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Ninety Percent of Everything

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The pix on my desk said, "There's an avatar on the line for you, Liz. Ramsdel Wetherall, looking for an appointment."

Understand that I was as amazed by this as if it had said "Bela Lugosi" or "William the Conqueror." The idea that Ramsdel Wetherall would want to talk to me was that far-fetched. But my pix couldn't be wrong.

"Put him off. I'll take the meeting in eight ... no, ten minutes." I needed time to see what I could learn about the reclusive mogul's latest hijinks.

Then I'd decide if I wanted to let him hijink me.

ProfitWeek called Wetherall's acquisition of seventy percent of the island nation of Grenada the machinations of an eccentric genius.

On Mother's Day, a panel of experts on _NewsMelt_ debated Wetherall's new infodump about management by avatar. They gave it a mixed review.

A transcript from _America, America_ hypothesized that the sixth richest man in the world had gone into hiding because he'd come down with an exotic disease, contracted from one or more of his myriad sexual partners.

No, said _Channel Lore_, the shitdogs had taken over his mind by infiltrating his avatars.

Hemisphere Confidential Report had pix of Wetherall indulging his hobby in the smart lasso competition at the sixteenth annual Wyoming Tech Rodeo. He placed second.

And just last week _Eye_ had interviewed several astonishingly attractive women in whom Wetherall avatars had expressed a romantic interest. His attorneys had asked them to sign pre-introduction agreements, which prohibited disclosure of any personal encounter with Wetherall, should they ever have one. None of them had. Or so they said.

The search had turned up about what I'd expected: too much speculation and not enough facts. And my appointment was in two minutes.

Although I'd never actually interacted with any of Wetherall's avatars, I'd seen them before. They gazed serenely from pixes across his financial empire. From time to time they gave interviews that were lighter than air. Personally, I found avatars slick and flat as trademarks; whenever I met with one I felt as if I were chatting up Betty Crocker or Bill Gates. But still, _Ramsdel Wetherall_. I took the call.

The avatar that filled the screen was roundish and unthreatening. It had short blond hair, slightly tanned smooth skin, and a not very distinct chin. It might have been the face of a man in his twenties -- or a fifty-year-old who had never sweated a mortgage payment. "Professor Cobble?"

"Call me Liz," I said.

"I'm Ramsdel Wetherall." It smiled as if it'd been waiting all its life to meet me.

I wanted to say _No, you're not_!

* * * *

It was what I liked least about avatars: they acted as if they were the people they represented. Ninety-five percent of the time they operated on their own: buying and selling, lying and telling secrets, flattering and insulting. A busy billionaire like Wetherall could seem to be in two, three, or eleven places at once. The catch was that from time to time the original checked in from afar, and acted and spoke through his digital agent. The real Wetherall might be looking at me through those vapid eyes.

Possible but not probable.

* * * *

"How can I help you?" I said.

There were several seconds of silence. The avatar's smile got bigger and goofier, as if the sheer joy of seeing me had struck it dumb.

"Was there something?" I said.

"Would you mind stepping to the window?" it said. Mystified, I got up and surveyed the campus. A dozen students sunbathed on the quad. Two girls and a dog were playing catch with a frisbee. A college cop was reading a pix in the shade of the whale statue.

"Do you see the white Jolly Freeze van parked in front of Gould Hall?" said the avatar.

I looked. "Yes." It had no customers, it wasn't lit for business, and it was parked in a handicapped spot. There weren't supposed to be ice cream trucks on campus anyway.

"Can I interest you in a short ride?"

"Does it come with chocolate sprinkles?"

The avatar laughed uproariously. This worried me -- it wasn't that funny a joke.

"Turn that smile down, would you?" I said. "It's getting warm in here. So what's this all about?"

The avatar sobered instantly. "Do you believe the shitdogs are intelligent?"

I considered. "If you're asking if they're as smart as human beings, I'd have to say no. Their intelligence is very limited -- in a range somewhere between a flounder and a football player."

"What about their vocalizations?"

"They bark. So does Lassie."

"Can I interest you in a short ride?"

"You might, but you haven't. Look, Mr. Wetherall, I've got a Curriculum Committee meeting in five minutes, and a graduate seminar on Primate Sexology in an hour and a half. I've got three thesis advisees backed up outside my door and no time to waste giving you a crash course in exobiology."

"I just bought ten square miles of salt flats near Eastline, Nevada," Wetherall said.

"I'll be right down."

* * * *

As with Ramsdel Wetherall, there was too much speculation and too few facts concerning the shitdogs.

To start, we did not know where they came from. Astronomers spotted the ship that brought the shitdogs to us only eighteen hours before it went into orbit. It made just three revolutions of the earth before splitting into five vehicles which entered the atmosphere and made soft landings in barren salt flats: Chile's Atacama Desert, Australia southeast of Lake Disappointment, the Tsagan Nor basin of the Gobi Desert, the Danakil Plain in Ethiopia. And Eastline, Nevada.

What followed was well documented at all five landing sites. In the United States, fighters from Edwards Air Force Base scrambled and followed the

mushroom-shaped lander to touchdown. The Marines arrived shortly after and cordoned off the area. It was fifty-three minutes before the head of the first shitdog poked out of the lander. The Marines assumed that it was coming through some kind of hatch. It wasn't until all five shitdogs had emerged from different exits that the onlookers understood.

The shitdogs were eating their spaceship.

* * * *

On my way out I ran into Saintjohn Matthewson, the chair of the department.

