Irina had been meeting with Drew, who had slammed out of the house afterward. Irina looked serene as always, a pink wool scarf over her graying hair. The scarf had two small moth holes in the tail hanging over her shoulder. Jennie focused on the holes.

"I'm fine, Irina."

"You're not. Was it the chair factory? Did Drew make you participate in that?"

"Drew doesn't make any of us do anything. We choose to be T-boc."

Irina gave a tiny snort of laughter, so unexpected that Jennie's eyes darted to her face. Immediately Irina said, "I'm sorry. What you just said is true, of course—we all choose. But sometimes we choose from emotion, not thought, and our thoughts can be wrong and self-destructive. I know, I know—I'm talking to you like a psychologist, not a friend. But I am a psychologist and you, Jennie, are very brave but also very young."

"I'm not brave. I . . . I can't sleep."

Irina said gently, "I can see that. Tell me, dear one."

It was the "dear one" that got to her. Motherly—God, she was pathetic, still looking for a mother at twenty-one! But—

"I *choose* to tell you," Jennie said, with as much dignity as she could muster. "From thought."

"Okay."

Irina listened: to the night of the raid, to the nightmares, to the food sticking in Jennie's throat. And then, unable to stop, to her life at UC Davis, as JJ, in Lemberg with Gran. She didn't realize how long she'd been talking until her voice went hoarse. Then something in Irina's gentle listening stopped her.

"You already knew all this."

“No,” Irina said, “not all. Just what turned up in your T-boc vetting.”

“Which was a lot,” Jennie said. More than she’d realized.

“Yes.”

“You know about my mother—the prison and the escape?”

“Of course.”

“I was at her trial. Not in the courtroom, but I sort of watched it online. Did you know that?” It was a challenge.

“No. Jennie, ask me what you need to know. Go ahead, I won’t say anything to Drew.”

Jennie reached over and tugged at Irina’s pink scarf. It slid off her head and landed in a wool puddle on the table. Jennie pulled it toward her and wrapped her cold hands in it. She didn’t think why.

“Irina—do you believe T-boc is off-track? Getting too violent? Becoming . . .” She couldn’t say it.

“Becoming like the people we’re fighting. Yes. I do. It’s not just you who thinks that.”

The relief was so great that tears prickled Jennie’s eyes. Fiercely, she did not let them fall. “What are you doing about it? You’re important! Are you *doing* anything?”

“Yes. I have contacts higher up than Drew. We’re working to change both policy and leadership. Peacefully, without the kind of internal violence that’s marked rebellions in the past.”

“Ricardo once said . . .”

“Tell me about Ricardo.”

But before Jennie could do that, or ask more questions about T-boc and hungrily absorb more of Irina’s understanding, Imani walked into the break room. She’d been gone for two weeks. A fresh scar, raised purplish flesh, snaked down her left cheek.

Jennie jumped up, shedding the scarf. “Imani! What happened?”

“I’m fine. Don’t fuss over me.” And then, to Irina, “Lawrence is dead.”

Jennie saw that Irina already knew this.

Imani went on, her voice hard, “I need to talk to Drew.”

“He went out. Imani—”

“I said don’t fuss!”

Irina rose. “Jennie, leave us, please. You and I can talk later. Imani, please sit down.”

“I don’t need no fucking counseling.”

“No. But I need debriefing. Sit. That’s an order, Imani.”

For a long moment, Jennie wasn’t sure what Imani would do. Then Imani sat. Jennie moved toward the door. Then, with a swift movement she didn’t think about, she put Irina’s scarf into Imani’s hands, left the room, and closed the door.

Yasu stood in the hallway. “Imani’s okay?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know.”

“Where’s Drew?”

“I don’t know.” Why did everyone think she’d know where Drew was?

Yasu chewed her lip, not a characteristic gesture. “There’s a situation. No, not in my room. Check the news. You know they’re going to blame us.”

Jennie took out her phone. The story was everywhere. A United States senator had been fatally shot at a town meeting in West Virginia.

Beautiful hilly countryside, a few maples still blazing with color. A few hundred people demanding Universal Basic Income thronged a quaint town square from another century. Holograms sprung from their phones like colorful ghosts. Senator John Ryman, smiling, emerged from a white clapboard building. Security drones above, bots and men discreetly in the crowd. And, despite all that, a gunshot. The senator fell. People screamed. A bot raced across the square so fast it looked a blur, but not fast enough. Before it could reach the sniper, he’d turned the gun on himself.

Yasu said, “Well, good for the shooter. A public service murder.”

"No. Ryman was in *favor* of the basic universal income. That's what we want, too! He was on our side!"

"Not enough on our side, and he was still a rich blingass. Good job, whoever just died shooting him. And we'll be blamed."

Jennie said slowly, "But . . . did *we* do it?"

"How should I know? But either way, we'll get the blame. You better write some flash about it." Yasu went back into her lair.

Jennie sat on the stairs and watched the news loop, again and again.

Fifteen minutes later Drew pushed past her without a greeting and barreled into the break room. Imani came out and closed the door. Shouting came from the break room, the words indistinguishable but clearly two voices.

*Irina* shouting.

Imani sat on the steps beside Jennie. The rosy scar gleamed on her cheek. She still held Irina's scarf. Jennie put her arm around her childhood friend and the two young women sat immobile, listening to words they could not understand behind a door closed to them.

The next day, Irina's trial began.

\* \* \*

Drew came into the film room where Jennie was trying to get the dim-witted Del to see what she wanted an avatar to do. Drew said, "There's a drivie downstairs. Get into it, both of you."

"Where are we—" But he'd already left. Jennie turned to Del, who shook his head, looking bewildered.

They were, apparently, the last to arrive. Drew met them at a small city row-house—how had he gotten here before Jennie and Del? Their drivie must have taken a more convoluted route. This was Drew with all charm gone, close-lipped and rock-faced. He led them down to the basement: cracked concrete floor, the only object an ancient, pre-laundry-bot washing machine in a corner, an anchor for cobwebs. Boarded-up windows. Imani and Yasu stood, expressionless, beside six other people Jennie had never seen and wasn't seeing now since they wore plastimasks, gloves, and identical loose, dark clothing. When Jennie and Del entered, she thought she saw Imani's eyes widen for a moment, but in the dim light she couldn't be sure.

In the middle of the concrete floor, Irina sat on a chair, hands folded in her lap. Del no longer looked bewildered, but Jennie certainly was. She said, "Drew, what is—"

"Quiet, Jennie. This is an official T-boc loyalty hearing of Irina DeLac, member of cell 164. Present, as required, are all senior members of cells 164 and 165, plus Jennifer Flint, a junior member here as a witness. Irina—"

Witness? Jennie was a witness? To what? Her stomach clutched.

