

HOW YOU COME UNDONE

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PART ONE

It was a busy day at the IBMCelestron headquarters on Arcadia-6. Being a Goldilocks planet near the outer rim meant it was always quite busy: processing shipments of precious metals from the mining belt, acting as a staging world for research ventures, and offering a host of more “pleasurable” activities for private citizens and high-status corporates alike. But these were just a few among a litany of affairs that took place on Arcadia-6. To sum it up, the supercity planet was a desirable location for conducting important business. And business meant busy. But more importantly, IBMCelestron had just entered the 4th quarter of the Universal Calendar, the beginning of which was dubbed “crunch-month” by its underpaid and underappreciated employees. During crunch month, Arcadia-6 received a spike in off-world shipping and business-related visits, which meant that Velvet was especially busy.

As an In-Transit and Traffic Route Administrator, more appropriately simplified to just “Router,” Velvet would see more action in one month than she had in the past three quarters combined. She’d probably have to work a double. And yet, this was the time she enjoyed the most. Not because of an overt and intrinsic passion for her work, but because this was the time when IBMCelestron would publish its employee reviews. And Velvet was always at the top. She loved being at the top. After thirteen years with the company, she felt she deserved it, and the feeling of satisfaction at seeing her name at the top of the holo-board on the 266th floor, which was where she and the other routers worked, induced in her a natural high persevering throughout the entirety of crunch month. For Velvet, this was the easiest time of the year. But this time was different.

That morning, on the first day of the fourth quarter, when Velvet saw her name at the top of the holo-board, she didn't feel the same high that she always felt. Rather, she felt as though she had been cheated out of something. But of what, she wasn't sure. And instead of standing by the board for a moment — sometimes as long as a few minutes to wait for one of her coworkers to pass by, glance up at the rankings, and utter an obligatory, "Good job, Velvet" — as she usually did, she simply forced a grin and walked straight to her desk, picked up her telecom, and began working.

"Patching in," Velvet said, as was customary to do so while one waited for their holo-table to warm up and they could begin processing queues. Whether there was someone on the other line at this point, she was not sure.

The holo-table flashed on and she began scrolling aimlessly through a list of what must have been a thousand requests. She straightened her back, adjusted the telecom, and tapped on the first one. "Router identification number one-dash-two-dash-two-dash-four-dash-three-dash-six-dash-one. Celestron Central Command. Arcadia-6. How may I route your approach?"

The pre-recorded voice on the other line answered in a robotic, yet animated voice, "This is Petrovska vessel two-four-eight-nine-eight-four. Shipping division. Vessel class: Orion. Cargo: precious metals. Point of origin: The Outer Rim, Sector Three. Requesting permission to dock at 1800. Special Request:" The robotic voice was replaced with a grizzled, male voice — as special requests were typically recorded by the vessel's captain — "As close to Morowin Bay as possible."

"Processing, please hold," Velvet said as she placed her hand on the holo-table. Immediately, an intricate map popped up on the table, with dozens of circles and "x's" and a web of lines connecting them. "Petrovska vessel two-four-eight-nine-eight-four," she said in a polite voice.

The robotic voice returned. “Affirmative. Awaiting instruction.”

“Morowin Bay is currently reserved at the requested time,” said Velvet. “You may, however, dock at Leopold Station, Concourse B, Dock 14. Is that satisfactory?” She asked, politely.

“Confirming. Please hold.” Immediately, the grizzled voice of the man returned. “Leopold Station!? That’s at least 23 kilometers from Morowin Bay! Listen lady, my crew and I have on board 23,000 tons of raw rhodium, mined directly from an asteroid belt in the Outer Rim. Our contract is to deliver the rhodium directly to the Morowin Bay refinery. If I have to unload the metal in Leopold Station and have it transported on-ground to Morowin, that’s half my paycheck gone!”

Velvet didn’t have the authority to cancel current appointments and as a result, she couldn’t free up a space at Morowin Bay. She looked to her left into the glass walls of her supervisor’s office, where she saw the man lying back in his chair with his feet on his desk. He spoke on his telecom passionately — the words of which she could not hear, but the tenor notes of his voice vibrated through the glass wall that separated him from the rest of the room — and out of nowhere, he burst into laughter. She kept watching for a moment, enthralled by the enjoyment he seemed to be having. She wondered what it would be like to lean back in his chair, put her feet up on his desk, and have an entire room to herself, to not have to process hundreds, rather thousands of transit requests a day. Some part of her felt she deserved it and she was annoyed.

The Supervisor glanced to his right and noticed Velvet watching him. When their eyes met, she returned meekly to the holotable in front of her. Nevertheless, the Supervisor stood up, walked over to the glass wall of his enclosure, and made a gesture with his hand. Immediately, the glass became opaque. Velvet silenced her wandering thoughts. *The Supervisor hates being interrupted*, she reminded herself.

“I apologize, but there are currently no openings at Morowin Bay,” said Velvet, in her characteristically polite voice. She continued, “I can transfer you to my supervisor but the currently expected wait time is fourteen hours. If you do not book now you will be placed at the bottom of the queue and may miss your appointment at 1800 hours. Furthermore, I cannot guarantee that there will be an open space at Leopold Station, either, when you return at the top of the queue. The next closest dock, ‘Grindle and Co.’ Spaceport is approximately 57 kilometers from Morowin Bay.”

Velvet knew all of the spaceports in Arcadia-6 like the back of her hand. She had a photographic memory and had memorized the entire dock map, which spanned thousands of kilometers and hundreds of docking stations, after only her third month as a router. To be quite frank, she was overqualified for the job. Nevertheless, she was sure that the information she had just recited would be enough to put the grizzled man’s grievances to rest. She listened on her telecom for a response.

After a moment, he uttered in a low voice, “Leopold Station’s fine,” followed by a resounding “click,” which signified the end of the call.

The request for Petrovska vessel two-four-eight-nine-eight-four disappeared from the list of hundreds on her holotable and she continued to the next.

The clock projected by her holotable spun round and round as she worked. After she finished working on a request, a few dozen down the list, a loud “beep” sounded throughout the room. Not one moment later, the great hustle-bustle of “lunch break” began, and bodies flowed quickly toward the elevator. The woman to her right threw her telecom from her head to the holotable with great force. Someone else across the room yelped as he clambered over his desk to the hallway. Velvet, however, remained seated.

The two to her left rose slowly from their seats and faced Velvet. The first was a man named Jasper. He was young, maybe twenty-six, and slim, but short. Jasper always wore a devious smile on his face which made it impossible to ever tell what he was thinking. The other was Tiadl. She was dark-skinned and slightly older than Jasper, though not by much. Tiadl had been an accountant in the finance division of the headquarters but transferred to routing after she received some form of harassment from the supervisor there. Velvet didn't remember exactly what had happened to her, but she thought that Tiadl had made a fine choice. The routing supervisor never bothered the employees. In fact, the last time Velvet had had a conversation with her supervisor, in her thirteen years of working at the department, was when she was initially hired.

“Coming to the cafeteria, V?” asked Jasper, brusquely, but with a sympathetic tone.

“I brought my own lunch,” replied Velvet as she pulled up a small bag from under her desk and set it beside the holotable. She began to unpack various metal containers and set them beside her in an organized fashion.

Jasper looked to Tiadl and then back at Velvet. “We did too, but are you coming to the cafeteria?”

“No,” she replied. “Too much work to do.”

