

# Recruit

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“Some of you are volunteers. Some of you were recruited.”

The lean, somber woman behind the lectern at the front of the aggressively nondescript meeting room paused, looking out over Tessa and the motley handful of others sitting at the mismatched student desks facing her. That gaze was piercingly sharp, delivered with only one eye. A black patch covered the other eye, and a black scarf that might have been a hijab covered her head.

“Some of you,” she continued, “were more or less drafted.”

*That’s me*, Tessa thought. Only there was no *less* about it. She had been shanghaied. Dragooned. Abducted. Two very large people, one a man, one a woman, in gray business suits had showed up during the last hour of her shift at the library flashing badges she could only identify as being shiny, then gently but firmly escorted her to a large black motor-home. They locked her in the back, which was separated from the cab by a curtained metal grille sturdy enough to serve as part of a gorilla cage, then started driving.

Twenty-one hours later, here she was. Wherever *here* was.

“That means some of you think you know why you’re here. I regret to inform you that you’re wrong. That puts you on equal footing with those who have no idea why they are here.”

Tessa took a quick peek at the faces of the five others. She saw perplexity, and studious scowls. One guy, a studly sort whose whole affect fairly bellowed military looked actively pissed off. Not a bad looking guy, blond and buff, maybe late thirties, but as approachable as a bear on a bad hair day.

“I can only tell you that the next few days will be like nothing you have ever experienced before. Some of you may make it through this program, some of you may not. There is no shame in washing out. You will be compensated for your time and sent back to the life you were leading before coming here. Those who remain will be rewarded with, I believe, much greater compensation. So, any questions?”

Tessa watched Angry Man stand up. Angrily. “So why are we here, then?”

“For the program. Next question.”

“*What* program?” he demanded. “I was told this was for some kind of security duty.”

The one-eyed woman shrugged. “You were misinformed.”

“Is this some sort of religious thing?”

The woman touched her scarf. “No. Anyone else have a question?”

Angry Man’s hands curled into fists. “I’m not done asking questions.”

She eyed him coldly. “Actually you are. Sit down or wash out. I will take one more question. Anyone?”

Tessa watched Mr. Mad sit down, looking sour. No one else seemed inclined to speak up.

Though doing anything that made her stand out was not part of her nature—she was from the shy and drab faction of part-time baristas, but about average as a part-time reference librarian—there was a nagging something about one of the things the woman had said that seemed to solicit a bit of follow-up.

Still nobody leaping or even creeping into the breach.

What the hell. She meekly raised her hand.

The woman’s head turned. That one eye fixed on her, gaze icy enough to make her wish she’d kept her mouth shut. “You have a question?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Louder, please. I can barely hear you.”

“Yes, ma’am. Sorry.”

The woman’s hands closed on the sides of the lectern. “Your question? This week?”

“Oh, uh, sorry. You said some of us might not make it through this program, whatever it is.” She tried to smile. “I can live with that. For some of us failure is always an option.”

“I still don’t hear a question.”

“Uh, right. I’m just, um, wondering what happens if we do make it through this mysterious program.”

For the first time the woman at the lectern’s stern expression changed dramatically. The smile that appeared was utterly and breathtakingly radiant.

“Something more wonderful than you could possibly imagine.” Her smile faded, stone-faced impassivity returning. “Step one of orientation is over. You are dismissed. Take the door at the back of the room, follow the green line. That is all.”

Tessa got up, as did the others. There was a fair amount of shuffling and mumbling and glancing uncertainly at each other. Angry Man was the first one to the door, and he yanked it open, how else, like he was mad at it.

Tessa hung back so she would be last. Just as she was about to go out the door she looked back toward the podium.

The one-eyed woman was still there, stolid and colorless, staring back at her.

“Thank you,” Tessa said, ducking her head.

The woman gave her a wink, then turned and went out the door behind the podium.

Puzzled, but obscurely reassured, Tessa followed the others.

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The green line led them through a maze of featureless gray corridors. There were unmarked gray steel doors in the walls forming some of those hallways, and from behind some of those doors came sounds that had them eyeing each other nervously. They heard growls, whines, and hissing, gobbling sounds, high-pitched squeaking, and what sounded like someone sobbing inconsolably. It was like a trip through a bland and yet somehow menacing haunted house.

So it was a relief when the green line finally led them to a large, high-ceilinged, windowless room set up as some sort of dormitory common room. They trooped inside, halting in an uncertain knot, waiting to see what was going to happen next.

“This is *bullshit*,” growled Angry Man. “I didn’t sign up for summer camp with a bunch of civilians.”

“Doesn’t smell like bullshit,” said the trim, seriously muscular black woman with the intricately braided hair.

The burly Latino man with the drooping gray mustache grinned. “I’m getting a hint of Lysol and a hit of chlorine, but mostly I’m smelling—” His nose twitched.

“Coffee,” Tessa said, having homed in on the source of the smell. She headed for the area set up as a kitchenette, suddenly feeling yards more at home.

“This beauty is a Krausmunder Ultibrew,” she said over her shoulder as she made a beeline for the complicated chrome, brass, and glass monstrosity squatting on one counter. “The best

coffee, espresso, and hot drink machine on the planet.” She laid her hands on the familiar controls, reassured by the machine’s presence. No one who was up to no good would give them access to what was lovingly referred to in the trade as a Kraus-monster. The rig was fully loaded and ready to boogie. She turned to face the others. “Anybody want coffee or espresso? Latte? Cappy? We have the technology.”

“You can run that thing?” asked the tall, thin, geeky-looking white guy with the pink plastic-framed glasses.

“I fly one almost every night, four until ten shift.” She threw the lever that took it off standby. There was a muted whump as the gas-fired pre-boiler lit. “We have ignition and are ready to put you into the orbit of your choice.”

She made herself a cup of straight-up first, then began drawing drinks for the others. She was just finishing topping off a Cappy for Nerd Guy—probably Gay Nerd Guy—when the door they had come through opened and in walked a woman who seized their immediate attention.

She strode to the middle of the floor, crossed her beefy arms, and made the following announcement: “My name is Glory, and as of now your asses are mine.”

No one raised their voice to disagree with that statement, not even Mr. Angry, who seemed inclined to argue about everything.

Glory ordered them to sit at the tables in the dining area near the kitchenette, then just stood there staring at them like they were steaming dog turds on the perfectly mowed lawn of her life.

Glory was enormous. At least six-six and three hundred tattooed pounds of Goth/Kabuki makeup, a colander’s worth of piercings, and a head shaved bald but for a dark purple topknot. Her scalp was a starfield of small and large scars.

“Who said you could have coffee?” Glory said at last. Angry guy turned to stare at Tessa. *Tattle*, she thought. Not that he needed to rat her out. She’d been caught red-handed playing Caffeine Queen.

“No one, ma’am,” she said. “No one said we couldn’t. I was thirsty, they were too. We figured we ought to stay alert.”

“Alert. Huh.” The big woman moved to stand next to Nerdy Guy, towering over him. “Were you thirsty, man?”

He looked up at her, smiled. “Parched. Arid. The lady makes a mean cup. You should have one.”

“Really.” She gave Tessa the eye. “You make a good brew?”

Tessa shrugged. “I’ve worked one of those machines six hours a night, six days a week for the last three years. I guess I’ve got the basics. Just don’t ask for pumpkin spice. The smell makes me want to barf.”

Glory moved so she was standing close to the *Tattle*. “What do you think, cupcake? Should I have a coffee?”

Her closeness had him grimacing and leaning away. “Do what you want,” he said in the quietest voice he’d used yet.

“What I want. Huh.” She leaned closer. He edged back. She scowled at him. “I smell bad or something?”

“No.” A growl.

“You act like I do.”

“Actually you smell pretty good,” said the black woman with the braids. “Patchouli and, what, ylang-ylang?”

Glory turned and closed in on her, standing almost on top of her. “You got a good nose.”

“I’m a personal trainer. I get to smell all sorts of folks.”

Next the big woman put herself almost on top of the Latino man. “What do you say, big guy? Do I smell good?”

He gave her a loopy grin. “Depends. Were you ever a pro wrestler?” He pointed. “That tat says you were.”

“What if I was?”

“Then I’d tell you whatever I thought would keep you from busting a chair over my head.”

“Smart man.” Next she moved in on the older woman with the lined, calm face. “You’ve been pretty quiet.”

A small smile. “I’ve been enjoying my latte.” She glanced in Tessa’s direction, lifting her cup. “Best I’ve had in years.”

“Thanks,” Tessa said automatically. She had no idea what the big woman was looking for or trying to do. She seemed to be running some sort of game on them, but what were the rules to and the object of it? Beyond sheer intimidation? Which was something she had down cold.

“Survey says I should have a coffee.” She gave Tessa a nod. “I’ll have a large cup of regular, black.”

“Coming up.” Tessa went back to the machine. Pulled what had been requested, carried it over to Glory.

The big woman looked her in the eye as she handed it over. “You a troublemaker?”

Tessa shook her head. “No ma’am. I’m a part-time barista and a part-time reference librarian.”

“Well, you’re a probationary now.”

“A probationary what?”

Her question earned a truly evil grin. Glory’s canines had been filed to points. “Exactly. You’re a probationary what. All of you are. Now sit down and listen up.”

Tessa did as she was told.

Glory took a slug of her drink, put the cup down. “When you arrived you were issued a wristlet. Look at it now. You will see a number on it. That number is the cubicle you get during your stay here. Go to your assigned crib. Change into the coveralls you will find there. Once you’ve done that come back out here so we can get on to the next part of your disorientation.”