"Irina, you have endangered the security of your T-boc cell and, by extension, the entire organization fighting for equality and justice. The specific charge against you is trying to undermine the loyalty and dedication of Jennifer Flint and Yasu Parsons. You may speak."

Irina raised a calm face to Drew. "I deny the charge."

"You deny saying to Jennie that T-boc and not the government-corporate complex is the true enemy of the people?"

"I deny it."

How could Irina stay so calm? Or was it . . . resignation?

One of the plastimasked strangers spoke: a female voice. Jennie recognized the sound of command. "Specifics, please, Drew."

"At least two traitorous conversations took place between Irina and Jennie, a junior T-boc member, at Woven Dreams on October 8th and November 10th. Irina—"

The commander interrupted. "How do you have knowledge of this, Drew? You know

that we don't record in cell houses or their residences. We are not the government."

"No, of course not," Drew said quickly. Jennie had never seen him flustered before. "Yasu overheard these conversations and alerted me yesterday. Irina was telling Jennie that T-boc is a failure, that we are taking the wrong direction, that we are just as bad as the government-corporate complex. She was trying to undermine a junior member's loyalty, the first step toward recruiting her for the other side and betraying our cell. Disloyalty cannot be tolerated." His voice had steadied. Grown louder.

"No, it cannot," the commander said. "Yasu, how much of these conversations did you hear?"

"Only part. But I thought I should report it. The algorithm—"

"So your only real witness is Jennifer Flint."

"Yes," Drew said. "But she's a variant two selective savant with echomemory. She can repeat everything she ever heard, word for word. We can scan her for lying."

How did Drew know about the echomemory? Even Irina looked surprised. Had Drew guessed, as Ricardo and Cole had? How had Jennie given herself away?

The commander said to Jennie, "You are a variant two selective savant for echomemory?"

If Drew knew it, so did this steely woman. "Yes."

The commander nodded. A plastimasked figure stepped forward with a brain-wave-and-pheromone scanner and held it against the back of Jennie's head. Drew said, "Jennie, repeat every conversation you ever had with Irina."

"No," Jennie said. "I won't. Irina never tried to recruit me for anything. She was just trying to help me sort out my thoughts."

Drew said, "Repeat every conversation. That's an order."

"Those were private! Irina isn't disloyal and neither am I!"

Irina rose from her chair and turned toward Jennie. Drew shoved her back down, then slapped her across the face. "Stay there! Jennie, answer me!"

"No! This is wrong!"

He took a step toward her and raised his hand. The commander said sharply, "No." Drew's hand fell.

So did the glow that Jennie had always seen around him. Charismatic when in command, he was panicked when challenged, frenzied when he saw leadership slipping away.

Irina said, "Do it, Jennie. For T-boc." She twisted in her chair toward Jennie. In her eyes Jennie saw Irina's true message: *You can't save me. Save yourself.*

Jennie said, "The conversations were about how violent T-boc has become, killing whole towns, little kids, working people in that chair factory. I never doubted T-boc's mission, or that the rich are driving people at the bottom to desperation and must be stopped. Irina never doubted, either. I was just trying to get straight in my mind the—"

Drew thundered, "Exact dialogue, or else!"

Irina said softly, "Tell them, Jennie."

Jennie began reciting her first indoctrination sessions with Irina. They went on and on. When someone else was present, Drew or Imani, she gave their dialogue, too. After fifteen minutes of this, Drew said impatiently, "All right, skip the orientation!"

The commander said, "Quiet, Drew," as if he were a small child. Drew's face darkened.

Jennie droned on, recounting session after session of straight T-boc doctrine from Irina, of question-and-answer exchanges during Jennie's vetting. The only thing notable about any of it was that it was verbatim from nearly two years ago. No one commented on this. Drew shifted impatiently. Irina sat quietly. The commander never moved. Another hour went by. Jennie grew hoarse.

"Five," the commander finally said, "give her water."

Another masked person, presumably Five, produced a water bottle. Jennie drank.

More of her orientation. When that ended, Jennie began on inconsequential conversations she'd had with Irina: the weather, the soup brought by a transportbot for lunch, a few silly jokes, a rip in Irina's hem—surely they would tire of this garbage soon?

They didn't. Jennie went on and on, until there was no place else to go and she came to her last two conversations with Irina.

"I was in the film room. Drew was telling me to ramp up my work, it was too boring. Then Irina came in. She said, 'Am I intruding?'"

Jennie hated remembering that Drew had been holding her hand.

"Drew said, 'Not at all. What is it?' Irina said, 'I brought the new Woven Dreams worker. She's downstairs.' Drew said, 'Well, if you're done vetting and orienting her, put her to work.' Irina said, 'You should greet her.'"

The words didn't convey the tension between Drew and Irina, as taut as the tension in the room now. Jennie didn't want to convey it. She made her recitation as flat as possible.

"Drew said, 'Fine, Irina. Whatever you want.' He went downstairs. I said, 'Irina, what was that all about?' Irina said, 'Ideological differences. He was reprimanding you when I came in. Why?' I said, 'He says my work is too . . . too mild. Not violent enough.' Irina said, 'Do you think it should be more violent?' I said, 'I don't know.' Irina said, 'Violence gets attention, but it backfires if it doesn't seem both just and proportional.' I said, 'What's proportional to wiping out an entire starving town? Or to torturing T-boc heroes?' She said, 'Nothing. That's the point, Jennie. Because their acts are so monstrous, ours need to be measured in response. Violent enough to get attention and show we're serious, not so violent that we alienate people in government and industry who might be, or be made into, allies for T-boc.'"

Jennie paused, letting that stand in the air for a minute. It sounded the reverse of disloyal.

"Go on," the commander said.

"I said, 'Nobody in government or industry is our ally.' Irina said, 'Are you sure about that?' I said, 'Yes.' She said, 'You're sure that people are that one-dimensional? I need more water, please!'"

Jennie drank, pushing down panic. She could see now how Irina's words could be misinterpreted. And there was worse to come.

"I said, 'It isn't individuals, it's the system that's one-dimensional, in favor of profit and power and nothing else. You told me that in my orientation.' She said, 'Yes. And I said T-boc was fighting to change the system, fighting in every way possible and just. The difficulty is always defining "just," isn't it? And in not demonizing every person on the other side simply because they're so wrong. Have you ever read Eric Hoffer?' Then she said, 'You already know what I'm going to say.' She quoted something: "Mass movements can rise and spread without belief in a God, but never without belief in a devil." But, ma'am, what she meant was—"

"Just the actual words."

"Conversations aren't just words! How you say them, and how you look when you say them—"

"The actual words."

There was no disobeying that tone. And Irina was nodding at Jennie, her face compassionate. Compassion for Jennie, not for herself.

"I said, 'They are the devil!' Irina said, 'The system is, yes. As we are theirs. But originally T-boc—' and then she didn't finish because Drew came in and said, 'Okay, I greeted her. Now can you let Jennie and me get back to work?' And Irina said . . ."