"Oh, Liz, I'm glad I caught you before the meeting. I'm going to need that justification for the new curriculum by next Tuesday; the provost's breathing down my neck. And the corporate sponsors for the freshman chip implant program want to do some more pix of the experimental classroom to include in their annual corporate report."

"But you said I had another month. Registration hasn't even turned in the enrollment figures."

"I have every confidence in you, Elizabeth. That's why I appointed you." He turned toward the conference room, then paused to admire his profile reflected in the window. "By the way, have you noticed the springs are broken on the sofa in the faculty lounge? Almost as if someone's been jumping up and down on it. Have the Building Committee order a new one, and keep the cost down."

"But Saintjohn -- "

"Oh, and could you be an angel and get the coffee going before we sit down? I'm afraid this is going to be a long session."

He cruised ahead of me into the room. I stood outside the door for a moment and took a deep breath. Then I turned and went down the stairs and out onto the quad.

The pix of Judy Jolly Freeze on the side of the van waved and chuckled at me. "Please step to the rear door, Liz."

As I walked round to the back, pixes of Charley Cone and Billy Bar called out to me in childish voices, "Buy me! Buy me!" The heavy rear door swung open and I peered into the van. It was dim and cold -- not freezing, but chilly enough to make me wish I'd brought a sweater.

"Come in, come in."

As my eyes adjusted to the light, I saw another Wetherall avatar sitting behind a dark wooden desk. A hologram. Unlike the first avatar, this one was wearing data spex. I saw its breath in the cold air -- very lifelike. I was impressed. It mumbled something I couldn't quite hear.

"I'm sorry," I said. "What was that?"

Yellow and blue lights ghosted across the lenses of its spex. The avatar frowned. "The P/E is eleven," it said. "I'm not offering a ruble more than twenty-six."

I wondered if Saintjohn was worried yet. Good old Liz was never late for a meeting. "Maybe I'd better come back later."

"Absolutely not. Under no circumstances." It made a swiping motion across the desktop; I doubted it heard me. "I'm not interested in a limited partnership."

If I was looking to get ignored, I could do it as easily in the department as here. "Nice place you've got here," I said. "All you need is a few penguins."

"You're cold?" Its head jerked in surprise. "I find that the body works at peak efficiency when the air temperature is -- *_E il presso migliore che mi puo fare, Giacomo_?* Liz, I'm sorry, you should sit down."

I settled reluctantly into the plush chair facing the desk. It was as warm as a baby's hand.

"Yes, Murk, I'll get her to sign a release, don't worry. Yes, I agree." It nodded, then its voice dropped a register. "I'm sorry, darling, I'm spread a little thin at the moment. How about eleven? I'll send the limo."

"And all I get is the Jolly Freeze van?" I stood. "Good-bye, Mr. Wetherall. We'll have to not talk again real soon."

The avatar shot out of its chair. "Liz, please." It pulled off the spex and dropped them on the desk. "I'm finished. I promise there will be no further interruptions."

Something about the way the spex bounced against the wood caught my attention. I leaned forward and flicked my forefinger against them. They were real. "You're you, aren't you? Ramsdel Wetherall."

He shrugged. "So they tell me."

I sank back in my chair and chuckled in disbelief. "Aren't you going to make me sign something?"

"That's Murk's obsession -- my lawyer." He resumed his seat and did something behind his desk that brought the lights up in the van. For a moment he studied me, as if noticing for the first time that I was a woman. "Should I?"

I may not be Dawn Zoftiggle, but I have my pride. People tell me I'm attractive -- smart people, lots of people. On the other hand, I didn't want to give him the impression that I was harboring some romantic design on him. He was Ramsdel Wetherall, after all. "You can't buy the shitdogs," I said, feeling my face flush in the cold air.

"I don't want them." He opened a desk drawer. "I want their jewels."

I couldn't help it; I laughed at him. He laughed with me.

"Ice cream?" he said.

He had a Strawbetty Billy Bar and I had a Chuncolate Charley Cone. The van pulled out of the parking lot and I could hear its synthesizer chirp the first four measures of Scott Joplin's "The Entertainer" over and over again.

"Wait a minute!" I said. "I've got responsibilities. Classes. A meeting to sleep through."

"I love ice cream." Ramsdel Wetherall licked a Strawbetty smear from the corner of his mouth. "It's all I eat these days. Of course, it has to be properly fortified and nutritionally balanced, but that's why I bought Jolly Freeze in the first place. You've seen jewels up close, right? At the Eastline site?"

I made myself sit back in the chair. "Sure," I said. "I've even seen them die."

* * * *

When the shitdogs ate their ship, nobody tried to stop them. At that point it was assumed that they were intelligent. They must have perfectly good, if completely alien, reasons for eating their ship. And of course, there was also the problem of the big stink, which kept even the toughest Marine at a considerable distance.

With the landers gone, we had no clue as to the origin of the shitdogs or the purpose for which they were sent to earth -- other than the beasts themselves.

Most of my colleagues agreed that the shitdogs were beasts; the stubborn few who contended that we hadn't yet recognized their intelligence because it was so different from our own were trapped in a circular argument.