“You mean orientation,” Nerdy Guy said.

Her grin was huge, and fierce. “I meant *exactly* what I said, my sweet vanilla darling. Now hustle.”

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Two walls held ten door-less cubicles. They were plain and utilitarian, with a single bed and a tiny private bathroom. Her assigned space was small, but not much more than the shoebox bedroom in her cramped apartment. No bookshelves, though. It was hard for her to imagine living anywhere for very long without loaded bookshelves.

Back in common room, dressed in faded blue coveralls, most of them nursing refills Glory had ordered Tessa to draw, their disorientation continued.

Glory moved a table so she could sit facing them. It creaked when she parked one hip on it, but held.

“Next step, meet and greet for all you happy campers. When I point at you I want you to stand up. I’ll give your name, and what I think the others should know about you. If you disagree with what I say you get ten words to correct me.”

She pointed at the black woman with the braided hair. “You first.” The woman stood slowly, looking wary.

“Meet Opal. Age 42. Divorced. Personal trainer and self-defense instructor. Degrees in Phys Ed, Physiology, and several martial arts. Once arrested for assault after beating up six men.”

Opal stared for a moment, waiting for more. When she realized that was it she grimaced, then said, “Gang rapists. Found not guilty. They all lived.”

Glory snickered. “No, but four of them were in the hospital for over a month, which meant she took it easy on two of them. You can sit down.” She pointed at the tall, nerdy guy.

He stood. She said, “This is Alan. Age 31. Tech gunslinger for several nonprofits and social justice movements. College dropout. Believed to have cracked and published the files of numerous hate groups, drawing death sentences from some of those groups.”

Alan took off his glasses, offering them a shy smile. “I was framed.” He sat down again.

“Actually he’s had to relocate several times under Federal supervision.”

She pointed at the older woman, who stood slowly. “Now meet Agnes. Age 66. Widowed. Multiple degrees, mostly pertaining to teaching history. Lifelong teacher in inner city schools, does teacher training workshops in third world nations when she’s on break. Survivor of two

separate school bombings abroad and three active shooter incidents here in the good old USA.”

Agnes showed a small smile, shrugged. “Just lucky I guess.”

Next Glory pointed at the beefy Latino man. He stood, looking bemused.

“Now we come to Luis. Age 56. Single. City bus driver in Washington DC.” She paused a moment noting, as did Tessa, the smirk that had appeared on Angry Guy’s face. “Luis is a tenured professor of higher mathematics and mathematical cryptography at Cal-tech, now on open-ended sabbatical. When he’s not driving his bus he writes papers that run in the major journals, runs free math tutoring clinics, and consults with certain alphabet agencies on matters cryptologic.”

Luis bowed. “Academia did a number on me. Number two, actually.” He sat down.

“Your turn, stud,” she said, pointing at Angry Man. He slouched to his feet, scowling at her. “This is Clint. Age 37. Single. Former Army MP, multiple overseas deployments. Currently unemployed.”

Clint glared at her. “There’s more to me than that.”

Glory spread her hands. “You have four words left.”

He thought for a moment, then ticked the words off on his fingers as he spat them out. “Bet. You’re. A. Dyke.”

“Oh, how *barsb*,” Glory guffawed, turning her attention toward Tessa. “Your turn.” A sideways glance at Clint. “And you can sit down.”

He sat, glowering. She stood nervously.

“Last but surely not least we have Tessa. Age 32. Single. As mentioned before, part-time librarian, part-time barista. Degrees in Library Science and Information Systems. Shitload of student debt. Possible potential crazy cat lady.”

It seemed to Tessa she was getting short shrift in the bio department. Maybe this was payback hijacking the coffee machine. She smiled and spread her hands. “Training takes longer than you’d think.”

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Gloria stood up. “Check out your cribs and make yourselves comfortable. I’ll catch up with you later.”

“That’s it? You’re not going to tell us why we’re here?” Clint asked sharply.

“Nope.”

“Why the hell not?”

“If I told you then I’d have to kill you.”

His mouth hardened. “Bet you couldn’t.”

“Bet she could,” Opal said quietly.

“Listen to the smart lady,” Glory said before striding to the door and leaving them alone.

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Tessa quickly realized that there were no clocks in their dorm. Her guess was that the round of introductions had been made midafternoon—about the time she’d be hustling from the library to the coffee shop. Everyone obeyed Glory’s low key decree, retreating to their cubicles, probably wanting a bit of time alone to come to terms with their situation.

Her room offered an unbranded laptop that could bring her a very good selection of books, music, games, movies, and other video offerings, but only severely limited online access. She blew what must have been half an hour attempting to crack the system, hoping to figure out where she was and why she was there. No dice on that front. She worked with computers a lot, but was no hacker. Finally gave up and tried the bed. It was better than the lumpy curbside discount job in her apartment, but she was too wound up to relax.

She got up and started searching the cubicle, hoping to find some scrap of something left by a previous occupant that might help her figure out what was going on.

It was while looking under the bed she spotted something shiny. She pulled it out. It was some sort of ultra-thin digital pad the size of an old Blackberry, with no external buttons, keys, or other controls.

The face of it lit up when she touched it. On the screen appeared one word, green letters against a black background.

## CONGRATULATIONS

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"Whoa," Tessa said, pausing in the doorway to her cubicle and staring.

Opal was standing in the middle of the floor, folded over so both her hands and feet were flat on the floor. She kicked her legs up so she was standing on her hands, did ten fast vertical push-ups, then somehow flung herself upward and jackedknifed midair, landing lightly on her feet.

"That has to make your back feel better—or one hell of a lot worse," Tessa said as she continued on into the common room.

"Better," Opal said with a smile. Her gaze moved to the device in Tessa's hands. "You found one too, I see."

"Yeah. What's yours say?"

Opal retrieved it off a nearby table. "Same as yours. Congratulations."

"That makes four," Luis said, coming out of his cubicle with Agnes right behind him. Both held up identical screens.

"Make that five," said Alan, coming out of his own room. His gaze went to Tessa. "You do IT. You try hacking the rig in your room?"

"Yeah. Got nowhere. I'm figuring we're all sandboxed."

He nodded in agreement. "And it's a Sahara grade sandbox, too, my friends. Finding a way out might take days."

Tessa looked around, frowning as she tucked the screen into the patch pocket over her left breast. "Where's Angr—ah, Clint?"

"He got put in the crib down on the end," Luis said. He went and peered in the door. "No sign of him."

"Could he have left?" Agnes asked.

"Don't know," Alan said. "Are we locked in?"

"I'd assumed we were," Opal said, heading toward the door they'd come in through, which was opposite another door marked NO ADMITTANCE. When she tried the knob the door opened. "Huh. Does this mean we're free to go?"

"No," Agnes said slowly. "I mean we may be permitted to leave, but I don't think we're supposed to."

"Because?" Alan said encouragingly.

She held up her screen. "Because we found these. Our finding them, and the message on them suggests we all just passed some sort of test."

That made sense to Tessa. "Maybe that means Clint is passing—or failing—some other test."

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Besides the giant coffeemaker, the kitchenette held a small range, sink, microwave, and a side-by-side fridge/freezer stocked with soft drinks, milk, yogurt, bread, and various condiments. Next to it was a touchpad with the word MENU displayed. Under it was a list of offerings that was an odd mix of Panera and KFC. They took turns ordering, wondering aloud where the food would come from and how it would get there. Tessa made hot drinks for those who wanted them while they waited for their supper to arrive.

Half an hour later a chime sounded. What had appeared to be a metal splash panel slid up, turning out to be the door to some sort of dumbwaiter. Alan pulled out the food, Luis distributed it.

No one said much as they ate, but the silence was surprisingly companionable considering they'd just met each other. They were just finishing up when the door opened and Clint came stumbling in. He slammed the door shut behind him and headed straight toward his cubicle.

"Where'd you go, man?" Luis called.

No answer. He didn't even turn his head.

"What did you find out there?"

Clint disappeared into his cubicle.

"Weird," Alan observed.

"Maximally weird," Opal agreed.

“Well, this does seem to be weirdness central,” Tessa said. “Has anybody got the slightest idea why we’re here? I had two sides of beef in suits take me out of work in Portland and drive all night to get me here. Wherever *here* is.”

“Well, I think here is Kansas,” Alan said. “The Feds who handled my last relocation sent me to Salina, supposedly for a new ID refit, and that’s like eighty miles north of Wichita. I was put in a blacked-out van and driven an hour west, and there’s no way you can escape this state in an hour that way unless you’re driving the Batmobile.”

“I do a bit of cryptogeek work for law agencies,” Luis said. “I was told this would be a consult.” He chuckled. “Looks like I’m in the middle of a different sort of puzzle.”

Opal whistled the first few bars of the theme for the old show *The X Files*, then said, “So here we are at some presumably top secret government installation, test subjects for who knows what. That sound about right?”

“Maybe not right,” Luis said, “But accurate. We’ve been treated fairly well so far—I’ve stayed in far worse motels—but one thing bothers me.”

“Just one?” Agnes said. “What’s top of your worry list?”

“What we all seem to have in common. I for one don’t have a lot of serious ties to the outside world. I’m single, live mostly in my head, and have a track record of disappearing for days, even weeks at a time. Those bios Glory gave made it sound like most of us are social loose ends. So we are all people unlikely to be missed.”

Agnes nodded. “There’s a name for folks like that—like us.”