Anticipating Velvet's response, Tiadl had already sat back down at her desk. Jasper looked at Tiadl once more, and then back at Velvet, who had already dug into her lunch. He sighed and sat down as well.

They weren't formally friends, or at least, Velvet didn't think of them as such. Tiadl and Jasper, on the other hand, often went out together to various bars and attractions after the work

hours had ended. They were inseparable. Something in the way Jasper spoke, however, gave Velvet the impression that the relationship was purely platonic.

But no, Velvet didn't think about them as friends in the traditional sense. She never felt a strong desire to see them outside of working hours, which is what constitutes a friendship. At work, however, she never minded their company.

Velvet tapped on her holotable and continued working while Tiadl and Jasper exchanged words beside her. After completing another routing request, this time for a grain shipment, Velvet paused to listen to what Jasper and Tiadl were talking about. She rarely ever did this, but something Jasper had said caught her attention.

"Did you hear about what happened on Earth?" Jasper asked.

"No, what?" replied Tiadl, who looked up at him, skeptical of what he was about to say.

"I heard there was an attack. Or a bombing. It was a bombing. One of the major Petrovskia buildings got hit. It was their headquarters!"

"You listen to too much chatter," she said, dismissively. *Chatter* was the word for rumors spread on the free net, which rarely ever ended up being true. Nevertheless, Velvet leaned in to listen.

"I'm serious!" he responded. "It wasn't a small bombing either. The entire side of the building collapsed. People are saying it was..." his voice became low, almost a whisper, "*Dividend*. I heard a thousand people died, and most of them were corporate. Actual executives!"

"No. No way," began Tiadl. "See, that's how I know you're making this up or you were lied to," said Tiadl, who scanned the room before continuing. "Dividend's not real. I don't believe it for a second. If they were real —"

“Keep your voice down!” Jasper whispered. “You never know who might be listening.”

Tiادل did as she was told. “If Dividend was real,” she whispered, “I wouldn’t be working this shit job in a city full of Pavs.”

Pavs was short for private citizens, the pinnacle of human accomplishment. Society was namely made up of two classes, private citizens and public citizens. Public citizens were normal people like Velvet, Jasper, and Tiادل, and for rough approximation made up 99% of all human population contained in both the Milky Way and the Andromeda Galaxies. Private Citizens on the other hand were far from the “normal” that Velvet knew. Most never had to work a day in their lives. Many of them did of course, out of sheer boredom, but conferred upon them, without any effort or aspiration, were always positions of high prestige, such as corporate executives, governors, politicians, military leaders, or any other other position of leadership one might encounter across the 221 colonized worlds.

But the thing that most separated the Pavs from the rest of human society was their appearance. If one were to encounter such a being, they would know almost instantly. The Pavs, in a word, were god incarnate. They were perfect in every translation of the word. Pavs were incomparably tall and slender, compared to normal human beings, and sported a mix of well-defined, magnificent features that were carefully selected from the ancient races of humanity and combined in one body like a timeless mosaic. Their faces could never be achieved through the generational descent of any one population, and yet, the individual features contained within them were borrowed from every corner of the human gene pool. This was only possible through precise genetic modification.

While Tiadl made nonchalant mention of the Pavs, Velvet knew that she had never actually met one. Encountering a Pav in the city was next to impossible, and while Tiadl and the others worked at the IBM Celestron headquarters, or Celestron HQ for short, a place that was sure to house numerous Pavs, they had, and likely would, never run into one. The Pavs were always kept separate from the grunt workers, probably with separate routes for getting in and out of the building. Furthermore, one of them would never have any reason to pay a visit to the routing department.

Velvet, however, had wanted to ask about *Dividend*. Some years ago, she had heard mention of it over the free net, but she never learned of it to the point of familiarity with which her coworkers seemed to speak of it. But before she could formulate her question, the Supervisor's door swung violently open. The three turned to look at him, but he paid them no mind. He walked speedily over to the elevator and waited, where he stood vibrating from side to side. He was *shaking*. What could he be waiting for — where was he going? They watched him in awe. They had never seen him so nervous before, rather they had never seen him nervous at all.

A moment later, the elevator opened. Then, they realized it. It wasn't the elevator he was waiting for, but the person inside. The Supervisor took a step back and a tall, indescribably beautiful man walked out. At that moment, Velvet understood what she had felt earlier that morning when she looked at the holo board that displayed her name next to the number "1." It wasn't disappointment she had felt, but rather an awareness of the frivolity of her achievement.

Standing in front of that board now was a being whose very existence denied the meaning of that number on the holo board, which had each year prior and without fail brought her joy. But it wasn't just her hard work that he denied. It was every commendation she had ever earned, every

“Good job, Velvet” — even every hour she had ever worked. Every misery she overcame, every happiness she felt after a job well done — every day she had ever lived! *He* denied it all.

The man standing before them was a being from another plane of reality. Another universe perhaps. He was not human, but at the same time, he was more human than they would ever be. More powerful. More deserving of respect. More beautiful. More free. More... perfect.

A new emotion suddenly gripped Velvet. She felt it first in the tips of her toes and it traveled up her body, riveting her with a warm tingle. She wanted to fling herself at the man. But it wasn't a carnal desire. It was something deeper, more profound. The feeling burned its way out from the very depths of her soul... she wanted to become the man. She wanted to wear his skin on her face, and adapt herself to the structure of his body — his incredible height, which seemed to tower over the Supervisor as if he was nothing more than some small pest.

But seeing as she could never “become” him, what she really wanted was some way to improve her rank. Even if it was all pointless, in fact knowing it was pointless spurred her on even more as she would have nothing to lose, she felt something she had never before felt in all twenty-eight years of her life — obsession. She hadn't realized until this day how very hungry she was — her soul starving. But the realization of her ambition wasn't any help of its own. Rather, it presented a new challenge. How would she proceed? After working 13 years at Celestron HQ, she had always remained in the same exact position. What could she do to advance? Would she work another five, or ten years with the hope of being recognized for her skills? Would she wait for another fifteen, twenty, or one hundred performance reviews? No, she needed something sooner. But what, or rather how, she was not sure.

The Supervisor led the man, whose skin seemed to glimmer upon meeting the occasional, stray ray of light that dappled in through the hexacomb windows, to the conference rooms past the employee workstations. They disappeared into the hallway and were gone.

“Did you see that?” Jasper started, his mouth agape. Velvet had never seen him make such an awkward face.

“How could I not,” replied Tiadl, sounding short of breath. “He was practically glaring at me.”

“How is it possible for someone to look like that?” blurted out Velvet. Her abounding curiosity left her with no more excuses not to speak.

Jasper’s usual smile returned, accompanied by a newly impressed cunningness. “It’s very simple,” he began. “Kiyomi Enterprises. I’m sure you’ve seen them on the routing list, occasionally requesting to dock at Capital Square. On the transmissions, they always say they’re carrying ‘medical supplies,’ but Kiyomi’s real business is body modification.”

This time, Tiadl raised no concerns with the credibility of Jasper’s information. The two leaned in closer. Jasper continued. “Few people know this, and even fewer can afford it, but for the past two thousand years, Kiyomi has perfected the process of creating,” he paused for a moment, as if looking for the right word, “superhumans.”