As had been reported any number of times, the shitdogs were not dogs nor were their castings shit -- strictly speaking. From direct observation we could see that they were quadrupeds, ranging in hue from powder blue to near indigo. We estimated they weighed almost 3000 kilograms. The largest was fifteen meters in length; none were shorter than fourteen. They functioned without difficulty in earth's gravity. Their forelegs were long and particularly well suited to digging. Each of their three toes culminated in a razor-sharp crystalline claw, hard enough to scratch diamond. They used their short, powerful rear legs to propel them as they burrowed through salt flats and the piles of their castings. Their faces were composed of a circular maw which could dilate to as much as a meter and a half in diameter. Above that were two external organs the size of tennis balls -- eyes, we supposed. An orifice just above the rear legs could iris completely shut, or open to eject a continuous casting approximately twenty-five centimeters in diameter.

We'd been observing shitdog behavior for six years. It consisted mostly

of eating and excreting -- or intake and output, depending on your model. There was no way to tell whether they were natural or created; it was entirely possible they were some kind of organic mechanisms. In any event, they tunneled through the salt flats, gorging on a variety of materials, pushing others aside. When they emerged, usually after a period of eight to ten days, their bodies were grotesquely distended. They lay pulsing and inert in the fierce desert sun, digesting -- or processing -- for as long as a month. During this time, they periodically vented small amounts of chlorine gas. At the end of this rest cycle, they would crawl to the casting deposit area, climb or tunnel to an appropriate spot, and release their casting in such a way that it coiled into the conical pile.

The odor of a fresh shitdog casting was legendary. The Marines said it was like having barbed wired shoved up your nose. It smelled nothing like the excrement of any animal on earth; rather it was biting and bleachy, with just a hint of burning brakes. The castings were composed of long chain polymers, which, when first expelled, were one of the most adhesive substances ever known. The castings cured to a rubbery consistency in about a week, after which time their stench was slightly ameliorated. Because the shitdogs returned again and again to the same area to excrete, some suggested that their behavior was purposeful and that their piles were in fact 'buildings', constructed in much the same way the ancient Egyptians built the pyramids. I found this theory to be unsupported by the evidence. They had built two roughly conical piles at the Eastline site in the last six years. Each was approximately thirty meters tall; they were now at work on a third. There were similar piles at the other sites.

Public interest in the shitdogs peaked when the first 'finished' pile of castings sprouted a two meter tall crystalline growth at its peak -- the so-called jewels. Outwardly this formation resembled quartz in that it crystallized in the trigonal trapezohedral class of the rhombohedral subsystem of hexagonal symmetry. In their brilliancy, prismatic fire and color variation, the jewels were nothing like quartz. After long and rancorous debate, a team of scientists tried to retrieve the jewels from the first Ethiopian pile, using lasers manipulated from a helicopter platform. However, as soon as the jewels were taken from the pile, they dissolved into a slurry of shitdog casting. Subsequent attempts, including one in Nevada in which I myself participated, met with similar results. The jewels appeared to be artifacts of the internal chemistry of a finished pile. When you cut them off, they melted, and the pile began to regenerate a new formation. No one knew why.

We in the shitdog studies community suffered from severe fact deprivation. No shitdog had ever died, and to destroy one for the purposes of dissection was unthinkable. Besides, no one had devised a way to catch a shitdog, much less kill one. Attempts had been made to herd them offsite to field laboratories but, when confronted with manmade obstacles, they emitted a string of their famous barks and retreated. The Chileans captured one once, using a flying crane and a specially constructed claw-shaped cage. They lowered the cage onto a shitdog which was in a digestive stupor and the claw swung shut. This roused the beast and it began to bark piteously and hurl itself against the cage with a vigor not previously observed in any of its kind. Its actions were so violent that the helicopter was unable to lift the cage off the ground safely. Ten minutes later the shitdog had eaten its way to freedom.

Unfortunately, except for devotees of xenophobic mediants, a scattering of conspiracy-addled loons, and few scientists like myself, the world had lost interest in the shitdogs. Funding dried up. And why not? Their behavior was inscrutable, their origin a mystery, their nature repellent and their treasure ephemeral.

So why was Ramsdel Wetherall buying salt flats near Eastline, Nevada?

* * * *

"I take it you've seen the jewels in person?" I said.

"I've been to all five sites."

I whistled. "Even Gobi?"

"I spent an hour last month hovering over Gobi B, close enough to touch the cluster. It has a red..." He shut his eyes and his face softened with pleasure. I've seen men look that way after sex or just before cutting into filet mignon and once in front of the Botticelli frescos at the Louvre, but never remembering a rhombohedron. "They're the most exquisite things I've ever seen," said Ramsdel Wetherall.

Well, at least he was right about that. Then I got suspicious. "Wait a minute. A whole hour? This doesn't have anything to do with Cosmic Lighthouse Keepers?"

He crumpled his ice cream wrapper and tossed it at the trash can on the other side of the van. It missed. "You don't believe that the jewels might be windows to other realities and the piles are their batteries?"

"Oh, it's windows and batteries now?" I said. "Last summer Thorp was claiming they were some kind of beacons. Look, a theory explains observations, Mr. Wetherall. Did you observe another reality?"

"Not yet." He gave me a dreamy stare. "My friends call me Wetherall."