“Tell me it’s not expendable.” Tessa said.

Alan was frowning and shaking his head. “Listen, guys. I’ve spent most of the last three years in hiding or on the run. I know paranoia like Tessa knows latte. My antennae are up, but they’re not whacking me on the head. This is a game of sorts, but it’s more *Myst* than *Doom*. So far we’ve been rewarded for curiosity, and haven’t been punished for initiative. Right?”

“Right,” Agnes said. “It’s guaranteed that we’re being monitored, and our reactions to whatever they throw at us closely studied. We can’t know what they want—at least not yet—but it would seem our best strategy is to just be ourselves.”

Opal glanced at each one in turn. “We were chosen. Sought out. Because of who we are, and the way we are. So far the main thing we seem to be is calm, friendly, easy-going people.”

“All except one of us.” Tessa said.

As one they all turned to look toward Clint’s cubicle.

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They kicked it around a little longer, then let it drop and devoted themselves to finding ways to kill time. Alan had recognized the tables in the common area, and showed them how they could be used to call up video or games. He and Luis took over one table and began a series of cutthroat games of speed chess. Left to their own devices the rest probably would have opted for their own favorite flavor of Solitaire—Tessa was a Spider addict—but Agnes convinced them to start a poker game.

It was getting toward late, the hour marked by the increasing number of yawns, when suddenly the door opened and Glory came striding in.

“Attention campers,” she called, clapping her big hands together. “Looks like all are present and accounted for except our dear friend Clint. Where is he?”

“In his room,” Agnes said.

Glory went over and banged her fist on the wall beside his door. “Get your butt out here, cupcake. Mama wants to talk to all of you, and you don’t rate a special briefing.”

Tessa heard some sort of unintelligible reply, probably a growled *go away*.

The big woman smiled. “You have the count of five to get your buns out here or I’m coming in and dragging you out. One.”

She looked toward the rest of them, grinning and rubbing her hands together. “Two.”

“She can do it,” Opal said quietly. “I’ve been watching the way she moves.”

“Three.”

“Wonder what our medical coverage is?” Agnes said.

“Four.”

Tessa glanced toward the kitchenette. “We’ve got a first aid kit.”

“F—”

Clint appeared, looking sour and sullen.

“Safe,” Luis said with a snicker.

“What the hell do you want?” Clint demanded.

“Go sit down with the others.”

Clint mooched over, avoiding their gazes. He threw himself down at an unoccupied table, staring back at Glory with his face set and arms crossed. “Happy now?”

“Deliriously.” She addressed the group at large. “Now, people, I want you to examine your wristlets. You will see that they have a thin bezel around the outside of the case. If you turn it sharply to the right, then left, then right again that will send a distress signal. You can try it out now.”

Tessa checked it out. The twist sequence was easy enough, but it brought up the question—

Alan asked it first. “Why would we need a distress signal?”

“Duh. In case you’re in distress.”

Agnes peered over the top of her glasses. “Are we likely to end up in distress?”

Glory shrugged. “Who knows? Life is unpredictable.”

“What happens if we call for help?” Tessa asked.

“Maybe you get some.” Another shrug. “Maybe you don’t.”

Luis spoke up. “Why tell us about this now?”

“Better late than never. Plus mamma has some good news. You will find an extra page on your menu screen. As of now each one of you can order a drink if you want. One drink per customer, and we got beer, wine, and simple cocktails. So tell me, who loves ya?”

“You do?” Opal said.

“Nah, but I don’t hate you. Yet, anyway. Have a nice happy hour and sleep tight, kids. Tomorrow is another day.”

“What happens tomorrow?” Alan asked.

“That’s for me to know and you to find out. Maybe the hard way.” That vague warning delivered, Glory went back out the door and left them alone.

“Well,” Opal said with a laugh, “That was, ah, peculiar.”

“I think we better get used to it,” Luis said, pushing back from the table and standing up. “I also think a beer would go good now. Anyone else?”

“Sign me up,” Agnes said. They all went over to the menu pad, Luis acting as bartender and ordering for them. Tessa was next to last, and got a glass of red wine. Last was Clint. He got a beer, and without saying a word to anyone, disappeared back into his room.

“More weird,” Opal said.

Agnes nodded. “But probably all we’ll get for the night.”

She was wrong.

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The signal that it was time to turn in came when the lights in the common room began to lower. By the time they were in their cubicles all that was left was a dim red glow.

Tessa thought that she’d have trouble sleeping—she was prone to bouts of insomnia and had a head full of unanswered questions—but corked off fairly easily.

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Somewhere in the middle of the night she came awake, sitting up in bed with her eyes wide open.

She sat still, listening hard, sure she’d heard something that had wakened her, but not sure what. After a few seconds she did hear something, a sound that was something like a rumble and something like a whimper. It was coming from the common room.

“Anyone else hear that?” she asked in a stage whisper.

“I do.”

“Agnes?” She was in the next cubicle over.



“Yeah. I think there’s something out there.”

“I hear it too.” Alan’s nasal tone was easy to identify.

The sound came again. Tessa pushed the covers aside. “I’m going to look.”

“Be careful. Remember, we were just given a distress call.” That from Luis.

“Count on it.” She put her feet on the floor, trying to be quiet, then realizing that she and the others had already been making noise. Still she approached the open doorway cautiously, peeking around the edge.

The dim lighting only let her tell that there was a large, humped shape in the middle of the floor. She was pretty sure it was an animal of some sort. Maybe a dog, but it was awful big for a dog. She glanced to the side. The others were all in the doorways of their cubicles—all but Clint.

The sound came again. It sure sounded like whimpering. “I’m going to take a better look.”

“Don’t forget your distress signal,” Luis said.

“You dial 911 if I get in trouble.”

“Sure, but I’m going in with you.”

Tessa started moving slowly toward the shape, bent low, and trying to not look threatening. The others did the same thing, adopting the same posture. Tessa had done some time in an animal shelter, and helping at a wildlife rehab center, so knew the drill.

The thing was a monster, nearly twice the size of a Saint Bernard. As she drew closer it lifted its enormous head. She could just make out the gleam of its eyes, and a lower gleam that had to be teeth.

“What’s the problem, buddy?” Luis said, his voice a soothing rumble.

The thing whimpered again. “Think it’s in pain?” Opal asked.

“Sounds like it,” Agnes said. She lowered her voice. “Hey, little friend. Are you hurting?”

“Little friend?” Alan said, choking back laughter. “That thing’s the size of a bear.”

“Had a vet who called all of her patients that.”

No one said anything, or gave any sort of signal, but they all went down on their knees, side by side and facing the creature. It regarded them, letting out a rumbling whimper. It was still hard to see just what it was. It didn’t have fur, and there was a leathery sheen to its corrugated hide.

“Luis, you’re the math guy,” Alan said. “Could you slide down my way a bit more?”

“What’s up?” Opal asked as Luis slowly knee-walked toward Alan.

“Well, I’m off to one side here, and I’ve got kind of a math problem.”

“Meaning?” Tessa asked.

“I’m counting six legs.”

Tessa glanced toward Alan to see if he was kidding. He looked solemn and perplexed.

Luis reached his side. Stared and scratched his chin. “The man can count. We’ve got six legs here.”

The thing keened again. Tessa acted without thinking, as did the others. They moved in closer, murmuring calming words and noises.

Tessa was directly in front of its head. Their visitor’s dark eyes tracked her. She could read some sort of intelligence there. That, and some sort of need. The bad light made it hard to tell, but she thought its nose looked dry. In dogs that was a sign of fever or dehydration. She wasn’t sure this was a dog—most dogs didn’t have hide like an alligator suitcase or six legs—but thirst could be a cause of distress.

“Water,” she began.

Opal was already edging backward. “Just thinking the same thing. Maybe some food, too.”

Luis chuckled. “I don’t remember seeing Milk Bones on the menu.”

“Buttered toast,” Agnes said. “That shouldn’t hurt it.”

“Toast it is.” Opal rose gracefully and headed toward the kitchenette.

“This is probably some sort of test,” Alan said quietly.

Tessa had been thinking the very same thing. They probably all were. “Bet you’re right.”

Opal came back, knelt, pushing a plastic bowl over. “Here’s some water. Toast is almost ready.”

“Thanks.” Tessa slowly slid the bowl toward the animal’s face. “You hungry, Hex? Thirsty? Like a nice drink?”

Agnes snickered. “Hex. Short for hexapod. Cute.”

“Got to call it something.” Hex whimpered as the bowl came closer to his muzzle. “Want some water, boy?” She glanced toward Alan and Luis. “Is it a boy?”

Alan shook his head. “Can’t tell. Back two legs are crossed.”

Luis grinned. “We could call it Modesty. Modesty Hex. Sounds like a reject Bond villainess.”

The animal lifted its great square head. A long dark tongue emerged, rolling into a tube. It sucked water up through that fleshy straw, making a slurping sound.

Opal returned, carrying a plate. “I’ve got toast. Whole grain, of course.”

“You want to try feeding it?”

“I’ve probably got the best reflexes.” She took a piece of toast and slowly offered it.

Hex stared at her. Tessa didn’t see anything to be afraid of in the animal’s eyes. What did it see looking at them?

“Maybe take a bite of it first. Show him it’s safe.”

Opal nodded. Bit a corner off the half-slice she held. Chewed, making *mmmmmm-mmmmm-mmmmm* sounds to show how tasty it was. Offered the rest. Moved it closer and closer.