The three stared into the hallway that led to the conference rooms. He continued. “Every once in a while, we hear about someone going private. Someone just like us. It’s one in a million, and it’s never someone we know, but it happens. Apparently, they do it by becoming just like *him*.” Jasper gestured to the hallway. It was empty, but they looked toward it anyway. “They save up enough credits to afford a surgery, the real thing. Kiyomi. And just like that they become a different

person. Everything after is easy. But it takes at least 80 years to save up. Sometimes longer. Most people die before they ever get there.”

Velvet and Tiadl sat perplexed. They had heard the occasional story of someone going private, but never like this. It didn't once occur to them that someone could become a Pav just by looking like one. Furthermore, it never occurred to them, and to Velvet this seemed more important, that one could look like a Pav without being born into this exclusive and unreachable class. Immediately, a question burned in Velvet's mind. “Is it possible to do the surgery, or” she stumbled over her words, “or, I mean, somehow look like them, *become* like them another way?”

Jasper's face contorted as he pondered the question. For a moment, the three sat in complete silence, and Velvet began to regret her question. *Stupid.* She thought. *Of course not. There's no other way.* But then Jasper looked up, and he looked at her directly.

“Yes,” he said. “There is. But it's very risky. If you're brave enough to go on the private net, you'll see. But I wouldn't recommend it.” The three sat in silence once more, and Jasper's eyes returned to his lunch as he began to eat. Velvet too returned to hers. But she was no longer hungry. *The private net.* She thought.

While they had the same name, the private net did not carry the same connotation as “private citizen.” In fact, most of its users were not Pavs. Rather, the private net was a dark place. It wasn't very difficult to access, but once there, few would wish to stay. Velvet had been once before, out of curiosity, but she left immediately when met with countless images of dead miners, injured and maimed in gruesome ways. Some with their heads missing.

The place was home to society's underbelly which made its living through illegal and immoral activities. Prostitution, drugs, murder, and organized crime. And yet Velvet had to know what Jasper was talking about. Tonight, she would venture to the private net.

Suddenly, a loud "beep" shook the room from the intercom system. A moment later a flood of bodies dispensed from the elevator rushed to the workstations. The three returned their lunch containers to the space below the holotables and fastened their telecoms. Velvet looked at the clock projected on the table. *Six hours to go. Then, I'll see.*

PART TWO

That night, Jasper and Tiadl had asked Velvet if she wanted to accompany them to the night district, to which she abruptly refused. It wasn't that Velvet hated the Night district, she had never been. In truth, though, she had never been a fan of loud music, or recreational drugs for that matter. But it was not her distaste for what others considered "fun" that informed her decision to abstain that night, rather it was her newly obtained curiosity that made her impatient to leave. Her growing obsession.

And so she politely declined and the three parted ways, Jasper and Tiadl offering her a final warm, reassuring smile. The exchange of that moment held an air of permanence, as though the two would, no matter the circumstance, always offer Velvet an unfamiliar kinship. Nevertheless, she turned away and began her journey home, heading toward the nearest maglev station.

Once at the base of her shared residency, a building that some four thousand years ago might have been called an “apartment building,” she quickly scaled the stairs to the fourth floor and swung open the front door to her residency. The overhead lights responded by slowly brightening and she waved on the net-seer, a sort of personal, vertically-oriented holotable, which, while it could not be used for work, could create communicational ties with any receiving individual inside a distance of three astronomical units. The net-seer, as the name implies, could also access the free net, and with a little tampering, the private net as well.

Without any hesitation and emboldened by her newfound curiosity, Velvet input the necessary information, which she remembered verbatim from her failed endeavor years ago. Immediately, the vertical table projected dozens of pop-ups. The first few read, “Supervisor giving you a hard time, we’ll take care of it,” “Need a pick-me-up? 30% off on all first orders. Channel secure,” and “Breaking News: Dividend Sleeper Cell cripples mining operations in the Outer Rim. The Military currently scouring all incoming and outgoing vessels as the hunt for perpetrators begins. But they’ll *never* find them.” Velvet paused for a moment at the final pop-up, before taking a breath and waving them all away.

She opened a menu to her right and began scouring down a list of channels, each one pertaining to a different, probably illegal, operation. Her thirteen years of working with lists as a router made this an easy exercise. And in a matter of minutes, some one-hundred and twenty items

later, she found what she was looking for. It read, “Want to advance your life instantly? Body modification awaits. Gain a new awakening!” She expanded the page. At the top was written “Kiyomi,” and next to it was the number “2.8 Billion.” But the “2.8 Billion” was crossed out, and below it, in massive lettering was written *120,000*. At her current salary, the 2.8 Billion would have taken at least three hundred years of saving and a miracle to reach. The 120,000, however, could be accomplished in just a few years of diligent work and money management. But she did not have the credits at that moment and her newly awakened need for change made her impatient.

Below the advertisement were images of beautiful creatures like the one they had seen that day. And below these images was a long paragraph that began, “Don’t have the credits? We’ll loan them to you. Look no further. Your Journey begins here.” She began reading in a wild hysteria, unaware that she was grinning from ear to ear. “We have supplied over 1.2 billion people like yourself. Many of them have gone on to become corporate leaders and some have even earned private citizenship for themselves and their families.” This was exactly what Jasper was talking about. But her expression dimmed as the language of the paragraph became more technical, legal, even. “Our operation, however, offers no assurances. We are not responsible for any accidents, unintended side effects, or loss of life. Furthermore, any and all credits loaned will be done so at a 25% interest rate. If parties are unable to pay, modifications may be forcibly removed from the agreeing party and any and all assets in the party’s possession may be forfeited to make up for the accrued interest.” Then in large lettering, “DO YOU WISH TO CONTINUE?”

Velvet leaned back in her chair and laughed to herself. She had gotten her hopes up for nothing. Jasper had been right. She placed her hand over her face and began thinking to herself. Surely, there was another way. She knew as well as anyone after today that the Pavs were of a

different order — a human being of a different magnitude — but surely, *she* didn't have to become one. All she really wanted was a promotion, even a small one, such as taking the place of her lounging good-for-nothing supervisor.

After thirteen years with no mistakes, no real problems, and one hundred percent efficiency, she felt she deserved it. Moreover, she refused to believe that all she needed to advance was to become beautiful. *Impossible*, she thought. She knew she wasn't beautiful, but she wasn't ugly either. And even if she was, she was still the hardest working and most successful router on the floor and had been every year since she began working at the age of fifteen! She deserved it. She deserved better.

That's it, she thought. Tomorrow, she would take the elevator two floors up to the Routing Administrator's office and demand to become supervisor! *They can't deny me*, she thought, *not after everything I've done for them*.

And so the next day, she did exactly that. In the past, she would have been too meek, too focused on being good, but it was different now. Her "goal" consumed her, and she couldn't imagine working another day at the company without seeing it through. *They can't deny me*, she thought.

When the elevator opened to the 268th floor, two floors above the routing department, she walked out triumphantly but was stopped suddenly by a feeble-looking receptionist. "What is the purpose of your visit?" asked the receptionist.

"I'm here to see the Routing Administrator," responded Velvet, firmly.

The feeble-looking girl eyed Velvet skeptically before responding. "Do you have an appointment?" she asked.

“No, but,” Velvet stumbled, “But I must see him.”

The girl looked down at her holotable a moment before responding with a sigh, “He’s currently in with the routing supervisor, but he’ll be free afterwards. I suppose you can see him then. Please have a seat and wait.”