* * * *

Everyone had heard of the unfortunate Dr. Blaine Thorp who, after inadvertently getting a smudge of shitdog casting on his right hand, was driven by the smell to perform the self-amputation that almost killed him. Most people assumed that this famous accident occurred during the course of some kind of scientific experiment, a misapprehension which Thorp was happy to encourage. In fact Doctor Thorp's only advanced degree was from the Palmer College of Chiropractic in Davenport, Iowa. He was a hobbyist and a crackpot and possibly the worst thing to happen to exobiology since the shitdogs ate their landers. Nevertheless he relentlessly promoted himself as the Ahab of the shitdogs, a man whose unique intimacy with these mysterious creatures had somehow given him true insight into their nature. Or should I say insights; his theories about the shitdogs were as variable as the weather. He announced that the shitdogs do their math in base five. He discerned linguistic symbolism in the paths of their tunneling through the salt flats. He claimed he could tell their emotional state from the color of their castings. And the jewels ... they were either talismans of alien enlightenment or religious icons of an interstellar coprophagology cult or sculptures designed to transform human perception or, as of last Thursday, or whenever Wetherall had spoken to Thorp, windows to other realities.

* * * *

"If you're in this with Thorp, you'd better just pull over and let me out right here," I said. "He's a fake."

"He didn't fake his accident. I shook his hook when we met."

"I'll grant he's missing a hand. For all I know a crocodile bit it off when he was living in Never-Never land. For that matter, why hasn't he had it replaced?"

He permitted himself a smile. "Are you always this uncharitable, Liz?"

"About lunatics like Thorp? Yes."

"I take it you've met him then? I found him very ... persuasive."

"I debated him on Channel Lore two years ago and I still haven't gotten the bad taste out of my mouth." I leaned forward and thrust my right hand at him so that my mother's diamond ring was about ten centimeters from the bridge of his nose. "Look, Wetherall, you want to go on a magical mystery tour? Just stare at this and hold your breath until you pass out. It'll save us both a lot of time and money."

"Money is not a problem, Liz." He gently but firmly pushed my hand away. His skin was cool. "I want to build a house as close as possible to the jewel formation growing on Eastline A. Thorp need not be involved. I need a shitdog expert, Liz -- the best there is. I need you."

I tried not to be flattered. "A house! What about the big stink?"

"One man's problem is another man's opportunity," he said. "The stink

has its uses."

"Such as?"

He gestured at the inside of the Jolly Freeze truck. "I'm a man who values privacy as much as great beauty."

I let that go, for now. "Okay. You build a mansion with a picture window that overlooks the jewels. You get yourself the best gas mask money can buy. How are you going to keep the shitdogs from eating your basement?"

"Have you ever heard of Nguyen O'Hara?"

At that moment I realized that the van was no longer moving and the music had stopped.

* * * *

First Thorp, now O'Hara. Was Wetherall attracted to eccentrics? Maybe that's why he had chosen me. Not because of all the time I'd spent studying the shitdogs, but because I'd been raised by eccentrics and had learned to tolerate, if not appreciate, strangeness. But how could he know that?

I hoped he hadn't found my aunts.

* * * *

"Nguyen O'Hara, the lighter-than-air architect?" I said. "The man who floats slums? Didn't he win the Nobel Prize for Hype?"

"Mexico City would have sunk into the mire by now if its colonias weren't aloft. O'Hara's a genius."

"Putting the poor in balloons works for about eight minutes," I said. "First come the tourists, then the developers, and before long the floating neighborhood is all candle shops and jewelry stands. Meanwhile ninety percent of the families -- the ones not finding a niche in tee-shirt sales -- are forced into some brand new slum that's ten miles from nowhere. Pretty sleazy if you ask me. Anyway, those bubbleshacks are hardly a billionaire's digs."

"He calls it lifthousing," said Wetherall. "And you've never seen Laputa."

"Laputa?"

"O'Hara's private lifthouse. I've arranged for Nguyen himself to give you the tour."

Although I hadn't yet said I was interested in his project, Wetherall had read me like an annual report. There was no way I could turn him down -- not when he was offering what could be unprecedented access to the shitdogs. "I could clear some time at the end of the week, maybe Friday afternoon."

"Now," he said.

"Now?" I said. The thought I was even now skipping the Curriculum Committee meeting made me feel strangely giddy.

"I'd want you and Nguyen to meet each other as soon as possible." Wetherall came around the desk. "I'm a great believer in team chemistry, Liz. I need to know whether we can all work together."

"I'm afraid that's out of the question. I have duties, not just to the university and the department, but to my students. I'll have to reschedule my appointments, make arrangements for..."

He patted my shoulder. "That's what avatars are for."

"I don't have an avatar."

"It'll all be taken care of." He ducked past my chair and opened the door of the van; we were parked on a runway. There was a jet with a picture of Judy Jolly Freeze on its tail fin about twenty meters away.

"Wait, I'm not packed -- I don't even have a toothbrush."

"Money," he said, "means never having to pack." He produced a cash card from his shirt pocket and offered it to me. "When you get there, you can buy whatever you need." He flicked his thumb against the card's edge. "Buy three of whatever you need."

"But where are we going?"

He slipped his arm around me and aimed me at the jet. "Las Vegas," he said.

* * * *

As we approached The Zones Resort & Casino, I could see Nguyen O'Hara's Laputa

hovering some thirty meters over the parking garage. On the roof deck directly beneath it was the truck which served as its ground station. The sides of this vehicle were enormous pix; they cycled through a montage of people of various ages and races and social classes, all pointing up in wonder at the marvelous floating house. Satisfied customers, apparently.

We'd been met at McCarran Airport by yet another Jolly Freeze van. I was caught off guard when Wetherall ushered me to the cab and then climbed beside me and slid behind the wheel. He had scooted the ungainly van through the traffic on the strip like a teamster late for bowling league. Now he maneuvered it effortlessly up the garage's tightly spiraling ramp. We parked near the truck. I craned my neck; Laputa's shadow grew as it descended slowly toward us. I was so busy goggling that I didn't notice the dapper man until his smiling face appeared at the driver's side window. He knocked and then waved.