Silence. The commander broke it. "What did Irina say?"

"She said . . . she said, 'Drew, what happened to Carl Winter?'"

No one asked who Carl Winter was. They knew. They knew whatever had happened to him.

“Drew said, ‘That’s not your concern! Now leave!’ Irina did.”

Another silence. The commander said, “None of that includes what Yasu overheard in the break room. So continue.”

Jennie choked out, “I was upset about our raid on Chair Legs, the factory supplying the Lictorian embassy, and Irina saw that. She said, ‘Tell me.’ I said, ‘I’m fine, Irina.’ She said, ‘You’re not. Was it the chair factory? Did Drew make you participate in that?’ I said, ‘Drew doesn’t make any of us do anything. We choose to be T-boc.’ Irina said, ‘I’m sorry. What you just said—’”

The commander interrupted. “Why did she say she’s sorry?”

“I told you that not all communication is words! Irina . . . stepped on my foot. By mistake.”

Irina had not stepped on her foot. Irina had given a tiny snort of laughter, but surely Yasu, whom Jennie now despised, wouldn’t have overheard that.

The commander said, “Go on.”

“Irina said, ‘What you just said is true of course, we all choose. But sometimes we choose from emotion, not thought, and our thoughts can be wrong and self-destructive. I know, I know—I’m talking to you like a psychologist, not a friend. But I am a psychologist and you, Jennie, are very brave, but also very young.’ I said, ‘I’m not brave. I . . . I can’t sleep.’ Irina said, ‘I can see that. Tell me, dear one.’”

“‘Dear one?’” The commander said. “Did you and Irina have a sexual or romantic relationship?”

“No!”

“Drew?” the commander said.

“No, I don’t think so. Jennie was fixated on *me*.”

Despite everything, Jennie felt herself blush. He said that in front of everybody! She rushed on. “I said, ‘I *choose* to tell you. From thought.’ Irina said, ‘Okay.’”

Jennie recited all the rest of it: her nightmares about the raid, all the personal stuff she’d spilled to Irina about Cole, Mike, being JJ, her life with Gran. She gave all Irina’s responses, which had been unfailingly warm, supportive, encouraging, *non-political*. That was the important thing. Nothing had been political. Nothing should condemn Irina.

But then she got to—

“Go on,” the commander said, and Jennie knew that for the rest of her life she was going to dream about this commander saying, “Go on.”

“Irina said . . . she said . . . ‘Jennie, ask me what you need to know. Go ahead, I won’t say anything to Drew.’ I said, ‘Do you believe T-boc is off-track? Getting too violent? Becoming . . .’ She said, ‘Becoming like the people we’re fighting. Yes. I do. It’s not just you who thinks that.’ I said, ‘What are you doing about it? You’re important! Are you *doing* anything?’ Irina said . . .”

“Irina said what?”

“She said . . . I don’t remember.”

Irina rose from the chair. Drew made a movement toward her, but the commander stopped him with a gesture. Irina took Jennie’s hand. “It’s all right. Say it. Don’t lie.”

Jennie choked out, “Irina said, ‘Yes. I have contacts higher up than Drew. We’re working to change both policy and leadership. Peacefully, without the kind of internal violence that’s marked rebellions in the past.’ Then Imani walked in. She had a scar on her cheek—she still has it—and Irina told Imani to sit down. Imani said, ‘I don’t need no fucking counseling.’ Irina said, ‘No. But I need debriefing. Sit. That’s an order, Imani.’ I left them, closing the door.”

And Yasu had stood in the hallway, empty coffee cup in hand, eavesdropping.

The commander said, "That's the last conversation you had with Irina?"

"Yes!"

Drew said, "And it's enough! Look at what Irina said: That T-boc should act 'measuredly,' which means not with enough force to actually change anything. That T-boc is 'the devil.' That choosing to join us is 'wrong and self-destructive.' That we're 'becoming the people we're fighting'—becoming just as bad as the blingasses who have done everything possible to destroy the underclass in this country. And worst of all, that she has 'contacts' working to oust T-boc leadership, which means a fucking internal coup!"

Jennie said hotly, "That's not what Irina meant! She—"

"Shut up, Jennie," Drew said. "You don't understand what she meant. You're a fucking twenty-one-year-old parrot!"

He had invested himself, his credibility and leadership, in this trial. He could not risk being wrong. And maybe he even believed what he was saying, as he had once said to her, "There is no other side of the equation." He wanted Irina to be guilty, needed her to be punished, and he used Jennie to do it.

The commander made a gesture. One of the other masked people, a man from the width of his shoulders, stepped toward Irina and pushed her back into the chair. He said, "Irina DeLac, are you seeking to undermine T-boc's mission?"

"No," Irina said.

"Are you seeking to turn vulnerable and ignorant recruits against that mission?"

"No."

"Are you working against T-boc leadership?"

"We are trying to change the leadership's position on excessive violence."

"Who are your confederates higher up in the organization seeking to overthrow its leadership?"

"We aren't seeking to overthrow the leadership. We are—"

"Give me names!"

"No," Irina said. "Not now, not ever."

"She's a traitor!" shrilled stupid Del. "Waste her!"

The commander said calmly, "Drew, you and your team can go. Get them back to your cell. I'll see you tonight at 6:00 at locus seven."

"But I—"

"Go."

Jennie followed the others to the basement stairs. Then she ran back and hugged Irina. "I'm sorry!"

"You'll be okay," Irina said, as the big man pulled Jennie away and shoved her toward the staircase.

A tight-lipped Drew summoned drivies. He sent Imani, Yasu, and Jennie in one. "Yasu, take them to Woven Crafts."

Everyone knew better than to say or look anything in a public drivie. But when they got out, Jennie said, "I feel sick."

Imani said, "Oh, no! Poor thing. I'll take her home, Yasu." She gave the drivie Jennie's address.

Yasu said, "Drew told you to wait in the house. He probably wants to have a meeting."

Jennie threw up, making sure vomit hit Yasu, who twitched away in disgust. "Okay! Take her home!"

Imani put an arm around Jennie and they lurched awkwardly away. Imani said softly, "I didn't know *you* could puke at will."

"I've been practicing. Irina—will they—"

"Yes."

Jennie almost staggered for real. She'd bet everything on Imani's saying no—*They'll send Irina to a reindoctrination place, just a matter of understanding her reasoning and giving her evidence that she's wrong, she'll be back in a week or two, this has happened before . . .*

This *had* happened before. Irina saying to Drew, *What happened to Carl Winter?*

Jennie straightened. She said to Imani, her oldest friend, "Imani—"

"I know. Me, too. But don't say it."

"Can we?"

"Maybe. Shh."

But Jennie had to say it, had to hear the words upend her world, remake her reality yet again.

She said, "I want to get away from here."

\* \* \*

### VIII.

She hadn't known. Anything.