Hex’s mouth gaped open, displaying a double row of very large teeth. Opal’s hand was steady as she moved the toast closer.

Hex took it from her with an almost surgical delicacy.

“Way to go,” Agnes said softly.

“Want more?” Opal asked.

Hex whimpered again, but this time it was a hopeful sound.

One other thing happened.

Hex started to purr.

\* \* \*

Once again Tessa came awake with a jerk. She experienced a few seconds of feeling completely lost, then figured out where she was.

All of them except Clint were curled up on the floor with Hex. She, Opal, and Agnes were near his head, and each woman held a paw. Luis and Alan were on either side, spooned up tight against the beast.

Hex’s eyes regarded her steadily as she sat up. As she straightened up the light in the common room began to brighten. Before she could get to her feet, moving stiffly from sleeping on the hard floor, the door opened and Glory strode in. She stared at them, face unreadable.

“Good morning,” Tessa said, adopting a low and cautious tone of voice.

“Is it?” Glory jerked her chin at what remained of their pile. “How did you sleep?”

“Surprisingly well.” Tessa turned back, bending to stroke Hex’s broad, leathery forehead. “Good thing this big guy didn’t toss and turn.”

Glory clapped her hands together, the sound like a gunshot. “Up and at ’em, campers! Rack time is over!”

The others sat up, yawning and blinking. Each one petted Hex before they stood.

“Grab some coffee and breakfast, troops. Will you be coffee princess, Library Girl?”

“Uh, sure.”

“Great.” Glory let out a low whistle. “Fluffy. Come to mamma.”

The big animal heaved itself to its feet. All six of them. Standing it looked even bigger, easily four feet tall at the shoulders. It stretched, padded over to Glory’s side, sat on its haunches.

“How was your night, Fluffy?”

It answered with a sound that almost—*almost*—sounded like *pretty good, thanks*.

“Glad to hear it.” She pulled something from her pocket and fed it to the beast.

Tessa started drawing coffee. She made the first one for herself, considering it an emergency ration.

\* \* \*

“That’s not a dog, is it?” Opal said.

Glory gave her a blank look. "What makes you say that?"

"Well, let's see. It's bigger than any dog I've ever heard of, has skin like lizard, a double set of teeth, and—big hint here—six legs."

Glory shrugged. "Maybe he's a rare breed."

"I may teach history, not biology," Agnes said dryly "But even I know there are no six-legged mammals."

"Got to start somewhere, right?" Glory had ordered breakfast as well. Her dietary choices had earned a raised eyebrow from Opal and a look of admiration from Luis. She'd ordered bacon, sausages, fried ham, roast beef hash, and four raw eggs. Breakfast of a certain sort of champion, Tessa supposed. She suppressed a shudder as the big woman shotgunned the raw eggs, then said, "What do you think Fluffy is, Ms. Buff? Other than being cuter than my own dear grandma."

"Some kind of mutant? Maybe from a pound in Fukushima, maybe from a lab somewhere."

"Interesting idea. How would I get something like that? Craigslist?"

"Connections?" Luis suggested.

Glory turned her head to look at Clint, who sat off to one side by himself, moodily toying with his eggs and toast. "What do you think, dude?"

He lifted his head and stared at her, remaining silent.

"How come you weren't part of the dog pile?"

Still no answer.

"Not an animal lover?"

When that got no reply Glory only smiled. "Clean your plates, kiddies. Mamma wants you to meet someone." She tucked gleefully into her own breakfast, making her carnivore delight vanish in no time at all. Hex—Fluffy—only got one small piece of sausage, and one of ham, but no bacon.

\* \* \*

Glory led them out of their dorm and back into the maze of corridors. Once again there were strange sounds coming from some of the doors they passed. No other people were about, but twice they heard what sounded like distant, receding footsteps.

They went past one door that was rattling in its frame, shaken by the nearly subsonic animal rumble coming from behind it.

"Should I ask?" Agnes asked.

Glory gave her the side-eye. "Are you fond of disappointment?"

Agnes sighed. "Figured as much."

Tessa was trying to figure out how large a place they were in, and where they were in it, but she had a lousy sense of direction, and the sameness of the walls made it harder to know whether they were just going in circles. She saw that Luis wore an abstracted look, and guessed he was trying to build a map or model in his head. He saw her watching her, frowned, and shook his head. *The experts are baffled.*

Glory led them to another plain gray door. No number or nameplate to identify it. "Here we are." She opened the door, stepped back. "Go on in."

Tessa was in front so entered first, warily looking around, relaxing slightly at what she saw. It was a large room with ten doors in the far wall. Between them and the doors was an older man sitting on a stool.

"Good morning, folks," he said, standing to greet them. "Glad you could make it." He reached out toward Tessa, who was the first one to reach him, offering to shake hands.

Except he didn't have any. The first thing you noticed was his face, which had been tattooed in the Maori manner, black swirls and lines altered by deep wrinkles. Then you noticed that from his elbows on down he had metal prosthetics.

"I'm Luc," he said.

Tessa took hold of his metal clasp-hook. "Tessa. Pleased to meet you." One of her library regulars was a woman who had lost both hands in Iraq. The prosthetics she'd been given were pieces of crap, and Tessa had spent a lot of time with her helping research available and

affordable alternatives. The hooks had never bothered her, right from the start.

The only one who had a problem with Luc was, of course, Clint. He kept his hands in his pockets, only nodding and refusing to look directly at his face.

Once introductions were completed Glory took over. “After I leave, Luc will tell each one of you to go through one of those doors. On the other side of the door is a corridor. Follow that corridor to the end. Go through the door you find there. Got that?”

They all nodded.

“Luc is in charge. He may send you off all at once, he may hold some of you back so more than one of you can go through the same door. It’s his decision. Just do as he says.”

Alan spoke up. “You didn’t say, ‘do as he says and you’ll be just fine.’”

She bared her teeth at him. “No, I didn’t, did I?”

Luis said, “No hints as to what’s on the other side of those doors?”

“What do you think?”

“No hints. We should think of this as a surprise party.”

“A surprise, anyway.”

\* \* \*

Leaving them with a final, “Have fun, kids. Try to stay safe!” Glory went back out the way they had come in, leaving them with Luc.

“Well now,” he said, rubbing his metal claws together. They made an odd squeaking noise that reminded Tessa of a shopping cart with a bad wheel. “Who wants to go first?”

They exchanged glances. Tessa said, “I will,” the others—except for Clint—saying the same thing at the same time.

Luc laughed. “So I have me some eager beavers, do I now? Isn’t that marvelous.” He pointed at Opal. “Tell me, Madame. Are you enthusiastic about what you might find, eager to get this over with, or just don’t give a shit?”

Opal met his gaze, wearing a faint smile. “Yes.”

He threw back his head and laughed. “Good answer. Honest, and succinct. I do love my job.” He stepped back and lifted one arm, pointing toward the wall of doors. “Very well, Opal, you get to go first. I think you should take . . . door number two.”

Opal gave each of them a quick glance. “See you on the other side.” She strode to the door with the number 2 on it, turned the knob, and opened it. The others leaned forward and craned their necks, trying to see what was beyond it. Nothing but a narrow corridor was in sight. Opal stepped through, closing the door behind her.

After that Luc began sending the rest of them through the same door, letting about fifteen minutes elapse between each door assignment.

Tessa was next to last. Just before she went through she looked back. Luc was smiling encouragingly; Clint was scowling.

She went through the door thinking she was really getting tired of Clint and his attitude.

\* \* \*

Another gray corridor, but this one was narrow and fairly short, leading to a sharp turn to the left.

Tessa took a deep breath, started walking. She wasn’t really scared, but on her guard. She had been put there to see something, find something, have something happen to her. But what? Luc hadn’t seemed the type to send her to something horrible or dangerous. Glory, not so much. She’d probably think sending someone on a ride through a car crusher was a real hoot.

Turning the corner put her in another short corridor. At the end of it was another turn, this time to the right. Set in the wall facing her at eye level was a black square, a window of some sort.

She’d once gone through an art installation laid out in a similar manner, a maze with pieces scattered along its length. It had been called *Unexpected Views*, and it was only after going all the way through it did the seemingly unconnected pieces she’d seen come together to reveal the underlying theme. Hopefully this would be like that . . . and not some sort of crash test.

When she reached the dark panel she peered inside, seeing a dimly lit interior space about

four feet on a side, apparently some sort of terrarium. Because of the low light level, it took her a bit of staring to realize that there was something alive on the other side.

Her first thought was that it was some kind of turtle. There was a hard-looking humped shape like a turtle shell, though it was higher-domed than any she'd ever seen. She pushed her face closer to the glass, straining for a better look.

Long triangular appendages curled out from under it. Not like squid tentacles, more like thick, rubbery fingers. The shell was pushed upward, and flat shiny plates folded out from between these legs and extruded toward her.

Were those eyes?

The thing began moving toward the glass, tortoise-slow and ponderous. She watched, fascinated. There didn't seem to be any joints in the legs. The way the plates on the underside moved, adjusting so they stayed pointed at her, made her more certain they were sensory organs of some sort. Something about the creature suggested a deep, abiding patience and deliberation, that every thought and movement was carefully considered.

It stopped just on the other side of the glass. They looked at each other for a minute or two. She must have been less interesting to it than it was to her, because it turned slowly around, went back to where it had been sitting when she arrived, retracted its eyes and legs, and settled down again.

Tessa watched it a minute longer, then continued on to see what else she was going to find.

