

The Truth about the Shiners

Kevin Cudby



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Part 1

I am a pause
Octavio Paz

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Chapter 1

It's totally dark. Something is rumbling.

... is it a machine?... in the corridor?... or down on the street?... or hovering near the window?...

Whatever it is, it's going away...

"Light," thinks Letitia.

Nothing happens.

"Computer, put the light on," she says out loud, in case there's something wrong with her chip.

It's still dark. And it's coming back.

She pushes through the fuzziness between asleep and awake and remembers: This is Catalina's house. She is sleeping in Catalina's brother's bed. There's no data-grid here, nor an electric light, nor an elevator, nor a building manager. It isn't a twelfth-floor apartment, it's a little adobe house with a stone floor, right on the ground.

Letitia gropes for her flash-light—finds it on the bedside table.

She shines it around the room. Near the wooden door is a chest of drawers, made of polished wood—on top of that, some wooden carvings—a tall one of a naked woman, and another of a horse—hanging on the wall is a sword—another wall has wooden shutters.

The noise is getting louder. She throws back the blankets and rolls off the bed and jumps to her feet.

As she crosses the room toward the shutters, she covers her ears with her hands because the rain is so loud it's making her dizzy. At the window, she grabs the shutter bar, and then stops—what if it's not rain?... a wild animal perhaps?... They get mountain lions round here, and bobcats, and bears... But none of them sound like that... It sounds more like a machine... But there are no machines here. Just horses, and donkeys, and cows, and carts... And surely, no animal could roar for this long without stopping for breath. It can't be an animal—but it's louder than any rain Letitia has ever heard.

The noise swells louder—a few seconds of thunder—and then it begins to fade. If she doesn't look now, she'll never know. She lifts the bar and flings the shutters open and shines her flash-light through the opening.

Outside, millions of pale streaks hang like filaments of clear plastic, dancing and shimmering in the pale beam. It's so thick she can't even see the fence—and that's only twenty meters away.

The desert rain.

June is the start of the rainy season—when the streams become rivers

and the dry creek-beds fill with water; when the gray dust turns to mud; when the endless kilometers of mesquite change from dull yellow to clear, emerald green, studded with red, yellow, and blue wild-flowers; when the cactus flowers overshadow the brightest handwoven blankets and quechquémitls—the Chihuahua Desert’s brief burst of fertility and growth.

Back home, no-one will hear the rain thundering against the dome. All over the city, thin poles reach high above streets, and parks, and swimming pools, and schools, and apartment buildings, supporting the plastic panels of the env-dome. It protects the people from poisons, and germs, and radiation. Noise can’t get through. If it did, would anyone care? No... no-one ever thinks about what’s happening outside the env-dome. No rain falls in Grand City, unless you count sprinklers.

The Risk Management Commission said she has to leave Grand City forever, because she’s a hominid, and hominids are dangerous. Mum says they fear what they do not understand—but hominids are humans, and humans are hominids, and they’re all just people. Aunt Petra explained to the commissioners, and so did Emma—but they wouldn’t listen. Why don’t they get it? Letitia’s always top of her class. None of her school friends think she’s different—they treat her just like anyone else.

Her friends can live in any city they like, and go to university, and have careers, and live in comfortable apartments. But not Letitia. When the commission banished her and Alex from Grand City, they banished them from the whole Intercity Council.

Mum was so upset. But it’s not her fault. So what if she and Aunt Petra tried an experiment? They raised two young hominids just like ordinary babies. They proved that hominids are not animals. They’re human. And they said so in their scientific articles, and in grid-cast interviews, and in court. But the commissioners wouldn’t listen. Stupid old hags!... What would they know, anyway? They’ve never met a hominid—never seen a hominid village—never even been outside the env-domes—never swum in a river or climbed a hill or warmed their feet in front of a wood fire...

How could they be so mean?...

Letitia closes the shutters. She puts on her jeans and a clean t-shirt, then slips on the new oilskin poncho that Emma bought from one of the villagers. She creeps through the kitchen and living room to the veranda. It’s getting light. The rain is still roaring on the roof, but in the faint light she can see the fence and the water trough and the corral and the barn and the windmill that pumps water into the storage tank.

The door squeaks, ever so softly. It’s Catalina, wearing the white tunic

she sleeps in, carrying two tightly-woven baskets shaped like plastic buckets.

“Yuck!” She puts down the buckets and pops inside. A few moments later she returns wearing her poncho over the tunic. Gently closing the door, she slips her hand behind her neck and pulls her long black hair out of the poncho. She is fifteen, the same as Letitia, and although she’s thin and slightly shorter than Letitia, who is 165 centimeters tall, she is very strong. Letitia tried to arm-wrestle her last night and got beaten four times in a row.

“The rain is pretty,” says Letitia.

“Yes. And we need the water. Some of our wells were drying up. But I’ve never seen such heavy rain.”

“Neither have I,” says Letitia. “The most was when Mum took me to Spain to see my natural mother. It rained really really hard. But only for a few minutes. Nothing like this.”

“Have you heard from your natural mother?”

“Yes. I should write... her last letter came two months ago... She’s OK, but Alex’s half-brother is really worried about the shiners. I try to explain they’re just people, but...”

“I didn’t know Alex had a brother...”

“Marco... he’s old... twenty-nine...”

“Oh...”

The muscles in Catalina’s arms ripple as she picks up the baskets, especially the one that’s half-full of soapy water.

“How come that basket’s not leaking?” says Letitia.

“If you use the right stuff, and weave it very tight, you can make them watertight. Come on!” Catalina heads for the barn. Letitia follows, splashing across the yard, mud oozing between her toes.

Inside the barn, the blotchy orange, brown and white cow pokes her head over the gate of her stall and moos. She stares at Letitia, who stops, terrified by her wicked horns.

Catalina walks right over to the stall and opens the gate.

Letitia wants to run. But she can’t. She can’t even turn around, in case the beast decides to sneak up behind her.

Panchocita walks to her feed trough, turns her head and stares at Letitia, again, and then sticks her nose in the trough and starts eating.

Catalina grabs a stool from somewhere in the shadows behind the trough and starts cleaning Panchocita’s udder and teats with soapy water.

“Come on,” says Catalina. “You can have a go.”

Letitia’s stomach is churning, and her feet simply will not move, as if

they are stuck to the ground.

Catalina looks around: “What’s the matter? You’re shaking,” she says, stroking one of Panchocita’s teats with a soapy hand.

“I... I... Can’t...”

Catalina looks at Panchocita, then back at Letitia: “Oh... Why don’t you stand behind me? I’ll be right here, between you and her. She’d never hurt me, not even to chase someone she doesn’t like. But she does like you. I can tell. Didn’t you see how friendly she was when you came in?”

Letitia moves slowly. Her stomach is still tight, but Catalina is right. If Panchocita wanted to hurt her, she would have tried already.

“She doesn’t mind?” asks Letitia, her voice shaky.

“She likes it. At least, she does when I do it,” says Catalina. “I’ve been milking her all her life. Mum tried, once, but she kicked her. Didn’t you Panchocita, you naughty girl? Yes. But you never kick me. You’re my baby, aren’t you?” She faces Letitia. “I hand-fed her when she was a calf.”

Letitia moves in behind Catalina. Panchocita turns and looks at her. Catalina puts the empty bucket under her and grabs a teat with each hand, alternately squeezing one, and then the other, squirting milk into the woven bucket.

“I went to the milk factory once,” says Letitia. “The milk comes out of big machines.”

“I can’t imagine eating something out of a machine,” says Catalina. “It’s so strange. I get scared just thinking about it... I suppose...”

Silence.

The only sound is the swish of milk hitting tightly-woven plant fibers... and Panchocita’s munching.

“What?” says Letitia.

“Oh... I was just thinking how scared you were. Just like I get scared thinking about the shining... I mean, the cities.”

“I guess... We get scared of strange things... But it’s not really strange. Just different. Mum says synthetic milk is the same as cows’ milk, but city-folk would never eat or drink anything that came from an animal. They’d be too scared of germs.”

“When did you go to the milk factory?” says Catalina, still squirting milk into the bucket.

“It was a class trip. The teacher was Ms. Ososkey so it must have been year four. It was a long way from my school. The bus ride went on forever, and I fell asleep. Ms. Ososkey woke me, shaking me and saying, *Come on Letitia, dear... wakey wakey*. Everyone was getting off the bus and running around. Ms. Ososkey clapped her hands and we all stopped and listened.

She introduced the manager who was going to show us around. The manager said they made all the dairy products for Grand City and New Austin and Gulf Town, and it was a special privilege to go inside the factory, so we must do exactly what they said because food manufacturing is a safety-critical industry.”

Catalina stops mid-squirt and turns around: “Yeah. Mum says we could get sick if we don’t clean Panchocita properly before we milk her.”

“It’s the same thing, I guess,” says Letitia, wondering if it really is. But it must be. After all, she has stayed in hominid villages plenty of times, and their food never made her sick. Though, perhaps that was because of the pills Mum and Aunt Petra made her swallow before they left the env-dome. They said she only needed them till her system got used to village food.

Catalina starts milking again.

“Anyway, Alex didn’t listen—as usual,” says Letitia. “I had to tell him everything Ms. Ososkey and the manager said. Ms. Ososkey must have noticed. But this time, she didn’t say anything.

“The manager showed us a big machine for milk, and another big machine for putting it in plastic bottles. Then, she showed us where they were melting down old bottles and making new ones. The machine rooms had big windows so you could see inside. The manager said the whole place was completely sterile. No-one was allowed in the machine rooms while they were going—no toxins or dangerous microbes could get in.

“Alex got in for trouble because he got into the bottle recycling room and they had to shut down the whole factory and clean it,” says Letitia.

Catalina lets go of the teats, puts her hands over her mouth and laughs. “It’s strange,” she says. “All my life I thought you... I mean the shiners... I mean, city people... All my life I was taught to stay away from the shining mountains, because shiners live inside them.”

“What did you think they were?” says Letitia.

“Man-eating demons! They have heads like one-eyed fish and bodies like humans. They are covered all over with tiny silver scales that shine like polished metal. Their stingers spout dazzling light that paralyzes anyone who goes near them.”

“Emma told me you were scared of the env-suit, but she never said why,” says Letitia. “She said she stood in the middle of Renacimiento and put hers on.”

“I was only little,” says Catalina. “But I’ll never forget when she did that. It was so scary. I wanted to run away. Emma was so funny, always making us laugh, and I loved her beautiful red hair. But I’d never seen her in that suit. When she put on the hat...”

“Helmet,” says Letitia

“Helmet. When she put on the helmet, she was a **shiner!** Even now, it frightens me. I know it’s dumb. It was only Emma. But it was horrible, and I couldn’t look. Not while she was wearing that suit. Why do you... they... wear those suits?”

“They think it’s dangerous outside the env-domes... the shining mountains you call them,” says Letitia. “Mum says it might have been, a long time ago, but it’s not any more. But no-one believes her. They’ve forgotten what the problem was. Now they just follow the procedures. They don’t want to change. And anyway, they’re scared of villagers.”

“Why?” says Catalina.

“Your life is so different. They don’t realize you’re people.”

“You mean... They think we’re animals?”

Letitia moves closer. Catalina’s lip is quivering and tears are running down her face. “They’re wrong!” says Letitia. “You know they’re wrong. Some city folk know they’re wrong. Anyway, stop crying. I don’t want tears in my milk.”

Catalina laughs. Panchocita bucks her head up, looks at Letitia, moos, and continues eating.

“Letitia, you know I like you,” says Catalina. “Sometimes I think you’ll be my best friend. But...”

“What?”

“I’m scared,” says Catalina. “More scared than I’ve ever been. They threw you out, even though they thought it was dangerous out here.”

“They don’t really think it’s dangerous. Not any more. Mum and Emma and Aunt Petra proved that.”

“They think **we’re** dangerous!” says Catalina.

“Yes. But...”

“What will they do to us?”

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Chapter 2

Emma steers hard right. The Humvee's left front wheel bounces off a slippery mud-bank, pushing the vehicle back on to the track. She waggles the steering wheel, aiming at a cluster of derelict buildings two hundred meters to the north. The rain stopped just before sunrise. The sun is belting down from a clear sky. Wafting mist blankets the mud.

"They coulda waited till after the rainy season to chuck your kids outa Grand City," says Emma.

Petra laughs and grabs the back of the front passenger seat, almost punching Carol in the back as the SUV nosedives into a mud-hole. "You know the bureaucrats. That would be too practical."

"Anyway, you love the rainy season," says Stella, reaching for the back of the driver's seat just as the vehicle bounces out of the mud-hole. "You haven't missed one in eight years." Sliding over the seat-back, her hand slams into Emma's right ear.

"Ow!" says Emma. "Use the fucking handrail!... And no, I don't like the fucking rainy season. It's just that June's the only time I can get out in the field, with the university calendar the way it is. Do you have any idea how many shoes I've lost in muddy streets?" She swerves around a yucca and aims toward the ancient ghost town, which must have been some kind of industrial complex, with warehouses, offices, and houses. It's overgrown with scrub, mostly mesquite, sprinkled with cactus and agave.

"Why don't you wear work-boots?" says Carol, who has spent most of her fifty-two years building and maintaining utilities outside the env-domes.

"Would you wear training shoes to a dinner party? I study language by socializing with the villagers," says Emma, flinging the steering wheel hard right, sliding the SUV sideways, stopping in front of an enormous concrete and steel warehouse on the eastern side of the street. "That's why I bought these hand-made gaucha boots." She lifts her left foot on to the dashboard and wiggles her boot.

"Renacimiento's answer to stilettos," laughs Petra.

"Changing the subject," says Carol. "The mayor's not wrong. That's a good-sized warehouse. I didn't realize the hom... villagers had this kind of construction capability." She glances at the data-pendant dangling from a leather thong around her neck. From the car's roof comes a buzzing whine. Her remote inspection unit lifts off, flies over the end of the ladder protruding from the roof-rack and zooms toward the warehouse like a wind-blown sombrero, stopping in the six-meter-high doorway near a huge

sliding door clinging precariously to an overhead track. Three similar doors must have fallen off years ago, and now lie flat on the concrete floor.

“They don’t,” says Petra, flinging her door open and jumping out. “And look at this!” She kicks a clump of weeds, exposing the street’s original blacktop surface, now mostly buried under desert scrub and wind-blown dirt. “This place was built with technology the villagers must have lost hundreds of years ago. Technology that doesn’t feature in their legends.”

Yesterday, when they met the Mayor of Renacimiento to discuss Petra and Stella’s plans, he offered them the complex before anyone could ask. “No-one knows how old it is,” he said. “My father once told me that when his grandfather was young they still used some of the buildings. But they couldn’t look after them—they’re too big. That village has been dissolving into the desert for God knows how long. If you can use it, it’s yours.”

