

# LISE

a novel by D M Arnold

Edition of 25-April-2008

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I

The white Varadan sun washed the city with harsh morning light. A shaft streamed through a sill window and across Lise's eyes. She sat up with a start, dimly recalling her mother's attempt to rouse her earlier.

She rubbed her eyes and arose from the thin pad on the floor that served as her mattress. She wrapped a threadbare towel around her torso, climbed the stairs from the basement and stepped into a courtyard, walled on four sides by abandoned and crumbling four-and five-story apartment buildings. Pushing open a gate, Lise walked onto the street. There was no vehicular traffic, as this sector of Vyonna had long been walled

off from the rest of the city. Sitting in the middle of what once was a busy boulevard was a latrine, fabricated from scraps of corrugated metal and positioned atop a manhole opening into a sewer. She rapped on the door. "Occupied," came a reply. She folded her arms and waited until the structure was vacant, then stepped inside and voided her bladder. She headed back to the courtyard, filled a bucket from a standpipe, stepped behind a low screen formed from a pair of old doors and began washing.

As she dried herself she realized she was not alone in the courtyard. Sitting on a low wall was a figure

--another Novo Homonid. He was about the same age as she --nineteen years. Like Lise, the boy had green skin, orange eyes and no hair. He held a pad of polysheets.

“Tagg!” she exclaimed. “Were you watching me bathe?”

“I was sketching you,” the boy replied.

Lise turned her back and wrapped the towel around herself.

“Come look,” Tagg said.

She rolled her eyes and walked toward where Tagg sat. “Don't you have a job to go to?” she asked.

“No --I was let go. My owner hasn't found a new one for me yet. I'm not strong enough for most of the work that's out there. Instead I go to the park in Sector Ten and sit and sketch. I sell my drawings to white folks.”

“You sell your drawings?” Lise asked.  
“Let me see that...” She took his sketch of her portrait. “Tagg

--this is really quite good.”

“You can keep it.”

“I was afraid you were sketching me...”

“Nude? I'd like to do that, Lise. Maybe you'd pose for me. I'll bet it would sell.”



“How much do white folks give you for your sketches?”

“Whatever they want,” Tagg replied. “Mostly almost-used-up scrip cards ... enough so I can buy more pads and marking pens. I hope I don't get a new job. This way I keep more scrip than when I was working.”

“Don't let on to your owner that you're doing this.”

“I won't... The whites can't believe they were done by a novonid.”

“They believe we're not capable of very much. Don't the constables harass you?”

“The park is patrolled by a woman cop. She bought a drawing from me. I always check to see if she's the one on duty. Otherwise, I go elsewhere.”

“What you're doing isn't illegal --is it?”

“No. So long as I don't cause a nuisance. Lise... Come up to my apartment and pose for me. My roommates all will have gone to their jobs. We'll have privacy.”

“I can't,” she replied. “I'm starting my job today, and I can't be late.”

“YOU have a job? That's right --I heard you had been registered.”

She pointed to the serial number tattooed on her left clavicle: RAA005010. “I must go.”

“You remember where my apartment is?”

“Of course, Tagg.”

“Come up and pose for me sometime. I'll make a deal with you. Pose for me and if I sell it, you can have the scrip.”

Lise carried the sketch into her basement dwelling and set it on a bench. She slipped into her clothing

--a bandeau to cover her breasts, short shorts and sandals: a costume designed

to expose the most of her green skin to sunlight. The garments were new -- provided by Ramina. She headed up the stairs to the courtyard, through a gate and down an alley.

Her stepfather had warned her against using the alley. Before she was registered, Lise had ventured outside the basement and adjacent courtyard only after dark. Then, she stayed inside or close to the Green Zone, and went out only to scavenge food or other necessities. Not all novonids lived inside the Zone. Many more lived in housing provided by their owners. Some in the workforce were quartered in barracks. Others who were valets or

maids had comfortable rooms in the homes of the owners they served. Most grocers catered to these owners by stocking one shelf of novonid food.

Some shopkeepers --the considerate ones --would stack expired cans for the taking in the alleys behind the stores. After all, they couldn't be sold after the expiration dates. Spiteful ones would crush the cans, mixing the contents with detritus. Giving it away, they reasoned, reduced demand for the product they sold. Novonids in the Zone held scrip --how they come by it isn't the shopkeepers' affair, and as tender it is just as legal as that of the whites.

After dark, after curfew Lise would

creep through tunnels under the streets and emerge outside the perimeter to scavenge what expired cans she could find, or discarded cooking grease from the fry shops. Being registered changed that. The serial number on her shoulder meant no bounty hunter could turn her in for the reward on renegade novonids. Now she could roam in broad daylight, and she was just becoming accustomed to it.

With daylight came safety --the brothel on the edge of the walled-off sector would be quiet, and the thugs would be off the street. Even the tower-mounted cameras the constables used to patrol the perimeter of the Green Zone would be

given only cursory glances.

Lise approached a heavy gate and lifted its latch. It creaked on its hinges and she passed through it. She was now outside the Zone. Her heart accelerated. Outside the Zone in broad daylight would mean certain death to an unregistered specimen of her kind. Grott had told her in excruciating detail the fate of the bounty hunters' prey.

The lucky ones would be shot dead on the street. Captured novonids would be locked in a dark room. Deprived of sunlight, the chloroplasts giving their skin its green color would stop producing sugars to fuel their bodies. Their metabolism would slow and after

several days they would become torpid. Then, unable to resist, they would be carried to the death chambers... Thinking about it agitated her more and her heart began to pound. Lise fought back the fight-or-flight instinct, forcing her intellect to take control. This was now the order of things, she told herself. She was street legal. Killing or harassing a registered one was a crime severely punished. There was nothing to fear. She took a deep breath of Vyonna's air, polluted with ozone and the sterno-smell of burnt alcohol. She walked on the pavement to a corner, looking at the buildings. Some nearby ones were familiar to her from her nocturnal excursions. Others she had seen only the



tops looming above the wall enclosing the Zone. Traffic whizzed by. She looked up the street and down in the other direction. Novonids were beginning to file out of the Zone. A crowd of them was forming on the corner at the streetcar stop. Lise headed in that direction, as it was her rendezvous point. She stood at the corner, her back against a building.

The whine of a gas turbine grew louder as the streetcar approached and stopped at the corner. Its driver kept the doors closed. The green-skinned throng, nearly all men, climbed onto an open platform at the rear of the bus.

Lise watched with some amusement as

they packed onto the platform. “Come on, push together,” she heard an older man exhort, “we can all fit.”

The last of them pushed and squeezed onto the platform. A young man made room for one more and extended his hand toward Lise. She smiled and made a gesture saying, no thanks. The bus's turbine whined up and it pulled away from the corner. Then, she realized she would be riding that bus tomorrow and every day after.

Lise recalled the day her life changed. Her memory of it was vivid as if it were yesterday. She had been tending her garden of wild pomma in the courtyard;

and soaking up afternoon sunshine. Her ears picked up the sounds to which they were acutely tuned: footfalls approaching. The sounds triggered an autonomic response --a flood of adreneline and her heart began to race. She dashed into the basement apartment and hid behind one of the hanging sheets that served as a room divider. The door leading to the courtyard creaked open and she heard more footfalls on the stairs.

“Lise...,” she heard her mother call.

Lise pressed her hand against her chest as her heart slowed. She emerged from behind the sheet and stopped short at the sight of a petite, older, white woman

with long grey hair. A tall white man accompanied her. Both were flanked by Grott, Rayla and one of Grott's acquaintences --guaranteeing the white strangers safe passage into the green enclave.

“You must be Lise,” the woman said.  
“I've heard much about you.”

Lise backed away.

“Lise...” Rayla said. “This is Ms Ramina. She's going to register you.”

“Yes, child,” Ramina replied. “Don't be afraid. I've already purchased you from your previous owner. I'm your owner, now. All we need to make it official is a

little sample for the DNA registry.”

The white man approached Lise and withdrew a lancet. “Hold still, Lise,” he said and took her hand. It only required an instant for him to obtain a drop of her blood. It took Lise several more instants before she registered the sensations.

The next day Ramina returned, again flanked by Grott and another neighborhood man. Lise followed them outside the Green Zone and into Ramina's car. A short drive took her to the breeder.

“This is my home,” Ramina said to Lise. “Now, it is your home, too, child. You're welcome here any time.”

Lise regarded the structure, a row house once affluent but now wanting maintenance. She saw novonid boys and a few girls of varying ages, watching her through the railing from a landing. Ramina led Lise into another room containing an overhead lamp and a long, low table. "Lie on the table, child," Ramina instructed.

Lise obeyed. The same tall man who had taken her blood stood with his back turned, assembling a sencil. This he affixed to her skin near her left clavicle with spirit gum. Next he brushed black ink into the openings and reached for an instrument. She felt a vibration as the instrument buzzed over her skin.

“Done,” the man said and removed the stencil. He daubed her with a cloth soaked in a solvent, and Lise felt a burning sensation.

She looked down and saw the mark: RAA005010. “That may be tender for a day or two,” Ramina said. “You are now an officially registered novonid.” Lise touched the mark and examined her finger.

“Don't worry, child. It will not rub off.”

“Thank you,” Lise replied.

“Thank you, Mam,” Ramina corrected.

“Thank you, Mam.”

Ramina smiled. “We will work out the details of your employment. I will let you know once it's finalized.” She gestured Lise into the vestibule near the front door.

“Am I free to go?” Lise asked and then added, “...Mam?”

“After one small detail, Lise. I'm sure you are aware of your defect.”

“That I'm a one-shot ... Mam. Yes.”

“A pregnancy certainly would kill you, and likely the child you'd carry, too. However, that defect is confined to your uterus. Other components of your reproductive system are fully



functional.” Ramina gestured toward one of the novonid children. “Have Fara come down.”

The boy bolted up the stairs. “Fara!” Lise heard him shout. “Ms Ramina wants you.”

A novonid youth descended the stairs, and Lise regarded the figure that approached. She was a female, but her features were a twelve-year-old boy's.

“This is Fara,” Ramina said. “She also has a defect.”

“Atrophied ovaries,” Lise replied. “I recognize the signs ... Mam.”

“You're a smart girl, Lise. How old are you?”

“Nineteen ... Mam.”

“Fara is twenty-one. She doesn't look it, does she?”

“No, Mam,” Lise replied.

“She looks more like a teenaged boy, doesn't she? Her womb is sound, though. In three day's time we will take you and Fara to a clinic where we will take one of your ovaries and give it to Fara.”

“Take an ovary? ... Mam?”

“Surgically remove one and implant it

into Fara's body --in the hopes she can become fertile and bear children.”

“My children ... Mam?”

“MY children, Lise. You, Fara and all her issue belong to me.”

“Yes, Mam. I meant ... the children I might have born.”

Ramina continued, “At the same time, we'll have the surgeon cut and tie your tubes --to sterilize you. That way you will not conceive ... and thus not put your life at risk ... living in that horrid, lawless Zone of yours. It's a wonder you're not dead already.”

Lise swallowed hard. “Three days, Mam?”

“It's a very good clinic, Lise. You've nothing to fear...”

Lise remembered the day of the surgery, too. She was naked on a cot in dim light, covered with a light drape. Curtains hanging from the ceiling surrounded her. She was chilly from being sunstarved -- she had neither sun nor water for a day. Her heart pounded and every noise made her jump. A door opened and an attendant carrying a tray stepped through the curtains. “Hello, Lise,” the attendand said. “How are you today?” Lise shook her head. “Are you afraid?” Lise nodded. “I would be too, if I knew I was

about to go under the knife.” She set the tray on the end of the bed and removed a towel from it. Lise saw a large syringe. She gasped and recoiled.

“Don't worry, dear,” the attendant said. “This is just some medicine --nothing that'll hurt you.” She showed Lise the syringe, filled with a cloudy fluid and the thin, flexible tube on its end. “See? There's no needle. It's soft and the end's blunt and rounded.” She began smearing the tube with a clear gel.

“What's it for?” Lise asked.

“This will help you relax and take away some of the fear.” She handed Lise the towel. “Lift up and slide this under your

hips... Good. Now ... roll onto your side, dear, and draw up your knees.”

Lise complied. The attendant drew back the drape covering her and Lise felt her fingers spreading her buttocks and probing her. “Just relax, dear. This won't hurt a bit.”

Lise sensed an indistinct coolness infiltrating deeply into her pelvic bowl, and the tube being withdrawn. The attendant replaced the drape. “That wasn't so bad, was it?”

Lise shook her head. “No...”

“Now, stay on your side while the medicine does its work. And resist any

urge to push it out. It won't help you unless it stays inside. Understand?"

"Yes ... mam..."

The attendant sat on the cot and took Lise's hand. "Is this your first time in a clinic?"

Lise bit her lip and nodded. "First ever."

"You're new to Ramina, aren't you. She brings all of hers in here for regular checkups. I've known Fara since ... well, since I started here ten years ago."

"Will it hurt?"

"You'll be in a deep sleep. You won't

feel ... or, remember a thing. You'll be a bit sore when you wake, but novonids heal quickly.”

“Could I die?”

“No surgery is risk-free, dear.” The attendant caressed the back of Lise's hand “This doctor is very good. He's a board-certified surgeon, licensed to practice on white patients; and he cares deeply for your kind. All the equipment and medicines are the same as he uses for his white patients. He hasn't lost one yet.” She regarded Lise. “You're starting to feel it, aren't you? I can tell by the look in your eyes.”

“When I close them I feel like I'm



falling,” Lise replied, “and I have a strange taste in the back of my throat.”

“You're tasting the drug.”

“...feel odd ... like ... floating...”

“Don't fight it, dear. If you should feel like closing your eyes and dozing off ... that's fine. The more relaxed you are the more peacefully you'll go under the anesthesia. I'm going to dim the lights now, and let you rest.” Lise heard her leave the room.

Lise lay on her side, in a fetal position. The cold from sun-hunger was fading. Her cheeks felt flushed and a warmth suffused her body. Her chest felt heavy

and it seemed an effort to inhale. She moistened her lips and they felt numb; and she was having difficulty keeping her eyes open. She closed them and saw vague images of the pomma savanna with blue skies, warm sunshine and green-skinned figures in the fields.

Her reverie was broken by the attendant's voice. At first Lise thought she was being addressed; then she realized she was not alone in the ward. The door closed.

“Fara,” Lise called. “Are you there?”

“Lise?” Fara replied from behind a curtain. “Is that you? Yes, I'm here.”

“Did she just give you medicine in your bottom?” Lise asked drowsily.

“Yes.”

“Are you scared?”

“Yes,” Fara replied, her voice quaking.

“In a little while ... you won't be...” Lise rolled onto her back. The room was spinning. She closed her eyes and was again strolling the pomma fields.

She was awakened by the harsh light of an overhead lamp; and she realized she was in another room. The attendant was wheeling a cart of equipment toward her. Another was attaching adhesive

electrodes to her chest and scalp.

An older white man wearing pale green scrubs pulled away the drape and palpitated her abdomen. He turned to the attendant and nodded.

Lise felt something cover her nose and mouth and heard a soft hiss. “Breath deeply, dear,” the attendant said. Lise drew in a long, deep breath and a cloying sweetness filled her sinuses. “That's it ... in

... out ... in ...”

She awoke to find herself lying in sunshine in the yard behind the clinic. She attempted to sit up but was stopped

by a sharp pain in her abdomen. Lise collapsed onto the cot. A glance around the yard revealed other novonid patients on gurneys and in wheelchairs soaking up sunshine. She saw Fara, still unconscious, lying on a cot nearby.

The attendant was holding her hand. “Would you like some water, dear?” she asked.

“Mmmph...” Lise moaned and nodded.

The attendant reached for a large tumbler and offered a drinking tube to Lise. “I’ll hold up your head, dear.” Lise sucked water from the tumbler until it was empty. “My goodness,” the attendant remarked.

“I'll get you more in a bit. I imagine you're feeling pretty poorly, with us sunstarving you and withholding fluids for a day.”

“Why did you?” Lise asked.

“So we could anesthetize you. We sunstarve you so you're not producing oxygen --to force you to breath it from the air. If you're making your own oxygen --you stop breathing when you fall asleep; then the anesthesia isn't deep enough for surgery.”

“And the water?”

“Sometimes the anesthesia causes you to vomit. It would be a danger if that

happened during a procedure.”

Lise nodded in comprehension. “Did I vomit?”

“No, dear --you did well. You'll be sore for a few days, but you'll be fine.”

“Yes, child,” Lise rolled her head to the other side and saw Ramina sitting near her. “Both you and Fara pulled through with flying colors. Take some time to convalesce and then we'll start you in your job. Did I tell you what you'll be doing?”

“Yes, Mam ... babysitting two white children,” Lise replied groggily.

“Very good, child. Now, you rest.”

“We'll put this towel over your eyes,” the attendant said, “to keep out the sun.”

“The sun's starting to feel good,” Lise replied weakly. She closed her eyes and felt the cloth placed across them...

Realization dawned on her. So that was why Ramina was so keen to register her, she thought. The job amounted to nothing --it was more like charity.

Novonid men were in demand for heavy work --valued for their strength and stamina. A novonid woman's true work was pushing out baby after baby. What Ramina had done was to take two



worthless females and combine them in such a way as to obtain one valuable, fertile breeder --and the other, still worthless as a woman, but healthy and certainly capable of drawing an income. A black car approached the corner and pulled to a stop. Its door opened. Lise stooped and slid into the front seat beside a petite white woman with long grey hair.

“Good morning, Lise.”

“Good morning, Ms Ramina.”

“Have you recovered from your ordeal?”

“Yes, mam.”

“Any unpleasant, lingering after effects?”

“No, mam. I'm feeling fine.”

“Then you must be ready for your first day at work.”

“I am ... mam.”

“Are you nervous?”

“Yes, mam --a little.”

“You've cared for little ones before, haven't you?”

“Yes, mam. I've cared for novonid children in my neighborhood. I've never

cared for white ones.”

“In my business, I care for dozens of young novonids. Children are children, Lise.” Ramina grasped and squeezed Lise's knee. “You'll do fine.” She pressed the control stick forward and the car moved into traffic, its alcohol-fueled turbine emitting a soft whine. “The house is in quadrant three, block fourteen-forty. Now that you're registered --would you rather be called Lise or Zero-One-Zero?”

“I'd rather be called Lise, mam.”

“Very good, Lise. You know that many whites will call you Zero-One-Zero.”

She looked down at the registration tattoo on her left shoulder. “Yes, mam. I'll try to be alert to it.”

The car passed a corner marked with a sign bearing a yellow circle, then another with signs bearing the circle and a blue square. “What are you looking at, Lise?”

“The bus stops, mam. I must know the route home.”

“Ah --very good. I knew you were a smart girl, Lise.”

“Thank you, mam.”

“You've already spoken with Megan.

Her twins are adorable --a boy and a girl. Megan is a single mom who's had her trouble with the law. She spent a year in a rehabilitation center. She's been granted a worker's permit --for factory work --even though she's of the merchant caste if I recall...”

“I thought...” Lise began.

“You mustn't interrupt, Lise.”

“I beg your pardon, mam.”

“Pardon granted. What were you going to say?”

“I thought once someone was rehabilitated ... that fact can't be used

against them.”

“You're right, Lise --their records are sealed. However, the labor office won't clear them for work involving trust until they've had an opportunity to ... prove themselves.”

Lise nodded. “I understand.”

“That is why Megan must work in a factory. She won't be handling any scrip in this job. The pay isn't what she could make working at her own caste level.”

“And, that's why she hired me. She can't afford a white nanny.”

Ramina looked down her nose at her. “I

should hope, Lise that you keep our conversation to yourself. If Megan knew you ... appreciated her situation as you seem to... Well, it would mortify her - and me, also.”

“I won't say a word, mam.”

“Good girl, Lise.”

Ramina piloted the vehicle though the city streets. “I'm taking a route nearby to my breeding, Lise.”

“I recognize the neighborhood, mam.”

“I want to make sure you know how it relates to the other sectors. Should you find yourself in need of shelter ... near

curfew, for example --you are always welcome there.”

“Thank you, mam.”

“Normally I would insist you live at the breeder. Since you can't conceive after your surgery, I see no reason why you can't continue living with your mother and stepfather --in the Zone.”

“I appreciate that, mam.”

“I take pride in my product. Every one of mine has a fully documented pedigree. I know some owners turn their females loose inside the Zone and let nature take its course. It saves having to pay breeding fees or purchasing sperm. I'd



never do that with mine. I don't permit them near the place. If one of them wandered in there for just half a day ... I'm sure she'd end up pregnant ... her issue sired by who knows what sort of hooligan...” Lise felt Ramina's eyes scanning her. “Tell me, Lise... are you sexually active?”

“Mam?”

“Are you sexually active?”

“No, mam.”

“Never?”

“No, mam.”

“It's all right if you are, and it's all right to admit it. I was at your age. Can you believe that?”

Lise looked at Ramina and attempted to roll back the years' toll in her mind. “Yes I can, mam.”

Ramina smiled. “Thank you, Lise. It's a natural thing ... natural for a female of either species.”

“I am not, mam. Why did you ask?”

“Curious ... curious about how things work inside the Zone. I've never known anyone from there...”

She piloted the car onto a boulevard.

“Since you're sterile, I'll treat you more like one of my males.”

“Minding a pair of white children IS female's work, mam.”

“I suppose it is, Lise. We're here.”

The car stopped along the curb of a block of single-story houses. Each was a concrete box with a glass front and steps leading to a stoop. The old woman parked her car, stepped out and Lise followed her.

“Can you remember this house?” Ramina asked.

“Of course, mam --number 505.”

“I keep forgetting what a smart girl you are, Lise. Go on, child --press the chime.”

## II

The door was opened by a woman whose age straddled the territory between youth and middle age. She had shoulder-length, light brown hair and wore what was typical for a Varadan white --a one sleeved blouse cut to expose her left shoulder and arm. Tattooed on her clavicle were three circles, the emblem of the merchant caste. Tattooed around them was a wreath of vines.

“Come in,” the woman said. “Nice to

see you again, Lise.”

“Thank you, Ms Megan,” Lise replied.  
“Nice to see you, too.”

Megan was a large woman with big bones and slightly overweight. Lise detected a coarseness about her --a toughness in her speech and in her movements.

“You're a life-saver, Lise,” Megan continued. “Come meet the twins.”  
Sitting on the floor watching a mediascreen were a boy and a girl, about two years away from starting school. “Klarissa ... Geddes...”

Their heads turned. “This is Lise. She'll

be taking care of you while Mommy's at work.”

Lise knelt onto one knee to bring herself to their level. “Hello Klarissa... Geddes...”

“Hi,” Klarissa said and turned back to the screen. Her brother's gaze swung away.

“Lise...” Megan said.

“Yes, mam?”

“I've prepared lunches for them. Please don't let them watch too much mediascreen --it rots their brains.”

“Yes, mam...”

Megan smacked her forehead. “I forgot to buy some of the special food you eat. I'm sorry --I'll have some for you tomorrow.”

“It's all right, mam,” Lise replied. “I feed once every three days. All I need is water. I'll be fine.”

“Drink all the water you want. If you take the twins outdoors, make sure you put sun hats on them. They're in the closet.”

“Yes, mam...”

“Oh, Ramina...” Megan handed Ramina

two blue cards. Lise's eyes popped -- they were brand-new fifty-unit scrips. "Your fee in advance."

"Thank you, Megan." Ramina held the cards to the light --none of the holes had been punched. She slipped them into her bag and turned to Lise. "Good luck, Lise..."

"Oh, Ms Ramina?"

"Yes, Lise?"

"May... Will..."

"What is it, Lise?"

"I thought we had agreed that I would be



keeping my wages ... mam.”

“Yes, child --after my expenses have been paid. If you recall, that was part of the agreement. The fees and tests to register you amounted to two thousand units; and the doctor's bills two thousand more. I can't afford that kind of charity. Once it's been paid back, you may keep your wages.”

“But --that's forty pay periods! It'll be into next year...”

Ramina's eyes widened. “Very good, child. You do your arithmetic well. You succeed in this assignment, and those forty periods will fly by.”

“I was hoping to have a little...”

“Now child --remember our agreement ... and, remember how rude it is to talk of wages.”

“Yes, mam. I'm sorry.”

Ramina embraced Lise and kissed the top of her bald head. “You'll be fine --I know you will.”

Lise stepped into the room where the twins sat, eyes glued to the mediascreen. “So ... Klarissa ... Geddes,” she said, “what do you want to do?”

“Watch,” said Geddes.

“Your mommy said not too much mediascreen.” The twins continued to watch. Lise stood between them and the device.

“Hey!” called Geddes.

“Let's do something else,” Lise said.

“We always watch 'Ask Jaks,’” Geddes protested.

“Is that what this is?”

“No --it's on next.”

“All right --we'll watch 'Ask Jaks' together --but you must promise me we'll do something else after. Okay?”

“Okay,” they said in unison.

Lise pulled up a chair and sat viewing the screen, as a seemingly endless string of advertisements were broadcast. “Stupid commercials,” Geddes muttered.

The words, A Service Announcement appeared on the screen, followed by a an image of a well-dressed, coiffed and heavily made-up young woman announcer. She addressed a frumpy middle-aged woman sitting on a chair. Beside her was an older novonid woman, about Lise's mother's age, dressed in the usual bandeau and shorts.

*Who is this,* asked the announcer.

*This is Natlee, the frumpy woman replied cheerfully, and she is one of many fine companions we have in our shelter waiting to be adopted. Nathlee is forty-seven standard years old and she came to us from a pomma farm. She would make a wonderful companion to an older couple wanting someone to help around the house.*

“What does adopt mean?” Klarissa asked.

“It means to take someone into your home or family,” Lise replied.

“Like we did with you?”

Lise suppressed a laugh. “No --I'm only

working for your mommy. Someone who's adopted would live in the house all the time.”

Klarissa's eyes popped. “Could we adopt you?”

“No --I already have an owner.”

*Natlee*, the announcer addressed the novonid woman, *What work did you do on the farm?*

*I worked in the big house, mam*, Natlee replied, looking at her feet.

“What's the big house?” Klarissa asked.

“It's the home of the farmowner and his

family.”

“Lise, did you live on a farm?”

“Yes, I was born on one. My mother and I left the farm when I was much smaller than you.”

“Oh...”

The service announcement ended with the announcer suggesting that viewers wishing to adopt a novonid companion should contact one of the Benevloent Shelter Society offices or facilities. Then, the program the twins wanted to watch began. It was a comedy about an affluent single dad with three children -- a teen, a pre-teen and a little girl about

the age of the twins. The family had a novonid valet named Jaks. Lise shook her head as she watched the situation develop.

“Lise?”

“Yes, Klarissa?”

“Why did they have Natlee on the mediascreen?”

“They want people to know that some novonids need homes. If some viewer liked Natlee, perhaps they would want to adopt her, or someone like her.”

“Doesn't Natlee already have an owner?”



“Yes --she's owned by the Benevolent Shelter Society. They want to give her to someone who is willing to care for her.”

“Shhh!” Geddes said.

“Why is Natlee at the shelter?” Klarissa asked.

“It could be for a number of reasons,” Lise replied. “Perhaps the farm was sold, or...”

“Quiet!” Geddes protested. “I can't hear the screen.”

“Geddes is right,” Lise whispered to Klarissa. “Let's be quiet and watch.”

As she watched Lise realized the humor in the program was not directed at Jaks. He was the smartest and cleverest member of the ensemble. This didn't mean much --none of the characters demonstrated the common sense of a rock --but the resulting comedy was easily within the grasp of a Varadan four-year-old.

The program paused for another advertisement. Klarissa climbed onto Lise's lap. Geddes sat on the floor, using Lise's shins as a backrest. Klarissa leaned back and her blond hair tickled Lise's lips. She felt the bones of the girl's small pelvis digging into her thigh, her mass resting against her shoulder and

she inhaled the scent of her hair. Lise brushed some aside and marveled at its softness. For an instant Lise felt envy for Megan, for having two beautiful children --and, remorse that she had the surgery. It was necessary she reminded herself. Lise banished these thoughts and longings. What sort of a life would a child of hers grow up to, anyway? Certainly not as fine a one as lay before Klarissa and Geddes.

“You know,” Lise said, “that the man playing Jaks isn't really a novonid. He's a white man made up to look like one.”

“How can you tell?” Klarissa asked.

“You can see the line where they put on

the cap to cover his hair. And --his eyes aren't orange.”

Klarissa turned her head and looked into Lise's face. “Why do you have orange eyes?”

“All novonids do.”

“Why?”

“Because --that's the way we are... Also, you can see his skin isn't really green. They used green paint. And --when he talks, you can see the inside of his mouth isn't brown like mine, but pink like yours.”

“Let's see...” Lise opened her mouth and

Klarissa opened hers.

“Why do you suppose they wouldn't use a novonid man to play Jaks?” Lise asked.

“I don't know,” Klarissa replied. “Do you?”

“No, I don't.”

But, Lise did know. There was a not-so-subtle erotic undercurrent in the relationship between Jaks and another character --a neighbor woman. A broad section of the Varadan community would be scandalized if Jaks weren't so obviously played by a made-up white man. Then, it dawned on her... The joke

was that every character except Jaks's employer and the woman's husband knew he really was a white man masquerading in green paint. He did so to be near the neighbor woman, right under the nose of her cuckolded mate.

“What shows do you like to watch?” Klarissa asked.

“I don't watch any.”

“Why not?”

“We don't have a mediascreen. We can't afford one. And --even if we did, where I live we don't have any electricity to run it.”

The little girl made a silent “Oh.”

“Okay --show's over. Geddes, please turn off the mediascreen.”

“Awww...”

“Please.”

Geddes stood and switched off the device. Klarissa hopped down and ran into her mother's bedroom. She returned with a portable mediascreen.

“You could use one like this,” Klarissa said and switched it on.

“You're right,” Lise said examining the device. “It doesn't need to be plugged in

--but the power cells must be plugged into the wall to recharge.”

“Oh...” Klarissa made a bit of a pout.

Lise knelt down and kissed the girl's head. “It was a very good suggestion, though. Now, put this back where your mommy won't miss it.”

Klarissa smiled and scooted into the bedroom.

“Are you two hungry?” Lise asked. Geddes nodded. Lise opened the door to a refrigerated cabinet and withdrew two plates covered with a polymer wrap. “Here. What do you drink?”



Geddes pointed to a pitcher filled with a clear, red fluid. Lise poured a bit into a tumbler and tasted a drop on her finger.

“This?” she asked.

“Yes!” Geddes and Klarissa exclaimed together.

“It's terribly sweet...” She poured two short glasses and set them on the table. Lise filled a tumbler with water and sat with them.

“Don't you want some?” Klarissa asked.

“No. It's too sweet for me. It'll make me sick.”

“Why?”

“Because sugar makes my stomach hurt. That drink has too much for me --and, probably too much for you, too.”

“Aren't you hungry?”

“No.” She sipped her water. “Not for food at least. I am feeling a little hungry for sunshine. I get most of my food from sunlight.”

“Why?”

“Because I'm a novonid and that's the way we are.” She touched her forefinger to Klarissa's nose.

“I'm going to call you Little Miss Why.”

“Why?”

“Because you ask so many questions. What do you say we finish our lunch and then walk to the playground. That way, you can play and I can get my sunshine. Okay?”

“Okay,” Klarissa replied.

The twins finished their lunches. Lise rinsed the plates and stacked them on the counter. She opened the closet and located a pair of sun bonnets. “Here -- put these on.”

“I don't want to,” Geddes protested.

“They look stupid.”

“Your mommy doesn't want you getting too much sun --you'll burn.”

Klarissa slipped into the bonnet. Geddes crossed his arms. His sister whispered into his ear and Geddes pulled the bonnet onto his head and over his ears.

Lise led them toward the front door and stopped short. “I don't know how to lock the door,” she said. “We can't go out.”

Klarissa giggled and pulled a passcard from the inside door lock. Lise took the card and tested it in both the inside and outside locks. After convincing herself the card worked, she slipped it into a

pocket in her shorts and gestured the twins outside.

“Where are we going?” Klarissa asked.

“To the park.”

“What park?”

“It's just down this block. I saw it from the car when I was coming here. Here -- hold my hand. You, too Geddes.”

Lise walked toward the corner with Klarissa on her left and Geddes on her right.

“How far is it?” Klarissa asked.

“Not far.”

They reached the corner and waited for traffic to clear. A streetcar whizzed by, with four novonids standing on a narrow platform attached to the rear of the bus.

“Why do they ride on the back?” Klarissa asked.

“Because,” Lise replied, “novonids don't have much money, but we do need to go from place to place. The city lets us ride for free, but we can't ride inside the bus.”

“Why?”

“It wouldn't be fair to the paying white

passengers, would it?”

“I guess not...”

“So, they put the platform on the back of the bus and we ride there.”

“Lise...”

“Yes, Klarissa?”

“Why don't you have money?”

Lise smiled. “That's a complicated question... Actually, your question is simple but the answer is complicated...” Traffic cleared. “Hold my hands tight, gang --let's get across before the traffic starts up again.”

They sprinted across the street and Lise led them down a boulevard. The Varadan mid-day sun fell on her head, neck and shoulders. It was beginning to do its work, activating the chlorophyll in her skin and making sugars from carbon dioxide and water. It felt good --warm, satisfying, invigorating and relaxing at the same time. A full day in the sun would fill her of sunshine --with enough calories to last two or three days in the shade.

They reached the park. Klarissa and Geddes let go of her hands and sprinted toward a swing set.

“Lise!” Klarissa yelled. “Come push us.”



Lise stood between two swings and began pushing them. “Higher!” Klarissa yelled.

“That's plenty high.”

“Look! A sandbox!” Klarissa dragged her feet, tumbled out of the swing and ran. Geddes followed her.

Lise sat on a bench near the sandbox, stretched out her long legs, leaned back and lifted her face to the sun. She watched the twins play and saw others wandering through the park. Hers was the only green face, she realized, and imagined what the other adults must be thinking. How desperate must a parent

be to employ a novonid as a nanny?

She was beginning to feel full of sunlight. Lise stood and approached the children. “Maybe we should head home now,” she said.

“I don't want to,” Geddes retorted.

“We want to be home when your mommy comes from work.”

“Why?” asked Klarissa.

“So she won't worry.”

Geddes bolted from the sandbox and headed for a hedge of native shrubs. “Geddes!” Lise called.

“Come on, Klarissa --let's see if we can find him.”

Lise walked to the spot where Geddes was hiding and pretended not to see him. “Where is he, Klarissa?” Klarissa giggled and soon Geddes was giggling, too. “There you are. Come on --let's go.”

They headed home. Geddes began to lag behind. “I'm tired,” he whined and sat on the sidewalk.

“I'll carry you,” Lise said and picked him up.

“Carry me, too!” Klarissa shouted. Lise stooped, picked her up and strode down the sidewalk with each child slung over

a shoulder.

Lise heard the front door open and Megan walked in. “How did it go?”

“They're both napping, mam,” Lise whispered. “They're wonderful children. I love them both. Shall I come tomorrow, same time?”

“A bit earlier if you could.”

“Certainly, Ms Megan.”

“Oh, Lise?”

“Yes, mam?”

“Can we dispense with the Ms and

mam? You can call me Megan.”

“Yes, m... Ms... Yes, Megan.” Lise smiled. “I'll see you tomorrow.”

Lise headed to the corner and waited at the bus stop. The bus routes were numbered and color coded. She knew which buses she needed to ride --a blue number eight, then transfer to a yellow number fourteen. One of the streetcars approached, marked with a blue circle with the number 8. She sprinted toward the rear of the bus, climbed onto the platform and held onto the overhead rail as it pulled into traffic.

She watched the foot traffic on the sidewalks as the bus worked its route,

peering around the side at street and bus stop signs looking for her transfer point. This part of town was one where novonids weren't seen very frequently. She wondered how Megan's neighbors would react upon learning of her new nanny.

The bus reached a transfer point in Vyonna's business district. She hopped off the platform, crossed the street and waited for another bus to carry her to a sector within walking distance to the Green Zone. Lise descended the stairs to the basement apartment. She spotted Tagg's sketch lying on the bench, picked it up and examined it; then rolled it into a cylinder. Her eyes scanned the joists

above for a suitable hiding place. Standing on the bench, she tucked it out of sight. She climbed to the courtyard and tended her garden of native plants, picking off spent blossoms and carrying water from the standpipe. The sun was still high in the afternoon sky and she stood to intercept the strongest rays.

Other novonid residents began to filter in from their jobs around the city. Some loitered in the courtyard and others on the streets outside. For many whose jobs were indoors, between quitting-time and dusk constituted their principal sunlight meal of the day.

Rayla and Grott came into the courtyard. Rayla lay flat on the concrete plaza.

Grott headed below into the basement. Lise's eyes met her mother's. "How did it go?" Rayla asked. Lise nodded. "Well. Very well. They're two delightful children."

"Good. How much scrip did you bring home?"

"None. Ramina says I must pay off her fees and expenses, first."

"And here we are, thinking she was different." She heard her stepfather's voice coming from the stairs leading below.

"She told me my registration and medical bills amount to four thousand



units,” Lise protested.

“They all say that,” Grott replied. “Our owner has been telling us for years we still owe him this or that. We'll never see any of our wages. And --we can't quit because then he'd call us renegade and send bounty hunters after us.”

“We do owe her for Lise's registration,” Rayla said. “I for one am happy that's done. I'd lie awake worrying that some bounty hunter might spot her.”

“Ramina says she'll be paid after forty pay periods,” Lise added. “We won't owe her anything after that.”

“Besides,” Rayla noted, “she has her

fertile breeder, now. We can argue whether or not transplanting Lise's ovary was our responsibility or hers. Remember --a male is worth one but a fertile female is worth ten.”

“It was the agreement,” Lise replied.

“That will be the test, won't it?” Grott said. “We'll see how she treats Lise after forty pay periods are up.”

### III

“Lise! Wake up.” Rayla shook her.

“Mmmmmph...”

“Grott and I are going to work. You said

you needed to be up earlier.”

“Yes ... and I must ride the streetcars today.” She sat cross-legged on the mat and rubbed her eyes. Lise took a towel out to the courtyard. She scanned the area for Tagg and didn't see him. She began her bathing.

She rode the streetcar to Megan's home, changing lines in the center city. The busses were crowded and traffic was slowed by the commuting rush. She found house number 505, climbed to the door and pressed the chime.

Megan cracked open the door, smiled and let her in. “Klarissa and Geddes are finishing breakfast,”

she said. “Thank you for coming early... Lise --last night after you left Klarissa had a hundred and one questions about adopting novonids. I was wondering if you knew what prompted it.”

“She saw a BSS announcement on the mediascreen,” Lise replied. “Klarissa is a bright girl who thinks about things.”

“She certainly always is thinking.”

“I know this topic could be awkward, especially since I don't know your circumstances. I'm grateful for the work you've given me. I'm aware that females are often adopted out of the shelters to serve as caregivers, and...” Megan closed her eyes and shook her head.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“Not at all, Lise. I can see you think about things, too.” Megan lowered her voice. “I would never own one of you because I don't believe in it.”

“Someone has to own us. I'd rather it be a kindly person like yourself than some of the owners.”

“I never looked at it that way. I agreed to hire you because I'm comfortable with how Ramina runs her end of it. The city gives me a stipend toward the twins' day care. I prefer the individual attention you can give them, rather than sending them to a center. I'm telling you this, Lise, in case one of them starts asking you

awkward questions.”

“I understand. Thank you, Megan.”

“Now --I must be on my way.”

“Before you go... Yesterday the twins convinced me you permit them to watch a program on the mediascreen ... 'Ask Jaks.'”

“That horrid thing? I hope you didn't let them.”

“I'm afraid I did. I watched it with them and realized it probably wasn't ... appropriate.”

“I suppose once won't injure them too

badly. I hate that program. I wonder why they play it at a time when little ones are at home.”

“I'll make sure they don't watch it today. Have a good day, M...Megan.”

The twins' mother headed out the door.

Lise filled a glass with water and sat with Klarissa and Geddes at the kitchen table. Klarissa regarded her. “Don't you eat anything?”

“Not much,” Lise replied. “We talked about this yesterday. I get my food from the sun.”

“You don't eat at all?”

“We must eat for protein and minerals,” Lise replied, “once every two or three days. I do need to drink lots of water.”

“Do you go to the bathroom?” Klarissa asked. Geddes giggled.

“Yes.”

“Do you pee or poo?”

“I do both --though I don't poo very often.” Geddes giggled again. “What's funny, Geddes?”

“That you poo.”

“Why is it funnier for me than you?”



“Because you're different,” Klarissa interjected.

“Yes, I am --but I'm also like you.” She took Klarissa's hand and pressed it against her wrist. “I have a pulse like you do.”

“Let me feel,” Geddes said. Klarissa felt her own wrist.

Klarissa rubbed her finger along Lise's forearm and then examined her fingertips. “It doesn't rub off,”

Lise said.

“Oh! It's time for 'Ask Jaks,’” Klarissa said.

“You're not going to watch it,” Lise replied. “Your mommy gave me explicit orders. It's not an appropriate show for children your age. I don't think it's appropriate for anyone.” She turned to Geddes.

“You lied to me yesterday when you said you always watched it --didn't you?” Geddes sat stone-faced.

“Geddes --and, Klarissa, too --we can't have lying. Some day it may be very important that I believe something you say. I need to know I can trust you. I won't lie to you. Don't lie to me.”

Klarissa looked at the floor. Geddes sat, closed his eyes and began to breath

deeply and deliberately. He reached into himself for something and found it. His lip began to quiver and tears began to flow. "I want to watch Jaks!" he exclaimed, sobbing. "Please, let me watch Jaks."

"This isn't going to work, Geddes," Lise said. "You might as well save your effort."

"I WANNA WATCH JAKS!" Geddes shrieked. He fell on the floor and began pounding his fists and kicking.

"Come on, Klarissa," Lise said. "Let's go into the bedroom and I'll read you a story or something."

“YOU can read?”

“Of course I can. Come on...”

Klarissa accompanied Lise into the bedroom she shared with Geddes. Geddes followed them, wailing, and threw himself onto the floor.

Lise picked up the squirming boy, carried him to the living room and set him on the floor. “You can carry on all you want, but you're NOT going to disrupt our story.”

Geddes doubled and redoubled the volume of his wailing. “Okay, Klarissa - -what shall we read?”

The door chime sounded. “Just a minute...”

Lise opened the door to a middle-aged white woman. The woman looked her up, down and up again. “Hello --my name is Lise. Megan hired me to watch her twins.”

“What is the commotion?”

“Geddes is throwing a tantrum because I won't let him watch 'Ask Jaks.'”

“Is that all it is? It sounded like someone was being flayed...”

“I'm letting him wear himself out.”

The woman lowered her voice. "I've baby-sat for Megan. Geddes is a strong-willed boy. I think you're handling it the right way."

"Sorry to have disturbed you."

Lise joined Klarissa in her bedroom and began reading a story from an electronic book device. Geddes's wailing tapered off to silence. Lise looked into the living room and saw him, lying asleep in a puddle of tears and drool. She picked Geddes up and placed him on his bed. Lise let Geddes nap. He roused around lunch time, walked into the kitchen and sat at the table, avoiding eye contact.

"Here's your lunch, Geddes," Lise said.

The boy turned his head away. “Geddes --let's get something straight. I don't care if you like me or hate me. Well --I DO care --I'd rather you like me. I like you -- I think you are a darling little boy. But -- if you hate me ... well, I can live with that. You must understand, when I'm watching you...” She tapped her chest. “I'm the one in charge, here. I will not take direction from a child. Do you understand me?”

Geddes turned his face toward Lise and stuck out his tongue. Lise stuck hers out in reply. Geddes suppressed a giggle. “Good,” Lise said. “Now, we have that straight.”

Lise heard the front door open. Megan

walked in. “Megan!” Lise exclaimed. “Is something wrong?”

“We had a problem at the factory where I work. They let every one go home early. If you'd like, you can have the afternoon off.”

“You're sure?”

“Yes --I won't dock you for the time.”

Lise lowered her voice. “You're SURE everything's all right?”

“Yes, Lise.” Megan grasped Lise's hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “It's sweet of you to be concerned. A pipe broke and flooded the place. It'll probably be



on the news tonight. They should have everything back to normal by morning. Since I'm getting the afternoon off with pay, so should you.”

“Thank you. I'll say good bye to the twins and see you in the morning.”

Lise stood on the platform at the rear of the bus heading toward the Green Zone. The route took her through sector ten. She saw the park and a green figure sitting on a bench holding a pad. The bus pulled to a stop. She hopped off the platform and walked through the park to where Tagg sat. He was sketching a portrait of a little boy, handed it to a woman and received in return a scrip card. He held it to the light, then slipped

it into his pocket.

“Hi, Tagg.”

He jumped. “Lise! What are you doing here? You weren't fired on your second day, were you?”

“No --I have the afternoon off. I can't believe what I just saw. She gave you scrip for that sketch.”

“Of course she did.” He pulled the card from his pocket. Lise snatched it and looked at the punches.

“There are two and a quarter units left on this.”

He reached into another pocket. "Here's what I have for today." He handed her a stack of scrip cards.

Lise looked through them. Most of them were completely used except for one or two punches -pocket change. She began adding them up in her head. "Tagg --you have nine and a half units here."

"Not bad for half a day's work. I tell you, Lise --I have more scrip than I ever had when I was working."

"If you sketch me --do you really think you can sell it?"

"I do. I can probably get four or five units for it."

“Four or five units?”

“I'll give you half I make of any sketches of you that I can sell.”

“What are we waiting for? Let's go sketch.”

Tagg picked up his pad and tucked it under his arm. Together they headed to the bus stop, climbed onto the back of one and rode to a stop near the Zone.

“Come on,” Lise said and broke into a sprint. Tagg ran after her. They reached his apartment building. She followed him up the stairs to the top floor. He turned the knob on a door, cracked it open and poked his head inside.

“They're all gone --all at their jobs,” he said. He rolled back a mattress on the floor and scooped up another handful of scrip cards. “Look at this, Lise.”

She took the cards and began totaling them. “Seventeen units! Add to that the nine and a half today... Tagg --I have never seen so much scrip.”

“Let me sketch you. We'll make us rich.”

“What do I do?” Lise asked.

“Sit on that window-sill,” Tagg said. “Put your legs out ... now, bend your knee. No --the other one. Lean forward and hug your shin...”

Lise giggled. “Like this? This is uncomfortable.”

“I'm fast,” Tagg replied. “It's one reason the whites like to watch me draw.” He uncapped his marking pen and began sketching. “Almost done --there!”

“Let's see...” Lise jumped down from the sill and looked at his work. “That's nice, Tagg.”

He looked up. “I don't know if I can sell this one. I know I could if you were nude.”

“Nude! No way, Tagg.”

“It's for art,” he protested. “Pictures of

nude girls always sell.”

“Some art... Do you really think so?”

“I know so. Pose again and I'll make you nude in the sketch. You don't have to take your clothes off.”

Lise climbed back onto the window-sill. Tagg began sketching.