Velvet did as she was told, and a few minutes later, her supervisor walked out. He made his way to the elevator, and their eyes met for a moment. Velvet waited until he was inside and the doors had closed before getting up. She then made her way to the Administrator’s office.

When she entered, she was met by the man from yesterday. His golden hair shimmered and sat upon his head in waves. His eyes shone a cold, blue-gray. And his complexion was as smooth as ceramic. Even in his chair, she could tell he was at least seven heads taller than she was. She stood in front of his desk awkwardly.

“Ah, so you’re Velvet,” he said in a soft, melodious voice.

“You know my name?” she asked, stunned.

“Of course. You’re one of our hardest workers. I always make a note to remember our best employees. What can I do for you?” he asked, fashioning a brilliant smile.

“I —” she stopped. She suddenly felt very foolish. Here she was, attempting to make demands from her superior who had seemingly ignored her endless toil for all of thirteen years, and yet he knew her name. More than this, he said she was one of the “best employees.” But no. She shook her head. She had come this far and had to see it through. “I want a promotion.” And at once, the panging feeling of necessity returned to her.

“I see,” he said, in a somewhat disappointed tone. His hand swiped across the desk, as if cutting the air, and settled on his knee. “I’m sorry to tell you Velvet, but there are no positions higher than yours in the routing department. In fact, there is really only one position.”

“Make me supervisor.”

“Velvet, I can’t do that. The current supervisor has been with us for some time now and we really have no reason to doubt his performance. His routing department is one of the best on Arcadia.”

Velvet knew instinctively that this was because of her. “I can make it better. I’ve worked here for thirteen years and have always been the best. As supervisor, I could get even more work done. He sits in his office every day and passes the time in leisure. *I would do better.*”

The man chuckled lightly. Velvet felt her stomach twist. “I’m sorry. I mean no offense. But it is precisely for that reason that I can’t promote you. You see, the supervisor isn’t meant to get more work done than the other employees. His role is to motivate people like yourself to work harder by giving them an *example* of the ease of living they can achieve if they work hard. I’ll consider promoting you one day, but that day is not today. You’re too valuable to us where you are,” he finished, with an air of finality. Velvet stood still, her eyes watering. A sudden urge to yell came over her, but she suppressed it. “Now, is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No,” she said.

When Velvet returned to her workstation on the 266th floor, the twisting feeling in her stomach did not fade. Her urge to yell did not fade. She looked to her left and saw the Supervisor lying back in his chair, laughing and smiling. She would show them. She would show them what she would become. If they wanted an “example,” they would have it.

That night when work ended Jasper and Tiadl once again extended an invitation to Velvet, which she turned down almost immediately. Without wasting a moment, and without looking back to see their warm smiles, Velvet ran. She ran to the maglev station and boarded the first available train. She ran through the glossy, metallic city streets, which were paved with a porous compound called *intraglass*, made from the melted silica shells of small organisms. She ran up the four flights of stairs to her residence and ran through the pitch-black room to the net-seer, the overhead lights of her dormitory not yet woken up to the fact that she was home.

She turned on the net-seer, opened a connection to the private net, and waved her hand through dozens of channels of filth and iniquity until she finally arrived at it. “DO YOU WISH TO CONTINUE?”

“Yes.”

PART THREE

After accepting the terms of the credit loan and the risks associated with the surgery, she received a message, almost instantly, on the net-seer. It read:

Morowin Bay Docks, Underbelly. 2 Hours. Make a sharp left turn at the civilian entrance to Dock 12. There will be a small blue triangle marking a flight of stairs. Go down the stairs and continue to follow the triangles until you reach a narrow hallway. Open the third door on the left.

Walk through until you reach a grey tarp. Peel back the tarp. Take your shoes off and greet your surgeon. The parts will have arrived beforehand. Your surgeon will take care of you.

Velvet followed the instructions and arrived at the operating room. When pulled back the tarp, she was greeted by the surgeon, a small elderly man who walked with a hunch. Without saying a word, he motioned to a table in the middle of the room, which lay under a hanging contraption of odd-angled lights. The room was mostly empty aside from the operating table, the light fixture, and several smaller rolling tables which held a plethora of tools: saws, knives, surgical tongs, and needles, but nowhere did she see the “parts” for her new body. She looked around frantically and noticed a large, human-sized briefcase standing in the far corner of the room. Velvet sighed a sigh of relief—*those must be the parts*—and pulled herself up to the hip high operating table. When the surgeon saw this, he smiled and began pacing around the room to collect his tools, all the while mumbling under his breath.

When Velvet had asked him if he had “done it” before, he said “Plenty o’ times. Don’t be afraid,” in a thick accent, which must have been from Old Earth, that seemed to carry from one word to the next in the same breath. But Velvet *was* afraid. And to make matters worse, he refused to offer any anesthetics before or after the operation, attempting to comfort her by saying, “You should’ve paid for the premium,” followed by a dry chuckle, and “The pain is a reminder... it’s good.” The man offered her a leather baton to bite down on, which she quietly accepted, shaking, as he strapped her to the table.

She lost consciousness before the operation even began. “We always start with the worst part,” he had said as a six-inch long needle lowered from the ceiling into the outer iris of her eye. After that, she waded in and out of consciousness for brief moments, only to see her own blood

pouring out of her from disconnected sections of her bone under skin that had been pulled apart and held that way by fishing hooks, before fainting again. Then it was done.

“Oi. Oi.” The elderly man said, snapping his fingers over Velvet’s face. Her eyes fluttered and she looked around the room. When he saw she was awake, he moved away from her and began collecting his surgical tools. His voice faded as he walked further and further into the room. “It’s done. Best be on your way now. I’ve got to pack up and head out before they find this place. Bad business, this is. Pays good though.” He kept talking but she could no longer hear him. She shifted on the table and put her hand over her face. She felt her cheekbones. *This isn’t my face*, she thought. *Whose face is this?* She ran her fingers through her hair. She had never taken care of her hair, and it was often damaged and frizzy, but now it fell in smooth currents, like long blades of grass.

She put her hands on the edges of the table and swung her feet to the floor. They landed before she realized it. *Was the table this low before?* But as she shifted her weight to her feet, a sharp pain jutted through her torso, panging each one of her vertebrae as though a child was playing her spine like a xylophone. She stood up and her legs buckled. She fell back and leaned on the table. *It’ll come apart. My legs will come apart.* She looked around the room. The man was gone.

The pain did not subside at all during her journey home that night. Not when she walked back up the triangle-marked stairs, her legs failing under the weight of her new body, not when she boarded the maglev train that would carry her back into the heart of the city—the other midnight marchers parting around her as if she were some exotic zoo animal—and not when she arrived back at her residency. A fraction of the pain did dull, however, or rather, Velvet began to forget about it,

consumed by bliss and amazement at the delicate structure of her newly embodied form, in the moments that followed.

Once home, Velvet undressed, throwing aside the towel and robe that the elderly man had left her—the towel to wipe dry the blood from the cauterized scars covering her back, legs, arms, and torso, and the robe to replace the clothes she arrived in that would no longer fit her. All of this was to avoid detection, of course, at least on the surgeon's part, but Velvet didn't care. She walked into her bathroom and stood in front of an empty wall, which transformed into a reflective substance the same moment the lights came on. The reflection did not show Velvet herself. Rather, it revealed a being with which she was entirely unfamiliar. *This isn't me*, she thought.