Suddenly, Emma realizes everyone else is outside. She hops out and goes around behind the car, where Carol is distributing gray coveralls with *Grand City Engineering Department* printed on the back.

By the time she gets into her coverall, the others are already inside the building. There seems to be something stuck in the zipper, so she leaves it open and follows them inside, skirting around puddles, avoiding piles of broken glass, stepping over scraps of wood, sidestepping piles of steel.

Petra and Stella are barely visible in the shadows at the back of the building, chatting and gesticulating. Emma can’t make out what they’re saying, but she gets the gist of it from the way Stella’s waving her arms about: facing the south wall, she is describing a mezzanine that will run the full length of the building. Her curly black hair is almost invisible against the shadows, and her face looks like a white mask hanging disconnected above the shoulders of her coverall.

They move slowly toward the front of the building.

At forty-seven, Petra’s hair is still mostly black, with just enough gray to show against the shadows. It’s pulled back in a bun, as always, so her long, thin neck shows up as clearly as her white face. She’s about average height, 170 centimeters, but next to Stella she looks tall. She takes her right hand away from her chin and points a long, thin finger toward the front of the imaginary mezzanine: “If you put your office there, you’ll get a view of the church. It’s only one and a half clicks away.”

Stella points to the front of the building with a thick, stubby finger: “If I put it in the corner, I could have a window facing the sunset,” she says. “And I’ll see Renacimiento Church. And that little hill just north-west of it.” They’ve obviously decided this building will become Stella’s *Institute of Physical Anthropology*. (Just as well the university council’s never heard

of ancient Greek: Stella told them *anthropology* means *hominid zoology*.)

Now they are looking north, and Petra's describing something on another imaginary mezzanine while Stella nods agreement. Long and slim, short and curvy, that's Petra Romanov and Stella Wilson. They make an attractive couple. Pity they haven't noticed. Everyone else has.

Carol is watching the remote hovering slowly along the steel I-beam of a portal frame, streaming observations and measurements into her data-pendant. "Lookit this," she says, and suddenly the remote's video is streaming into Emma's chip.

"No sign of rust..." says Carol. "Golly. It's quite astonishing."

At which point Emma, distracted by the video, trips on a sheet of corrugated steel: staggers across the clanging metal with her arms extended like a ballerina's: sprints until her legs catch up with her body: and then, satisfied she's not gonna fall on her face, lands squarely on both feet. Right in the middle of the biggest puddle in the entire building: "Argh... Shit it's cold! Shoulda worn an env-suit." She is saturated from the waist down.

Petra puts her hand over her mouth. Stella's about to rush over when Emma says: "I'm OK."

Carol bends over, laughing. "We should all be wearing env-suits... Hell, I could lose my job. We've ignored every safety protocol on the 'grid!'"

"They'll never know," mutters Emma, as she starts picking her way back to the car.

Carol Martin is Grand City's Chief Engineer. She was in the public gallery when Petra's and Stella's kids were exiled. The first day of the trial, Emma saw her towering over a group of scientists, including the old archaeologist who testified for the prosecution: Dr. Sharon Daley. They were standing close together like friends, so Emma thought Carol supported the case against Alexander Romanov and Letitia Wilson. But after the tribunal delivered its verdict, Emma saw her arguing with those same scientists. She couldn't hear the conversation but Carol was obviously pissed off. She hung around while a crowd of reporters bombarded Petra and Stella with questions. As soon as they left she introduced herself, apologized for the way they'd been treated, and offered to help.

Even before the end of the trial, Petra and Stella were talking about moving to Renacimiento. "What sort of life will Letitia have now?" said Stella. She had a point: Letitia's and Alexander's faces were splashed all over the data-grid. *Experimental Hominids*, screamed the headlines.

Renacimiento was the obvious choice. Petra and Stella have plenty of friends here. "It's easier to study a culture if you immerse yourself in it,"

said Petra.

By the time Emma's dried off and changed her coverall and emptied the water out of her boots and hung her wet clothes on the front bumper, Carol is emerging from the building, smiling: "I need to get up and look at the roof... There's some wood framing. How about holding the ladder? You'll be standing still so you can't trip over anything."

"Why can't you use the remote?" says Emma.

"We don't use wood, do we?"

"Er... no... I guess not." The remote wouldn't have a clue how to analyze wooden structural parts—Emma should have known that.

Carol unloads the twelve-meter extension ladder and slings it over her shoulder with a clatter. Before Emma can offer to help, she has carried it inside, extended it up to the roof and leaned it against one of the frames: "OK. Now. Put your feet against the uprights, one each side," says Carol, demonstrating with her left foot. "Make sure it can't slide along the floor."

Emma feels insignificant. If it tips sideways, what could she do? Carol was world wrestling champion five years running. Tall and powerful, she must be at least twice Emma's weight... the ladder wobbles and clanks as she climbs unhesitatingly to the top. Emma looks up to see what she's doing, but her neck soon gets tired of bending backwards. Carol's the engineer: she knows all about physics. Emma can only do as she's told. She concentrates on the ladder's feet.

Carol pokes about, muttering, wobbling the ladder for what seems like forever, and then climbs down. Emma, relieved she is no longer responsible for Carol's safety, glances around for Stella and Petra. There's no sign of them in the warehouse, and the sound of voices tell her they're in the roofless building across the street.

"Never done this before," says Carol, telescoping the ladder into itself.

"What?... Oh... you mean coming outside without an env-suit?"

"Oh, not that... I've ripped half a dozen env-suits and never been sick," says Carol, slinging the ladder over her shoulder. "No, what I meant was, I've never restored an old building." In the cities, old buildings are torn down and recycled to keep up with the latest architectural trends.

"But you can fix these?" says Emma, as Carol chucks the ladder on the roof-rack and starts across the street toward the little building, which has a row of curved arches facing the street.

"Well, I just stuck my finger through one of the purlins..."

"That'll be what the villagers call rot," says Emma, stepping around an agave.

"Oh... OK... Anyway, the steel and concrete is fine. So, yeah, I guess I

can fix that warehouse. I'll run the remote over the other buildings, but they look promising."

They step up on the terrace behind the arches. The stone-flagged floor is partly covered with weeds and scrub and a scattering of broken roof tiles. A hallway runs between large rooms, bisecting the building from front to back. Out back is another veranda.

Petra approaches Carol: "This would make a beautiful schoolhouse."

"You really believe these hominid..."

"Carol!" says Emma.

"Er... sorry. You really believe these village children can be educated, don't you?"

"Of course," says Petra, indignant. "You saw us talking to their parents..."

"I couldn't understand a word of it. I'll admit, it looked like they have a... what do you call it?"

"Language," says Emma.

"That's it... But... oh my gosh! Everything I've learned about them told me they're just animals... It'll take some time to get used to this."

"You should learn Spanish," says Stella.

"Yeah right. Like I get time..." says Carol.

"Good idea," says Emma.

"What?" says Petra.

"Oh, I just realized," says Emma. "I could design an interactive data-grid course... so people like Carol could learn new languages."

"New?" says Petra.

"Oh, you know what I mean... ones that aren't on the data-grid."

"Oh how exciting!" says Stella. "And you could have virtual villagers interacting with the students and use background images from their villages so while the students learn the language they'll also get used to interacting with villagers. Then they wouldn't be scared to meet them in reality... Oh, Emma, that's **such** a good idea."

"Get real!" says Petra. "What makes you think anyone would want to see and hear and smell and touch something they think is dangerous? They'd sooner jump off a building!"

"She's right, Stella," says Carol. "Apart from a few nit-wits, no-one will be interested."

"I'm not so sure," says Emma. "It might be worth a try... On a small scale... Blanche always says we should look for commercial opportunities..."

Petra frowns: "On a small scale."

“That’s what I said!”

Petra rolls her eyes skyward, and then turns to Carol: “Getting back to what we’re here for... Can we do this?”

“Er... probably,” says Carol, fiddling with her data-pendant. “Some of the wooden framing seems to have deteriorated. It almost certainly needs replacing. You’re probably looking at quite a lot of new framing, plus roofing, plumbing...”

“Our sponsors are realistic,” says Petra. “But funding’s always limited. A little gold goes a long way out here, so the more we can do with village materials, the better. The villagers can work with wood.”

“And we could use clay roofing tiles on the school!” gushes Stella. “They’re so quaint. I love them.”

“Oh dear! I’ve never designed with wood,” says Carol, thinking out loud. “I would need to take samples. Test the strength. Feed the data into computer models. I suppose it’s possible.”

“Why don’t you look through some of our old texts,” says Emma. “We’ve got several on engineering. They’re bound to have something on wooden structures and...”

“How can I do that?” says Carol.

“Oh... damn... they’re not on the data-grid... look, when we get back to Grand City, come over to my office and we’ll go through it together. If we find anything, I’ll upload it to your office computer...”

“Will I be able to read it?” says Carol.

“Oh... I guess not... it’ll be ancient English...”

“Why not just do it the way the villagers do?” says Petra. “Most of their buildings have been standing for centuries...”

“I suppose,” says Carol. “Yes. There’s no theoretical reason why not. Their own buildings don’t collapse.”

“Good,” says Stella. “That’s settled... Now. Let’s find somewhere to live.”

“How about that?” says Petra, pointing to a building on the eastern side of the street, beyond the large warehouse just north of the Institute of Physical Anthropology (which might as well be called *Renacimiento Hospital*, because that’s what it’s going to become).

“OK, let’s check it out,” says Carol.

They make their way toward Petra’s house, the remote hovering above Carol like a techno-fashion accessory.

Some people would say they’re nuts, but Emma can’t blame them. Their lives revolve around Alexander and Letitia. To be told your kid’s an animal, and can’t live in the city—it’s enough to make anyone turn her

back on city life. The villagers have been unbelievably generous. Most of the people in Renacimiento barely manage to put enough food on their tables: they're in no position to help anyone. But that didn't stop them offering all sorts of practical help: food, clothing, accommodation.

Emma snaps out of her daydream just in time to avoid stepping on a cactus. Petra and Stella have disappeared inside Petra's new house, chattering rapidly but unintelligibly. Working her way around puddles and mud-holes, she approaches the house just as Stella comes out and points to the villa next-door. "That one's gorgeous!" she says, and disappears inside. Petra follows.

Carol comes out of Petra's house, fiddles with her data-pendant, and says: "Emma. What's your story? How did you get involved with these two?"

"Stella and I have been friends since elementary school... right from the very first day."

"That would make you..."

"Thirty-nine. Same as Stella. She and I went through university together. Even after she went to work with Petra, we kept in touch, and our research kept overlapping. The more we collaborated, the more progress we made... Seemed only natural to keep working together. We're a team now."

"And so," says Carol, "without you they would never have been able to communicate with the villagers."

"Exactly. It took a while to convince Petra to do field studies... I was gonna do the first one on my own..."

"The Commission would **never** allow that!"

"They wouldn'ta known. Anyway, Petra decided to come along, and once she'd agreed, Stella had no choice really... where Petra goes, Stella goes..."

"But you don't want to live here permanently."

"Er... well... I divide my time between Grand City and the villages—it's a bit primitive out here."

"I've noticed," says Carol, screwing her face up. "They could use better plumbing... But," she says, gazing toward the western mountains, "after I've finished with this place, gosh, it'll be just like a miniature city."

"Better," says Emma. "There's no sky in Grand City."

"True. But I still think you're all jolly crazy!"

Chapter 3

The mayor has been talking for hours. He is standing in front of the red ribbon stretched across the front entrance of the school, which now has a blue tile roof and freshly-painted white walls. The whole town is gathered around, all wearing their best clothes and fresh from their siesta. Every time Letitia thinks he's about to stop and cut the ribbon he thinks of something else to say. People are starting to shuffle and sigh.

Letitia opens her little shoulder-bag and takes out the slices of cake she swiped from the table inside the school during the chaos before the mayor started his speech. It was easy. All the women were rushing around, laying out the food that people had brought. No-one noticed.

She moves close to Catalina, elbows her gently in the ribs and hands her a piece of cake. Catalina looks at her, sucking in a loud breath, and then grins and cups the cake inside her hand and nibbles it.

"... I declare la Escuela de Renacimiento officially open," says the mayor. Everyone claps and cheers. Aunt Petra hands him a big shiny pair of scissors. "Thank you, Dr. Romanov," he says. "And might I say how very excited I am to have reached this auspicious juncture..."

"God," whispers Catalina. "He's starting all over again."

Letitia laughs, spraying a mouthful of cake at Catalina.

"Watch it!... God you're a pig!" says Catalina, laughing and brushing the crumbs off her quechquémitl. The Renacimiento quechquémitls are long enough to wear without tunic or blouse. Made of two rectangles of cloth, one short edge of each part sewn to a long edge of the other part, Catalina's cape sits neatly on her shoulders, a brightly colored triangle hanging down in front and behind. There's plenty of room for air. Letitia wishes she'd worn hers, because her blouse is wet under her arms and clinging to her back.

Suddenly, as if he's finally run out of words, the mayor stops talking and cuts the ribbon. The band starts playing and people start dancing.

"Let's go out the back," says Catalina. They squirm through the crowd in the entrance hall, but the back veranda and the playground are full of people looking at the new stone fence that will keep the little ones from wandering off into the desert, and the sandbox for them to play in between lessons, and the seats around the edge of the playground.

"God... I'll suffocate in this crowd," says Catalina, making her way back into the hall.

Aunt Petra is showing some people around, saying she'll sometimes put the older kids into a separate classroom so they can do their

assignments while the little ones are learning the basics of reading and writing and arithmetic.

“Dr. Romanov was talking about you and Alex,” says Catalina.

“And **you**. You can read.”

“Yeah... but Magda and Jorge’ll have to stay with the little kids won’t they?”

Aunt Petra has a friend who is an economist. She will set assignments for Letitia. Catalina wants to learn biology. Stella will help with that.

“Mum says Aunt Petra will keep Alex busy with physics or something,” says Letitia as they step on to the street.

Magda squeezes between two huge ladies standing near the entrance. “I’ve been looking for you,” she says, breathless, her short, curly, black hair shining with auburn highlights. She’s wearing an embroidered white tunic under her quechquémitl.

“I thought we’d lost you,” says Catalina. “There’s not much happening here. Let’s do something.”

“Hey, how about that card game you showed us?” says Magda.

“Poker—Yeah!” says Catalina.

“We need Jorge and Alex,” says Letitia.

“I saw them a few minutes ago. Behind the fence,” says Magda. “I’ll get them. Where are we going to play?”

“In there,” says Letitia, pointing to the boarded-up warehouse, next to Alex and Aunt Petra’s house. “You can get in through the back door.”

Even though the sun streams through gaps in the roof and a big hole in the front gable, most of the warehouse is shady and cool. Catalina and Letitia move packing crates into the middle of the building—one big crate for the card-table, and a circle of five smaller ones to sit on. Letitia collects her poker chips and cards from a hidden cupboard near the back door and starts sharing out the chips.