"Come in, come in!" Wetherall opened the door and slid across the bench seat toward me. "Liz Cobble, meet Nguyen O'Hara."

He climbed in behind the wheel and shut the door. "My dear Wetherall, you must either turn down the air-conditioning or pass out blankets. Good to have you aboard, Liz." He extended a hand; Wetherall flattened himself against the seat so we could shake. "I'm glad there's finally one sane person on this project."

"Only one?" I said.

"Well, I'm hardly qualified to make representations about my own mental health." He spoke with a slight German accent and tended to murmur.

Nguyen O'Hara had a dark angular face; his neat mustache had flecks of gray in it. There were epicanthal folds at the corners of his dark eyes. While the cut of his suit was conservative, it was the color of butter -- his trademark, apparently. He smiled in an entirely different way from Wetherall. Wetherall's smile was bluff and straightforward. Nguyen's grin was sly and insinuating, as if inviting you in on a joke. I found him instantly attractive.

He immediately launched into the story of a woman down in the casino who, only moments before, had pulled a hammer out of her purse and begun to bludgeon the poker machine she'd been playing. When several bystanders attempted to intervene, security had rushed to her defense. "It turns out she's a destruction artist, hired by the casino to commit random acts of vandalism for the amusement of the guests! These people certainly take their spectacle seriously." He laughed as though he were being tickled.

I glanced up again at Laputa. It loomed now like a wok the size of a post office, suspended beneath a yellow balloon. As it eased to a stop, two multi-jointed arms unfolded from its underside; at the same time a boom with built-in stairs rose up from the truck, hydraulics singing. The arms reached for the boom and locked onto it. A hatch opened and I glimpsed a man dressed in a blue uniform and a butter-colored beret. He disappeared. Through the hatch shuffled a stream of people, forty or fifty strong. It was a middle-aged crowd; most wore sneakers and shorts and pix shirts. What was strange was that they all had one what looked like butter yellow boxing gloves.

"Tourists?" I asked Nguyen.

He nodded. "The operating costs for a floating house of this quality are quite steep. And unlike my friend Wetherall, I'm not financially independent. If you assume forty sightseers at forty dollars a head times four tours then I make about sixty-five hundred dollars a day from opening Laputa to my public."

At the bottom of the stairs a uniformed attendant collected the yellow boxing gloves and ushered tourists onto a waiting bus.

"More than two million dollars a year," said Wetherall approvingly.

"And to think they gave you a MacArthur Grant for your architecture."

"You let all those people tramp through your house?" I said.

"What's good enough for the King of England is good enough for me."

Nguyen peered through the windshield. "I do apologize for the delay. It'll be

safe to go out in another minute or two."

"What are the gloves for?"

"Cuts down on breakage -- and pilferage. By the way, I'm halfway through your infodump on shitdog psychology."

"Actually, I wrote it as a book."

"Is that so? Very readable, nevertheless. You don't think like most academics. I'm intrigued when you say the shitdogs are not at all proprietary about their finished piles."

"They didn't seem to care when we cut the jewels at Eastline A. And they tolerate scientists taking core samples well enough."

"I wonder what they'd do if we wrapped them in plastic. Some sort of smell abatement device, like a giant baggie. No?" He giggled, then opened the door of the van. "Just a thought. Shall we go?"

He had timed his exit so that the tourists would be able to see him from their moving bus. The windows filled almost immediately with faces. Nguyen smiled and gave them a brisk wave. Wetherall ducked back into the van. I couldn't help but see his look of alarm as he cowered behind the dashboard. After the tour bus had disappeared down the ramp, I gave him a gentle nudge. "They're only people, Wetherall. They don't bite."

"Some of them do," he said.

* * * *

We were met at the truck by two attendants. On closer inspection I could see their uniforms weren't actually a solid blue but rather a pattern: Nguyen O'Hara's dense calligraphic signature repeated over and over again.

"Anything to report?" said Nguyen.

"Not really. Somebody dropped chocolate on the carpet in the billiards room. Nothing the cleanbots couldn't take care of."

"Very good. I'll be in conference here the rest of the day, so dismiss the tour staff. We'll open tomorrow at ten. Friday we move to the site."

He led us up the stairs. The risers were pix on which messages flashed sequentially, so that Nguyen's canned greeting cascaded down at us like a waterfall of words:

Welcome to Laputa

Keep in mind

You are entering

a private residence.

Food, drink and

photography

are prohibited.

Your visit will last

about an hour.

Please note:

there are no

restrooms

"What kind of house has no bathrooms?" I said.

Nguyen paused at the open hatch and flicked several switches, turning the message off and lights on inside the lifthouse. "Oh, that's only to discourage the tourists. Water is a kilogram per liter; it's the biggest part of the weight budget. Besides, when we're over a city we can't void waste to the air." He ushered us up the circular stairs.

* * * *

I've never been able to get past my first impression of Laputa: an odd combination of a yacht and my Aunt Galadriel's house. A yacht in that, with the exception of a few moveable pieces, all the furniture and chairs were built in. There were no open shelves; what was not stored in the beautifully joined cupboards was battened down behind transparent sheets of nuglass.

Aunt Galadriel lived by herself; in the days before cleanbots, she'd kept a house that was sterile enough to recombine DNA in. Aunt Lindsay and Aunt Kym's house, where I grew up, is a mess, so I always felt a vague sense of guilt when I visited Aunt Galadriel, as if by the mere act of breathing I

might be disrupting an order she had taken years of hard labor to impose on her environment.