"I've been unconscious," she said to Imani. "For three years."

"You're not the only one," Imani said grimly. "T-boc wasn't supposed to go like this."

"Ricardo said once—"

"I don't give a fuck right now what Ricardo said once. Jennie, *focus*. This is a crucial test."

They hadn't returned to Jennie's room, not even to get clothes or a toothbrush. Imani said, "Yasu might be put off by puke, but Drew won't be. And there are cameras everywhere."

Imani summoned a drivic, which took them to a homeless locker. Here, in an abandoned storefront, the destitute could be assigned a big, lockable garbage can to keep safe from theft whatever possessions they owned—a winter coat or boots, extra clothes, books or photos from their previous lives. Armed guards watched the locker twenty-four hours a day. The guards watched what went into the garbage cans; weapons were forbidden. Black paint opaqued the windows. Imani went to one of the garbage cans and took a small plastic key from her shoe.

Jennie said, "Cameras?"

"Not in here. Otherwise illegals and other needy persons wouldn't use it."

Jennie looked at the guard, who watched them closely. "Imani, Yasu can hack drivic records, and maybe even street surveillance that—"

"Wait."

Her garbage can was so big that she had to practically climb inside to retrieve anything. Jennie watched her ample butt balance on the edge of the container and fought down laughter.

She was hysterical.

She was an idiot.

She'd been an idiot for over three years. With Grace's world, with Cole's world, with Drew's world.

Imani emerged with a single item, an ancient, oversized hardcover book titled *Pride and Prejudice*. "Okay, here." From the book's spine she extracted two identity-and-credit e-cards, one with Jennie's picture.

"How—"

"Ricardo," Imani said. "That's your DNA scan, too. He got them for both of us, at that fancy college of his. You wouldn't think blingass kids like that would be so criminal. 'Just in case,' Ricardo said."

"In case of what?" She was still staring at the picture of herself above the name Louise Amanda Glenn.

"Ricardo didn't say. He wanted to spout a whole lot of history and I wouldn't let him. I was furious because he thought I might need to hide from T-boc when I . . . Jennie, I believed so much . . . my brother . . ."

Jennie put her arms around Imani, who immediately pushed her away. "No time. And I'm fine."

Imani wasn't fine. Jennie wasn't fine, either. *I hadn't known. Anything.*

"Back door, please," Imani said to the guard, who buzzed it open long enough to let them into an alley, where cameras swiveled to watch them. Imani led Jennie to the street. "You want to know something ironic?"

"What?"

"That locker room—it's maintained by T-boc. Helping the little bastard at the bottom. Come on, look for a crowded bar."

They found one full of drunken young people watching football. Jennie and Imani went into the bathroom and donned the wigs and plastifaces in Imani's hollow book. "What else is in there?" Jennie demanded.

"Nothing. Throw away your jacket and your phone."

They left the bar in a group of people, went into another one, left by the back door, walked a few blocks, repeated. Before they caught a drivie, Imani peeled off her plastimask long enough for the drivie's facial recognition to approve the identity and credit of Kira Tinette Williamson.

Imani slumped on the seat and covered her face with her hands. Her whole big, muscular body began to shake. Jennie saw that she'd reached some sort of emotional limit. Imani!

Jennie said to the drivie, "Bus station."

\* \* \*

The drivie bus had a security bot aboard. Intercity transport for the poor, the bus smelled of unwashed bodies, food brought for the trip, three chickens in a crate. Imani's and Jennie's plastimasks itched by the time they'd ridden ten hours to Portland. In the middle of the night, they waited for the bus to Tacoma. Imani snapped at and argued with everything Jennie said. Jennie let it go; Imani's anger and confusion emerged as combat. They couldn't both do that. Jennie would have to be the calm one.

*Cora's tough. Like you.*

In Tacoma, there was enough credit left for another drivie. Ricardo's scholarship wasn't generous. What had he gone without to do this for her and Imani? Food? Heat? Software?

"Come on, Imani, this way. You can sleep in the car."

"Don't fucking tell me what to do!"

Jennie gave destination directions. *The government can find you anyplace*, Ricardo had once told her. Maybe, but T-boc didn't have government resources, and the cabin, where Jennie suspected she'd been conceived, was the only place she could think of with absolutely nothing to hack. Under thick trees, it was invisible to camdrones. There was a waterfall. She'd filled four bags with food from a bodega beside the Tacoma bus station. Dawn spread red over the sky as they left Tacoma.

What if the cabin wasn't there any more?

Then she'd think of something else. She just needed a safe place to think.

*Gran: It's my job to keep you safe.*

Jennie had the drivie leave them in a parking lot once used by hikers. Weeds grew up through the cracked pavement; the signs that still stood were weathered into illegibility. Five trails began here. They would walk the two miles to the cabin.

The trail was uphill and overgrown. Could the drivie even have made it though?

Could they make it through? “Keep going,” Jennie said grimly when Imani stopped.

“I’m just catching my breath. Leave me the fuck alone!”

Trees rustled in a cold breeze. The air smelled of loam and pine and mint. An unseen squirrel chattered, scolding them. The two women climbed over fallen logs, pushed through uncut brush, splashed through shallow puddles. Jennie, her shivering replaced by sweating from the exercise, remembered that this was the world’s only temperate-climate rain forest.

“Nearly . . . there,” she puffed at Imani.

Across a sun-washed clearing, two cabins stood silently under trees, one a pile of soft charred wood and the other miraculously intact. From its open doorway, Ricardo walked toward them.

Jennie let her bags of groceries drop to the ground. “Ricardo! What—how—”

“The I.D. cards,” Imani said. “They emitted a signal to you the first time we used them, didn’t they?”

“Jennie’s did,” Ricardo said. “I gambled that you’d come here. But Jennie, there’s something I need to tell you, right now. The—”

“Copter!” Imani said. “Move!”

The copter came in fast. It descended straight down with noise and wind, blowing Jennie’s sweat-grimed hair into her face. She pushed it back. Lucy jumped from the copter, followed a second later by the pilot, a muscular man carrying a gun.

Jennie shouted, “Lucy! How did you know where we’d be?”

And then, realizing: How *did* Lucy know where we’d be?

“Oh,” Jennie said. “Oh.”

“Drew sent me,” Lucy said. “I told him this was the only place I could think of where you might go. I’m here to bring you back.”

“Why?”

“Why? Because you and Imani can’t just leave T-boc! You both swore an oath, just like we all did! I believe in what T-boc is doing, and I thought you did, too!”

“I do. But not in what they’re becoming. Fuck it, Lucy, don’t you see? We’re supposed to be against the way blingasses abuse power, and now we do the same thing! Irina was executed, wasn’t she?”

“Irina?”

“You weren’t told that, were you?”

“And you were? You saw it?”