The back door slams and Magda comes in, with Alex and Jorge Batista following, wide-eyed, like great big puppies.

“Phew, it’s hot out there,” says Alex, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. “I hope you’re counting those properly.”

“course,” says Letitia. “A blue chip is worth five white ones and...”

“Too complicated,” says Magda, with her hands over her ears.

“OK. Don’t worry about the colors. All chips are worth the same.”

“Better,” says Catalina.

“Right!” says Letitia, “no table limit, minimum bet one chip. OK?”

The others shrug. Alex grins. Jorge sits down, his chair scraping loudly

as he pushes it away from the table to make room for his legs. The others sit down, Alex scraping his chair even louder than Jorge and bumping Magda, who shuffles sideways. “Move over, Jorge.”

Jorge stands up, drags his chair away from Magda, and sits down.

Letitia lets the others win the first few hands, studying their faces while they play. Magda already knows you have to control your face so the others can't guess what you have. She's pretty good, but her pupils dilate if she thinks she has a good hand and her wide, full lips tighten if she gets a bad one. Jorge is easy. His rectangular face beams when he gets a pair.

Alex is the first to run out of chips. Out in the street, the band is playing and people are dancing and talking.

“Lend him some chips,” says Magda, taking off her quechquémitl.

“OK... I'll stake you, if you do my chores for a week,” says Letitia.

“Three days,” says Alex.

“A week,” she says, focusing on his face so that her pupils close down, and keeping her voice low-pitched and commanding.

“Er... OK,” he says.

Jorge goes bust. The afternoon sun is now shining directly through the hole in the front gable, right on to the card table.

“It's warm isn't it,” says Alex. “Let's make it interesting.”

“What do you mean?” says Jorge.

“Strip poker!”

“What's that?” says Magda.

“You take off your clothes if you lose,” says Catalina. “One thing for each hand.”

“Er...” says Magda.

“Come here,” says Letitia, getting up and walking away from the card table. Magda, Catalina and Alex get up to follow her, “You boys stay there.” She leads the girls outside and shuts the door.

“It'll be funny,” says Catalina, softly. “Let's make them dance.”

“But what if I have to get completely naked?” says Magda. “I don't think I could.”

“If you put on your quechquémitl, you'll have more clothes than them,” says Letitia. “And Jorge's not very good—and Alex is losing too.”

“Yeah!” says Catalina. “Wish I'd worn a tunic.”

“I'll lend you a t-shirt,” says Letitia. Wait here.” She runs around behind Alex's house toward hers.

A couple of minutes later she's back, wearing a different blouse, carrying her quechquémitl and a t-shirt.

Catalina takes off her quechquémitl, puts on the t-shirt, and then puts

her quechquémitl back on. “Come on,” she says, her hand on the door.

“Er... I can’t,” says Magda. “I want to see Alex... but...”

Letitia thinks about saying how she’ll use her chip to keep track of the cards, and how she can stack the deck, her hands moving faster than the eye can see. But she doesn’t want to... It’s more fun if it’s secret.

Catalina says, “They won’t be able to do anything—there’s three of us.”

“I’ve got an idea!” says Letitia, putting on her quechquémitl and smoothing it down. “When the sun sets, we can say we’re cold and put on our clothes.”

“OK,” says Magda.

Catalina goes inside. Letitia waves Magda through the door, and then follows them back to the card table. Magda puts on her quechquémitl.

“Hey! That’s not fair. You’ve got more clothes than us,” says Alex.

“Tough,” says Catalina. “You wanna play, or not?”

Jorge and Alex look at each other.

“We can beat them anyway,” says Jorge.

“I’ll deal,” says Letitia. She gives Alex and Jorge lousy cards. Jorge loses.

“Stand up and take it off slowly,” says Catalina. The girls clap slowly, and Jorge wriggles in time to the clapping as he removes his shirt. He has black curly hair up the middle of his back, and a narrow strip up his tummy, and a patch on his chest.

“You dance like a burro,” says Magda. Jorge pushes her shoulder, and she shoves him back.

Catalina deals next, and Letitia loses her quechquémitl. She dances slowly for fifteen seconds, then flicks it off, twirls it around above her head, and flings it away into the shadows, finishing with both hands held high above her head. Everyone claps.

Magda loses her quechquémitl next. She circles slowly around behind the others, and then flips it over her head, does a few pirouettes and tosses it over her shoulder.

Alex stands up and claps. Jorge rushes over and gets Magda’s quechquémitl.

Alex’s shirt goes next. There’s no hair on his tummy or back.

“That’s more like it,” says Letitia, when he finishes his routine and tosses the shirt into her lap. She picks it up, holds it to her face, and inhales the smell of him.

On the next hand, Alex loses his pants. Magda and Catalina have never seen briefs, and they giggle for ages. His face goes red.

It's Letitia's deal. She thought she gave the boys lousy cards, but Alex ends up with a pair of aces and Jorge has two queens. Catalina loses her quechquémitl.

Catalina deals next, and loses her t-shirt. As she dances, the boys clap and cheer loudly. She turns bright red, but she dances nicely. She finishes with her back to the others and tosses the t-shirt over her head. She has beautiful breasts, round, medium sized, with nipples pointing ever so slightly upwards. Alex's eyes and mouth are wide open, his tongue hanging over his bottom teeth. Jorge is staring at Magda, as if by staring hard enough, he'll be able to see through her tunic.

Letitia claps her hands. Loudly. "Come on you two. Next hand."

Magda loses her tunic. She goes red, and she can hardly dance. Her hands shake as she turns away and wriggles from side to side, working the tunic slowly upward. She flicks it over her head, throws it aside, turns around, and immediately cups her hands over herself. Jorge and Alex start jeering.

"Shut **up!**" says Catalina. "Ignore them Magda. You're beautiful."

Magda lowers her hands. Letitia and Catalina stand and clap; Jorge and Alex follow suit. Catalina's right. They are nice, but different. They're bigger than Catalina's, and they swing as she walks.

Next, Magda loses her skirt. She does a couple of pirouettes as she tosses it aside; underneath she has a short red underskirt. Her face is still red, but everyone cheers which seems to help.

Letitia loses the next hand. She stands and walks about two meters away from the others, turning her back to them. When she undoes the top button of her blouse, a hot flush comes over her face, and her fingers and nipples tingle. She remembers the time, when they were little, when Alex came to stay because Aunt Petra was away on a lecture tour. Mum put them both in the bath together, and she thought nothing of it. Neither did Alex. But this feels different. It doesn't make sense, but she can hardly undo her buttons, and her feet are rooted to the floor. Catalina did it. Magda did it. She can't back out. The last button is undone. She pushes her arms back, straight, and lets the blouse slip off behind her. She stands up on tiptoes, holds her hands up in the air, and does a pirouette, right around, finishing with her back to them. They're all clapping, and Magda and Catalina are cheering. She does another one. On the way round, she caught a glimpse of Alex: it looks like his eyes and tongue are about to fall out of his face. She covers herself with hands that shake like crazy.

This time.

She rises on tiptoe, as high as she can, breathes deep, and turns toward

them. Jorge and Alex are motionless. Silent. Their eyes bore into her, as if they can see right through her hands. “Go Letitia!” says Catalina. “Woo hoo.” She and Magda clap again. Letitia holds her arms up straight, above her head, stands panting for a moment, then bows low, and returns to her seat.

Jorge turns and ogles Magda’s breasts. Alex keeps his eyes on Letitia’s, and a tiny drop of dribble escapes from the corner of his mouth.

“E-e-ew,” she says. “Alex, you pig!”

“What?” says Magda.

“He drooled.”

Magda and Catalina crack up, and it’s catching. Letitia starts laughing uncontrollably as well.

Jorge seems to wake up, though his gaze is still fixed on Magda’s breasts. “Come on... Deal!” he says. Probably hoping Magda will lose her underskirt.

Not if Letitia can help it. She gives each boy a handful of trash. Jorge loses his pants. He’s wearing black shorts. The sun is beginning to set, the crimson light making their skin glow.

Catalina deals and Jorge loses again.

“Dance,” says Magda, her knees jammed tightly together, her hands cupped over her breasts.

“I’ll dance if you move your hands,” says Jorge.

She lowers her hands, blushing.

Alex is still ogling Letitia, which distracts her. She tries to concentrate on Jorge, but she can’t stop glancing at Alex. “Alex! Watch Jorge!”

Jorge turns away, wiggles his hips, and starts pushing his shorts down, slowly. First, he pushes one side down a little, then the other, and so on. His bum-crack is hairy. Magda puts her hands over her face, giggling. Catalina has her hand over her mouth but she can’t stop sniggering. As he bends over to take them right off, Letitia glimpses his dick swinging back and forth, and doubles over laughing. Catalina loses it, laughing so hard she has to hold Letitia’s shoulder so she doesn’t topple off her seat. Jorge makes a clumsy pirouette, loses his balance, sidesteps to regain it, and holds his hands high above his head. He is staring at Magda’s breasts, which jiggle as she giggles. She has to hold the edge of the card-table-box with both hands to keep her balance.

Slowly, Jorge’s dick rises and swells. Magda is laughing so hard she falls off her seat.

“E-e-ew... Jorge!... Stop that!” says Catalina.

He covers himself with both hands and turns away, showing his hairy

bum-crack again. Catalina collapses on to Letitia, laughing hysterically.

Magda crawls over to her quechquémitl, still giggling, and slips it over her head. “Enough!” she says. “I’ll die laughing if I see any more.”

Letitia cups her hands over her breasts and stands up. “Everybody get dressed.” She’s giggling so much she has to put her hands over her face, so she turns in her elbows to cover herself.

“Aw...” says Alex. “Not fair. You all have to get naked too.”

“Yeah,” says Jorge. “I did... now it’s your turn.”

“No,” says Catalina. “It’s getting too cold now.”

“Come on,” says Alex. “Look, I’ll strip first.” He stands and slips off his underpants. He’s stiff.

“Yuck,” says Catalina, looking away.

Letitia faces the others. She fights to overcome the giggling, and in her most commanding voice, says, “Alex, that’s enough. Get dressed and leave us alone. You too, Jorge.”

“No,” yells Alex. “Not till you get naked.” His eyes look like they’re on fire; his face is livid, the little freckles stark against the white skin. He grabs Letitia’s wrists and pulls her hands away from her breasts. “Get it all off. We did.” She tries to cover herself, but he is holding her arms out and his hands are like steel clamps. She wants to kick him, but her body won’t respond. She’s trapped.

Catalina has Jorge by the shoulders: “Jorge, make him let her go... He’s gone too far!”

“No,” says Jorge. “It’s her turn.”

Letitia tries to twist her arms, fighting Alex’s grip, which only tightens. Her hands are going numb.

“Jorge! He’s hurting her,” yells Catalina.

Jorge pulls away from her and grabs Alex’s wrist: “Stop,” he says, twisting the wrist so that Alex lets go of Letitia’s left arm. “Let her go.”

Alex glares at him.

Letitia is shaking. She wanted him to see, but... not like this.

“Please go,” she says. Alex goes blurry as her eyes fill with tears.

He releases her other arm, mutters something under his breath, and turns away. He puts on his briefs and pants and stomps out, pulling on his shirt as he goes, slamming the door behind him.

Jorge’s face is a confused apology—he pulls on his pants and then follows Alex, his shirt over his shoulder.

Magda takes off her quechquémitl and starts brushing the dust off it, “I thought he wasn’t going to quit.”

“Yeah,” says Letitia. “I wanted to... But it didn’t feel right, at the end.”

“Alex spoiled it,” says Catalina.

“It was fun, even though I was scared,” says Magda, putting on her tunic. “I wish they’d learn when to stop.”

“Boys are always like that,” says Catalina. “My brother’s just as bad.”

“Do you know,” says Magda. “Down in the sea-ports, the sailors pay women for sex.”

“Ew... I couldn’t do that,” says Catalina.

“In Grand City,” says Letitia, “they have escort services... you can hire someone to go out with... sometimes they have sex with their clients.”

“I’d do it if I was in love...” says Catalina. “But not for gold! Even then... God, did you see Jorge? I wouldn’t have room!”

“I don’t think I would, either,” says Letitia.

“My mum says you always think that at first,” says Catalina. “But if you love him, it’s OK. I guess...”

“I know who you want,” says Magda. “Viviano Múzquiz.”

“I do not!” says Catalina.

“Yes you do,” says Magda. “I’ve seen you watching him!”

“You’re imagining things,” says Catalina. “I don’t like any of the boys around here... not **that** way.”

“I could probably do it with Alex,” says Letitia. “If he wasn’t so rough.”

“He frightened me,” says Magda. “Is he always like that?”

“No, he’s only been that way since...”

“Since you got thrown out?” says Catalina.

“Yeah.”

“Look,” says Magda, pointing to star twinkling above a hole in the roof. “Make a wish.”

“I wish Alex still did nice thoughtful things for me like he used to.”

“It doesn’t work if you say it out loud,” says Magda. “Don’t you know that?”

“I never saw a star till the first time I went outside the env-dome.”

“Dad says they’re like the sun,” says Magda, “only further away.”

“That’s what Emma says too... Did you know? People used to go up there.”

“In flying machines?” says Catalina.

“Yeah. And in rocket ships, like giant fireworks. And they had things circling the earth, like radio stations and stuff.”

“Can you see them?” says Magda. “Maybe they’re like shooting stars?”

“Emma says they probably fell down hundreds of years ago. We don’t need them any more.”

“Why not?” says Catalina. “What were they for?”

“Some for looking at stars, and some for communication—like—you know what I told you about comm-links and chips? and how we can talk to people thousands of kilometers away? They used to bounce the signals off those satellites. But now that everyone lives in a few cities, they only need cables, so they don’t bother with satellites.”

“What about us?” says Magda. “I’d like to be able to talk to my grandmother sometimes. It takes nearly a week to get to her place. I hardly ever see her... The shiners are selfish—someone should teach them a lesson.”

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Chapter 4

On her front veranda, Stella puts on her sunglasses and flows into her new rocking-chair. She sips the blood-red Spanish wine. It is smooth and fruity.

In two days' time, it will be exactly one year since she decided to move into this house... but already she's a hero. The mayor came over this morning, with young Esteban Múzquiz, and very formally presented to her a beautiful wooden rocking-chair. Oak. Decorated with intricate carvings in Esteban's rapidly-maturing style, which favors angular patterns, eagles, and deer, quite unlike his father's characteristic spirals and flowers.

With his father away at the Gulf, Esteban must have made it by himself. "For your veranda. So you can watch the sunset," he said, after the mayor had finished his speech. And then he produced the wine. "My uncle brought it from Spain."

It really wasn't necessary. She could not refuse. But does Renacimiento now expect too much? She is no surgeon—she is a physical anthropologist...