\* \* \*

It was laid out like *Unexpected Views*. Short corridor. Hard turn to the left or right. Another window or viewing port. Some windows—and the space beyond them—were large, others were small.

One of the next windows looked into a sort of hive populated by pink, thumb-sized, bee-like things with three sets of short lacy wings and odd goblin faces on their midriffs. They moved quickly and decisively, darting like hummingbirds, constructing some sort of gleaming structure that looked like a small, fantastical castle. They were so busy they never noticed her.

The one after that was filled with some liquid kept at such a low temperature she could feel the cold falling off the glass. In it were creatures with softball-sized hot air balloon bodies and trailing tendrils that were in constant languid motion. There was something serene about the way they looked and moved, floating up and down in some sort of pattern she couldn't quite grasp. She had a feeling they were trying to communicate with her, that they had some sort of message she really ought to know. She would have stood there the rest of the day, mesmerized by the grace of their movements and trying to nail down the meaning behind them, but a mechanical, recorded voice sounded over a hidden speaker, telling her to keep moving. She obeyed, but reluctantly.

The next window was a big one, the size of a patio door. Blue glowing bars were on the other side of the glass, spaced about six inches apart.

Fence or forcefield, she thought. What the hell was in there?

Once she got herself lined up with the bars properly she could see through them and got her first look at what was on the other side.

It was an enormous quadruped, the size of a hippo, pencil-sized glassy spines covering it like quills on a porcupine. The part she thought might be the head was on the underside, dangling like an udder. She watched it for half a minute, and it seemed to be warily watching her.

Suddenly it charged straight at her. Startled, she took a step back. The creature stopped short of the bars and the window. Closer now, she could see what appeared to be two small eyes embedded in its shoulders. It seemed to glare at her, as if outraged she was invading its privacy.

"Sorry, sorry," she said, starting to go.

Before she'd gone three steps she stopped, turning back and returning to look at it through the glass. It bugged her that it had felt the need to scare her off. Maybe it thought she was a threat?

She stood still for a few seconds, then ducked to the left, out of sight. Returned. Stood there, moved quickly to the right, then returned again. She stood there half a minute before slowly lowering herself to the floor, making herself look smaller, and presumably less threatening.

She'd shown it she could move fast, and how she moved. Would sitting show it that she was giving up her ability to move fast?

It seemed worth a try.

She sat there quietly, not looking directly at it. She couldn't have explained why it was so important that the thing—whatever it was—understand that she meant it no harm. Maybe it was the same reason she'd tried to befriend every dog and cat—and turtle and hamster and goldfish—she'd ever met, and been largely successful at it. She had confidence she could make it see she was nothing to fear.

Half a minute passed.

The thing slowly settled to the ground. Tessa smiled. She couldn't tell if it did or not. It was enough that her message seemed to have been received.

She would have stayed there longer, but once again the brassy voice told her to get moving.

\* \* \*

The last turn—last window—was different from the others. Instead of glass, there was sturdy wire mesh. A strange, heavy scent, like a mix of cinnamon, fresh paint, and cooking beef came through the grating. The light inside was dim and dark blue. She peered through the mesh, trying to make sense of what she was seeing.

There was something like a spider in there. If a spider could have a body the size of a bowling ball, six snow crab legs, and a head that defied comparison to anything she had ever seen; tapered, three jawed.

Spiders had never bothered her, she'd even had a pet tarantula for a short while. It had come to her from a coworker whose new live-in boyfriend was totally creeped out by it. She hadn't kept it long because handling spiders is bad for them—repeated physical contact can trigger molt—and the urge to pet it was driving her crazy. Webster's new owner already had several spiders, and a better handle on the urge to cuddle his pets.

Tessa moved her face closer to the grate. The spider-thing moved, seeming to strain back away from her but for some reason not able to get away. It pushed back and stopped, pushed back and stopped.

She took hold of the grate and went up on her toes, trying to see what it was doing.

The habitat it was in was largely stones and sand, recreating some sort of desert ecosystem. Most of the stones were flat, but not all of them. From her higher vantage point she could see that one of the larger round stones was pinning one of its feet.

"You've got a bit of a problem, don't you?" she said to it. She glanced around. The corridor was bare, with nothing she could push through the grate to move the stone. Nor was there anything on her, or any sort of sticks near the front of the cage.

She came down off her cramping toes. As she did she felt the grating give ever so slightly.

She looked it over closely, wondering if it might open. Took hold of it near the top, pushed in and pulled back. There was a click and the grating opened on hidden hinges at the bottom.

"Okay, now what?" she said, studying the spider-thing. Sticking her hand in there wasn't a terribly attractive option, but she felt like she had to do something.

After a moment's thought she reached down and pulled off one sneaker. Shoved her hand inside it so she could use it as a clumsy glove.

"Just going to get you loose," she said softly, reaching in with her sneaker-covered hand.

The spider-thing freaked, jerking wildly back so frantically she was afraid it might tear its leg off.

"Sorry, sorry," she chanted, withdrawing her arm. "I didn't mean to scare you."

Was it the shoe that was frightening it? Only one way to find out. She wasn't exactly pumped about reaching in there bare-handed, but hated the idea of leaving it trapped. Sure, there was bound to be some sort of keeper for the thing, but this wasn't the sort of situation where she could just walk away. The same thing happened with strays. She'd never been able to make herself believe that someone else would care enough to do what she might leave undone.

"Let's all remain calm," she whispered as she reached back into the habitat. "This is a rescue mission, not any sort of threat." The spider thing watched her hand come closer but remained still.

“Just going to get that nasty stone off your leg. That’s all.”

She slowly shoved her arm further in. Her fingers brushed the warm surface of the stone. “Now I’m just going to take hold of this . . .”

She didn’t dare try to lift it. Her arm was stretched out as far as it would go, and the rock looked pretty heavy. Trying to lift it and losing her grip might make things worse. But if she rolled it toward her that should release the pinned leg.

“You ready? When I pull, you get your leg back.”

It just stared at her.

“Strong, silent type, huh? Here we go. One. Two. Three.”

She rolled the stone toward her. The leg came free. The spider-thing scuttled back a few inches, pausing with its two front legs raised. The one that had been stuck appeared undamaged.

“There we go. Isn’t that better?” She started easing the stone back into place. The thing took a step closer to her hand.

“You’re not going to bite me, are you,” she said, clamping down on the urge to just release the rock and snatch her hand back. It could roll and hurt the thing. “We’re all friends here. Right?”

The stone was almost eased into place when the spider-thing reached out one foreleg, stretching it toward her hand.

The stone was seated now. She let her hand rest on it, staying still, hoping she wouldn’t need to find out if that distress signal worked.

The leg brushed across her knuckles. Softly, as if petting her. It stroked that way four times, then moved its leg to scribe a circle on the back of her hand.

“Thank you,” she whispered, overcome with a strange sort of reverent joy. The spider-thing backed away, then down into a hole between some rocks.

Tessa pulled her arm out of the habitat. Carefully made sure the grate was latched tight.

She put her shoe on again and continued her trip through the strange series of unexpected views she had been put in. It was a short trip. Around the next corner was a door marked EXIT.

\* \* \*

On the other side of the door was a waiting room complete with battered, uncomfortable chairs and a pile of tattered magazines on a low table. Glory and her fellow abductees were there, and they looked up from their ancient, dog-eared copies of *The New Yorker*, *Time*, *Good Housekeeping*, and the inevitable *Reader’s Digests*. Somehow Clint had beaten her there and found a *Guns and Ammo*.

“No talking,” Glory said as Tessa entered, heaving herself to her feet. “We’re all here, so let’s get moving. Follow me.”

Tessa and the others were led on another long trek through more nondescript gray corridors. They exchanged yearning glances, dying to talk about what they had just seen and done, but obeying Glory’s gag order.

The silence was killing Tessa. Her trip through the maze had left her feeling excited, even elated. She wanted to tell them about the floaters, the big creature behind the glowing bars, the spider-being. Had they seen the same things? The gleams in their eyes said they’d seen something—and something similarly tremendous.

Their trip ended at yet another unmarked steel door.

The room they entered was quite large. More gray walls, gray floor, high, off-white ceiling. The only furniture was a gray steel desk and chair set at the center. The woman at the desk looked up from the papers she was reading when they entered.

“Well, there you are,” she said, pushing her chair back and coming around in front of the desk. The woman was an albino, her skin the color of milk, and thin to the point of emaciation. Tessa guessed that her ancestry was part Chinese from the shape of her face and eyes, she was cue-ball bald, and if she had eyebrows they were too faint to be seen. She wore a white lab coat that hung open with no shirt under it; her ribs were there for the counting, and her waistline had to be measured in negative numbers above jutting hip bones.

“Campers, meet Abby,” Glory said. “I don’t need to introduce you to her because she already

knows who you are. Your asses are hers now, at least for a while. Don't disappoint her, or me."

Those instructions delivered, Glory left the room. They waited uneasily, watching the pale woman and wondering what was coming next. She stood there staring at them, scowling slightly. Tessa glanced at Agnes, who stood beside her. The teacher shrugged.

"How many of you are into old cult movies?" Abby said at last. "Raise your hands."

Tessa raised her hand. Everyone but Clint did.

"Very good. Any of you seriously familiar with *Buckaroo Banzaï*?"

Tessa raised her hand again. So did Alan and Luis.

"What a treat to be in such refined company." She pointed at Luis. "Give me a classic line."