“...There!” He showed her the drawing.

“That's not how I look,” she said. “It's not how any female looks.”

“It's not?” He tilted the sketch from side to side.

“No, it's not. Tagg --a woman's breast hangs like a bag of water on her chest. They don't ... stick out like that. Mine don't, at least. And you got ... other things wrong, too.”

“I've never seen a nude female.” He handed her the stylus. “Show me what it's supposed to look like.”

Lise made a couple of marks on the pad. “I can't,” she said handing the stylus back to Tagg. “I've never been any good at drawing.”

He tore the sketch in half. “I can't sell that one. Lise --it would be a big help if you posed nude for me.”



“No, Tagg. I'm not taking my clothes off. Why does it have to be a nude?”

“Because I know it'll sell. Lise --the most I've ever gotten for a picture has been two and a half units. I KNOW I could get five for a nude of you. You're so pretty... I'm sure I could.”

“Five units, Tagg?”

“Well ... four units easily. Come on, Lise... No one will know the picture's of you. They're whites who buy them -- whites who never set foot in the Zone.”

“I don't know, Tagg...”

“My roommates won't be home for a

while yet. We'll have privacy.”

She looked at him for a long moment.  
“Oh, all right... But --if I take my clothes off, so do you.”

“Why?”

“Fair's fair, don't you think? I'm not going to sit naked unless you do, too.”

He looked at her for another long moment. “All right --fair's fair.”

Lise slipped off her sandals, removed the bandeau and slid down her shorts. Tag removed his shorts and sat on the bench.

“How should I pose?” she asked.

“Same way.”

Lise sat on the window-sill again and Tagg began sketching.

“It's taking longer this time,” she said.

“I want to get it right... I see what you mean about your breasts. I had them all wrong... You are beautiful, Lise.” He sketched more. “What are those scars on your stomach?”

She looked down at the incisions. “That's where I had my tubes tied.”

“What does that mean?”

“So I can't get pregnant. You know I'm a oneshot and giving birth would kill me...”

“Yes --I've heard that. I've also heard your stepfather promised to kill any man who made you pregnant.”

“Now, I can't get pregnant. It was part of the deal that got me registered.” She glanced out the window. “I wonder if anyone down there can see me. I hope not. Hurry up.”

“Almost done. There.”

Lise hopped down and looked at it. “Oh, Tagg!” she gasped. “I don't know...”

“Don't know about what?”

“Oh, it's very good. I don't know if I like the idea of me hanging on someone's wall --a naked me.”

“Like I said, it's for art. I'll tell you what --I'll take both sketches with me to the park tomorrow. We'll see which one sells. I have to sign it...” He made a moniker of a T inside a circle. “There...” He held up the nude. “If this sells, I'll give you all the scrip.”

“Only half,” she replied. “Fair's fair.” She glanced at him. Her eyes stopped, staring at his firmly aroused manhood. Her jaw dropped. “TAGG!”

He covered himself with the sketchpad. "I didn't want you to notice. Don't tell me you've never seen one before."

"Never one in that state."

"Oh, Lise... I love you, Lise. I've loved you ever since we were youths playing in the courtyard. You're the most beautiful girl..." He approached her, hugged her and began kissing her face, neck and shoulders. "I love you so much."

"Tagg... Don't."

"I can't help myself." He took her hand and drew her to him. "I've wanted you, but I know what Grott said. Now you

can't get pregnant...”

“Please, Tagg ... no.” She folded her arms tightly across her breasts.

“Oh, Lise...” He pulled her onto his lap and kissed her. She felt his hand on her thigh.

“TAGG! I said NO!”

He stopped, released her and she stood. Tagg picked up the clothes she had stacked on the floor and handed them to her, looking away. He turned his back to her, grabbed his shorts and began to pull them on.

“Wait, Tagg...” He turned and she

looked into his orange eyes. “I changed my mind. It's a female's prerogative, isn't it?”

“You want to?”

“Yes, I do.” She unfastened his shorts, pulled them off him and began kissing his abdomen and hips. Tagg scooped her up and carried her to his mattress. They lay beside each other, caressing each other's skin. He kissed her lips and nuzzled her neck; then covered her breasts with kisses and caresses.

“Tagg... This is my first time.”

“Mine, too. There aren't many females here in the Zone ... not many who'd want



me, at least. But, I know what to do.”

“How do you know?”

“The other men in this apartment talk about it. I've done it dozens of times in my dreams --with you, Lise. What made you change your mind?”

“It's for me to know,” she replied.

“Please tell me.”

“Stop pressing me, Tagg --before I change it back.” Tagg resumed kissing her. He groped her breast. “Not so hard... TAGG!”

Lise grabbed a handful of his flesh and

squeezed. "Ouch!" he exclaimed. "That hurt."

"That's what you've been doing. Think how it feels to me." She kissed his cheek. "Now, don't pout..."

She ran her hand along his smooth chest. "Like this ... gentle. Doesn't that feel better?"

"Yes..."

"Remember --girls like it soft. And, you don't have to smash your face against mine when you kiss me." She brought her face to his and kissed his lips. Then she kissed him again, parted her lips and touched his with the tip of her tongue.

Tagg responded in kind and they took turns each exploring the other's mouth. "Isn't that better?"

"I'll say..."

"And, slow down a little..."

"I thought you said this was your first time..." Tagg began covering her body with soft kisses. He smoothed his hand along her skin. "Lise... you look beautiful ... you smell beautiful ... you taste beautiful..." He explored the shape of her breast with his fingertips.

"That feels good, Tagg... But, not too much at once." She ran her fingers down his arm, tracing the outlines of his

muscles. “That's better ... much better... Mmm... Both hands like that...” Her heart was racing. She closed her eyes as her body relaxed, and rolled her head to the side. A warm, throbbing sensation grew deep in her pelvis.

Tagg eased her onto her back and knelt between her thighs. He bit his lip. Lise closed her eyes. She felt a sting as he lay atop her. “Ahh!” she exclaimed.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes. Don't stop.”

Tagg eased his full weight onto her. “Does it still hurt?”

“No ... not much. It feels good. Do your thing, Tagg.” He closed his eyes and bit harder on his lip.

“Go ahead, Tagg.” She wrapped her legs around his, caressed his calves with hers and grasped his buttocks.

“I'm ... trying ... not to...”

“Not to what?”

Tagg arched his back. “OH!” he gasped through wide-open mouth. “Oh, Lise!” He pressed his hips against hers and she felt the force of his ejaculation. “Oh!” he grunted and looked into her face. “That. That ... was what I was trying not to do.”

“Isn't ... that ... the whole point?”

“Yes... But... The man's supposed to last a while. One of my roommates boasts how long he can ... I hardly lasted an instant. I'm sorry, Lise.”

“It's all right, Tagg. You can't trust what men say. They exaggerate.”

“Oh Lise, I'm so sorry. I wanted it to be perfect for you.”

“Tagg --was the first sketch you drew perfect?”

“...no... I haven't done a perfect one yet.”

“You've done some that are very good --

even if your first one wasn't. Next time, maybe you won't be so ... eager."

"Next time? There'll be a next time?"

"I love you, too Tagg. I've wanted this, too." She slipped her arms around his shoulders and kissed him. "Of course there'll be a next time."

Tagg lifted himself off her. "Let me see if I have a towel or something ... see how bad you're bleeding." He approached her with a cloth and dabbed her. "Not bad... Look."

Lise felt herself and examined her finger. "I'll live. I should get home before quitting time and your roommates start

coming back.”

She slipped into her clothes, took Tagg's hand and the descended flights of stairs to the ground level.

“You have to tell me,” Tagg said. “What made you change your mind?”

“Tagg... If you ask me again... There won't be another time.”

“Okay... Okay.” They reached the courtyard. Tagg kissed her. “I'll take your sketch to the park tomorrow.” He kissed her again. “I love you, Lise.”

Lise trotted down the steps into her basement home. It was too early for



Grott and Rayla to be home. She stripped off her shorts and examined them with a scowl. From a crate holding her personal belongings she withdrew an old top and shorts and slipped into them. She carried her soiled costume to the courtyard, where she placed the garments into a bucket and filled it from the standpipe. After a thorough rinsing she wrung out the water and spread them on the low concrete wall to dry in the sun. The water in the bucket she dumped onto the plants in her garden; then she spent the rest of the afternoon weeding and pruning them.

Rayla stepped through the gate and Lise spotted her. "Good afternoon, Mother.

Where's Grott?"

"He'll be along." Rayla lay on her back on the concrete bench. "I am so sunstarved today. Grott's lucky. He gets to work outdoors." She stretched. "The sun feels good. We need to feed tonight. Go see if we have enough food."

Lise ducked into the basement. "We have two cans," she called from the stairs.

"Good... I don't feel like going out to get some. I need all my strength for my rounds tonight."

"Why do you do that, Mother?"

“We've all agreed. There are so many more males here than females. When the men aren't satisfied -they become frustrated. Frustration leads to resentment ... resentment leads to rage ... rage leads to violence.”

“Do you enjoy it?”

Rayla lifted herself onto her elbows. “Such a question.” She lay back down. “No --I block it out. I only enjoy it with Grott. I let myself enjoy it with him. He understands --not that he likes the situation very much, but he understands.”

“All the men in the Zone share all the women?”

“That's right.”

“Maybe I should start making rounds, then. It's safe for me now --I can't get pregnant.”

“There will be time for that, Lise. No need for you to rush into it.”

## IV

Dusk had fallen. Rayla ignited lanterns made from empty cans, fueled by discarded grease from fry shops near the Zone. She worked a hand can opener on the remaining two cans of special novonid diet. Opened, she divided their contents between three bowls and handed one each to Grott and Lise.

“Once I've paid Ramina,” Lise said, “we'll have one hundred units per pay period.”

“Don't count your scrip until you have it in your hand,” Grott admonished. She scooped a spoonful of the pink mineral-and-protein nutrient paste. “I'll want to make some changes. For starters, we can buy fresh food instead of feeding on discards.”

“This food is perfectly edible,” Rayla replied.

“Yes --but, wouldn't it be nice to have some fresh food --and, some variety like the whites have to feed their novonid servants.”

“What good is variety?” Grott asked.  
“Food is food.”

“Maybe we could buy some real mattresses from the second-hand shops... get some building materials and make real rooms down here.” She scooped another spoonful. “You work on construction, Father. You'd know how to divide this space into rooms.”

“I've watched the tradesmen enough,” Grott replied.

“How did your day go?” Rayla asked.

“Very well.” Lise giggled. “One of the twins threw a tantrum because I wouldn't let him watch a mediascreen show. He

kicked and hollered so much that one of the neighbors came to check.”

“Oh? What did this neighbor say?”

“Only that she thought I was dealing with it in the right way.”

“I wonder what she'll say to the other neighbors,” Grott mused.

“Be careful, Lise,” Rayla added.

“I know... Once I'm bringing real money into this family, I want something else. I want Tagg to move in.”

“Tagg?” Grott looked up, holding his spoon in mid-air. “Why Tagg?”

“I want to pair with him --they way you and Mother are paired.”

“With Tagg? That scrawny, stunted, weak, little runt? He can't even hold down a job.”

“Tagg is a very good artist. He sells his drawings in the park over in sector ten.” Lise stood on the bench and retrieved the portrait sketch. “See?”

Rayla held the drawing to the lantern. “When did he draw this?”

“The other day. He sits in the park and sketches and sells them to the whites.”

“He's begging,” Grott retorted. “The



constables will make short work of this activity.”

“No, he's not. He's selling them to the whites, and drawing portraits. He even has sold some to the constable that patrols the park.”

“Why would you want to pair with him?” Rayla asked.

“We love each other. Besides --if he doesn't come live here, the two of us can find a place of our own.”

“What makes you think you can do that?”

“Because --once a male and a female pair --they can have a place of their

own. It's one of the rules of the Zone.”

“There's only one rule in the Zone,” Grott replied. “Might makes right”

“Grott's right, Lise. The only reason we can keep this place is because there's no one willing to call him out. They know he's stronger than any of them. It's why he's an elder.”

“What about another rule?” Lise asked. “The one with the most money gets his way. Right now Tagg has more scrip than I've ever seen you two hold -- combined!”

“Scrip can be taken away from you,” Grott replied. “There's no way Tagg

could hold onto a place of his own -- unless it's a closet or a polyboard carton somewhere no one else wants. Face the reality of that, Lise.”

“And, how do you know you love him?” Lise's mother asked.

“Have you been sleeping with him?” Grott asked.

“...No. We haven't slept together.”

Rayla's eyes narrowed. “Have you had sex with him?” Lise looked at her feet. “Have you?”

Lise could feel their eyes boring into her. “...Yes... Once.”

“When?”

“This afternoon.”

“Did he force himself on you?” Grott asked. “If he did I’ll teach that runt a lesson...”

“No, he did not,” Lise retorted.

“Of course he didn’t,” Grott replied. “He doesn’t have enough strength to force himself onto a white woman, much less a green one.”

“Now Grott,” Rayla admonished. She looked at her daughter. “Lise! You were having sex with Tagg when you were supposed to be at your job?”

“NO! Meg... Ms Megan came home early. She said there was a flood in her factory --it was on the news.”

Rayla nodded. “I do recall hearing of a problem in Quadrant Three. Go on.”

“She gave me the afternoon off. On the ride home I spotted Tagg in the park. We went to his apartment and he drew more sketches of me...”

“And then you had sex.”

“Yes. We both wanted it, Mother.”

“I knew it!” Grott said. “I knew if we agreed to that surgery it was a matter of days before she'd turn into a slut.”

“I'm NOT a slut. I don't go out, night after night and service dozens of men.”

Grott approached her, lifted his hand and stopped. “You had better get out of my sight. Now!”

Lise set down her half-finished bowl of pink paste and bolted up the stairs to the courtyard. She sat on the concrete bench and buried her face in her hands.

She felt a hand on her shoulder. “Lise...”

“Oh, Mother --I'm so sorry. It just blurted out. I didn't mean it.”

Rayla held her. “I know you didn't. All this is so strange to me. Growing up on

the pomma farm --I never had to worry about ... about having a family or a man in my life. The overseers took care of that. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to tell you to do.”

“Do YOU think Tagg is so bad?”

“He wouldn't be my choice. Why is he yours? You're a pretty girl, Lise. If you're determined to pair with someone --you can have your pick of men.”

“I picked Tagg. He really cares for me. I know we could make a family. I know there are orphans here in the Zone who need a home. We'd take one in...”

“It's not how it works for us --not for our

kind.”

“It is more and more so these days. More and more brokers are turning us loose here in the Zone -to our own devices.”

Rayla nodded. “And, to our own pairings. How do you know Tagg really cares for you?”

“This afternoon... He started to force himself on me...”

“You had better tell me the whole story,” Rayla interrupted, “from the beginning.”

“We went over to his apartment --the



one he shares with those other men. Of course they were all at their jobs so we had the place to ourselves. Tagg wanted to sketch me, so I posed for him ... nude."

"You took your clothes off in front of him? Lise! --what did you THINK would happen?"

"I wasn't thinking about it. He did sketches ... good sketches. Then --he was ... you know ... big..."

"I think I can picture it --without a sketch."

"He started kissing me and ... and touching me..."

“It is a good thing Grott's not hearing this. He'd go out and fix Tagg so he couldn't molest another woman for the rest of his life.”

“Tagg didn't molest me. He started to. Then, I told him to stop and he stopped.”

“You told him to stop and he stopped?”

“Yes. He stopped and looked away and handed me my clothes. Right then, I knew how much he cared for me --he cared more for ME than for himself ... and I knew how much I cared for him.”

Rayla sat beside her daughter and held her hand. “You know... Grott was the same way. He watched out for me ...

protected me. Not exactly the same, but I could see him doing something like that. I'll tell you, THAT in a man can make up for a lack of upper-body strength.”

“I told him I changed my mind. And then we...” She suppressed a giggle. “He was terribly bad at it.”

“Mmm... Most men are, at first. The good ones are, at least. It's the ones that know what they're doing you need to question. Where, exactly did they learn it?”

Lise looked at the pavement. “I had to show him...”

“I had to show Grott. At least he's a

good learner. I suspect Tagg's a good learner, too.”

“So ... you don't mind Tagg?”

“Lise... You're the one who'll have to live with him. Why don't we agree to have this discussion again after you've paid Ramina... Maybe the situation will have changed.”

“Maybe Father will get used to the idea.”

“I don't know about that...” She kissed the top of Lise's head. “Come on --let's go do rounds together.”

“Tonight? I thought you said there was

plenty of time.”

“There's no time like now. Wait here...”

Rayla headed down the stairs and returned with a can filled with the grease she used in the lamps.

“Here --use some of this.” Lise turned up her lip. “It makes it easier --trust me. Then, we'll do rounds and get it over with.”

“What will Father think?”

“What will Tagg think is the bigger question.”

Lise walked with Rayla toward the

courtyard. “How many did you do?”  
Rayla asked.

“Eight --I think.”

“I did twelve.”

“They were nice to me. They were all  
very sweet.”

“They are nice men in this building,”  
Rayla replied. “How do you feel?”

“Sore.”

“You'll toughen up. We'll wash once we  
get back to the house. Grott hates it when  
I come in smelling of other men.”

“I stink of them,” Lise replied. “I think I can taste them.”

“So, you notice it, too... It wasn't like this on the pomma farm ... somewhat like this, maybe. There were ten males to every female. The overseers would assign us our partner for the night. The men wore sheaths to collect the sperm for the breeders. We had a freezing device in our rooms for that purpose. At least you felt clean in the morning ... the women were inseminated artificially ... it's how you were conceived. I don't even know who your father was.”

“Did you meet Grott on the farm?”

“No. We met after I was sold off the

farm --with you a babe in my arms. You and I are both oneshots. They knew something was terribly wrong when I went into labor. I nearly died giving birth to you ... I would've --and you would've, too --if the farm's surgeon hadn't intervened. My womb is in tatters. I can never conceive again. As it was, it took me a long time to recover my strength. Then, I ... we ... you and I were sold. A male is worth one, and a female ten but a oneshot is worth nothing. That's when I met Grott. He had just been purchased from a neighboring farm. Our new owner turned us loose to fend for ourselves here in the Zone. It's cheaper than providing quarters for us.”



“You’ve told me this part already, Mother.”

“You know,” Rayla continued, “we were made for the farms. Our kind were human --white once. Our inventors gave us features to make us perfect farm workers. I wish I was back there, now. I know Grott wishes he was on the farm, picking pomma. This life we lead isn't what our designers intended.”

They reached the house. “Wait here, Lise...” Rayla descended the stairs; then returned with a bucket and two towels. “I'll wash you first --then you can do me the same way. Take off your shorts and lie on the bench.”

Lise complied. Rayla filled the bucket from the standpipe and began washing between her legs.

“Ow!”

“Sorry. Is that where you're tender?”

“Yes...”

“I put a little laundry soap in the bucket. That's why it smarts.” Rayla rinsed Lise with clear water from a can. She dabbed her daughter with a towel. “There.”

Lise wrapped the towel around her waist. Her mother stripped off her shorts and lay on the bench, her knees bent and her thighs open. Lise knelt and began

washing her.

“That's good,” Rayla said. “Don't be shy, Lise. Be thorough. You can do a much better job than I could by myself.”

“Mother...”

“Yes, Lise.”

“Tonight ... tonight you're treating me like another adult --a friend ... not as your child.”

“You'll always be my daughter, Lise. Now, you are a woman. You'll never be a child again.”

“I don't think I like being a woman

much.”

Lise dabbed Rayla with the towel. Her mother stood and wrapped herself. She picked up the two pairs of shorts and dumped them in the bucket. “We'll let them soak overnight --I'll deal with them in the morning. The night's young. We have plenty of time for a reading lesson for the little ones.”

Rayla looked up at the dull orange sky, illuminated by Vyonna's light pollution reflecting off haze. “I'm scared, Lise. The discipline is breaking down. I blame owners and brokers like ours. They dump us in the Zone and it's out-of-sight, out-of-mind. All these unregistered children here make me fear for what will

happen once they reach your age. It's why I take it on myself to teach them to read, write and do sums. Poverty and ignorance are an explosive mixture. I can't do much about poverty, but ignorance is something I can address.”

Rayla descended the stairs and Lise followed. A single greaselamp lantern illuminated the basement. Grott sat on a bench. Rayla began lighting more lamps.

Lise approached him. “Father --I'm sorry for what I said.”

Grott's gaze swung toward the half-empty bowl of pink paste. “You had better finish that. We can't afford to waste it.”

Lise lay on her back on her mattress pad, her arms crossed above her head. Her bedroom walls consisted of worn sheets Rayla had scavenged from the industrial laundry where she worked. She could hear her parents speaking low to each other. She couldn't make out the words. Tonight she couldn't sleep. Most nights she slept like a log, but not tonight. The day's events kept scrolling through her mind --Geddes's tantrum, Tagg, the fight with Grott ... making rounds. The basement grew silent. Lise continued to lie, her orange eyes wide staring into the darkness. She heard the sound of a match and then saw the flicker of a greaselamp. The sheet dividing her room from her parents' glowed with yellow light and

she could make out their shadows thrown against it. Her mother was lying on her back. Grott knelt beside her, caressing her. Rayla put her arms around Grott's shoulders and drew his face to her breast. Then, she bent her knees and he slipped his hand between her legs. She arched her back began making soft moans. Lise could tell her mother was swallowing her groans and gasps, but the odd one escaped. She watched the shadows. Rayla reached up and hugged her husband. They kissed.

Now, Grott lay on his back. Rayla knelt astride his hips and began swaying. He reached for her breasts and the throttled moaning resumed. Lise turned away, lay

on her side, closed her eyes and wished she could close her ears. Guttural sounds came from her stepfather. Then, the greaselamp was extinguished and darkness returned. She could smell smoke from the wick as the embers died. Rayla shook Lise awake. "Time to get up."

"Mmmph." Lise rubbed her eyes and sat up.

"You must learn to rouse yourself," Rayla said, "if you're going to keep a job. Grott and I are on our ways."

Lise arose and headed for the courtyard. She bathed and picked up her work clothes from the low wall where she had



left them to dry. They had become damp from dew in the night air.

“Lise!” She looked up and saw Tagg approaching in a fast trot. “Lise... Lise -- I hear you went on rounds last night.”

“That's right.”

“Why? How could you?” She turned her back to him. He grasped her upper arm and turned her to face him. “How could you?”

“Let go of me.” Her orange eyes met his, then looked at the pavement. “You know the rules. The men share the women. I was doing my duty.”

“How many?” She stared at her feet.  
“Lise --how many?”

“About eight. I wasn't counting.”

“Did you enjoy it?” She turned her head.  
“Lise --did you enjoy it?”

“Do you want to know? Do you really want to know?”

“Yes, I do.”

Her eyes filled. “It was awful --I hated it. I tried to block it out. And afterward I felt so ... so filthy.”

“I don't want you making rounds.”

“I have to, Tagg. I have to do my duty to keep the peace here. Aren't women making rounds in your building?”

“Yes --but, they never get round to me. If they did --I wouldn't want to. I only want to with you.”

“Tagg --you made me a woman yesterday. I must do my woman's duty. Now, I have to go to work.”

She picked up the damp top and shorts and bounded down the stairs. She slipped into the clothes; then looked around the basement and put things in order.

Lise climbed the steps. Tagg sat in the

courtyard. "Lise..."

"I don't have time, Tagg."

"Do you still love me?"

She approached him. "Of course I do. Do you still love me?"

"I'll never stop loving you, Lise."

"Last night was my duty. Mother tells me after a while you learn to wall it off... She and Grott pretend it doesn't happen. So can we."

"Can we ... you and I ... again?"

"I won't say no, Tagg. I don't know

when, though.” She smiled. “I don't know when another pipe will break at Megan's factory. Now, I really have to go. I'll see you later, Tagg.” She kissed his cheek and headed toward the gate.

“Lise! I'll take that sketch to the park today.”

V

Lise forced open her eyes. Dawn twilight was filtering into her bedroom through the sill window. She arose and pushed aside the fabric sectioning off her room.

“Good morning,” Rayla said to her.

“Mmmph.” Lise sat on a bench. “I don't like getting up early.”

“You're no longer a care-free youth.”

“I had plenty of cares before.” She rubbed her eyes. “Just different ones.” She grabbed a towel and bucket and headed to the courtyard to bathe.

She wrapped the towel around her waist and dumped the last of her bath water onto her garden. Another novonid woman approached. She was pregnant and had a little boy in tow. “Lise!”

“Oh, good morning Glinda.”

“Lise --can you watch Rinn for me

today?”

“I wish I could. I have a job now.” She looked into Glinda's eyes. “What's wrong, Glinda?”

“My owner was found dead last night ... murdered.”

Lise put her hand to her lips. “Oh, my...”

“The constables want to speak with me. They're waiting outside the Zone.”

“They certainly don't think you...”

“Of course not. They're interviewing the novonids she owned. We're also meeting with the Benevolent Shelter Society. It

might take most of the day and I can't leave Rinn alone.”

“All right --I'll watch him.”

“But --you said you have a job.”

“My job is minding two white children about his age. I can't imagine their mother would object if he tagged along.”

Glinda opened her arms and hugged Lise. “Thank you.”

“What will happen to you?”

“I don't know. Now I mustn't keep the constables waiting.”



“I'll take good care of Rinn.”

She watched Glinda head across the courtyard.

“Come on, Rinn...” She took the boy's hand and led him down the steps.

“Mother! We have company.”

Rayla looked at the little novonid boy.

“Hello, Rinn.” She turned to Lise.

“What's he doing here?”

“Glinda asked me to watch him.”

“How can you do that?”

“I'll take him with me to Megan's. I can't imagine she'd object.”

“I don't know about that, Lise.”

“There's no one else to watch him. This place is deserted during the day. Believe me --I know. I spent many a day confined here before I was registered.”

“What about Tagg? He has nowhere to go.”

Lise looked up at her mother. “Tagg... Mmm ... no. He goes to the park and sketches. Rinn's a nice little boy. We'll be fine.”

Rayla shook her head.

“Mother --Glinda said her owner was murdered.”

“That's the second one in ten days.”

“Do you think they're connected?”

“I wouldn't know.”

“What would happen to us if your owner --or, Ramina --died?”

“That's a good question. We'd probably be auctioned off --or end up in a BSS shelter.”

“So --there's a chance we'd be separated.”

Rayla nodded. “A good chance.”

“I know Ramina's intent was for me to

remain living here with you. She doesn't consider me one of hers. It's more like she's brokering my labor.”

“It doesn't matter what Ramina intends. You are registered to her --in the eyes of the law, she is your owner.”

“What about your owner?” Lise asked.

“It upsets me to think about this,” Rayla replied.

“We have to think about it, don't we?”

“There is nothing we can do about it, so worrying is wasted effort.”

“The next time I see Ramina,” Lise

replied, "I'm going to ask her. Can you watch Rinn for a moment while I dress?"

Lise led Rinn through the gate and toward the bus stop. "Have you ever ridden a streetcar?" she asked.

Rinn looked up and shook his head.

"You'll have to hold onto me tight."

The bus pulled to a stop. Lise climbed onto the platform and extended her arm to lift Rinn. She held the rail while the little boy hugged her leg. "That's it -- hold on!"

The bus worked its route to the transfer point. Lise guided Rinn to the sidewalk.

“Now we wait for a yellow number eight.” She leaned to look down the street. “I think this is one coming.”

Rinn held on as the bus carried them to Megan's neighborhood. Lise took his hand and walked to number 505. She rang the bell.

Megan opened the door. “Good morning,” Lise said.

“Good morning, Lise. It looks like it's going to rain today...” Megan's gaze shifted to the little boy.

“This is Rinn.”

“Lise... I'm paying to have you watch

Klarissa and Geddes.”

“I know you are. I'm sorry, but Rinn has no one else to watch him today. I've minded him before. He's a nice little boy --very quiet. He won't need anything, except for some water. He'll be no problem, and it's just for today.”

Megan knelt down. Rinn moved back and behind Lise's leg. “Oh, Lise --he has the biggest and saddest eyes... Hello, Rinn. Welcome to our home.”

Lise placed her hand between Rinn's shoulder blades and pushed him into the house. Klarissa and Geddes were sitting on the floor playing with plush toys in the shapes of native Varadan animals.

“Why does he need watching today?”  
Megan asked.

“His mother's owner was found murdered.”

“My goodness!”

“She must meet with the authorities and maybe a BSS caseworker.”

“BSS? Do they get involved?”

“Yes, for now.”

“What will happen to her?”

“We don't know. She could go to auction, or she might end up in a BSS



shelter.”

“They wouldn't separate Rinn from her ... would they?”

Lise shook her head. “No --he's too young. It's likely she'll be separated from the man she lives with, though.”

“Something like that could happen to you.”

“It could happen to any of us.”

“Oh, Lise...” Megan shook her head. “The monstrosity of what we've done to you --to your kind ... just sank in.”

“I look at it from the other side,” Lise

replied. "I'm happy to be registered and to have an owner. Before, I spent my life hiding in the shadows and fearing the bounty hunters." She tapped the registry tattoo above her left breast. "Now, no one can take me. I'm happy to be working for you."

"Still..." Megan turned to her children. "Klarissa ... Geddes... This is Rinn. He'll be staying with us today. He's a guest in our home --remember that and treat him as one. Now, I'm on my way to work."

She picked up an umbrella and headed out the door.

One of the twins approached Rinn. "Hi.

I'm Klarissa.”

Rinn followed her into the living room and sat on the floor. Lise watched them playing with a toy truck and the plush animals. She spotted the electronic book reader, picked it up and flicked through the titles. She sat in a chair, opened one of the titles and began reading. Her abilities were at a middle-school level; nonetheless she never missed an opportunity to practice. She encountered a word she didn't know and puzzled over it. With her finger she pointed to the syllables. Her finger touched the screen and the definition popped up. She smiled and continued reading.

Geddes let out a shriek. “It's MINE!” He

lunged for something Rinn held. Rinn was slow to release his grasp. Geddes made a fist and brought it down onto the bewildered boy's forearm. Rinn let go.

“GEDDES!” Lise exclaimed.

“It's mine!”

“It's his favorite,” Klarissa explained.

“Geddes --you shouldn't have hit Rinn.”

“He shouldn't have taken it.”

“Maybe not --but hitting is never the right way to solve it. Apologize to Rinn.”

“No!”

“Geddes --apologize or go to your room.”

His lip began to tremble. “Why are you siding with HIM?”

“Because YOU hit him. Now --apologize.”

“Stupid greenie...”

“Geddes!” Klarissa exclaimed.  
“Mommy would wash your mouth out for that.”

“Geddes,” Lise said, “go to your room until you calm down.”

Clutching the toy, Geddes darted into the bedroom. Klarissa was stroking Rinn's forearm. "Lise -are you going to wash Geddes's mouth?" she asked. Lise shook her head. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because Geddes was angry and sometimes we say things in anger we don't mean."

"Doesn't it make YOU angry?"

"If there were hate behind his words, maybe. I try not to be angry with the things little girls and boys say." She opened her arms and scooped up Rinn. He sat on her lap and she held him.

“Rinn,” Klarissa said, “Geddes didn't mean it.”

“Klarissa --why don't you pick up the toys? Then the three of us can sit on the sofa and I'll read a story.”

Lise took a plate from the refrigerated cabinet, removed the polymer film and set it before Klarissa. She filled a tumbler with water and handed it to Rinn. “I wonder if Geddes is ready to join us...”

She stepped into the bedroom. “Geddes --come have some lunch.” He started to stand. “You still have to apologize to Rinn.” Geddes sat on the bed, crossed his arms and turned his face. “I think you

really are sorry you hit him.” Tears began to flow down his cheeks. “Why is it so hard to say you're sorry?”

“You're siding with him because he's one of you!”

“No, Geddes. You hit him. If it had been the other way around --I'd have come down on Rinn.”

“I don't believe you.”

Lise knelt so she could look him in the eye. “Your lunch is on the table, Geddes. Before you eat, you must apologize to Rinn. Otherwise you'll go hungry. Then, when your mother comes home --she'll wonder why you didn't eat your lunch



and I'll be forced to tell her the whole, awful story. You don't want that, do you?"

Geddes broke eye contact and looked down.

"If you apologize, you can have your lunch. What happened will stay between the two of us. Understood?" Geddes stuck his lip out and closed his eyes. "I'll let you think about it. But --don't take too long. Once I put your plate away, I'm not bringing it out again."

She returned to the kitchen. Rinn sat at the table nursing a tall tumbler of water. Klarissa picked up half of a pomma bread sandwich. Out of the corner of her

eye Lise saw Geddes approaching. He stood at arm's length from Rinn.

“I'm sorry I hit you,” Geddes mumbled. He sat at the table and picked up his sandwich. He looked up.

“I said I was sorry,” he said and turned toward Lise. “Why don't he say something? Can't he talk?”

Lise put her hand on Rinn's bare back. “He's shy ... and he's frightened. This is his first experience with white people. Finish your lunch, Geddes, so I can put the plates away. Then we'll sit and I'll let you watch some mediascreen. But -- no Jaks.”

She herded the children into the living room, sat on the sofa and picked up the book reader. Rinn sat beside her and leaned against her.

Klarissa came from her room carrying an object. It was a plush toy in the shape of a worm. “Here, Rinn,” she said. “You can have him. He needs a good home.” She held it toward him.

“Go ahead and take it.”

Rinn hesitated and grasped the toy.

“What do you say?” Lise asked.

“...thank ... you...” Rinn whispered.

“That was very sweet, Klarissa,” Lise added. “Thank you very much.”

Rinn hugged Lise's leg as they rode the streetcar. She pressed the stop request and the bus pulled to the curb. Lise helped the boy to the street and held his hand as they walked to a row house. She pressed the bell. The door opened. “Fara...” Lise said.

“Hello, Lise... Come in.”

Lise pushed Rinn through the door. She looked Fara up and down. Her thighs and hips were fuller, her ribs less distinct and the muscle definition in her abdomen softer. And, Lise spied two unmistakable bumps under the bandeau

she wore. "You're looking more ... female. That didn't take long."

"Yes," Fara replied, "It was a healthy ovary you gave me. Ms Ramina said she knew from looking at you that you'd be a good donor. She said she wouldn't be surprised to learn you have especially strong female drives."

Lise wondered if that explained Ramina's interest in her sex life.

"It's a shame," Fara continued, "they're wasted on you --being a oneshot." She ran her hands up and down her abdomen. "Now they won't be. I can't wait to be pregnant. Most of Ms Ramina's females have born five children by my age."

“Really.”

“Yes, really. Maybe I'll get lucky and concieve twins.”

“May be... Is Ms Ramina in, Fara?”

“Certainly. I'll get her”

Ramina approached from the rear of the house. “Oh, Lise --you don't need to ring the bell. This house is your house.”

“I see Fara's doing well ... mam,” Lise replied.

“Yes --so far, so good. She's yet to have her first period, but I'm hopeful we can save the expense and bother of a second

surgery.”

Lise swallowed hard. “A second surgery ... mam?”

“To harvest your other ovary, Lise. Sometimes the first one doesn't take. It's why we took only one

--to give us a second chance.” Ramina regarded her. “Let's not worry about it, child. It was a good, healthy one you gave her. Oneshots do often have strong hormones. I can see it in you. You're a very ... feminine specimen. I see it in your mother, too. I've since learned this surgery is common on the pomma farms when one of the females has atrophied ovaries. I'll tell you, Lise... I was at a

loss as to what to do with Fara, until I heard of your situation.” Ramina spotted Rinn, knelt and addressed him. “Well, hello there. Aren't you a nice little boy. Lise --where did you find him?”

“He's Glinda's, mam. She lives in the Zone. Glinda has Rinn and she's pregnant with another. Her owner was murdered last night.”

“Oh, so he's one of Lenore's.” Ramina clicked her tongue. “Horrible stuff. Horrible. Of course, I would never say Lenore got what she deserved, but...”

“Mam?”

“It's a poor way to do business --letting



your females roam and then taking the children when they're of age. There ought to be a regulation against such a one calling herself a breeder. That practice reflects poorly on the rest of us. On top of that --exposing herself to who-know-what kind of criminal influence. That's what you get when you deal with the Zone.” She looked into Lise's eyes. “Present company excepted, of course, Lise. You're a fine example from good stock.”

“Thank you, mam. Ms Ramina, I...”

“Yes, child?”

“What would happen to me ... to us ... to yours ... if anything should...”

“Lise... Have you been worrying?” She shook her head. “How you think about things. I've never met one who thinks of things the way you do. You shouldn't concern yourself about such.”

“But mam...”

“Despite how I look, Lise, I have quite a few years left in me.” She coaxed Rinn onto her lap. “It's working with little ones like him that keep me feeling young. It's my intention that all of mine are properly cared for.”

“By the BSS, mam?”

Ramina looked up at Lise. “Why, yes, Lise.”

“Thank you, mam. It's a relief. I'm watching Rinn so his mother can meet with the constables. I had him come with me to Meg... Ms Megan's house.”

Ramina glared at her with a scowl. “Lise, you should never do anything like that.”

“Oh, mam --I wouldn't have if I didn't know how nice and how quiet Rinn is. There are children in the Zone I would never...”

“He is a nice little boy. But, if I hear of this from Megan.” She shook her head. “I don't like having to apologize for the actions of mine, Lise. Don't do it again.”

“He got along well with Klarissa and Geddes ... pretty well, at least. Klarissa gave him one of her toys.”

“I know these things seem innocent enough, Lise, but they have a way of escalating.”

Lise took Rinn's hand and the boy slid off of Ramina's lap. “It won't happen again, Mam.”

“Good. Make sure it doesn't.” Ramina knelt. “Very nice meeting you, Rinn... He is quiet, isn't he?”

“Yes, mam.”

“The quiet ones make good workers.”

Ramina addressed the boy. “Now, child, you must be on your way with Lise.”

“Yes ... mam...” Rinn replied in a barely audible whisper.

“Ms Ramina,” Lise said.

“What now, child?”

“Would you really have me go through another surgery?”

“Only after we've exhausted all other avenues,” Ramina replied, “and only if the surgeon agreed. We're a long way from that decision, Lise.”

“I understand ... mam.”

Lise escorted Rinn out of Ramina's row house and led him to the corner bus stop. A streetcar approached and stopped. Lise lifted Rinn onto the platform and the boy wrapped his arms around her knee.

Thoughts of another surgery brought back her memory of the first one. She had no desire to experience it again. If Ramina insisted on taking her remaining ovary -- what would happen to her then?

Would she wither away and end up looking like ... like Tagg?

Her mother was right, Lise realized. It made no sense to worry about possibilities over which she held no control. The fact was, that as her owner

Ramina held absolute authority over every aspect of Lise's life. That was what it meant to be born a novonid. This reality had never before been driven home with such force.

The bus reached the corner outside the Green Zone. Lise stepped off the platform. Holding Rinn's hand she led him through the gate and toward the courtyard. She saw her mother sunning on the concrete bench. Glinda sat on the stub wall.

Rinn let go of Lise's hand and ran toward his mother. Glinda scooped him up and kissed his cheek.

“What have we here?” She examined the

plush toy.

“A present from one of the white children,” Lise replied.

“Isn't that something... Come on, Rinn.” The little boy trotted away with his mother.

“How did it go?” Rayla asked her daughter.

“Well. Pretty well. Where's father?”

“A meeting of elders. I don't expect him 'til late.”

“How's Glinda doing?”



“She spent all day with a BSS caseworker. Her owner didn't leave a will --not one that was filed, at least. She's under BSS custody until the estate gets sorted out. She told me something about the murder.”

“What?”

“Her owner was killed with a garrote.”

“A what?”

“A length of rope with a handle on each end. It's formed into a loop, slipped over the victim's head and then...” Rayla made a gesture of pulling her fists apart. “Quick and silent. It's a favorite weapon of the street thugs.”

“Do they think street thugs killed her?”

“No --they think it was made to look like that, though. She was killed getting out of her car --right before curfew. Someone had been lying in wait for her. Street thugs don't operate in that part of Vyonna.”

Lise saw Grott approach. “Hello, Father.”

“Is the meeting over already?” Rayla asked.

“No --it's still going on. I left early. I heard about all I could take.”

“What are they saying?”

“They're crazy. They think we can organize.”

“Organize?”

“Yes. If we work as a group, we become a force to be reckoned with. That's what they're saying. We've never been able to organize before.”

“Why not?” Lise asked.

“Because we can't organize the farms,” her mother replied. “Without the fieldworkers, there's no point in organizing.”

“Why can't we organize the farms?”

“Communication is too difficult,” Rayla replied. “The distances between farms are too great. Fieldworkers aren't permitted to have mediascreens. If one overseer found a mediascreen, every barracks on every farm would be torn apart looking for more.”

“That's what they're saying will be different, this time,” Grott said. “This thing is being organized by Mott.”

“Who's Mott?” Lise asked.

“He's a renegade,” Rayla replied. “He and his gang live on the far side of the Zone.”

“Some say he has his run of Vyonna,”

Grott added, “he knows how to get around in the middle of the night despite curfew.”

“Yes,” Rayla added, “and some say he doesn't exist at all.”

“Why haven't I heard of him?” Lise asked.

“It's man talk,” Rayla replied. “You know how men like to talk.”

“Was Mott at the meeting?” Lise asked.

“No, but some of his gang were there. He's recruiting renegades and unregistered and giving them shelter at his end of the Zone. They'll be the

runners, going between the farms. Mott's training them to live in the hedgerows like the feral novonids do.”

“Training them?” Lise asked.

“Yes. He's training them how to steep minerals from the soil and how to trap small animals for protein.”

“Ugh!” Lise shuddered.

“That's an element I'd just as soon have out of the Zone,” Rayla replied. “Having them out in the hedgerows is fine with me.”

“And,” Grott continued, “they'll be equipped with mediascreens.”

Rayla snorted. “So the renegades have mediascreens. You know I've been wanting one.”

“You don't need a mediascreen,” Grott answered back.

“Father, what's wrong with her having one?”

“It's a needless ... thing,” he replied. “They say Mott's working with the street thugs, too. That's where the money to do this is coming from. There's even talk that Mott was responsible for killing Glinda's owner.”

“Do you think it's likely?”

“I wouldn't know.”

“She was garroted,” Rayla added.

“I hadn't heard that.”

“Glinda just told me this afternoon.”

Grott nodded. “That's one of Mott's signatures.”

“Why not go to the constables with it?”  
Lise asked.

“They're not interested in hearing any green talk,” Rayla replied.

VI



Lise arrived at number 505 and rang the bell. Megan answered and gestured her inside. “Klarissa told me what happened yesterday...”

“It's all right,” Lise interrupted. “I dealt with it.”

“She told me what ... word ... Geddes used. I was mortified. He did not hear it from me, Lise -believe me.”

“I believe you. I hear that word all the time and I'm sure so do Klarissa and Geddes.”

“I am very sorry, Lise. Geddes has been punished.”

“I had forgotten it. I hope Klarissa told you the rest of the story ... how she gave one of her toys to Rinn.”

“Yes, I rewarded her for that. I think you handle Geddes well. He requires a firm hand ... firmer than mine, I'm afraid. How did you learn to deal with children?”

“I've been doing this for years. Before I was registered I couldn't risk wandering away from home ... in daylight, at least. The neighborhood moms would leave their kids with me. Some days I minded half a dozen.”

“Lise's day care,” Megan mused.

“I've had to deal with novonid boys who were very much like Geddes. Children are children. They behave exactly like ... children.”

“Any word on Rinn and his mom?”

“She was offered to be taken into a BSS shelter. She turned it down, because she would be separated from her man. She's pregnant --about half-way along.”

“Then, what's next?”

“It could take some time to sort things out.”

“Does she have a job?”

“A female's job is making babies,” Lise replied. “Rinn is Glinda's...” She rolled her eyes in thought.

“Her sixth I think.”

“Don't tell me the others have been taken from her.”

“As soon as they're old enough for training and conditioning...”

“Oh, my goodness...”

“...usually around age eleven or twelve.”  
Megan's eyes were brimming.

“I had no idea. I know what it felt like to have my children taken from me --but I

knew I'd get them back. I had no idea... Of course I didn't. I had no desire to know, and our society has no desire to tell anyone... What happens then?"

"They go to the pomma farms ... or, into the work force ... or, back into the Zone. Glinda had a little girl who died shortly after birth. Then, she spent a while as a wet nurse to a white family --that's also females' work."

Megan nodded. "I remember when the twins were born. I needed help nursing them. The hospital sent a novonid woman. She'd pick them both up, sit and feed them, one at each breast, and never say a word. After some days I was able to feed them both by myself. I never saw

her again. I've wondered about her, though... How long was Glinda a wet nurse?"

"Until the child was weaned; then, she came back to the Zone and had Rinn. I like Glinda. I hope her new owner is kind to her. I'll go have a word with Geddes."

She walked into the twins' room. Geddes sat on his bed. "Hi," she said. He turned from her. "You promised you wouldn't tell!"

"I didn't tell."

"You told Klarissa to tell. She did your stupid gr... stupid dirty work for you."

“As far as I was concerned, the matter was closed when you apologized to Rinn. What happens between you, Klarissa and your mom after I go home is no affair of mine.”

“It's all your fault. You brought Rinn. It wouldn't have happened if you didn't bring Rinn.”

“It wouldn't have happened if a lot of things had gone differently. The fact is, it did happen. You're going to face these situations, Geddes, as you grow up. How you deal with them is your choice. Think about this... In general, people will treat you the way you treat them. That goes for green people as well as white people. Maybe you're too young to

fully understand. Keep it in mind as you go through life. Come on, Geddes. Let's have some breakfast.”

She coaxed him to his feet. He started toward the kitchen. Lise took his hand and he snatched it away.

Megan faced him. “So, did you apologize?”

“He certainly did,” Lise replied.

“Good. Geddes, your breakfast is on the table.” Megan nodded toward the door and stood in the house's small foyer. Lise approached her. “Lise, I have something for you.” Megan handed her a red 25-unit scrip card. “This is yours to



keep.”

“I can't accept this.”

“You certainly can. Without you, Lise, I wouldn't have my twins back. Having them is more important to me than anything. Take it. It's a small, small token of my appreciation.”

Lise threw her arms around Megan. In that instant the magnitude of the breach of etiquette she was committing dawned on her. Before she could withdraw, she felt Megan's arms surrounding her in a strong embrace, and her hands squeezing her shoulder blades.

She stood back. “Thank you,” she said

and slipped the card into the pocket of her shorts.

“I'll see you this after.”

Lise headed for the kitchen. “Klarissa ... Geddes ... let's get ready to go out.”

“I'm ready,” Klarissa said. She pulled on her sun bonnet.

“Come, Geddes.”

Lise locked the door and slipped the passcard into her pocket. She grasped the twins' hands and headed down the sidewalk, with Geddes dragging his feet. “Do you want me to carry you?”

“No!”

“Then walk with us.”

They reached the corner. A constable's squad car was parked. One deputy sat behind the controls while the other stood outside, leaning against the vehicle, using his communicator. Lise walked by them and made eye contact.