It is true that she is a qualified paramedic, but she has never put the training into practice. She couldn't talk Emma and Petra out of studying hominids in the field, so she decided to join them. According to Risk Management Commission guidelines, any group traveling outside the envdomes must have at least one paramedic for every five members. (Not that that would have stopped Emma.) Petra's the psychologist and Emma's the linguist... so naturally, it was Stella who trained as a paramedic. But that was a long time ago, and anyway, nothing could have prepared her for what happened last Thursday morning.

... Letitia, all panicky and disheveled, shook her awake.

"Mum... It's an emergency... Hurry..."

Jorge Batista and Catalina Vinyals were at the door... horses tied to the veranda, snorting and shivering.

Señora Gutierrez said Simona Natividad was going to die from her baby. could señora Wilson's shiner-magic save her? señora Gutierrez said she must hurry... the baby's stuck... Simona's screaming and everyone's crying... please help... Simona's only eighteen and it's her first baby and please save her.

It would have been so simple to fly her to Grand City, to the hospital, to real surgeons—but even if Renacimiento had an airfield and a comm-link with which to request an aircraft, they'd never let a villager inside

Grand City without a comprehensive risk assessment. That would take months, even under urgency.

“Jorge,” she said, “Tell señora Gutierrez to bring Simona to my lab.”

Then Letitia pointed out that Jorge’s horse was too tired: “You’d better take Flash,” she said. “Or, perhaps I should go because he’s only little.”

Jorge must be at least 75 kilograms.

“I need you and Catalina here,” said Stella.

By the time Stella had dressed, poor Flash was cantering back toward the Natividad farm carrying Jorge, while Letitia and Catalina searched the lab computer for one of Emma’s ancient texts—a treatise on obstetrics that is probably six or seven hundred years old.

... if the lab had had a data-grid connection, maybe... but no, the data-grid would have nothing about childbirth, not any more, not now that childbirth means opening a gestator and lifting out a baby... they found the text and displayed it on the big wall-screen so that Catalina could read it too... if the baby was stuck, then Simona would need an emergency caesarean...

Although Catalina reads well in Spanish, she has barely begun to learn Shiner, let alone ancient English... but the diagrams were good and while Stella read the procedure and re-read the basic surgical techniques— anesthesia—incisions—sutures... Catalina turned the room into a theater, removing extraneous equipment, moving in the big overhead lamp, the surgical robot, a table... sterilizing instruments... sending Letitia for linen and containers and drugs, Catalina giving orders to Letitia, for a change.

Then there were horse-hooves clip-clopping on blacktop and the cart squeaking and rattling and Jorge calling gently but firmly: “Whoa, whoa.”... and the midwife helping Simona into the lab... sweating profusely, breathing rapidly, her eyes shut tight, neck muscles tense... the ancient midwife’s face shadowed and lined, but still smiling, though her dark brown eyes were dull... how many times has señora Gutierrez been through this?... Renacimiento’s midwife for over thirty-five years... “sometimes it happens like this, señora Wilson: only God can say why.”

Catalina waiting in the lab, scrubbed impeccably... Stella checking and rechecking laser settings, drug doses, procedures, life signs... two heartbeats—quick and very quick... the surgical robot’s laser beam cuts into living flesh... Emma said this would happen... Inevitable.

... Underlying all her fears was the risk of what Emma calls semantic shift—the subtle evolution of language over time, a phenomenon that must be taken into account in any work of translation. Emma has often warned of their imperfect understanding of historical texts, that the same word in two

texts might have different meanings... she can go on about this stuff for hours. The point is that Stella might have been following faulty instructions, that she had to analyze every step of the procedure, think about what she was doing from first principles, visualize each layer of tissue and remember everything she had learned from dissecting and analyzing and measuring and classifying, and all that, while she held not one, but two lives in her shaking, terrified, hands. Perhaps with practice, she can learn how to detach herself from her emotions, to do what needs doing and defer anxiety, and fear, until she has done everything in her power. Does señora Gutierrez cry, when a baby dies before it takes its first breath? or when a mother, after struggling to deliver a new life, loses her grip on her own? she didn't look at all worried when she arrived, though she had done everything she could to save Simona. She had focused all her being on keeping Simona's spirits up—maybe the shiner magic can save you. But you're a good girl and you have nothing to fear. God loves you...

The baby was a bruise. A purple rubber doll, bent and squashed like something from the bottom of a toy basket. While Stella finished the sutures and bandages and hoped Simona wouldn't hemorrhage because she didn't have a single microbot, he nursed contentedly with his teenage mother dozing against the pillows. Gutierrez said he was just lovely... she'd been working for hours, without rest—Stella thought she was raving deliriously... but she was right. The baby soon found his proper shape and color. He will have his father's complexion—on Simona's breast, he is a rose on bronze.

His name is *Adam*.

He is the mayor's first grandchild.

... at least Simona has plenty of milk... her body knew exactly what the baby needed, without any help from a chip... Which ought to make sense, because the chip simply relays biological signals from baby to mother via the data-grid...

The villagers thanked their god for sparing a talented young woman whose adult life had just begun. And they thanked him for helping Stella work the shiner magic. But there was no omniscient hand on Stella's when she moved the robot over Simona's belly, slicing into living flesh. There was only a frightened little girl—someone she thought she had left behind in the fantasy world of shadows that become strange monsters that hide under the bed, dangerous animals that invade her dreams, who transform themselves into a pile of clothes in the middle of the bedroom floor when she wakes, sweating, whimpering for the computer to turn on the lights, slowly, so they don't blind her with their sudden intensity...

It's a lovely chair, and tonight's sunset will be glorious. Already, the sun is a small, yellow disc shining through a deep purple haze above the far distant mountains. A yellow flare is beginning to erupt from the haze.

... The rains are late—later than last year—the villagers are worried. A subtle frown that dulls a smile—a laugh that stops before it should—an averted glance when rain is mentioned...

Is that a dust cloud? out near the foothills, three kilometers west of Escuela de Renacimiento.

... there was a panic about Kate Patton's baby, Helen. It was a little more than twenty-two years ago. Kate's partner was on her way back from Europe: "A data-grid hug just isn't the same... I'll be there in six hours... you're her best friend Stella..."

Helen's vital signs had begun to fluctuate a week before she was due. As the doctors vacillated and debated, Kate paced back and forth in the waiting room: "What if she has to be aborted?... I don't think I could handle that... what did I do to deserve this?..."

The doctors had already disconnected Helen from the data-grid. That probably made it worse for Kate, but until this week, until she saw Simona giving birth, Stella could never understand why. Simona could not disconnect herself from her baby... it was there inside her, and perhaps her determination gave the baby the strength to survive. Kate could not do that. She could only pace back and forth or sit around drinking too much coffee while the doctors lifted Helen from the gestator and resuscitated her... Is natural childbirth worth the risk? Did whoever built the env-domes go too far? did they throw out something vital when they purged risk and danger from city life? perhaps, by now, city-dwellers can no longer give birth naturally? maybe they really are different from the villagers... different in some way that hasn't shown up in Stella's research? has she missed something?...

Señora Gutierrez has never mentioned her predecessor, but she often talks about her father-in-law, the local physician. Perhaps it was he who inspired her to become a midwife?

Old señor Gutierrez has a degenerative brain condition. Emma took scans and samples back to Grand City two months ago, but even if she could get him through Security, it's too late—they would need to replace so much brain tissue he could not possibly survive. If he'd trusted her even

three months earlier... So now, it seems that Stella will become Renacimiento's physician...

It is a dust cloud. She can see it clearly now, left of the spare house, moving east. The Humvee, for that's what it must be, is bumping and bouncing roughly over the desert, bypassing the town and heading straight for the village of Escuela de Renacimiento.

A low murmur drifts out of the house behind her. Letitia is probably playing cards in her bedroom with Catalina.

... Her wardrobe has been growing. The first month or two, it was only small things. A new underskirt, a bandanna, a faja, a bag. Stella would have drawn the line at the bag. But then Adam came along, and while Stella was distracted she has acquired a new skirt, an embroidered tunic, and a gorgeous new quechquémitl—not that there was anything wrong with the one she received as a welcoming gift. Those kids' mothers would have spent hours on those garments... dyeing the yarn carefully in a dozen or more colors—weaving every pattern, every stripe, one thread at a time—sewing every stitch of embroidery... Though Letitia denies it, she's using her chip to keep track of the cards. Not only that, but she has developed remarkable sleight of hand, based on those ancient martial arts Alexander has been studying. The other kids don't stand a chance.

She's going to give it all back.

But that can wait until tomorrow...

The car is clearly visible now. Shimmering through the rising heat. The front wheels stretch and suddenly it resembles a lizard jumping over a dune... now the front legs disappear as if it has pounced on some unlucky animal, and then the face yawns wide and shakes from side to side... the mouth snaps shut, slaver dribbling from each corner, and the huge flashing eyes search the desert for young villagers to eat... in its wake, the dust cloud speaks of its impossible speed...

... In their legends, the villagers sometimes describe the Humvee as a giant, man-eating lizard. The two-piece wind-shield, the long snout, the vertically barred grille flanked by headlights, the body hunched over wide-spaced wheels—through the heat-haze it is clear how the image came to be. But this lizard-carriage is not carrying man-eating fish across the desert, nor is it hunting for young children to eat, it is bringing Emma Graham to the village of Escuela de Renacimiento. It must be her—she said she'd

definitely come down on June Seventeen, and that's today. Besides, anyone else would follow the trail. Not Emma: "Stuff the trail. This is more fun."

... The archaeologists still cannot explain why the env-domes were built, but the environment must have been dangerous sometime in the distant past. If that is true, then whether the problem was radiation, toxic air, dangerous microbes, extreme temperatures, or renegade microbots, where did the villagers come from? Were their ancestors expelled from the env-domes like Alexander and Letitia? or did they find a way to survive whatever catastrophe prompted the cities to enclose themselves inside domes? There's nothing in their legends about city life, and so perhaps their ancestors always lived in the wilderness. Some of Emma's students collect legends, hoping to find clues to the past, but the real value of that work is to preserve the stories for their intrinsic value—in case people stop passing them on now that they know the truth about the shiners. Emma thinks the answers will come from ancient texts, like those recovered from the abandoned env-dome near the Spanish village of Xavier de la Montaña...

The SUV appears suddenly over a hillock a hundred meters west of Stella and immediately disappears behind the spare house. Emma has removed the canvas top, her hair is tied in a ponytail that streams behind her, and a dusty bandanna covers her mouth and nose. Hitting the road just north of the spare house, she turns south, swishing along the blacktop, still dragging her dust-cloud, and stops abruptly. Right in front of Stella. The car shades her veranda and blocks her sunset. The choking dust-cloud swirls, spreading, hovering, and settling slowly around Stella, and on her terrace, and on her, and on her clothes, and in her hair; and on her rocking-chair—and in her wine!

"Hey Stella. Whaddya think?" says Emma, standing on the driver's seat, jumping confidently over the door and landing on the street. Over a blue airport company coverall she wears a thick layer of dust. The top of her face looks like a mask, while the bandanna has kept her mouth, nose and cheeks dust-free. Until she opens the back door to get her bag, it is absolutely impossible to make out the color of the SUV. The door-frame is bright yellow—so, undoubtedly, is the rest of the vehicle.

"You look like a very dusty aircraft technician," says Stella.

"Not me, the car."

Dark gray smudges on the front door resolve into words—*Escuela y el Hospital de Renacimiento*. Emma promised to bring some new (ancient)

videos to entertain Petra's kids... but she didn't mention a **car**.

"You swiped a whole SUV! One of these days you're gonna get..."

"Relax. They can't trace it. They were re-manufacturing fifty of them for cities all over North America. I just added one more car to the work order."

"But someone must have seen a yellow Escuela de Renacimiento SUV leave the city... you can't just tuck it down your cleavage!"

"No sweat. I checked all the video logs and then wiped them. And anyway, the records'll be gone in a couple of years—you know how that works... Carol and I put the decals on last night—out in the desert. Even if there was anyone there, which I doubt, they would have seen only a yellow car."

"I'm worried about you. What if you get caught?"

"I'll sell up, buy a bucketful of gold, and buy that," she says, pointing to the spare house, "from you and Petra..."

"And who'd buy medical supplies, and school texts, and... dammit Emma, we need you in Grand City. You're taking too many risks... And get that bloody car out of my sunset."

Emma hops in, U-turns and parks in front of the spare house. She takes off her coverall, shakes out the dust, slings her bag, and walks to the front door.

"Chip, contact Emma," thinks Stella. Then, remembering there's no data-grid here, she stands and calls out: "There's no hot water over there. Use my shower."

"Only if you're not mad at me."

"I'm not mad, I'm worried. Just get out of my face. I might calm down by the time you're clean."

Emma crosses the street and goes inside Stella's villa.

... Maybe that was unreasonable. It was touch and go with Simona and Adam... if they'd had a car... how clever of Emma to think of it... so much quicker than a horse and carriage, and a car doesn't get tired or need to be fed... sooner or later, this vehicle will save someone's life. Whose, Stella can't tell, but by the end of the year, someone will be alive because Emma made a data-grid record vanish and an SUV materialize in Renacimiento...

Esteban saunters out of the warehouse he's been fixing up. The kids have been playing in the unused warehouses. It seems their games are harmless, and the teenagers need their own space, so Petra asked Esteban to

repair that warehouse, and made the kids promise to stay out of the others.

Stella waves him over: “Would you like to come to supper tonight.”

“Sí, señora.”

That’s a relief. If Stella had remembered Emma was coming she would have invited Esteban a week ago. At least now there won’t be an odd number around the table.

“Well then, you must promise to call me Stella,” she says.

“Sí, señ... Stella.” He turns and heads toward the school-house.

The front door opens and Emma appears, her hair back to its normal (hennaed) auburn, shower-damp and shining, a short quechquémitl over her shoulders, a blue denim skirt around her waist, and deep-tooled leather gaucho boots on her feet.

“Nice outfit,” says Stella. “Sorry I was mad.”

“It’s OK... Good to have someone who cares.”

“Thanks. Where’d you get the quechquémitl?”

“Like it? My students gave it to me. Came from a village about 350 kilometers north-west of Grand City. Pasito. Heard of it?”

“No... I like the light background.” The cape is solid gray with a row of eagles around the edge.

“What about the eagles?”

“It’s like they’re holding hands...”

Renacimiento weavers tend to emphasize stripes. Other patterns are rare, although sometimes, young girls wear quechquémitls with animal or bird patterns in one of the outer stripes.

“Why so short?” says Stella.

“This is how they make them up there. The Pasito women always wear tunics.”

“You should too.” Although Emma is usually sensitive toward the villagers, she doesn’t seem to understand the importance they place upon modesty. If Esteban saw her dressed like this, he would be polite, but he would not approve.