“No, but I know. I just do. T-boc isn’t fighting for the people anymore, it’s just fighting. Irina taught me that unless there’s cooperation—forced at first, maybe, but working toward some form of society that is genuinely fair to everybody—everybody loses. It would be just replacing one power structure with another. We—”

“I’ve heard enough,” the pilot said.

“Yes,” Lucy said. “Leonard, tanglefoam them. All three. Ricardo, I don’t know what you’re doing here, but you’re supposed to be on our side, and Drew will want to ask—”

“I’ve heard enough,” the pilot said. “They’re heretics.” He raised his gun.

Time slowed down for Jennie. The barrel of the gun came up slowly—so slowly—as Lucy’s mouth rounded to an astonished O. Imani dove forward so leisurely that her body made a clear and graceful sine curve. She was halfway to the pilot when he turned his gun from Jennie to Imani. Imani rolled sideways and the bullet missed. Leonard kicked her in the head with a steel-toed boot. Imani lay still. The gun—slowly, slowly—moved toward Jennie. Leonard corrected his aim, and—

A shot cracked out in real, speeded-up time, and Leonard’s head exploded. In the open doorway of the cabin stood a woman, rifle on her shoulder.

Cora.

Ricardo said, “That’s what I wanted to tell you.”

The world lurched sideways for a moment, and when it righted itself, Cora stood beside her, staring at the pilot she'd just murdered. "Shit," Cora said.

Jennie blurted, "Why are *you* here?"

"Hiding out. Bright girl like you shoulda figured that out."

"Cora," Jennie said, "I want some answers."

"I bet you do. But let me say one thing upfront—I didn't give you up."

"You *did*—Gran raised me, not you. But how did you get here? Who kidnapped you from that prison?"

Cora tucked her rifle under her arm, reached into her jacket pocket for a cigarette, and lit it. For a long moment she smoked in silence, her eyes closed almost to slits. Finally she said, "Okay. Why not? But it's a long story."

"We have some time."

"But not too much, right? Whoever tried to kill you is going to know that helicopter isn't returning and they'll track it. Also, you got a girl with a concussion, another who looks like her whole family just died, and a corpse leaking blood all over the ground."

"Inside," Jennie said.

The cabin barely held them all. Jennie and Ricardo managed to carry Imani and heave her onto the bed. She'd regained consciousness but was dizzy and nauseated. Lucy sat on the floor, crying, with Ricardo's arm around her. She kept repeating, "No, no, we were only supposed to bring her back. . . ." Cora and Jennie stood, facing each other.

The cabin shelves were stocked with food, the cans and plastic containers shiny new. Imani lay on a clean, thick quilt. There was no trace of the mice that had infested the cabin five years ago. Cora wore expensive-looking pants, jacket, and boots. Her hair was tinted a glossy chestnut, cut short. Eyes the same color as Jennie's stared at her. She leaned her rifle against a wall.

Jennie said, "Now tell me. Everything."

"My kid ordering me around. Well, well. Where do I start? The Likkies sprung me from Gig Harbor. They brought me here when they were done with me, 'cause I asked them to. Only place I could think of."

"The aliens? Why did they rescue you from jail? What do you mean, they were 'done with you'?"

Cora drew on her cigarette. Jennie realized that her mother was actually nervous. Jennie's stomach tightened; she didn't know what she was going to hear.

Cora said, "Might as well plunge right in. You're my daughter, all right. But Anna—the woman you called Gran—isn't my mother."

"Isn't your—"

"No. Anna isn't my mother.

"I'm hers."

\* \* \*

No one spoke. Outside the open door, a small animal skittered past. The waterfall splashed. A sudden plop of bird shit hit the cabin window.

Jennie finally said, "You're lying. You can't be—"

"You want to hear what I got to say or not? You want to know why the Likkies took me, or not?"

"Yes! But not lies!"

"Stubborn as Anna, aren't you. Shut up and listen. I'm Cora Linda Murphy, born 1954 in Aberdeen. I was always a wild kid. Got pregnant at sixteen with Anna. Unwed mother was a disgrace, back then. I quit school, lived at home. My mom and I fought all the time. She was a bitch, and I guess I was, too.

"The next year, on Valentine's Day 1971, I left Anna with Mom to go on a camping trip with some of my friends. Up here. We—what is it, Jennie?"

“Nothing. Go on.” *An elaborate Valentine: Can’t wait for the cabin trip tonight!*  
Paul.

Cora finished her cigarette. “We were drinking and partying and having a great time. We came to see the meteor shower—there wasn’t all these trees over the cabin then, and it’s a good thing we were out of the cabin because a meteor fell right on it and started a fire. The best bonfire you ever saw. Next morning we dug through the ashes and found the meteor. The wood was still hot in places, and Paul burned his leg. I licked it all better.” She gave a secret little smile that made Jennie glance away.

Cora didn’t notice. “We played with the meteor. After we went home, we all got real sick. When I got better, I found out I could remember everything anybody said to me. I still can. The Likkies told me that’s a side effect of the sickness.”

Ricardo stood, leaving Lucy huddled on the floor. “What did they say, exactly?”

“Who are you?”

“I’m a genius. Come on, Ms. Flint, I know you can repeat whatever anybody said. The aliens have human scientists working with them, don’t they?”

Cora cocked her head and studied him. “You got a name, genius?”

“Ricardo.”

“Well, Ricardo, you’re not really cute but you got something. You Jennie’s boyfriend?”

“Not for a long time.”

Cora laughed. “Oh, she’s got time. Maybe. I’m not going to repeat all that scientific shit word for word—too long and boring. What it boiled down to is that the Likkies said us kids who touched the meteor got a virus. The virus came from a spore that ‘bloomed’ when the fire warmed it up enough. Our immune systems all fought back, which is why we got so sick, and it killed the virus in us. But not before it did things to our genes, turned some on or off in ways that caused brain changes. They’re still studying it. The echomemory got turned on in us, too. So when they found me, I bargained with them. I’m not as dumb as I look.”

*Ricardo at UC Davis: The ‘break,’ the multi-colored tulip petals, was caused by a virus.*

Ricardo said, “But the echomemory isn’t the main genetic effect, is it. The main effect is cell repair and regeneration. You were seventy when Jennie was born, and you’re ninety-one now.”

“Give a girl a compliment, why don’t you,” Cora said, smiling, but this crude flirtation went right over Ricardo’s head.

“Are the others that were on the camping trip also not ageing?”

“Yeah. But not their kids or grandkids. The Likkies tracked us all down. The next generations don’t have echomemory. Only Jennie does. And—” she swiveled to look at Jennie “—I didn’t give you up. I owe them for getting me out of prison, but I don’t owe them you. It’s the only good thing I ever done for you, so you’re welcome. You won’t have to decide if you want your genes sampled, along with everything else in you.”

Ricardo said, “‘Decide?’ They didn’t force you?”