Geddes began to pull away. “Geddes!”

“NO!” he shouted “Help! Help!”

The deputy approached. “What's going on here?”

“Officer,” Lise replied, “I've been hired

to mind these children. He's a bit cranky.”

The officer knelt and looked into Geddes's face. “Is that true? Is she your nanny?”

“NO!” Geddes shouted.

The officer whistled to his partner, who jumped out of the car. “Mind the kids. Miss --step over here.” He looked at Lise's registration number and punched it into his communicator. “Your number comes back invalid. I'll have to take you in.”

“No! I'm registered! This is a valid number.”

He punched the number in again. "Not according to this." He drew his baton. "Up against the car -put your hands out." The officer began patting her down. She felt his fingers probing her breasts, then his hands against her hips and buttocks. He reached into her pocket, withdrew the key card and the scrip and slipped them into a polymer envelope. "Now -- your left hand..." Something snapped around her wrist. The officer pulled her right hand behind her and secured it to her left. "Into the car..."

He pushed her into the seat. "This is a mistake," she protested. She looked around and realized there were no door handles --even if she could free her

hands, there was no escape. Geddes and Klarissa were now holding onto each other and crying. The deputy sat in the front of the car. “What about the children?” she cried. “What'll happen to the children?”

“A car will take them to Family Services.”

Lise watched out the window. The second deputy attempted to calm the twins. They cried and pointed toward the car.

Another squad pulled up. An officer stepped out and helped push Geddes and Klarissa into the back. Its turbine whined up and it pulled into traffic.

The front door opened. The deputy sat behind the controls, started the turbine and pushed the control stick to move into traffic.

The car stopped outside a fortress-like building in the center of Vyonna. The deputy opened the door and hauled Lise out. He drew his baton and used it to prod her down a hallway. He opened a door.

“What do we have?” another officer asked.

“Unregistered --counterfeit registry number.”

“That's the second in two days.”

“Yeah --but I spotted this one. I get to keep the bounty.”

The intake officer snapped a collar around Lise's neck with a tag marked with the number 8. He opened another door and pushed her into a holding cell.

Inside was a bench, seated upon which were an assortment of rough-looking individuals. A white man with tag number 1 sat on the end of the bench. Lise sat at the other end, her hands still cuffed behind her back. The restraints were beginning to dig into her skin.

She bowed her head, closed her eyes and fought back tears.



The cell door opened and a middle-aged prostitute wearing tag number 9 was pushed into the cell.

“Busy day for the inspector,” Lise heard the intake officer remark.

Lise sat and waited. The cell door opened. An officer entered and escorted Number 1 out. The door opened. The intake officer entered and escorted Number 7 out. Lise looked down the row. They were up to number 21. She shook her head --they were arresting people faster than they could process them.

The door opened again and the officer grabbed her upper arm. “This way,

green girl.”

He led her into an interview room. A plain-clothes detective sat at a desk. On another chair sat the deputy who had arrested her. “What have we here?”

“Unregistered. I thought her registry tattoo looked awfully fresh.”

The inspector stood and approached Lise. He examined her tattoo. “Yeah... They're getting better and better...” He looked into Lise's face with a smirk. “How much scrip do you have to pay for one of these? Fifty? A hundred?”

He licked his thumb, rubbed it against her serial number and examined it. He

licked it again and rubbed harder. Then, he turned to his media terminal and punched in her number. He manipulated the device. “RAA005010 ... comes up registered to Ramina! Have you lost your mind, man? Bringing in one of Ramina's?”

The deputy whipped out his communicator. “It comes up invalid on mine ... look...” He punched in the number. “Look!” He turned the device toward his commander.

“It's a new number. You've gotta check the addenda, too. What are you? Some rookie?”

“She looked too old to have a new

number. That's why I didn't... Who IS this Ramina?"

"She's one of the top breeders --and she's tied in with the commissioners and prefects. She looks like a sweet old lady, but she's a demon. I've seen her flay a man at twenty-five metres with a single lash of her tongue. You have to double-check these, man! If Ramina complains to the Chief --you'll be busted down to beat officer."

"I'm already a beat officer."

"Then you'll be busted off the force."

"But that number's too new for someone her age," the deputy protested. "It still

could be counterfeit. One her age should have a number in the high QZs”

“Only one way to know --take her to the lab.”

The deputy led her to a lift and called for the basement level. Lise felt the drop as the lift descended. The doors opened and he prodded her down the corridor. She entered a room with shelves lined with cabinets holding bottles and equipment.

A white-coated woman entered. “What have we here?”

“Quick DNA screen,” the deputy replied. “Confirm the registration

number.”

The woman approached Lise. “It's all right, dear. I won't harm you.” She turned to the deputy. “You'll need to take the shackle off.”

The deputy unhitched a device from his utility belt. “Here's the key...” He handed it to the attendant and drew his weapon. “No funny stuff, green girl.”

The attendant unlocked Lise's restraints. She brought her arms to her lap and rubbed her wrists.

“Now, dear,” the attendant said, “I'll need to take a little of your blood.” She produced a syringe. Lise gasped and

recoiled.

The attendant showed it to her. “See, dear --it's empty --nothing in it to hurt you. Just relax and it'll be done in a moment. Let me see your arm. Are you left or right handed?”

Lise stared at the needle. It grew to fill her entire field of vision.

“Look how frightened she is,” the attendant said. “You can see her heart pounding.”

“Probably 'cuz she knows the outcome of the test,” the deputy replied.

“No. They're all like this --terrified of

needles. They know what they're often used for. Most of them are left-handed..." The attendant tied an elastic band around Lise's upper right arm. "Make a fist, dear. It'll be easier if you cooperate."

Lise complied. The attendant was probing the inside of her elbow with her finger. Lise clamped her eyes shut and forced out a tear.

"You'll feel a poke..." Lise chewed her lip. She felt the needle biting into her skin and let out a whimper. "Almost, dear... All right --you're done." Lise looked down. The attendant was pressing against her vein. "Put your finger here and press down."



Lise looked at the syringe. It was now filled with a dark brown fluid. The deputy continued to point his gun at her, his finger outstretched and lying against the trigger guard. The attendant returned and handed the deputy a viewer. He regarded the results of the analysis.

“Species: Novo Homonid... No shit...” He scanned down. “Registered RAA005... Ramina...”

“Did you get what you were looking for?” the attendant asked.

“Not quite...” He checked the safety of his gun and slipped it into its holster. “Come on, green girl. Back up to the

inspector.”

“Well?” the inspector asked.

The deputy handed him the report. “One of Ramina's. She was registered early this year.”

“Would it matter,” Lise asked, “if I was registered yesterday or five years ago?”

“Watch your lip, greenie,” the deputy sneered. “If I had found you a year ago -- you know where you'd be now.”

“But you didn't,” Lise replied finding courage for some defiance. “And, now I'm legal.”

“She's right,” the inspector replied. “She's legal. We have to release her. I'm going to have to write this up ... don't know how... Must be a new wrinkle for Ramina --cruising the Zone for unregistered.”

The deputy faced Lise. “Okay, Zero-One-Zero. Get outta here.”

“What about the twins?” Lise asked.

“Twins?”

“The children you took from me.”

The deputy smacked his forehead. “The kids! What did you say their names were?”

“Klarissa and Geddes.”

“Come here...” She followed him into an office. The deputy made one call and another. He stood and conferred with a sergeant. “We're trying to locate them.”

“Trying to?”

“They're all right --they're with Family Services ... somewhere...”

His media phone warbled and he answered the call. “Yes... Young novonid girl --registry RAA005010.” He looked up. “They found 'em. A car is bringing them around. You can wait at the corner of First and Hope.”

“Thank you, officer,” Lise replied.  
“What about my belongings?”

“Right...” The deputy rifled through a drawer, removed the envelope and tapped out the scrip and key cards.  
“Here.” Lise tucked them into her pocket. “I’ll show you the way out.”

“I can follow the exit signs,” Lise replied, turned and left.

Lise stood at the corner. She didn't know what time it was, but by the look of the sun it was late. Megan was certainly home by now and likely frantic. She looked at the street, filled with two, three and four-wheeled vehicles.

A squad car pulled up and a woman stepped out. She approached Lise and compared her registry number to one on a handheld screen. “Are you looking for two children?”

“Yes, I am.”

She opened the door and Klarissa and Geddes tumbled out. They ran to Lise and hugged her legs. Lise picked up Geddes and looked into his face. The boy broke into tears. “You're angry with me,”

he sobbed.

“I am,” Lise replied, “with the constables. Geddes --do you see what

can happen when you lie? You wouldn't want to go back to the foster home, would you?"

"NO!" he blubbered.

"Have you learned your lesson?"

"Uh -huh!" Geddes nodded.

"Good. Then, I'm not angry with you." Lise kissed Geddes on the cheek.

"You don't hate me?"

"Of course not. You're a delightful little boy, Geddes." She looked toward the woman from Family Services. "They live at number 505 --quadrant three,

block fourteen-forty. Can you take us there?"

"I'm sorry --it's against policy."

"It wasn't against policy for the constables to bring them here?"

"That was the constables' doing. You can take it up with them." She climbed into the car and it pulled into traffic.

Lise rolled her eyes. "Come on, gang. Let's see if we can find the deputy who arrested me. Maybe he can arrange a ride home."

She led them back into the Safety Palace and to the floor where the deputy kept



his desk. A sergeant looked toward her.  
“May I help?”

She pointed to the empty desk. “The deputy?”

“Gone for the day.”

“He arrested me --by mistake and brought these children in. I was hoping you could arrange for a ride home.”

“Sorry --don't know a thing about it.”

“What about the inspector?”

“He's gone, too.”

Lise led them back to the street. “How

are we getting home?" Klarissa asked.

"Let's try a streetcar," Lise replied.

She led them to the corner bus stop and waited for a bus marked with the correct route. One pulled to a stop and the door opened. Lise stood at the tail of the line of passengers and waited for them to board and present their fare or scrip cards.

She pushed the twins aboard ahead of her. The driver held out his hand.

"Please," she said. "I'm minding these children. We need to get home." The driver shook his head and gestured toward the back of the bus. Lise pulled

out the red scrip card. "I'll pay a fare."

"Rules is rules, green girl," the driver said. "They can ride, but YOU have to use the back."

"But ... they won't know where to get off! Can they ride in back?"

"No. Now, get off the bus!"

Lise took Geddes's and Klarissa's hands and stepped onto the street.

"Now what?" Klarissa asked.

"I guess we'll have to use a taxi."

She led the twins to a livery call box,

pressed the button and watched traffic. The light went out and she saw a livery cab approaching. The driver slowed, eyed her and pulled back into traffic. Lise pushed the button again.

“Why didn't he stop?” Klarissa asked.

“He must not have needed the business,” Lise replied

The light darkened and another cab approached and stopped. Its door opened. “Come on, gang...”

Lise watched as a business man pushed ahead of them and sat in the cab. The door closed and the car pulled into traffic. “Hey!” Geddes yelled.

She pushed the button a third time and waited. She saw a livery car approach and stop. The window rolled down. "Where you going?" the driver asked.

"Number 505 --quadrant three, block fourteen-forty."

"Do you have the fare?" Lise pulled the red scrip card from her pocket and handed it to the driver. He held it up to the light. "This should cover it. Get in."

The rear door swung open and Lise gestured the twins inside. The driver slipped the scrip card into the meter, pressed a button and pulled into traffic.

"I've never been in a taxi before," Lise

said to the children. “Have you?”

“No,” Klarissa replied. Geddes shook his head.

“Then, this will be a little adventure for us.”

The car headed away from the central city and toward the residential districts. Lise watched the fare on the meter mount: five units ... five and a half ... six...

They turned off a boulevard and into a neighborhood Lise recognized. The car pulled to a stop outside number 505. The driver punched a button on the meter. The fare read eleven and a half units.

The scrip card ejected and he pocketed it. "Here you go." The door swung open.

"Excuse me, sir," Lise said, "but the fare read eleven and a half. There were twenty-five units on that card. You owe me thirteen and a half in change."

The driver regarded her through narrowed eyes. "There's a surcharge for carrying greenies. Now -get out before I call the constables."

Lise pushed the twins onto the sidewalk and climbed out herself. The door slammed and the taxi sped away.

She took the twins' hands, climbed the steps and slipped the key card into the

lock. The door swung open.

“Lise!” Megan said. “Where have you been? I've been worried...”

“Oh, mam --I'm sorry... I'm so sorry...”

“Sorry? What happened?”

“We were arrested!” Klarissa blurted out.

“Arrested? Lise --tell me what happened.”

“We were headed to the park. There were a pair constables who questioned us. One of them checked my registry number. I don't know if he made a



mistake, or if there was a problem with the registry or if he was just harassing me, but he said it came back invalid.”

“Oh, Lise!”

“He took me downtown to the Safety Palace. I sat all day before seeing an inspector. Of course, then they realized the number was good and they released me.”

“Geddes did it,” Klarissa chimed in.

“Geddes did what?” Megan asked.

“Geddes told the deputy Lise wasn't our nanny. That's why they arrested us.”

Megan's jaw dropped. Geddes collapsed in tears. “You did WHAT?”

“Please don't punish him,” Lise said. “They've suffered enough and he learned his lesson.”

“Have you?”

“Yes,” Geddes blubbered.

Megan turned to Lise. “You poor girl. I know what they do to unregistered. You must've been terrified.”

“I was more worried for the Klarissa and Geddes.”

“How did you get home?”

“The constables wouldn't transport us. We tried the streetcar, but the twins would have to ride up front and I'd have to ride in the back and I didn't want us separated again. So, we took a livery cab. I paid for it out of the scrip card you gave me.”

“That's not what I intended it to be used for, Lise.”

“I know... But I had to get the children home.” She bit her lip. “I'm so sorry...” She fought back tears and saw and saw anger building in Megan's face. “Oh, mam, I'm so sorry.”

Megan regarded her. “There's more, isn't there, Lise?”

She nodded. “The livery fare amounted to eleven and a half units --that's what the meter read --but the driver kept the card. He probably thought I couldn't read or add. I asked him for the card and he said there's a surcharge for carrying ... novonids.”

“That's nonsense!”

“Oh, mam --I'm so, so sorry...”

“Quiet, Lise. I'm thinking.” Megan paced the room.

“You've every right to be furious with me.”

“I am, furious, Lise. But, not with you. ”

Megan faced her. “My heart aches for you. I've had my run-ins with the deputies. In my case, though --I deserved it. There's no excuse for them harassing peaceful, law-abiding folks ... and, little children. There's no excuse for taking advantage of someone. You didn't happen to remember the number of the livery cab, did you?”

“No, mam.”

“Lise --the only thing that will make me angry with you is if I hear the word 'mam' one more time.”

Lise smiled, covered her mouth and laughed.

Megan turned to the mediaphone and placed a call. She turned to Lise. “Where did you get the cab?”

she asked.

“The corner of First and Hope --outside the Safety Palace.”

“I know the place...” Megan conferred on her call, then turned to Lise. “I don't know if we can do anything about getting back your scrip. The driver has already checked out for the day, so it would be your word against his.”

“I know how much weight a novonid's word carries in such a case.”

“I registered a complaint.” She faced Lise. “Lise --If I could afford to replace that scrip card, I would. I won it in a pool at the factory, so it was like found money for me.”

“I understand, ma... I understand.” Lise replied. She bit her lip. “I was planning on using it to buy a mediascreen --a portable one like the one Klarissa showed me from your bedroom.” Tears began flowing down her face. “I wanted it for my mother. She likes to keep up on the news. We don't have electricity where I live, but I thought I could bring it here to recharge ... if it would be all right with you.”

“Of course, Lise. They don't use much

power. I think having a media screen is a good idea. That way I could send you messages.” Megan smiled. “I’m not as young and pretty as you are, but I won’t rule out being invited for a night on the town now and then. I’ll need a baby-sitter and you’d be my first choice. You’d do that, wouldn’t you Lise?”

“Yes...”

“It could be our little arrangement. No need to involve Ramina, don’t you think?”

“No...” Lise sniffed back tears.

“Well... It was a good idea while it lasted.”



“I know,” Lise replied. “Klarissa and Geddes are home, safe and sound. That's what matters.”

“Yes, that's what matters.”

“If you hadn't given me that scrip --I don't know what we would've done.”

“I have one question, Lise. Why didn't you call?”

“Call?”

“Yes, call.”

“It ... the thought never crossed my mind.”

Megan nodded. "I understand. You've grown up learning to rely on the one thing you have --your own wits. Lise -- you and I are a team with these kids. Don't ever hesitate to call for help."

"I ... I've never used a call box. I don't know how. And, now I have no scrip for the toll."

"THAT we can fix..." Megan rifled through a drawer and handed Lise a scrip card. "This has one unit left on it -- enough for a couple of calls." She jotted numbers on the card with a pen. "This is my number and this is the factory. Hang onto this for an emergency."

"I will." She slipped it into her pocket.

“There's a call box on the corner. Let's walk down there and I'll show you how to use it.”

The sun was setting as Lise stepped off the streetcar's platform and headed toward the Zone. What-ifs kept swirling in her mind. *What if she had held onto that card. What if she hadn't taken Klarissa and Geddes to the park. What if she had had the foresight to make a call..* . She remembered what Grott had said: *Scrip can be taken away from you.* She grew angrier and angrier with herself.

Lise stepped into the courtyard and stubbed her toe against a chunk of concrete that had broken loose. She

kicked it across the pavement. Her mother was lighting a lantern as she descended into the basement.

“Lise! Where were you? It's late.”

“I don't want to talk about it.” She sat on a bench, turned her head and pressed her knuckle into her lips.

“Are you all right? Lise --what happened?”

“Oh, mother!” She exploded into tears and sobbed out the day's events. Rayla held her and caressed the back of her head. “I don't know what to say,” she said as Lise wept against her.

Lise regained her composure. “Crying it out helped. I'll be all right, mother.” She looked around the basement. “Where's Grott?”

“Another meeting, They're talking of a green strike.”

“Isn't there always talk?”

“It's serious talk, this time.”

“Mother --I don't want to strike. I have a chance at making some real money.”

“Time will tell if it's a chance or only a dream. Lise ... Ramina owns you. The money you earn is hers.”

She heard footfalls on the steps and saw her stepfather.

“Well?” Rayla asked.

“A strike.”

“When?”

“Sometime.”

“There was a green strike before,” Lise said.

“Yes, and it didn't end well. Many of us were killed. It was before my time, but I've heard tales. This one will be different --so they say.”

“Different, how?” Rayla asked.

“Last time, only those of us living in the Zone struck. Only a third of us live here --there are many more scattered around the city. This time, we'll be organized. The pomma farms will go out, too. Our workers will sit down in the fields. It won't take much to disrupt the pomma crop. The plants will shoot into seed and go dormant for a season. The whites won't permit that to happen. We'll be a force to be reckoned with --so they say.”

“They think their runners can convince the fieldworkers to strike?”

“They think they can.” Grott paced the room. “I think it's a crazy idea. The

farms will never go out. It's perfect work for us. I'd give anything to be back on a farm right now... These young people see the lives of the whites and get envious. They want ... things. We don't need ... things. We're better than them ... stronger.”

“Father,” Lise replied, “you wear our poverty like a badge of honor. What would be wrong to have a home with water and power? To have mediascreens? To have real beds and comfortable chairs? To have pretty things?”

Grott's eyes narrowed. “You've been spoiled already by that white home



where you work.”

“Megan's home isn't luxurious. It's comfortable.”

“Comfortable... That's the problem with those of us living outside the Zone. They're too comfortable. They won't go out either.” Grott shook his head. “It'll be like the last one --just the Zone going out. And, it'll be a massacre.”

“Is this real or someone's bright idea?” Rayla asked.

“I think,” Grott replied, “it's somewhere between real and a dream. No date's been set. Right now, they're recruiting.”

“Lise... Lise...” She heard a voice calling from the courtyard.

“Tagg --come on down.”

Tagg descended the stairs. Grott regarded him and approached. “What did I tell you?” he growled. Tagg swallowed hard. Grott lifted his fist and Tagg stepped back.

Lise stood between Tagg and her stepfather. “Father... Now I'm a woman. I can choose the company I keep.” She turned to Tagg and kissed his cheek. “Don't worry --he won't hurt you. Come in.”

Grott slunk to a bench and sat with his

back turned.

“I sold the sketch of you.” Tagg pulled a yellow card from his shorts. “Here...”

Lise examined it --a new, five-unit scrip. “Oh, Tagg! We'll have to get this broken down, so we can each have our share.”

“No, Lise --that IS your share. I sold it for ten units.”

“TEN?”

“Yes --to a white man. I figured out how to do it. I put the sketch at the bottom of the stack. He came along and started looking through my drawings. He found the one of you and wanted to know how

much. I told him it wasn't for sale.”

Grott turned his head and looked their way.

“He offered me four and I said no. He told me when he wanted something he was accustomed to getting it. Then, he kept asking me my price and I kept telling him it wasn't for sale. He kept offering me more and when he offered ten --I very reluctantly agreed. He gave me two fivers. I told you it would sell.”

Grott approached them and took the card from Lise. He held it to the lamplight, looked it over and handed it back to her.

Tagg stepped backward from Grott.

“Well... I ... I had better go. I wanted to tell you about it and give you your share.” He headed for the steps, turned and looked back at Lise and Grott and left.

“Now, what do you think, Father?”

Grott snorted. “He might be worth something after all.”

## VII

Lise waked before dawn, thinking of scrip. She reached under her mattress, retrieved the yellow card and regarded it. If she had four more like this one -- she could buy that mediascreen after all. She rose, bathed and headed across the

courtyard to Tagg's building. Up the stairs she trotted and rapped on the door to his apartment. An older man opened the door. "Hello, Lise."

"Is Tagg here?"

The man nodded toward the corner where Tagg's mattress lay. The boy jumped up, pulled on a pair of shorts and approached her.

"Tagg --let's do more drawings."

"Now?"

"Why not?"

"Don't you have to work?"

“Not today --it's a rest day for the whites. Megan is home with the twins, so I have the day off. The laundry is open, so my mother has to work; and it's cleanup day at the construction site, so Grott had to go in. He'll be back by noon. We can go to my place and sketch.” She smiled and wrinkled the bridge of her nose. “And, afterward ... if there's time, we can...”

“I'll get my sketchpad.”

Tagg followed Lise across the courtyard. “Wait,” he said. “I don't feel comfortable doing this in Grott's home.”

“He's warming up to you, Tagg. And -- he'll be gone 'til noon.”

“But if he comes home early and finds us... Why don't we go to the old park --at the other end of the Zone? We could do some outdoor sketches.”

“Outdoors? No, Tagg...”

“The place is deserted. I used to wander over there with my friends.”

“What if someone else's friends wander over there?”

“We never saw anyone else.”

Tagg tucked his sketchpad under his arm. Lise took his hand and they began walking along a street. The pavement was cracked and tufts of vegetation had



sprouted. They walked past decaying buildings in a direction away from the city.

The buildings became more dilapidated as they walked. Some had roofs that had caved in, and any were stripped of doors and windows. “This was a rich part of the city, once,” Lise observed.

“This part is deserted even by novonids,” Tagg replied.

They turned a corner. Tagg pushed open a rusted gate in a stone wall. A city-block-sized park, overgrown with waist-high brush lay beyond. He led her down a flagstone path.

“This is spooky, Tagg.”

“It's fine,” he replied.

“Yiiii!” Lise shrieked as a many-footed arthropod the size of her forearm scurried across the path.

“They're harmless. Over this way -- there's the old viaduct. That might be a good setting.”

Lise followed him as he pushed through the scrub. They arrived at the ruins of the viaduct. He gestured to a caved-in stone arch.

“Pose on that,” he said. Lise stripped off her bandeau top and started to remove

her shorts. “You can leave those on,” he said. “I’ll sketch you from the waist up.”

She climbed onto a fallen chunk of concrete. “How do you want me to pose?”

“Kneel... Now, arch your back and hold yourself up with your arms ... lean back and look up... Perfect!”

Tagg sat on a rock and began sketching. “This is great, Lise. I’ll call this series Scenes from the Zone.”

“This is really uncomfortable,” she replied.

“Who said good art is easy?” Tagg

continued to sketch. “Okay, done.”

Lise sat up and rubbed the insides of her elbows. “Let's see.” Tagg showed her the drawing. She nodded with approval. “Now what?”

“How many should we do?” Tagg asked.

“At least three more.”

“Hmm... Sit on that stone.”

“Like this?”

“Yes --hug your knees.” Tagg looked from several angles. “Put your left hand down ... and your left leg. I want to see one of your breasts.”

Lise giggled. “What is this doing for you, Tagg?”

“Seeing you like this really gets my artistic juices flowing.”

“I’ll bet it’s getting some juices flowing.”

“Admit it, Lise. You like doing this, too.”

“I do. There is something sexy about it.”

Tagg walked back and forth. “You look great from here.” He stood and sketched. “How long can you hold that pose?”

“For a while.”

“I'm going to put in more background. You really do dress up that old viaduct, Lise.” He sketched more. “Done.” He showed her the drawing.

“That's very nice. I like how you have the brush in the foreground. You're getting better and better, Tagg.”

“For the next one, I want you to stand with your back to me.” Lise complied and stood before one of the viaduct's arches. “Turn toward me a little... bring your shoulder back...” He leaned to the left and to the right. “That's good.”

“Is this one from the waist up, too?”

“No --it's full-figure.”

“Shall I take my shorts off?”

“No --I can get your ass right.”

“TAGG!” She laughed.

Tagg finished the sketch and showed it to her. “What do you think?”

“It's the best one yet. Where should we do the next one?”

“I don't know... Let's walk this way.”

Lise accompanied him to the end of the park holding Tagg's hand and carrying her bandeau. “This part of the Zone certainly is deserted,” she remarked. “I feel like you and I are the only survivors

of a dead city.”

They encountered a high chain-link fence topped with barbed wire. Beyond the fence was a savanna of scrub and native pomma. A four-legged beast with a long ostrich neck grazed. It raised its head, turned and looked their way and resumed feeding.

“The city just stops here,” Lise remarked.

“Yes, and way yonder are the pomma farms.”

Lise scanned the pomma savanna and the broad vista of open sky overhead. “Look!” she said, pointing skyward, and



Tagg's eyes followed her gesture. A large, winged creature made lazy circles overhead as it rode the thermals arising from the open fields. She worked her fingers through the chain-link. "Is this fence to keep us inside or the animals out?"

"Both, I think."

"It looks like nothing... Nothing but scrub as far as the eye can see."

"Lise!" Tagg pointed toward the woods.

"What?"

"I saw someone."

“Where?” Lise folded her arms across her breasts.

“Over there in the woods... He's gone now. Lise! It was a feral.”

“A feral novonid? No, Tagg --they don't live around here. They live in the woods between the pomma farms. There are tales of tribes of them living in the far north.”

“That's what it was,” Tagg replied. “I didn't see a registration mark. That must be what the fence is for

--to keep ferals out of the city.”

“The whole city isn't behind a fence,

Tagg.”

“No --but the Zone is. Think about it, Lise. A feral wouldn't dare come into the white parts of the city. They might seek shelter here in the Zone, though. I've heard whites in the country have started hunting ferals. Maybe a tribe of them headed toward Vyonna to avoid the hunters.”

“If that's what it was --it's really something,” Lise mused, “spotting a feral. I don't think my folks ever saw one --not even when they were on the farms.”

“I've heard stories, too,” Tagg said. “They escaped from the farms and live

in the woods and hedgerows ... whole families of them. They eat small animals --like that decapod we saw in the park.

“Eeeew.” Lise shuddered. “Don't remind me.” She turned from the fence. Tagg slipped his arm around her and she leaned against him.

“Come this way.” Tagg led her down a crumbled sidewalk. “Let's look in here.” He pushed open the door to an abandoned hotel.

They walked into what was the lobby and past a bank of lifts long ago out of order. He led her past a lounge and through a doorway to a corridor of guest rooms.

Tagg picked a room and pushed open the door. The windows had been smashed out. He picked his way through the broken glass.

“Put your hands behind your back,” he said, “and lean against the wall near the window.” He began sketching. “Turn your face and look out the window. Don't smile ... look serious ... sad even, if you can manage it. Perfect.”

Lise looked out onto the empty, overgrown street.

“Done!”

Lise stepped to him and looked at his drawing. “Tagg! This is amazing. I look

like some abandoned youth, living all by myself in a broken building.”

“It's about how we live.”

“How we live isn't nearly this dreary. It's a powerful picture, Tagg --one with a message.”

“Shouldn't art have a viewpoint? Can't it make a political statement? I'm just getting going, now. Why don't you get on your hands and knees on that bed?”

“That bed must've been collecting dust and grime for a hundred years.” She climbed onto it. “Like this?”

“Yes ... No --I have a better idea. Lie on

your stomach and make it look like you're just getting up.”

“For this one I think I should be totally nude...” She slipped off her shorts and lay on the mattress.

“That's it ... now, grasp for something. That's it --you're down and hurt and reaching for a helping hand.”

He began sketching.

“This is the most political one of them all,” Lise said. “Maybe if your constable friend sees this one, she won't let you sketch in the park any more.”

“There. Look.”

Lise sat up on the mattress. Tagg sat beside her and showed her the drawing. She nodded. "Yes, it's very good."

"Maybe I should put tears on her face..."

"No --don't. I think that would be too much."

Tagg tilted his head one way and the other. "I think you're right."

Lise threw her arms around him and kissed his cheeks. "Tagg --you're such a brilliant artist!" She kissed his lips. "I love you."

He put down the sketchpad, then embraced and kissed her. She felt his



tongue against hers. She sat on his lap. “I know why you picked this room,” she said.

“I didn't know the bed was in here.”

“Should I believe that?”

“It's the truth...”

She caressed his shoulders and arms; then lay on her back.

Tagg lay beside her. They began kissing and caressing each other. She ran her fingers across his chest. Here, Tagg ... gently... That's it. Go slow... No need to rush.”

“This feels good, Lise. You're so beautiful...”

“It feels good to me, too. Do it just like that for a while. Mmm...” She closed her eyes and pulled her shoulder blades together. “Remember, Tagg --a girl needs more time than a boy. It's worth it... Mmm... both hands like that...” Lise felt her body go limp. Tension drained from her muscles and built in her pelvis. She hooked her arm around Tagg's neck and brought his ear to her breast.

“Your heart's pounding, Lise.”

“Mmm...” She coaxed him onto his back, knelt astride his thighs and began unfastening the waistband of his shorts.

“Ow!” she exclaimed.

“What was it? What's wrong?”

“My knee hit something hard --a lump under the mattress.”

“What is it?”

He climbed off the bed and helped her lift the mattress. Underneath was a projectile weapon --a handgun.

“Tagg!”

“Don't touch it.”

“Someone else HAS been here.”

Tagg hopped off the bed and forced open a dresser drawer. "Look..." He pointed to a cache of knives. He opened another drawer.

"What are these?" she asked. From a pile she withdrew a short section of chain. "There must be dozens of these."

"I've never seen anything like this."

"Tagg --I don't think it's a good idea for us to stay here."

"I think you're right."

She pulled on her shorts and bandeau and adjusted it across her breasts. Tagg picked up his sketchpad and led her to

the corridor. She heard voices.

“This way,” Tagg whispered and led her down the corridor. He tested the knobs on the doors to other rooms, but couldn't open any.

He ducked into a stairwell at the far end of the corridor and pulled Lise in with him. She peered around the corner.

Three novonid men stepped into the room they had been using. She could hear them talking and laughing but couldn't discern the words.

One of them stepped into the corridor holding something and faced in her direction. Lise ducked behind the corner.

She heard a loud pop and a ceiling lamp at the end of the corridor exploded, showering her and Tagg with shards of glass.

“Well, that one works,” she heard him say.

“Where did you get it?”

“I took it off that bounty hunter we found prowling the Zone. He won't need it where he is.”

The voices grew distant, then distinct again. Finally they trailed off. Lise cowered with Tagg in the silence. They looked into each other's faces. “Is it safe?” he whispered. She poked her

head around the corner. "I think they've gone." She stepped into the corridor and flicked shards of glass from her skin.

"Be careful," Tagg said. "They're sharp."

They crept down the corridor and ducked back into the room. Lise picked up the mattress and saw a second pistol had joined the one they had found. She pulled open the drawer and picked up one of the lengths of chain. "Let's get out of here."

"I'm with you," Tagg replied. Lise headed toward the old lobby. "No --not that way --this way."

Tagg led her into another stairwell and out an emergency exit. He grabbed her hand and they began running down the crumbling sidewalk.

They reached the courtyard. Both had begun to pant from the exertion. Grott lay sunning on the concrete bench. "Father!"

Grott sat up. "Where have you been?"

"Tagg was sketching. Show him, Tagg."

Tagg handed Grott the sketchpad. "Hmm... These are good, Tagg. I couldn't do anything like this. That looks like the old viaduct."

"Yes," Lise replied.



Grott flipped to the ones in the deserted hotel. “Where did you do these?”

“The deserted hotel at the end of the Zone.”

“I don't want you going down there any more. They say that's where Mott and his gang hide out.”

“Oh, we won't,” Tagg replied.

“Someone hid weapons there,” Lise added. “We saw handguns and knives...” Lise withdrew the length of chain. “And, these.”

“A chain can be used as a weapon,” Tagg noted. He took it from her and

attempted to wrap it around his fist. "It's not long enough to use as metal knuckles."

Grott took it from him. "This is a strike chain."

"A strike chain?" Lise asked.

"Yes. I saw one at the meeting the other night." He grabbed the end link and twisted it off. "The links are made to come off easily. Mott's runners will deliver these to the farms. Every night at sundown, the keeper of the chains removes one link from each. When only one link remains --the next day is strike day. It's how they expect to organize the farms."

“So they can all strike together without communications,” Lise observed.

“Exactly.” Grott handed the chain back to Lise.

“Who came up with that idea?” Tagg asked.

“It's Mott's invention. Once they fix the day of the strike, Mott will hand chains to his captains, who'll distribute them among his lieutenants, who'll distribute them to the runners and so on until there's one in every barracks.”

“What should we do about the weapons?” Lise asked.

“I'd leave them be. Haven't you heard stories of what goes on in that old hotel?”

“Yes,” Tagg replied. “I thought it was just tales --that it would be deserted in daylight. It turned out it wasn't.”

“That's right,” Lise added. “Someone came in while we were there. I don't think they saw us.”

“Did you get a good look at them?”

“No,” Lise and Tagg replied in unison.

“Could you tell if they were registered or not?”

“I don't remember, Father. I think the one I saw was.”

“Thugs?” Tagg asked.

“Who knows...” Grott lay back down on the bench.

“Tagg saw something else,” Lise said.

“Yes,” Tagg added, “a feral.”

“A wild novonid?” Grott shook his head. “Not likely.”

“We were looking through the fence at the edge of the Zone. We saw him in the woods.”

“More likely a renegade,” Grott replied. “Maybe one of Mott's trainees ... perhaps even Mott himself. Ferals don't come this close to the city. They live out in the country --past the pomma farms, in the wilds.”

“I know what I saw,” Tagg said.

“Think what you like, but I'm sure it wasn't a feral.” Grott stretched and locked his hands behind his neck. “What are you kids up to now?”

“I don't know --wander around,” Tagg replied.

“Look, you two... If you want to spend time alone together --go ahead and use

your room, Lise.”

“Father?”

Grott sat up and swung his feet to the concrete. He approached Tagg and began squeezing his bicep.

“Do you really love this runt?”

“Yes, Father --I do.”

“Boy --how long have you been drawing?”

“Since I can remember. I used to pick through trash outside the Zone for scraps.”

Grott nodded. "Tagg --you're welcome to move your things over here."

"Father!" Lise exclaimed. "I can't believe I heard you say that. Don't tell me you approve..."

"I never said I approved. You two have done it once. Whether I approve or not, you'll do it again. I remember what it was like. I was young and in love once..."

"You were young once. I know you still love Mother."

"Do you really mean this, Grott?" Tagg asked.



He nodded. "I do. Since I know you'll do it anyway, I'd rather you be here in the safety of our home

--not in some thug-infested, run down hotel."

"Oh, Father... What will Mother say?"

"It was her idea." He turned to Tagg. "You'll need to supply your own food."

"I have scrip," Tagg exclaimed. "I'll buy food for everyone." He began sprinting toward his building.

"I'll go get my things," he said over his shoulder.

“Wait!” Lise yelled. “I’ll help you.”

Lise placed the cover on the tin-can lantern to extinguish it. She had positioned it between her mattress and the sheet separating her space from her parents'. Tagg lay on his back. She slid onto the mattress and snuggled under his arm. He held her around her waist. She kissed his chest. She felt his hand slide down and caress her buttocks. “Are you trying to start something up again?”

she whispered. “Haven't you had enough for one night?”

“No, I'm not trying to start anything. You do have a terrific ass, Lise.”

She smiled. Her eyes were beginning to adjust to the dim light filtering through the sill window. She placed her hand against his breast and began caressing him. With her fingers she explored his body. Lise traced the outline of his ribcage and smoothed her palm along his abdomen. She found his pelvis and felt its shape. Tagg jerked. "That tickled."

"Sorry..." Lise moved her hand lower. She wrapped her fingers around him. "It's so different than how it was just a little while ago. It was so big... so firm..."

"This is how it usually is," he replied. "A guy couldn't go around like that."

“I suppose not...” She continued to finger him.

Tagg slid his hand around her ribcage. He worked his fingers under her arm and stroked the side of her breast.

Lise continued to caress him. “Tagg... Look what it's doing, now. Are you making it do that?”

“No. You are. You're making it want more.”

“More?” She climbed up and lowered herself onto him. Tagg embraced her. She nuzzled his neck and felt his fingers explore her back and spine. “Mmm ... more...” He locked his legs with hers.

“Quietly,” she whispered.

His hips began a slow rocking. “Feel good?” he asked.

“Mmm..”

“As good as before?”

“Mmm..”

Tagg increased the vigor of his rocking. Lise began moving her pelvis with his. He gripped her buttocks, pressed himself against her and swallowed a groan.

She put her hands on his face, turned it toward hers and kissed his lips. “Was it good?”

“So good it almost hurt... Was it good for you?”

“You know I like it ... with you.”

“But ... did you...”

“Tagg, you know I don't need to in order to enjoy it.”

She felt his body relax. His hands slid from her back to his sides. She lay her face against his chest and closed her eyes.

Morning light waked her. She had slid off of Tagg during the night but still lay clutching him. “Good morning,” she said.

“Good morning.”

“Let's go wash.”

He followed her as she grabbed some towels and soap and headed up the steps to the courtyard.

“Where do you get the towels?” he asked.

“They're discards from the laundry where Mother works --the soap, too. We might not have much, but we're clean.”

She wrapped a towel around her body, trotted down the steps and slipped into her bandeau top and shorts.

“Must you leave now?” he asked.

“I can't keep Megan and her twins waiting.” She kissed his cheek. “I'll see you tonight.”

“I'll take those sketches to the park.”



# VIII

The streetcar pulled to a stop near the Zone. Lise hopped off the platform in back and headed through one of the gates in the wall separating the novonid ghetto from the rest of Vyonna. She reached her courtyard and found Rayla lying on the concrete bench, sunning herself.

“Tagg's waiting for you downstairs,” she said. “He has some news.”

Lise sprinted down the stairs. “Tagg?”

He handed her a red twenty-five unit scrip card. Lise read the punches and saw twenty units remained on it. “I sold

those sketches. The same guy who bought the first one gave me forty for the others.”

Rayla worked her way down the stairs.

“Forty units, Mother!”

“That's wonderful,” Rayla replied.

Lise threw her arms around Tagg. She leaned to kiss him but he pulled away.

“Tagg ... what's wrong?”

“Oh, Lise... My owner found me.”

“And?”

“He has a job for me.”

“Where?”

“At the big eatery in Quadrant Two, up in sector six. I'll be bussing tables and cleaning up.”

“When do you start?”

“Tonight --in a little while.”

“Tonight?”

“It's a night job.”

“When will you be home?”

“That's the problem. I won't be done until after curfew, so I won't be home until morning. They have a barracks

there for the workers who stay overnight.”

“Oh, Tagg! No!” She began crying.

“They're giving me one day off per pay period, and the restaurant is closed another. That's two days off.”

“Two days out of ten!”

“Since it's a night job I can still go to the park and sketch. What about those three rest days when you don't go to Megan's? We can be together, then.”

“Oh, Tagg...” She wiped tears from her eyes. “How much are they paying?”

“One fifty.”

“How much of it can you keep?”

“None of it. My owner says I still owe for my registration.”

“They all say that,” Rayla interjected. “Registrations seem to cost more and more as time goes on.”

“You could make more sitting in the park and sketching. Did you tell your owner what a talented artist you are?”

“I didn't dare. If he knew I was making money from it, he'd claim it's really his and want it. I've already spent some. Lise --I have to go.”

“No, Tagg...”

“Please --don't make it more difficult. I must go. You KNOW what'll happen if I don't show up.”

“I know...”

He pulled from her embrace. “I'll see you later.”

He headed up the stairs, stopped halfway, turned and waved.

Lise collapsed, sobbing in her mother's arms. “Oh, Mother... It's not fair!”

“It never is.”

“I thought we'd be so happy together.”

“You will be together, two nights out of ten.”

“But, Mother... Eight nights out of ten we won't be.”

“The nights you're apart will make the ones you're together more special.”

“You don't really believe that.”

“It's better than none at all. When I was your age and living on the pomma farm - -we weren't permitted relationships with men. We lived apart and the overseers determined who we'd spend...”

“You've TOLD me this already, Mother.” She sniffed and wiped tears from her cheeks. “You and Grott are SO lucky.”

“I know we are. I also know it could end on a moment's notice. You're lucky to have Tagg. You must live each day one at a time. Enjoy every moment you have with him. It might be the last.”

“I know...”

Rayla embraced Lise and caressed her bald head. “I had just gotten used to having him around, myself.”

Lise carried a tin can lantern into her room and set it on the floor. She slipped



out of her bandeau. From her pocket she retrieved the twenty-unit card Tagg had given her and she dropped it on her mattress.

She pulled off her shorts, put out the light and flopped onto her bed. She reached under the cushion and found the fiver Tagg had given her the other day. Holding the cards in her hand she closed her eyes and sobbed herself to sleep.

The streetcar stopped near a residential neighborhood in quadrant three. She headed toward number 505 and saw Ramina's sleek black car parked at the curb.

She rang the bell and Megan opened the

door. "Lise --come in."

"Lise," Ramina said. "Megan was telling me how happy she is with the job you're doing."

"Thank you, mam." She smiled toward Megan.

"She also told me about that awful incident with the constables. I wish you had told me about it --I would've had that cop's credentials."

"I'm sorry, mam --I didn't want to bother you with it."

"It is my job to be bothered by such," Ramina replied. "With all the crime out

there, why should they harass law-abiding folk?”

Megan opened her bag, retrieved two blue fifty-unit scrip cards and handed them to Ramina. “Your fee.”

“Look at this, Lise --two down and thirty-eight to go.” Lise watched as Ramina put them in her bag.

“Ms Ramina?”

“Yes, Lise?”

“How... Can...”

“What is it, child?”

“Mam, I'd like a way to keep track of the wages I earn --so I'll know when my debt to you is paid.”

“You can trust me, Lise.”

“But, mam...”

“I understand.” Ramina opened her bag and withdrew a business card and a stylus. She made two strokes on the back of the card. “We'll keep this as a record.”

“May I hold it?” Lise asked.

“Lise?”

“I'm sorry, mam --I would like to keep

the card.”

Ramina's eyes narrowed. “You are a sharp girl, Lise... If I let you hold this, how do I know you won't add an extra mark now and then --when I'm not looking?”

Lise chewed her lip. “I wouldn't, mam. I never thought of it.”

Ramina withdrew another card. “You can recognize your own name when you see it written, can't you Lise?”

“Yes, mam.”

“Yes, a very sharp girl...” Ramina wrote LISE on the card and put two strokes

beneath it. “I'll keep this card and you keep that one. Every pay period I'll add a mark to each. Does that sound fair, Lise?”

She smiled. “Yes, Ms Ramina. Thank you.”

“Good. Now, I'll be on my way...”

“Ms Ramina?”

“Yes, Lise?”

“After the forty pay periods are up -- how much of my wages may I keep? ... Mam?”

“Lise... I have tolerated all the rude talk

of wages I can for one day. We will open that discussion after another thirty-eight periods have passed. Understood?”

“Yes, mam. I'm sorry.”

“I accept your apology, Lise. Now, I really must be on my way.”

Megan approached her. “I meant what I said, Lise. I'm very pleased.”

“Thank you.”

“I can see a difference in Geddes's behavior.”

“I do, too.”

Megan opened her bag and removed a yellow five-unit scrip. “This is for you, Lise. I made such a fuss with the livery company over that driver who cheated you. They agreed to settle the claim for five units. I know he swindled you of thirteen, but five is better than nothing - - don't you think?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Megan opened her arms. Lise accepted the invitation and embraced her. She felt Megan's arms around her back. Lise rested her face against Megan's shoulder and hugged her. Lise released her and stepped back.

“It's a nice day,” Megan said, “after such



a stretch of dreary weather. What are your plans?”

“I've been feeling a bit sunstarved,” Lise replied. “I thought I'd take the twins to the park for a picnic lunch.”

“Very good. That way you get nourishment, too. I have a hamper in the closet you can use to carry their food. Don't forget the sun bonnets.”

“I won't.”

“Then, I'll see you this after.” Megan gave her a little wave and headed out the door. Lise pulled the cards from her pocket and added the new fiver to them. *Thirty units!* She had never held so

much money. She certainly could buy a mediascreen, now. She poked the cards and Ramina's payment ledger into her pocket.

Klarissa and Geddes struggled down the sidewalk carrying the hamper between them. They reached the corner. "Hold up, gang," Lise said. "I'll take the hamper across the street. You can carry it from there."

The signal changed and Lise gestured the twins into the crosswalk. She noticed a constable's car parked at the corner. The cop who had arrested her leaned against it, working his handheld. "Good morning, ladies ... gentleman...", he said.

Lise smiled and snapped her head in a bow. She led the twins halfway down the block and set down the hamper. "Geddes ... Klarissa... You can carry it the rest of the way."

The sun had climbed above the trees and tall ferns lining the streets. Its oblique rays hit Lise's green skin and began activating her chlorophyll. Sun-hunger was a cold, prickly sensation. Sunlight was the opposite --warm, soothing, invigorating and relaxing at the same time. She drew in a deep breath, released it and realized how much breathing she had been doing lately. When her body was full of sunlight she need not breathe at all. Her aerobic and

photosynthetic metabolisms would be in balance supplying the blood gasses she needed. Walking to the park was the perfect level of physical activity for her as the energy-producing systems in her body started coming on line. If she were too sedentary, then her blood would become oxygen-rich and she would begin to exhale it. This was an uncomfortable state for her, too; leaving her feeling agitated and uneasy.

The sun felt good after so many days of shade; and it would feel better as it climbed to the zenith, its rays becoming more direct and intense.