“I will,” says Emma, “in town... But there’s no-one around... Got any tequila?”

Chapter 5

“Doctor Graham, it is seven a.m.,” says Emma’s chip. “This is your wake-up call.”

“Fuck off.”

“I’m sorry...”

“Just shut up.”

It’s gonna hurt. Bad. But that won’t keep Emma away from her office. She was supposed to be back on Tuesday. Now it’s what?

“Thursday, Doctor Graham.”

“Thought I told you to shut up!”

It could be worse. At least she struck good weather on the way over, driving the school’s new car. And Carol had good weather on Saturday. If they’d come back on Sunday...

But they didn’t.

Late Sunday night the skies opened, worse than she’d ever seen, way bloody worse than last year, and that was the worst the villagers had seen in twenty years. By Monday morning the trails were quagmires. She was up to her neck in mud less than two hours after they set out. Carol was driving down the hills north-west of Renacimiento when they came across a humongous mud-hole. Carol went in at about twenty k’s. Way too slow. They ran out of momentum halfway across. The ground was so soft the Humvee kept sinking even after its floorboards hit the mud. Emma volunteered to take the winch cable across. So there she was, half crawling, half swimming, with mud oozing down the front of her coveralls and ponding in her bra and then dribbling down her stomach. And just when she thought it couldn’t get any worse she came to a stretch of frigid water that dribbled up inside her coveralls, freezing her legs and knocking the breath out of her. When it hit her arse she almost jumped the rest of the way. How the hell the water gets so damn cold when it’s forty degrees in the shade is beyond Emma. She hooked the cable round a tree but it ripped out of the ground when Carol, sitting on the hood, clean and dry, started the winch. So Emma had to go back through the freezing water and halfway across the mud to retrieve the cable, and then she had to find another tree, a willow, well clear of the mud, solid enough to take the pull. All the time, she could swear Carol’s SUV, and its load of village artifacts, was sinking deeper into the mud.

Three hours!... Three hours it took to get out of that bloody mud-hole. She was gonna be back in Grand City by Monday afternoon. Instead, there she was, freezing, covered in mud, dripping all over the inside of the car,

still more than a hundred k's from home, and it was already lunch-time. And then it started pouring again. Not that light drizzling stuff, the stuff that gently soaks into your clothes, warming up against your skin as it goes. It was like the skies were making up for lost time, dumping everything they'd held back for the last twenty years in one hour and making you want to pee. But if you do you get drenched—again—so you hang on as long as possible, until you can't wait any longer. Just as you finish and stand up, soaked from head to foot with rainwater escaping from your clothes in tiny body-heat-stealing wisps of vapor—the bloody rain stops.

By the time they'd winched themselves through two more mud-holes, it was too dark to go any further, and they weren't even a third of the way across the desert.

On Tuesday they covered twenty-five k's in the first two hours without getting stuck, and Emma started thinking they'd be home in time for dinner. Fat chance. The instant the thought entered her mind—just as she swung the SUV round a patch of mesquite—Carol said: "Good grief!"

Emma thought "fuck" woulda been more appropriate. No way were they gonna cross that raging brown torrent. Usually, that particular creek is dry—one time, years ago, she saw a trickle of water in it—but Tuesday—hell, it had more water than the Río Bravo! So off they went upstream, looking for somewhere to cross. After two hours and three mud-holes (only one of which she got stuck in, and Carol pulled the cable across that), they swung north-west. Carol took over the driving, and kept saying she thought they'd make it by nightfall. Which meant she was hungry. At least they took the villagers' advice about water—Emma would rather die of thirst than drink the soup pouring down the creeks. Then they came to an even bigger river and spent the rest of the day searching for somewhere to cross. Carol reckoned there was no point going upstream, so off they went downstream. As they worked their way north, the valley grew steadily deeper and its steepening sides closed in until they came to a narrow gorge, wall-to-wall soup. In the fading light, they backtracked till they found some high ground. And then, for the second night, they had to sleep in the car, with the roar of the river and the clatter of rocks rolling along its bed and the rattle of rain on the roof and the swish of wind in the scrub.

And no bloody dinner!

And then it stopped. Sometime in the middle of the night. In the early light, they continued upstream until they found a wide, shallow riffle where the stream fanned out over a bank of shingle and rocks almost as if it had tried to dam itself. They winched and drove the SUV around the downstream edge of the pool.

About mid-morning, Carol caught her env-suit on a mesquite thorn. And then, at the last mud-hole, barely a kilometer from the sealed road between Grand City and the solar crude oil facility, Emma slipped over and ripped hers on the front bumper. So to cap it all off, they had to go through decontamination. By the time that bullshit was over and done, it was after ten p.m., and the café opposite Emma's apartment building was bloody closed.

Come to think of it, that's the last she can remember. She's naked, and she's in bed, so she must've gone through her usual bedtime routine: Brush teeth, strip, crash. And in spite of the pain that seems to have seeped into just about every muscle in her body, Emma feels pretty damn good. Until she tries to sit up. Her stomach muscles don't work. Neither does her right arm. She rolls on her stomach, swings her legs out of bed, and kneels on the floor.

"Do you want your shower running?"

"No, coffee. Scratch that. Tequila." No matter what she wants, that damned computer offers her something different. Might as well be living in Renacimiento!

Emma stands. Everything feels stiff, but it all works—except for her right arm, which she can't lift above the horizontal. Well, she can, but her side hurts like hell when she does. "Shall I make a doctor's appointment?" suggests her chip.

"Keep your bloody nose out of my nervous system."

Then she has an idea. Something she should have thought of years ago, when she reprogrammed her chip: "Remind me to reprogram you to keep your trap shut unless I talk to you."

"Yes, Doctor Graham. How often should I remind you?"

"Only when I ask you."

"Yes Dr. Graham."

Might as well make the thing earn its keep: "Any appointments?"

"Professor Mildred Stalnecht wants to see you in her office at noon. Shall I confirm this appointment?"

Millie? When was she ever this formal? It's usually: "can you pop over when you've got a minute", which means half an hour, minimum, and never a wasted second, or: "can I come over, there's something I want to show you?" But never, ever, an **appointment**.

She's in her office by ten a.m., less than two hours late, her in-box cleared of administrative garbage on the way over. Lowering herself gently

into her chair, she drops an analgesic and thinks: “Replay Fred’s message.” Winifred is working on her masters. As the young woman’s fine-featured face and hairless head appears in her view field, she closes her eyes to focus her attention, and tries to lift her feet on the desk. Pain shoots up her side and she buckles over. It hurts less when she stands up. Might as well talk to Fred in person.

“You see? It’s an atlas,” says Fred, pointing to a partially reconstructed title page on the wall-screen. She’s been working on this text since early last week. She hacked it last Friday, and she’s obviously been busting to tell Emma what she’s found.

She flips forward to a data table: “See... it says here the world population was eleven billion. If I could find a publication date...”

Emma has stopped listening. Eleven billion! Where did they all go?

“Right,” says Emma. “Compare this with the present situation.”

“OK,” says Fred. “There are 21.03 million people in the cities.”

“And outside?”

“If you count the hominids...”

“Do you? Take a position. Do you count them?”

“Yes, I think I will,” says Fred. “I find Dr. Romanov’s analysis compelling.”

Good girl. “OK. So. How many?”

“Counting all of us, all over the world, right now. Less than three-quarters of a billion.”

“So?”

Emma’s mind is spinning, but she can’t let it show. Fred is studying how the constant purging of moribund data-grid files has lead city society to forget its own history. This is just what she needs. A fact that will astound and amaze. But it’s her thesis, not Emma’s.

Fred is looking out the window, her face blank, her pale blue eyes empty—and not because she’s using her chip. Then she turns and looks at Emma: “So... Where did they all go?”

“Exactly.”

Helen Patton’s cubicle is one floor up. Deciding the walk might ease her muscles, Emma takes the stairway. She can’t stop thinking about Fred’s discovery. Does it eliminate one potential explanation for the env-domes? The list of possibilities keeps growing. Every so often another apocalyptic prediction emerges from some ancient text. No-one has found the slightest hint of evidence against any one of them. Until now. Perhaps Fred’s new

evidence shows that it was not bureaucratic paranoia. Perhaps there was a genuine catastrophe, and not, as Emma has been starting to think, a paranoid reaction to an overwhelming pessimism brought on by the vast number of end-of-the-world scenarios described in pre-env-dome literature.

There's a remote vacuuming the bloody stairs, and the bloody thing moves left just as she does, and then back to the right, but too late, because she was already going that way—why the hell doesn't the site manager program some fucking manners into these damn remotes? Aside from their ability help in emergencies, their software provides for nothing beyond their basic functions. When they respect your personal space, they follow the letter of the law—regardless of what you really want. This one coulda got outa her way the instant it recognized a chip in the stairwell. But then it'd take a tiny bit longer to vacuum the stairs, and that'd reduce its efficiency...

That's the trouble. Even if there was some catastrophe, there's no reason to believe it happened before the env-domes were built. Fred's discovery is damned interesting, but it adds practically nothing to the story of the env-domes.

She spent longer than she should have with Fred, and she's short on time, but Helen seemed excited about what she discovered yesterday. Today, the twenty-two-year-old's hair is green. She has slowly-changing fractal patterns on the hairless left side of her scalp, down her neck, over her shoulder and the pert young breast exposed by her one-shoulder top.

Helen has almost finished her dissertation on lexical interchange between ancient English and ancient Spanish. But what she has found over the weekend has little to do with language.

She offers Emma a chair: "No thanks. I need to stand. I bumped my side."

"Oh... I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it. Show me this brochure." When Helen's chip requests her attention, she adds: "On the wall-screen. I've got a headache."

It's a golf-course. A woman is preparing to tee off, watched by two men and another woman. The sky is clear blue, with a few cumulus clouds above low hills in the distance. There is no sign of an env-dome. According to the caption, this is one of eighteen holes on Gulf Town's private golf-course. No present-day golf-course has more than six holes.

Helen scrolls to the next page. There is a private airfield with a neat row of large business aircraft and a wide concrete runway. Most of the aircraft are jets, clearly placing the brochure in the kerosene era, when the

aviation industry switched from gasoline to kerosene. Which isn't much help. Emma is beginning to learn that the early kerosene era was a time of frantic technological development. She doesn't know if kerosene-burning aircraft came before or after the wide-scale deployment of information technology.

Emma scans the text, which promotes the settlement as an exclusive community. The subtext implies that only the wealthiest, most powerful ancients could afford to live there. This is a central marketing point: If you want to be among the best, the smartest, the most powerful, buy into our community—If you can prove you're one of us.

"Any mention of a data-grid?" says Emma.

"Nothing." Helen scrolls down. "Here's the strangest part. It says the community is powered entirely by renewable energy. Isn't that thermodynamically impossible?"

Emma laughs. "We've seen that before. It doesn't mean the energy is renewable. That **would** be impossible. It means the energy comes from resources that are constantly replenished. Wind, sunlight, that kind of thing."

"Oh." Helen goes quiet for a few moments. "I wonder if it's the same Gulf Town?" she says, referring to a small env-dome roughly a thousand k's east of Grand City. Gulf Town's nine-kilometer-wide env-dome has the biggest concentration of heavy engineering plants in North America.

"Whadda **you** think?" says Emma.

"I guess if we compared the topography," she says, pointing to the hills in the background.

"So... how would you do that?" says Emma.

"Go and get some pictures. But I'm not... I've never been outside an env-dome, and I'm not env-suit rated and... what if there are hominids?"

"If you really want to understand language, you're gonna have to get out and speak it, aren't you? This would be ideal for your first field trip."

"I..." Helen pouts, and then sneers, "I didn't think **I'd** have to go on a **field** trip."

"Nothing to worry about. Actually, it'll be a breeze—you wouldn't have to go more than ten or fifteen kilometers from the dome, probably less. Technicians do that all the time. And I can guarantee no villager in his right mind would go that close to a city."

"Er... er... So you think I should check this out?"

Emma says nothing. Helen already knows the answer. In any case, her chip interrupts: "Doctor Graham, you have five minutes until your meeting with Professor Stalnecht."

“Good work Helen. I gotta go. Keep it up.”
On the way, she drops another analgesic.

Emma carefully lowers herself into one of Millie’s armchairs. She can be pain-free if she holds her back just right. Millie sits in the other armchair, brushing her long gray hair away from her face with a thin, wrinkly finger. She is so tiny that Emma could probably lift her with one hand.

“Dr. Daley called last Friday. She has so much material coming in from that big dig up north that she has decided to establish a special archive. They’ve recovered more than a hundred thousand storage devices already. They have years of excavation ahead of them. Dr. Daley has secured the funding. Now she’s looking for a director. I want to put your name forward.”

“Er... Yes, that’s exciting. But, er... I was thinking of retiring.”

“Emma! You’re only forty.”

“Exactly. There are things I wanna do.”

“Like?” Millie frowns.

“I’ve been thinking about moving to Renacimiento...”

“What happened to: I’m never going out there again in the beep-beep rainy season?”

“That was my stomach talking. The trip back woulda been fun if we’d had enough food.”

Millie laughs: “You’d miss your students. I know you Emma, you love teaching.”

“Yeah, but...”

“It’s a man isn’t it?”

Say to yourself, a hundred times: I’m not in love with Esteban; I’m not in love with Esteban. It was just one night...

“Emma, where have you gone?”

“Sorry. I got distracted.”

“Well?”

“No, there’s no man. But...”

“You wish there was.”

“I guess. I don’t... can’t... I’ve never had a decent relationship, and sometimes...” Life begins at forty? Maybe for some folks. For Emma, it seems more like loneliness begins at forty. At least if she moves out of Grand City, there’s a chance she’ll meet someone she could fall in love with.

“Millie, you’re probably right. I do get bloody lonely.”

“This might be just the thing. Dr. Daley’s plan calls for everything to be put on the data-grid. You can delegate that. You could administer the archive from anywhere. You’ll only need to come to Grand City every now and then.”

Now she’s trying to be nice. Sharon Daley spearheaded the move to banish Letitia and Alexander. She could have supported Petra and Stella at the trial—should have, because she conceived the art of scientific research in the first place (although Emma later discovered what the ancients called the scientific method, a more advanced approach to the art of science), and because she was originally a staunch supporter of Petra and Stella’s work. Instead, she twisted every piece of data to convince the Risk Management Commission that villagers aren’t human. No way is she gonna let anyone run the archive from Renacimiento... And where will they get the money for a data-grid cable all the way over to Grand City? And power—the commission would never authorize a field office without a proper power-grid with double redundancy.

“They’ll never go for it,” she says, hoping Millie will give up and let her get back to her office. That analgesic will wear off, any time now, and her bloody chip will notice the pain and offer to make a doctor’s appointment.

Millie hasn’t given up, not if the look in her eye is any indication. What’s she up to? She looks like she’s just set fire to the dean’s office and got away with it.