"Don't tug on that. You don't know what it might be attached to," he answered. "Words to live by for sure."

She pointed at Alan. "Your turn."

"I feel so break up I wanta go home," Alan replied, mimicking the manic tone of Dr. Emilio Lizardo.

"Bet you do. How about you, Coffee Mechanic?"

Tessa smiled. This was a movie she knew almost line for line. "I doubt you're looking for the line about the watermelon. Or 'Buckaroo . . . it's your hand.' So I'm guessing you're looking for the line that turned up in a lot of movies and other places afterward: 'No matter where you go, there you are.'"

"That's the one," Abby said, beaming approvingly. "Do you believe that?"

"I guess so. I'd clap for it with one hand."

"Excellent." She addressed them as a group. "If you look to your left you will see a wall with ten black doors. Now look to your right. That wall has ten white doors. You will notice that they are identical to the others, except for color. Pick a door, any door, go through it. Wait until you hear the gong, then come back out."

"What gong?" Agnes said.

"That one, of course." Abby pointed at her desk. There was a shiny brass gong, at least six feet in diameter, sitting on her desk.

Agnes frowned. "That wasn't there before."

"Wasn't it?"

Opal shook her head. "No. It's kind of hard to miss."

Abby cocked her head. "Really. Well, it's here now. When you hear it just come back out here. Got that?"

They all nodded, and there were mutters of *Sure*, and *I guess*.

"Then pick a door, any door." Her smile widened. "Have fun."

They exchanged uneasy glances. Luis shrugged. "Last door wasn't so bad. Actually kind of great."

Tessa nodded in agreement. Her first impulse was to head for a white door, but she hesitated. Maybe the door colors were an attempt to manipulate them. Manipulate them even more.

That thought was enough for her to make up her mind. She headed toward the wall with the black doors.

"I say we follow her," Opal said before she'd taken two steps.

"Works for me," Alan agreed. They followed after Tessa, lining themselves up before the black doors.

"Are we ready?" Agnes said.

Opal laughed. "Close enough for government work." They all chuckled at this summation of their peculiar situation. Human lab rats running a very bizarre set of mazes.

Alan took hold of the knob of the door closest to him. "Let's do this."

That's what they did.

\* \* \*

Tessa stepped through the doorway into a space not much larger than an old-fashioned phone booth. The walls were beige, the lighting indirect, nowhere to sit. She turned around, examining the place. No other doors, windows, viewing panes, or graffiti from any previous occupant.



"All right," she said softly. "Maybe this is a test for claustrophobia." If so, no problem. Heights could be an issue, but enclosed spaces were just small places.

She stood there for a few minutes, waiting for something to happen. Nothing did. Finally she lowered herself to the floor to sit cross-legged. "Should have brought a crossword or Sudoku," she muttered. "Except I haven't got a pen." She patted the breast pocket of her coverall. The pad she'd found in her cubicle was still there. She pulled it out.

The screen displayed a single word: **WAIT**.

"That's a lot of help," she murmured, stowing it back in her pocket. More time passed. Her butt going numb from the hard floor, she started to stand. Partway up a wave of vertigo washed through her, making her stagger and reach out to catch herself. The wave crested, receded. She opened her eyes and shook her head, finished standing, wondering what the hell that had been. Had she stood up too fast? Caffeine spins? Blood sugar dive? Whatever it was, she felt fine now.

Another minute passed. Then she heard it, the muffled sound of a gong. She grabbed the knob and pushed the door open. Stepped out, then halted uncertainly. On either side of her the others came out and did the same thing for the same reason.

Facing them across the room was the wall with the black doors. She turned to look at the door she'd just come through.

It was white. She'd gone in to the right of the desk. Now she was on the left. The desk could have been moved, but not the door they'd come in through.

Abby was sitting with her butt on a corner of her desk, watching them frown and scowl. She wasn't sharing the desktop with a gong.

"Now, wasn't that fun?" she called brightly, standing up. "How does everyone feel?"

"I felt dizzy for a moment," Alan said. "Then it went away."

"You feel all right now?"

"I guess. I'm a bit confused. Does that count?"

"Nope. Not around here. Anyone else feel sick?"

"Yeah, I do."

Tessa turned in surprise. That had come from Clint. So far his default had been to be silent and act sulky. Now he looked actively pissed off. Again.

"Sick of what, pray tell?" Abby asked with exaggerated sweetness.

"All of this shit," he growled. "Doors and . . . stuff. Head games. Trying to scare us."

"Sorry to hear you feel you've been treated badly," she said, not sounding the least bit apologetic. "Consider your highly articulate complaint lodged with the proper authorities."

He glared at her. "You going to do anything about stopping this shit?"

She grinned at him. "For all you know I already have. Now, I want all of you to step back inside the rooms you were just in. I promise you the wait will be shorter. No gong this time around. A set of musical tones will let you know when it's time to come out. Sound good?" She didn't wait for any of them to answer. "Great. Back inside. Once this is done you can break for lunch."

They exchanged glances. Luis shrugged and went back inside. Agnes and Alan went next. Clint glared at Tessa and Opal, shot a black look at Abby, then went in, slamming the door after him.

Tessa and Opal stared at each other a long moment.

"I don't think this was some cheap trick," Tessa said softly.

Opal nodded. "I know."

"Meet you for lunch?"

"It's a date."

They went back through the now-white doors to the small rooms beyond.

\* \* \*

Tessa was braced for another dizzy spell because that seemed to be the whole point of being in the room. When it came it was shorter and less intense than the first time. In a matter of a second or two she felt back to normal.

Several more minutes passed. Finally some musical tones sounded.

As she was pushing her way through the door what she'd just heard clicked: the classic four

notes from *Close Encounters*.

She stepped out the door, not into the room where Abby waited, but into the common room. The rest of her group was already there.

Only they weren't sitting there waiting for her to come make coffee, but sprawled on the floor looking dead. She had just a second for that to register before Glory materialized in front of her with something in her hand.

"Nighty-night," was the last thing she heard before everything went black.

\* \* \*

"That bitch *gassed* me."

Tessa lifted her head and looked around woozily. Opal was sitting up and had just expressed her own slowly congealing grasp of the situation perfectly.

She sat up, her mind clearing further. All the others were also coming around, blinking and shaking their heads.

"This calls for coffee," she mumbled, climbing to her feet and stumbling toward for the machine. That seemed like the best sort of first aid she could offer, and she sure needed some.

Opal went to help Agnes get up. Alan and Luis got off the floor, both wearing *what the hell just happened?* faces. Clint was sitting up with his arms on his knees, glaring at the rest of them like his getting knocked out was their fault.

Tessa started pulling drinks, already knowing what her friends liked. Opal seemed to have thrown off the effects of being stunned the fastest. No surprise there. While Tessa might have been the youngest, Opal was by far the fittest.

Before long everyone but Clint was sitting in a cluster at the tables, nursing a hot drink. The disagreeable member of their group had taken his coffee without a word of thanks and retreated to his room.

"Never saw that coming," Alan said, shaking his head. "I knew we were being socially engineered and manipulated. But getting tranked? I never expected that."

"Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition," Tessa mumbled.

Luis chuckled. "That means the dreaded fluffy pillows are next?"

"Maybe not pillows," Agnes said, "But something. They're trying harder and harder to push our, ah, freak-out buttons. Hex was a test. The creatures in the maze were a test. Trying to convince us we'd been teleported was another."

Alan looked interested. "You think that was a fake?"

The teacher made a face. "I don't want to believe it. Logic tells me it was a trick. I find it hard to imagine that the government—or whoever these people are—have access to technology like that. If they do, that means we've been drafted into one of the old *Men In Black* movies."

Opal leaned forward. "Putting the teleporting thing aside for the moment, what about the, um, beings in the maze?"

"They were real," Tessa said without a trace of hesitation.

"What makes you say that?"

She tried to explain. "Because I *connected* with them. Some more than others. But I saw them and they saw me. Like with the spider thing. Did any of you meet it?"

They all nodded. "I helped it get its leg loose," Agnes said. The others said they'd done the same thing.

"I connected with it. Only tenuously, even glancingly, but I was sure it needed help and it understood I meant it no harm. It thanked me. I know it did."

"That's how it was for me, too," Luis said. He took a deep breath, let it out. "I'm guessing all of us are thinking roughly the same thing. None of us wants to say it out loud. I don't want to say it out loud. But I will . . . if you want me to."

"Go for it," Alan said. Tessa nodded, as did the rest.

"All right. We are under the control of some shadowy, probably at least quasi-governmental agency. We have been subjected to a series of tests to see how we react when confronted with, shall we call it, *the other*. It started right at the beginning. The woman who spoke to us when we arrived had an eye patch and a hijab. That meant nothing to any of us, but there are

plenty of people who would get tense around someone who looked like that. Then we get Glory whose appearance and attitude would put some people off. After that we meet Hex.”

He paused. “Hex was the size of a small bear, had skin like a cowboy boot, and six legs. What did we do? We slept on the floor with it because we thought it was in distress. At first I was careful around it, but I was never scared. How about you?”

“No,” Agnes said.

“Me either,” Opal agreed. Tessa and Alan just shook their heads.

“Next up was the maze. Anyone get creeped out by what we saw in there?”

Tessa chuckled. “I kept having to be told to move along. Those balloon things? I could have watched them all day.”

Luis took a sip of coffee, put his cup down. “Last we were subjected to—and shown the use of—what sure seemed to be some kind of teleportation.”

“I *bate* that idea,” Agnes said with a sigh, “But that’s probably what it was.”