They reached the park. Lise put the hamper on a bench near the sandbox.

“Geddes --Klarissa... Go play.”

“When can we eat?” Geddes asked.

“When it's lunchtime.”

“How will we know it's lunchtime?” Klarissa asked. “You don't carry a watch.”

“I'll know.”

“But, how?”

Lise pointed to the sky. “When the sun is overhead, it's lunchtime. Now --you play 'til then.” She stretched out her long legs and leaned back to expose as much of her green skin to the sun as possible.

Klarissa helped Lise pack the empty food containers, plates and utensils into the hamper. Lise withdrew a bottle she had filled with water and took a long drink from it. “You drink so much water,”

Klarissa observed.

“I need lots of water.”

“Why?”

“All my kind do. We don't eat much, but we drink lots of water.” She capped the bottle and put it into the hamper. “Are you bored or do you and your sister want to play more?”

“The swings,” Geddes exclaimed. The children ran to them.

Lise locked her fingers behind her head and leaned back again. Her sun-hunger had dissipated. She felt an overall state of well-being as she absorbed more sunlight, recharging her biological battery in reserve for the next stretch of cloudy weather.

“May I sit here?” A man's voice startled her.

She turned and saw a white man in early middle-age standing near the bench.

“There are other benches,” she said.

Rayla had taught Lise to remember the features of strangers who approached her. Lise made a mental inventory of this man's appearance: medium height; athletic build; age early thirties, grey eyes. His dress was typical for a white Varadan man: tan trousers and a one-sleeved shirt. A brown sash, fastened behind, was thrown over his left shoulder, concealing his caste tattoo. On his head was a broad-brimmed hat of the kind frequently worn by whites to shade themselves from the harsh, midday rays.

“I would like to sit on this one. May I join you?”

She made a gesture that said, suit yourself and leaned back to absorb more



sun. Lise sensed the man was watching her. She slid from him until she reached the end of the bench and regarded him out of the corner of her eye.

“I see you're Zero-One-Zero,” the man said.

Lise glanced at her registry number. She could feel heat building in her cheeks.

“A pretty girl like you must have a nicer name than that.”

She folded her arms and looked away.

“You were brought up right,” he continued. “You were taught never to speak with strangers.” He extended his

hand “My name's Thom... Thom Broman.” Lise looked at her feet studying the vein that ran from inside her ankle and made a loop along the top of her foot. Then she glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. He held his hand out for a moment, then retracted and examined it before placing it in his lap. “I'm Thom ...you're...” She rolled her eyes. “You're...”

“Lise,” she relented.

“Ah, Lise. Much nicer than Zero-One-Zero, don't you think?” Lise stared at her toes. “I think so, at least. Tell me, Lise -- what's a girl like you doing in a place like this?”

Lise studied the back of her hand.

“Lise --we're no longer strangers. We CAN have a conversation.”

“Please, Mr Thom...”

“No --not Mr Thom. Just Thom.” He held up his thumb and forefinger. “Short ... Thom.”

“Thom,” she replied.

“You have no reason to fear me, Lise. I work with your people.”

“Do you mean novonids?”

“Exactly. I'm writing a book on the urban

novonid population and I'd love an opportunity to talk with you --to have you tell me about yourself ... your story."

"There's not much to tell."

"Why don't you let me be the judge of that... I have a better idea. Let me tell you what I know about you already and we'll see how close I am. Are you game?"

She smiled. "Go ahead."

"Let's see..." He regarded her from head to foot. "You look about nineteen standard years old..."

"Eighteen ... and a half."

“Close. You live in the Green Zone and for some reason or other you can't bear children.”

Lise's jaw dropped. “How can you tell I live in the Zone?”

“Was I right?”

“Yes, but... How did you?”

“Well, if you could bear children, you wouldn't be out on the streets --you'd be locked up in some breeding.”

“There are breeding females living in the Zone,” Lise replied.

“Yes --a few. However, you're

definitely not pregnant --not with your slim, sleek figure.” She smiled. “Based on your age, you should have at least one child --one not old enough to be weaned. However, there are no novonid children within eyeshot. So --the likely explanation is that you are a working girl.”

Lise nodded. “Yes...”

“Would you mind sharing with me why you can't?”

“Can't what?”

“Bear children, Lise. There aren't many novonid females in the workforce. Those that are, can't.”

Lise regarded Thom for a long moment and let out an exasperated sigh. “You are the most forward man.”

“You won't tell me?”

“No, I won't.”

“Then let me guess... I've done fairly well with guessing so far haven't I?” He scanned her body with his eyes. “You certainly don't suffer from atrophied ovaries. It's the single most common reason for infertility in novonids. If you had that condition, you'd be built like a twelve-year-old boy, not like a twenty-year-old girl.”

She sighed. “I've been sterilized. I'm a

oneshot.”

“A oneshot... Is your mother alive?”

“Yes...”

“Unusual... I definitely want you in my book. I don't encounter oneshots every day.”

“No,” Lise replied coldly. “There's not much demand for us and we usually die young.”

“Yes --in childbirth,” Thom added. “I've never heard of a oneshot being sterilized. How did that come about?”

“I'd rather not talk about it.”



“Not a problem.”

“What about the other thing?” Lise asked.

“What other thing?”

“Living in the Zone.”

“Oh, yes... Well --I went a bit out on a limb for that one. I'd say you haven't been registered very long --certainly less than a year.”

“Yes...”

“I could tell THAT by your registration number. The RAA series is new.” He leaned toward her and held his hand to

shield his voice. "It's my job to know these things."

Lise nodded. "That fact confounded some constables a couple of days ago."

"Since novonids must be registered before their sixteenth year, and since we both know you're in your nineteenth, you must've spent time underground as an unregistered. Yes?"

Lise nodded. "... yes..."

"The only place you could do THAT and survive is in the Zone. So, I figured you at least had lived in the Zone recently."

"Yes, that's right."

He rubbed his hands together. “Oh, how I want you for my book.” He began counting on his fingers.

“A working female novonid who has lived underground as an unregistered and is a oneshot. What a specimen!”

“I'm afraid you'll need to look elsewhere for your collection, Mr Thom.”

“Now, now... Please, Lise. And, please --no Mr Thom. It's Thom. You must understand the purpose of my book. I'm writing it to further the cause of greater autonomy for your people.”

“Autonomy?”

“Yes --independence, freedom -- whatever you want to call it. So many whites think your kind are incapable of much. I know better. I know you're capable. I have a great respect and fondness for your people, Lise. I think you've been treated very poorly, especially since being brought into the cities. I want to document as many cases I can of ... of people like yourself who break the stereotype --to educate the white population on the true capabilities of your kind. I want to help you, Lise. So --will you think about it?”

“What would I have to do?”

“Nothing other than talk with me ... maybe let me take your photoimage. I

want us to be friends, Lise. I consider you my friend already. Please consider me one of yours.”

“I don't know...”

“Think about it.”

“All right --I'll think about it.”

“Good.” He looked around the park.  
“So, are you on the clock now or waiting for your stint to start?”

“I'm on duty now --watching two children.”

“White children, no doubt. Which ones?”

Lise pointed toward the swings. “Those. They're twins.”

“How delightful.”

Lise looked at the sky. “I should be getting them home. All this fresh air is apt to tire them and I want them to have their naps.”

“So they're fresh for their mom and dad.”

“She's a single mother.”

“A single mom... I'd like to meet her some day.”

“Nice meeting you Thom...” She stood

and grasped the hamper. “Geddes! Klarissa! Time to head home.”

Lise heard the front door unlock. Klarissa and Geddes jumped up and ran to greet their mother. She stepped into the living room. “Did you have a nice time at the park?” she asked.

“Very nice,” Lise replied. “Some white man insisted on talking to me. I let slip I worked for a single mom and he...”

“Lise... I'm not desperate enough to require matchmaking services.”

“I didn't think you were. I just wanted to get rid of the guy.”

Megan laughed. "I have encountered many men who've made me feel the same way." She regarded Lise. "If I didn't know better --I'd say you look darker than this morning."

"I likely do," Lise replied. "When we fill with sunlight, our skin darkens." She knelt on the floor and hugged and kissed the twins. "I'll see you tomorrow."

She headed for the door patting the pocket that held her scrip. She knew better than to count it on the street, so she paused in the doorway and pulled it from her pocket. Once again she reviewed the three cards --thirty units. She slipped them back into her pocket and headed out the door. Lise walked to



the corner and turned right toward a retail area she had noticed from the streetcar. She approached a shop selling electronic equipment, walked in and stopped short. The displays of myriad devices bedazzled her. Half the store was turned over to media screens. She saw large, wall-mounted ones, ones for business, ones for homes. She saw built-in units and portable ones like Klarissa and Geddes watched.

One wall was filled with handheld mediascreens. She looked over the display and tried to make sense of the descriptive placards. There were miniature ones --quite expensive. As they grew larger, the prices dropped --to

a point. Then, the larger ones were more expensive.

Lise looked at a handheld unit. The placard listed its features, but she didn't understand many of them. The price was right, though. She should buy one like that.

A young man whose caste tattoo was the three coins of the merchant class approached her. "Miss,"

he said, "I must ask you to leave."

"Leave? But..."

"Please." He gestured toward the door. "You're making the paying customers

uncomfortable.”

“I have money. I want to buy one.”

“This way...” He grasped her upper arm and turned her from the display. Her eyes began to burn. She bit her lip, turned and headed toward the door.

“Frustrating, isn't it?” She heard a voice and turned to see Thom loitering near the exit.

“Did you follow me in here?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact I did. I happened to notice you on the street and wondered what business you had in here.”

“Let's talk outside.”

They stood on the sidewalk. “I wanted to buy something and they threw me out. My scrip is as good as yours.”

“It must make you furious.”

“No. Discouraged.”

“It makes me furious. I see it all the time. It especially pains me to see it happen to someone I like.”

“Please, Thom. Please leave me alone.” She turned from him and pressed her hand to her eyes.

“What did you want to buy?” He touched

her shoulder and then withdrew his hand. "Tell me, Lise."

"A mediascreen --a small, handheld one."

"What would you do with one of those?"

"It's for my mother. She likes to keep up with the news."

"Very good."

"And, if she could use it to read books from the library, then..."

"Your mother knows how to read?"

"Yes," Lise replied. "When she was

little on the pomma farm, she was the farmer's daughter's favorite. They were about the same age and she taught my mother to read.”

“Now, I must include your mother in my book. It's no wonder that salesman behaved so badly. I've never heard of a novonid...”

“You said yourself we're capable of much.”

“True, true... I apologize, Lise.”

“The only reason so many of us don't read is that no one ever bothered to teach us.”

“You're absolutely right. I'm sorry --I'm guilty of the same prejudice as the society I wish to change.”

“It's all right, Thom. I thought we also could use it to communicate. And, a portable one wouldn't need to plug into the wall, except to recharge the power cells. I could bring it to Megan's and recharge it there, when it runs down.”

“I see you've thought it all out. I'm impressed. Let's walk together and figure out how to deal with this.” They walked a distance. “I know --I'll buy it for you...”

“Oh, I couldn't...”

“... with your scrip, of course. How much do you have?”

“Thirty.”

“We should be able to find something for that amount. Let's look in here...” Thom pointed toward another shop. “We won't buy it here, but we can get a good look at what's on the market. Then, I know a place that has better prices.”

Lise accompanied Thom into the shop and they approached the handheld mediascreens. “Which one did you like?” Thom whispered.

“That one ... I think.” Lise pointed.



“Hmmm...”

A salesclerk approached Lise. “Miss...”

“She's with me,” Thom interjected.

“Very good, sir... May I help?”

“Tell me about this mediascreen.”

“A basic model with a monochrome screen,” the salesman replied. “It can receive the free broadcasts and the news. It comes with text and voice messaging. Video messaging is an extra-charge service.”

“What about accessing the central library?”

“Oh, yes --that's part of it, too. Premium entertainment programming is extra.”

“And, the price?”

“It lists for forty-five, but I can let you have it for forty --if you purchase video messaging or an entertainment package.”

“Hmmm... I'll think about it.” He nodded toward the door and Lise followed him onto the street.

“That model would be perfect for your needs,” he said as they walked, “don't you think?”

“I can't afford it,” Lise said. “I only have thirty units.”

“Don't despair. I'll take you to where the prices are rock-bottom.”

He led her around the corner, onto a side street and to a basement storefront. “Give me your scrip and wait here. I'll be right back.”

“Can't I come, too?”

“I'm afraid this shopkeeper is prejudiced against green folk.”

“Then maybe we shouldn't...”

“Lise --which would you rather do tonight --fight a social battle or buy a mediascreen?” She pulled the three cards from her pocket and handed them

to him. He nodded. “You're pragmatic. We'll leave the social battle to fight another day.”

Thom trotted down the steps and into the shop. Lise paced on the sidewalk. She thought about the mediascreen. Then, a realization washed over her. She knew nothing about the man to whom she had just given her scrip. Grott's words echoed in her mind. *Scrip can be taken away from you* . She had willingly handed hers over. The livery driver had swindled her just a few days ago. Had it happened again?

A sinking feeling formed in the pit of her stomach. *Thirty units!* She bit her lip and pressed her knuckle to her mouth.

Had she, in the course of just a few days let more than fifty units slip through her fingers? It might as well have been a fortune. It WAS a fortune to her... She paced more. Thom had been down there an awfully long time. What if he never reappeared?

What if he ducked out a back way and disappeared into the city? Maybe she should go down and investigate.

She headed down the steps. On the door was a sign. It bore a green figure inside a red circle with a slash across it. Lise knew better than to enter any establishment bearing that emblem. She headed back up the steps and resumed

pacing.

A constable on a foot beat approached her. "Move along," he said.

"I ... I'm waiting for someone, officer."

The cop regarded her registration number. He pulled out his handheld, manipulated it, slipped it back into its pouch on his belt and continued on his beat.

Lise wondered if she should chase after the cop and tell him what happened. No --they wouldn't help the likes of her. She squeezed shut her eyes and shook her head.

The door opened and Thom came up the steps holding a pair of boxes. "Here," he said. "Mission accomplished." He looked at her face. "Are you all right? Lise --have you been crying?"

"What took so long?" Lise asked. "I was getting worried."

"They had to locate the correct model. Come. To celebrate our victory in the mediascreen campaign, I would like you to accompany me to dinner. I know of a place that serves both our species. They have a modest dinner menu for whites, and some special diet for you."

"I fed yesternight," Lise replied. "I'm not hungry."

“Well, I am. Would you sit with me and have an iced pomma brew? Unsweetened, that is.”

“No. I can't.”

“Are you still on duty?”

“No. I must get home.”

“It would please me if you would, Lise. I'm a fast eater.”

She pondered. “All right.”

“This way...”

Thom led her up some stairs to a dining room. She looked around --it wasn't



busy. At a couple tables she saw white and green folks sitting together. “What is this place?” she whispered, “and, who are those people?”

“Like I said --it's a restaurant that serves both kinds.”

Thom pulled out a chair and Lise sat. He sat across from her. She scanned the room again and realized every novonid was accompanied by a white.

Thom doffed his hat and set it on the table. Lise glanced at him and attempted to conceal her surprise. He was bald. The hat had done a good job of concealing it outdoors, but now she could see it. He was as hairless as she,

lacking even eyebrows and eyelashes. She put her fingers to her lips.

“The condition is called congenital alopecia. It makes me look a little like a very pale novonid, doesn't it?”

“I guess...”

“You and I have something in common. When it starts raining --we're the first to know.”

Lise giggled and then laughed. “I suppose you're right.” She regarded him. “Can't you wear a ... wig or something?”

“I did for a while. Then I realized that one must be true to oneself --you must be

what you are. I AM

bald so I decided to BE bald.”

“Were you born that way?”

“I was born as bald as one of you. That in itself isn't uncommon in white infants. But --my hair never developed.”

“Does it run in your family?”

“In my case, yes. It's not a common condition, but it's not a rare one either. I'd say the odds of it are

... about the odds of being a oneshot.”

A member of the wait staff placed a

menu card before Thom. Before Lise she set a card with pictures of preparations.

Thom pointed to the menu. “You see ... they dress up the special food you need to make it more attractive ... more varied and interesting.”

She looked up at him. “Thom --they must do this for the benefit of our white owners. We don't care what the food looks like. We feed because we must -- not because we enjoy it. I told you I fed yesterday. I'm not hungry.”

The waiter approached holding a handheld screen. “I'll have the seaprawn sandwich and two iced pomma brews ... plain for her and syrup in mine.”

The waiter entered the order, nodded and left.

Thom set the boxes on the table. "I'll show you what I bought..." He opened a box. "This mediascreen should work well for you." He switched it on and manipulated it. "Here is the official news..." He poked it. "The alternative news..." He poked it again. "Text and voice messaging ... here's the call number."

Lise nodded.

"There are some other free services -- library access and so on. They tried to sell me an entertainment package but I said no."

“I've seen some entertainment on Megan's screen,” Lise replied. “It's nothing we'll miss.”

The waiter brought a plate and two tall glasses filled with an amber liquid. On the plate were two rounds of pomma bread with a pink filling.

Lise sipped her drink and her eyes popped. “It's so sweet. I think this is yours,” she said. She wiped the rim with a napkin. “I'm sorry. She must've mixed them up.”

“Not a problem...” Thom handed her the other glass. Lise sipped from it and tried to analyze the flavors.

“How do you like it?” Thom asked.

Lise picked up the mediascreen. “I love it. I'm sure Mother will love it, too.”

“No --the pomma brew.”

“Frankly?”

“Yes, frankly.”

“I don't understand why one would spoil perfectly good water by putting this into it.”

Thom chuckled. “You are a pragmatic girl, Lise. Some folks enjoy the taste. It IS all right to expose yourself to new sensations --for no other reason than

deriving pleasure.”

“I'll try to think of it that way. The cold is nice --refreshing after a long day.”

“That's the girl.”

“What's in the other box?”

He opened it. “It's a solar charger. You set this in the sun, connect it to the screen ... no need for house current.”

“That's perfect, Thom!”

“I thought since YOU were solar powered there was no reason your mediascreen shouldn't be also.”



He dug into a pocket. "I almost forgot."  
He handed her an object.

She looked at a yellow five-unit scrip and read the punches. "Three units?"

"That's right. Both devices came to twenty-seven."

"It was much more expensive in the other shop."

"One must become a savvy shopper, Lise." He pointed to the mediascreen. "This is not exactly the gadget we examined together. It's a model from a couple of years ago, but it has the same features and works the same way. The store where I bought it sells remainders

at half the cost.”

Lise held the screen to her bosom. “Yes, Mother would approve of that. Thank you so much, Thom.”

Thom tore a bite from his sandwich. “Have you thought about it?”

“About what?”

“About helping me with my book.”

She looked into his grey eyes and smiled. “Yes, I will. I like you, Thom. I'll be honest --at first I thought you were stalking me ... or something. You've been very kind and helpful. Talking with you is the least I could do.”

“It makes me very happy. You'll be a fine addition. Am I your friend, now?”

She extended her arm and Thom grasped her hand. “Yes --friends.”

“That pleases me more.”

Lise drained her glass and crunched on an ice cube. “That's a new sensation,” she said, swallowing.

“Did you enjoy it?”

She smiled and shrugged.

He finished his sandwich and raised his hand to catch the waiter's eye. She approached their table. Thom handed her

a pair of yellow scrip cards. She slipped one and then the other into a slot in her handheld. The first one popped out, with all its holes punched. She handed it to Thom and he tossed it onto his plate.

The second card popped out with two units unpunched. "Keep it," Thom said.

"Thank you, sir."

"Lise --I'll walk you to the bus stop." He picked up his hat.

## IX

Lise hopped off the streetcar and headed toward the Zone. She was noticing what she hadn't before

--the cracked pavement, the litter blowing against the curb ... unkempt tufts of native weeds along the broken sidewalks.

It was sunset. She headed through the gate and could hear voices coming from the brothel on the corner. Her walk accelerated into a trot. She made her way to the courtyard and down the stairs to the basement.

“Mother ... Father,” she called.

“Where have you been?” Rayla asked. “Tagg was looking for you. He had to go to his job.”

“I'm sorry I'm late... I was shopping.”

“Shopping?”

She presented the boxes. “I bought this for you, Mother.” Rayla stared in silence. “Take them, Mother.”

Rayla opened the box and withdrew the mediascreen. Grott approached them.

“Lise...”

“Now you can keep up on the news.”

“Why would you buy something like that?” Grott asked. “We don't need it.”

“Father --it IS all right to spend money on things we don't need.”

“Money we don't have.”

“It was MY scrip.”

“It was Tagg's scrip.”

“No, Father. I earned it. I posed for Tagg. Without me, he wouldn't have drawings to sell. I earned it as much as he did. It was MINE, and I spent it how I wanted.”

Rayla switched on the device and began scanning the news headlines. “Oh, Lise...”

Lise pointed to the screen. “There's the alternative news ... and the library...” A tear rolled down Rayla's cheek. “We can

also use it to communicate. That's the other reason I bought it, Father. Ms Megan told me she might need someone to watch her twins in the evenings. She also told me she'd pay me and not Ramina. ME, Father --scrip Ramina need not know of."

"Sometimes," Rayla replied, "one must spend some money in order to make some."

"Now, if Megan needs me she can call."

Grott snorted. "You're being spoiled by what's outside the Zone. You want ... needless things."

"No, Father. A mediascreen is useful."



“Yes, Grott,” Rayla agreed. “You know I’ve wanted one for years. Now, our daughter has given one to us.”

“Father, I don’t know why you want to wear our poverty on your shoulder. I don’t want the sorts of things the whites have. But there’s nothing wrong being comfortable...” She nudged a bench with her toe.

“...like having soft chairs instead of hard benches.”

“How did you buy this?” Rayla asked.

“Well... A white helped me.”

“Helped you?”

“Yes. I met him in the park. He works with us.”

“Works with you?”

“No --with us ... with our kind.”

How so?” her mother asked.

“He's writing a book ... to try to convince whites to give us more freedom.”

“As if that's going to happen,” Grott interjected.

“He's sincere. I gave him my scrip and he bought the mediascreen for me.”

“Did he keep some for his trouble?”  
Grott asked.

“No. He knew of a shop where they sell at a discount. This mediascreen goes for forty-five but he bought it for me for twenty-seven. It's almost half price. And --that was with the solar charger. Not ALL

whites are evil, Father.”

“Then, you did well,” Rayla replied. She opened her arms and hugged her daughter. “Thank you so much.”

Lise stood at the corner waiting for the right streetcar to work its way down the street. The sun was getting low in the sky

and traffic was beginning to lighten.

“Lise!”

She turned and saw a figure in a tan shirt and broad-brimmed hat.

“How did your mother like it?”

“Oh, Thom! She loved it. Have you been waiting for me?”

“Truth be told --yes. I've been here I don't know how long and was about to give up, figuring I had missed you.”

“Oh, no --Ms Megan had a doctor's appointment and asked me to stay late with the twins.” She pulled a yellow

card from her shorts and held it up. “She gave me three units --and it's all mine!”

“Wonderful. Lise --I was hoping we could start working on your segment of my book.”

“I should be getting home...” She craned her neck to look down the street. “Here's my bus, now.”

“Wait --Come with me, instead.”

“Mother will be worried...”

“You can call her.”

Lise smiled. “That's right!”

Thom whipped out his handheld mediascreen. “What's the number?” Lise pulled a card from her pocket. Thom manipulated the screen. “Busy...”

“Busy? I wonder who Mother is calling.”

“I'll put it on callback.”

“Callback?”

“Yes --it'll put the call through once the circuit frees. Come, walk with me.”

“Where are we going?”

“To my car. I'll take you to my office and we'll start our interview.”

Lise walked with Thom. A warble came from his pocket. He withdrew his handheld. "Ahh... Your call is going through..." He handed the device to Lise. A voice-only connection formed.

"Hello?"

"Mother! It's ... your daughter."

"Lise! Where are you? It's getting late. Tagg has already gone to his job."

"Ms Megan had me stay. She paid me three units. Mother --I tried to call and the circuit was busy."

"Yes. Once the word spread I have a mediascreen ... the neighbors have been

coming in all afternoon to make calls. Lise, you'll be home soon --won't you?"

"No, Mother. The man I told you about ... the one with the book wants me to go with him so he can interview me."

"Lise..."

"Don't worry, Mother. I'll be home before curfew..." She looked in Thom's direction and he nodded.

"If not I'll call."

"I don't want you having to stay overnight in a wayside, Lise."

"Oh, no --I'll be home."



“Thanks for calling, Lise.” The call terminated.

Lise handed the device to Thom.  
“Thanks.”

He gestured toward a sleek, red speedster. It was a two-seater with yellow upholstery and a narrow windscreen. The nose was low and long and the aft quarters bulged with dual turbines. It was parked in a stall with a meter. Lise noticed a novonid boy, about ten standards old and she recognized him as one from the Zone. He was scavenging around the meters, picking up discarded scrip that had a hole or two unpunched.

Thom took out a new yellow fiver and pushed it into the slot of the parking meter. It debited a unit and a half. He glanced sideways toward the boy and nonchalantly flicked the scrip card onto the ground near his feet. Then, he unlocked the vehicle and gestured Lise inside. She fastened her safety restraint. Thom manipulated controls and the twin turbines whined up to operating speed. He released the parking brake and pulled back on the control to back it out of the parking stall. A sharp flick on the stick and the car responded by cutting to the left. He pushed the stick forward and they headed onto the street.

“There's still some sunlight,” Thom said

and pressed a control. The cowl slid backward, opening the cockpit to the sky. Lise could feel the wind whistling in her ears.

“Where's your office?” Lise asked.

“Quadrant One.”

“I've never been in Quadrant One.”

“I'll show you some sights.”

Traffic in downtown Vyonna was light, now. Thom regulated the car's speed to match the synchronized traffic stops. They whizzed through the central administrative district, through a canyon of now nearly deserted highrise

buildings.

He paused at an intersection and then pulled onto a broad boulevard. A panel in the dash lit up. He pressed a control.

“There's auto-steer on this street,” he said. A list of destinations appeared on the panel and he pressed one, then leaned back and laced his fingers behind his neck. “She knows her way.”

The car, now on auto-pilot, slipped into a middle lane marked with blue circles. It accelerated to match its speed with other vehicles.

Thom drew in a breath. “Mmm.. Listen to her...”

“To whom?” Lise asked.

He motioned behind them. “The turbines. No other car on the road sounds like a Twin-T. They're adjusted ... they're tuned to spin at slightly different speeds. The tones are a perfect half-pitch apart. What lovely music they make ... what beautiful dissonance. The sound of a perfectly tuned Twin-T

makes aficionados swoon.”

Lise wasn't listening to turbines. She was watching the corners for landmarks and bus stops. This was unfamiliar territory, with open spaces, groomed gardens and well-kept buildings. She made a mental inventory of places and

bus lines. Then, she felt something on her forearm. She looked down. Thom was stroking her. She glanced sideways toward him. He pulled his hand away. "I'm sorry to be so presumptuous, but I just love novonid skin. It is so soft and so smooth ... yours in particular, Lise. I'm fascinated by it --an expanse of lovely, green skin..."

"Please... You're making me uncomfortable."

"It's an aesthetic thing, Lise --nothing carnal. Please believe me. I think we whites are so boring. We used to have variety --did you know that?"

"No..."

“This colony was seeded from another colony planet. The original population of that world was quite diverse. There where white people and brown people... yellow people and red ones... Over the centuries, all that diversity was lost. We call ourselves whites but, in reality --it's more of a muddy tan, don't you think?”

“I don't know... I really hadn't given it much thought.” Lise returned to studying streetsigns. In case she needed to find her way home by herself she wanted to know which bus routes to take. She felt something against the back of her hand. It was Thom's hand, held palm-up in an ancient gesture that predated the founding of their world.

Lise glanced into his eyes and placed her palm against his. He spread his fingers and she laced hers with his.

“We're now officially friends --aren't we, Lise?”

“Friends.”

“I'm happy --and honored.”

She giggled. “Thom --please stop making a fuss over me. I'm just another novonid.”

“Not so...” Thom rolled his wrist back and forth, rolling Lise's with his.

“What are you doing?”



“Admiring the color of your skin compared to mine... Do you know how much alike we are?”

Ninety-nine point five percent. That's how much of your DNA is identical to mine. One half of one percent is responsible for the differences.”

The estates along the boulevard grew larger and more elaborate. Thom pointed at one. “Over here, Lise... Do you see that house?”

The house was old but maintained in immaculate repair. It sat on a knoll commanding the other properties surrounding it, and in the midst of a sculpture garden. A lattice-work fence

lined the perimeter.

“Yes, I see it.”

“A novonid woman lives there. Her name is Margliss. She's I guess about sixty standards --an amazing woman. She's the centerpiece of my book. I hope, my dear Lise, that doesn't offend you. I wish I could make all my case histories the centerpiece. You will be an important sidebar --but her story is so remarkable.”

“Remarkable, how?”

“That green woman commands one of the largest fortunes on Varada. She has a staff of a dozen servants and

groundskeepers. She's the darling of the BSS circle and hosts gala parties ... of the sort to which I'll never be invited. The big Benevolent Society Ball is held every year in her garden. You'll see her on the mediascreens, wearing fancy gowns. You have no idea how difficult it was for me to gain access to her for my book.”

“Who owns her?” Lise asked.

“Spoken like a true Varadan. Legally, she is the property of a special trust overseen by the BSS. In practice, she lives the life of a wealthy white widow.”

“How...”

“How did this happen?” Thom replied  
“Therein lies a tale. About forty or so standards ago, the Benn Drumm family lived in that house. Benn was an important Varadan businessman, the founder of Drumm Industries. One division manufactures luxury vehicles.” Thom patted the upholstery of his car. “This is a Drumm. He had a wife and two teenaged daughters. One day he returned from visiting a factory on the other continent and discovered them all dead --murdered.”

“My goodness!”

“One of his servants was accused, tried and convicted. He eventually was executed.”

“A novonid?” she asked.

“Yes. I have my doubts about his guilt. Benn's wife had been active in the Benevolent Shelter Society. She was one of the major donors. As a tribute to her he donated a large sum. It was a major endowment and he became involved in the organization.

“This was back when independent shelters still operated. They've all since been brought under the BSS umbrella. A breeder who maintained the most appalling conditions had owned Margliss. She had been terribly mistreated, along with the rest of his females. The authorities raided the

breedery, seized the females and turned them over to an independent shelter.

“The shelter was able to place all of them with other breeders. All but Margliss. There was something wrong with her that precluded her from breeding. A male's worth one and a female's worth ten...”

“But an infertile female's worth nothing,” Lise interrupted. “I've heard the saying and I understand full well how it applies.”

Thom squeezed her hand. “You understand, Lise, this was before the notion of placing novonid females in the workforce was widely accepted. We

have made progress in the past generation or so.

“Margliss couldn't be placed in one of the breederies, and no broker wanted her. It was also before the Termination Act passed, and she was scheduled to be put down. Her only chance was if someone adopted her for charitable reasons. Word of her plight reached the ears of some in the BSS. Benn stepped in and bought her. She was moments from being killed.”

Lise stared at Thom, wide-eyed and slack-jawed.

“They can't do that, now. Today, each case must be brought before a

termination committee and all avenues for placing such a one must be exhausted. And then, it must be for cause.”

“Being unwanted and unregistered is still considered sufficient cause,” Lise responded, coldly. “And, bounties are still paid by the city for such.”

“True,” replied Thom. “Yet more often today unregistered find sanctuary in the Green Zone --like you did. Not too many bounty hunters are going to risk entering the Zone for the price on an unregistered. Renegades are another story...”

“She must've been terrified.”



“She was. She was strapped into the death chair and the needle had already been placed in her vein. I'm not a brave man, Lise. I can't imagine the horror of knowing my life was about to end. Benn stepped in at what truly was the last moment and took her to his home.

“At first she felt lost in his big house, ostracized by Benn's servants. She caught on, though. She's like you, Lise -- a smart girl. She was smart enough to let Benn fall in love with her. And then -- she fell in love, too. For twenty years they lived as husband and wife, she sharing his bed.”

“You mean they...”

“Had a sexual relationship? Most definitely. Why? Does that shock you, Lise?”

“It's an unnatural pairing. It's ... it's taboo!”

“Lise, you're too smart of a girl to be so naive. You must know of the brothels that operate along the perimeter of the Green Zone.”

“Yes...”

“There are escort services in Varada who will happily supply green flesh of either gender. All it takes is a call. Yes the laws are on the books, but the authorities overlook it, for the most part

--except for a few prudish zealots. If it's done discreetly, there's never a problem. And, it happens all the time.” Thom continued to eye her. “Don't tell me it offends your sensibility.”

“It ... it does!”

“I'm surprised. Think about this, Lise...” He held up his hand, his fingers still locked with hers. “Does this offend you?”

“No.”

“Does it please you? It must, or you wouldn't continue to do it.” Lise began to work her hand from his grasp. “Now, now, Lise...”

She freed her hand from his. "It's a gesture of friendship," she protested, "and you made it feel somehow sordid."

"No, Lise. That notion came from your own head." He held his hand palm-up again. "Please?" She placed her palm on his and they locked fingers again. "You do like the contact, don't you?"

"I do. You're a good friend, Thom. I enjoy talking with you."

"Hearing you say that pleases me beyond expression, Lise." He squeezed her hand. "Do you like having your back rubbed? Your shoulders massaged?"

"Yes..."

“Would you find it unwelcome if I were to do that?”

“I ... I don't know. I don't think so.”

“So there are ways I can touch you that give you pleasure, and which don't offend you.”

“Yes.”

“At what point does it become taboo?” he asked. He released her hand and placed his on her knee. Then, he slid it up the inside of her thigh.

“Thom --please stop.”

He returned his hand to his own lap.

“That offended you.”

“Yes, it did.”

“Then, I apologize. Do you have a boyfriend, Lise?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Do you permit him to touch you like that?”

“Please, Thom. This discussion is making me uncomfortable.”

“Bear with me a little longer. Do you?”

“Yes...”

“Does having him touch you like that please you?” She looked away from him.  
“Be honest.”

“I suppose it does.”

“Then, why does it offend you when I do it?”

“Because ... you are not my boyfriend.”

“Ahh --fidelity. That answer I will accept. You reserve certain forms of intimacy for your lover. An understandable thing to do. He is without a doubt a very lucky young man. Suppose I were your boyfriend...”

“Thom --you're not.”

“Just suppose. Do you believe it impossible?”

“I don't know...”

“Supposed you were in Margliss's position. Here is a man who's giving you attention ... kindness ... someone who admires you ... who expresses his own love for you ... who worships you. That sort of love rarely goes unrequited. Would you find it impossible to love him back if he were white? If that was the only obstacle?”

“I ... I don't know...”

“Impossible, Lise. Is there some impediment that prevents a green woman



from loving a white man?

Even though she shares the same interests and enjoyments?"

"I guess not."

"Excellent. If there is, it's not nature. There's nothing physical to stop them -- certainly no anatomical reasons."

"You're trying to corrupt my thinking," she replied.

"Yes. That's exactly what I'm trying to do. I want you to question, Lise. I want you to question everything you've ever been taught. I'm trying to corrupt everyone's thinking ... society's thinking -

-that there is a barrier between our species that keeps one here and the other there. I find it amusing that the novonid community is as resistant as the human one in this regard. More so, in fact. Lise --there is no physical barrier. You and I came from the same stock. You and I are cousins.”

“But our kinds can't breed,” Lise protested. “It goes against nature,”

“No --YOU are against nature, Lise -- your whole kind is against nature. Your species was artificially created. It was the decision of your genetic designers that you not interbreed with humans. That was a human act. Nature had nothing to do with it.”

“But --it's ... it's wrong.”

“What makes it wrong? Are you invoking the tired old argument that since sex is intended for procreation, it's somehow immoral as recreation? That's rubbish. Nearly all offspring on this planet are conceived artificially these days --green ones as well as white. It doesn't keep anyone from engaging in sex. Lise --do you have a sexual relationship with ... what's your boyfriend's name?”

“Tagg.”

“Are you sexually active with Tagg?”

“Thom, please. This is getting to be too personal.”

“You need not answer, Lise. It doesn't matter to me if you are or you're not. However, if you follow that argument, you and Tagg should not be. You should never be. Since you can't conceive, you should be spending your life as a celibate virgin...”

“But...”

He eyed her. “So you and Tagg ARE physical lovers, after all. Don't deny it, Lise. I can read you like a book.” She snatched her hand from his and looked away from him. “So --why do you do it?”

“Because we enjoy it.”

Thom shook his head. “Enjoy is not the right word. You enjoy the crisp breeze after a rainstorm has washed the pollution from the air. You and Tagg do it because you love each other, and it's a means of expressing your love.” He grabbed her hand. “It's communication, Lise --just like this is communication. No one will ever convince me that two consenting adults who wish to communicate should have any means denied them --no matter what permutation of color --or gender is involved. Whose business is it, anyway, other than the participants'? Who cares how I touch you? ... other than you, of

course. It's between us and is no one else's business.”

Lise looked at Thom and shook her head.  
“I had never thought of it that way.”

“Our society doesn't want anyone thinking of it that way. It's yet another way our kind are oppressing yours, Lise. Think of it that way.”

“I ... I think ... you might be right.”

“You'll discover, my dear Lise, as you get to know me ... I may be many things. One thing I am not, however ... is often wrong.”

“So, what happened, next?” she asked.

“Next?”

“To Margliss.”

“Oh, yes... Benn began to bring Margliss with him to soirees and social events, she often wore the most exquisite evening gowns. I have a photo of her in such a gown for my book - - very striking. She started hosting such events at the house. Margliss, as I said before, is like you, Lise --a bright girl and a quick study. Benn discovered she has a good head for business. To make a long story short, Margliss became, for intents and purposes, the second Mrs Drumm. Benn left his entire estate to her.”

“How could he do that?” Lise. “We're

not permitted to own property.”

“A technicality,” Thom replied. “He actually left his estate to a trust managed by the Benevolent Shelter Society. Margliss was part of that estate. A BSS attorney was instructed to follow her direction

--without question. From a practical viewpoint, however, she is a free woman controlling her own fortune.”

“Do you mean she's in charge of Drumm Industries?”

“No. Drumm is a public corporation. Margliss is in charge of the fortune the Drumm family amassed when the



company was traded publicly.” A warble came from the dash of the car. “You must let go of my hand, Lise. I’ll need it to steer the rest of the way.”

Lise looked down and realized that Thom had insinuated his fingers between hers again. She relinquished his hand and he grasped the control stick. The car turned off the boulevard and onto a narrow roadway leading through undeveloped land to a building on a promontory. He parked the car outside a building that resembled casually-stacked crates made of polymer concrete. “This,” he said, “is my humble abode.”

“I thought you said you were taking me to your office.”

“My office is in my home.”

She looked down the long drive and realized walking to the nearest bus stop was impractical. Thom gestured her to a terraced patio. “What a view!” he exclaimed. “Don't you agree?”

She looked down and realized she was looking at the Green Zone. “This house is in Quadrant One?”

she asked.

“Certainly. Quadrant One abuts Quadrants Two and Four. This parcel sits at the very boundary of Vyonna.” He gestured. “Beyond there is no

civilization except for pomma farms and scattered villages ... until you reach the western coast.”

“You can see the whole Green Zone from here,” she said. “I can see my building.” She pointed.

“There's the courtyard. I remember when this house was built. I recall sunning in the courtyard and looking up at this hill and wondering what they were building.”

“Now, you know. Come inside, Lise. Are you hungry? I'm famished. I'd love it if you'd share a meal with me.”

“I'm not hungry,” she replied. “Today is

not my day to feed.”

“You didn't yesterday, either... Unless you had something after we parted.”

“No...”

“Then, you could eat something -- couldn't you?”

“I suppose I could.”

“Wonderful. Nothing spoils my dinner more than a table partner sitting across from me at an empty place, her hands folded across her chest and impatiently tapping her toe waiting for me to finish.”

Lise smiled. “I wouldn't do that...”

Thom regarded her face. “Lise, you have the most beautiful smile... Smile for me again.” He regarded her. “Yes... Beautiful. Please, take a seat. I’ll prepare something for us to share.”

She watched him slip a pouch into a heating device. He placed a plate and a bowl on the counter. Into the bowl he spooned a mound of brown strands. A chime sounded and he retrieved the pouch, slit it open and dumped a pile of finger-length kernels onto the plate. Onto this he spooned more of the strands.

He placed the bowl before Lise and the plate before himself.

“This doesn’t look like our food,” she

said.

“Do you mean that pinkish paste that comes in cans? I'm afraid it isn't. This is something of my own invention ... not mine, personally, but a food scientist's who works for my company. I've wanted a meal that I could share with a guest of another species. Lise --do you know what it is you eat?”

“We eat our food.”

“Do you know what's in your food?”

“No...”

“Your food is protein. I also require protein in my diet.” He pointed to the

mound of strands. “Protein comes from meat. This is derived from synthetemeat. It's been processed more than is typical for a human food product, but not as much as for a novonid's. Broman Enterprises is a leading producer of synthetemeat. We culture it on an industrial scale.”

“Culture it?”

“Yes --muscle cells grown in huge vats ... on membranes we flex to give the flesh exercise.”

“What kind of muscle?” she asked.

“It's no kind at all from no species at all. It's based on a custom-crafted cell. Once

grown, it is harvested and processed. This is the result.”

“I've never seen anything like it.”

“In addition to protein,” he continued, “you require minerals --specific minerals to support your photosynthesis.” He pushed a small bowl toward her, lifted the cover and spooned multi-colored crystals over her bowl. “Now, your meal is complete.” He gestured to his own plate. “For my meal to be complete, I need carbohydrates --which you don't need, since the chlorophyll in your skin produces them for you. The bed of parboiled pomma supplies them. Pomma noodles or bread would serve equally



well.” He drizzled a thick liquid over his plate. “Now my meal is complete.”

Thom sat, removed his hat and placed it on the table. Lise picked up a utensil that was a combination of fork and spoon. She poked it into the mound, picked up some of the strands and transferred them to her mouth. Her throat resisted swallowing them.

“Chew them, Lise. You're equipped with beautiful teeth. Put them to use.”

She picked up another scoopful, chewed with some deliberation, swallowed and smiled. “I like how the crystals feel on my tongue,” she said, “like sparkles.”

“Very good. I'm pleased.”

She took another scoop. “Thom, why do you wear that sash over your shoulder?”

“Excellent, Lise. You're becoming comfortable enough with me to ask personal questions. Why do you think I wear it?”

“To conceal your caste tattoo.”

“Amazing. You got it in one guess.”

“Why conceal it?” she asked and scooped another forkful of the strands.

“Because I like how I'm treated when folks don't know what my caste is.”

“Are you one of those self-made men who turned nothing into a fortune?”

“Do you mean like Benn Drumm? He was worker caste. He wore three staves on his shoulder. If I were like him I'd wear my caste mark with pride. I'm sorry to say, though, I earned my money the old-fashioned way. I inherited it.”

“Which caste, then?” she asked.

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because I'm curious.”

“Ahh... Curiosity. Do you know there are folks on this rock who wouldn't believe a girl like you possessed any?”

Lise rolled her eyes. “Yes, Thom. I've heard all those things and more. Please tell me your caste.”

“I'm ashamed to say it.”

“Then, show me.”

“All right... You asked for it.” He flipped the sash off his shoulder revealing a three-diamonds mark of the leadership caste. His was rendered in purple instead of the conventional black. Lise's jaw dropped. “Thom.. You're a ... a lord?”

“My proper form of address is Thom, Lord Broman. It sounds terribly stuffy, don't you think?” Lise shrugged. “I'd

much rather be known simply as Thom Broman. After all, there aren't many of us left, and it's been centuries since the last lordship was bestowed.”

“Why? Why conceal it?”

“Because I wish to be dealt with for myself, on my own terms, not for my rank. I wear this mark because I had the foresight to choose the right parents, and for no other reason.” Lise smiled. “I never asked for this and I never sought it. However --what I have done ... THAT's how I wish to be regarded. Otherwise the deference begins to feel normal after a while. I'd like to see everyone on this planet -everyone, Lise - -have the same opportunities and rights.”

“Don't lords have some additional privileges?” she asked.

“Not so much any more. I do have the honor of being a member of a rather exclusive club. The Constable-in-Chief for Vyonna is also a member. I'll admit it comes in handy when a traffic cop pulls me over for speeding.”

Lise swallowed the last scoop of her meal and set her utensil into her empty bowl. She pressed her hand against her abdomen. “It was very good ... but now I feel like I over ate.” She palpitated her abdomen. “My stomach is bulging out...”

“Novonids have smaller stomachs than

whites,” Thom replied. She put her fingers to her lips. “I’m sorry, Lise --I shouldn’t have given you such a large portion.”

“No --it’s my fault. I shouldn’t have eaten all of it. I was so absorbed in our conversation...”

“That’s quite a compliment, Lise. Sharing a good meal and good conversation with a friend is one of my favorite pleasures. I’m delighted to have prepared something we could both enjoy.”

“I’m starting to feel uncomfortable,” she said.

“Would you like to lie down?”

“Maybe that would help.”

He helped her to her feet and led her to a bench. She lay on her back and Thom slid a cushion under her head. “Do you think you're apt to vomit?” he asked.

“I don't think so...”

“I'll get a basin --just in case.” Tom returned and set a polymer tub on the floor. “I'll do some more work on my book and let you rest.”

Lise closed her eyes and tried to ignore the throbbing under her ribcage. That she might vomit was a distinct possibility.



Perhaps she should attempt to, and get some relief. It would humiliate her, though; and embarrass her host. She thought instead of her conversation with Thom on the ride to the house --his story of Margliss ... the table talk...

“Lise... Lise...” She opened her eyes and looked around. Darkness had fallen and the walls of the room were washed in artificial light.

“Oh! I must've fallen asleep.”

“Yes you did. Are you feeling better?”

She pressed her hand to her abdomen. “Yes... I feel better... I can feel that lump of food working its way through my

intestine.”

“You looked like you needed rest, so I didn't disturb you. Now, it's approaching curfew. We need to get you home.”

Thom led her to the car and she climbed in. He started the turbines and sped down the hill, onto city streets and through the now dark and deserted canyons of downtown Vyonna. The car headed on an arterial leading toward Quadrant Four. Thom turned onto a side street. Chimes began sounding.

“The warning chimes!” Lise exclaimed. “You'll never get home before curfew.”

“Not to worry,” he replied. “One of the

perquisites of wearing this caste mark is exemption from curfew. I won't have any problem.”

The car approached the Green Zone. “You can let me off at this corner,” she said, pointing. “There's a passageway leading to my house.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

He pulled the car to the curb. “I'm sorry,” she said, “you didn't get your interview done.”

“Not at all,” he replied. “I think we made excellent progress.”

The curfew siren began wailing as Lise stepped from the car, made her way to a set of steps leading underground and descended them.