“I’ll make a deal with you,” says Millie. “If you can run the archive from Renacimiento, will you take the job?”

“What about the data-grid connection and the...”

“Leave it to me,” says Millie. “There’ll be an office, mini-dome, airstrip, data-grid and power-grid. You know what that would mean for Doctors Romanov and Wilson.”

She’s dreaming... It’ll never happen.

“OK.” says Emma. “You organize all that, and I’ll take the job.” There. That’ll shut her up.

Back in her office, Emma calls Blanche Davis.

“Emma, how wonderful to see you,” says Blanche, her glittering eyes set in a soft, smiling face she hasn’t owned, in real life, for more than twenty years.

“Can we talk?”

“Of course... is it about your language classes?—I’m very impressed. I must say, I didn’t expect people to go for something so... inventive.”

“Thanks,” says Emma. “Your support made all the difference.”

“Always pleased to help...”

“Anyway, it’s not about me. Petra... well, actually, Alexander, has a business proposition that might interest you.”

“Oh?... How is young Alexander?”

“Thriving,” says Emma. “He spends most of his time pouring over ancient history—he’s like an information sponge. Damn good with languages too. He thinks people might want to buy village hand-crafts.”

“Hmm... What an interesting thought. I presume you mean ceramics and wood-carvings?”

“Actually... I’ve just brought back some clothing samples and...”

“Oh good heavens no... no no no. People are afraid of new things. You have to make them seem familiar... You could try something ornamental... A marketing strategy based on celebrity endorsements... something like that...”

“I’ve also got some brass-work and... Oh... I guess food’s out...”

“Food?” says Blanche, her eyes widening and her pupils dilating.

“Hominid food?... perhaps I could try some... get an idea how to develop a marketing strategy... Yes... we could start with ornaments, and then, once people get used to the idea of owning hominid...”

“**Village**,” says Emma.

“Sorry... village hand-crafts... Then we could move slowly toward more intimate things... Yes!... That could work!”

“I left the samples at the south-east decontamination station last night...”

“Oh good,” says Blanche. “We can try this food tonight. You must pick it up and bring it here. Immediately.”

“See you around six,” says Emma. Disconnected from the data-grid, she slumps back in her chair. That was easier than she thought—Blanche Davis is one of the wealthiest business-people in the world—Emma can never remember her exact position on the rich list—who’d have guessed the way to her heart is through her stomach? She’s so damned skinny.

Chapter 6

Letitia is nothing but a surge of warmth and blackness... a throbbing convulsion.

Alex's face is a grotesque mask. He comes... moaning. Letitia comes again, fighting it at first, not believing she can take any more... then surrendering... not caring whether she can take it or not.

This can't be happening. He's not ready. He may never be ready. He may never let her in, never share his inner thoughts the way he used to.

He slumps on top of her.

She lies under his heavy, sweaty body, struggling for breath, crushed by his weight. The music is still playing, but was it loud enough to mask the noise?

"Thanks, Tish, I needed that."

He is breathing evenly now, body limp, eyes closed.

"Time's up mister," she says, pushing him off. She rolls off the tatami, landing face down on the dojo's wooden floor. He might be asleep. In any case, the anger has gone. This morning, he was ranting about the shojis that Magda made. She was supposed to follow a design from one of Emma's texts. But instead of using plain white paper, she made the panels from calico, and then painted them with brightly colored patterns—birds, flowers, and trees.

"They're not right!" he yelled. "They must be plain. The dojo is about inner tranquility and peace..."

Magda was terrified.

Now he seems to have found inner tranquility in spite of Magda's shojis.

Letitia slips on her gi-top, opens the shoji and goes into the changing room, which takes up part of the narrow strip between the back of the windowless dojo and the southern wall. Because the dojo is on the hospital's southern mezzanine, the windows are high enough to give a clear view over Renacimiento, where the church and the livery stable have cast long shadows across the desert.

Letitia strips and hops into the shower. She scrubs hard, as if to wash off all traces of him. Señora Ruíz's kindly soft face appears in her mind: "When you start having orgasms with clients, it's time to quit."

But Letitia can't quit yet. She has barely started—she only has one client. And he doesn't even pay in gold—he pays in training, in dojo time, half an hour for a week of lessons. At least he does what he's told—when he's on bordello time.

Letitia won't be like the village women, who have to do what their husbands say, whether they agree with it or not. It's their duty, they say. But that's what the priest tells them, and he's a man. The village men ignore their wives' opinions. Their word is law. And yet the village girls, like Catalina and Magda and Esmeralda, actually **want** to get married. As if that's all there is to life.

Señora Ruíz is the only one with any sense. Before she bought the guesthouse she had a bordello down at the Gulf. Men do what they're told in a bordello—or else. Letitia giggles as she remembers the time, fifteen months ago, when she and Catalina and Magda played strip poker with Jorge and Alex. It was fun, making the boys do stuff. That's what it's like in a bordello. Nowhere else in the hominid world can a woman command such attention. In a bordello, señora's word is law. Not only that, but señora can keep the best clients for herself. And even though she gets to pick her clients, she can still charge double, especially if she's hot—like Letitia.

Through the splashing water she can hear Alex just outside the shower curtain: “Come on Tish. You want more. You came, and don't tell...”

“I faked it,” she lies.

“Bullshit!”

“Don't you dare call me a liar,” she says. “I did it to make it better for you—That's what you pay for! Now go away—I've got work.”

That's the trouble—she does want more. But she can't let him see that. He's not the gentle, kind, funny guy she grew up with. Maybe that Alex is still inside somewhere. Sometimes she thinks she can see him. Usually when Alex is screwing her. But most of the time he is cruel, and angry, and bitter. When he slices through a heavy straw dummy with his pattern-welded sword, his eyes glow red, as if he can see the blood his imagination is shedding. When he smashes a five-centimeter slab of lumber with his bare hand, the sound that comes out of him is like the wowl of a mountain lion. Once, when they were training, sparring, she was late pulling a punch. In his eyes, for a split-second, she thought she saw her own death.

“It's me... It's Tish,” she said.

It was like flipping a switch in his brain.

She could love the old Alex, she wants the old Alex, needs the old Alex—for who else knows how it feels to be exiled from your home? But the old Alex is hidden. He only comes out, sometimes, just before he comes. How long until he comes back?

He needs to pay them back. She doesn't know how she knows, she just does. Instinct? Intuition? Whatever it is, it's not something a chip could

analyze. The commission had no right to banish them. Letitia has no idea how she could even begin to deal with them. But Alex is planning something, and whatever it is, he's doing it for her, as well as for himself, because deep down inside, he loves her. Somewhere underneath all that frustration and anger, he loves her. That's why she can trust him to pull his punches when they practice hand-to-hand combat. That's why his hands are always gentle on her body, no matter how bitter and angry he is.

"Let me scrub your back," he says.

"I told you Alex. Time's up. Get out!" He mutters something and slams the shoji.

Later, showered, she walks silently across the dojo, carefully placing each foot on the floor, moving in total silence. Alex is in his office, probably scouring old texts for anything with military significance. The music is still playing. He doesn't hear her leave. Perhaps, at last, she has learned the silent walk. Either that, or he's bored with this part of the game.

Outside, she leans on the rail surrounding the mezzanine, watching the activity below. Just beyond the water feature, a four-meter-high conical rock with a little waterfall splashing noisily down one side, Esteban is carrying a sheet of wall-board toward the opening in the back wall that leads to Emma's mini-dome. Through that opening comes the whine and howl of power tools. The university engaged señor Múzquiz for the interior construction. There was too much work for him and Esteban and Viviano, and anyway, he had to go down to the Gulf, so he hired some of the other villagers to help out. The villagers were suspicious of this project, afraid that the mini-dome might bring other shiners to Renacimiento, shiners that couldn't be trusted. But dangle gold in front of them and all of a sudden they forget about the long-term implications and line up for a piece of the action. It's just business. And when it comes to business, there's no difference between villagers and city folk.

Mum says it's a good sign, but Letitia thinks the university just wanted cheap labor. They haven't changed their attitude—they're just stingy.

The front windows are pink. The sun is setting, which explains why it suddenly went cold. When the env-dome's finished, the whole building will get proper heating and air-conditioning, a small-scale version of the thermal control system in a full-sized env-dome. Why wait? They should have put it in first. Emma's never going to use the mini-dome anyway. She hates env-domes. It's just for show. Mum thinks they'll do a surprise audit and catch her walking around without an env-suit. Emma says bureaucrats are too dumb to think of that. Whatever. It's the middle of January, it's

cold, and they should do the heating first.

Emma's going back tomorrow, and Letitia still has to finish her third assignment for *Strategic Management*. If Emma takes it back with her, Dr. Patton will probably mark it over the weekend. If she does, by Monday Letitia will be half-way through her degree. In the eighteen months since she was banished, she will have finished two years' worth of study.

Not that she'll get a proper degree. Aunt Petra's friends can tell her what to study, and set assignments, and mark them, but there's no way they could tell the university about it. Letitia is a hominid, and hominids aren't allowed to study at university.

The degree doesn't matter anyway—what matters is the success of your business. For a woman living outside the env-domes, owning a business is the key to an independent life. It's the reason the village men listen to señora Ruíz. She is a successful businesswoman, with more gold than the rest of them put together.

You need gold to start a business. A lot of it. What little gold Letitia has managed to save up came from Alex's students, from late-night poker games with horny, tequila-addled boys with lousy poker faces and too much confidence. But it's not enough—nowhere near enough, and poker is a man's game. When she was doing her market research, everyone she interviewed told her a woman could never get into a high-stakes poker game. Even señora Ruíz.

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Chapter 7

From her kitchen window, Emma can hardly see Stella's villa, though it's barely twenty-five meters away. The rain roars on the roof, drowning the sound of the shower splashing over Esteban's gorgeous body. Twelve months ago she was cursing the rain, but everything's changed now that Renacimiento has a sealed airstrip.

Halfway through the complex routine of setting up the coffee machine—rinsing the parts, loading it with just the right amount of ground coffee—Emma changes her mind, closes the machine, and pours a tequila—Renacimiento Blue.

She leans against the kitchen counter with her back to the window, sipping her drink and trying to decide how she feels about Esteban. Today is their first anniversary. They hooked up the day she delivered the school's SUV.

The clatter of rain on clay-tiles suddenly grows louder.

The front door clunks and the noise drops.

Then there's a voice: "Couldn't you hear me knocking?"

It's Letitia, peering from under the hood of an oilskin poncho which is dripping water on the living-room floor. Her face and hair are drenched.

"Sorry. Musta been the rain."

"Mum says breakfast'll be ready in half an hour."

"Thanks. You might as well wait till the rain slows down," says Emma, on her way to fetch a towel.

Letitia hangs her poncho on the coat-rack by the door. In spite of the hood, the rain has found its way down to the shoulders and front of her cotton tunic, which clings to her skin. Emma hands her the towel and then retrieves her drink.

As they wait for the rain and the carpenter, Letitia updates Emma on the goings-on around Renacimiento, as seen and analyzed by the young people. Emma hasn't really looked at Letitia for ages—Stella's little girl is no longer a kid. She's a stunning young woman. Seventeen, she says, when Emma wonders aloud how old she is now. Eighteen in October. It won't be long before she's striking out on her own. Already, she talks of friends who are marrying, having children, moving away to other towns or setting up farms of their own...

Suddenly, Letitia looks toward the front door: "It's stopped."

"Esteban!" yells Emma, hopefully loud enough to reach the bathroom, "Come on, before it starts raining again."

Esteban walks into the living room pulling on his shirt. They grab their

coats and ponchos, just in case it starts raining again, and cross the road. Petra and Alexander have also waited out the rain. Now they're splashing their way up the street.

From Stella's front door, a hall leads between the two bedrooms, and the lounge and dining room, to the kitchen at the back of the house. Stella is busy stacking the large formal table in the dining room. Amongst the aromas seeping into her nostrils, Emma recognizes coffee. Already made. But somehow, in this formal setting, it seems rude to just grab one like she would have done at Stella's apartment back in Grand City.

"Who wants a coffee?" says Stella. "It's just made."

Problem solved.

As usual, Stella makes a fuss about who should sit where. She will sit at one end of the table, with Petra at the other. Emma must sit on Stella's right, and Esteban on her left. Letitia is next to Esteban; Alex is next to Emma.

Letitia is pumping Esteban for information about a young village couple. Since he finished building the Sharon Daley Linguistics Institute last month, he has been busy with odd jobs all over Renacimiento and the surrounding farms—he knows everyone's opinion on the subject. Most people think the couple should marry. Señora Batista thinks they were made for each other and they should marry as soon as possible. Señora so-and-so thinks he should quit his job at the cantina and get a decent living, and then think about marriage, whereas...

But it's not the message she's listening to, it's the sound of the language. Spanish is like the villagers—melodic, vigorous, optimistic, and beautiful. Emma closes her eyes and lets the sound flow through her.

"Come on Emma. What's happening in Grand City?" says Petra.

"Oh. The usual."

"Give us the goss," says Stella.

"You're not missing much. Sharon Daley is still bitching about villagers. She's determined to prove they're inferior. But the University's not taking as much notice as they used to... She's pissed off about the linguistics institute... She's in a huff with me and Millie. I'm not so sure that putting her name on it was such a good idea. I guess she thinks she owns all those disks and books and paintings..."

"You never did tell us about that," says Stella. "Where did it all come from?"

"They were planning a new power station up near the Great Lakes, and they found the remains of a small env-dome. It was only about two hectares, but under the main building they found a concrete bunker just packed with stuff."

“As if you don’t already have lots of material,” says Stella.

“Oh, this is humongous! Hundreds of thousands of artifacts. They shifted the power station, and they put up a mini-dome so they can excavate safely. They’re scanning all the books and paintings and that kind of thing. It’s all going on the data-grid.”

“That’s where it should have been in the first place,” says Stella.

“Quite,” says Petra. “Maybe this will force the data-grid companies to change their policies. So... Emma... this collection comes under the umbrella of the University of Grand City?”

“No. They just handle the administration. The Daley Collection belongs to a trust. I’ve only met the chairman: Genevieve Roseveare.”

“Ah... that explains a lot,” says Petra.

“What do you mean?” says Stella.

“She used to finance Sharon’s research, but I don’t think she was too happy about what Sharon said at our trial. I think you might find Sharon and Genevieve aren’t as close as they once were.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” says Emma.

“You know who introduced me to Blanche Davis don’t you?” says Petra.

“Wouldn’t have a foggy.”

“Genevieve Roseveare,” says Stella, pointing the coffee pot toward Emma’s cup. “Blanche and Genevieve are like this,” she says, holding her free hand up with the first two fingers crossed.

“Yes please.”

Stella tops up Emma’s coffee, and then fills Petra’s and hers.