“So we’re being checked out for some sort of job that requires dealing with unusual people, strange, um, let’s use Opal’s term, *beings*, and possibly teleportation. What kind of job is that?”

Tessa remembered what the woman who had first met them had said.

“Something wonderful?” she said.

\* \* \*

They let the matter drop there, giving themselves and each other time to think about it. Tessa stood up, declaring, “I need more coffee and some of nature’s most perfect food next to pizza.”

“What’s that?” Agnes asked.

“A BLT.”

Alan stood up. “Best idea I’ve heard all day.”

“Works for me,” Agnes agreed. “What about you, Opal?”

She smiled. “Tomato, lettuce and tofu would be a better dietary choice, but what the hell.”

A short while later, while they were all working on their sandwiches, Tessa brought up one other matter that had been on her mind.

“I just met you folks yesterday,” she said. “You just met me. On the face of it we have little in common, but we’ve become a weird sort of unit. Anyone else notice that?”

“I have,” Opal said. She grinned. “Maybe it’s because we all slept together.”

“With a dog,” Luis said. “Or something.”

“Does that make us a dog team?” Alan asked.

“Young man,” Agnes intoned sternly. “Your thinking is pure mush.”

Laughing, they finished their sandwiches and celebrated their bond by sharing a banana split.

\* \* \*

They expected the next test to come quickly, but it did not. The rest of the day passed, and the evening. No messages on their screens. No sign of Glory. No strange animals turned up in the night.

The next morning, after breakfast, Opal offered to lead them in some mild exercises. Boredom having set in, they all joined in. After that Agnes put on a historical trivia contest. Tessa won that. Her prize was an origami elephant Luis made.

They had lunch. Played some games. Luis gave them a rambling and hilarious oral history of the DC bus system. They gathered around to watch as Alan attempted to hack into one of the tabletop game systems.

The hours passed, unmeasured by clocks. They knew they were waiting for something to happen. The suspense had them mildly on edge.

Alan had summed it up best: they had gotten to see, meet, and even touch what seemed to be aliens.

If more of that was what the next test entailed, then it was worth the wait.

\* \* \*

“What the fuck?” Tessa shouted, roused from a sound sleep and drop-kicked into utter chaos. The lights in her cubicle and the common room beyond were flashing like cheap disco strobes. A loud, discordant buzzer was sounding, along with a robotic voice chanting, “*Warning*.”

*Evacuate this area immediately. Warning. Evacuate this area immediately.*"

She hauled on her coveralls, shoved her feet into her sneakers, and was out her door in seconds.

"What the hell is going on?" Alan yelled from his doorway, grimacing as he struggled with one shoe.

"No idea!" she shouted back.

Opal came out of her room, sniffing the air. "I don't smell smoke or anything!"

"Then maybe it's just a dr—" Tessa had to grab the doorframe as the whole room shook violently. The lights went off, and the robot voice began sounding if it had been huffing helium. The room steadied. After a few seconds emergency lights came on, lighting the first tendrils of drifting smoke.

Agnes appeared in her doorway. "Are they screwing with us?"

"No idea," Opal said. "Where's Luis?"

"Here," he puffed, coming out his doorway. "Couldn't find one damn shoe." He looked around. "We're all here—all except Clint."

"I'll check," Alan said. He was the one closest to Clint's cubby, which was way down on the end. He went to the door, stuck his head inside.

Tessa heard him yell, "*Come on, man! Get the lead out!*"

Agnes caught her eye. "Think this is a trick?"

"Probably is." She pointed. "There's a flashing exit sign. It's not on the main door, but the one we came through after that black door thing. The one that also says no admittance."

Luis's brow furrowed. "Meaning we're supposed to teleport out of here?"

The floor shook again. A moment later Alan yelled, "*I need some help here!*"

They headed toward him, Opal and Luis out in front.

When Tessa reached the door to Clint's room she saw that he was huddled in a corner, having a meltdown. Opal was on one side of him, Luis on the other, Alan in front, pleading with him, saying, "Come on, man! We've got to get out of here!" The floor shuddered again, as if to drive home his point.

Agnes pushed in beside Tessa. "We've got smoke coming in under the main door. Plus that door is hot."

"You hear that?" Alan said. "We've got to bug out!"

Clint shook his head. "I don't—"

"You have to," Opal said, taking hold of one arm. Luis grabbed the other. Luis was big, and Opal was strong. Between the two of them they managed to haul Clint onto his feet.

"We ready?" Alan asked, shooting Tessa a look.

"Ready or not, we've got to move."

The common room was now rapidly filling with acrid smoke that moved in heavy, nearly opaque bands through the beams of the emergency lights. The recorded announcement was a broken gabble, and the floor was vibrating, as if some terrible engine had started running somewhere under it.

They made their way across the room, Tessa and Agnes leading the way, Clint staggering along between Opal and Luis, Alan bringing up the rear. Agnes grabbed Tessa's arm. "We've got to check that door before we try going out it."

Of course Agnes would know what to do. As a teacher she had probably been part of hundreds of fire drills.

"You're fire chief. Do it." They reached the door. Agnes held her hands close to the door, then grazed a knuckle across it. "It's cold. We're clear."

The rest of the group caught up with them then.

"How do we do this?" Alan asked. Asked Tessa, as if she were the one in charge.

"We go through the door, I guess. There's no way to know whether we'll end up in the room with doors, a corridor, or what. All I know is we should stay together."

"I hear that," Opal said. "So we do this?"

"We do this," Tessa said. Agnes pulled the door open. They could see nothing but blackness on

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the other side. The floor shook again, and there was a deafening sound like tearing metal.

Nobody needed to yell *Go*. Linking hands, they just went.

\* \* \*

“So where are we?” Agnes asked, her voice hoarse with uncertainty.

“No idea,” Tessa said. “I got hit with that weird feeling when we came through so there’s a chance we could be anywhere.”

They had hustled through the door to find themselves in total darkness, in a place that had the feeling of a very large space. There was no sign of the door and wall they had just come through.

“Now what?” Opal said. “I’m not crazy about wandering around when I can’t see where I’m putting my feet.”

“Hang on a sec,” Alan said. “I wonder—”

A dim blue glow appeared. Tessa saw that he was holding up his screen. She patted her breast pocket, found hers. It lit when she took it out, adding a bit more illumination. Soon everyone but Clint had their screens out. He just hung there in Opal and Luis’s grip, head down, mumbling.

Now they could see each other, but not much else. If there were walls around them the light was too weak to reach that far.

“Here, take this a minute, would you?” Tessa said, handing her screen to Agnes. She took a few steps away from the others, and carefully keeping her back to them, slowly sidestepped a wide circle around them, peering into the dark. She paused, straining her eyes.

“I think I see a light.” She pointed. “That way.”

“Who votes we head for it?” Alan said. “I sure do.”

“Hell yes,” Opal said.

“What she said,” Agnes agreed. Luis nodded. “Count me in.”

“I’m outside the light you guys are making, so I’ll go first,” Tessa said. “I’m getting enough to see the floor, but not so much it will make me lose sight of our objective.”

“Lead on,” Alan said. “We’ll bring up the rear.”

Tessa started out, watching the floor ahead while trying to keep the dull amber gleam she’d spotted in sight. The floor was smooth and level, maybe some sort of ceramic. Little by little the distant glow grew brighter.

“Man, this place is huge,” Luis said.

“Sure is,” Tessa called back. “Then there’s the other thing.”

“So it’s not just me?”

“Don’t think so,” Agnes said. “I thought it was just me.”

Luis laughed. “Always figured I should lose some weight. Never thought I’d do it in lower gravity.”

“You haven’t lost much,” Alan said. “Maybe 10 percent? Just enough to be noticeable.”

“Does that mean we’re in space?” Opal asked.

It was Tessa’s turn to laugh. “Well, we’re sure as hell not in Kansas any more.”

The light resolved into a large, silver-metal raised tub or pool filled with glowing amber material. They approached it as a group, stowing away their screens now that they didn’t need the light from them.

“What’s anyone think?”

“Hot tub?” Opal said. “Habitat? Air lock?”

Alan rapped his knuckles on the gleaming metal that formed the outside of the thing. “Hello? Anybody home?”

“*Don’t*,” Clint croaked hoarsely.

They all turned to stare.

“Why not?” Agnes asked.

Clint stared at them like they were crazy. “There could be something in there.”

“That’s what we’re hoping,” Agnes said patiently. “Maybe they can tell us where we are, and what’s going on.”

“Don’t,” he said again, pulling away from Opal, who had been keeping a hand on his arm. He stepped back, unzipping his coverall. He reached inside, pulling something out wrapped in a towel.

“Clint, no,” Opal said sharply when he unwrapped a knife from the towel. One of the knives from their kitchenette. One of their towels.

He held the knife up between them, face gone pale and hard. “Stay back. I saw the things in that maze. I’m not letting any of them get me.”

“Aw, come on, man,” Luis said. “Nothing there tried to hurt you, did it? Now put down that knife before someone gets hurt.”

Clint shook his head, clutching the blade with both hands. “All of you stay back. I don’t want to hurt you, but I intend to protect myself.”

“Against what?” Alan asked.

“Against *what?*” he shouted. “Don’t you idiots *get it?* We’re being shown monsters! *Alien* monsters. And we’re supposed to be all right with that?” He shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“Nothing has tried to hurt you,” Agnes said patiently.