Aunt Galadriel would have approved of the fastidious housekeeping at Laputa. It was the kind of place a man with a weakness for yellow suits would have to live in.

* * * *

Laputa had three donut-shaped levels that surrounded a central utility core. In the core were plumbing, water, and waste storage, heating and ventilation, the VTEMF generator, the homebrain and a 300 kilowatt Pons power plant that provided electricity for the living quarters and heated the helium in the envelope. Most of the floors were done in pliatex which could be varied with firmness from a mudlike consistency to diamond hardness; all of the open walls were pixes, which could display any color or show any scene stored in the computer. Nguyen called up the palette on a sloping wall in the living room to display the 6.7 million available colors. "Personally," he said, "I worry about visual overstimulation, which is why I rarely stray from my defaults. I'm afraid I'm perceptually old-fashioned. I only use the pixwalls to allow clients to get a feel for the possibilities." Above the living quarters was an exterior observation deck, which we skipped; Wetherall did not seem much interested in taking in the view.

Nguyen led us back down to the bottom level, which was divided between the entrance gallery and a conference room. Part of the floor here was the exterior hull itself. As we entered the conference room, he made a section of the deck transparent; the garish splendor of the Strip was spread beneath our feet like a two hundred dollar whore.

"Excuse me, Nguyen." Wetherall was suddenly pale, "but it's awfully warm in here, don't you think? Could we turn up the air-conditioning?"

"We can go as high as a hundred and fifty meters," he said to me as he opaqued the floor, "which is the limit of the phased VTEMF generators in the truck and the core. Unfortunately, some people find the view from this height vertiginous." He smiled. "Just why such a person would want to build a lifthouse is beyond me."

"The view is not a problem," Wetherall said. But he had sunk into a chair and directed his eyes at the ceiling. "Actually, I think I'm getting to like heights," he told the crown molding. "I just have to prepare myself for it."

Nguyen opened a cabinet door, which revealed a rolled up rope ladder with teak treads. "In case of an emergency, you can use this to get down quickly."

"Getting down too quickly is what I'm afraid of," Wetherall said. He loosened his collar and then waved for us to join him. "I'm fine. Let's get started."

* * * *

We sat around the conference table. At its center was a holographic simulation of the Eastline site. Two tiny shitdogs crawled like slugs on the unfinished C pile.

"Our most critical design restraints have to do with lift and control," Nguyen said. "In almost all cases, the envelope will provide enough buoyancy to keep the house aloft, although we should expect that there will be times when the VTEMF generators will be required to provide backup lift. Otherwise the field will be used to anchor the house in its fixed position."

"So you're going to need some kind of base," I said. "Near the pile."

"Well, we could do away with magnetic fields altogether by making Wetherall's house a propeller-driven airship. Of course, it would need a full-time pilot..."

"No pilots," said Wetherall firmly. "No stewardesses or servants or mechanics or people of any sort. Not on board, anyway. Everything is to be completely automated. This is the one place in the world where I can be by myself."

"I won't rule an airship out," Nguyen said, "but I agree that it's not

a very elegant solution. I'm an architect, after all, not an aeronautical engineer. Besides, an airship would probably require an even more elaborate base station, including a hangar for shelter during extreme wind conditions. And there would of course be periodic equipment inspections and repair. No, I would prefer a Laputa-like solution; a helium balloon locked in place by a very tight electro-magnetic tether."

He leaned over the map. "Which brings us to our first major decision: where do we site the base generator? Ideally, we would want to build something permanent. The maximum range of a fixed VTEMF generator locked in phase with a smaller portable such as the one here on Laputa is about twenty-five hundred meters. It would be best if we could locate the base on a height, where it will be safe from shitdog depredations." He touched the A pile and then drew his finger out about forty centimeters. "So if we create a circle with its center at A and with a radius of twenty-five hundred meters..." A white circle appeared on the simulation. "...we see that we are tantalizingly close to several elevated sites. Here to the west we have this spur of the Pilot mountain range; to the south are the Leppy Hills. How close must you be to the jewels, Wetherall?"

"Close enough to touch."

"Sheer extravagance." Nguyen shook his head ruefully. "I would expect nothing less from you. That puts us down onto the flat, which is where we'll need your expertise, Liz. How far will the shitdogs range?"

"Impossible to predict," I said. "While they rarely go more than a couple of kilometers from the working pile, one of the Australian shitdogs made a documented run of over eight kilometers. Plus we don't know where they'll decide to start the next pile or how many they'll eventually build."

"Which means we may have to abandon the fixed base concept. If the shitdogs were to eat his base generator, Wetherall here would find himself taking an untethered balloon ride on the prevailing winds. In the unlikely event that he made it over the eastern Mountains, he almost certainly would come to grief in the Southern Rockies."

"What if we bury the base?" said Wetherall.

"Expensive, but worth considering -- although you still run the risk of having the shitdogs destroy your access. Liz, suppose a shitdog is in a hurry. How fast could it run?"

"Well, we haven't exactly been able to clock them in a race. But in short spurts, as fast as a man, maybe faster. Say thirty-two kilometers an hour."

"So a mobile base similar to my truck down there should be able to outpace a charging shitdog?"

"One shitdog is no problem. But if you were trying to escape a pack of them, there might be trouble."

"I didn't think they traveled in packs," said Wetherall.