Emma has to know: “So... if Blanche is so influential, how come she hasn’t forced them to rescind Letitia and Alexander’s exile?”

Petra laughs: “She has no leverage with the **Commission**. They’re a law unto themselves.”

“She wouldn’t have pulled any strings for you, either,” says Stella, “if she didn’t think you’re a damn good scholar.”

“Good old Millie,” says Emma. “All the time, I was thinking she had no show of getting me this job, and all she had to do was talk to Blanche!”

Emma stirs her coffee and takes a sip. A snippet of Spanish catches her attention: “... I’ve got a job with my uncle,” says Esteban. “I’m shipping out on Paloma. Late July. Next time you see me, I’ll be old and gray and wrinkled.”

“What’s Paloma?” says Letitia.

“She’s a three-masted barquentine. 220 tonnes. Almost brand-new. Launched last year. I’ve been waiting for this my whole life, but I had to

wait till Viviano had learned enough to help Dad...”

Petra and Stella are talking about Blanche Davis. Something about how lucky they are to have a sponsor who stands by them. Blanche doesn't have to keep financing Petra's work. She could have dropped Petra and funded a less controversial scientist, or even dropped science altogether and concentrated on more conventional arts like poetry and ballet. Stella counters that her own sponsor has been just as supportive, but Petra reminds her it was probably because of Blanche's influence.

Instead of responding, Stella puts her hand on Emma's: "What's the matter?"

It's been a long time since Emma felt this way. Perhaps she has never felt this way. She can't remember... and there he is, casually announcing he's going to sea. Forever! She stutters: "Er... I'll tell you later."

Esteban thanks Stella, kisses Emma, and leaves, saying he has to be in town early to do something for the blacksmith. Alex follows, muttering something about the dojo.

Petra turns to Emma: "What's happening with Davis & Hursthouse? Any progress?"

"What?... Oh that... it's all tied up in bureaucracy... the other day Blanche told me it'll be next April before she can start importing bulk shipments."

"April!" says Letitia, spitting toast-crumbs halfway across the table. "Why so long?"

Stella screws up her nose, but before she can scold Letitia, Petra says: "You should be the expert on that. You're studying business. Blanche has to produce comprehensive risk management plans. Every minute detail must be documented, and then it has to go before the Risk Management Commission... and then her plans will have to be publicly notified..."

"Oh... I guess..." says Letitia, looking thoughtful. "And then there'll be a public hearing."

"The way they go on," says Emma. "Anyone would think being hominid is some kind of disease. Something you can catch by touching something a villager has touched."

Letitia laughs, spitting out more toast crumbs: "E-e-ew. Sorry..." she says. "But... you don't follow **your** plans..."

Stella grins and rolls her eyes upward.

"No," says Petra. "But we still had to go through the process..."

"Anyway," interrupts Emma, "Blanche has been getting village artwork placed in data-grid programs."

"You mean, like *West Melton*," says Letitia.

“Er, I don’t know,” says Emma. She can never understand what people see in soap operas. “I think she’s targeting a... different (she almost said *more sophisticated*) audience. A couple of weeks ago I watched a new drama called... er... oh, never mind... anyway, there was one of these dinner sets...” pointing at her empty cereal bowl.

“You mean, one of Esmeralda’s ones,” says Letitia, stating the obvious.

“As I was saying,” says Emma, imitating Petra’s *I’m the fucking schoolteacher and you’ll shut up while I’m speaking tone*, “this dinner set was all laid out on a sideboard in a dining room, and I’ll swear two-thirds of the program was set in that room.”

“So now,” says Petra, “half of Grand City wants one of these dinner sets.”

“Don’t knock it,” says Stella. “A lot of people take great pride in their décor, even if you don’t.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Oh, it’s OK, really, I know you didn’t mean it.”

Emma’s not paying attention.

Petra stands and nudges Letitia: “Come on, we’d better get the school open.”

“I don’t need to...”

“I need your help this morning. The creek will be up. You’ll have to ferry the kids across in the car.”

Letitia stands: “See you this afternoon,” she says, kissing Emma on the cheek. She kisses Stella: “Bye Mum,” and follows Petra out the door.

“Speak,” says Stella.

“Did you hear what Esteban said?”

“No. Tell me.”

“He’s going to sea. For good! And I thought...”

“Emma! You’ve only seen him four or five times!”

“Seven!”

“Since when did you ever get attached to a man anyway?”

Tears well up in Emma’s eyes, escaping and flowing hot over her cheeks. She tries to suppress the sobs and ends up blubbering like a child: “I, I...”

“Time we found you someone your own age.”

“Who are you?... my bloody mother?”

“No, your best friend. Emma, he’s half your age. And just about every young woman in Renacimiento has a crush on him. Half the town will be pining for him. You’ll be standing in a very long line.”

Emma laughs. As if he'd take a forty-year-old woman over one of those cute young things: "I still feel like shit!"

By the time Emma reaches the hospital, the sky is more blue than gray. Her office is alongside Alexander's dojo on the south mezzanine. Thanks to Emma and Carol's new masking app, the risk auditors think the only data-grid terminal at Escuela de Renacimiento is the one inside the mini-dome. They can't detect Emma's real office, nor can they detect the rest of the village data-grid.

Emma finds Helen Patton on-line with two other students. Their avatars float, weightless, twenty meters beneath a rippling silver-gray surface, the water beneath and around them shading into the deepest possible blue.

They have been studying an ancient English dictionary with a chapter about Roman numerals. A twenty-year-old who joined the team last week thinks the unintelligible groups of letters which appear at the end of many ancient videos are in fact Roman numerals, and that they represent dates. The girl looks up toward the surface, which is now a flat screen displaying the closing credits of an ancient video. It's about life at a university—and it's one of Emma's favorites—*National Lampoon's Animal House*. She freezes the credits: "There, see?" she says. "MCMLXXVIII—1978."

"Could be," says Emma. Her chest is tight. She's been holding her breath because the water is so realistic. She concentrates on breathing normally.

Sooner or later, someone will find a way to map the old calendar system into the modern one. Materials scientists can estimate the age of storage devices, but the method is imprecise, and Emma would love to find a more accurate dating system. In the meantime, she has to be satisfied with what she has. The new girl's idea is an important breakthrough, allowing them to organize ancient videos chronologically.

"OK," says Emma. "Rewind to the closing scenes." As each of the main characters exits, their names are given, with numbers such as '63.

"Those are dates too," says Helen. "'63 means 1963!"

"This hasn't got one," says the new girl. The video is paused on an image of Senator and Mrs. Blutarsky escaping the carnage in a low-slung open-topped car. "Hey... What if this video is historical, not fictional?"

Emma remembers to go real before she cracks up laughing. A minute or so later she is sufficiently composed to go virtual again: "In that case, Helen, you may have found a possible explanation for the env-domes."

Now they're talking about how Senator Blutarsky might have wrecked the environment.

“If you really think you’re on to something, find the evidence,” she says. Then she goes real and has a good laugh.

By noon, Emma has dealt with her correspondence and administration. There’s not much else to do because the archaeologists have been delayed and nothing much has come in since last week. She grabs a sombrero and bandanna and goes for a walk in the rapidly greening desert. Mist swirls around her feet and the sun warms her back as she meanders east and north, not thinking about Esteban. Not thinking about how she’s never seen a sailing ship. Not thinking about the dangers of long voyages across trackless oceans guided only by crude, archaic instruments.

A kilometer or so from the hospital she hears a sudden sharp crack, somewhere ahead. Then another. Then two more in quick succession.

She’s never heard anything like that before.

The cracks continue, in random groups and isolated single shots, as she follows her ears. A couple hundred meters further on she comes to a small hillock, only three or four meters high. Half-way up, she falls flat on her face and slides back to the bottom. Spitting out mud she picks up her hat, which landed on a small agave and isn’t even wet. The second time she reaches the top. Still wiping her face with her bandanna, she spots movement about fifty meters away.

“Hey!” she yells. “Anyone there?”

Alexander pops up out of a hollow and waves: “Emma. Check it out.”

He and six other boys are gathered in a depression about sixty meters across, open to the south but surrounded on the other sides by higher ground. Against the sloping bank at the north end are several black silhouettes—mostly animals, but the second one from the left is a very fat woman. In front of the shapes and a little below them is a hitching rail.

As she watches, one of Alexander’s companions holds his arms out straight, both hands clamped around a small black thing. There is a loud crack and the little black thing spits pale gray smoke.

About halfway down the western bank she slips on her arse and slides the rest of the way. As she gets up, wiping her hands on the front of her jeans, Alexander produces another one of those black things.

“Three-fifty-seven magnum,” he says.

“What?”

“A revolver. Look,” he says, opening the cylinder and emptying the spent cartridges into his hands. “It’s a weapon. Fires a lead slug,” he shows her a fresh cartridge. “Remember that manufacturing equipment you bought for me? I gave it to the blacksmith so he could make these... Hey

Jorge, show Emma how you can shoot.”

One of the boys stands six small broken pots in a row along the hitching rail. He walks to the south end of the depression, runs east, halfway up the bank, and then flicks his feet up and rolls into a backward somersault: his revolver cracks and the right-hand pot breaks into tiny shards: as he lands, the revolver cracks again, smashing the next pot: now he's on the ground, on his belly, and another pot shatters: he rolls over and takes out another: leaps to his feet as the fifth pot explodes: continues into a hands-free cartwheel as the last pot disintegrates.

Jorge swaggers toward Alexander. When Alexander nods approval, Jorge beams, and the others clap silently and their mouths move as if they're cheering and congratulating him. Emma removes her hands from her ears, hears the voices, knows her ears aren't busted. “Impressive... But what do you want them for?”

“Hunting,” says Alexander, his mouth curling into the curious grin he has recently developed—one side smiling, the other deadpan.

“Way better than a crossbow,” says the tall one, who Emma vaguely remembers fucking in the straw at the back of the livery stable a year or so ago. “You remember me, don't you,” he adds, scratching his nose with a piece of straw. She was obviously drunk. She tilts the sombrero forward to hide her red face.

“If they're for hunting... why does one of your targets look like a woman?”

“Oh, sometimes I come out here and pretend it's that Risk Management Commissioner... you know, the head of the tribunal that exiled us.”

“You mean Commissioner Seaga.”

“Yeah, her,” says Alexander.

Emma decides to leave them to their game. “I'm off,” she says. “Enjoy yourselves.”

Something isn't right, but she can't quite put her finger on it. Those weapons perhaps? But then, most villagers do a bit of hunting to supplement their meat supply, and it's more or less a rite of passage for a young man to kill his first wild animal. These weapons are nothing like the assault rifles that city security departments have (but never use), with chip-activated security keys, each weapon usable only by its owner. Alexander's weapons follow an ancient design, pre-chip, that he must have found in some old text or other. Obsolete in the cities, but a big step forward for the villagers, making it so much easier for a young man to collect meat. What could be wrong with that?

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Chapter 8

Letitia arrived in Renacimiento just before midnight. Dismounting at the guesthouse, she thought she saw a curtain moving. Before she could knock on the door, candle-light glimmered on the threshold and then señora Ruíz was hustling her inside and sending her maid to look after Flash.

“Catalina Vinyals gave me your note.”

Sleep did not come easily. She kept imagining herself as the wealthiest woman in the hominid world.

Then it was after ten a.m.—she slept for nine hours!

The bathwater is getting cold and it’s after one. People will be going home for their siestas. It’s almost time to make her move. She dries off and then peeps around the curtain.

Directly across the street is señor Múzquiz’s workshop. Forty-odd meters of empty street-frontage, overgrown with patches of gray-brown mesquite, run east from there to the cantina, which, in spite of years of neglect, is structurally sound. All that empty frontage belongs to the cantina. Away in the distance, the tiny star-burst of Emma’s mini-dome looks like a pinhole in the ice-blue mountains low on the northern horizon. The mini-dome was finished early last June—eleven months ago.

The mesquite continues around behind the cantina to the corral behind the livery stable. Main Street will look so much better when that ugly fire hazard gives way to a nice concrete fence and a wooden gate. When she’s finished with Renacimiento, it will be the most beautiful village in Coahuila.

She’s drying her hair when the landlady knocks and calls quietly: “Letitia—are you there love?”

“Come in.”

Señora Ruíz enters carrying an armload of clothes: “Here’s your laundry... Oh, what’s that?” she says, laying the clothes on the bed.

“A hair-dryer.”

“Can I see?”

Letitia passes it to her: “You squeeze the handle.”

Ruíz takes the dryer but when it starts she drops it, startled: “Oh, I’m sorry.”

Picking it up, Letitia scoops up a brush-full of still-damp hair and demonstrates: “It’s OK. It won’t break.”

“Grand City must be wonderful. The technology.” She lifts the hem of

Letitia's new calf-length azure-blue skirt: "And these clothes... Gorgeous."

Letitia takes her new black vest from the closet: "What about this?"

"Oh... it's beautiful..."

"Emma bought it from Pasito."

"It must have been expensive... Oh... the detail..." She feels the embroidery on the front—an arrangement of desert flowers in rich primary colors. "Oh yes, definitely from Pasito..."

"You know... there's a lot of interest in stuff like this in Grand City. We'll soon be able to trade our hand-crafts for their technology. Imagine—Lights that come on when you speak—Hot water from a tap," says Letitia.

"And machines that dry your hair. It would be something. Is it possible?"

"I'm gonna make it happen."

Señora Ruíz looks into her eyes. "Yes—I think you will." She nods slowly, smiling. "I really think you will... Good luck." She winks and then leaves, closing the door.

Her hair dry, Letitia rolls on her new black stockings. Her skin prickles and crawls as she stands to put on the suspender belt. She fumbles with the clasps, trying several times before they finally snap shut behind the garter holsters. Her hands shake as she puffs up the blue and white satin flowers on the garters, making sure they fully conceal the holsters. Her gaze strays to the bullet-hole above the mirror and blood rushes to her head. She grips the edge of the bed, steadying herself. This is for real. There'll be no room for error. If she loses...

... Fonseca must be the most disgusting man ever. No-one knows where he came from. He just showed up about fifteen years ago. They say he was handsome—he's not tall, but he was slim and well-dressed, wearing beautiful suits with gorgeous vests and clean white shirts. It's not clear how he acquired the cantina. Some say his predecessor, Sanchez, owed him money. Others say it was a poker game. In any case, Sanchez left town two months after Fonseca showed up. Sometimes, he disappears for days at a time, leaving Miguel the barman to run the cantina. Some people say he goes to visit friends... that seems unlikely...

... but... he could have friends. Mysterious strangers sometimes come to Renacimiento. They usually stay at the guesthouse and señora Ruíz thinks some of them might be friends, or at least acquaintances...