The figure was taller than she was, the nose smaller and more delicate. Its arms were longer and slimmer than hers, and were connected to the hands by two small wrists. The fingers, too, were elongated. *This isn't me*, she thought again, and yet, the body moved as she did. Its waist was also wider than hers—or rather the proportion of the body's hips to the slender torso was more pronounced, more contrasting—but it was still small in an objective sense. She dropped her arms and the figure in the mirror mimicked her, lowering its hands gracefully to the waist. She gripped the skin and her fingertips touched silk. She continued, tracing the body's shape up to her neck and then back down. *Is this me?*

She leaned in closer, studying the face. It was the only part of her body that did not have a single scar. She was afraid to touch it as if it were a painting, and doing so would wash it all away. So she simply looked. Her delicate nose met her cheeks at a slightly concave angle, which lifted and thickened like two small pillows when she smiled. They looked softer, even than how they had felt when she had awoken on the operating table. But they were not *puffy*, no, they were still firm

where they met the jawline and the cheekbones, revealing hidden, yet discrete lines. Her forehead and hairline too, collaborated to bring forth a clear portrait of her other features. They blended into her eyes, nose, and cheeks without emphasizing any one trait but fashioning the image of *smoothness* itself. Everything in her face and body presented this idea: its perfect symmetry, the lack of harsh lines or sharp edges, and the absence of any one distracting feature. It was as though the person she was looking at was designed in a laboratory. *She was.*

But it wasn't just the shape of her face and body that spoke perfection, it was the finite, nearly invisible details as well. Her eyes, once hazel, had become green kaleidoscopes before a canvas of rich aquamarine that folded between green and faint wisps of margarine like waves. Her lips were fuller and wider. Her mouth was larger. But what surprised her more than this was that the vertical lines that previously ran down her lips had been mostly removed, leaving a smooth surface with only a few lines remaining, just enough to still give them the texture of real lips. In addition, the peeking nose hair that had constantly plagued her had been removed, and in its place, a polished, smooth entrance. The surgeon had even removed the indent that ran along the outside of her left ear, previously making the two uneven, as well as a small mole from the inner canal of her right one. How could he have had such attention to detail? It then occurred to her that he had probably just replaced the ears, but there were no scars behind them, or any sign that should indicate their removal. Her teeth too, were perfectly ordered, and white.

She stood in front of the mirror for what might have been a few hours, studying her naked figure. The pain dulled considerably, almost gone now, as she ran her fingers along the raw, exposed scar tissue on her back, legs, and torso. It did not dull because the action of touching the scars

soothed her physically, rather it confirmed that the fantasy unfolding before her very eyes was true, that this was *her* body. And this lulled her into a blissful intoxication.

When Velvet first arrived at work the next day, the pain had returned in full force. She remembered the old man's words. *The pain is a reminder... It's good.* And she subdued it the best she could.

The doors of the elevator opened to the 266th floor and Velvet stepped out. She scanned the holoboard that displayed her yearly ranking. *1. Velvet; Best Router on Arcadia*, it read. She walked, no, strode into the main room of the routing department. The light from the large glass wall behind the workstations reflected off her face and brought strands of blue out of her silky black hair. The room slowly quieted. One by one the routers stopped what they were doing to look at her, but she did not look back. She gazed out into the room at a fixed point and upturned her chin, not in defiance of her fellow routers, but as if to say, *I am here. I am the example among you.*

The supervisor exited his office and began walking toward the elevator. He must have been consumed in some task because he did not look up. A few paces later, he arrived at Velvet, almost bumping into her. Startled, he looked up. She was much taller than he was now, and he had to strain his neck to see her. But something in him changed, and he quickly lowered his eyes.

"I—I'm so sorry, Miss..." He began, but stopped. His eyes flashed back and forth a moment, as if searching his mind for something, but soon gave up. He added, "I apologize," in a high-pitched, almost weasel-like voice, and, not once raising his eyes, fled.

She looked into the back of the room, where Jasper and Tiadl sat, and saw them looking back at her. Jasper stood slowly with his hands at his side and a look of perplexion on his face. Tiadl remained seated next to him with the same look on hers.

“Velvet?” whispered Jasper, cutting the silence of the room like a guillotine. Velvet’s chest panged. She repressed the urge to say something back, knowing the other routers were watching her, and now that they had made the connection, with vulturous eyes. She simply smiled back at Jasper, her mouth creasing widely at the edges, exposing her bright white teeth, the natural red of her lips, and her cheeks rising to her eyes, adding volume to her face. The light touched her at all the right angles, highlighting her eyes and her perfect hairline, her collarbone, and her jaw. Someone in the room fell over onto their desk and did not move. The other routers ignored this and continued to watch her, enamored by her beauty.

Her wide smile collapsed into a small grin, a condescending yet sympathetic one. The way one would smile at a child who injured himself while playing. To Jasper and Tiadl, it seemed to say, *You can have this too.* Without staring for too long, Velvet turned around and started back toward the elevator. The pain was completely gone now, replaced by the intoxication of her own superiority... her own perfection.

Velvet took the elevator up two floors and arrived at the 268th floor. When the doors opened, the timid receptionist looked up at her and quickly averted her eyes, just as the supervisor had done two floors below. Velvet approached the desk, confidently, in a few graceful strides of her long legs. She stood over the girl, who slowly looked up to meet Velvet’s gaze. Velvet waited for a response. A moment passed.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have stared for so long. Please forgive me!” pleaded the girl.

“It’s all right,” replied Velvet. Another moment passed.

“Um, what’s the reason for your visit today, Ma’am?” asked the girl.

Ma'am. Velvet had never been called that before. Not in her thirteen years with the company or any time before that.

"I'm here to see the Administrator," said Velvet. She waited a moment, expecting the girl to ask if she had an appointment, to which Velvet would reply "No." But the girl said nothing. So Velvet added, "I don't have an appointment."

"That's okay!" exclaimed the girl. "He's in right now... if you'd like to see him."

"Thank you," replied Velvet. She turned away from the girl, passed the front desk in just two or three paces, walked down the hallway, and paused in front of the Administrator's office. She hesitated. She could hear the man inside breathing, and shifting ever so slightly in his chair. She collected herself, but a thought kept invading her mind. *Will he treat me the same,* she thought. There was only one way to find out.

Velvet knocked once and entered the room. She felt one knock was enough and she wanted to do everything in her power to display a woman worthy of the body she wore, worthy of respect. She walked up to the desk, where the man was still working, and sat down in the chair facing him. He raised his head and their eyes met, at which she froze. She hadn't thought of anything to *say* to him. She should have at least rehearsed some speech, some plea, some desire of hers. She knew what she wanted—she still wanted the same thing, to be supervisor—but how to get it? Doubt began to fill her mind, and the pain returned in waves. She opened her mouth to speak, but the man broke the silence first.

"Velvet," he said affirmatively, "what a pleasant surprise." His eyes scanned her, from her legs to the top of her head.

"Yes," she replied, not knowing what to say next.

“Well, I’m impressed. I didn’t think you had it in you,” he said, with an air of understanding, as though he had been present during her surgery, and at her home, when she was examining the surgeon’s work. “I apologize. Allow me to introduce myself properly. My name is Trinadier Althos. I’m currently the youngest son of the Althos family and the Head Administrator of the Routing Division of IBM-Celestron on Arcadia-6. And you are?”