“No. I was surprised, I have to tell you. You’d think if the Likkies are going to go to all the trouble to snatch me from Gig Harbor, getting the government all mad at them, you’d think they’d just take what they wanted. But no, they asked me every step of the way, real polite. Force is against their religion or something. Like Quakers, I guess. I didn’t really care why, as long as they weren’t sticking things up my . . . well, you know.” She grinned at Ricardo.

Jennie put a hand on the wall to steady herself. It was too much to take in. Cora was ninety-one and looked the same age as Jennie. Cora was her . . . what? Her mother, but also Gran’s mother, too. Gran was Jennie’s half-sister. And Grace . . .

She demanded, “Does Grace know?”

“That spiteful little drip? No. I left when Anna was a year old. Motherhood just

wasn't for me. Later on, I visited my mom when Anna's daughter Grace was a kid—well, not so much a visit as a withdrawal thing. Grace thought I was her teenage big sister. Anna—she was widowed already—and I fought all the time. So I got a new birth certificate—a string of 'em, actually—with a sorta new name and moved on. The second time I went back, Grace was gone, Anna had moved to Lemberg, and I was knocked up with you."

Jennie got out, "Who was my father?" Not Paul at the cabin, decades before Jennie was born.

Grace shrugged. "Not sure. Somebody I got careless with on the birth control."

Ricardo wasn't interested in family history. "Is your cell regeneration the reason the Lictorians came to Earth? Did they know about the spores carried by the meteor shower?"

"Dunno. You'd have to ask them."

Lucy stood. "None of this makes any sense!"

"Yes," Ricardo said. "It does. It's the only thing we have that aliens that far advanced would want. It's why they've been collecting animals. Searching for—"

"I'm not an animal!" Cora said.

"—genetic comparisons. They didn't know where the meteors landed, so the Lictorians started searching in China because it's the most populous. For two decades, they've been looking for humans whose virus broke. They must have had some idea about the life extension in the first place, which implies it happened first on other planets, or on theirs, or—"

"Shut it," Cora said in disgust. "You might be a genius, but you're not a sexy talker, you know what I mean? Jennie can do better."

Jennie said quietly, "You said the children of your friends who touched the meteor don't have the cell regeneration. So I don't, either."

Cora looked at her. "I think you do."

"Why?"

"Because none of those kids have the echomemory. Like I do. Like my friends who touched the meteor do. Like you do."

"Why should I alone—no, Lucy's right. It doesn't make sense."

Ricardo said, "Cora's unique genetic make-up. Your unique genetic make-up. The ways the same virus affects different people differently. Different methylation patterns. The—"

"I said to shut it," Cora said.

On the bed, Imani whispered, "My head hurts."

Jennie looked from one person to the next. Imani, her head injured because she'd tried to deflect a bullet meant for Jennie. Ricardo, his mind racing with ideas, who'd left the safety of college to help her. Lucy, her world turned inside out, confused and frightened at the betrayal of all she'd believed. Cora, her mother, who had killed a man to save Jennie, but was nonetheless dumb as a bucket of hair. None of them could get everyone to safety. And, as Cora had noted, outside was a copter that T-boc could trace, plus a man dead from his own heresy-hunting.

Cora was shaking her cigarette pack, evidently empty. Jennie took both Cora's hands in her own, startling her mother.

"Cora, listen, this is very important. Maybe the most important things you'll tell us. You said that the aliens didn't force you to let them examine you, to do . . . whatever they did. You *bargained* with them. Did they perform surgery on you?"

"Cut me open? Not a chance!"

Ricardo said, "Jennie, we have to leave soon."

Lucy, still anguished, said, "And go where? Imani needs a hospital, and Drew will . . ."

Ricardo cut her short. “Lucy, is the copter a drivie? Once it’s programmed with a destination?”

“No. And I’m telling you—T-boc will hunt you down harder now! Cora killed Leonard! There’s no place we can go!”

“Yes,” Jennie said. “There is.”

\* \* \*

The T-boc drones swept in faster than Jennie expected, although not as fast as the ones that had swarmed to Gig Harbor Correctional Facility to kidnap Cora. T-boc might have some rogue military contacts, but not even the military had Lictorian tech.

Jennie stood in the doorway of the cabin. Fire from the drones hit the copter, and it exploded. Leonard’s body, which she and Ricardo had dragged into the copter, burned along with it.

Ricardo came up behind her. “We’re next. If you’re wrong . . .”

“I’m not wrong. Just orphaned. Again.” And then, “My mother is a person who wants her own way.”

“I noticed,” Ricardo said.

Cora had wanted them all gone, in the copter or on foot. She had gone so far as to reach for her rifle, but Jennie grabbed it from her. “Search the cabin,” she’d said to Ricardo, who’d found a pistol and tanglefoam.

“Get out!” Cora had screamed. “I done enough to help you! I done murder! Now get out!”

“No,” Jennie had said, surprised at the calm of her own voice. Her guts twisted and heaved. “I’m sorry, Cora, but we can’t. You must see that Imani can’t hike and that T-boc will hunt us down. We can’t leave.”

“Then we’re all going to die right here!”

“I don’t think so,” Jennie said. “All that food on the shelves there is recent—you even have fresh lettuce. You’re getting supplies flown in. The aliens left you here alone, but they haven’t abandoned you. There are bears up here, and I imagine people are looking for you. Not the government—they must be cooperating with the Lictorians on this non-ageing thing because if they wanted to find you, you’d be found. But there are bounty hunters, and you might be a decent shot but you’re not a pro. You—”

“You don’t know what I am!”

“You’re a woman protected by a Q-shield when you choose to activate it. So do that.”

“Hah! It’s a personal-sized shield! It’ll protect me and you’ll all die! That’s why I told you to get out now!”

For a terrible moment, Jennie wavered. Was that true? But she didn’t believe it. Still . . .

She said levelly, “Then all of us except you will die.”

Cora had laughed, the ugliest sound Jennie had ever heard, and said, “You’re just like Anna.”

Jennie had replied, “I hope so.”

Now Ricardo said softly into Jennie’s ear, “I love you,” but there was no time to reply because the first drone hit the Q-shield that suddenly shimmered around the entire cabin. The drone slid off the shield and sputtered, presumably too damaged to fly.

Lucy, guarding Cora, called unnecessarily, “It activated itself. She didn’t do anything.”

More drones, some flying off and some broken. In less than a minute, it was over. Jennie turned, kissed Ricardo, and faced her mother.

“How long until the aliens come for you?”

\* \* \*

The Lictorian Embassy in San Francisco covered four acres of what had once been Jefferson Park. All four sides were massed with what were apparently permanent

protestors, with tents and sleeping bags and flashing holosigns. Jennie glimpsed GO HOME ALIENS! and ALLIES OF THE BLINGASSES and, bizarrely, RESTORE THE DOG PARK before the bullet-shaped box, some sort of alien vehicle, landed on the roof.