... But usually, he disappears because he's been drinking too much and can't be bothered getting out of bed. He has long since abandoned his fancy clothes for moth-eaten dirty white shirts and filthy trousers that might originally have been tan or gray. Now, his hair is an untidy ring of gray

below a spotty scalp, his smile consists of gaps between a few brown teeth, and his paunch hangs almost to his knees. Letitia shudders...

She needs to calm her mind and so for the second time today she runs through her morning warm-up routine, focusing on each individual muscle in its proper turn. Her hands steady, she opens the dresser's top drawer and takes out her pistols and ammo. She thinks of Alex: "I shouldn't give you these yet, Tish... Whatever you do, don't let mum or Emma or Stella see them..." He seemed worried, unsure, as if he regretted having them made for her. What's he up to? Why is he so secretive about these powerful little Glock's? Whatever it is, there's no time to think about it now.

With her eyes closed, she inserts a round into the chamber of the first pistol, gently closes the slide, and slips a loaded clip into the handle. Then she does the other one. Back at the dojo, she must have field-stripped and reassembled them a thousand times, blind-folded. Loading is the easy part. But somehow she needed to prove she could do it without looking. As if that proves she can put the rest of her plan into practice. She shouldn't worry. She has thought about every possibility. Nothing can go wrong. If you never feel afraid, you're mad—but Alex would laugh if he'd seen her shaking like a terrified road-runner just now.

She does her face, giggling as she tries to put on her lipstick. Programmable lipstick was uncool when she lived in Grand City. But unsold make-up and clothes are recycled quickly and she couldn't get the color she wanted. Every week for the last five months she searched the data-grid for blood-red lipstick. She never found it, so she settled for programmable. No-one will notice.

Around her neck goes a black choker with an oval onyx set in gold. Cheap costume jewelry in Grand City, although the stone is real. But to the average villager, it is worth more than six months' earnings. She tapes a small vinyl bag inside each forearm. Flat hoses taped along her arms and down her sides connect these bags to the larger one in her suspender belt. "Chip," she thinks, "match the tape and tubing to my skin." The system changes color until it is completely invisible under her semitransparent blouse. She slips a water-sac into the wide seam on each side of the keyhole collar and then ties the black ribbon into a bow, carefully adjusting the free ends so they reach halfway down her exposed cleavage. The skirt has deep folds to disguise the bulk of the garters without the weight of petticoats, which, she has found, interfere with her draw. It is slit from waist to hem with an eight centimeter overlap and a black waistband that complements the choker: its inside pockets especially made for extra ammo clips. She leaves the vest unbuttoned. Black lace-up boots and a silk-

trimmed black bolero hat complete her outfit.

She opens the curtains and checks the street. The cantina hitching rail is empty. Good. With any luck, the bar will be almost empty. Except, perhaps, for the gambling room out back.

Into the side pocket of her black leather shoulder bag she stuffs a blouse and a bra. It'll be busy tonight and she'll have to change in the cantina's parlor. Loaded with shiny gold coins, the bag is heavy and as she leaves the room the shoulder strap stretches slightly with each step.

Outside, she heads east, past the mayor's house toward the cobbler's shop opposite the cantina. A gentle breeze wafts the stink of sweat, stale beer, and pungent cigar-smoke across the street.

There is a notch in the top of the left-hand bat-wing door. A few weeks ago one of Alex's boys, overloaded with Renacimiento Blue and pissed off about losing his money at poker, emptied his revolver randomly into the bar-room. The only damage was smashed glassware, two holes in the roof and the notch in the door. But the incident dovetailed neatly into her plan—Fonseca has seen what a gun can do.

A couple of paces before the end of the hitching rail by the cobbler's shop, she spots Fonseca leaning across the bar talking with a customer. Perfect. She lifts her left foot up on the rail and fiddles with the lace. From this angle, the livery stable door is about twenty meters away and directly in front of her. She ignores it and concentrates on the bar-room. Fonseca is staring at her exposed thigh with bulging eyes. Somewhere behind her, probably down at the general store, a couple of women are talking. Someone else is moaning—it's barely audible, somewhere to her left. Pleasure, not pain, she decides. From over her right shoulder comes the sound of señor Batista's hammer: tap-tap... tap-tap... She wants to turn and smile at him, to show him how fantastic her new boots look with the rest of the outfit. Instead, she keeps her eyes down, glancing between Fonseca and the boot-lace. The old cobbler wouldn't have heard her walking along the side-walk anyway—he's too deaf. Fonseca leans forward as if straining to see through the shadow beneath her. She keeps fiddling with the lace. The customer turns his back to the bar and stares, nodding and saying something, probably tasteless. Fonseca moves sideways to get a better view around the drinker, whose beer is dribbling over the rim of his tilted glass.

A tall, slim young man who Letitia has beaten at poker several times, Ignacio, emerges from the livery stable and leans against the doorway, scratching his narrow, beak-like nose with a piece of straw and ogling her.

Accidentally on purpose she drops her left foot on the side-walk and sidesteps a little further from the hitching rail. As she lifts her foot back on rail, her skirt swings wide, fanning fresh air over her groin. His long narrow face widens into a grin and his eyes pop wide open—her skin flushes and prickles.

She suppresses a smile. That wasn't in the plan, but now Ignacio's wages should flow smoothly into her purse for the next few weeks. Maybe more, she thinks, as the straw falls from his hand.

It was easy. But even though she likes Ignacio, and wanted him to see her, she is shaking again. She breathes deep and slow. Fonseca won't be so easy.

Batista is still working... tap-tap... tap-tap...

She stands up straight, smoothes her skirt, and strides deliberately across the street, making sure her left leg peeks through the slit as she goes. She steps on to the cantina's creaking board-walk without taking her eyes off Fonseca's or interrupting her rhythm and breasts the doors. She walks to the bar: stands silently with one hand on the shoulder bag and the other at her side: watches a drop of saliva fall from Fonseca's wide-open mouth: feels the skirt swinging and the slit opening as it swishes back and forth: says: "I want to join the game." Without averting her gaze she thumps the bag on the bar. Hard.

Fonseca's gaze flits between her cleavage, the gold clasp on her waistband—or possibly lower—and the bag: "That's a man's game niñita. Go home to your mamá."

"You think I can't play poker? Why don't you try me?"

He stares her in the breasts. She looks through him to the cracked mirror behind. As well as the drinker at her left, there are two other customers, sitting at a table near the front window making a show of minding their own business. Miguel, the two-meter-tall heavily-muscled barman, lies with his head on a table left of the bar, apparently taking a siesta.

The poker game runs 24-7—if there are players. Fonseca takes a cut of the stakes. A lot of villagers don't like gambling. Others say it's none of their business, as long as he keeps to himself. To humor the villagers he doesn't let anyone play unless they are at least twenty-one.

He's been staring at her breasts for more than a minute. At first, the smell of his breath made her retch, and then she noticed he has more hair inside his nose than on his head, and it was hard not to laugh. Then she

noticed a tiny bogey hanging from his nose hairs and it made her feel like retching again. The longer this goes on the easier it is to tolerate the stench—but she’s almost had enough of being ogled.

His pupils widen slightly. For the first time since she entered the cantina he makes eye-contact: “Five-card stud... Ten hands... You win five hands, you’re in.” He nods at the bag: “Either way, I take ten percent.”

“I deal,” she says.

His gaze fixes hers, but she’s already won this round: if she walks out now he won’t get his cut.

“OK,” he says.

He takes a bottle of Renacimiento Blue and two glasses from under the bar.

“Miguel,” he calls over his shoulder. The barman gets up goes behind the bar, towering over Fonseca. His round, smooth face scrunches into a frown. Under his wispy black mustache, his thin lips are drawn tight. He slowly shakes his head, but says nothing.

Fonseca leads her toward a door near the right-hand end of the bar. Nearby is a rack for hats and coats. She removes her hat, but all of the pegs are broken. Miguel is at her side. “Señorita... I’ll keep that safe.” His narrow mouth widens into a friendly smile and his gaze wanders no further downward than the choker.

She smiles and bows slightly as he takes the hat: “Gracias, señor.”

Behind the door is a small parlor sparsely furnished with a battered wooden table, two chairs, a pot-belly stove, and a bench covered with dirty glasses and a saucepan with the dried remains of a meal of beans. A small window in the north wall might once have looked out across the desert, but now it’s nothing but an opaque beige rectangle in the dull gray wall. The room stinks of cigar smoke, baked beans, and stale booze. Fonseca motions for her to sit at the table and pours three fingers of tequila into each glass.

Taking the other chair he picks up his glass. “Your health, muchacha.” He skulls.

“Salud!” She tips back her head and pours the liquor into her mouth. She fakes a cough and spits the tequila into her sleeve, feeling the little bag expand. As he refills their glasses, she stretches her arms upward and leans back, faking a yawn. The vest falls open and he ogles her breasts as the tequila drains into her suspender-belt. He can only see the faintest hint of what’s under her blouse—but he’s just like Alex, and Jorge, and all the others. No matter how ugly, how old, how disgusting they are, they have one thing in common: show them your breasts and they can’t look anywhere else.

She lets him win the first hand and folds on the second. With each hand the tequila makes his face easier to read. She takes the third hand with two pair.

He smiles: “Ah muchacha. Now we get serious.”

He downs another tequila. Already, the bottle is half-empty and his concentration is wavering. He thinks he is getting her drunk, just as he tries to get all his opponents drunk, but he wouldn’t notice if she tipped hers on the floor. She wins the next three hands—one more and she’s in the game.

Not.

Fonseca lied. He won’t risk being run out of town for Letitia’s sake, even though she has more gold than he’s seen in one place for years. Win or lose, he’ll never let a woman join the game, especially when she’s not yet twenty-one.

Anyway, that’s not the plan.

The tiny parlor is stifling. His shirt is drenched with sweat and his stale, musty odor has filled the room. She thought she’d get used to it, but you could never get used to **that**. As he refills their glasses she squeezes the water out of her collar. It flows down her front, rendering the blouse transparent. She leans back in her chair. The vest slides open: “OK, let’s raise the stakes. I win this hand, you forfeit your cut... and I take the cantina.”

Fonseca speaks softly, almost whispering: “Ah... you want to make it interesting?...” He raises his arms, elbows bent, palms up. “But what can you bet against all this?... Eh?” His gaze is fixed on her breasts and his tongue is beginning to flop out of his mouth.

She lets her eyelids droop and pouts slightly. His gaze begins to dart up and down between her lips and her breasts, and his breathing quickens. Then she answers: “You win, and I’ll screw your brains out.”

A grin spreads across his face. With her left forefinger, she rubs the end of the ribbon slowly up and down the inside of her left breast. He stops breathing.

“We have a bet, señorita. Deal!”

There are forty-seven cards left in the pack. The aces of diamonds and clubs, a couple of jacks, and the queen of hearts are tucked under his enormous belly, wobbling and bulging over his legs. She deals him two tens, an ace, and change. Three kings, a queen, and a nine for herself. She watches him carefully as she sets the pack aside. He’s quick—must have been good in his day. But her chip video, replayed in slow motion, shows him switching two cards, replacing trash with aces. Full house.

“These’ll do,” he says.

“Dealer takes one,” she says, discarding the nine and dealing herself the fourth king.

He is staring intensely at her. The wet cotton clings and she longs to pull the vest over herself, but that’s not in the plan. He slams his cards on the table grinning victoriously.

“Looks like you’re out of a job,” she says, showing her hand.

He stands and lunges at her—she jumps aside, kicking the table-legs toward him. His belly catches the edge of the table, which tilts up, legs bending under his weight. Cards and coins scatter everywhere. She sidesteps, a pistol in her right hand.

“Whore!” he yells, as the table-legs shatter and he drops on the now vertical tabletop, belly flowing evenly over each side, face slamming into back wall. Draped across the fallen table, kicking the air, red face mashed against the wall, he yells: “Double or nothing! Hear! Double or nothing.” The table topples backwards, crashing noisily on the floor, Fonseca sprawled on top.

Miguel opens the door, pushing hard to force Fonseca’s leg out of the way, and comes in: She points the tiny pistol at his face: He stops and raises his hands, palms forward. In a half-crouch she flicks the front of her skirt over her right leg and runs her left hand slowly around the thigh. Fonseca gazes between her legs. Behind Miguel, the two customers near the front window drop under their table and crawl toward the front door, staring between Miguel’s legs at the gun in her right hand. Slowly, she draws the second pistol. Miguel steps back, but he is watching Fonseca, not her, and he’s grinning.

“Double or nothing?” she says, covering Miguel with one pistol and Fonseca with the other. Fonseca is bluffing. For years he has been spending his profits on tequila. He has long since pissed away his gold. “What you can bet against this place **and** sex with the hottest chick in Renacimiento?”

Miguel’s head swivels toward her, his face wide.

“It was the cantina against a night with you,” says Fonseca. “OK. You win and I’ll work for you for a year—for free. I win and we’re even!”

“You?... Work?... I don’t think so.” She stands up straight, kicking the skirt back into place.

Miguel smiles at his new boss. She smiles back: “Miguel, throw this drunk out of my cantina.”

He grabs Fonseca’s belt with one hand and his collar with the other. Big though he is, Miguel can hardly lift the fat bastard. She holsters her pistols and takes the other side. Together they half walk, half drag him through the bar-room and propel him into the street.

“If you ever set foot in this town again,” she says, “you’re dead meat.” She draws, so quickly the pistol appears in her right hand as if by magic. She motions to where the road curves east and downhill, just beyond the livery stable. “Move!”

Ignacio emerges from livery stable, grinning. The two men who snuck out earlier are standing near the carpenter’s workshop, talking with a shirtless Viviano Múzquiz. There’s no sign of Viviano’s father, who is probably down at the Gulf.

Here and there on Main Street, doors open and people peer out of windows. Catalina comes out of the workshop and snuggles against Viviano, her face flushed, her hair full of wood-shavings. She faces Letitia, grins and nods. Further west, near the bakery, Magda’s mum and señora Natividad are pointing and laughing. Padre Echeverría comes out of the church to see what’s happening. The other customer comes up behind Letitia rubbing his chin, his drink spilling from his glass.

Fonseca stands shakily and punches the air, belly wobbling in time with his punches: “You won’t get away with this, you cheating slut.”

Across the street, señor Batista looks up quizzically, hammer frozen in mid-swing.

“Chip,” she thinks, “make my lipstick black.”

Fonseca shrinks away, hand up in front of him, palm outwards, and backs along the street, blubbering.

“Go,” she says.

He turns and staggers along the road, puffing heavily.

“Miguel,” she says, buttoning her vest over the sodden blouse. “Happy hour tonight. Drinks are on me from seven till nine. Put the word out. You work at Wilson’s Cantina now... Oh, and tell señora Ruíz we’re ready for her maid. This place stinks.”

“Sí, señora,” says the giant, grinning broadly. He turns to go, then stops and faces her: “Muchas gracias, señora Wilson. He was a prick.”

He called her señora. Not señorita. **Señora.**

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