Clint’s face twisted with loathing. “You people cuddled up with that six-legged thing! Like it wasn’t some sort of monster! You’re all traitors to your kind! All of you!”

Before Agnes got a chance to argue, the space around them filled with a soft musical tone, like a low note played on an oboe the size of a stretch limo.

They all turned to look. The amber stuff was rising up in a glowing column. Golden sparks coursed across the shimmering surface. Soon the column had to be ten feet tall.

“I think we’re going to get company,” Luis said quietly.

Tessa glanced at Clint, and didn’t like the panicked revulsion she saw on his face, and the desperate way he held the knife. She moved to place herself between him and the column, shielding both him and the artifact.

A form began taking appearing inside the column, the exact shape of it rendered indistinct by the amber stuff around it. It was large, almost as tall as the column.

“Big fella,” Agnes muttered.

The amber shroud began to grow clearer, letting them slowly get a better look at what was inside.

Agnes was right, Tessa thought. It was big. It had a humanoid—not a word she’d had much reason to use before then—torso complete with two short arms, and held up by four sinuous lower legs strapped with bands of metal and glossy orange material. The head—presumably the head—was all sharply eroded angles and multiple black eyes. For some bizarre reason it made her think of Abe Lincoln—maybe it was the beard-like fan of short tentacles covered with feathery structures on the lower part of its face. The creature moved toward the outside of the column, its movement stately and graceful. It emerged from the amber stuff, descending slowly down onto the floor.

Tessa stared in wonder, moved by the being’s strange beauty. Its bearing was regal, and there was an air of tremendous age and weariness about it. Her rapt contemplation was shattered by a sudden shout.

*“Keep that thing away from me!”*

Clint! She whirled around, saw him edging sideways, pointing the knife.

“Clint, no,” Luis said soothingly, starting toward him.

Clint lost it then, eluding Luis and launching himself forward with the knife.

“No—” Tessa cried, leaping forward to shield the creature from Clint.

Opal moved faster than she did, faster than seemed possible. There was a blur of motion, grunts and a shout. Moments later the knife was on the floor, and Opal had Clint in some sort of submission hold. He struggled against her, but she held him tightly, calmly saying, “Take it easy, man. Take it easy. We’re all just fine here.”

Tessa went to him, glancing down to kick the knife away.

“Nobody’s going to hurt you,” she said. “There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

His eyes darted madly to her, past her. “It’s right behind you,” he whimpered.

“And we’re all between you and it,” she answered placidly. “There’s no reason to be afraid.” She reached out and laid her hand on his shoulder. “All right?”

He stared hard at her a moment, then his face changed. He smiled and said, “Yeah, I think we’re good here.”

“We’re *very* good here,” said a new voice from behind Tessa, one it took her a couple seconds to recognize.

She turned her head. Standing beside the giant alien was the woman with the eye-patch, Glory at her side.

“You’ve done good, campers,” Glory said, beaming at them. “Mama is proud.”

“Congratulations,” said the alien in a high, musical voice. “Let me just take us—”

\* \* \*

“—somewhere more comfortable.”

They were back in the common room. The lights were on, the smoke was gone.

“Grab a seat and take a load off,” Glory said. “Tessa, would you help me rustle up some refreshments?”

“Uh, sure.” Space traveler or not, she was still a barista. The rest of her group took seats at the tables, the big alien remained standing next to the woman in the eye-patch. Tessa pulled drinks, Glory and Alan distributing them.

“Introductions are a good place to start,” the one-eyed woman began once they were settled. “My name is Mazi. I’m a former Air Force officer and pilot, and over the years I’ve done work for certain intelligence agencies. You’ve already met Glory, of course.” She grinned. “The less said of her history, the better. Clint was a Navy pilot, and part of NASA. Last, but not least, I’m pleased to introduce our friend Mandanat.”

“Hello,” the alien said, tentacles lifting, “Glad to finally meet you.”

“Here’s the deal,” Mazi continued. “A while back an astronomer at NASA started noticing some strange perturbations in some data, anomalies that led her to believe there might be something in orbit around Earth. Something we couldn’t see, or directly find with any of our sensors. A secret, cheap, fast and dirty mission was mounted to take a closer look at the area where this disturbance seemed to be located. An old, retired spy plane was retrofitted to carry a pilot, three information specialists, and some extra sensors. It was thought that, once on the edge of space, we might be able to find this anomaly and figure out what it was. I was pilot on that flight. Clint was one of the three crewmembers. We went up, and had just started our sensor run when we had a catastrophic failure in the plane’s structure. The thing started coming apart around us like a kite in a tornado. Before I even had a chance to send a Mayday we stopped being on the plane and ended up somewhere else.”

“They ended up on my ship,” Mandanat said.

“We would’ve been dead if he hadn’t grabbed us. We were brought to the deck you just came from. Not long after we got there he came to check on us. That’s when things got real dicey. Right, Clint?”

He nodded. “Dicey is a good word. Mandanat appeared, just like you saw, with his trademark theatrics. Mazi and I reacted about the same way you guys did, the slow reveal supposed to make it easier for us. We were awed, and unsure the big guy could really be real, but neither of us reacted badly to seeing and being near him. Not so much with the other two crew members.”

“Not so much,” Mazi agreed. “One went berserk and tried to attack Mandanat.” She touched her eye patch. “That’s how this happened. I got hurt trying to stop him. Clint also got hurt, though nowhere near as badly, trying to keep our fourth crew member from killing himself.”

A shadow crossed Clint’s face. “Trying and failing.”

“When things quieted down Mandanat told us who he was and why he was here. You can think of him as a conductor. A conductor of the sort that used to be part of the Underground Railroad.”

“You help slaves escape?” Opal said.

Mandanat gave a very human nod. “Slaves and refugees. Also indigenous endangered low sentience and quasi-sentient creatures.”

“He and his ship,” Mazi said, “Are part of a vast network transferring the endangered and hunted and dispossessed to safer places, sometimes to other galaxies. But being transposed—transported—takes a terrible toll on some of them, both physically and psychologically. They have to stay here with him a while, resting and recovering before they are ready to be moved on.”

Mandanat spread his arms. “This limits how many I can help. I have ample space, and it can be reconfigured to meet almost any need, but I can tend to only so many at one time. That is why it was decided I should place myself near your world. You have been studied, and it was believed that some of your kind would be able to deal with the others. I had planned to recruit help quietly, but rescuing Mazi and Clint and the others changed my plans.”

Mazi nodded. “Which brings it back to us. We were incredibly lucky that our crew had Clint and me on it. The odds of there being two empathic xenophiles on it were stacked way against us. The other two were really the norm, experiencing an instinctive and extremely negative reaction to alien contact. Once we understood what Mandanat was trying to do, we wanted to help—after all, we owe him our lives. The best way to do that is to find and recruit people like us. People who not only remain calm in the presence of the other, but can empathize with them. Even feel drawn to them.”

“That’s what our testing was about,” Agnes said.

“Sure was,” Glory said. “You all passed with flying colors. Clint was part of the testing, playing the part of a different kind of other, and you did pretty well with him.”

“So you’re not really a schmuck?” Luis asked, one eyebrow arched.

Clint laughed. “You have to ask the others.”

“Only when he loses at poker.” Glory said with a grin.

Alan spoke up. “So what are you? Part of NASA? The NSA? Starfleet?”

“Maybe a bit of all of them,” Mazi said. “Let’s just say we’re part of a shadowy agency led by a dead woman, with a dead man as second in command. That’s Clint and myself, of course. We have access to certain official and semi-official resources. Mandanat provides other extra-special resources. We’re just getting up and running, and are focused on recruiting. We’re ending up with two tiers of aides. People like Luc and Abby are xenophilic, but are so wrecked by being transposed they can only work here on Earth. They were recruited from inside a circle we already knew. You’re our first group of likely recruits, and we can’t believe how lucky we are that all of you can deal with being transposed.”

“So this was all a job interview,” Opal said.

Mazi smiled. “For the best job offer anyone could ever get.”

Opal glanced at Tessa, then the rest of her friends before returning her attention to Mazi. “If we accept do we get to stay together?”

“If you want.”

“More importantly,” Tessa said, “Do we get to keep the coffeemaker?”

Clint laughed. “That can probably be arranged.”

“Then sign me up.”

“Sign us all up, right?” Agnes said.

Alan, Opal and Luis nodded. “When do we start?” Luis said.

Mandanat answered that question. “Any time you want.”

“Now seems like a good time,” Agnes said.

Mandanat nodded. “Then let’s go back to my ship. I can show you the ropes and introduce you to some of my passengers.”

A brief flicker of nausea passed through Tessa as she was transposed off to her new career. That would take a bit of getting used to.

*What the hell*, she thought as she arrived in a new, strange room. She had also always felt queasy at the smell of pumpkin spice coffee, but showed up for work anyway.

*The first Stephen L. Burns story to appear in Analog, “A Touch Beyond,” ran in the January 1985 issue. Since then forty-some of his odd fictions have followed. He continues to*



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*caretake several—well over a dozen—homes and cottages on Wellesley Island. He and his wife, herbalist Sue-Ryn have run a wildlife rehab practice for sixteen years, caring for orphaned and injured birds and small mammals. About two years ago he started relearning to play guitar, an instrument he put aside “temporarily” back in the mid-Eighties, when he started selling stories, so he could concentrate on writing. Three and a half decades, and whatever chops he’d achieved, went by just like that. It is unlikely he will be seen on a stage in a gold lame suit any time soon, but there might be a story or two left in him.*