She didn't remember the ride. She, all of them, had suddenly fallen to the floor of the cabin, and then she was waking in this small box with clear windows, jammed in with Imani on her lap and Lucy, Ricardo, and Cora squeezed beside her.

"What the fuck!" Cora, of course. "I didn't want to leave my cabin!"

No one answered her. The box descended through a hole in the roof and opened.

Jennie scrambled out. An unfurnished white room with one person standing by the door. No, not a person—a humanoid bot like the ones Jennie had once walked the runway with.

"Please come this way," its androgynous voice said. "The ambassador is waiting for you."

Jennie said, "This woman is injured. She needs a doctor. A human doctor."

A brief, telling delay. "It will be provided. Please come this way. The ambassador is waiting for you."

"And he's going to get an earful!" Cora said.

No. This was Jennie's one chance, and a furious Cora was not going to spoil it. Nor Lucy, still clinging to the idea of T-boc, still thinking there were clear rules. Not even Ricardo, who might go off onto some historical tangent at a critical moment.

"Just me," Jennie said. "I will see the ambassador alone. I am Jennie Flint, Cora Murphy's daughter. I have something to tell him that he will want to know."

A much longer delay. Cora screeched. Lucy looked hurt. Ricardo said, "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Don't be—"

"I'm not. Remember to explain about the tulips."

The entire tulip conversation flooded her mind, and, despite everything, she smiled. Ricardo!

The bot said, "Please come this way, Jennie Flint. The ambassador is waiting."

Jennie followed the bot while Ricardo restrained Cora. The bot walked as fluidly as runway models, much better at motion than conversation. The small mark on the back of one leg said RIPPLETON ENTERPRISES.

She had no time for irony, or for nerves. This would be the most important conversation of her life. If Cora was wrong, or had been lying . . .

The bot opened a door and she went through.

A large room, thickly carpeted and furnished with polished marble tables and plush chairs, AR stations and virtual-screen consoles. A serious room for serious business deals, diplomatic negotiations, international treaties.

Jennie lifted her chin and pushed back her shoulders.

Cora had been wrong to call the ambassador "he." The alien looked like more of a "she," with a more rounded head and larger eyes than the Lictorian Jennie had seen during the runway hack in New York. Or maybe Jennie was just anthropomorphizing.

"Ambassador, I'm Jennie Flint. Cora Murphy is my mother, and I'm coming to you with a business proposition."

The ambassador studied her. When the alien finally spoke, her voice was light, with a highly inflected accent. But the Lictorians had been on Earth for twenty-one years; her English was perfect.

"I find that hard to believe, Ms. Flint."

"It's true. Please listen to me, Ambassador. You landed in China and traded your advanced technology to the Chinese, who traded it at huge profit to businesses in the United States. But all that advanced tech has put more and more people out of work. The bli—the rich people you deal with—don't need the people who used to work for

them, and they don't want to pay for supporting them. Their misery bred T-boc so that now the United States is practically in civil war that—”

“Stop, Ms. Flint. We do not interfere in any planet's internal problems. We are traders. That is all.”

*You caused the internal problems, or at least made them far worse.* She didn't say this. Wrong, wrong, she'd started at the wrong end. The ambassador was no more interested in human misery than an insect roaster was in ant warfare.

“You came here, Ambassador, because you knew the meteor shower of February, 1971 brought certain spores to Earth. You knew that when they first bloomed, and only when they first bloomed, they infected anyone who touched them. Seven people, including my mother. It caused genetic changes that led to huge increases in cell regeneration and repair.”

“I assume your mother told you this.”

“Some of it. A question—why did it take you from 1971 to 2024 to get here?”

“The meteor swarm was not identified earlier. But I don't hear any business proposition. And I am not interested in what is, after all, known to us. Please don't waste my time.”

*Cold*, this creature was cold as ice. Jennie would need to be cold, too.

“One more question, Ambassador, before we negotiate. My mother told me you don't ever force human beings to submit to taking blood or gene samples or cutting them open. Is that true?”

She had offended the alien. The ambassador's entire body went rigid, so much like an outraged human that Jennie was startled. The ambassador said, “Of course we do not cut people open. We are not monsters. Do not insult me.”

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to insult you. Is it against your religion?”

“Why would you ever assume that I would discuss our religion with a human? And you are the most barbaric human I have ever met. You have polluted this room.” The alien turned and walked away, her gait a strange glide-hop—glide-hop.

Jennie said desperately, “I have the echomemory. I'm the only one of the children of those who touched the meteor who does have it. I may also be like my mother and not age. It's in my genes. And I will trade you the eggs in my body so you can study this.”

The Lictorian turned and regarded her from alien eyes, the eyes of a star-faring ambassador, a medieval religious fanatic, a ruthless nineteenth-century robber baron, a zookeeper whose animal had just done something unexpected.

Jennie had intended to say what she'd worked out with Ricardo: *If you take my eggs by force, I've left hidden internet posts that will inflame everyone so much that the government will be forced to turn against you.* There were no posts and Jennie had no faith that anything would deter the American pursuit of profits, but maybe the threat would deter the Lictorians? It was her last strategy.

Only now her instinct said to wait. To not threaten. To let this strange being from the stars, this alien who was neither friend nor enemy, weigh her offer.

Finally the ambassador said, “Not all your eggs. We will need to see if the genetic change is heritable. In the other children, it was not. You must breed.”

Breed. And the aliens would examine her kids.

“We can keep you safe from your own people,” the ambassador said, with what Jennie would have sworn was distaste, “and you may choose your own breeding partner.”

Jennie said, “I want a lawyer to help me with anything we decide. A human lawyer.” “Agreed.”

“And you protect the four people with me, too. Starting now.”

“Agreed.”

*Do what you have to, but be prepared for the shit you get doing it.*

She felt her shoulders relax. Why was that, in such an unrelaxing situation? It

didn't matter. She nodded, realized that the alien might not recognize the gesture, and said, "Okay."

"Agreed," the ambassador said. "What do you want in return?"

\* \* \*

## IX.

In June, atypical rain deluged San Francisco. Jennie looked up from her tablet to watch it streak the window of her study in the Lictorian embassy. Her and Ricardo's suite of rooms faced the central courtyard, as did every single window in the embassy. The aliens preferred to see greenery and sky instead of the constant human protests beyond the building's Q-shield. Over the last six months, Jennie had realized how deeply the Lictorians despised humanity.

"Why?" she'd asked Dr. Kingman, the geneticist who'd analyzed, it seemed to Jennie, every single thing her DNA did or would ever do. Laura Kingman, a cheerful trans woman, had a brisk let's-just-carry-on British attitude. "Why do they detest us so much?"

"You already know they consider the use of force to be barbaric."

"There are all kinds of force."

"True. But that's not their main reason. Spit into this, please."