“Velvet. Just Velvet,” she said, feeling a little overwhelmed by the stature of Trinadier Althos. But she would not shy away from him. Not now. Especially not now. “Currently the best router on Arcadia-6,” she added, triumphantly.

The man stood up from his chair and walked over to the glass wall behind his desk. “Join me,” he said, firmly, and she joined him. Together, they looked out over the city. The view wasn’t particularly special, or different in any way from the view she had of the city on the 266th floor. But as she looked out now, she marveled over how small everything was. Below her, the roads, trains, and the flood of people were minuscule and seemed to fit perfectly in the palm of her hand. To her left, she could make out the night district, hidden in the depths of a chasm formed by strange outward-shaped buildings, not nearly as tall as the one she was in. *How insignificant*, she thought.

“Just Velvet,” the man continued. “We’ll have to fix that. Start thinking about the family name you want to take when you become private.” Velvet tensed up. The thought had never occurred to her that family names were a distinction exclusive to private citizens. And yet, it seemed so obvious now. “Do you know, Velvet,” he began, in an almost sorrowful voice, “what the most valuable resource in the Universe is?” He turned to her. Velvet did not. “People,” he said as he turned back to the window overlooking the city. “Left to their own devices, they can be quite

dangerous. They can spread ideas, organize, rise up against their *imagined* oppressors. We, Velvet, are in the business of managing people. We give them jobs to occupy them every waking hour of the day, not to make a profit, no, the time of profit is long past us, but to keep them busy. To give them the illusion of change, of advancement in life. And people like you and I, Velvet, are the very crux of that illusion. People work so that they can become like us. You are proof of this,” he said, turning toward her once again. “And this simple truth is what keeps the system in check. It keeps people focused on their own lives rather than abstract ideas. Freedom, Velvet,” he began, “well, I digress.” He moved away from the window and sat back down at his desk. Velvet followed suit and sat across from him.

“You’ll have to start accumulating wealth,” he said. “Save up as many credits as you can. When a residence becomes available in the city center, buy it.”

“But, I don’t make nearly enough,” said Velvet. It was true, a residence in the city center averaged fifty to one hundred times the rent that she currently paid.

“Not on a router’s salary, but as a supervisor, you’ll be closer. The company is restructuring, Velvet. The President will arrive here shortly to oversee the change. All the important roles will soon be filled with people like myself, even trivial roles like supervisors. But you’re an exception. Your ambition is inspirational. We need more people like *you*.” Mr. Althos leaned back in his chair. His tone of voice changed, it became concrete. “Starting today, you’ll be the routing supervisor.” Velvet’s heart fluttered. “And when I move up, I’ll recommend you for my position.” It was more than she could have asked for. “Now, I have work to do, but we’ll speak again. Soon,” he finished, with that same air of finality as the first time she had visited him.

Velvet stood up and began for the door. But before she left, she asked, “What will happen to the old supervisor?”

The man had already begun sorting through documents on the holotable. “He can have your old job, or he can leave. It really is of no consequence to us.” He paused what he was doing and smiled at Velvet. “Inform Seray of my decision and she’ll take care of it,” and Velvet left the room.

The Hallway outside Mr. Althos’ Office was lined with brilliant sapphire-blue holoboards which projected the names of people Velvet had never heard of. She recognized the first name—closest to the office door—it was Mr. Althos’! But as she continued forward, the names appeared to grow in size. Whether this was some optical illusion cast by the holoboards or a true element reflecting the size of the board and the writing, she could not be sure. The last board before the hallway ended read: “MR. AYLIN XEPHLIN,” and underneath, “CEO and President.” *I’ll have my name here someday, and it will be larger than Mr. Althos’.*

Emerging from the hallway, Velvet paused at the receptionist’s desk. “Are you Seray?”

“Yes,” the girl replied, surprised, and a bit worried.

“I’m the new routing supervisor.”

Without hesitation, the girl put on her telecom and turned it on. “Understood,” she said.

When Velvet exited the elevator, two floors down, the holoboard with the yearly performance review had already been adjusted. The number two employee, Tiadl, had moved up to the number one spot, and Velvet’s name was gone. She turned to her right, where there was a great ruckus. The former supervisor was being dragged out of his office by two large men. Velvet paused for a moment, watching. The Supervisor was shouting and kicking at the two men, repeating the phrase, “You can’t do this!” over and over again. Eventually, they caught his leg and carried him out

toward the elevator, one man holding the legs, and the other the arms. He gave up fighting. Velvet steeled herself and began walking toward the Supervisor's office. *It's my office now*, she thought.

After a few paces forward, she passed the old supervisor, and he looked up at her with utter defeat. There was nothing he could say to her now, but at that moment, he knew who she was and what she had done to take his job. He turned away and began to quietly weep. It didn't matter now. *Nothing* mattered now except her own advancement, her own trajectory upward into the great heights of human civilization.

Velvet entered her new office and sat down at her desk. She leaned back in her chair and put her feet up. Through the transparent glass, she could see all of the routers at their desks. Some of them looked at her, but as her eyes waved over theirs, they quickly turned back to their holotables, as though they had been working the whole time. Jasper and Tiadl eyed her cautiously. When their eyes met with hers, they held their gaze for a moment, before slowly returning to their work. Velvet wondered what they would say to her that night after work. How they might shower her with envy, ask how she did it, and she would tell them. Perhaps they already knew—Jasper likely did. Regardless, she would encourage them to do the same. When the company restructured, they too would have the chance to move up. And even if they could not, their lives were sure to improve in myriad ways.

The day ended almost as quickly as it began. Velvet had only received three routing calls, all of which were directed to her automatically by the routing system. Instead of reading out the vessel class and serial number, as it usually did, the voice on the telecom simply said, "High Priority," followed by a location and the ambiguous demarcation of "Supply Depot," for the reason of the voyage. It occurred to Velvet that "Supply Depot" may have been code to something, like the arrival

of an important executive. The Supervisor's holotable also gave her the option to override previous bookings if the high-priority vessel wished to dock at an unavailable location. Out of curiosity, she memorized the limited arrival information of the third vessel, which seemed the more important of the two. *In one month, City Center Dock 1, Highest Priority.* And the information was erased from her holotable, permanently.

After completing the three bookings, Velvet spent the remainder of her time speaking to the other supervisors, as she discovered that her telecom patched into a network, a sort of social club, connected the other supervisors throughout the building. She didn't do much speaking herself, to be fair, but she listened in on the conversations between other supervisors. They said the crudest things.

"I got to tell you what happened at The Pantomime last night," a male voice began.

"Not this again..." a woman interrupted.

"No listen—Ward hasn't heard this yet—Ward, listen, you won't believe it."

"Go on," said a second male voice.

"So I'm sitting at the private booth—the usual, right—

"The one in the back."

"Yeah. And me and all these girls are high out of our minds. Clint was there too."

"I was," said a third male voice, higher pitched than the rest.

"And Clint and I are just bumping. I mean just one after the other. One of the girls was so gone, Ward, that she had fallen over under the table. Like, her head was under the table and her legs were sticking in the air like two fucking bird legs, man."

"And?" said the second male voice.

“This is why I hate when he tells stories, he never gets to the fucking point,” said the female voice.

“Okay, okay. No. *Listen*. So we’re just sitting there, right? And we’re rolling. And this guy comes up to our table—I don’t even know how he got to our section—but his pants are completely down. I don’t even think he was wearing pants.”

“He *was* wearing pants.”