X

Lise slowed her descent as the darkness thickened. Total blackness had enveloped her by the time she reached the bottom. She was in one of the old service tunnels that ran between the buildings in this part of Vyonna. Long abandoned power, communications and data mains ran through the tunnels. In the direction away from the Zone the tunnel had been bricked up, to prevent Zone inhabitants from using it as a hidden highway into other parts of the city.

She felt for one of the sticks left by others who traveled before her. Her hand touched one. She grabbed it and swept it before her as she worked her way through the tunnel under the pavement. Eventually dim light appeared ahead. She reached the terminus and set the stick in another pile for use by a traveler heading the other way.

Her eyes now accustomed to darkness, she walked through basements and connecting passageways until reaching another set of steps. These led to the surface safely inside the Zone. She climbed to the street and walked briskly toward the courtyard and to the doorway

leading down to her basement home.

“Mother! Father!” she called.

“Lise!” her mother replied. “Bar the door.”

She pulled shut the door leading to the courtyard and dropped a heavy steel bar into brackets bolted onto the building's frame. Below her, at the foot of the steps came the orange flicker of a greaselamp.

“We heard the sirens and you weren't here,” Grott admonished her. “Your mother was worried.”

“I was well in the tunnel when curfew sounded,” she replied. “I wasn't on the

streets.”

“Still --you were cutting it close.”

“I came home as soon as I could,” Lise replied. “Is Tagg working tonight?”

“Yes,” Rayla replied. “He left before sundown.”

Lise pulled aside the sheet that screened off her sleeping area from the rest of the basement. She emptied her pockets and placed the scrip card under her mattress. Then, she stripped off her sandals, shorts and bandeau and stretched out on the mattress.

Dawn twilight roused Lise. She arose

and began her morning routine. She was getting better at rising early. Even so, Grott and Rayla had already left the house. Lise was happy, at least, that Megan's workday started later than her parents'.

She bathed, dressed and headed for the courtyard, pulling shut the door behind her. She had no way of locking it from the outside, but that was no matter. There was nothing of value in her basement home worth stealing. Grott was right about one thing, she reflected. If you have nothing, then no one can take it from you.

She headed toward the gate leading outside the Zone. "Tagg!" she yelled



upon seeing him approach. She ran to him. “Tagg! How was your day?”

“My day? Horrible. Absolutely horrible. Just like every day.”

“Horrible how?”

“I'm the junior guy so I get all the shit tasks. The others tease me and the foreman rides me. I hate the work. I'm an artist. I want to draw. I want to sell my art. Lise... When are we going to see each other?”

How many days has it been? I might as well sleep in the barracks at the restaurant and save myself the trouble of coming home.”

“This after,” she said. “I’ll come straight home. We can have time together, then.” She regarded the exhaustion on his face. “Get some rest while I’m at work.”

“I need sun.”

“Nap in the courtyard. I’ll get my sun during the day, too. Get some rest and then... When I come home...” She put her arms around his neck and thrust her hips against his.

“Your folks will be home. We can’t.”

“They understand. They won’t disturb us.” She kissed his cheek. “I’ll see you this after.”

“Right.” He shuffled toward the courtyard.

Lise headed for the corner and stood with a growing crowd of other novonids. The streetcar pulled to a stop, the driver not bothering with opening the door. Lise could see a handful of white passengers inside the coach.

A pair of pubescent novonid boys approached the side of the bus, shouting and pelting the windows with loose chunks of pavement. The driver gunned the turbine and pulled away, leaving most of the assembled standing at the corner. Some of the men in the group shouted and began chasing the two boys, who laughed and ran back into the Zone.

Lise climbed the steps to Megan's house and pressed the chime. The door opened and Megan welcomed her with what had become her usual greeting: a firm hug.

“I'm sorry I'm late,” Lise said, “there was trouble with the bus over by the Zone.”

“You're not late,” Megan replied, “but I have no time to spare. Klarissa and Geddes are finishing breakfast.” She grabbed her bag and rushed out the door.

Lise cleared the table of breakfast detritus. “Geddes ... Klarissa... Use the toilet and put on your sun hats. We're going to the park.”

“Awww,” Geddes whined, “we go to the park every day.”

“The fresh air is good for you.”

Lise walked, holding hands with the twins. Megan's neighborhood was becoming as familiar to her as her own. She saw familiar faces and some of them acknowledged her with a nod or a smile. Upon reaching the park the twins headed for the playground. Lise sat on a bench, took a swig from her bottle of water; then stretched out her legs and leaned back to absorb sunlight.

“Hello,” a voice called.

Lise rolled her eyes. “Thom...”

“I worried about you after dropping you off.”

“I told you I'd be fine and I was. I know my way around that part of town.”

“I'm sure you do. May I sit?”

Lise gestured that he may. “Thom ... don't you have anything better to do than stalk me?”

He rolled his eyes in thought. “No... As a matter of fact, I don't.”

“I thought you had a company to run.”

“It runs itself... Lise --I hope after you're off work today you could...”

“Not today, Thom. I promised Tagg I'd spend some time with him.”

“Your lucky boyfriend... Maybe we could do some talking now, while you watch your charges.”

“Fine, Thom. What do you want to know?”

“Everything. I want to know how this world looks through those beautiful orange eyes of yours.”

Lise uncapped her water bottle and took another swig. “I don't know how to begin.”

“Have you thought any more about what

we discussed yesterday?”

“Do you mean Margliss and Benn?”

“Precisely.”

“Yes, I have.”

“And...”

“And I believe she is a fortunate woman.”

“No, Lise. Have you thought more about physical relationships between our kinds?”

“I haven't dwelt on it.” She sipped more from her bottle and capped it. “I suppose



if I were in Margliss's position and a white man demonstrated his care for me; then I could love him.”

“Could you make love with him?”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, Thom. I think I could ... if I loved him.”

“Then, there's hope for someone like me.”

“Thom.. Please.”

“I'm serious, Lise. I have ... feelings for you. To my eyes, you are the most beautiful creature I've ever seen. I've never met your equal.”

Lise could feel warmth in her cheeks.  
“Thom...”

“Yes --the combination of your face and your body ... your long, shapely legs ... the muscle definition in your arms ... perfection.”

“Thom, please stop this.”

“And, your personality and your intellect. You are undoubtedly as bright as any white I've known and brighter than most. I must know, Lise. How do you find me, physically?”

“You're all right physically.”

“Do you find me at all attractive? Does

some ... chemistry get ignited?"

"Thom --we don't have that sort of friendship."

"Nonsense. Whenever a man and a woman interact, there's a sexual element. There can't help but be. To deny it is to deny biology. I know I feel it with you. You ooze sex appeal. I need to know if you feel any ... intrinsic biology from me."

"Thom --if you don't stop this right now, I'll have to ask you to leave. Or, I'll gather the twins and leave myself."

"Oh, Lise... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you. I do care for you. I'll bet I

care for you as much as this Tagg fellow does.”

“I believe you do. It's different with Tagg.”

“Because he's ... a novonid?”

“No.” She looked him straight in his face. “It's different because I know Tagg cares for me, for me. I don't believe you do. I believe you care for me, for you; not for me.”

He held both hands to his sternum. “Lise! You've wounded me! How could you think that?”

“It's simple. I've told you repeatedly that

I'm uncomfortable discussing ... this topic with you. If you cared for me, for me ... you'd understand that --and stop talking about it." She stood. "Klarissa!

Geddes!" she called.

"Wait, wait... I'm sorry, Lise. I truly am. I hope I haven't ruined the rapport we've built." She folded her arms across her chest. "Is there any way we can get together tonight? I want to discuss with you what it's like to be you. I promise ... physicality is off limits."

"I can't tonight, Thom. I promised Tagg."

"You're sure it's impossible."

She sighed. “Tagg goes to work around sundown...”

“That'll work. Suppose I wait for you where I dropped you off last night -- outside the Zone.”

“Thom --if I agree to this will you promise to stop pestering me?”

“Absolutely.”

“Fine --I'll meet you at the corner.” The twins raced each other to where Lise stood and each wrapped their arms around her legs. “Klarissa, Geddes -- you nearly knocked me over!”

“I was here first,” Geddes yelled.

“No, I was,” Klarissa replied. “Lise, which one was here first?”

“You know --I really couldn't tell. Come on, gang...” She held their hands and led them toward the street.

“Sundown!” Thom called after them.

Lise sat cross-legged on the floor playing a board game with the twins; one in which players' pieces chased each other around the twists and turns of a track. The latch on the front door rattled and the twins leapt up and ran toward it. Megan stepped into the house and hugged each twin.

“I'll pick this up,” Lise said and scooped

game pieces off the floor.

“Leave it lie, Lise,” Megan replied.  
“Maybe they'll play more, later.”

“Megan --may I ask you a question?”

“Of course, Lise.”

“Do you ever have a problem with men making unwelcome advances?”

Her eyes widened. “Hmm... I can't recall the last time it was unwelcome... I'm flattered by your question, Lise. Truth is, it's been a while since any man has looked twice at me. You, on the other hand



--I imagine you have to chase them away with a stick. You're a knockout, Lise ... a very pretty girl."

Lise bit her lip. "Thank you. Megan -- what would you think if a novonid man started following you around ... telling you how alluring you are ... suggesting the two of you start a physical relationship?"

"I don't know ... I'd complain to his owner."

"What if you believed he truly did care for you, but didn't quite know how to express it? What if you liked him as a friend otherwise, but wished he'd stop the sexual advances?"

“That complicates it. Is this your problem, Lise? A white man has been harassing you?”

“Harassing is too strong. Bothering me would be more accurate.”

“Have you told him to get lost?”

“He doesn't like hearing no as an answer.”

“I wouldn't be afraid to slap his face ... or, kick him in the balls. Most white men understand that message.”

Lise giggled. “Most novonid men, also...”

“Lise --we're so much more alike than we differ. You and I have more in common being women than I have with any white man I know.”

“Megan... How would you feel if, when they're old enough, Geddes fell in love with a green woman or Klarissa with a green man?”

Megan stared at her. “How would you feel?”

“They're your children.”

“I don't want to think about them dating at all,” Megan replied, “not for a number of years yet.” She looked at the ceiling and sighed. “That wasn't an answer, was

it? I understand your question. It is the test, isn't it? The test whether or not I'm sincere. I've learned a lot from you, Lise. I claim ... I like to believe I consider you and your kind equal partners on this world. How would I feel if one of my children fell in love with one of yours? I don't know, Lise. That's an honest answer."

Lise nodded. "I understand."

"I hope it doesn't change how you feel about me."

"No. I wouldn't know the answer myself." Megan opened her arms and embraced Lise. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Lise walked toward the corner where the busses ran. She half expected to see Thom loitering somewhere along the way.

The bus came and she climbed onto the platform in back, sharing it with several novonid factory workers. It carried her to central Vyonna where she changed to one on the line heading for the Zone. She reached the courtyard. Tagg lay on his back on a concrete bench, asleep. There were no signs of Grott or Rayla.

Lise descended the steps and looked around the basement. It was deserted. She slipped out of her sandals and stripped off her top and shorts; then she climbed the steps and stood in the

doorway.

“Tagg!” she yelled. “TAGG! TAGG!” Tagg roused and lifted himself onto his elbows. “Tagg! Over here!”

Tagg glanced her way and looked past her. Then his gaze swung back around. He jumped off the bench and sprinted toward her. When he reached her he scooped her up and carried her below. Lise lay beside Tagg, running her hand across his chest. “I’m sorry, Lise,” he said. She kissed him. “Nothing to be sorry for,” she replied. “It felt good. I can still feel it...”

“But I didn’t make you... You didn’t have...”

“It's all right. I enjoyed it very much.”  
She kissed him again.

“Some of the other men brag about how they make women... how big they are and how long they last

... and how many times... Not once. Not once have I been able to ... The other men joke about guys like me... I'm a two-pump chump.”

She pressed her hand to his mouth. “Stop this talk, Tagg. You're making yourself miserable. Don't believe what those other men say. It's all stupid man talk. Don't believe their claims. I've been with them on rounds. They're nothing special. They're not any different than

you.”

“You're saying that.”

“It's the truth, Tagg. And many of them don't ... well --they don't last any longer than you do. Besides, I don't need one to enjoy myself with you. You need it, and you had one --and I love how it feels when you do. I love drifting asleep afterward with you in my arms. None of what those men talk about matters to me. What matters is how you make me feel, and you make me feel good. Be happy we're together for an afternoon. Okay?”

Tagg lay on his back in silence

She kissed him. “I thought about you all



day,” she said, “what we'd be doing... I wanted this, Tagg. Thinking about it ... anticipating it is part of enjoying it. I always want you.” She touched his face and stroked tears from his cheeks. “I love you.”

“Oh, Lise... I'm so unhappy. I hate my job. I HATE it. I have half a mind to just walk away from it ... hide in the Zone forever. I wouldn't care if I was branded a renegade.”

“Don't talk like that. I know what it's like to live underground, in constant fear of the bounty hunters. It's no life, Tagg. You'd never be able to sell your sketches. At least you can do that, on your days off.”

“Yes, at least...”

“No more feeling sorry for yourself. ”

“Maybe I should try being so bad at my job, they'll fire me. My owner will be pissed off, but what can he do?”

“Nothing but place you in another job.”

“It's worked before...”

Lise began smoothing her hand along Tagg's arm. She could hear footfalls on the steps and motion in the room.

“Tagg...” Lise heard her mother's voice.  
“Tagg --we're feeding tonight. Would

you like some before you go to work?"

"No thank you, mam," he replied. "I'll feed at the restaurant."

"Lise? Are you feeding?"

"No thanks, Mother. I don't need to today."

"It was four days ago..."

"I fed on my own day before yesterday."

"So, I need to open just one can tonight..."

Tagg stretched and put his hand behind his neck. Lise stroked his body from

armpit to waist. "I could fall asleep again," she said.

"So could I... I'd better not, though. They'll dock me if I'm late. Then, I'll have my owner on my back."

"You should suggest babysitting as a job," Lise said. "The work's not hard, it's never boring and you can work during the day."

"I'm no good with kids."

"I don't believe that. Handling children is easy --you were one, once. Just remember what it was like."

Tagg rose on his elbows. "I wonder how

late it's getting.”

Lise restrained him. “Not late enough.”

“No...” He craned to look through one of the sill windows. “Sun's almost on the horizon. I'd better go.” Tagg stood, pulled on his shorts and pushed his way past the hanging sheet.

“Off to your job?” Lise heard Rayla ask.

“Yes, mam...”

Lise pulled her bandeau over her head and stepped into her shorts. She slipped her feet into her sandals and walked past Rayla toward the steps.

“Where are you going?” Rayla asked.

“Out. I must meet with Thom.”

“The white man? Lise ... you just finished with Tagg, and now you have a liaison with this white man?”

“Not a liaison, mother. What do you think I am?”

“What about rounds? You haven't been on rounds but once. It's a responsibility.”

“That's right,” Grott added from his seat in the shadows.

“I can't believe you two want me to go on rounds.”

“It's a duty for women in the Zone,” Rayla replied. “It's a double duty for those of us who are infertile.”

“Thom is doing important work, and I'm part of it. You said so, yourself, Mother --I'm no longer a child. I can come and go as I please.” Lise started up the steps to the courtyard.

“Be careful of curfew,” Rayla called after her.

Lise decided to take the shorter, and more dangerous route to her rendezvous spot. It wasn't very dark, yet, she figured. She exited a gate and passed the brothel, then through another gate in the wall enclosing the Zone. The street was

deserted.

She crossed and walked a block to the corner where Thom had dropped her off. He wasn't there. Lise scanned the area, looking for signs of street thugs and establishing her situational awareness. She paced back and forth and glanced up at one of the constables' surveillance pylons. Its camera was trained on the Zone.

An older and dented green car pulled to a stop. The driver whistled. Lise crouched to look in the window. The driver held up a pair of yellow fivers. Lise shook her head.

“How much, then?” the driver asked.



“You're a looker.”

“Sir,” she said politely, “I think you've made a mistake. I'm waiting here for a friend.” She pointed toward the corner. “There's an establishment over there that may be what you're looking for.”

The car's turbine whined and it sped from the corner. Lise fanned from her face the burnt alcohol fumes of its exhaust and resumed pacing. The sun was now almost completely below the horizon. A red Drumm speedster pulled to a stop, its twin turbines making a dissonant whine. The passenger door popped open and Lise stepped inside.

“I'm sorry I'm late,” Thom said.

“You're not. We said sundown, and it's sundown.” Lise fastened her restraint. Thom pushed the stick forward and the car moved away from the curb. They made it about half a block when he pulled to the curb and pressed his hand to his forehead.

“What's the matter?” Lise asked.

Thom gestured behind them with his thumb. She turned around and through the rear window saw a constable's car behind them. A second car screeched to a halt in front, blocking them. A deputy pulled open the passenger door and another grabbed Lise's upper arm and hauled her from the car. He pulled both her arms back and held them in a lock.

Lise squirmed. “Calm down you little green whore,” he sneered.

A third deputy felt down the front of Lise's shorts. He pulled his hand out, rubbing his thumb against his finger. “She's full of jizz all right.”

“She's a fast worker,” the first deputy replied. “It's hardly sundown and she's on her second or third trick.”

Thom slid back the car's cowl and another officer leaned against his door. “What's this all about?”

Thom asked.

“Procurement ... solicitation. That corner

is widely known as a pickup point for prostitutes. Your green ... friend was observed directing a customer to the brothel across the street in the Zone. The customer was an undercover agent.”

“We watched her come from the brothel across the street.”

“I did not,” Lise protested. “He propositioned me. I turned him down and merely pointed out a fact that's even more widely known than this corner!”

“Hold your tongue, green girl.”

Thom held his hands up in a gesture requesting calm.

“May I see your identification, sir?” the constable said.

“Certainly,” Thom replied. He reached into his pocket and with his thumb and forefinger withdrew a polymer wallet. From it he removed a holocard and handed it to the constable. The officer examined it in the light from the rear cruiser's headlamps. “Chief....” he said. The head constable took the card and examined it. He made a shrill whistle and a hand gesture toward his troops, meaning stop. “Lord Broman... I didn't notice the emblem on your car. My apologies, Lord.”

Thom snapped his fingers and the officer returned the card. “Release the girl,” he

demanded. “She's a friend of mine.”

“But, we just got done arresting her,” the deputy replied.

“Then,” Thom said in a voice of quiet authority, “you had better un-arrest her.” He turned to the head constable. “I can have your badges for this. I want your numbers. All of them.”

“We can make the procurement rap stick,” the deputy protested.

“Let her go,” the head cop ordered.

Lise sat in the passenger seat, pulled the door closed and rubbed her upper arm. “Are you all right?”

Thom asked.

She trembled. “I will be once I calm down.”

The chief constable handed Thom a sheet torn from a notepad. Thom scanned it and then glanced at the deputies. “Is your number on here, too?” he asked the head cop.

The cop handed him a card. “Again, my apologies, Lord Broman ... sir.” The deputies piled into their cars and pulled away.

Thom held his hand, palm-up near Lise. “Lise...”

She grabbed his hand, locked her fingers with his and squeezed. She bit her lip and clamped shut her eyes to stop the tears. It didn't work. "How could they? How could they think I was a..."

"It's all right, Lise. It's over." He leaned toward her.

She threw her arms around him and sobbed. "He had no right to touch me like that!"

"What did he do?"

"He put his hand down my shorts and felt ... inside me!" She sobbed. "Just before I came here, Tagg and I..." She wailed.



“So that's the comment about second trick... Which one did it?”

“The older, short, fat one.”

“I'll have his badge, for sure. You're right, Lise. There was no excuse for that.”

“They would've taken me away...”

Thom caressed the back of her bald head. “It's over, Lise. Lise... If you ever have trouble with the constables, just call me. I'll take care of it.”

“I've had more trouble with them since I've been registered than when I was underground.”

“I don't know why they're not out solving real crimes ... crimes with victims,” Thom replied. Personally, I don't think prostitution should be a crime.” He looked at her. “I'm sorry, Lise, for bringing up an inappropriate topic.”

“It's all right. I agree with you.” She wiped tears from her face.

“Good.” Thom pushed the stick forward and headed down the pavement. “These streets certainly get deserted this time of day.”

“Yes,” she replied. “Even the taxis won't come here after sundown.”

“I don't drive here myself after dusk. It is

the short way to my place, though. And, it's not all that dark, yet.”

## XI

Thom piloted the Drumm roadster over the broken streets of Quadrant Four, heading away from the Green Zone. This part of town was commodity industrial - the car drove past brickyards, scrap metal reclaimers and foundries. Many of these business had begun using novonid workers in large numbers and many of these came from the Zone.

“Lise,” Thom said, “I've been thinking about what you said this morning. I see your point. You're wrong --I am in love with you ... for you. I will be even if that

love is unrequited. As for my inappropriate behavior... Well, it is, unfortunately, one of my faults. It seems whenever I'm fond of someone I become overly familiar. I was out of line, and for making you uncomfortable I am deeply sorry."

"I accept your apology, Thom. You have been a good friend."

"Don't hesitate to reprimand me if I do it again."

Thom stopped the car at an intersection. "This is the boundary between Quadrants One and Four,"

he said. "Up there is my house. There

are steps leading down to the street here, and a bus stop. If you ever need to get here by yourself, this is how to do it.” He made a right turn. “This street takes us to the main boulevard, up and around to the main entrance. It is quicker, however, than driving through downtown. I wouldn't do it close to curfew, however.”

Lise studied the panel of dials and controls in the center of the dashboard.

“Would you like to try driving?” Thom asked. “Take the stick. You're left-handed, aren't you?”

“Yes...”

“I thought so. Most novonids are.” He put his hand on hers. “Push forward to accelerate; pull back to stop and right or left to turn.”

Lise smiled. “This is fun.”

“Maybe you should get driving credentials.”

“May I?”

“Of course you may. All you need to do is pass the exams. More and more novonids are getting driving permits -- they're essential for some of the jobs your kind are asked to perform these days.”

“I thought it was prohibited.”

“It was until a few standards ago. Then the powers that be came to a startling conclusion that maybe novonids with driving permits would prove useful... So, they changed the roadsigns to be symbolic --for the benefit of illiterate novonids...”

“And, illiterate whites, too...”

“I suppose.”

“...Just like the bus routes.”

The car approached a curve. Thom pressed against Lise's hand. “You need to anticipate and follow through.”

“I think I could do this,” she said.

“I have no doubt you could. We're approaching the access road. It's a bit tricky so I'll take it from here.” Lise relinquished the stick and Thom piloted the car up the hill. Thom parked the car outside his house and escorted Lise inside. He led her to an office containing a large desk and a wall-mounted mediascreen.

Lise looked around Thom's office. A wall of shelves held binders and a disheveled pile of documents, some looking quite old. From the ceiling, on wires hung a miniature of a native Varadan flying creature crafted from polymer resin. Thom sat behind his desk



and gestured toward a chair. Lise sat.  
“Okay, Thom. What do you want to know about novonids?”

“Nothing.”

“I don't understand. You said you wanted to talk to me...”

“Lise --I know all there is to know about novonids, I'm afraid. More than all. I have studied your kind. I know your anatomy and your physiology. I know your history. I have a library of material on how you came to be --notes from the original experiments ... feasibility studies. This is source material, Lise

--original lab notes ... data cartridges,

hard copy. I have the largest and most comprehensive collection of material on novonids anywhere on this planet. Much of it comprises rare, original, one-of-a-kind documents. And, I have read them all. You can't tell me anything about novonids that I don't already know. For example..." He gestured toward the model of the winged beast hanging from his ceiling. "Did you ever see one of those in the wild?"

"Yes --just the other day. I think it's what we saw. It was circling over the pomma savanna beyond the edge of the city."

"It's called a photoptertheron."

"A what?" she asked.

“Photoptertheron ... phot-op-TER-ther-on,” he repeated emphasizing each syllable. Lise mouthed the word. “This is a very good likeness. Tell me, Lise -- do you see anything remarkable about it's appearance?”

She regarded the likeness. “A flying beast is remarkable enough,” she replied. “What does it have to do with novonids?”

“You'll see shortly... Do you know what the word means?” She shook her head. “It's derived from classic Greek...”

“Classic Greek?”

“Yes --a long-dead language from our

ultimate planet of origin... Break the word apart ... photo-pter-theron ... light-wing-beast.”

“The wings do look very light-weight,” she replied.

Thom smiled. “Not the right sense of 'light', Lise... Do you notice anything interesting about its color?”

“A rather non-descript brown, I'd say.” Thom stood on his desk, grasped the model and turned it so she could see the upper surface of the wings. They were a deep, forest green. “Green wings?” Her eyes met his.

“The same color green as your skin,

Lise. These creatures spend the sunlit half of the day soaring overhead and soaking up the sunshine that nourishes them. When darkness falls they wrap themselves in their wings and roost on the highest points to evade their predators.”

“Do you mean ... that I ... that we ... that all novonids share genetic material with ... them?”

“Indeed. Like a photoptertheron, you are a symboitic being. The structures that color your skin green and your blood brown are in fact micro-organisms, harvested from creatures like the very one you watched soar over the savanna. Now, after so many generations, they

have become endemic ... passed from mother to fetus *in utero* . Those organules feed you and feed from you, consuming the carbon dioxide your muscles exude. Their waste is your manna --and vice-versa.”

Lise stroked her forearm and studied her skin. “The green corpuscles... It makes perfect sense.”

“Inventing humanoid photosynthesis from scratch was far too daunting a task for your designers, Lise

--brilliant as they were.” He flourished his hand toward the suspended model. “However, this native creature offered a working system that needed only to be

mated to a hospitable human matrix.” He resumed his place behind his desk. “As you see --I know more about your kind than you do.”

“Then ... what...”

“What you can teach me, Lise, is what it's like to be you. I want to know about one novonid named Lise.”

“I ... I don't know...”

“You don't know what it's like to be you?”

“I don't know what to tell you.”

“Are you happy, Lise?”

“Oh, yes. I'm very happy.”

“How can you be? How can anyone be with a registration number seared into your flesh?”

“I'm delighted to have this, Thom,” she said tapping her left clavicle. “You don't know what it's like living in fear. For three years I couldn't stray from that courtyard your terrace looks upon --not in daylight, at least. Now, I'm free.”

“Free? How can you call yourself free? Watch this...” He picked up the control to his mediascreen.

“I'll show you what it really means to be a novonid.”



“Do you think you can tell me something I don't already know?”

“I think I can,” he replied.

The screen displayed a message reading please stand by.

“What is this?” Lise asked.

“This is today's novonid auction. It's about to get underway. Oh, this isn't a channel you can receive on that screen we bought for your mom. You need to be a registered novonid broker and have a seat on the exchange to view this.”

“You're a broker, Thom?”

“Oh, yes. I've never owned one but I've bought countless. I buy them to free them.”

“Do you mean you buy them for the BSS?”

“I started out doing that. I was a member of the BSS, but we've since parted ways. Benevolent Shelter Society... Have you ever been inside a BSS shelter? Shelter is about it --large barracks, segregated by gender... I became convinced the BSS isn't really interested in helping your people, Lise. They're interested in preserving the status-quo.”

“That's the way my mother feels about them, too.”

“Certainly they don't want to see novonids put to death. We can thank the BSS for the Termination Act, and I suppose that's something. No, Lise. I wanted to do more, so I founded an organization called Novonid Rescue. When we learn of a novonid in distress ... one deserving relief from an oppressive or threatening situation, we buy and free him ... or her.”

“Free?”

“Absolutely, totally free. The individual may live any life he or she desires ... find whatever work ... keep whatever wages ... live wherever, sleep with whomever... As free as a white.”

“There's no such thing as a free novonid.”

“A legal technicality. Once a novonid's title is transferred to Novonid Rescue, there is absolutely nothing the legal system can do about it. Lise ... over the past ten years I have spent in excess of twenty million buying and freeing novonids.”

“Twenty million?” Lise could not fathom such a number.

“When it comes to helping, Lise --I put my money where my mouth is.”

“Where ... how...”

“How did I come by twenty million? It's a small part of my fortune. My family founded Broman Enterprises. Up until the moment of my father's death, Broman Enterprises was the largest and most active novonid brokerage on the western continent... Perhaps the whole planet. At one time Broman Enterprises owned six hundred novonids. They were pledged as collateral on loans made to one of the larger pomma farms by our financial division. When the farm defaulted, we acquired them. And, we held liens on twelve thousand more.”

“My goodness...”

“Now, do you feel like you've been sleeping with the enemy?” He looked

toward her “Not that we've actually slept together, but a guy can dream, can't he?”

Lise rolled her eyes. “Thom...”

“Within ten days of my father's passing, I had dismantled the whole operation. I kept my father's seat on the exchange, though, so I can keep an eye on the market. The Broman name is deeply stained with the brown blood of your kind, Lise. I hope my actions sponge away some of that stain. I find it amusingly ironic that my father's ruthless search for profits yielded the funds that I use to un-do the very institution he spent his life supporting. Ah... The auction is

about to begin.”

“Thom... I had no idea...”

“In addition to buying novonids I buy properties. Just last year I bought the old residential campus from Vyonna College. The college is consolidating its campus in the suburbs of Quadrant Two. We bought a cluster of dormitories, on the cheap. They make perfect starter apartments for novonids ... both singles and couples.” He showed her a photoimage. “This is one of the rooms.”

“It's small...”

“Each unit has two bedrooms, a lavatory and a sitting area. There's no kitchen, but

novonids don't cook meals. I rent one of these for two thousand.”

“Two thousand per pay period?” she asked.

“Two thousand per standard year,” Thom replied.

Lise looked at the ceiling. “I could afford that on what Megan is paying me! In a couple of years, once my registration fee is paid... And, Tagg too...”

“My organization also is a holding company. Let's say a freed novonid wants to buy a house.”



“We can't own property...”

“No --but my holding company can. We've developed legal fictions that permit your people to live like my people. And my people don't like it. They don't like it one bit. That delights me.”

“Can't they pass laws?”

“Oh, they've tried. You see, passing any law restricting what we do will trample on some other white enterprise somewhere on the planet. We have the best business and legal minds on our side, Lise. There is nothing they can do about it.” He turned to his display. “Let's see what inventory is on the block

today.” Thom manipulated the mediascreen control and screens of images appeared --images of novonid men, mostly, and a few women.

“Pretty typical,” he said, “an estate sale. We don't see many farm workers in the auctions. Those are traded by the planters, among themselves. They know who's good and who's not. Once in a while a farm will be liquidated and some workers end up here.”

“It's how my mother and father came to Vyonna,” Lise replied.

Thom continued scrolling. He stopped on an image of a young novonid man. “What do you think of him, Lise? He's

currently employed by a landscaping company. Look at that physique. Too bad you already have a boyfriend. Otherwise, I'd buy him for you."

"Thom... He's not my type."

"What do you think of seeing all these green faces, Lise? Every one of them for sale. My regret is I can't buy every single novonid on this planet and free them all. I would if I could ... in a heartbeat."

"Wait," Lise said. "Stop and go back one." She leaned toward the screen. "That's Glinda!" Her owner was murdered some days ago."

“I'll bring up her data sheet... Fertile, breeding female ... seven gravidas ... she has some life in her yet. She's pregnant ... pedigree of the fetus unknown... and with a little boy.” Thom sat back and stroked his chin. “We'll keep an eye on her. My gut tells me one of the other breeders will snap her up. I bet she sells tonight for five thousand.”

“Five thousand? That's all?”

“Five thousand, tops. A male's worth one but a female's worth ten. You've heard that saying?”

“Of course.”

“I've heard it, too. It's true, perhaps, on

the farms, but not in Vyonna. Glinda's getting along in years. Her pedigree isn't all that good to begin with, and her little boy..."

"Rinn. I know him. He's a nice little boy."

"But of unknown parentage --a mongrel. In this business, here in Vyonna, pedigree is everything. On top of that, Glinda has born five other children, with one miscarriage. She's about halfway through her useful life. Let's say a breeder can raise Rinn and his sibling and sell them into the workforce. They'll bring twenty-five hundred each. If Glinda can bear five more children... Five thousand would be a good

investment for a second-tier breeder.”

“But... Glinda was taken by the BSS when her owner died.”

“And this is what the BSS does --care for her until she can be sold. If there's no buyer, then the BSS

will put her into a shelter. And, there she'll stay.”

The screen flashed. “Bidding is open... Look --twenty-five hundred on Glinda already... There are unscrupulous buyers who'll troll the shelters, picking up discards at rock-bottom prices. I think that's how a lot of the females end up in the brothels. Of course, the BSS is

always ready to let a white adopt a novonid. They turn a blind eye to what happens after.”

“Would you buy Glinda for your organization?”

“Perhaps. We'll see how the bidding goes. I have watches on several auctions tonight, but I doubt I'll move on any of them. I know who all the other brokers are. If a good one bids on her, we'll let it ride. If it looks like one of the sleazebags is on the hunt... Well, let's say I'm an expert at bid sniping and leave it at that. Since she's an acquaintance of yours, we'll give her extra attention.”

“Who bid on Glinda?”

“One of the breeders I know. Not a bad one.”

Lise watched the clock tick down. The bid jumped to thirty-five hundred.

“Look!” Thom pointed to the screen. “That's Ramina! Why is she bidding on such a one as Glinda?”

Things are going to get interesting, now. The market knows Ramina buys only the best stock... I wonder what she knows that we don't.”

The bids began climbing in hundred-unit increments as the clock ticked down.



Thom flipped to other auctions and then back to Glinda. The bid now sat at six thousand.

“This is crazy,” Thom said. “There's no way she's worth six grand... It's a bidding frenzy, now. They're not thinking what they're doing. Look! Ramina's back in at seventy-five hundred.” The clocked ticked its final ticks. “Done and done! Ramina bought Glinda for eight thousand. I don't understand it.”

“Thom... How can you say Glinda isn't worth more than five thousand?”

“I wouldn't have paid four thousand. I learned this business at my daddy's knee, Lise. Ramina knows something about

Glinda, and her participation spawned competition.”

“Ramina didn't seem too distressed about the news of Glinda's owner's murder...”

“Now, Lise... I know Ramina. She's an excellent breeder and a savvy businesswoman, but she's no murderess. If you're insinuating she'd kill another owner in order to scoop one up at an estate sale... I don't think she's capable of THAT. She'd much more likely have bought Glinda outright in a private transaction.”

“Poor Glinda,” Lise said.

“Poor Glinda? Lise --she was snagged by the top breeder in Vyonna. Ramina takes good care of hers.”

“I know. But it means she'll be separated from her man.”

“Glinda's living with someone?”

“Yes --in the Zone.”

“Why didn't you say something? That's exactly the sort of situation Novonid Rescue looks for.”

“Do you mean you would've bought her?”

“I'd have paid more attention. Was her

man in tonight's list?" He began flipping through screens.

"No --he belongs to another owner."

"Hmmm... That does complicate it. Still --I wish you had said something. We look for stable family units and try to preserve them. It's too late to do anything about it, now."

Thom stood and opened a cabinet. "Here is my collection of original documentation. It's my pride and joy. Some of this dates back five hundred years, when the notion of novonids was merely the gleam in a geneticist's eye. It's all here, Lise --why you are as you are. You were built for a purpose."

“Yes --to pick pomma.”

“No. That was one intended purpose. There are too many other attributes. For example, your strength. Novonid muscle is stronger, gram for gram than a human's. I wager you'd easily beat me in a footrace, and if you and I got into a wrestling match, you'd splat me flat. Such strength isn't needed for picking pomma.”

“Then, why?”

“Because our people anticipated returning to space, some day. This colony was founded and later abandoned, leaving a die-hard group that called the place home and preferred to

stay than return to the homeworld. Varada lacks the exotic minerals necessary for building warp coils and inertial sinks, at least based on homeworld technology. As a result, our technology regressed, but now it's progressing again.

“When we do return to space, there will be difficult and dangerous missions ahead. Missions for which additional strength and fortitude is essential.”

“So we were intended for off-world missions?”

“Among other things. Lise --it's obvious you have never been pregnant. Did you know that, if we were to put an infant to

your breast, within a couple days you'd begin lactating?"

"Yes, I knew that."

"And, you know novonid milk is satisfactory for human infants."

"Some believe it's superior."

Thom nodded. "Again, no accident. It's all documented here. Have you been called upon to nurse an infant?"

"No. My mother has."

"Then, there's the issue of your brain. Did you know that novonids come with one of two brain models? They're known

as high-capacity and low-capacity. You possess a high-capacity one, no doubt. Again, it's all documented. Your designers discovered they could make you either stupid or intelligent. Intelligent meaning matching a white's intelligence --though in your case, I'd say you're smarter than most.”

“You've said so.”

“Low capacity is fine for pomma farming. Up to a hundred years or so ago, that's what was bred. Hence, our society's conviction you are stupid, docile creatures. However, when you started moving off the farms and into the cities, your oppressors...” He paused and smiled. “That's me and my kind...”



We discovered the low-capacity brain doesn't have what it takes for urban assignments. Within a generation high-capacity models were being bred and became the dominant strain.

“You see, Lise --we could make stupid ones or smart ones, but not half-smart ones. For a while we experimented with various forms of conditioning. Thankfully, that practice is dying out.” Thom pointed to a binder. “This one discusses your sexuality. I know the topic makes you uncomfortable, so we won't go into it ... except to note there's a reason why your reproductive strategy so exactly matches the human one. And the reason is not that the human model is

so superior. It's not a very good system in my opinion.”

“Thom... All this has my head swimming.”

“Good. I want to uncover your eyes, Lise. I want you to see how you fit into the larger scheme. I want to radicalize you --make you angry, and make you want something better.”

“What I have now is better than what I had,” she replied. “Isn't that good enough?”

“No --not by a long shot. Let me show you something else Novonid Rescue is doing.” He brought up another

photoimage. “This is a trade school we're starting. We'll be teaching novonids all the basic building trades.”

“Thom --it won't work. My stepfather works as an unskilled construction laborer. He does so only because no white man wants to do that kind of work. He lifts things. He carries things. He digs holes and fills them in again. And, he can't touch any of the trades. If he touches a piece of iron or some polycrete, or even unplugs a cord, one trade or another files a grievance against him. You'll never penetrate the construction business. Not while the trade guilds hold sway.”

“That's not quite true,” Thom replied. “A

generation or so ago, no one would've thought someone like your stepdad would set foot on a site ... not even as an unskilled laborer. Do you know if there are any white unskilled laborers on his jobsite?"

"One... An old man ready to retire."

"Now, it's almost exclusively a novonid trade. Once we've created a workforce of novonids trained in the skilled trades, some contractor will hire them. He'll discover they do quality work, and other contractors will follow his lead."

"See?" Lise asked. "We're evolving. Our situation is better than a hundred years ago."

“Revolution, not evolution,” Thom retorted. “Evolution isn't fast enough. We need to grab society by its lapels and shake it. That's what I'm trying to do with Novonid Rescue.”

“I admire you, Thom. I admire someone who takes action.”

“That pleases me... All this material is yours, Lise.” He made a sweeping gesture toward the bookcase. “Come here in your spare time... Lock yourself in this room and educate yourself.” He checked his timepiece. “It's getting late. I should take you home.”

She followed him out of the house and to the car.

Lise stepped through the courtyard door and called down the stairs. “Mother!”

“Lise!” she called back.

“Shall I bar the door?”

“No --Grott's not back yet.”

Lise descended the steps and into the glow of a greaselamp. Another meeting?”

“Yes. He feels he must attend and be the voice of reason.” Sirens began wailing across Vyonna.

“Curfew.”

“Glinda's been sold --to Ramina,” Lise said.

“What?”

“Ramina bought Glinda and Rinn. I doubt they've heard yet.”

“How did you hear?”

“I watched it happen. I watched an auction session. Glinda will be going to Ramina's breedingery.”

“I'll miss her,” Rayla mused.

Lise heard the sound of the courtyard door. “Rayla! Lise!” Grott called.

“We're both here, Father,” Lise called in reply. She heard the bar drop into its brackets. Grott came down the steps. “They've fixed the time for the strike,” he said. “In ten days.”

“Oh, Father!”

“It's idiocy. The pomma farms will go out, so they say. After ten days the pomma crop will be ruined and the whites won't permit that. It won't play like they think it will.”

“How will it play?” Lise asked.

“The farms won't stay out long enough. Two, three days at most ... then, when the farms start to cave the comfortable



urban greens will start heading back to work. That'll leave only the Zone on strike. No one cares about the Zone.”

“Did you tell them that's how it'll play?” Rayla asked.

“Of course I did. They don't know what it's like on the farms. None of them have ever set foot on one. There's no way the farm workers will stay out more than three days.”

“It's because,” Lise added, “of the low-capacity brains of farm workers.”

“What?” Rayla asked.

“It's true --novonids are bred with two

different brain models. There's a low-capacity brain for farm work and a high-capacity one for city work. I learned about it tonight.”

Grott narrowed his eyes. “Are you saying farm workers are stupid?”

“Not all... But there are two different novonid brains.”

Rayla suppressed laughter. “It does explain some of what I've seen over the years,” she said.

“Those with low-capacity brains are more docile, more apt to do what they're told and less likely to appreciate a coordinated effort. That's why it'll be

hard to organize the farms.”

“They've solved the organization problem,” Grott replied. “It's keeping them out that's the challenge. It has nothing to do with brain size. It has to do with the farmers having hundreds of years experience imposing their wills.”

“Is Mott's bunch leading it?” Rayla asked.

“Yes...”

“Was Mott at the meeting?” Lise asked.

“No --just his lieutenants.” Grott held up his hand. “They asked me to keep one of their strike chains. I told them I'd keep it.

I have to be up at dawn and I'm tired from arguing with those nitwits. I'm going to bed.”

Lise undressed and stretched out on her mattress. She heard sounds of Zone residents talking on the street outside her building.

A noise tugged at her, pulling her from her slumber. Someone was pounding on the courtyard door.

“Lise!” a voice called from outside.  
“LISE! GROTT! RAYLA!”

She headed toward the steps, grabbing a towel on her way and holding in front of herself. “Who's there?”

“It's me, Lise!”

“Tagg!” She lifted the bar and opened the door. He pushed past her into the basement. “Tagg --what are you doing here this time of night?”

“What's the commotion?” Rayla asked as she stepped from the sleeping quarters she shared with Grott. She lit a match and ignited a greaselamp.

“I'm not going back,” Tagg said. “I'm not going back.”

“What happened?” Lise asked him.

“Look!” He faced away from the lamp. Tagg's back was covered with a random

pattern of welts. Some were caked with dried blood.

“Tagg!” Lise cried. “It's criminal!”

“Lise is right,” Rayla added.

“Who did that to you?”

“I was bussing tables. I had a tray stacked with dishes. One of the tables had a group of workers. They were having some sort of party and they all smelled of pomma beer. One of them put his foot out while I was passing and tripped me. They thought it was great fun. The dishes went flying and everything broke.

“Then, the foreman decided to make an example of me. He's never liked me, not from the start. He marched me into the barracks and started caning me. He had me bend over a desk and he caned me - one stroke for each broken dish. Then he told me to get back to work.”

“Is the foreman white or green?” Lise heard Grott ask from the shadows.

“He's another novonid.”

“Do you have his number? I'll have a word with him.”

“I don't... I think he lives at the restaurant. Well, I didn't go back to my post. How could I go in front of

customers with my back bleeding?  
Instead, I headed for here.”

“The restaurant's in Quadrant Two,”  
Lise said.

“The busses were still running, so I made it to downtown before the warning chimes. I figured if I kept to the shadows I could make it back to the Zone. I think one of the pylon cams caught me, but I made it here.”

Rayla brought a can with some water.  
“Let me clean your back.”

“OWW! I've had it. I am not going back there. I don't care if they list me as a renegade or put a bounty on me. I'm not



leaving the Zone.”

Lise sat and held his head in her lap. “No, Tagg. I’ve lived underground and it’s no fun. You need to speak to your owner about this. An owner won’t put up with someone mistreating his workers. A good one won’t.”

“No. I’m not going back.”

“Lise is right,” Rayla added. “You must clear this up. Your owner can file criminal charges for what he did.”

“What about your art?” Lise asked. “If you spend your life hiding in the Zone, how can you sell your art?”

“I don't care. I'm not going back.”

## XII

Lise knelt in Megan's living room picking up polymer construction blocks. The door opened. “Lise?”

Lise stood. “Oh, hello Megan. The twins are napping. We were at the park for a while.”

“That's fine, Lise. Something wrong?”

“What makes you think that?”

“You seem down today.”

“I'm worried about my boyfriend. He

lost his job and now he's in some trouble. That didn't sound right..." She pondered. "He didn't do anything wrong but he's bearing the brunt of it."

"I know that scenario well," she replied. "Good luck."

"Thanks. We're going to need some."

The mediascreen warbled with an incoming call. "I'll get that," Megan said and headed for the device.

"I'll be on my way. See you tomorrow, Megan."

Lise headed for the door. She was halfway down the block when she heard

her name. Megan was half-walking and half-running after her. “Lise!” she called.

“What?” Lise turned. “What is it?”

Megan attempted to catch her breath. “I’m out of shape... Lise, that was your owner.”

“Ms Ramina?”

“Yes --she wants you to stop by her place on your way home.”

Lise rolled her eyes. “Am I in trouble now, too?”

“Not from me you’re not.” Megan

opened her arms and embraced her. “You’re wonderful, Lise -you’re wonderful with the children and a good friend and I never miss an opportunity to tell Ramina so.”

Lise smiled. “You made my day.”

Ramina's breeder was in Quadrant Two --the opposite direction from the Zone. Getting there wasn't nearly the problem going home would be. Lise crossed the street and waited for an inbound bus routed through Quadrant Two.

The bus stopped three blocks from the row houses comprising Ramina's facility. Lise headed up the walk and rang the bell. A novonid youth opened

the door and let her in. “Ramina wanted to see me.” she told the boy.

Ramina came from the back of the house, her long, grey hair down and wearing a housecoat. “Lise -thanks for coming. Hann, bring Lise some water. Would you like to sit under a sunlamp?”

“No, thanks, Ms Ramina.” The boy handed her a bottle of water.

“Are you hungry? Would you like some food?”

“I'm fine, mam. Why did you want to see me?”

“Let's step into my office where we can

talk.” Lise followed Ramina and sat on a sofa. Her owner closed the door and sat behind a large desk. “Lise --I received a call from Lord Broman today. He indicated that he would like to buy you.”

“Thom? Buy me?”

“Yes, Lise.”

“But ... but...”

“Of course I told him you were not for sale.”

“Thank you Ms Ramina.”

“Lord Broman is a man who is unaccustomed to being told no. He likes

to get his way and he usually does.”

Lise smiled. “But not this time.”

“There's more, Lise. Thom badgered me for a price. I explained to him that, in addition to any ... price I could put on you, there's the matter of your surgery and registration fees, which amounted to four thousand. Plus, you are under contract to Megan for two years with an option to renew for another three. I told him without a doubt she'd be renewing. Those contracts amount to a revenue stream of another fifteen thousand. I didn't tell him it was my intention to let you keep your wages after your debt was paid, Lise. I was making it sound as unattractive as I could.”



“And?”

“I tossed out a price of thirty thousand. You must understand, Lise --my best fertile, breeding females are worth no more than twenty-five, tops. And then, if you add the nineteen thousand for your doctors' bills and registration, and Megan's revenue stream.”