Jennie spat.

"Consider this scenario, Jennie. You belong to a DNA-based species, because nearly all species are, the Lictorians say. Panspermia seeding the galaxy. Space is apparently as full of drifting microbes as a dirty bathroom. You find a virus that 'breaks,' causing cell regeneration and repair. Several species, most non-sentient, contract this virus and become very long-lived. You go from planet to planet chasing this virus and seeing beings—creatures lesser than you—cheat ageing and death. Not indefinitely, because entropy is inevitable for everything, but for a long, long time. You want this virus to infect your species, but it doesn't. It can't. You spend—oh, I don't know, maybe centuries—trying to obtain some version of this precious boon for your own race, and you can't do it. Despite all your knowledge of genetic modification, you can't. You see humans, intellectual and moral brutes, gain this miracle by random chance, and you don't. Your specimens flourish, and you die. How do you feel about those lucky inferiors?"

Jennie was silent. Laura drew blood from Jennie's arm. Finally Jennie said, "It's wrong. And what they've done to us is wrong."

"I think," Laura had said, "that we've done most of it to ourselves. Make another fist, please."

"You don't despise what I'm doing," Jennie had said.

It hadn't been a question. Lucy, for one, had been outraged by Jennie's bargain. "*You'd sell your body?*"

*"It's mine to sell. And I have a job to do here."*

"No," Laura said. "I don't despise what you're doing. I admire it."

\* \* \*

That had been in November and December, during the most intense phase of Lictorian-human negotiation. Jennie's seven "contractual demands" of the Lictorians had been very specific:

- Dissolve or nullify or jam—"whatever it takes"—all Q-shields unless the United States government imposed a heavy tax on all robots and all financial transactions, the tax to be used exclusively to fund a Universal Basic Income high enough to live on. To the rich, that was the stick.

- Offer for universal sale some wonderful piece of advanced technology—"I know you must have more"—and give all the profits to a new foundation that would aid small businesses making and growing things that corporations did not. Things that poor people could use and eat, and which the UBI would let them buy. To the rich, that was the carrot.
- Sell to the United States the physics and plans for the kind of starships the Lictorians had, for a huge sum that would be used totally to fund gifted and talented programs in schools. Both to give others the illegal education that Jennie had and to break the Chinese stranglehold on advanced tech.
- Provide her, at the embassy, with both the latest film-and-holo producing tech and access to the internet, with total freedom for Jennie's team to post through encrypted anonymous channels. "Not anti-Lictorian propaganda," the human lawyer for the aliens said. Jennie's lawyer agreed.
- Use Jennie's harvested eggs for genetic analysis but not for growth into embryos transplanted into surrogates. No interference with Jennie's care for, and education of, children born to her. In addition, when her children reached adulthood, they could leave Lictorian scrutiny and go where they chose.
- Give Jennie, Imani, Ricardo, and Lucy ten million dollars each, held in a Swiss bank. Cora, it turned out, had already gotten that amount, plus her Q-shield.
- Find Irina.

There had been more, of course, much more, as there always was when lawyers were involved, not to mention stiff-lipped diplomats and corporate CEOs. The contempt that the Lictorians had for Jennie had been nothing compared to the blingasses' contempt. Jennie had known, intended, that she was reshaping American society, and it was costing everyone, not just the Lictorians, dearly. Cheating death was expensive.

Irina's body lay buried in the embassy courtyard, under the falling snow. Drew awaited trial for murder.

Jennie turned from the window back to her tablet. Imani came in.

"Reading again? More on tulips?"

"Yes. Scientists still haven't cracked the code for why tulip color 'broke' in the 1630s."

"Well, nobody's cracked your code, either." There was more complexity in Jennie's genomics than anyone had expected, or yet understood. "Did you review my holo?"

"Yes." Jennie brought up on her holostage Imani's latest production of one of Jennie's scripts. Imani had become adept—much more adept than Del—at creating digital effects that enhanced Jennie's message. That message was simple: We share this country, and a common humanity. Extremists on both sides are not the majority of people, who just want a normal and civil life. It is possible to understand each other without agreeing with each other. It is possible to restore peace and justice. The country was not this way once, and it doesn't have to be this way now.

So far, nobody was listening.

T-boc continued to attack the rich and to fight internally, even though reliable reports said that many people, assured of an income and busy establishing a business or going to school, had deserted the revolution. Corporations, even those benefitting from the new tech, went on isolating themselves from the poor they considered inferior, even as they strove to make them into customers. Protests continued against, it seemed, everything. "The country is worse than before," she'd said to Ricardo.

"Worse on the way to getting better. It will take time."

Jennie had time. Cora still looked twenty.

"Well," Imani said impatiently, "what do you think?"

"Your holo's good," Jennie said, "and you know it's good. You don't need me to tell

you."

"Sure I do. You make the rules."

"And when did you turn into Lucy, desperate to follow rules?"

They grinned at each other. Jennie said, "She going with the latest delegation to D.C.?"

"Yep. She'll report back to us on all that political stuff. Ricardo going, too?"

"Not this time. He's got a big virtual-presence exam for law school. Studying day and night."

"Not all nights, I bet."

"Shut up. You and that cute rep from the People's Engineering Coalition . . ."

"Shut up. But I'll say this—it's a good thing the Likkies—oops, the Lictorians, our interstellar friends—build with soundproof walls."

Imani would never like the Lictorians. She would quit the embassy soon, Jennie knew. As Cora had. Restless Imani, reckless Cora. Jennie, who could not leave for perhaps decades, didn't envy them.

After Imani left the room, Ricardo came in. He put his hands on Jennie's shoulders and kissed the top of her head.

"Done studying?"

"Never. I just wanted to check on you."

"I'm a ball of energy. You know, I'm very lucky to have this sort of pregnancy. Some women get weak or vomity or depressed."

"You are the reverse of weak," he said.

"Ricardo—I want to name the baby 'Tulip.'"

"Tulip? Nobody's named Tulip."

"She will be. Tulip Anna Flint."

"Well, I suppose it's better than 'Semper.' Or 'Augustus.'"

He lifted her to her feet and turned her to face him. "We'll name her anything you want. But I came here to tell you something, because I said I would. The ambassador offered again to take us to their world. Three of the long-lived who touched that meteor are going: Jimmy and Kathy and Paul."

Paul, Cora's teenage boyfriend, who had certainly not fathered Jennie on Cora's cabin trip in 1971. Jennie had been misled by a lacy Valentine.

"No," Jennie said. "I have a job to do here. Minds to influence. A chance to do good. And I made a bargain."

*"Do what you have to, but be prepared for the shit you get doing it. You remember that, Jennie."*

"Yes, Gramma."

She would never be free of any conversation she'd ever had.

Outside the window, rain had slowed to a drizzle. "No, Ricardo," Jennie repeated. "I don't want to go away."

"I'm staying right here."