"They did on the way here," I said.

* * * *

"Here is my proposal." Nguyen waved at the hologram and it winked out. "Wetherall, I think we should begin design of your lifthouse immediately, using Laputa as a model. That part of the project ought to go forward, regardless of the final base solution -- even if we decide to build you an airship. In the meantime, I'll be moving Laputa to Eastline to survey the site. Liz, I'd like you to come with me. We need to do some experiments." Nguyen pushed back from the table and walked across the room. "We'll have to make a more precise determination of the shitdogs' tolerance of incursions. What sort of activities and/or structures get their attention? What's the deepest they've dug underground? Exactly how fast do they move? What is the likelihood of cooperative behaviors?"

"I'll have to take a leave of absence." The idea would have been unthinkable a few hours earlier. Now I contemplated it with some enthusiasm. I guess I'd joined the team. "And the kind of research you're asking for is going to cost..."

"Don't worry," said Wetherall. "That'll be taken care of."

Nguyen opened a cabinet and brought out three crystal glasses and a winebell of Pommery & Greno. "We are agreed then?" He popped the cork, grinning. I wondered what he was so happy about. The design? The commission? The chance to associate himself with Wetherall?

"To our mysterious visitors," said Nguyen, raising his champagne.

"And their jewels." I touched my glass to his.

"To solitude." Wetherall drained his glass, set it back on the conference table, and glanced at his datacuff. "Excuse me, but I've got to be in Munich, Islamabad and Cornwall, Connecticut in about fifteen minutes."

* * * *

The pix on the back of the door of my room -- or rather, my suite -- at The Zones informed me that the fire escape was seven doors down the hall to my left. I asked it the nightly rate: eight hundred thirty dollars. I had once spent a week at Sebago Lake in Maine for eight hundred fifty dollars, but then the camp I'd rented hadn't come with a waterfall, a Steinway, or a bed the size of the District of Columbia. The room looked like a set for a gropie of The Thief of Baghdad.

When Wetherall had checked me in, he'd said he'd call later, that we'd have dinner. It was only after he'd left that I realized I didn't know what later or dinner meant to a billionaire. It seemed a safe assumption that we'd be going out somewhere, except that Wetherall clearly had an aversion to being seen in public. And I had no idea how long he'd need to honcho his avatars through their meetings. Would we be dining at eight? Ten? Midnight? Should I order room service in the meantime? Did I have time to go down to the casino, skim a couple of hundred off Wetherall's card and gamble? I kicked off my shoes, vaulted onto the bed and bounced.

* * * *

I freely admit that jumping on beds that don't belong to me is a childish habit that has persisted far too long into my adulthood, but it helps settle me down when I'm on the road. Besides, I liked it that this was something no one knew about me.

* * * *

Everything was happening so fast. I was probably going to get my picture in Eye with Wetherall. Although that kind of publicity would doubtless ruin my reputation in the department, I enjoyed picturing Saintjohn's reaction. That's right, Dr. Matthewson, I skipped the Curriculum Committee meeting for this. And freshmen don't need chip implants -- they should be reading books. By authors.

Then there was the problem of carrying my course load with the fall semester already three weeks old. Meanwhile, I had just agreed to move to Eastline, Nevada with Nguyen O'Hara and his sly smile. Where was I going to stay? Eastline had no Sheraton.

It was a good bed for bouncing on.

* * * *

Wetherall's avatar called at eight. I could tell it was the avatar by its witless smile.

"Hi, Liz. Are you hungry yet?"

"I could eat." I casually motioned for the hairdresser to stand in front of the coffee table, blocking the avatar's view of the Peking ravioli I'd ordered from room service.

"I've made reservations for eight-thirty. Is that all right?"

"I'll have to check my calendar. How dressed are we getting?"

"As you see." It was wearing a high-collared white shirt and a blue suit. It hit me that Wetherall wasn't bad looking, in a boyish way. "Can you be ready in twenty minutes?" It didn't wait for an answer.

The hairdresser was looking at me in awe. "That was Ramsdel Wetherall."

"Actually," I said, offering her Wetherall's cash card, "it was an array of electrons with an attitude."

She stared at the card and then back up at me.

"If you're thinking glamorous, you've got it all wrong," I said. "He's -- strange."

"I've heard that," she said. Standing behind me, she lifted the hair from the back of my head and sighed; her eyes met mine in the mirror. "You know, there's no reason for you to use your own hair. I can give you a smartwig."

I eyed the brown pageboy bob I had worn since grad school. "Thanks, but no thanks."

"Still -- "

I shooed her away with a hundred dollar tip. There was nothing wrong with my hair and even if there was, I didn't need to know about it. I undressed, swept through the scanner in the closet door and activated the virtual Ragusa in the clothes processor.

A few minutes later I emerged in a long-sleeved black velvet gown that grazed my ankles. It had light boning and back smocking. The sweetheart neckline was just off the shoulders. I'm told I have good shoulders.

There was a knock at the door.

I paused in front of the mirror. So I might've looked better if I'd had an Arpels necklace dangling to my décolletage, but for short notice this would do. I was a professor, not a runway model. And the dinner was actually an appointment with a chill-crazed eccentric with a fear of heights, people, and who knew what else?

But to the world it would be a date with Ramsdel Wetherall. I wondered about the women he normally dated. Did any of them wear their own hair?