“I understand. Forty-nine thousand.”

“A figure I reasoned was well out of reach.”

“How did Thom respond?”

Ramina opened a drawer and withdrew

an envelope. “Under the circumstances, I think it's only fair that I give you this.”

Lise opened the envelope. It was stuffed with scrip cards. “A hundred eighty units...”

“Your wages for the past two pay periods --less a ten percent brokerage fee --instead of the customary twenty-five. I'll call Megan in the morning and inform her. I imagine she'll be paying you directly from now on.”

Lise's jaw dropped. “You sold me! You sold me to Thom Broman! Ms Ramina, how could you?”

“As I said, Lord Broman is a man

accustomed to getting his way. When I named my price, it became a legal ask. When he accepted, it was a binding contract. I had no way out of it. The title will transfer as soon as the funds clear the banks. I wanted to tell you, in person, as soon as I could. There is one thing I don't understand.”

Lise buried her face in her hands.  
“What's that?”

“Why was he so determined to acquire you? Novonid Rescue specializes in distress cases. You're not distressed... At least, I hope you're not. I believe I treat mine fairly and well.”

“Oh, you do, Ms Ramina. I have no

complaints. I know exactly why Thom wanted to buy me.”

“Why, pray tell.”

“Are you familiar with the tales of Benn Drumm and Margliss?”

“Margliss... Certainly. She's well known in Vyonna.”

“I believe Thom wishes to emulate Benn Drumm, with myself in the Margliss role.”

“What makes you believe that?”

“I've been working with Thom for ... well, since about the time I started with

Megan. Thom happened across me in the park. He's writing a book, so he claims...”

“He wanted you in it.” Ramina rolled her eyes. “You poor dear...”

“Within no time he was ... bothering me ... bringing up unwelcome topics of conversation.”

“Unwelcome, how?”

“Of a sexual nature, mam.”

“Oh, my. I have heard rumors that Lord Broman has been afflicted with bouts of Green Fever from time to time.”

“He ... suggested behavior that I consider taboo.”

“Our society considers taboo. It does happen more frequently than you might imagine, Lise.”

“But, there are laws...”

“Yes. The laws are ... sporadically enforced. If a constable were to walk in on a mixed couple engaged in coitus, he could arrest them, charge them with fraternization and the penalties would be severe, indeed --for both parties. However, when discreetly done behind closed doors... Who's to be the wiser?”

“I could complain...”

“There is no law against a white propositioning a green. From that point on, it becomes an issue of consent. Without corroborating witnesses, it boils down to one's word against the other's. In a dispute between white and green parties ... you can imagine which side will be given credence.”

“I don't have to imagine. I know.”

“I always teach mine to avoid such situations with whites. The boys in particular are at risk. A white man is likely to claim it's consensual when it isn't --to save his own skin. However, a white woman is more likely to claim it wasn't consensual when it was --to save her honor. For that matter, white men

claiming they were victims are not unheard of. In any case, if there is physical evidence...”

“A novonid wouldn't stand a chance.”

“Precisely. It's why I believe it's a matter of prudence for one species to remain at arm's length from the other.”

“Nothing has happened, mam. And, nothing will happen.”

“I had no idea you were falling into anything like this. I certainly don't blame you, Lise. I feel sorry for you. I wish you had said something earlier. It might've induced me to be more adamant about not naming a price.”



“If he thinks now, since he's my owner he can simply command me into his bed... I won't do it. That's something he cannot order me to do ... mam.”

“I do believe many so-called maids and valets are indeed obliged to do just that.”

“No --it's not right. He can't ask me to do that. If you'll excuse me, Ms Ramina -- I'm going to Thom Broman's house right now and tell him he can't do it.” She stood and stormed out of Ramina's office.

“Child,” Ramina called after her.  
“Remember your place.”

Lise pressed the stop request on the red line coach that serviced Quadrant One. The bus was making a loop near the boundary with Quadrant Four. She hopped off the platform and walked to the steps leading up to the promontory where Thom's house stood.

She climbed the steps, reached his front door and pressed the chime. Thom opened the door. "Lise... Come in."

She bit her lip in a futile attempt to contain her rage. "How could you? You're just like all the others!

You can't have me any other way so you bought me. Well, you can forget it. You can order me to do your bidding but you

can't make me do that!” She clenched her fists and tried to control herself, but the tears were flowing.

“Lise, calm down. I don't know what you're talking about.”

“How could you not? Ramina told me just now. You bought me!”

“Yes. I bought you,” Thom replied calmly.

“I've heard stories in the Zone about lonely, sleazy men buying girls to be their maids. Then they have them wear little revealing costumes and keep them as their sex toys. I won't, Thom. I won't cooperate. I don't care how it ends up,

but I won't. You can't order me to do that!" She buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

"Lise... Sit and get hold of yourself. I did not buy you for myself. I've never owned a novonid and I'm not about to start. After what I've shown you about my work with Novonid Rescue I'm a bit disappointed."

"Then why did you buy me?"

"I bought you to free you."

"I was already free..."

"No, Lise. You were owned by Ramina. I've worked with Ramina for years.

She's kind and honest. I wish all the owners were like her. However, she is mortal, like I am ... like all flesh she will go the way of all flesh. You could find yourself at auction, just like Glinda.”

“But Ramina has assured me...”

“Assured you what?”

“That... In her will, she... She was going to donate me...”

“To the BSS?”

“Yes, with instructions...”

“Lise, those might be her intentions ... her desires. Desires aren't always

carried out. It's up to a probate magistrate to decide what happens ... what assets must be sold to cover what obligations. And the BSS frequently disposes of novonids to make space or to raise funds. I couldn't bear the thought of your face on that auction list. If there is one of your number who deserves freedom, Lise --it's you. I was determined you have it, at whatever cost."

She sniffled. "So, you don't expect..."

"I don't own novonids. I've never owned one. I don't believe in it. I don't own you. Your title is held by Novonid Rescue. You are a free woman, Lise. You're free to find your own job ... keep your wages

--all of them, no brokerage fee... You can live wherever you like ... in the Zone or somewhere else. You can rent a room at Rescue Towers. If you decide you want to buy a house, Novonid Rescue will hold the title for you ... open a bank account for you ... whatever you need to live whatever life you desire ... pursue whatever future. Now, Lise no one can ever buy you, sell you, lease you, or trade you again. I expect nothing in return. Nothing.”

“You mean...”

“Remember, Lise --Novonid Rescue isn't mortal. It's perpetual. You can't out-live it.”

“In return...”

“Like I said, nothing. I've never concealed my attraction to you, Lise. Ever since I met you, I've respected you ... your person ... as if you were a peer. Now you are one.”

“Oh, Thom...” Now the tears flowed in earnest. She threw her arms around him, lay her face against his shoulder and wept. “I'm sorry...”

He caressed the back of her head and her shoulders. “Lise... Lise, it's all right. This is what I do.” He lifted her chin with his finger and kissed her forehead. Then, he kissed the tears from her cheeks.



“Thom, thank you, and I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry I thought...”

“You're forgiven, Lise.”

“I can't stop crying,” she blubbered. “You can't imagine what this means. Just a year ago I was an unregistered hiding in the Zone. My only prospect for earning any scrip would be in one of the Zone brothels. And, now ... this... to be free!”

“Lise, if there were a place on this planet where you could be truly free, I'd send you there. But, there isn't. We're doing the best we can do with what we have.”

“How can I thank you?”

“You can give me your friendship. Will you do that?”

“Of course, Thom.” She put her arms around him and hugged him again. He brought his face to hers. Lise moistened her lips with her tongue. Then, he kissed her. He held her, caressed the back of her neck and kissed her again.

Lise pulled back. “No, Thom,” she said. “I can't ... I ... I'm not ready.”

“I love you very much, Lise. I can't help it --in my eyes, you are the perfect young woman. I'll wait for you to be ready.”

“What if I'm never ready?”

“So be it. I'm letting you set the pace, Lise.” He held her face in his hands and stroked the last of her tears away. “Are you all right, now?”

“Oh, yes...”

“I'm sorry I can't enjoy more of your company. I have a meeting to get to, and I'm running late as is.”

“I won't take any more of your time.”

“Once the transaction is finalized, we can talk about details. I'll give you the name of someone at Novonid Rescue.”

“I'll be going.”

“Do you know where to wait for the bus?”

“Yes. I won't have any trouble getting home.”

“I'd drive you, except...”

“I understand. I'll see you later.” She gave him a little wave and headed out the door. Lise descended the steps to the street and listened for the whine of a blue-line bus servicing her quadrant. She climbed onto the platform and held on as the bus bounced its way along the rough streets in Quadrant Four. The conversation with Thom ran through her

mind and her tears began flowing again. The sun was casting long shadows in the courtyard by the time she reached it. Lise crossed it to her mother, lying on a concrete bench.

“Lise --you're home early for a change. Are you all right? It looks like you've been crying.”

“Let's go inside.” Rayla followed Lise into the basement. “Look, Mother...” She pulled the scrip cards from her pocket. “One hundred eighty. I didn't want to show you on the street.”

“Lise --where did you get that?”

“From Ms Ramina. They're my wages

from the past two pay periods. She no longer owns me.”

“Ramina sold you?”

“Yes --to Novonid Rescue.”

“I have never heard of them.”

“I'm free, Mother. Novonid Rescue lets us live free lives. Oh, Mother! It's too good to be true.”

“When something's too good to be true ... it usually isn't.”

“Time will tell. Tomorrow's another pay period and Megan will pay me. Me, mother --not Ramina or some broker. I'll

have nearly three hundred.”

“I've never seen so much,” Rayla replied. “We should find a safe place to hide it.”

“Where's Tagg?”

“He went out --I don't know where to.”

“How's his back?”

“It's healing. He'll have some scars, I'm afraid. Grott told him in some quarters scars like his would earn him some respect.”

“I can't wait to tell him.”

“I'd hold off telling Tagg if I were you. Since his incident at work, he's changed.”

“Changed? How?”

“He's been saying things that worry me.”

“What sorts of things?”

“Nasty things about whites ... about settling the score. Three hundred could buy a weapon, Lise. I'd keep it quiet.”

“Mother --Tagg's not like that. He wouldn't hurt anyone.”

“I'd be careful. You think you know someone, but you never truly do. I've



been with Grott for longer than I remember, and at times he's a stranger to me.”

Lise lay on the concrete bench in the courtyard looking up at the yellow haze of the night sky, illuminated by the reflected light of streetlamps as her mother washed between her legs.

“It was nice having you on rounds with me,” Rayla said.

“I hate it,” Lise replied. “I hate this place. I hate the Zone. One of these days I'm going to rent my own apartment and move out of here. I'll have you and Father come live with me. No more damp, musty basement with smelly

greaselamps. No more making rounds.”

“Don't get your hopes up, Lise. It costs more than a hundred units per pay period for an apartment. For one that's better than what we have, at least. This one doesn't cost us a thing.” Her mother dabbed her privates with a towel.

Lise stood and wrapped the towel around her waist as Rayla exchanged places and rolled open her legs. “Gently, Lise...”

“I'm sorry, Mother. It makes me angry. I want to get every last bit of those filthy men out of you... Why should we do this, Mother?”

“To keep the peace. Men need satisfaction, else they become frustrated...”

“Which leads to anger which leads to rage which leads to violence. I've heard the litany, Mother. It was a man who said it. The agreement to share the women was made among the men, wasn't it?”

Rayla wrapped her towel around her waist. “You're beginning to sound like Tagg. And, you've seen white life. You're getting the white man's disease, wanting comfort --wanting what we don't need.”

“You're beginning to sound like Grott.”

“Sound like what?” Grott asked.

“Nothing,” Rayla replied. “We were just having a talk.”

“Where's Tagg?” Lise asked.

“Still out.” Electronic chimes reverberated off the buildings. “There's the warning --Curfew soon.”

“We'll have to keep the door unbarred for Tagg.”

Lise stepped into her bedroom and pulled closed the sheet. She undressed and lay, prone on her mattress. The smell of rotting fabric from moisture seeping through the bare concrete floor

filled her nostrils and revolted her. She lay on her back and locked her fingers behind her neck. Footfalls sounded on the steps. She sat up. “Tagg?”

“It's me, Lise.”

“Bar the door, Tagg.” She heard the steel beam drop into its brackets. Tagg pulled open the sheet. He was carrying a greaselamp and held it so it illuminated her. “You're beautiful, Lise.”

He set down the lamp, stripped off his shorts and dove onto the mattress.

“No, Tagg --I'm not in the mood.”

“I am!”

Lise struggled. Tagg kissed her and forced his tongue between her lips. She wrenched her face from his. He kissed her neck and between her breasts.

“No, Tagg, don't...” She folded her arms across her chest. Tagg pushed her onto the mattress. “I'll cry out,” she hissed. “Grott will stop you!”

He threw his weight against her, pinning her to the mattress and clasped one hand across her mouth. Then, he worked his other hand under her arm, cupped it over her breast and began a deep massage. She stopped her struggle. Her body relaxed. Anger drained from her. Tagg looked into her eyes.

“You won't cry out... Yes, green girl. You're mine.”

He ran his hands along her body, fondled her breasts and caressed the insides of her thighs. Lise closed her eyes and rolled her head to one side.

Tagg grasped her knees and spread them. He lay upon her and she held him across his back as he pressed his hips against hers. Grunting, he increased the force of his thrusting. Lise felt Tagg's climax. Then, spent, he rolled off her and onto his back. “I feel like a man tonight, Lise. I proved it --I am a man.”

“For conquering a woman? I don't think so, Tagg. Before --you had my heart and

I gave you my body. Tonight wasn't love, it was power. It doesn't make you a man.”

“No --I feel like a man because I'm doing a man's work. I spent the whole day down by the old hotel, with Mott's group. They admire my scars, Lise. Mott was there tonight. He told us what good work we're doing, and how this strike will change the way whites treat us. We're a force to be reckoned with.”

“Tagg... This isn't right.”

“It's not the right way, Lise --it's the only way.”

“But what about your art?”



“My art.” He snorted. “Since when did pictures change anything? Art is nothing. This is something. Tomorrow I distribute strike chains --at the factories in Quadrant Four. Here...” He pulled a chain from his pocket. “Not too many links left. Think of it --the farms go out, and Vyonna shuts down. That restaurant ... they can't stay open without us, not without someone to bus tables, cook food and sweep floors. Tomorrow night I'm bringing you to the meeting with me.”

“I'm not going, Tagg.”

“Oh, yes you are. Some men bring their women and share them. Wait'll they see you, Lise. Maybe I'll share you with Mott himself. It'll put me in solid with

him.”

“I am not doing that!”

“You go on rounds. It's the same thing.”

“Did you come here fresh from sharing someone's wife?”

“Oh, Lise --she was withered from bearing so many children, and pregnant with another. She only whetted my appetite for you.” He grabbed for her.

Lise slapped his face. “I don't know who you are any more, Tagg. You'd better get out of here.”

“Lise! I have every right to be here.”

“No you don't. You're a guest here and you had better remember that. I don't know what sorts of things this Mott tells you, but he's turning your head inside-out. You'd better leave - - go back to your gang at the old hotel and stay there until you get your priorities straight.”

“Lise... Lise ... I'm sorry. You're right.”

“I don't find any of it appealing or sexy, Tagg. It's all swagger. There's no courage in what you're doing.”

“But the strike...”

“What of it? You go ahead with your strike and when it fails maybe you and all the others will see how foolish this

was.”

“No, Lise. You wait. It won't fail. It'll be glorious.”

“It'll be a disaster.”

Lise slipped into her shorts and bandeau and headed for the steps. “Lise,” her mother called.

“Yes?”

“Is Tagg here?”

She rolled her eyes. “No --he went out early to the factories here in this quadrant ... to distribute strike chains.”

“Did you two have an argument last night?”

“Of sorts.”

“I thought so. Grott wanted to intervene but I told him lovers quarrel and need to resolve things on their own.”

“I don't know, Mother. I don't know what's gotten into Tagg ... all this rhetoric from Mott. He has them believing they'll change Varada.”

“I fear they will,” Rayla replied, “but I don't think in the way they intend.”

# XIII

Lise sat cross-legged on the floor at number 505. The door opened and Megan stepped in. Lise stood and Megan approached and opened her arms.

“You're a good hugger, Megan,” Lise said.

“Lise... What's this I hear of a green strike?”

“I'm afraid it's true,” Lise replied. “In a few days.”

“What's a green strike?” Klarissa asked.

“A strike is when a group of workers refuse to show up at their jobs,” Megan explained.

“Green means it'll be novonids who won't be working,” Lise added.

“Lise ... does that mean you won't be coming?”

“I'm not striking. I think it's wrong and I think it'll hurt us.”

“Well, my factory doesn't use novonids. They're old-fashioned that way, I guess, so we won't be affected. Not at first, at least. If some of our suppliers stay shut for long, there may be furloughs.”

“I'll be here, Megan.”

“Lise --don't do anything to expose yourself to danger. Sometimes these strikes can get nasty.”

“I'll be careful.” She knelt and hugged the twins. “See you tomorrow, gang.”

“Not tomorrow,” Megan replied.  
“Tomorrow's a rest day.”

“Awww...” Klarissa pouted.

“Then the day after.”

Lise walked to the corner. She had developed the habit of looking around for Thom loitering but saw no sign of



him. She hopped onto the platform of her bus and rode into downtown Vyonna, where she changed to one heading toward the Zone.

She walked into the courtyard. A crowd of novonid men, women and some adolescent boys were grouped around something. She approached and saw a white man lying on the concrete, dead. His skull had been split open.

“Bounty hunter,” one of them said.  
“Trann spotted him.”

“I took care of him with this,” another green man replied. He held up a length of iron pipe, filled with polycrete.

Grott pushed his way through the crowd. "He was headed for your place, Grott. He had this." Trann held out a handgun.

Grott took the gun and emptied its magazine into the grate of a catch-basin. Then he propped the weapon against a concrete block. He took Trann's truncheon, lifted it and brought it down on the gun's barrel with enough force to bend it into a U.

"Hey --what did you do that for?" Trann protested. "That was worth scrip!"

"We don't need any more guns in the Zone," Grott replied.

Lise knelt by the dead man and withdrew

his mediascreen. She pressed a button and the screen illuminated. "Look! This is Tagg's number!"

"Tagg has a bounty on him?" Grott asked. "Does it say how much?"

"No," Lise replied.

"Must be a big one," Trann replied, "for a bounty hunter to risk coming into the Zone."

Grott tucked the man's gun into his waistband. and lifted his shoulders. "Trann --help me carry him into the tunnel. We'll leave him there until after curfew. Then, we'll dump him onto the street."

Lise turned and started running toward the gate leading outside the Zone. “Where are you going?”

Grott yelled after her.

“Tagg has a bounty on him! I'm going to do something about it!”

She waited at the corner for one of the inbound busses and hopped onto the platform. The bus jostled her as it followed the dilapidated streets past the foundries, brickyards and scrap-metal works in Quadrant Four north of the Zone. She saw the promontory ahead. The bus started into the curve. She pressed the stop request. The bus kept going.

She pounded the stop request and realized it must be broken. “Hey!” she yelled, pounding the rear window. “Stop! Stop the bus!”

A white passenger turned and regarded her, then pressed the stop request inside the coach. The driver pulled to the curb. Lise hopped off and sprinted two long blocks to the steps leading up to Thom's house.

She rang his bell. The door opened “Thom! You have to help me!”

“Help you? How.”

“It's Tagg. We have to rescue him --buy him.”

“Buy him?”

“Yes --for Novonid Rescue. He's been declared renegade with a bounty on his head. You have to buy him and remove the bounty.”

“Slow down, Lise. Tell me what happened.”

“A bounty hunter came looking for Tagg this after. One of the other Zone men killed him.”

“Killed Tagg?”

“No --the bounty hunter.” She let out an exasperated sigh.

“What's Tagg's number?” She handed him the mediascreen. Thom began operating his. “Here we go...” Thom let out a whistle. “Ten thousand... Complaint against him for desertion.” He shook his head and clicked his tongue. “I can't buy him, Lise.”

“Why not? Are you jealous of him because he's my boyfriend?”

Thom gazed at her for a long moment, then returned to his screen. “No, Lise. I can't buy him because he has a complaint lodged against him. Until that is resolved, the title won't transfer. The complaint must be dismissed by his present owner. What did he do to deserve being marked a renegade?”

“He quit his job after being caned.”

“Caned?”

“Whipped ... flogged. You should see his back, Thom --all welts and scars.”

“That sort of thing is criminal. His owner should be filing charges, not blaming the victim.”

“His owner doesn't care. He doesn't care about any of his. He turns them loose in the Zone and collects their wages --that's what he cares about.”

Thom continued to regard the screen.  
“Stoll Tranya is his owner.” He nodded.



“I know Stoll...”

“I thought you said you knew everyone.”

“In fact I do... Stoll is a stubborn, hard-headed man. He's been known to do irrational things ... like putting a ten thousand bounty on a novonid he bought for twelve hundred. I hadn't realized he was a Zoner.” He looked up at Lise. “That's what we call owners who don't provide proper quarters.”

“You said you helped novonids in distress. Tagg is in distress!”

“Stoll's stubbornness is mitigated only by his greed. I'll give him a call and see what we can do.”

“Thom --if you can save Tagg... I'll sleep with you.”

“Lise?”

“He means that much to me. I'll sleep with you, Thom. I've been thinking about what you said about sex and communication. I've decided... It can be a way of saying thank-you.”

“You don't have to, Lise.”

“I know you want it, Thom. You've done so much for me ... for us. There's nothing else I have to give you. I want to ... willingly and eagerly ... if you can save Tagg.”

“I can't give any promises.” He tapped his keypad. A call connected. “Stoll ... Thom Broman here.”

“Thom --what can I do?”

“I was looking through the list of renegades and noticed one of yours -- with quite a hefty bounty.”

“Yeah... That piece of green shit. Do you know where he is?”

“No... Not precisely. Stoll... I was wondering if you'd let me take him off your hands. You only paid twelve hundred for him.”

“And I haven't made a unit back. He's

worthless, Thom.”

“You're a natural salesman, Stoll. I'll bid you three thousand for him.”

“Three thousand? You're crazy, Thom.”

“Seems to me you're the crazy one. You've got a ten grand bounty on one you paid twelve hundred for. You'll take a nine grand haircut just to prove a point, yet you won't take three grand to make the problem go away.”

“It's not the money, Thom. It's the principal. He can't get away with this. It's bad for my others.”

“How about I add two grand for

principal? Five grand, cash bid. You'll have it tonight.”

“No, Thom. I gotta make an example here.” The call terminated.

Lise groaned. “You couldn't offer him more?”

“Not when Stoll is working on principal. I told you he's a stubborn man.” Thom checked his timepiece. “However, right about now, Stoll's greed should be overtaking his stubbornness.”

“Are you going to call him back?”

“Of course not.” Thom leaned back in his chair and locked his hands behind his

head. "I'll let him call me."

Lise paced. "How much longer?" Thom shrugged.

"He might not call back at all." An incoming call warbled. Thom waited for the second ring signal and then answered. "Stoll..."

"Seventy-five hundred. That's my ask."

"Five thousand is a firm bid," Thom replied. "You won't get a better one."

There was a long pause. "Six thousand."

"All right, Stoll," Thom replied, "done. Take Tagg's number off the renegade list

and I'll order the funds transferred. Pleasure doing business with you, Stoll." He tapped his keypad. Lise stood behind Thom's chair and watched the list of renegades. Tagg's number disappeared from the list. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed the top of his bald head. "Thank you! Thank you, thank you, thank you! Now, I'll keep my part of the bargain."

"I told you, Lise --you don't have to."

"I want to. I really do, Thom. What you said about chemistry between us? It's true. I am drawn to you. And now, more than ever I want to. You said you'd wait 'til I was ready. Well --I'm ready."

“The bedroom's upstairs, first door on the left. I'll be up as soon as I finish this transaction.”

Lise mounted the stairs and stepped into Thom's bedroom. It was clean but sparsely furnished, with a large bed, nightstand, desk and chair. A sliding door was open. Lise walked through it onto a private balcony overlooking the city. The sun was setting and the sky glowed rose. “Quite a view?” she heard Thom say.

“Very nice. I thought the view was good from the terrace.”

“Lise --I'm going to take a shower first. I've become accustomed to showering



before bed. The personal care experts advise against it, because it does terrible things to your hair. I believed them for a while.”

Lise chortled. “Do you want me to bathe, too?”

“It's up to you.”

“I bathed this morning.” She pretended to fluff her hair. “I don't want to get mussed.”

“I won't be long.” He stepped through a door to a private bath. She heard water running. Lise slipped out of her sandals. She removed her bandeau and shorts and set them on the chair. Then, she tested

the bed. She seemed to sink into it.

The water shut off. Lise sat on the bed, cross-legged. She pressed her hand to her chest --her heart was pounding.

The bathroom door opened. Thom emerged, a towel around his waist. "It's not too late to call this off."

"I meant it, Thom. I gave my word, and when I give my word, I keep it."

"I'll admit, I'm more nervous than I expected I'd be."

"Me, too."

"The first time is special."

“Am I your first novonid?”

“Alas, I wish I could say you were. I'm being honest, Lise. There haven't been many others, though... Certainly none like you.” Lise rolled her eyes upward. “You take that with some skepticism ... you're a bright girl. It is true. May I look at you for a moment?” Lise smiled and shrugged. “Strike some poses for me.”

“What sort of pose?”

“Some that show off what you think are your best features.”

“I don't know what's best. I never thought about it.” Lise sat up, bent one knee and hugged her shin.

“You can do better than that,” Thom remarked.

She bent her knees, arched her back and supported herself with her hands. “Is this better?”

“Much.” Lise stretched on her back, crossed one knee over the other and locked her hands behind her head. “You have a great body, Lise --and you know it. I think you're enjoying showing it off.”

She smiled. “I do a little ... to the right person.” She rolled onto her side and held her knee. “What do you think?”

“I think you're perfection, Lise. There is nothing that would make you more

beautiful.” He stood, regarding her. “Your people are incapable of gaining weight --except in the form of muscle. For both sexes the amount of body fat is optimum. It gives you the perfect figure.”

“By design?” she asked.

“Of course. All novonid women are beautiful. You are the most beautiful of a beautiful species. In all my years of working with your people, I've never met your equal.”

“Thom... You're making me blush.”

Thom slipped off the towel. “You'll notice I'm ready.”

“Very ready, by the looks of you.”

“You'll also notice the alopecia affects more of me than just my head. Some white women find it a definite turn-off.”

“I don't. You have a nice physique. When you told me I could beat you wrestling, you must've been exaggerating.”

“I'll challenge you to three rounds and we'll see.” He sat on the bed near her.

“Maybe some other time.” Lise ran her hand along his arm. “You're built like some of the men in the Zone. I think you look sexy, Thom.”

“Really?” She smiled and nodded. “I’m delighted to hear it.”

“If it weren’t for your color, you’d look just like one.”

“Lise! That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.” He lay beside her and cradled her in his arms.

“You are the most beautiful girl. Perfection, that’s what you are. Your face, your figure, your legs... I know you’re not a virgin. I’m happy for that.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I dislike the notion of taking a woman’s virginity.”

“Someone has to do it.” she replied.

“I suppose. Still ... have there been other men besides Tagg?”

“I do rounds with my mother ... from time to time.”

“That's not love-making. That's a gang-bang --it doesn't count.”

Lise smiled. “Only Tagg, then.”

“Is Tagg an experienced lover?”

“Not really. He's somewhat clumsy, actually.”

“Not an uncommon problem.”



“Of course,” she replied, “I would never tell him that.”

“I'm sure you wouldn't. By now no doubt you've discovered that men are afflicted with large and rather tender egos.”

“He is improving.”

“All he needs is some coaching ... and, practice. I've wanted to educate you on your sexuality, Lise. Up to now, it's a topic we put off-limits. This seems like a good time to broach the subject.”

“I suppose it is.”

“Like everything about you, it was done for a reason. Novonid women are more

sexual than is typical for white women. Typical, I said --some white women are sexual indeed. This was done on purpose. One of your intended functions was as a sex worker. I think it's ironic that our society builds sexual beings like yourself and then imposes sanctions to stifle that very aspect. It's not anything you can control, Lise. It's wired into your nervous system. Not here..." He pointed to his head. "Not where you think, but here, in the animal part of your brain." He pointed to the back of his neck. "I have the blueprints in my library. When you tell me you feel chemistry between us, I believe you. You can't help it. You feel it with every man."

“Yes...”

“It doesn't mean you act on those feelings. Living in a civilized society means we constrain ourselves.”

Thom kissed her brown lips. He kissed her chin and her neck, then between her breasts. Lise realized she was breathing. She had stored enough sunlight to keep her metabolism strictly photosynthetic through the next day, but she was breathing. And, her heart was throbbing. Thom caressed her breasts with the backs of his fingers. Lise felt her body relaxing. She closed her eyes and felt almost as if she were falling.

“This feels good, doesn't it?”

“Oh, yes...”

“You want more, don't you? Both sides...” She licked her lips, swallowed and nodded. “Your brain is flooding itself with endorphins --shutting down your emotional centers. Anger, fear, hate... You're unable to feel any of those, now...” He continued massaging her breasts. “You feel only one thing...”

She nodded and realized that's what happened the previous night, with Tagg.

“I'll imagine your mother taught you to protect certain parts of your body from being touched. This is why. It's why I'd never force myself on a novonid woman. There's no sport in it.”

“So, Thom... This is sport to you?”

He smiled. “No, Lise. I wouldn't force myself on anyone. But it is why it's so difficult proving a rape with a novonid victim is non-consensual.” She felt his lips against her sternum and her abdomen. “Your skin tastes sweet, Lise.” He took her hand and guided it onto his body. “It's all right if you touch me, too. You don't find white skin repulsive, do you?”

“Not yours, Thom,” she replied softly.

Lise ran her hand along his chest. “Do you know, Lise, how much I enjoy feeling your touch --seeing your green fingers against my skin?”

“Do you know, Thom, that you talk too much?”

“I suppose I do...”

Lise lifted her arms and grasped the pillow. Thom smoothed both hands along her sides, exploring the muscles in her abdomen with his thumbs and tracing the gothic arch of her ribcage. Lise's breathing was deepening, as was her relaxation. She reached up, smoothed her hand along Thom's bald head and drew his face to her breast. “That's it,” he said, if you know what you want --ask for it...” He kissed her.

“Your heart is pounding. Are you frightened?”

“No... Not now. Oh, Thom... I've never felt anything like this in my life.”

“You're just getting started.” He placed his hand on her knee. “I love novonid skin,” he said. “Yours is so smooth, and such a pretty color...” Thom caressed her thigh. “And, you have such lovely, long, sleek legs...” He worked his hand higher and higher along the inside of her thigh. Then, he cupped his palm over her mons and Lise felt his finger probing her.

He began stroking. “Thom ... Thom, what are you doing?”

“Why --I am endeavoring, my dear Lise, to bring you to orgasm...”

“It's too intense --it doesn't feel good.”

“I'll lighten my touch a bit ... is that better?” She moistened her lips with her tongue and nodded. “You have never experienced orgasm --have you?”

“I don't know,” she panted.

“If you had --you'd know. You're an open-minded girl, Lise. Just relax and go along for the ride. There ... it's starting to feel good, now --isn't it?”

Lise licked her lips again and nodded. Her heart was accelerating. She needed more air --her lips parted and her breathing deepened. Tension was draining from her muscles and pooling in



the bowl of her pelvis.

Thom held her around her back and gazed into her eyes. Her breathing became panting, and Lise felt a deepening throbbing low in her abdomen, stronger than she had experienced before. It felt good but the intensity became almost uncomfortable, straddling the line between pleasure and pain. Now, her heart was racing. Each of his strokes reverberated in her thigh muscles.

The sensation sharpened. The closest she could recall was that of a too-full bladder, but this wasn't quite like that, either. Thom increased the pace of his stroking and she began making soft

whimpers in the back of her throat.

“Go with the sensations, Lise,” Thom coached. “Don't fight it --just let it happen...”

She started to feel tension in the backs of her thighs. She closed her eyes, bit her lip and was about to cry out...

Then --release. Waves of pleasure radiated from her pelvis through all the muscles in her body, like waves in a tub bouncing back and reinforcing each other. She arched her back and groaned; and felt spasms in her pelvic floor from muscles she didn't realize she had.

She gasped, panted, held onto Thom and

cried, "Stop! Oh, Thom! It's too much."

Lise panted to catch her breath, but before she could Thom was atop her and filling her. He began working his toes under her heel. She accepted the invitation and locked her legs with his.

"Lise --do you have any idea what a thrill this is?"

"Some idea," she gasped.

Thom began rocking his hips, supporting himself on his elbows. Lise put both hands against his chest and smoothed them along his skin. "You can use a heavier hand, Lise. Men like a firmer touch..." Now she could feel his heart

accelerate. He closed his eyes and lifted his face. "Mmm... That's it. This is wonderful, Lise..." He held her around her shoulders and Lise felt his weight and warmth against her body.

Lise held him across his back as he increased the vigor of his thrusting. She felt tension in her pelvis again --more diffuse this time, but building. She wanted release but it wasn't happening. Thom continued his thrusting. She strengthened her grip on Thom's legs with hers and began pushing against him. Then, she pushed Thom off of her and onto his back. She climbed atop him, rocked and rotated her hips until she found the stimulation she sought. Lise

pushed hard against him, grunting with each thrust.

“Lise!” Thom exclaimed. “That’s the spirit!”

Lise doubled and redoubled the vigor of her thrusting. Droplets of perspiration formed on her temples and the small of her back. Her own climax was moments away. She bit her lip and concentrated, tensing her thighs in an attempt to bring it closer.

Then, Thom grasped her buttocks and pressed his hips hard against hers. “Oh, Lise!” he grunted and she felt the unmistakable sensation of his release. An instant and a half later, pleasure

waves began washing again over her own body. She gasped, moaned and fell limp against him.

“Wow!” Thom exclaimed. “Exquisitely done! Have you ever experienced sex like that before, Lise?”

“Never,” she gasped.

“I'll bet you never expected you had it in you.”

“No... I astonished myself.”

“I'm not astonished,” Thom replied. “I'm not surprised at all. You were simply following the program wired into your medulla. It appears you needed some

instruction, too, Lise --to show you how to unlock that which your designers built...”

She pressed her finger against his lips. “Will you shut up about my designers! I swear, Thom --you have to be the most pompous, arrogant, egotistical, self-important ... windbag I have ever known.”

Thom gazed at her, his mouth attempting to form words. “Is ... is that how you really feel about me, Lise?” he finally asked.

“Oh, Thom... Nobody's perfect. I put up with it because ... because you've done so much good.”

“I love you, Lise,” he said.

“I know you do. I love you, too, Thom -- despite your faults.”

“I love every part of you ... all of you. I love your people.”

“I believe you. With all you've done for us ... done for me I have no doubt.”

“Oh, how I wish I were one of you.”

“That I can't believe.”

“Your kind will rule this world some day, Lise. It's been set into motion and nothing can stop it.”



A shaft of sunlight crossed her eyes and roused Lise. She looked to her left and saw Thom, sleeping on his back. She arose and stepped through the doors to the balcony and stood, nude with her arm across her chest. The Zone was quiet. Outside the Zone, streetlamps were winking off and the busses beginning their morning runs.

She went inside and down the stairs to Thom's library. His big mediascreen caught her eye. She switched it on and brought up the main menu, curious to see to what additional services he subscribed. One was the exchange auction. She selected it and was requested a password. This she

cancelled and reviewed the items on the menu.

She spied an entry for Novonid Rescue. This one yielded several more. She selected one titled Newsletter. The publication was displayed and she immediately recognized the cover art. It was the sketch Tagg had done of her at the abandoned hotel --the one in which she stood by the broken window.

Lise turned and regarded the shelves of ancient books and note binders. Something caught her eye -a large folder. She removed it and opened it. All of Tagg's sketches of her, all the nudes were there. She withdrew the one of her by the window and examined it. Tagg

hadn't left anything out. She saw the scars on her abdomen ... a birthmark on her breast ... her registration number. Tagg! she thought. He should've obliterated it.

“There you are,” Thom said from the library doorway. “I'm going to make breakfast. Come join me in the kitchen.”

She picked up the folder and followed him.

“I'm making a sea prawn and pomma pilaf,” he said. “I usually have my main meal of the day at breakfast and then snack for lunch and dinner. Would you like anything?”

“No, thanks... Maybe something small.” Lise sat at the table and held the folder on her lap. Thom warmed some of the protein strands and put them in a bowl. He dumped his breakfast from a pan onto his plate and sat across from her. “You certainly brighten my breakfast table. I wouldn't mind seeing you sitting there every day.”

“Are you inviting me to move in?”

“If you desire to, I wouldn't turn you away. As I said --you set the pace, Lise.” He sipped his pomma brew. “How did you sleep?”

“Very well.”

“Lise ... last night ... any regrets?”

“I am sorry I called you pompous, Thom. I regret that.”

“I've been called worse... Other than that?”

She smiled and shook her head. “No ... none.”

“Do you see now how artificial is our society's taboo --how ridiculous is the law against the fraternizing of our kinds?”

“Please, Thom --not another lecture.”

“I'm sorry, Lise. It was my inner

windbag speaking.”

“Oh, Thom... I hope I didn't wound you too badly with my remark last night.”

“No, Lise --it was a kindness. I need to be reminded that not everyone likes to hear my voice as much as I do. I will say this, though. There are many mixed couples living and loving in secret. Those I've interviewed all say the same thing --how satisfying is their physical love and what an important dimension it is to their relationships.”

“They confide in you?” Lise asked.

“Of course they do. They know me and they trust me. One of these days I'll write

a book about their stories.”

“Does that mean last night will become a chapter in your book?”

“Not if you don't wish it, Lise.”

“These books you're writing, Thom --are they real?”

“Of course they are. Why would you think not?”

“Dawn's light waked me. You were still sound asleep, so I wandered into your library. There I found something interesting.”

“What's that?” She held up the folder.

“Oh, THAT.” He gave her a sheepish smile.

“You must've been stalking me from the beginning.”

“Guilty as charged.”

“I'll bet you knew ahead of time the answers to that guessing game you played with me.”

“I hate to lose.”

“And, I suspect your interviews were ploys to get me alone with you.”

“You're a smart girl, Lise. No, the book is real. I can show you the manuscript.



It's a work-in-progress but it is no lie.” Thom opened the folder and withdrew Tagg's drawing of her standing by the broken window. “I fell in love with this sketch, Lise. I traced the registration number and couldn't believe it when it matched one of a young woman whose description matched the sketch.”

“Tagg should've obliterated it ... or changed it.”

“Tagg? The young man we rescued last night did these? Your boyfriend?”

“The very same.”

“Then, I'm happy we did. He's a talented artist who deserves to pursue his art.”

“He can't to that very easily bussing tables,” Lise replied.

“I suppose he can't. I traced your number and discovered you were recently registered to Ramina. She told me you were babysitting for a single mother in Quadrant Three. I knew all about you before we first met. Believe me, Lise ... I might have been smitten by the sketch, but it's you I love. Are you angry with me?”

“No... It doesn't surprise me. In fact, it's in perfect character for you.”

“I told you from the start when I want something I usually get it.”

“I do think you owe Tagg royalties for using his sketch on your newsletter.”

“Hmm... You're probably right. What do you think is fair?”

“How about ... six thousand, to be applied toward his freedom?” Lise stood behind Thom, wrapped her arms around him and kissed his head and neck.

“Fair enough if he'll accept it.”

“I'll ask him when I see him. Since today's a rest day, there's no hurry for me to go home.”

“Unfortunately it's no rest day for me. I

have work to do.”

“On your book?” she asked.

“If only it were something so pleasant... No, it's more serious business.”

“Then, I'll head back to the zone.” She bent and kissed his lips. “I had a wonderful time last night, Thom. I've learned so much from you.”

Lise strolled from the bus stop into the courtyard. Grott and Rayla were sunning themselves. “Good morning,” Lise said.

“Where have you been?” Rayla asked. “You ran out of here and never came back.”

“I spent the night with Thom.”

“Your white friend?” Rayla asked. “Oh, Lise! You didn’t!”

“Didn’t what?”

“You know full well what I mean!”

“Why? Does it show?”

“It’s written all over your face. Lise! How could you?”

“How could she what?” Grott asked.

“She slept with a white man.”

Darkness spread across Grott’s brow.

“Then, you're not sleeping in my house.”

“I did it for Tagg!”

“You did what for me?” Tagg bounded up the steps and into the courtyard.

“You're free, Tagg. You're free from that odious owner of yours. You can devote your time to your art. The bounty's been lifted.”

“She paid for your so-called freedom with her honor,” Grott sneered.

“Lise --you shouldn't have.”

“Tagg --I thought you'd be happy. You wanted freedom. Now you can forget

this Mott nonsense and be what you wanted to be. You and I can rent a room outside the Zone. You can have a real studio, Tagg.”

“I have freedom. I'm as free as I need to be already. I'm part of Mott's gang. No one can touch me. Not the bounty hunters --no one. I didn't need you to sleep with some white *goucher* .”

“Tagg ... Mother ... Father... You don't understand. Thom's not any white. He's on our side. He's more one of us than one of them. He's helped countless of ours.”

“You mean he's helped himself to countless,” Tagg replied. “I can't bear

the thought of you being soiled like this. I'm getting my things and I'm going.”

Tagg bounded down the steps. He returned with an armload of his clothing. “I should've left the other night,” he said and headed toward the far end of the Zone.

Lise sat on a bench, her face buried in her hands. “It's my body,” she said. “I can do with it what I please, and it pleased me to sleep with Thom.”

The warning chimes sounded. “Lise...” Rayla approached her. “Lise, come inside.”

“You heard what Father said.”



“He said it in haste. Neither of us want you to spend the night out here. Come along.”

“Do you think what I did was really so wrong? Thom's a good man. He's helped me ... he's helped all of us, and I love him.”

“I thought you loved Tagg.”

“I do. All I wanted to do was to get the bounty lifted.”

“Was that the bargain? Your honor to lift Tagg's bounty.”

“Honor? What is honor? No, Mother. I love Thom, too. How does it damage my

honor to make love with a man I love? What difference does the color of his skin make?"

"We live in two societies, Lise."

"It's one world and one society, Mother. And, why does it have to be one and only one man?"

"That is the generally accepted arrangement."

"It was a one-time thing with Thom."

"So you say. One time 'til the next time."

"Maybe I should go to his house and not come back."

“You could've gone there. The chimes have sounded and it'll be curfew soon. Now, you dare not leave the Zone.” Rayla sat beside her daughter and put her hand on Lise's knee. “I think you need to choose the life you want to lead. You can be the kept mistress of a wealthy white man, or you can be poor and free, here in the Zone. You can't live in two worlds.”

“There is a third way, Mother. Tagg is a good artist. He can make real money selling his art. We can find a place outside the Zone. With my work and his art, we can afford it. Why doesn't he want that?”

“He may yet. Give him time. Remember,

the more you have, the more you have to lose.”

“That sounds like Father talking.”

“If you want to make a life with Tagg, you had better make your peace with him. If that means forswearing Thom, so be it.”

“I know.”

The curfew siren sounded.

“Come inside, dear,” Rayla said. “The night's long and dangerous.”

Lise stood and embraced her mother. “You're a good friend.” She walked to

the steps and barred the door behind her.

## XIV

“Lise! Grott!” Lise awakened to her mother calling.

“What is it?” she asked, pulling aside the sheet to her room.

Rayla was holding her mediascreen. “The pomma farms --they're all on lockdown!”

“Lockdown?” Grott asked. “All of them?”

“All within five hundred kilometres of Vyonna.”

“Someone must've got wind of the strike.”

“Yes --one of the farms struck a day early.”

“The idiots! There goes the element of surprise.”

“What does lockdown mean?” Lise asked.

“They bar the doors to the farm workers' barracks and close the shutters. The workers are locked inside, away from sunlight. I was in a lockdown, once. It's terrifying. You're shut in the dark --you lose track of time, of the sun rising and setting. Then, the sun hunger sets in. It

takes a strong worker not to crack after three or four days.”

“So, Mott has lost the farms,” Lise remarked.

“Right. Before the pomma crop is ruined, it'll be worker turning on worker in the barracks. They'll hand over the strike organizers and it'll be over. They'll be begging to go back to the fields. Without the threat to the pomma crop, the city strike will have no teeth. None at all.”

“The strike's a failure before it started,” Lise replied. “They might as well call it off.”

“And, regroup for another day,” Grott added. “That won't happen. Mott has whipped those hotheads into a frenzy.”

Lise headed up the steps to bathe. She spotted Tagg heading toward the building. He stopped and faced her. “It's not going to work, Tagg,” she said. “Leave this bunch. Come back and do what you're good at doing.”

“No.”

“You've lost the farms, Tagg. Before the strike started you lost the farms.”

“It only makes it more important that we all go out tomorrow. All of us, Lise. You, too. That's why I'm here. I want to



know you'll go out with us.”

“I'm not striking, Tagg. I have no complaint with Megan.”

“She's white. That's complaint enough.”

“She's my friend. She's a mom who needs work. Her kids need watching.”

“It's all for one and one for all, Lise. I was up all night. I need sleep.” He pushed past her and down the steps.

“Tagg!” Lise shouted after him. “I thought you said you were moving out!”

“He's welcome here,” Rayla replied.

Lise bathed and dressed. “Mother --I’m going.” She headed back up the steps and toward the gate leading from the Zone. A group of novonid men loitered around the gateway. She looked them over. They were a motley bunch, with many unregistered among them.

She passed through the crowd. “Strike tomorrow,” they chanted.

Lise made her way to the corner and waited for the bus. Her ride to Megan’s house was uneventful. She rang the bell. Megan greeted her with an embrace.

“The strike is all that’s on the news this morning,” Megan said. “It seems somehow someone let it slip.”

“Yes --one of the pomma farms struck a day early. I don't think it'll amount to anything. Some of the factories in Quadrant Four will be shut for a few days.”

“Do you expect violence?”

“I don't know. I expect to be here tomorrow.”

Megan headed out her door. Lise sat on the sofa and flicked on the mediascreen.

“Hey!” Klarissa said, “I thought you didn't like watching.”

“This is the news,” Lise replied.

“The news is boring,” Geddes added.  
“Let's go to the park.”

“When I want to go to the park, you want to watch. Now I want to watch and you want to go to the park.”

“Let's watch Jaks.”

“No, Geddes. I want to watch the news.”

“Why?” asked Klarissa.

“Because it's about the strike. Please be quiet and let me watch. Go look at a book or something.”

Lise watched the news reports. Klarissa sat on the floor with her back against

Lise's shins.

“Lise?”

“Yes, Klarissa?”

“What are they saying about the strike?”

“They're interviewing people ... both humans and novonids. The consensus is that it's the Zone that'll be striking.”

“What's the Zone?”

“The Green Zone --the part of the city reserved for novonids.”

“Is that where you live?”