“Do you want to tell it or do you want me to?”

“Go ahead.”

“And this guy—the big fella he is, I mean huge—just stands in front of Clint, naked. And Clint doesn’t know what to do, right? So Clint tries talking to him and out of nowhere he just starts pissing all over Clint!”

“It was awful.”

“I mean emptying the whole fucking tank. For like minutes. And Clint is freaking out. I mean the guy thought he was in the bathroom! And guess what Clint does. You’ll never guess.”

“What does he do?”

“He grabs the chick that was passed out and uses her as a human shield! And she’s so fucked up, she opens her mouth and starts drinking the man’s piss! I mean she thought it was a fucking water fountain!”

The telecom erupted into laughter.

“And finally, security comes and carries the big guy away, and he’s shouting at us and at them. Something about Celestron screwing up his delivery and losing his paycheck. I don’t really know. The guy was heated though. Real low-tier scrapper, that guy.”

“God it was a fucking mess,” said the high-pitched voice.

“Did I just hear Clint curse for the first time,” the female voice interjected. And the conversation continued for some time.

When her shift ended, Velvet didn't get the chance to speak to Jasper and Tiadl. It wasn't at all necessary that she speak to them. It wouldn't change anything, not about her new position, the new respect she received from the other routers and the Celestron staff, or her future prospects. There was no real reason for her to speak to the two of them, but she had the nagging feeling that she *should* speak to them if she could. Nevertheless, at closing time, two men, the same ones that dragged out the previous supervisor by his hands and legs, escorted her to a separate elevator, which she had never seen before, that lay on the far side of the conference room hallway.

Velvet took the elevator down, and awaiting her was a private car that took her directly home. No longer would she have to take the maglev with the rest of the public citizens. She savored every moment of that car ride, watching the trains pass above and below her, and crowds of people lining up by the night district for their daily festivities. She wondered if the other supervisors she heard on the telecom would be there among the crowd. She wondered if Jasper and Tiadl would be there too. Her chauffeur noticed her searching the crowd.

“Is something wrong, ma'am?” he asked.

“No. Not at all,” she said, returning her attention to a fixed point in front of the car. And soon, she was home.

In the weeks that followed, Velvet got used to the supervisor social network, of which she became an active member. She enjoyed the company, and she conversed with the other supervisors casually and in a carefree manner. Occasionally, she would notice Jasper and Tiadl watching her

from the main room, and she would walk over to her office wall and change the opacity of the glass so that they could no longer see her. *A supervisor shouldn't enjoy themselves*, she told herself. But it was all the same.

After work, she began going out to clubs with the other supervisors. They were enamored with her appearance, and worshiped her. Whenever Velvet went out, some eight or nine other supervisors would accompany her, asking her questions and buying her things. Whatever she wanted, she would have. Whether it was drinks, drugs, or people. She loved it. She became a regular, and whenever she would arrive at one of the various night-time establishments, a staff member would come out into the crowd to escort her and her posse apart from the rest of the night goers. Naturally, the crowd understood their own relative importance, and began parting preemptively to allow her easy access.

Sometimes, she would see Jasper and Tiadl in the common area at a club and would motion for them to come over, but they would simply scoff and turn away. After a while, she stopped seeing them, except for at work, but they never spoke at work. The nagging feeling of wanting to speak to them dissipated as time went on, as did the pain from her surgery. And in its place, pure happiness and achievement blossomed. For the first time in her life, Velvet was fulfilled. She was beautiful, she had a job that paid well, and more than this, she could rise even higher. Perhaps it was unfair that the wall that barred people like her former self from advancing was simply how they looked, but she didn't care anymore. Compared to the other routers, like Jasper and Tiadl, she was the only one who had no limits. *We are in the business of managing people*, she remembered Mr. Althos saying. *But I am not like them. I am the example. I am better.*

Then it happened. On the final day of crunch-month, Velvet noticed that one of the scars on her arm had torn. It began to bleed profusely. She was at work, so there was not much she could do, but she tore a piece of the robe she was wearing—it was the same one the elderly man had given her, she couldn't find it in her to part with it—and wrapped the bleeding part of her arm. But it wasn't just this. She felt a trickle behind her left ear and raised her hand to it. It was bleeding there too. She tried to cover it with another piece of cloth, but it was no use. Then, she felt her ear. The indent was back! The one the surgeon had removed to even out the two ears. She ran for the office door, hoping she could leave early, return home, and possibly fix herself, or somehow get in contact with the surgeon and have him do it, but before she could leave the room, her telecom rang.

She stretched herself out over the table to grab it and immediately felt something tear underneath her robes. A sharp pain shot through her stomach. She bit through it and picked up the telecom. It was Mr. Althos.

“Velvet. I need you in my office.”

“I'll be just a moment,” she replied, hoping to buy herself enough time to repair her unraveling body.

“Turn off your holotable, your work can wait. This is more important.”

Velvet leaped over to the wall and pressed a button. The glass on all four sides transformed into four large mirrors. “What is this in regard to?” she asked politely, buying herself enough time to assess the extent of the damage on her body.

“You'll know once you get here.”

The four mirrors offered no consolation. Each one showed the same thing: a crooked nose, mismatched eyes, a wrinkled forehead, and an ear that seemed to be sliding down her head toward the floor. She felt her heart stop. “I just need a moment, is all,” she said, her voice quaking.

Mr. Althos had lost his patience. “Velvet, if you aren’t here in the next minute, you’re fired.” And he hung up.

Velvet stepped closer to the mirror. The more she looked, the worse it became. Her left arm hung limp at her side, blood trickled down her leg, one shoulder was markedly higher than the other, and the left side of her face was all numb. It was all wrong! *How could this be possible?* The skin above her left eye began to sag, slowly moving its way down her face, covering her eye. She lost vision in it. She was getting worse by the minute.

Velvet ran across the room, covering the bleeding scars as best she could, leaving only a thin dotted trail behind her, and into the elevator. *Maybe he won’t notice. If I hold my face up, he won’t notice.* She practiced on the elevator ride up two floors, raising the limp skin by her cheeks so that her eye became visible and she could see out of it. *This can work.*

She arrived at the 268th floor and darted past Seray, but stopped in front of Mr. Althos’ door. She could have stood there for an eternity. It wasn’t necessary to face reality. It could be prolonged, couldn’t it? Like the way the routers lived their lives, never moving up or down, never changing, existing in a prolonged state of life until death. Oh, how she wished to be a router again.

The Administrator’s voice boomed through the door. “Velvet, come in.”

She entered, slowly, propping up her sagging face as she had practiced. Mr. Althos was facing the window, as it seemed he liked to do.

“Yes?” she said, quietly.

“Tomorrow is the day our President arrives. Mr. Aylin Xephlin. His arrival information was forwarded to you some weeks ago for routing. He is very important. You see, thousands of years ago, a diligent worker not unlike yourself had the idea to build a spacecraft that could transport dozens, no, hundreds of people. He was a genius, and his designs garnered the attention of Earth’s largest companies. His name was Maximillian Xephlin, and he was responsible for humanity’s golden age,” he reached out his hand toward the city before him. “Our president is a direct descendant of that man and a genius in his own right. He has a vision for the future of this company. I would like you to meet him—” and as he said this, Mr. Althos turned to look at Velvet. Her hand held the skin taut around her eye, but it did not prevent the skin below it from falling toward her neck and below her chin. Mr. Althos looked at her in horror.

Velvet began to cry immediately. “I’m sorry, Mr. Althos. This—this is just a mistake, a side effect from the surgery! It will be alright in no time! Just let me go home and fix it. It will be fine, I promise!” As she spoke, her lips became increasingly deformed. The lines in them returned, bleeding and parting with each word, causing slivers of skin to separate and dangle from her mouth. A tooth fell out onto the floor and her gums swelled.

Mr. Althos frantically picked up his telecom and shouted, “Send security! Now! Remove her from the premises! Quickly!”

“No! No!” Velvet pleaded, falling to the floor and prostrating herself before the Administrator. Her tongue blistered, and her words became increasingly mumbled, drowned out by the gurgling of blood in the back of her throat. She scrambled across the floor, pulling at her hair. “Please! You don’t have to do that! I can fix this! Please!” Velvet’s head shot up and she held her hand out toward the man. In it was a writhing clump of jet-black hair. He turned away from

her in disgust and looked out the window as four large men entered the room. “Please!” She cried as they picked her up and carried her out of the office. “PLEASE!” She yelled, passing Seray, the timid receptionist, who turned away from her in the same fashion. When she got to the elevator, it became too painful to speak any longer. She lay quiet and limp as the men threw her out onto the steps in front of the first-floor lobby and left her there.

Velvet tried to crawl back up the steps to the building, but it was no use. She could not move her left arm, and her legs were barely functioning. The skin on her face drooped further, and she lost sight in both of her eyes. The scars along her back, arms, and midsection had almost all torn now, but the bleeding came slowly. It was not life-threatening. She held one eye open with her right hand and waited on the steps, hoping someone would come to her aid.

Four or five hours later, night came, and the routers began to file out of the building. She looked up at them as they passed her, forming a wide circle around her so as not to get too close. One of them nearly tripped over her, forgetting to look down as he walked the steps. She extended her hand to grip his foot and he kicked it away in terror. The pain was unbearable. Her head felt like it would explode, and her ribs compressed her chest, making it difficult to breathe. But a moment later, she saw them, Jasper and Tiadl. They exited the building and began walking down the steps. When they saw her, hunched over and twitching like a wounded animal, they eyed her cautiously. But they didn’t circle her like the rest of the routers. Instead, they approached her.

“Jesus, Velvet,” said Jasper, as he let out a deep sigh. “I warned you.”

“What are we going to do?” asked Tiadl.

Velvet could not speak, but she managed a few guttural moans. They looked at her sadly. Their eyes were watery and blue, full of pity.

“What can we do?” said Jasper.

“We can’t just leave her here!” said Tiadl.

Velvet’s head dropped onto the stairs and she lost consciousness.

When Velvet awoke, she was in a bed in a white room with no windows. There was no darkness, only light. She looked down and saw tubes of various colors going in and out of her left arm and her chest. There was a slight dull ache in her throat. She felt it with her hand. *Tubes here too.* She tried to open her mouth but couldn’t. But it was alright. A wave of calm rushed over her. Most of the pain was gone now, there was no reason to scream. Even the emotional pain. Nothing mattered. She traced the path of the tubes back to a large upright machine with blinking lights. *Healing bay,* she thought. A moment later, a woman entered the room and walked over to the side of Velvet’s bed. She was naturally beautiful, with no augmentations.

“Can you tell me your name?” she asked.

“Velvet.”

“How are you feeling, Velvet?”

“Fine.”

“Do you know why you’re here?”

Velvet looked down at her body. The bleeding scars had all been closed, but the deformities remained. Even lying down, she could tell that her body was not right.

“Yes.”

“And why is that?”

Velvet looked up at the nurse, tears streaming down her face.

“What is going to happen to me?” she asked.

“You’ll remain here until you’re feeling better. Then we’ll go over options for surgery.”

“Surgery?”

“To reverse what has happened to you.”

“Is it expensive?”

“It is.”

“I don’t have a job,” she said as her voice quivered.

“You can pay the hospital back in installments once you find another one.”

Velvet began to wail. The nurse approached her and caressed her shoulder. “It will be alright,” she said, “Just breathe.” She breathed with Velvet, slowly and controlled, and Velvet began to calm. “There,” she said, in a motherly voice, “All better.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re not the first one we’ve seen,” said the nurse, as she smiled reassuringly.

She left the room and Velvet lay there, studying the contraptions of the odd healing machine. Her anxiety began to fade with each breath she took and the calm returned to her. The pain in her body was all gone now, and she thought of Jasper and Tiadl, how they took pity on her and delivered her to this healing place. How they never once judged her for the grave mistake she had made. She wanted to see them badly, to apologize for trying to be better than them. She wanted to accompany them to the night district and buy them things, to show her gratitude. *My friends*, she thought.

Perhaps this was all a dream...a prolonged nightmare of 13 years. When Velvet awoke next, she would be on a transport to the outer rim, with the lunatic mining man of Petrovska vessel

248984. She would spend the rest of her life experiencing danger and thrill, and the constant joy and grievance over the smallest paycheck. She would be free. Free from the evil corporate leaders who viewed the human race as animals that needed to be controlled. Free from the supervisors and their shallowness. Free from the people of Arcadia-6. She would travel among the stars and trace the constellations with the tail of her ship. She would make her way to Andromeda and live among the frontiersmen, erecting shelters amidst brutal storms on a desert planet. She would learn of new cultures that formed far from the reaches of civilization and indulge in new delights. She would die happy and poor on a desolate forest with no tombstone and no one to remember her. She would be free.

Velvet heard the door creak and opened her eyes. Immediately, a shock of terror ran through her body. She tried to sit up, to move somehow, but it was no use. She had no strength in her arms and legs. The elderly man approached her, with a massive, machine of a man behind him. The machine man's face shone a metallic silver-gray. And all the light in the room seemed to fade.

"It is time for your payment, my dear," said the elderly man in a low, stern voice. Velvet tried to speak, but couldn't let out so much as a whimper. He approached the bed and the machine man closed the door behind him. Sylvie was quiet and closed her eyes once more.

It's just a bad dream... a horrible nightmare.

THE END...

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IP: The wreck of the Argonaut-2 was never found.

MAXIM: Aylin was a close contact of Zeta's previous owner. The forgotten one. Aylin will find a new scribe before the next voyage. I hear murmurs of a girl, Sylvie-33, a prodigy. She will be tasked with Avalon. We must recover Zeta before Aylin can make contact with her.

IP: And what of the other companies? Pretrovska, Kiyomi, Madagascar Enterprises?

MAXIM: They are uninterested in the true work.

IP: And Xenon-Alpha?

MAXIM: I concede. Xenon is an enigma. But at best, they have the information that we do.

IP: Understood.

MAXIM: And if Sinbad should fail?

IP: Sinbad is too complex. Arcadia's defenses are a thin veil, which he will uncouple with ease.

MAXIM: I would not call the Perturbator array a "thin veil."

IP: Perhaps not. But its lack of sentience limits it.

MAXIM: Very well. The time to return on our promise has finally arrived. The Pantheonians will be elated.

IP: Yes.

MAXIM: And what of the informant, the Celestron girl?

IP: Collectors left only the brain, but she still lives, in suspendium. Communication was established via neural interface.

MAXIM: Xenon tech?

IP: No, KirkeStan. Old, repurposed. Untraceable. Coders before the Golden Age had much more talent...