“Yes, Klarissa.”

“I thought you said you weren't going to strike.”

“I'm not. Not everyone in the Zone agrees with the strike. I think it'll be just a couple of factories that will strike.”

“Why?”

“Because these factories hire lots of workers from the Zone who are likely to strike. Klarissa --I want to listen to this. When this news report is over, we'll go to the park and then I'll make your lunch. Okay?”

“Okay...”

Lise heard Megan unlock the front door.  
“How did it go?”

“Fine,” Lise replied.

“What's the word on the strike?”

“The city wants to make sure anyone who wants to work will be able to. They're assigning constable's deputies to ride the busses.”

“You mean on the back?”

“Yes, where we ride.”

Megan laughed. “It'll serve them right. I never knew why you had to ride there.”

“The fare's affordable,” Lise replied.  
“I'll see you tomorrow.”

“Good luck. Lise --don't do anything foolish.”

“I won't.”

“We should go to the bus stop together tomorrow,” Rayla said. “Some of them might try blocking the path, but they won't get in Grott's way.”

“Or, we could use the tunnel,” Lise replied. “Not everyone knows about it.”

“It'll be interesting,” Grott said. “We might as well turn in. We'll see what tomorrow brings.”



Lise stretched out on her mattress. She wished Tagg were there, but imagined he'd spend all night in meetings with Mott or his henchmen, planning strategies to attempt to enforce the strike. She closed her eyes and willed herself to sleep.

Morning's light woke her and she could hear a commotion outside and chanting of "Strike! Strike!

Strike!" She performed her morning routine and joined Grott and Rayla as they headed toward the path leading from the Zone. Grott had armed himself with a piece of iron pipe. A mob of novonid men and boys milled around the gate leading outside the Zone. The three

of them paused. “They look nastier than I figured,” Grott said.

“I hope the fervor fades in a few days,” Rayla replied.

Lise spotted a young novonid male hanging back from the crowd. He approached them. “There's no way through,” he said. “All the entrances are blocked.”

“Come through with us,” Grott said. The young man shook his head.

“You two go through,” Lise suggested. “I'll take him with me through the tunnel.”

She watched as Grott and Rayla approached the mob. Grott took Rayla's hand and walked through. The crowd parted to let him pass.

“They won't mess with him,” Lise said.  
“Follow me.”

She led the young man into one of the other buildings, down into the basement and through passageways. She picked up one of the sticks and felt her way through the tunnel until she saw light filtering from the street.

Lise set down the stick and climbed the steps. At the corner was a smaller crowd harassing those awaiting the bus. One of the coaches lumbered down the

street and stopped at the corner. Lise grabbed the young man's hand and made a dash for the bus. She felt hands grabbing for her and feet trying to trip her but she made it to her goal and climbed onto the platform. Standing there was a constable with his weapon drawn. It was the first time in her life she was happy to see one. He smiled and nodded at her. She grabbed the overhead rail and held on as the bus pulled from the corner. Megan greeted Lise with a hug. "I see you made it."

"No real problem," Lise replied.

"It's pretty quiet in this part of town."

"It's pretty raucous over in Quadrant

Four.”

“I hear some of the farms are back to normal operation already.”

“Yes,” Lise replied. “It's playing out about how Grott expected it would.”

“Who?”

“My stepfather. He spent time on a farm before coming to the city. The farms have hundreds of years of experience in dealing with this sort of thing. They just locked them down --shut them into the barracks without sunlight. A white person can't appreciate how distressing it is for us to be locked in a dark room.”

“They need to lock the strikers in a dark room.”

“That's the trouble here in the city. There isn't that sort of control.”

“Lise --I'm surprised to hear you talk that way.”

It's the few that spoil it for the many",  
Lise replied.

“I suggest you stay indoors today,”  
Megan added. “No sense asking for trouble. I even told the children they could watch Jaks.”

Lise sat in the courtyard soaking up the last strong rays of sunshine. Her mother

sat beside her with her mediascreen. “Grott pegged it,” she said. “The only disruptions were to the factories here in Quadrant Four. In a few days the fervor will burn itself out and we’ll be back to normal. So far, we’ve avoided bloodshed. That’s good.”

“The constables on the busses help,” Lise added.

“Yes... I never expected to be happy to see a deputy.”

“We should go below and lock up,” Grott said. “Just in case things get rowdy after dark.”

Grott followed Lise and Rayla into the

basement. He dropped the bar across the door.

“Maybe we should turn in early and get up early,” Lise suggested. “We can beat the mobs to the bus stop. I wonder how long it’ll take them to figure out about that tunnel.”

Lise stretched out on her mattress. Dusk had given way to night. She closed her eyes and attempted to sleep. She was beginning to drowse when pounding on the door snapped her awake.

“Lise! Open up!”

She lifted the bar and let Tagg into the basement. He carried a backpack.



“Tagg! What are you doing here?”

“Waiting. I have a mission.” He opened his pack, withdrew a lump of charcoal and began blackening his face with it.

“What mission?”

“We're going to blow up the Quadrant Four Safety Building.”

“WHAT?”

“You heard what I said.”

“The constables?”

“Precisely.” He took a brick-shaped object from his pack. “I have fifty kilos

of high explosive here.”

“Where did you get that?”

“From Mott. He supplied it. We're going to show them we're a force to be reckoned with.”

“Don't do this, Tagg. This isn't the way. None of this is the way.”

“It's the only way, Lise.”

“Tagg --if you do this, it's over between us. I won't have anything to do with it or with you.”

“Too late. It's going to be glorious, Lise. First we set charges on the security

pylons that watch the Zone. Those are going down, one after another. That'll draw the deputies out of the Safety Building. We'll go in and BOOM! I'm in charge of one of the pylons. We assemble as soon as curfew sounds.”

The warning chimes reverberated across the city. “Not long, now! See you later, Lise.”

Tagg packed the block into his pack and headed up the steps.

“Mother! Father!” Lise yelled.

“What is it?” Grott came from his room.

“It's Tagg --They're going to bomb the

Safety Building. You've got to stop him.”

Grott grabbed his length of pipe and headed up the steps. He returned a short time later. “No sign of him.”

“Use your mediascreen,” Lise said. “Call the constables and warn them.”

She grabbed it. “Low battery,” she said. “I was using it all afternoon to follow the news and didn't have the charger.”

The curfew siren wailed. “Shall we risk breaking curfew to warn them?” Lise asked.

“No,” Grott replied. “We'll just have to let this play out.”

Lise paced around the basement, chewing her lip. “How much longer?”

It wasn't much longer. She felt the concussion a split-second before hearing the blast. Then another and another --six in all, followed by the wail of sirens.

“That was Tagg's doing?” Grott asked.

“I ... I'm afraid so.”

Grott shook his head. “I don't know what thrall this Mott holds over the young ones.”

Then, there was a flash in the sill windows, followed by a grunting thud and a blast that shook the foundation and

dislodged dust and bits of concrete.

“A force to be reckoned with, are they? Now we'll see who's a force to be reckoned with.”

## XV

Dawn twilight began to fill the basement through the sill windows. Then came an unfamiliar sound -the whine of turbines. Lise jumped up and peered out the window. She saw trucks.

“They've opened the main barricade,” Grott said.

“The one closing off the Zone from the rest of the city?” Rayla asked.

“Yes.”

Amplified announcements could be heard. “Attention. The city of Vyonna is now under a state of emergency. A dusk-to-dawn curfew is now in effect. All registered novonids living within the Green Zone must report to their owners by sundown tomorrow.” The announcement repeated itself.

“Report to our owners?” Rayla said.

“In my case,” Lise replied, “it's Novonid Rescue. That must mean Thom Broman.”

“I suspect we should pack some clothes.”

“Mother --make sure you bring your mediascreen and the charger. Keep the battery charged.” Lise grabbed some shorts and bandeaus and packed them into a polymer sack. She pulled her stash of scrip cards from under her mattress. “Here...” She handed some to her parents. “In case you need it.” She pocketed the rest and took the card with Megan's call number.

“Let's go,” Grott said.

The three of them headed toward the gate leading to the bus stop. A crowd was there, but this time it was of constable's deputies in full riot gear holding long arms. A growing line of novonids waited to pass through the



gate.

Lise reached the checkpoint. A deputy keyed in her registration number. “Novonid Rescue. What the f...”

“Thom, Lord Bromen,” Lise replied.

“Bromen... Okay, find your bus.”

She turned and saw Grott and Rayla speaking with deputies. Her mother was arguing with one. He was blocking her path with his baton.

“What's the matter?” Lise asked.

“He ... he said my number is invalid!”

“Go on ... back into the Zone.”

Lise looked at her stepfather. “You'd better find your bus,” she said. “When I see Thom I'll tell him about this. He'll know what to do.”

Grott nodded and squeezed Lise's shoulder.

Lise embraced Rayla. It was the first time she could recall seeing fear in her mother's eyes. “Don't worry, Mother. Thom will know what to do. Hang onto your mediascreen. Keep it charged up and I'll be in touch.”

Rayla turned and headed back toward the courtyard. Lise crossed the street and

waited for the inbound coach. It pulled to the corner and she hopped onto the platform at the back. She regarded the factories along the route, now deserted because of the state of emergency. The bus entered the curve approaching Thom's house. She pressed the stop request. This time it worked and the bus pulled to the side of the road.

Lise hopped off and mounted the steps to the promontory. Thom's red roadster sat in the drive. She rang the bell.

Thom opened the door. "Lise! What are you doing here?"

"They're evacuating the Zone," she replied. "We've been ordered to go to

our owners. Since that's Novonid Rescue in my case, and since..."

"Fine, fine. Come in. Lise --I'm sorry, but I'm awfully busy right now. Make yourself at home."

"Thom... My mother was turned back into the zone."

"What?"

"They're turning all unregistered back into the Zone. They couldn't find my mother's number on the register."

Thom cradled his head in his hand. "Lise --I really have more important things to do right now."

“More important than helping my mother?”

“What's her number?” Lise jotted it onto a polycard. Thom manipulated his mediscreen. “I don't see it here.”

“That can't be right,” Lise replied. “She's been registered for years.”

“Who's her owner?”

“I can't recall the name. He's the same as my stepfather's.”

“Do you have his number?” Lise jotted it on the card. “Let's see... Yes, here's Grott. I'll cross reference his owner... Rayla, right?”

“Yes!”

“Here she is. For some reason the number never transferred to the registry master list. I'll open a trouble call...” He manipulated his screen. “There ... Someone in BSS administration will take care of it.”

“Thank you, Thom. I knew you'd know what to do. I'll call Mother. How long will it take to fix it?”

“A few days.”

“A few days? They said the Zone had to be evacuated by sundown tomorrow!”

“Lise... I've done what I can.”

“Can anyone look up the registry?”

“Yes...” He pointed to the screen. “You request the BSS directory and it's under Registry. Now, I really have other things to deal with. If you'll excuse me...”

“Can I use your mediphone?”

“Go ahead, but keep it short.”

She punched in her mother's call number. “Mother ... It's Lise. It was a mixup with the registry. Thom has put in a request to have it fixed. He said it could take a day or two.”

“Thank goodness it was only that,” Rayla replied. “I was afraid... Lise --

they're turning more of us back into the Zone. Folks are getting worried.”

“Thom's busy but I'll speak to him about it. He needs to make calls and I need to call Megan. I'll speak to you later, Mother.”

“Okay, Lise.”

She pulled the card with Megan's number from her shorts and keyed it in. The call connected.

“Megan --it's Lise.”

“Lise --are you all right?”

“Yes, but we've been ordered to our



owners.”

“It's okay, Lise. My factory is shut due to the state of emergency. I'm happy to hear you're all right. I heard about the explosions in your quadrant.”

“Lise,” Thom said, “Do you mind?”

She looked up at Thom. “Someone needs to use this, Megan. I'll keep in touch.” She terminated the call. “Thom... What about everyone else who's being sent back into the Zone?”

“I know about it... I'm doing what I can.”

“Are you working with the authorities for a solution?”

“Yes, Lise.”

She let out a sigh of relief. “Good. I feel better, now. I'm sure with your influence you'll get it resolved.” She walked behind his chair, draped her arms around his shoulders and kissed his neck. He caressed her forearm.

“Lise ... I have to ask you to stay on the upper level of the house. I'll have meetings and the like downstairs. You can use the guest bedroom on the second level.”

“You don't want me sharing your bed? I'll be happy to.”

“My schedule is going to be crazy for the

next few days.” He squirmed from under her arms. “Please, Lise... I must get this work done.”

“Okay... May I use the terrace?”

“Go ahead, Lise.”

“I'll get some sun.” She rubbed her arms. “I've been feeling a bit sun-hungry lately.”

She stepped out onto the terrace and looked down. She could see the constable's trucks patrolling the main streets of the Zone, and the crowd of novonids waiting to pass through the checkpoints. Her eye scanned rightward, toward the woods of native cycads.

Then she looked toward the horizon and saw where the city ended and a savanna of wild pomma grew. In the distance she could make out some of Varada's fauna, grazing on the pomma heads.

Lise strolled the terrace. Concrete planters, long neglected were overgrown with trash plants. She stepped inside.

“Thom --I like being busy in the sun. Would you mind if I tended your garden?”

“Fine, Lise...”

Lise stepped back onto the terrace and began pulling the weeds from the planters. There wasn't a single,

attractive plant among them. She looked at the empty planters, and had an idea. She recalled her garden in the courtyard, the one she had sown with varieties of wild pomma. With care and cultivation those plants could be quite attractive, and she knew they grew along the streets in the Zone. She could probably find some here.

Down the steps to the street she bounded, and then paused. She hadn't noticed it before, but there appeared to be a trail leading toward the woods and the pomma savanna. Lise headed in that direction and noticed a marker --a wand planted in the ground with a red reflector. Ahead a distance was another

wand.

She followed the wands, collecting seeds from likely-looking specimens along her way. Then, she stopped short. She hadn't walked far, she realized, but the topography had been deceptive and it appeared further than it was.

She was looking at the old, deserted hotel, but from the other side of the fence that separated the city from the countryside. The whine of a turbine grew near as a truck barreled down the broken and overgrown street. Lise crouched, hiding among the shoulder-high pomma plants. Deputies, carrying long arms piled out of the truck and into the old hotel.

A pair of young novonid men appeared from behind some debris. They ran to a break in the fence and pushed through it, and then started running through the wild pomma, away from the city. One of the corpsmen nudged his partner; then raised his long arm and squeezed off a few rounds in their direction. The men kept running.

Through the pomma heads she peered. The corpsmen entered the hotel, leaving their vehicle deserted. Convinced the coast was clear, she turned and headed back to the house. By the time she reached the top of the steps, Thom's speedster was gone.

She planted the seeds and headed to the house to find something in which to carry water. She looked around the lower level of the house. Yes, she remember that Thom had asked her to keep to the upper levels, but she couldn't disturb him if he weren't here. Lise hadn't seen this part of the house before. She walked along a short corridor to a pair of doors. One was locked --for a reason, she figured. From the kitchen she fetched a panful of water and carried it to the planters and dumped it onto the freshly planted soil.

She was beginning to feel full of sunshine, so she went inside to explore the house some more. The bed in the



guestroom was as soft as Thom's. Then, into the library she wandered and sat before the mediascreen.

Lise turned on the news broadcast and saw images taken from hovering aircraft. She could see the crowd of novonids being processed by the deputies, and the trucks and other vehicles on the streets inside the Zone.

Then came a report of a weapons cache discovered at the abandoned hotel, along with more explosives. The deputies had been fired upon from the hotel and were in the process of securing it when the guns had been discovered. Several novonids had been killed. She wondered if Tagg was among them.

Another report showed the collapsed security pylons and the bombed-out Safety Building. A dozen deputies, several civilians and some jailed arrestees had been casualties in the explosion. She turned off the screen and paced. Here she was, alone in a house of luxury. She dared not leave it, not with tensions as high as they were. There was nothing she could do but wait. Lise climbed the stairs to Thom's bedroom and stepped onto the balcony in order to watch events unfold in the Zone. Sporadic sounds of small-arms fire snapped and popped above the distant hubbub and the whine of turbines. Rotary-wing aircraft hovered overhead.

Then, she heard turbines approaching. They were quite close and then they shut down. She recognized the sound as that of Thom's Drumm speedster. The car door slammed and she heard footfalls in the house.

She ran to him. “Thom! Thom! Do you know what's going on?”

“Of course I do. This is terrible ... terrible. Lise --I've been meeting with the prefects. The white community is divided on this. The owners are up in arms --they don't want to see this...”

“See what?”

“They're planning on demolishing the

Zone.”

“Demolish it?”

“Start at one end and burn it down, flatten it, turn it into an open field.”

“Thom --what about those sent back into the Zone. What'll happen to them?” He turned from her.

“Are they going to burn the unregistered with the buildings?”

“They want blood. They're still counting casualties from the Safety Building.”

“Those are innocent people, Thom. My mother is among them. She didn't do

ANYTHING, Thom!

It's Mott and his gang who are to blame.”

“They can't separate them from the rest. Lise --I can't talk now. I'm doing all I can ... we're doing all we can. I'm hoping cooler heads will begin to prevail.”

Dusk fell and Vyonna became eerily quiet. Lise strolled the terrace. Other than aircraft hovering over the Zone and sweeping it with floodlights there was no activity. The streets outside the zone were deserted from the extended curfew.

“Lise!” Thom approached her. “Lise --I have to go out for a while.”

“But the curfew... That's right. You're exempt.”

“I'm apt to be gone most of the evening.”

“I'll be all right. I was going to bed soon anyway.”

He turned and headed back into the house. Lise stepped from the terrace, closed and locked the doors leading to it and climbed the stairs to the guest room she was using. She undressed and lay on the bed, her hands laced behind her neck and closed her eyes.

Sleep didn't come. She thought about the situation in the Zone, of her mother, of the unregistered, of what Thom said

about destroying it. And, the children. How could you differentiate children of registereds from unregisteredds?

Lise tried to drive these thoughts from her head. Slowly she banished them, closed her eyes and drowsed.

The thoughts returned and awakened her. She sat up, unaware of the time. Now, she was wide awake. Perhaps a stroll outside would help her clear her head.

She unlocked the doors to the terrace and stepped out. Aircraft still hovered over the Zone, flashing their floodlights. Then, something blinked in the corner of her eye. Her gaze shifted to the right, to where the wild pomma gave way to the

cycad woods. She saw it again --a sparkle of red light. Then again, closer, and again closer yet. She realized what it was. Someone was walking the same trail she had walked earlier in the day. Whoever was carrying a hand-held infra-red lamp and using it to activate the wands to find the trail. Lise crouched low to conceal herself behind the terrace wall. She peered over it to see if she could discern the figure. No --she couldn't see, but she could hear footfalls on the steps leading up to the house.

She moved to another spot on the terrace and crouched low. From this spot she could glimpse the back doorway leading into the house. The figure approached.



She let out a sigh of relief upon seeing Thom's bald head as he used his passcard to open the door and step inside. Then, she realized --it wasn't a white head she had seen but a green one. Someone --a novonid -had walked from the Zone, from where the old hotel stood --from Mott's domain, to Thom's house. Lise wondered if perhaps Thom were brokering a truce between the strikers and the city. One thing for sure --she didn't like the idea of a strange novonid man in the house. She remembered what Thom had said --that she wasn't his first novonid woman. Perhaps his association with the green community was closer than she had imagined.

Lise thought it prudent to shut herself in the guestroom until morning. Back there she crept, latching the terrace doors behind her. Once in the guest room she closed and secured the door. Then, she flopped on the bed and with effort forced herself to sleep.

Dawn's light roused her. She figured out how to operate the shower in the guest room bath and dressed in fresh shorts and bandeau. The house was deserted again, and Thom's car was gone. She wondered how much longer this would go on.

After carrying water to the terrace garden she flopped on a sofa in the living room and switched on the

mediascreen. The state of emergency was the topic of the news broadcasts. It was organized confusion, she thought.

The dissonant whine of the Drumm roadster's dual turbines approached and quieted. Lise heard Thom tread into the house and head for his office. She followed him there.

“Thom --who came in last night?”

“What?”

“Last night --I ... heard someone come in.”

“It was me.”

“No, Thom. It was a novonid. I glimpsed what looked like a novonid coming into the house.”

“No, Lise. You must've dreamt it or imagined it. Last night I was in contact with some of the insurgents...”

“Mott's gang?”

“Call them what you want. I got home very late.”

“So it was only you?”

“Of course, Lise --only me.”

She pressed her hand above her breast.  
“That's a relief. Maybe all this has me

seeing things. I couldn't sleep thinking a strange man was in the house.”

“You are perfectly safe here.”

“I worry about mother.”

Thom opened his arms and she fell into them. “I'm worried about her, too. I'm worried about everyone in the Zone, Lise. It's why I can't talk now. I have to find something and then I have to be on my way.”

“Okay... I know they're in capable hands.”

Thom kissed the top of her head. Then, he rushed from his office and down the

stairs. She heard the turbines of the Drumm whine up and then fade into the distance.

Back into the house she wandered. The combination of anxiety and boredom was beginning to bother her. Last night bothered her. Her dreams were never so vivid as the sight of the green man mounting the steps, and she was sure she hadn't imagined it. Or, had she? Sometimes she would rouse from deep sleep. In half-sleep she would be unsure of her surroundings and objects took on different forms. With Rayla trapped in the Zone things weighed heavily on her mind.

She needed something to distract her.

She wanted to do something --anything, but what? Gather more seeds for the garden?

## XVI

Lise stepped back onto the terrace and watched the Zone. It would be sundown soon. A blast came from the old hotel. Flames began to emerge from the windows and soon the whole building was engulfed. It's started, she thought. The burning of the Zone was underway.

She sat at a portable mediascreen and entered her mother's call number. The call connected.

“Mother,” she said, “are you all right?”

“Yes, for now,” Rayla replied. “People have been in and out using my mediascreen --most of them in the same situation as me.”

“Do you mean a problem with the registry?”

“Yes --they are legal, registered novonids who didn't show up on the master list. The owners are complaining but the authorities aren't doing anything about it. They're using us, Lise. They plan to demolish the zone, starting at one end and working toward the other. They think if we feel the heat then we'll turn Mott and his gang over to them.”

“Thom said that Mott and his gang won't



surrender without a general amnesty.”

“You know what I think Mott can do,” Rayla replied. “The squeeze is on and we're the ones caught in the grip. Lise -- my battery is getting low. Like I said, people have been using the mediaphone to call their owners. I'll have to recharge it tomorrow.”

“I'll call again, Mother.”

“Lise...”

“What is it Mother?”

“I love you, Lise.”

“I know you do, Mother. I love you,

too.”

“It's hard for me to say it. I don't know why and I never said it often enough...”

“Mother --you said it each and every day we were together. I never doubted it.”

She heard her mother sniffing back tears. “Good bye, Lise.” The call disconnected. She returned to the guest room and locked herself in. The night crept slowly as she lay, sleepless on the bed. Well after midnight she heard the sound of someone climbing the steps to the house. Lise crept onto the terrace and saw what she had seen the night before - -a green figure unlocking the door and admitting himself into the house.

Tonight, she was wide awake and knew she wasn't imagining things. She crept to the lower level and heard the sound of water running coming from behind the locked door.

The water sounds ceased. She heard movement and regarded this as her cue to hide. Lise ducked into the stairwell and under the steps. She could just glimpse the mysterious, locked door. It opened and Thom stepped out, leaving the room dark. He locked the door with a passcard and turned toward the stairs. She watched him trudge up one flight of stairs and then another. His bedroom door closed.

She sat under the stairs, her heart

pounding, as she assimilated what she had seen. The difficult part was believing it. A green man had walked into the house, into the locked room and Thom had emerged. There was no doubt that Thom was impersonating a novonid.

Lise crept from the stairwell and silently ascended the stairs to the guest room. She lay in the dark, eyes wide open and sorting through what it meant. Why was Thom doing this? Was it to broker a truce between white officials and the insurgents? Was this how he could meet with Mott? The thought this was his mission comforted her.

But, she recognized a problem with this

explanation. If this was his mission, then why the locked room? Why the secrecy? Why the skulking in the middle of the night? There was another possibility. Her mind wanted to reject it, but couldn't. Night time was Mott's time -- between bedtime and the dead of night was when Mott held court in the Zone. What if Thom WAS Mott?

Lise needed to know. Did Thom, Lord Broman --a man she loved, the inheritor of a lordship granted five hundred years before and a scion of Varadan business and society --lead a double life and have as an alter-ego a renegade novonid named Mott?

Shadows lengthened in the afternoon

sun. Lise approach Thom's library. She could see him at his desk, manipulating his mediascreen. "Thom?" she said.

He looked up. "Yes, Lise?"

"I'd like to feed tonight. You haven't had your dinner. I thought we could share some of that special food you invented."

"Lise... All right, that's a good idea."

Lise followed him into the kitchen. Thom dumped some of the protein strands into a bowl for her and onto a round of pomma flatbread for himself. He set the bowl on the table. Lise covered it with multi-colored crystals from a bowl.

Thom sat across from her, rolled the pomma flat into a cylinder and began wolfing it down.

“You look terrible, Thom,” she said.

“I haven't slept in days,” he replied.  
“I've been working night and day to resolve this.”

“I know you are. I realized how much I miss having our dinners together.”

“Me too.”

She lifted a forkful of the protein strands. “You taught me how to enjoy a meal, Thom. I'll be so happy when this thing is resolved and we can get back to

normal.”

“Yes... So will I.”

Lise stepped up the pace of her eating to match Thom's. He bolted down some pomma brew and stood. “If you'll excuse me I have to get back to work.”

She pressed her hand against her stomach. “If you'll excuse me, I think I'll turn in early. Feeding makes me sleepy and I didn't sleep well last night. See you tomorrow.”

Lise headed up the stairs and closed the door. It was just past dusk and the twilight was deepening. She wondered how long she'd need to wait.



It was approaching midnight when she heard Thom's footfalls on the stairs, heading to the lower level. Lise armed herself with a handheld lantern she found in the guest room's bedside stand. She waited and then crept down the stairs herself. The door to the mystery room was ajar. Back to the stairwell she crept and waited. A green figure emerged, closed and locked the door and headed out the lower entrance leading to the steps. From her vantage, Thom's disguise looked nearly perfect. He had gone to the trouble of having orange contact lenses made to color his eyes. Whatever paint he used on his skin was dead-on novonid green, and he had darkened his lips. He wore a novonid

man's shorts and sandals, and a sleeveless pull-over shirt of the sort she often saw worn in the Zone after the sun had set. He would certainly pass for a novonid in the dim, greaselamp-lit rooms in Zone buildings. She let him put distance between them and then she followed him. He reached the end of the trail. To Lise's surprise he didn't turn left and head toward the end of the Zone where the ruined hotel stood. Instead he turned right and went into the woods.

Quietly she followed him. She stepped into a clearing, looked around and found no trace of him. With her thumb she activated the lantern. The additional light showed the clearing to be the

remnants of a roadway leading back toward the Zone and under the chain-link fence. To the side was a concrete slab and signs of recent foot traffic.

Lise worked her fingers under the slab and tested its weight. It wasn't concrete but a lightweight, foam polymer and lifted easily, revealing a pit with a ladder. She eased herself down the ladder, pulling the polymer slab across the opening above her. At the bottom of the pit was a tunnel, similar to the service tunnels linking the buildings within the Zone.

The existence of the old roadway and the tunnel meant one of two things: At one time either the city had extended further

than the current perimeter or such expansion had been planned. Lise pocketed her lantern. With her hand against the wall, she followed the tunnel for a distance. It joined with another tunnel and she followed the right-hand fork.

After a distance she began to smell smoke. The further into the tunnel she went, the stronger the smell. Perhaps this branch led to the burning hotel.

She backtracked and took the left fork. The tunnel was narrow --just wide enough for a single file and it went for quite a distance. Eventually she reached the end --a makeshift door fabricated

from a panel.

Lise cracked the door open. Beyond it was a basement similar to the one she knew as home. Light from overhead aircraft flashed in the sill windows. It appeared to be deserted. Through the sill window she could make out the ruins of the viaduct. This was, she figured, one of the deserted apartment buildings near the old park.

She actived her lantern, flashed the light around the room and found a stairway leading to the upper level of the building. Off went the lantern and she crept up the stairs to the first level and into a corridor. The building was so decrepit not even novonids lived here.

But, she heard voices --animated voices --echoing through the corridor. Lise found her way to a foyer. The door was off one hinge and she could look out onto the park, onto the very spot where she had posed for one of Tagg's sketches. Light from the searchlights swept the area, illuminating the landscape like lightning. Lise followed the voices. She crept along the old, terazzo corridors of the abandoned building, feeling her way along the wall. Ahead, a door ajar admitted a dim shaft of orange-yellow greaselamp light into the hallway. She stood to the side of the doorway and peered in.

A half-dozen novonid men sat cross-legged on the floor around the greaselamp. Another paced, his back to the door. "The whites won't grant a general amnesty," the pacing man said. "They want blood for blood. I told you bombing the constable's station was a bad idea."

"I say we wait them out," another man replied.

"If they want blood," a third man said, "let's give it to 'em. We'll round up some unregistered and blame the bombing on them."

"That's right," the second man added. "We'll snag a few. They want the

bombers dead or alive. We'll deliver 'em dead ... so they can't argue. Who'll miss a few unregistered, anyway?"

"Yeah," the third man said. "No one will miss 'em. We'll claim credit for keeping the peace in the Zone. We'll all come out of this clear --as clear as an azure sky on a sunny day."

"No!" The pacing man turned toward the rest. Lise could see his face in the orange glow. It was indeed Thom.

"But Mott... You said yourself there's to be no amnesty... Somebody has to..."

Lise backed away from the doorway. Now there was no doubt in her mind.



None at all. Thom and Mott were one and the same. Who would believe it? She barely believed it herself. She felt a hand clamped across her mouth and a hard object pressed against her back. “Don't move,”

came a whispered hiss. “Don't cry out or you're dead!” The hand released her and probed her, finding her lantern. “Okay, turn around...” Light from her lantern flashed in her eyes. “What are you doing here?”

In the dim light she could discern a novonid male, somewhat older than she. “I... My mother and I are registered but we're trapped in the Zone. I wanted to see Mott ... and ask him to smuggle us

out.”

Another male, one Grott's age and also armed, joined them. “What do we have?”

“A girl... wants Mott to take her out of the Zone.”

“That's the second one tonight.”

“Mott's too busy to run an escort service,” the first man sneered. “Get lost.”

“Quiet, man...” He looked Lise up and down. “It's no good,” he said gently. “Maybe there are ways out of the Zone. Then you'd be on the streets, after

curfew. You're just as dead.”

Lise put her hand to her eyes. “We're so scared... We just want to be safe.” She sniffled. “Mother said if anyone can help us, it's Mott...” She began soft sobbing.

The older novonid checked the safety on his handgun and tucked it into the waistband of his shorts. He knelt. “There, there little one... Where do you live?”

“At the eastern edge of the Zone,” Lise sniffed and wiped her eyes.

“That's the safest place for you be.”

“How do I get there?”

“How did you get here?” the older man asked.

“I ... I came in daylight and hid in the old park, under the viaduct until dark...”

The older man's eyes narrowed. “How did you know to come here?”

“I ... I ... heard talk.”

He looked toward his younger comrade. “There are an awful lot of loose lips,” he growled.

“Not from me,” the younger one protested.

“Mother will worry,” Lise sniffled. “I

didn't mean to make trouble, believe me.”

“Show her the tunnel,” the younger man said.

“You shut your yap...” He looked at Lise. “All right ... you can make it if you dodge the searchlights. The whites are patrolling the western end. That's why we moved our operations up here. If a searchlight catches you, you're dead. They sweep in a regular pattern. Watch it for a while and you'll see how to dodge them.” Lise nodded. “Good luck.”

She ducked out the door, hid under the portico and did what Mott's lieutenant had instructed her to do --she watched

the pattern of the searchlight from the hovering aircraft. It went south-to-north and back, then eastward.

Lise crouched and made a run for it, reaching a building closer to her end of the Zone. This one was inhabited, so she ran through the lower level, past old apartments, her path illuminated by the orange light of greaselamps shining through makeshift doors.

She reached the other end of the building, looked up, watched and waited. A shaft of light swept outside the door where she stood and then moved on. Lise made another dash. Two more buildings and she'd be at the familiar courtyard. Through the ground floors and

between buildings she sprinted until she reached the door leading to her basement apartment. She pounded on the door. “Mother,” she called.

“It's Lise!”

The door opened. Lise pushed down the stairs. Rayla threw her arms around her daughter and squeezed her. “Oh, Lise! You shouldn't have come. Now you're trapped here, too.”

“Mother --where's your mediascreen?” Rayla produced it and Lise switched it on. She manipulated it. “Look --the registry's been fixed. Here's your number. You're legal!”

Rayla took the screen. “What good does that do? They've sealed the Zone and they're not letting anyone in or out, registered or not. They're using us to pressure Mott. They're putting the squeeze on Mott's gang. They want Mott. They think, once we start feeling the heat, we'll turn Mott over to them. And, now --you're trapped here, too!”

“I know a way out of the Zone, Mother.”

“How?”

“Through the service tunnels.”

“The tunnels are bricked up,” Rayla replied. “The constables have men posted where they're not.”



“Not at the western end of the Zone. It's how I made my way here.”

“They're patrolling the western end. They'll shoot us on sight. If they spot us, we're dead.”

“We can dodge the searchlights. Come, Mother --It'll lead us out beyond the fence into the woods. We can take refuge there until daylight.”

“If we're spotted there, we're dead, too.”

“No, Mother --it's on private property. There are no patrols there.”

“Whose property?” Lise bit her lip.  
“Whose?”

“Mother... I know who Mott is!”

“Who?”

“He's Thom.”

“Who?”

“Thom ... Lord Broman.”

“YOUR Thom? Why would he?”

“I don't know. I have no idea, but I'm sure of it. I followed him from his house and through the very tunnels that'll lead us out of here.”

“The authorities want Mott,” Rayla said.  
“Let's give him to them. We'll go have

chat with the nice constables manning the gate.”

“I can't betray Thom,” Lise protested.

“Can't betray Thom? You don't think he's betrayed us? They torched three more buildings today. And, what about the bombing that started this mess? Two dozen whites were killed. And then there are the fieldworkers who supported his strike and are now under the boots of their overseers. Who betrayed them? Who filled them with ideas about changing the world? There are hundreds of us locked inside the Zone. There are thousands whose lives will never be the same again. Lise! Who is betraying whom?”

Lise buried her face in her hands. “I can't. I love him.”

Rayla grasped Lise's face in both hands and looked into her eyes. “Sometimes, even when we love someone we must intervene ... to keep them from hurting themselves or from hurting others.”

“I know...”

“It must be done, Lise. You know it must. Come with me.”

Lise and Rayla approached a constable's deputy near the gate leading from the Green Zone, making sure to hold their hands in view. “Halt,” ordered the

deputy. "You're violating curfew." He unholstered his sidearm.

"We heard," Rayla replied, "that you will turn us over to our owners in exchange for information."

"That depends on the quality of the information."

"We know where Mott is," Lise said.

"We get a dozen a day who claim they know where he is..." The deputy whistled. Two others approached holding long arms. "They got information. Take 'em to the sergeant."

One of the officers patted them down

while another reviewed their registrations on his handheld.

“Follow me.”

“Put your hands on your head,” the other officer ordered and followed them outside the Zone to a pair of trailers that had been joined to form a makeshift headquarters.

“Sergeant... They claim to have information.”

“We know where Mott is,” Lise said.

“Where?”

“Do you have a map?” she asked.

The sergeant unrolled a scroll onto a table. She pointed to a building on the north side of the old park.

“There --in a ground floor room.”

“You're sure?”

“Positive.”

The sergeant operated his mediascreen. “Swarm coordinates B-3,” he ordered and then looked toward Lise and her mother. “We'll see...”

“I also know who he is,” Lise added.

“Who? What do you mean, who?”

“Mott isn't a novonid. He's a white man, disguised as one.”

“Why would a white disguise himself as a novonid?”

“I don't know,” Lise replied.

“Who is he, then?”

Lise looked into the sergeant's eyes.  
“He's Thom, Lord Broman.”

The sergeant laughed. “Lord Broman? A lord would do this?”

“Do you know what Mott looks like?”  
Lise asked.



“We have a composite sketch.” The sergeant brought an image onto his mediascreen.

“That's Lord Bromen,” Lise said.

“I'll bring up Lord Bromen's image...” The two images were displayed side-by-side.

“You know, Sarge,” the deputy said. “I think the greenie's right.”

The mediascreen signalled an incoming call. “Yes?” the sergeant answered.

“They scattered,” came a voice from the device. “We bagged a few of them.”

“Mott?”

“He got away --if he was there at all.”

“He was there,” Lise said. “I saw him.”

“Cordon the building,” the sergeant replied into the mediascreen. “That one's next for demolition. Go through it for materiel and then have the demo team set their charges.”

The officer on the other end acknowledged his orders and the call terminated.

“Sergeant,” Lise said. “Mott will be headed here --to the house on the hill.” She pointed to the map.

“There's a path from the far end of the Zone leading here.” She traced the path. “If you wait for him here, you'll catch him.”

The sergeant placed another call and ordered officers to the address.

“That's a lord's residence,” the officer on the other end protested. “We need the Constable-in-Chief's go-ahead.”

“You stake it out,” the sergeant replied, “and let me worry about Lord Fahrr's permission.” The call disconnected. “Or, his forgiveness,” the sergeant muttered under his breath. He turned to the officer who had brought Lise and the others. “Take them downtown. Lord

Fahrr will want a word with them.”

“Will Lord Fahrr accept the words of novonids as an excuse for searching a lord's home?” the officer asked.

“If it's true --if Lord Broman is Mott... Then we had a hot tip, and these novonids' words won't matter.”

“If it's not true?”

“Then I'll be the one to deal with it. Dismissed.”

The officer gestured them out of the sergeant's office. “We need a car,” he said to another deputy behind a desk.

“There's one outside.”

“Come along...”

He opened the rear door. Lise and Rayla slid in.

“I don't know what I'm doing here,” Rayla said. “I don't know anything about Mott or Lord Broman.”

“At least you're outside the Zone,” Lise replied. “With any luck you won't need to go back. Have you heard from Father?”

“No... I'm treating no news as good news.”

The car's turbine whined and the driver guided it away from the Zone and toward the cluster of high-rise buildings in central Vyonna. He pulled the car into the underground garage and stopped by an entrance.

Another deputy greeted them. “Are these the ones to see Lord Fahrr?” he asked.

“They're the ones.”

He pulled open the rear door. “This way, folks.” He led them to a lift and escorted them into an office waiting room. “Wait here for Lord Fahrr.”

Lise sat, her hands in her lap. She could hear constables and staff murmuring and

she could discern the words Mott and Broman.

An officer approached them and regarded their serial numbers. He looked at Rayla. "Come with me."

"Me?"

"Yes --follow me." He led her through a door.

Lise sat and waited, thinking of what she had done ... what she had set into motion. Thom! Why? She remembered what her mother had said --sometimes we must intervene.

The door opened and a deputy led Rayla

back into the waiting room. He nodded toward Lise. She walked into the room and faced a grey-haired man with an impeccably trimmed moustache. He wore a constable's uniform, on the right shoulder of which were embroidered three lozenges, done in metallic purple thread.

“Please sit,” he said. “I’m Lord Fahrr. You must be Lise.”

“Yes, Lord,” she replied.

He consulted his mediascreen. “Lise, I’m going to ask you a series of questions. You must answer them truthfully. If we discover any falsehoods, it could be very serious for you. Do you



understand?”

She swallowed. “Yes, Lord.”

“Very good. It is a serious accusation you have made against Lord Bromen.”

“I know it is.”

“What event brought you to the conclusion he was leading a double life, impersonating a novonid named Mott?”

“Well, Lord... I was in his house and witnessed what appeared to be a novonid man of similar build and physique enter and go into a locked workroom. Thom... Lord Bromen emerged from the room. When I

questioned him about who had entered the room, he said it was only himself. He suggested I imagined it.”

“Did you consider that possibility?”

“The first night this happened I thought I might've imagined it. Then, the second night I purposely waited under a stairwell so I could be sure. It was without a doubt Thom ... Lord Broman in novonid disguise.”

“You saw this on numerous occasions?”

“Yes, Lord.”

“You were inside the Zone when you approached the constables with your

information.”

“Yes --The first two nights I observed Lord Broman enter the house in novonid disguise. Tonight I waited to see if Lord Broman left the house as Mott. He did. I followed him into the Zone and into the building where he was meeting with his lieutenants.”

“What were you doing at Lord Broman's home in the first place?”

“After the bombing, when the Zone was evacuated we were instructed to go to our owners. Since I am registered to Novonid Rescue, I had no owner to go to; so, I went to Lord Broman's home.”

“Why?”

“He bought me for Novonid Rescue. I didn't know where else to go.”

“How would you describe your relationship with Lord Broman prior to the incidents in the Zone?”

“We were friends, Lord.”

“Good friends?”

“Yes, Lord.”

“Were you lovers?”

Lise took a deep breath. “I loved him as a very dear friend, Lord. We were not

lovers in the traditional sense.”

“Did you have a sexual relationship with him?”

“Lord, I don't believe I should be compelled to answer that. The sort of physical relationship, if any, that two consenting adults share is their business and no one else's.”

“Let me be the judge of that, Lise. Sexual relationships are frequently cause for all sorts of behavior. Did you have a sexual relationship with him?”

“I will not answer that, Lord.”

“Lise, you need not fear consequences

from your answer. I've known Lord Broman for years. Despite his eccentricities, he is first and foremost a gentleman, and a gentleman protects his ladies' honor. It would hinge on his word and I know what his answer will be. I'll ask you again... Did you have a sexual relationship?"

Lise's heart was pounding and she felt her neck becoming damp. She tried to maintain her composure. "Lord, with all due respect --I will not answer."

"Hmmpf... Then, I must assume the worst."

"Assume what you must, Lord. I will not lie and I will not answer that question."

“Lord Bromen has long been rumored to have a fondness for green flesh.” Lise felt warmth building in her face. “How would you respond if I told you I know of other novonid females who have been ... intimate with Lord Bromen?”

“With all respect, Lord Fahrr --it's of no consequence to me.” She looked at her feet. “Have you interviewed them? Did they admitted to such?”

Fahrr gazed at her for a long moment. “If it's of no consequence to you, why do you ask?”

She looked him in the eye. “It IS of no consequence, Lord.”

“Fine, Lise, if you say so... How did you find Lord Bromen after the evacuation of the Zone?”

“As I said, we were told to go to our owners and I believed in my case that meant to Lord Bromen's house...”

“No, Lise --how was his behavior toward you?”

“He was distracted and ... distant.”

“Do you have any other evidence of his alter-ego?”

“Other than seeing him in novonid green paint and costume with my own eyes ... no, Lord.”



“That's enough, Lise. Thank you.” He pressed a key on his desk. A deputy escorted Lise back to the waiting room. Rayla was gone. “Where's my mother?” she asked.

“Her owner has made arrangements with a temporary shelter in Quadrant Two. She's being taken there. Your registration is in order. We're awaiting instructions on where you should go.”

“Am I to be detained?” Lise asked.

“No. It turns out that one Thom, Lord Broman was this Mott guy stirring up trouble in the Zone. Well, they caught him on some hot tip as he was trying to sneak back into his house. Because it

was a white who was responsible, they're not charging any of the novonids ... except for the ones who blew up the constable's station. They have those on surveillance cams."

"So, what happens next?"

"We go through the Zone with a fine-tooth comb and find those four or five who bombed the substation. Then, we'll re-open the Zone, lift the state of emergency and we're back to normal. Those are Lord Fahrr's orders."

"Lord Fahrr's orders?" Lise asked.

Lord Fahrr has a soft spot for greenies. He doesn't think it's in your people's

nature to do something like that on your own. If it were up to me, I'd go in there with a flame-thrower and fix the problem once and for all.”

Lise winced. “The other strikers won't be punished?”

“No. They was just following this Mott fellow's lead.

“Will I need to testify at Lord Broomen's trial?”

“No... Novonid testimony isn't admissible. However, what you told the Constable-in-Chief IS

admissible.”

“What about all the unregisteredds in the Zone?”

“Lord Fahrr says, leave 'em be. They're not hurting anyone --so long as they stay there.” The deputy's handheld warbled and he consulted it. “Looks like Novonid Rescue didn't make any arrangements for temporary shelters. I don't know where you go next.”

“I do,” she replied. “Can someone take me to Quadrant Three, block fourteen-forty, number 505?”

“I think we can arrange that. This way...” Lise began walking toward the lift. The squad car sped along the empty streets and pulled into the residential

neighborhood where Megan lived.  
“Officer --what constitutes a curfew violation?”

“You must be off the streets.”

“So if I sat on a doorstep...”

“You'd be off the street.”

The car stopped in front of Megan's house. Lise sat on the doorstep, buried her face in her hands and wept.

Dawn twilight painted the sky. Lise sat, half asleep and propped against the house. The sound of the door opening jarred her awake.

“Lise! Are you all right?” She stood and faced Megan. “What are you doing here at this time of day?”

I got a call from across the street that someone was on my doorstep.”

Lise threw her arms around Megan and began sobbing.

“Oh, Lise --you poor girl. Have you been here all night?”

“Most of it.”

“Why didn't you ring the bell?”

“I didn't want to disturb you.”

“Come inside. The twins aren't awake yet.”

“Have you seen the news?”

“No.” Megan led Lise into the living room and turned on the mediascreen. “They're calling a truce in the Zone. They've captured Mott!”

“Yes. It turned out he was a friend of mine.”

“My goodness... This is unbelievable.”

“I have no place to stay, now.”

“Then, you'll stay here.”

“Really?” a young voice asked. Lise turned and saw Klarissa standing in her bedroom door. “Lise is staying here with us?”

“For a while,” her mother replied.

“Geddes! Lise is here and she's staying with us!”

The twins ran to her and she hugged and kissed them. “They're such beautiful children, Megan. You are so fortunate.”

“You can sleep in my bed,” Klarissa said.

“No, mine,” Geddes replied.



“I'll be fine on the sofa.”

“The sofa unfolds into a bed,” Megan said.

“Perfect.”

Lise sat at the kitchen table as Megan, Klarissa and Geddes ate their dinner.  
“Lise --I feel so badly that you're sitting there with nothing but a glass of water.”

“I'm fine. I won't feed for another couple of days. ”

“She gets her food from the sun,” Klarissa said.

“Yes, I know, dear,” Megan said to her

daughter.

“It's a privilege and an honor to be invited to sit at your dinner table.”

“I will pick up a couple of cans of the food you eat. Is there anything in particular you like?”

“It's all the same.”

The doorbell rang. “I wonder who that is?” Megan stood and opened the door. A pair of constable's deputies stepped inside. “Is there Zero-One-Zero ... a Lise here?”

“That's me,” Lise said, standing.

“Would you please come with us?”

“Is she in trouble?” Megan asked.

“No. We just want to talk with her.”

# XVII

Lise half expected cuffs to be put on her wrists, but they weren't. One of the deputies opened the rear door of the squad car. She slid onto the seat and noticed a young man seated. He wore a dress shirt with the three scrolls of the clerical caste embroidered over his left collarbone.

“Lise,” he said, “My name is Bryce Nath. I'm Lord Broman's attorney. It's a pleasure to meet you.”

The car pulled from the curb and headed toward downtown.

“How do you do, Mr Bryce?”

“No, Lise. Just Bryce. If you'd like to be formal, you can call me Squire Nath.” She rolled her eyes in thought. “No? Bryce is fine.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Nothing. Nothing at the moment. I wanted to make my introductions to you, because it's likely we'll be doing business together.”

“What sort of business?”

“Time will tell, won't it?”

The squad pulled into the underground

garage of the safety palace. Bryce escorted Lise to a lift. They walked down a corridor and were gestured into an interview room by a deputy.

“Have a seat, Lise.”

Lise sat and noticed another man leaning back in a chair, his head resting against the wall. A door on the opposite side of the room opened and a guard led Thom in. He had cuffs on wrists and ankles and a chain ran between them and around his waist.

Thom sat across from Lise. “Bryce, that will be all for now.” The attorney nodded to Thom and left the room. “Lise, I wanted a private conversation

with you.”

She glanced toward the man in the corner. “How can it be private?”

“That is Brocton Mees, attorney at law.”

“I thought Bryce...”

“Bryce is my solicitor. Broc is a trial lawyer, an expert in criminal law. So long as he is in this room, our conversation is privileged. That means the constables are prohibited from eavesdropping. Broc has assured me he will hear nothing.”

“Nothing,” the man repeated.

“Believe me, our conversation is more private with Broc here than if he were absent.” Thom regarded Lise through narrowed eyes for a long moment. “Lise, were you the one who betrayed me? The more I think about it, it's the only explanation.”

“Didn't you betray all of us?” She shook her head. “Look at the mess you created --the Zone in flames and innocent novonids being hunted and shot on sight.”

“I was negotiating an amnesty,” Thom replied.

“How many more innocents would die while you negotiated to save the guilty?”



Do you really think you'd be granted an amnesty after bombing the police station?"

"That wasn't my idea," Thom protested. "When I heard about it I tried to change their minds."

"Did you provide the explosives and the weapons?"

"She sounds like a prosecutor," Broc remarked.

Thom sighed. "Yes... They were to be used for defensive purposes, only. I suppose in hindsight supplying munitions was a bad idea."

“Why is it so important you know if it was I?”

“It has a bearing on the statement I intend to make to the media,” Thom replied.

“Yes, Thom. I turned you in.”

Thom nodded. “I thought so. Believe me, I'm not angry with you for what you did. I was coming

'round to the notion that turning myself in was the only solution. I believe everything happens for a reason. Perhaps the reason you were sent to my house was to put an end to this. Have you been watching the news?”

“I try not to. Not now, at least.”

“They haven't released any details regarding my capture. The reason is, Broc here has been drafting a statement --one that implies I did turn myself in. Lise --there are novonids who admire Mott, and who might decide to harm whoever betrayed him. We can't have you becoming a pariah. That would ruin everything.”

“I appreciate your concern,” she said coldly.

“It's more than that. You've been thrust into a role, Lise. Animosity toward you would complicate the situation considerably.”

“What sort of a role?”

“Let's not get ahead of ourselves. What our statement will do is to give our cause something of value

--something the authorities don't want but will have to accept as part of ending this. We will give those in the Zone a martyr.”

“You?”

“Mott. I'm not getting out of this one alive, Lise. I've resolved myself to that fact. A hundred years from now, novonids will talk of Mott. He'll drive the cause forward.”

“Thom, I think you've gone a little crazy.”

“Maybe I have.”

“Will you answer one question for me, Thom?”

“I'll answer any and all of your questions, Lise.”

“Why? Why did you do this? Why impersonate a novonid? If it weren't you, Thom --I'd be offended. I'm not sure -- maybe I AM offended.”

“I became Mott in order to have access to the Green Zone. You know what happens to whites who wander in there.

I got to know the people --some of the desperate ones, the ones being mistreated. Those I targeted for Novonid Rescue. Mott became a savior. His reputation grew, as someone who could help. I bought property adjacent to the Zone --quite economically I might add ... built the House on the Hill --all in order to be near your people ... my people ... Mott's people. Mott began to spend more and more time there. The more I learned about the Zone, the more radical he became. In some ways he's become his own personality.

“Did you kill Glinda's owner?”

“Careful...” Broc advised.

“No comment.”

“What made you think we needed someone from the white world to organize us ... to strike?”

“First of all... I organized no one. The organization came from within --for and by those living in the Zone. All I did was to facilitate and to motivate. It's what a boss does, and it's all I've ever done -- for my own company and for Novonid Rescue. The people in the Zone did the organizing and the planning.”

“It wouldn't have happened without you.”

“Maybe not. Maybe it would.

Secondly... I am not from the white world. I'm from yours, Lise. I am one of you.”

“No, you're not. You have a white man's features... Except for your ... condition, you are a human, not a novonid.”

“It's not for lack of trying, Lise. I attempted to innoculate myself with photoptertheron organules, but to no avail. My matrix is incompatible.”

She shook her head in disbelief. “I can't believe you want to be one of us.”

“No, Lise --I AM one of you. I'm surprised you haven't figured it out, yet. You're such a smart girl. How much do



you know of the history of our world?”

“Some... What I've read.”

“Then, the time has come for clarification. You know there are three epochs in Varadan history, each lasting about a thousand standard years. We are now in the third epoch.

“First, our world was colonized. For a couple hundred years we were a planetary outpost. Then, for various reasons, the decision was made to abandon the colony. The inhabitants were given the choice to leave or to stay. About half decided to stay.

“Varada at the time was a paradise. The

colonists had brought Earth plants -- wheat, fruit trees, vegetables. The climate was ideal for these crops and they grew in abundance. The society became agrarian, and technology was abandoned. We lived an idyllic life, plucking food from nature and sleeping under the stars.”

“What does this have to do with you?”

“Lise, if you look at the big picture, how the individual pieces fit becomes clear. Be patient.” Lise shifted in her chair. “About a thousand years after colonization the first epoch came to a sudden end. A comet collided with Varada. The impact threw enormous clouds of dust into the air. The result

changed the climate and destroyed the Earth crops. The comet bombed Varada into a stone age.

“Finally the skies began to clear. We managed to salvage some wheat, which we replanted, but it was a long, dark age in which we entered. After a thousand years we had almost rebuilt the civilization that the comet had nearly wiped out. Then, the second epoch came to an end with the pomma invasion.

“There had always been pomma on this world. It was a spontaneous genetic mutation that bred an invasive variety that inexorably overran our wheat fields. Now, that strain is the dominant life

form on this world. We had a choice -- learn to cultivate pomma or starve.

“Learn we did, but it is a labor-intensive industry. Our society adapted by becoming stratified. The castes were established and we created a class of slaves for field work. Involuntary servitude was the only way to cultivate pomma without it becoming an economic black hole.

“After a few hundred years of this, the slaves rebelled. They did what Mott's gang attempted to do -they permitted the pomma to shoot into seed and go dormant for a season. It led to some lean times, and the powers that were resolved never to permit something like

that to happen again. The slaves were freed and paid a fair wage for their efforts. They received what they wanted -- money in their pockets. But with so much of the nation's currency diverted, the rest of the economy suffered. The result was inflation, followed by an economic depression.

“A committee was formed to devise a better solution. A member of that committee was a distinguished geneticist, and he had an idea. Why not create the perfect field worker? This scientist had been studying adapting the photosynthetic process into animals. We could create a new species, designed for cultivating pomma. They'd derive their

nutrition from the sun, and being built for a purpose would never care about wages or advancement in society.”

“Hence the genesis of novonids,” Lise remarked.

“Precisely. The name of that scientist was Abel Broman.”

“Your ancestor?”

“How else do you think I came by all that original source material from the dawn of your kind?”

“I hadn't thought about it.”

“It's in the family archives for hundreds

of years. Abel Broman used his own family as his base gene pool. He would clone gametes, make genetic modifications, combine egg and sperm and grow the embryos in culture chambers, the same ones he invented for the production of synthetemeat. Using that technique he could collapse the generations. Many fetuses were not viable, and many more were sacrificed. It took him twenty standard years to get the photosynthesis working --to modify the human matrix to support the photoptertheron chloroplasts; and twenty more before he had the first fertile prototypes.

“When he died, others took over the

project. Eventually, a breeding population was created and they were introduced into the farms. Abel was rewarded for his efforts with a lordship.”

“I had no idea your family's association with novonids extended so far back.”

“It's more than you think. Aside from green skin, what single characteristic do you think of when you think novonid?”

“Hairlessness,” Lise replied.

“Precisely. Where do you think they got the gene for hairlessness?”

Lise gazed at Thom's bald head and her



jaw dropped. “You mean...”

“Lise ... you and every other novonid share a direct line to my ancestor --Goss Broman, son of Abel. He suffered congenital alopecia. His genetic material formed the foundation for all novonids. Everything else was done by tweaking his genetic pattern. Your DNA and mine differ by less than one half of one percent. You and I are cousins, Lise. I am more closely related to you than to anyone else on this planet. You are my family.”

“Thom...”

“And, that's why I did it.” She could see anger building in his face. “How would

you respond if your family was being mistreated? Enslaved? Hunted like animals?” Thom rose to his feet. “It filled me with rage, Lise... Rage when I realized what it all meant. My family enslaved. And, my father, becoming wealthy on the sweat of his nieces and nephews. My whole line, back to Abel, stained brown with novonid blood. When my father died, I vowed to put it right. I vowed to use my undeserved privilege to help the unprivileged.”

“Oh, Thom... You were doing such good work with Novonid Rescue...”

“That work will continue. As I said before, Novonid Rescue is perpetual.”

“Evolution --not revolution,” she said.

“Evolution is too slow. I wanted to see change in my lifetime.” He sat down again. “You asked me why. Now I've told you. And, it would've worked, too. It would've worked if someone hadn't pulled off one too many links and that single farm hadn't gone out a day early. It tipped our hand, and the authorities were ready for us.”

“No, Thom. It wouldn't have worked. Grott had it figured out. He said anyone who had spent time on a pomma farm would know how the owners would respond. He predicted the farms would begin to capitulate after four days. You needed at least ten for the crop to shoot

into seed. Your plan was doomed to failure. You told me once you were many things, but never wrong. You were wrong about this.”

“Perhaps.”

“And, you've set us backward. How long will it take for us to regain society's trust? How long before the people living in Quadrant Four forget it was us who killed so many when the police station was bombed?”

“I told you --that wasn't my doing.”

“It was our doing, and we wouldn't have done it without you, goading us. I was happy, Thom -happy to live a normal

life. Then you came along with your chains and your guns and your ... facilitation.”

A tear ran down her face. “I saw the results of your so-called motivation. Tagg was a sensitive artist and you turned him into ... I don't know what -- someone I didn't recognize.”

“Again, I did not. Mott was merely the catalyst. Your life was hardly normal, living in squalor ... burning discarded fry grease for lighting ... no power, no communications, no hot water ... no water at all.”

“And I never missed them. My parents always told me, when you have nothing,

you have nothing to lose... When you're on the bottom, you can't fall down.”

“Nothing to lose but the bonds that enslave you.”

“In my case I never considered myself enslaved.”

“Then, you are one of the fortunate few. You should've attended some of my meetings, Lise, and heard some of the tales.” He drew in a deep breath. “This isn't why I wanted to see you. I didn't intend to argue politics with you. No --I wanted to confirm my suspicions regarding who turned me in. And, I wanted you to know I hold no hard feelings.”

“It was the hardest thing I've ever done, Thom. I admire you and I admire the good work you've done. Novonid Rescue is a fitting monument for anyone.”

“I also wanted to tell you --I still love you. I can't help but love you. I don't know if I'll see you again. The magistrates will decide my case in a few days.” He looked into her eyes. “Lise... Do you still love me?”

“I don't know. All this has made me numb inside. I'm sorry, Thom.”

“No room for sorry, now.” Thom nodded toward Broc, who stood and rapped on the door through which he had

entered. A guard opened the door and led Thom from the room. Lise stepped outside and saw Bryce pacing. He walked with her and two deputies toward the underground garage.

“Lise,” he said, “the authorities are done examining the house on the hill. Thom wanted me to tell you

--you may continue to live there, if you'd like.”

“I'd rather not. Take me back to Megan's house.”

Bryce spoke to the deputies and sat in the back seat with her.



“I still can't believe it,” Lise said. “Bryce --did you have any idea what Thom was doing?”

“None whatsoever,” Bryce replied. “I was as astonished as anyone. I've spoken to Novonid Rescue folks who knew Mott...”

“Do you mean novonids?”

“Exactly. I spoke to some who had direct contact with Mott ... with Thom as Mott ... and their description of him was so out of character with what I knew... I consulted a psychologist and he explained that sometimes alter-egos do take on personalities of their own. It must be what happened to Thom.”

“What will happen to him? Life imprisonment? I'm sure they'll come up with enough charges to keep him locked up for the rest of his life.”

“No. They've charged him with sedition --the attempted violent overthrow of the government. It's been over a hundred standard years since they've used that statute.”

“Sedition?” Lise gasped. “How could they regard this folly of a strike as that?”

Bryce leaned toward the deputies in the front seat. “Our conversation is attorney-client privileged,” he said. One officer pressed a control and a transparent panel rose from behind the front seat and

sealed off the rear compartment.

He reached into his pocket and retrieved a handheld mediascreen. He slipped an optical chip into a slot on its side and switched it on. “During the search of Thom's house they found this ... the original that is. As a member of his legal team I'm entitled of a copy of the evidence they hold against him. I shouldn't be showing this to you, but since you asked... I'm sure I can count on your discretion.”

“Of course.” Lise took the screen. The document Bryce had brought up was titled *Novonid Manifesto* . She scrolled to the table of contents. “My goodness...”

“It's an outline for a new society --one that emancipates novonids ... dissolves the current charter ... expropriates property from owners...”

“I can't believe it...”

“Two items are particularly troubling to the authorities. One is the section titled Interim Government. It describes an authoritarian council comprising novonids and sympathetic whites to oversee the formation of a new constitution.” He pointed to the screen. “The other is a roadmap to achieving it -by siezing the pomma farms, and inciting uprisings in the cities as diversions.”

“Bryce --this is some sort of pipe dream. They can't possibly imagine Thom would...”

“Are you sure? Look the document over, Lise. It advocates disarming the constables and using their weapons to arm enforcement squads; as well as replacing magistrates with paramilitary tribunals.”

“This makes my blood run cold,” she said as she scrolled through the document. “This section outlines training camps in the countryside. I know members of Mott's gang were recruiting runners and training them in the wilds.”

Bryce pointed to the screen. “Look here

... there are even lists of urban targets ... like the constable's station. The prosecution will use this as proof Thom was staging something more serious than a work action. They claim he was attempting a revolution.”

“Evolution, not revolution,” Lise replied. “I shudder at the outcome. But, after looking at this and after my conversation with him I fear perhaps they're right.” She handed the display back to Bryce. “What will happen to him?”

“If they get a conviction --and we believe they will --he'll be hanged.”

“She buried her face in her hands. “No...

Poor Thom. He told me he's not a brave man.”

## XVIII

Lise sat on the sofa in Megan's living room. Klarissa snuggled under her left arm with the electronic book reader. Geddes cuddled to her right, sucking his thumb.

The news was on the mediascreen. Lise watched a reporter state that Thom, Lord Broman was not contesting charges of sedition, and that a Varadan magistrate would sentence him tomorrow. She pressed a remote control to switch it off.

Megan sat in a chair. “Hey,” she said, “I’m beginning to feel a little jealous.”

Klarissa looked up at her mother, then hopped off the sofa and climbed into Megan’s lap.

“I do feel like a member of your family,” Lise said. “It’s a wonderful feeling.”

“You are a member of our family,” Megan replied.

“Does that mean we’ve adopted Lise?” Klarissa asked.

“In a way, I suppose it does. Lise, I mean it. You’re always welcome here. You’re so good with the twins. You gave



them unconditional love and look how they responded. You're good for me, too. I never knew unconditional love, so I didn't know how to bestow it. You've taught me."

"Surely you exaggerate."

"Surely I do not. You're a role model for me. Speaking of families --have you heard from your mom and dad?"

"Yes. They're still living at the temporary shelters. They'll be reopening the Zone in a few days, so I imagine we'll head back there. There's no telling what we'll find. Since no one owns the buildings, it's homesteaders' rights. I don't know if we'll get our old place

back again or not.”

“If I had the space, I'd invite all of you to live here.”

“At least, we've gone back to the old curfew.”

“Yes,” Megan replied. “Dusk-to-dawn was beginning to wear on one.” She smiled. “I wonder if we'll have a curfew-fueled baby boom within the next standard.”

The doorchime sounded. “I'll get it,” Lise said. “Excuse me, Geddes...” She went to the door and swung it open. “Bryce...”

“Lise, may I come in?” She stood aside. “The civil reserve are busy clearing debris in the Zone. In doing so, they ran across a group of novonids who had been holed up in the basement of one of the burned-out buildings. They were caught in the firefight, so to speak. Some of them are injured --one in particular. He happens to be registered to Novonid Rescue, so he's our concern. We had him transported to a novonid clinic in Quadrant Two. He's in pretty bad shape and they don't expect he'll last the night. He's asking for you.”

“For me?”

“Yes.”

Lise glanced at Megan. “Go to him,” she said. “We'll manage 'til you return.”

Bryce led Lise to a constable's squad car. “Are these people your private taxi service?” Lise asked.

“They're helping us get around with curfew.”

Lise heard the warning chimes sound as the car headed toward Quadrant Two. They drove past Ramina's breeding and stopped outside a single-story building. Bryce led her inside and spoke to an attendant.

“This way,” the attendant said. “I should warn you, it's not a pretty sight.”

“What happened to him?” Lise asked.

“He has a punctured spleen.”

“Can't you help him?”

“This condition is invariably fatal in novonids. The spleen is a vital photosynthetic organ. There's nothing we can do.”

Lise was led to a cot. She knelt beside him. Tagg' skin had faded to a pale yellow and he lay, gasping.

“Tagg... Oh, Tagg...” She cradled him in her arms.

“Lise... You came.”

“I came as soon as I heard. Oh, Tagg... You should've listened to me. All your talent...”

“Don't scold me, Lise,” he gasped.

“Oh, Tagg --I'm sorry.”

“I wanted you here, Lise ... to tell you ... I never stopped loving you.”

“I never stopped loving you, either. Oh, Tagg... Your art. It did make a difference.”

“My art?”

“Yes. One of your sketches is on the cover of the Novonid Rescue newsletter.

It means you reached people, Tagg. You got their attention.”

“Lise... Have you heard?”

“Heard what?”

“Mott... Any news of Mott? They said he was captured.”

“Mott turned himself in. The strike is over, Tagg. They've called off the demolition of the Zone.”

“We'll keep fighting...”

“There's nothing left to fight for.”

“Oh, Lise... I'm so tired. I've been

staying awake 'til you came. I can't any longer. I'm going to sleep now. Don't leave me, Lise. I want you to be here when I wake up.”

A tear ran down her face. She squeezed his hand. “I'll be here, Tagg.”

“I love you ... and that's forever.”

“Tagg... No, Tagg...”

He closed his eyes, shuddered and was still. Lise eased him back onto the cot. The attendant covered him with a drape.

Tears blurred Lise's vision. Bryce approached her. “I'm sure you comforted him.”



“Who's going to comfort me? I loved him, Bryce. Such a waste. Such a waste of his talent...” She sniffed back tears. “What happens next? Can we claim the body?”

“Claim the body? Surely you know novonid remains are disposed by...”

“Yes. By the city department of sanitation. Bryce --Thom bought Tagg so he could live like a white. He never had the chance to do so. Can't he at least die like one?”

“We'll need to find a ... facility that will agree to this.”

“A body's a body and ashes are ashes. I

don't understand what is the difficulty.”

“I'll start making calls.”

“Oh, Bryce... I'm losing both of the men I loved.”

“You're a young and beautiful woman, Lise. There'll be other men.”

“Not like these two, there won't.”

A delivery courier stopped at number 505. The driver rang the bell and Lise accepted a package, and tipped the man with a mostly-fresh five-unit scrip card. She set the box on the floor.

“Aren't you going to open it?” Klarissa

asked.

“Not now. I know what's in it.”

“What's in it?”

“An urn.”

“What's an urn?”

“Do you know what a vase is?”

“Yes...” She pointed to one holding dried flowers.

“It's like that but with a lid on it.”

“Oh... Can't we see it?”

“In due time. Now, it's almost time for your mommy to come home, so why don't you pick up your toys in the living room?”

“Okay...”

Megan opened the door and hugged Lise. She noticed the box. “Is that...”

“Yes. We'll keep it under wraps until I finally move to wherever it is I move.”

“You are more than welcome to stay here, Lise --for as long as you want.”

“I know, and thanks, but I really should be with my folks.”

“I understand. Are you ready for tomorrow?”

“As ready as I'll ever be.”

“I can't believe they're actually going to do it --and I can't believe you're actually going to witness it.”

“Thom asked me to be there. He ordered his attorneys not to file any appeals. The outcome would be the same, and he'd rather get it over with.”

“Good luck and good courage, Lise. I wouldn't have the stomach to do it.”

Bryce placed a placard in the windscreen of his car as they

approached the tunnel leading into the Safety Palace. A constable's deputy examined it and waved him into the building. He escorted Lise to an upper floor, down a corridor and to a balcony overlooking the Vyonna central square -- the point where all four quadrants of the city came together. A scaffold had been erected on the spot, with a gibbet and a noose. Bryce showed another deputy some credentials and he motioned them onto the balcony. A row of folding chairs had been set up. Lise took a seat beside Brocton Mees.

“Thom will never see me up here,” Lise said.

“He knows you're here and it's a comfort

to him.”

She looked down on the crowd assembled in the square. They pressed up against a barricade. A group of novonids pushed against the fence to the right of the square and a raucous crowd of whites assembled on the left.

“It looks like some ... perverted sporting event,” she whispered. “Bloodthirsty animals.”

“It's the first public execution in over a hundred standards,” Bryce replied. “It's been the only thing on the screens all day --both the official news and the alternative.”

“I haven't watched. How does killing Thom make things better? Letting him live would make things better.”

“Believe me, that argument was made and it fell on deaf ears. Thom's good work will continue... Look! They're bringing him out.”

Lise leaned forward. A door in the safety palace opened. A pair of constables led Thom outside. Jeers and catcalls came from the left side of the square.

Thom's hands were shackled behind his back. He walked toward the barricade where the novonids were assembled, nodded and spoke to them.



One woman held up a novonid child. Thom leaned and kissed the infant's cheek.

“I know her,” Bryce said. “She was one of the first ones Thom rescued. In fact it was her case that made him found Novonid Rescue. She was in a terrible situation... Simply terrible. She had been horribly abused, both physically and emotionally. Thom stepped in and...”

“And he'll never be able to step in again. Oh, Bryce --I can't go through with it.”

“A moment's courage, Lise, is all it takes.”

Lise bit her lip as the constables

escorted Thom up the steps and to the platform. Another official began wrapping bands around his ankles and knees. A third pulled a white hood over his head, slipped the noose around his neck and tightened it. They stepped back.

A magistrate stepped forward and read the death warrant. Then, the trapdoor opened and Thom dropped through and was stopped abruptly by the rope. His body flexed, stiffened and was still. Some constable's deputies began placing a screen around the scaffold.

The crowd fell silent. Novonids were weeping and embracing each other. A few whites cheered and applauded. Then, the crowd began to disperse.

Lise stood and turned to leave the balcony. She paused in the doorway, supported herself against the frame, leaned over and vomited. Bryce came to her and put his arm around her.

“It was so ... barbaric,” she gasped.  
“Poor Thom.”

“Lise --if you need a shoulder to cry on...”

“I've done my crying already. Take me to Megan's house.”

“I'm afraid we have another piece of business. I'd like you to accompany me to my office.”

“Fine, Bryce. Whatever you say.”

He led her to the garage, opened the passenger door to his car and Lise slid in. He sat in the driver's seat and piloted the vehicle to an office complex in a suburb of Quadrant One, not too far from the house on the hill.

Once inside his office he unlocked a cabinet and withdrew a polysheet scroll. “This is Thom Broman's will,” he said, unrolling the scroll. “It is Varadan law that one convicted of a felony must forfeit his estate to the government. However, using a bit of legal legerdemain, Thom and I transferred his entire estate to Novonid Rescue, with the effective date of the transfer order

prior to his arrest and arraignment. Consequently, it has all been preserved. Do you understand?”

“Yes...”

“In particular, the estate has been placed into a trust with you as beneficiary. This includes his controlling interests in Broman Enterprises.”

“Me?”

“Yes, Lise. Thom wanted his work with his company and with Novonid Rescue to go forward. He wanted to keep it in the family, so to speak, and he has no immediate family of his own. He considered you ... all of you his family..”

“What does this mean?”

“It means, for all practical purposes, you have inherited Thom, Lord Broman's entire estate. The house on the hill is yours for your home ... or, to sell if you'd prefer. As in all Novonid Rescue cases, you need a white regent to carry out your wishes. I have been assigned that role. It was Thom's dying wish that I give you absolute obedience --which I will without hesitation. It seems you and I will be doing quite a bit of business together.”

“Do I have to accept this?”

“Are you inclined not to?”

“I know nothing about business.”

“Success at business is more a combination of courage and luck than skill.” Bryce removed a folder and slipped a polysheet from it. “This explains his reasoning.”

She took the sheet. “A handwritten note...”

“I'll read it to you, if you'd like.”

“I can read it just fine.” Her eyes scanned the document.

*My Dear Lise... Throughout my career I've found it easier to obtain forgiveness than permission. It's an*

*approach that has served me well, and I'm applying that doctrine now. I've made known my intentions to leave my estate in your control. Knowing you as I do, I'm convinced had I asked your permission to do this, you would've demurred.*

“Bryce,” Lise said without looking up, “what does demurred mean?”

“Objected ... resisted.”

“That's what I thought...” She continued reading.

*I've gone ahead and done it anyway. Forgive me for not consulting you, and please accept. You are capable, Lise. I*



*can't imagine anyone in a better position to carry on my work. You've lived underground and you've lived in the Zone. You understand novonid issues as well as anyone. You're smart and a quick study. If I had the slightest doubt, I wouldn't have done this, Lise. If you admire the work I started, then you won't shrink from this burden I've placed upon you. --Thom.* Lise looked up at Bryce. “What makes up his estate? What did he expect me to be responsible for?”

Bryce rolled his eyes in thought. “Well... There is Thom's interest in Broman Enterprises. His share amounts to about seventy percent, and the current market

value would be..." Bryce counted on his fingers. "Around one billion. That makes his share worth..."

"Seven hundred million," Lise replied. "What else?"

"There's his personal portfolio, which amounts to another two hundred million or so ... depending on the market, of course. Plus, he has fifty-one percent interest in Novonid rescue. That's a not-for-profit organization, so we can't really count it as assets... And current bank balances amounting to about three and a half million --petty cash."

Lise closed her eyes. "To think not many days ago I was concerned about

spending thirty units of scrip.”

“The decision-making is the same. The only difference is in scale.”

“Yes... The size of the consequences should I make a mistake.”

“If you value the good work Thom did -- you won't shy from this. So, what do you say?”

“I'm speechless ... I don't know what to say.”

“How about, yes I'll do it?”

“When is this effective?”

“Immediately.”

Lise grabbed a polycard from Bryce's desk and wrote two numbers on it. “I want you to go out and buy these two novonids and register them with Novonid Rescue. Their names are Grott and Rayla. Bryce

--negotiate your best price, but make sure to buy them. Once you've located them, send them to the house on the hill. Tell them I'll join them there, later.”

“Lise --I'm a solicitor, not a trader. I don't know anything about negotiating prices.”

“Then, you had better learn.”

## XIX

Megan approached Lise. “I have something to ask you,” she said in a whisper.

“What, Megan?”

“I'm embarassed... Lise --do you think you could take the twins overnight some night?”

“Overnight?”

“You see... I have a boyfriend and...”

“Oh, Megan!” Lise threw her arms around her and hugged her. “Say no more. I'm so excited for you!”

“I'm not getting my hopes up ... not yet. We'd like an evening together to...”

“I understand completely. I'd be happy to take the twins. They'll have a great time at the house on the hill. I never would've taken them into the Zone, but there will be fine.”

“Thanks, Lise. Let's not say anything to them until I have something lined up.”

Lise looked into Megan's face and couldn't help breaking into a broad smile. Megan hugged her. “Oh, Lise -- you are my best friend. My very best friend.”

“I'm happy to hear that, Megan. I'm

honored.”

Lise hugged and kissed the twins. “See you tomorrow, gang,”

“Lise,” Geddes said, “can Rinn come over to play?”

“I’ll ask Ms Ramina.” Then, Lise headed out the door and to the corner where she climbed aboard a red line number four. The bus worked its route between Quadrants Three and One and began to make its loop at the end of the line.

She hopped off the bus at the bottom of the hill and climbed the steps to the house. Once inside she headed for the master bedroom on the third floor. There

she kicked off her sandals and stripped out of her shorts and bandeau.

She knew she had a bit of time before Bryce would arrive, so she stepped onto the private balcony to enjoy the last direct rays of sunlight playing on her nude body. She found it a pleasant solar snack. The sound of a car in the drive alerted her that Bryce had arrived.

She stepped back into the bedroom, into the clothes-press and reviewed her choices. From the rod she picked a white, synthetic fibre dress and slipped into it. The hem came to her knees and the right shoulder had a little cap sleeve. Like most Varadan business attire the left shoulder was cut to reveal the



wearer's caste tattoo. In her case, it exposed her serial number. She fastened a belt around her waist. Lise took a page from Thom's book and tucked one end of a sash into her belt in back, then flipped the other end over her left shoulder. She found a pair of medium-high-heeled shoes and slid her feet into them. Then, she stepped into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. With her finger she dipped into a pot of lavender metallic face color and smeared some onto her right eyelid, extending the line across her temple to her ear. Some brown gloss on her lips completed her toilet. She slipped on a pair of non-corrective eyeglasses and headed downstairs to the library.

Bryce met her there and withdrew his mediascreen. Lise picked up the control for the wall-mounted screen and switched it on. The image of a board room appeared.

“We'll keep it short today,” Lise said. “First item is our investment portfolio. I've reviewed it. I'd like to sell all our Drumm Industries.”

“What do you suggest we buy with the proceeds?” a woman in a blue dress asked through the mediascreen.

“I think we should hold it in cash for the time being,” Lise replied. “At least until we know which way the political winds are blowing. Also, we should lighten up

our luxury sector by forty percent and our heavy industry by twenty --also to be kept in cash.”

“What about agriculture?” a middle-aged man asked.

“It's fine where it is,” she replied. “Even during hard times folks need to eat. Any objections?”

“No,” replied the woman in the blue dress. “It sounds shrewd to me.”

“What makes you think there will be hard times?” the man asked.

“The strike has unsettled people,” she replied. “Uncertainty breeds caution.

We're seeing it already on the Eastern continent.”

“Shouldn't we stay the course until we see what direction...”

“It's easy to gamble with someone else's money,” Lise shot back. “Lloyd --would you put your life savings into Drumm Industries right now?” She looked at him through the screen. “I didn't think so... Next topic --Uncle Thom's packaged meals.”

A woman in a red suit replied. “The focus groups have been very positive. They like the notion of meals that humans and novonids can share.”

“My gut tells me,” Lise said, “that the market for them is restricted to a fairly small sector of Vyonna. I think we should go with limited production and see if it catches on.”

“Here's the suggested design for the package.” The woman in red tapped a key and an image appeared on the mediascreen. “We'd use the same layout with different color schemes for the red and white synthetemeat products.”

“I like the concept,” Lise said. “Let's redo the artwork so the figures look more life-like.”

“But --we thought caricatures would have more impact.”

“I think they're borderline offensive,” Lise replied. “Both the white one and the green one. They're not dignified. Remember that --whatever we do, we do it with dignity.”

“I see your point,” the lady in the blue dress said.

“What if we used photoimages?” the man asked. “How about a pretty white girl and a pretty novonid one?”

“I know,” said the woman in red. “Just their eyes. We photo them dead on, with their eyes looking to the side --at each other.”

“I like the sound of that,” Lise said.

“We'll have new artwork day after tomorrow,” the red-dress lady replied.

“Good,” Lise said. “Any other business?” She scanned the faces in the mediascreen. “Adjourned.”

She pressed a control and the screen went dark.

“I've put a number of contracts that need your review in your in-stack,” Bryce said. “I'll be at my desk.”

Lise dismissed him with a nod and he headed to a sitting room that had been converted into an office. She sat behind the large desk, pulled the mediadisplay before her and began reviewing

documents. A rap came at the door and a teenaged white girl with long blond hair stepped in. “Mam, your appointment is here.”

“Show her in, Leah.”

A novonid woman stepped into her study. Lise stood to greet her, and scanned her from head to foot. She looked no older than her mother, though Lise knew she had at least twenty additional standard years. The woman was wearing the traditional costume of bandeau and short shorts. Lise extended her hand. “Margliss, pleased to meet you.”

“The pleasure is mine. I was expecting



to meet someone who looked a bit older.”

Lise smiled. “So was I.”

“You're too kind.”

“Please sit.”

“This is my first visit to the Bromen estate,” Margliss said. “It's so very ... snug.”

“Yes. Lord Bromen sold the family manor and bought this property. He did so because it overlooks the Green Zone.”

“I'm pleased to hear things have returned

to normal inside Zone.”

“That's precisely why I wanted to speak with you,” Lise replied. “Things are returning to normal ... unfortunately.”

“Unfortunately? Why do you say that?”

“Conditions in the Zone were never optimal.”

“What today is optimal? The Green Zone does serve an important purpose.”

“What purpose is that?” Lise asked.

“It's a safety valve. It's a place where unregistered can go, unharassed.”

“It's also a place where renegades go to hide from bounty hunters, where street thugs evade the constables and where desperate girls sell their bodies to white men for pocket change.”

“Our society is not prepared to have unregistered novonids roaming the streets of Vyonna.”

“So, the solution is to hide them in the Zone --out of sight, out of mind. The plight of unregistered novonids is a particular interest of mine,” Lise said. “You and I are members of a second class of Varadan citizens.”

“As I know all too well.”

“Do you, really? Unregistered form a third class. Those of us who are ... or, were members of that class live in constant fear. We learn to scan our surroundings for any suspicious strangers before exposing ourselves to the sun, and thus to possible capture.”

“And that is why we need safe harbors.”

“Like the Green Zone? Is this your position, Margliss? Or, do you speak for the BSS as well?”

“The BSS believe safe harbors should be encouraged.”

“I have heard it said that the BSS is more interested in maintaining the status

quo than in progress. It appears that assessment is correct. Margliss --thank you for stopping by.” Lise sat at her desk and began reviewing documents on her mediascreen.

“You are a brazen girl,” Margliss hissed. “I am not accustomed to being dismissed so.”

Lise continued scanning documents. Margliss rose and headed for the door. Bryce stepped in from his desk across the hall. “I can't believe you treated Margliss that way,” he whispered. “She has powerful friends and can be a formidable enemy.”

Lise held up one finger. The sound of

footfalls approached. Bryce ducked back into his office. Margliss poked her head into the library. "Lise... I don't wish you to perceive me as opposing progress ... or, as insensitive to the plight of unregistered. Perhaps we should make another try at our conversation."

"We can try it as many times as you'd like."

"May I sit?"

"Please."

"It's obvious," Margliss said, "that you have a different vision for the Zone. Would you mind sharing it with me?"

“I thought you'd never ask.” Lise manipulated her mediascreen and pressed a key. An image appeared on the wall screen. “This is an artist's conception of what is now the Green Zone. We've removed the walls, fences and gates. The centerpiece is a replica of the old hotel, restored to its prime a couple hundred years ago. We believe with its location at the edge of the city and overlooking the pomma savanna, it will be a popular destination both for visitors to Vyonna and for city folk looking for an escape.”

“More popular than the coastal resorts?” she asked.

“If we offer the right value, it will be

popular enough.” Lise pointed to the screen. “Here is the old park, restored, with new homes and apartments ringing it. All this was burned down during the strike. And at this end, the apartment buildings are to be renovated. All apartments and homes are to be equipped with power, water and sanitation. The streets will be open to traffic. The Zone will cease to be its own enclave, and instead be integrated into Vyonna's fabric.”

“Will this be income-generating property?” Margliss asked.

“Yes... We anticipate modest rents along the lines of the Rescue Towers.”



“How will you induce owners who've been accustomed to dumping their novonids in the Zone to avail themselves of these renovated properties?”

“We will ask Vyonna to require owners to provide housing.”

“And, if they can't afford to?”

“We believe most can afford to. Otherwise, they can give up their novonids.”

“Give them up to whom?”

“To Novonid Rescue and receive a tax write-off. Novonid Rescue will then place them in housing and find work for

them.”

“And, what of the unregistered? How do they fit into this plan?”

“They don't,” Lise replied. “There won't be any.”

“What do you plan to do with them? Deport them? Send them to the hedgerows and forests beyond the pomma farms?”

“Of course not. There won't be any unregistered because we will register them. All of them.”

“How many are there?”

“Our best count puts the number between three and five thousand,” Lise replied. “This is where we need some help from the BSS. We'd like a price break on registering them.”

“What sort of a price break?” Margliss asked.

“We were hoping you'd do it gratis.”

“Register five thousand novonids for free? That's a loss of ten million units of revenue!”

“No, it's not,” Lise replied. “These are registrations you'd never have to begin with. Margliss --the BSS runs the registry. It doesn't cost you two thousand

units to register one.”

“There are some costs.”

“What's your profit margin? Ninety-five percent? Give us a ninety-five percent discount and we'll pay the rest. Margliss --in a generation or two, there will be a population explosion of unregistered if we don't do something about it now.”

“And, you expect Novonid Rescue to take title on all these newly registereds and care for them?”

“It will be our challenge. We'll welcome help from the BSS but we're prepared to go it alone if we must. Will you help us with the registrations?”

“I can't speak for the BSS, but I will bring it up at the board meeting.”

“Thank you, Margliss.”

“Tell me something, Lise... Do you really think the city of Vyonna will go along with this idea?”

“I think so.”

“What makes you think so?”

“Because of the money we bring to the table. The only cost to Vyonna is turning over the Zone to Novonid Rescue and making some upgrades to services. We will do the rest.”

“I was wondering when we'd get around to that topic. I imagine you expect me to donate, too.”

“If you'd like,” Lise replied. “I am prepared to liquidate our interest in Broman Enterprises and put it all into this project. That amounts to about seven hundred million..”

Margliss looked at Lise for a long moment. “Seven hundred million?”

“Yes, and more if I sell everything except this house and a small annuity for living expenses. And, Margliss --I'm accustomed to living modestly.”

“I ... I can't give you a figure right

now...”

“Whatever you can do will be appreciated. We have more than a billion pledged already --most of it is Broman money.”

“I'll get back to you ... and I'll bring the matter up before the BSS board. Good day. It was a pleasure meeting you.”

“Likewise.” Margliss walked out of the door.

Bryce stepped back into the library. “Wow,” he said, “how you handled her. They say Margliss has a heart of gold --only harder. You're as tough as she is.”

Lise gazed at the plans on the screen. “I can't wait for the work to start,” she said.

“I can. I lie awake nights worrying about it. Don't you?”

“No. What frightens you, Bryce?”

“Putting all that capital at risk,” he replied.

“You're not worried about the long-term ramifications? We will accomplish what Mott's gang failed to achieve.”

“How do you figure that?” Bryce asked.

“Mott's ... Thom's mistake was thinking



he could persuade us to covet the white lifestyle. We don't and that's why the only ones who struck were Zone residents who've been poorly treated.”

“They're the ones who had reason to strike.”

“Precisely. Forcing owners to either provide room and board or a living stipend should alleviate that problem. No, Bryce. What I see happening is bigger --much bigger. How many novonids are registered to Novonid Rescue right now?”

“I think about five hundred.”

“We'll add ten times that number. We'll

absorb the unregistered. We'll integrate the Zone into Vyonna and give those living there an investment in the place. We'll send them to the trade schools and train them; and we'll use their labor to rebuild the Zone.”

“What makes you think Zone residents will cooperate?” Bryce asked.

“Have you ever looked over the notes Thom collected about the genesis of our species? One thing our designers built into us is an aversion to idleness. We like to keep busy in the sun. Zone residents won't simply cooperate. They'll embrace it.”

“Won't the trade guilds object?”

“They won't dare,” she replied. “To object would be to admit novonids are a threat. By admitting we're a threat, they're admitting we're their equals. They can't afford that. They'll ignore us.”

“I'm beginning to understand,” Bryce said. “When we're done we'll have eliminated five thousand unregisteredds living off scraps and have replaced them with five thousand functioning, contributing members of society.”

“Five thousand functioning, contributing members of society who are living a free lifestyle, Bryce. In a couple generations that number could swell to twenty thousand; and in a few more could approach a hundred. THEN, we'll have

established a green lifestyle the other urban novonids can and will wish to emulate. The pressure will be on to expand novonid rights, at least in the cities.”

“Now we're talking about a green strike with some teeth.”

“I would hope it won't come to conflict,” she replied.

“Evolution, not revolution,” Bryce said. “What looks to the city as a charitable effort to clean up the Zone is in reality the seeds of a new order.”

“We don't set out to change society,” she replied. “We use society and it changes

itself. This will be Thom's true legacy. That was his other mistake --he was too impatient. The Broman fortune has been amassing for generations. Now is the time to put it to use. It's the right thing to do. I'm sure of it. It's just like when I had thirty units in my pocket and wanted to buy a mediascreen for my mother. It was a fortune to me then, Bryce.” She looked in his eyes. “As a white, doesn't this frighten you?”

“Not in the least, Lise --it delights me. I'm as fond of your kind as Thom was --or else I wouldn't be associated with Novonid Rescue. When my wife and I are ready to start a family, it's our intention to adopt a novonid baby. We'll

register the child with Novonid Rescue and raise him alongside our own as siblings.”

Lise looked at him, her eyes welling. “You'd do that? You're braver than I thought.” She held out her palm. Bryce pressed his to hers and they locked fingers. She squeezed his hand; then, embraced him.

“You're a good man, Bryce. It won't be easy for you...”

Leah entered the library. “Excuse me, mam,” she said.

“Yes, Leah?”

“I've finished filing. Is there anything else?”

“No, Leah --you may call it a day.”

“Thank you, mam.” The girl turned and left.

“She's a nice girl,” Lise said to Bryce.

“I'm surprised you didn't hire a novonid as an intern.”

“I would have, but I couldn't find one who reads well enough,” Lise replied.

“Leah reads better than I do.” She bit her lip. Bryce put his hand on her shoulder.

“I'm sorry, Bryce. I was having a moment of white envy.”

“There's no shame in what you're doing, Lise. Once the school Thom founded starts graduating students --we'll have plenty of novonid interns.”

“I know. It all reminded me of how far we have to go yet. Leah's what... two years younger than I? I was just thinking what I was doing two years ago.” She pulled her shoulder blades together and stretched. “It's been a long day for me and probably you, too. See you tomorrow, Bryce.”

“I have a little work to finish before I go.” He headed back to his office. Lise left the library and stepped onto the terrace. She approached a section where planters had been arranged in a sort of



shrine. Two urns sat in it --one labeled Tagg and the other Thom. She poured water from a can onto the plants and began picking off spent blossoms and flicking off maturing seeds. A hand rested on her shoulder. She turned and saw Rayla. "I can understand why you honor Tagg,"

her mother said. "But, why Thom Broman? Why after all the trouble he caused us?"

"Thom did much good work, too," Lise replied. "He was a good man."

"Then, why did he do what he did?"

"No good man is completely good ... and

no bad man completely evil. It's important his good works are carried forward.”

“I'm proud of you, Lise,” her mother said. “I can't believe how well you're doing.”

“I have you to thank, Mother. You taught me to read and to do sums. I couldn't have taken this on without that.”

“It goes beyond reading and writing,” Rayla replied.

“I have a good mentor in Bryce. He keeps telling me success is more courage than skill.”

“Courage is something you have in abundance.”

Lise grasped her mother's hand and they laced fingers. The two women walked to a table where Grott was sitting and joined him.

“You're looking glum,” Lise said to her stepfather.

“What is that on your face?” he asked.

She removed the eyeglasses. “I wear these to make me appear more mature.”

“No. This...” He tapped his face near his right eye.

“Just some color.”

“What's the point of it? And, what's the point of the costume you're wearing? Are you ashamed to show your green skin?”

“Father --I have to deal with business people. Business people who are accustomed to dealing with other business people. White business people. I discovered they take me more seriously if I look a bit more like they do.”

“Why don't you paint your face white and put a wig on, then?” Grott made the guttural growl he reserved for ultimate contempt. “There is nothing to do here.”

“That's not true. There's plenty that needs doing. These gardens are all wild pomma. It needs cultivation just like the food crop. You're more than welcome to do whatever you think needs done.”

Grott growled again.

“Father --if you'd really rather be back on the farm picking pomma... Well, I'll just tell Bryce to buy a pomma farm and you can go pick to your heart's content. Or --go back to your construction job. I thought you hated it, though.”

“I was happy to quit working for the laundry,” Rayla said.

“Both of you --you should enjoy your

freedom. You've certainly worked hard enough up to now. Are we ready to feed?"

"I am," Rayla replied. Grott grunted.

Lise poked a key on her mediascreen. "Marta, please bring our meals."

An older novonid woman pushed a cart onto the terrace. She set before them three bowls of brownish strands covered with multi-colored sprinkles.

"Thank you, Marta," Lise said.

"That's another thing," Grott added. "I don't like being waited on by another novonid."

“Would you rather be waited on by a white?” Lise asked.

“Maybe I would.”

“It gives Marta work,” Rayla replied.

“That's a good thing.”

Bryce approached. “Beg pardon, Lise. I'm sorry to interrupt your family meal.”

“What is it, Bryce?”

“I received a call from Prefect Ogan's office. He would like to schedule a meeting in the next day or so to discuss your Green Zone proposals.”

“You have my calendar. I'm free

tomorrow and the next day, late afternoons.”

“The prefect would rather meet in the morning.”

“I have a commitment mornings --my babysitting job.”

“That's what I wanted to discuss. You could be more effective if you didn't have that ... obligation. You don't need the money. Why do you insist on keeping that job?”

“Because I entered into an agreement with Megan to do it and that agreement pre-dates any of my commitments here. It doesn't matter if it's Klarissa and



Geddes or the prime minister himself. A prior commitment is a prior commitment.”

“Certainly you could hire someone to...”

“Megan doesn't want someone. She wants me. I promised her and I'm keeping my promise. I want those children to grow up knowing when a novonid gives her word it's her bond.”