* * * *

When I opened the door I was greeted not by Wetherall, but by a severe, angular man in a charcoal suit that looked like it cost more than my car. He tried to smile but didn't seem to have had much practice at it. "Good evening, Dr. Cobble. I'm Murk Janglish, Mr. Wetherall's lawyer. Perhaps he's mentioned me to you?" He slipped through the door like a watermelon seed. "I hope you don't mind my doing a security check before we go down." He took out a wand and, craning up and down on his knees like a human ironing board, ran it over the length of my body. Then he inspected my irises and hands.

"Do you want to check my teeth?"

"Your teeth are fine. Nice dress." He cocked his head to one side. "I don't know about the hair, though."

I let that go. "I take it Wetherall sent you to pick me up?"

"Actually, he overlooked it. Details are not his strength -- that's why I'm needed."

"I thought the point of all those avatars was to free him from the details."

"His avatars are too good, I'm afraid. They replicate the man himself and all his foibles. They generate almost as much trouble for me as he does. Look, I'd appreciate it if you didn't distract Mr. Wetherall. He's a little scattered at the moment."

"Distract him? In what way?"

He stared at me as if I'd just fallen off the barn. "That's all right. On second thought, I don't think there will be any problems. May I escort you down?"

His gesture at the door might have appeared polite if he hadn't also been hustling me out by the elbow with his other hand.

* * * *

Murk Janglish showed me to the Rain Forest Restaurant in the Tropical Zone of the hotel. He led me to one of the rafts moored on the river that looped through the vastness of the restaurant. The raft had a circular palm-thatched roof from which hung a heavy curtain of mosquito netting -- not that there were any mosquitos. Inside the netting was a table set for two. In gold.

"He'll be here," Janglish said. "Sign everything he gives you." And he left.

While I listened to the calls of exotic birds and admired the hordes of

butterflies flitting among the branches of the big trees, I ignored the grinding of my stomach and awaited Wetherall. After a few minutes, a tall, awkward-looking man in a safari jacket and khaki hat with a snakeskin hatband detached himself from the bar and sidled past the suddenly oblivious maitre d' toward the raft. He parted the netting, and took the chair opposite me. Immediately the raft nudged away from the dock and we were adrift.

"Excuse me..."

The man took off the bushman's hat and brushed his luxuriant brown hair away from his face. It was Wetherall.

"What happened to your blue suit?" I asked.

"Privacy is always worth the effort." He stuck his leg out from beneath the tablecloth, pulled up on the knee of his pants. "Leg extenders," he said, grinning loonily. He touched his face. "Skin polarizer." He grabbed a strand of his hair and shook it. "Smartwig."

The hair twisted out of his hand and tucked itself back behind his ear. Wetherall slung a backpack from off his shoulder and pulled out a folder. "I have a few things for you to sign."

His savoir-faire took my breath away. "Right," I said. "The liability waiver."

Wetherall looked momentarily fuddled. "Damn, I forgot. Janglish will have my head. No, this is about your avatar. Is it hot in here?"

I waited to open the folder because I could see the sommelier paddling towards our table. Actually, she was being paddled by a busboy. She stood in a dugout canoe, cradling a bottle of wine. Other diners looked down at us from tables perched on platforms in the trees that lined the river. The sommelier ducked through the netting to present the wine to Wetherall.

"Tokay is sweet, almost like syrup." Wetherall sniffed the taste the sommelier had poured for him and waved his approval. "It's the only wine I can drink with dinner. You know, it is hot in here."

"Shall I open the netting?" said the sommelier.

"No, no," said Wetherall. "It's just me. I'll be fine."

The sommelier filled our glasses and headed for shore. I opened the folder and scanned the form on top. "An avatar is more trouble than I want to get into."

"It only takes a few hours. They take a psychological inventory, run some perceptual tests. Oh, and you'll have to allow them access to some of your personal databases." His expression was innocent. "Don't worry, it's all very secure." I could see how some women might find those deep, guileless eyes -- not to mention two hundred and thirty-eight billion dollars -- sexy.

"But what do I need one for?"

"To teach your classes. To handle the press. To order materials, manage your research team, search databases. To remember why you thought what you're doing now was such a good idea. Believe me, in a few weeks it'll be hard to imagine how you got along without one."

"What do you mean, teach my classes?"

"I had to promise your Saintjohn Matthewson and the dean that there would be no academic disruption."

"What gave you the right to interfere?"

"I told you everything would be taken care of."

I glared at him.

"Liz, I need your expertise. When I see talent, I go after it -- you know that now. I like to keep my top talent focused. As long as you work for me, I'll try to see to it that you..." A bright green parrot dropped out of the trees and landed on the rail of our raft. "...that you live in a worry-free..." The parrot bobbed its head, turned sideways to examine us with a lustrous black eye. Wetherall hunched over and put his hand to his face.

"What's wrong?"

"I think that bird might be rigged for pix."

"Naah. Looks more like a bomb to me."

For a second I thought he might dive under the table.

"Oh, that was joke," he said. "Perhaps you could signal when you are making an attempt at humor?" He spun his hat at the parrot and it bounced off the netting. "Hey, you bird! _Raaah!_" At this, the parrot squawked and flew away.

"Anyway," he said, picking up the hat, "since I have access to certain resources, I was in a position to ease your transition from the university to my project."

"How many resources did it take?"

He shrugged. "When you get back, there should be a warm body sitting in the Wetherall Chair for the Study of Twentieth Century Popular Music."

"You mean like jazz? Rock and roll?"

"I have every record the Kinks ever made -- on the original vinyl."

I was a little dizzy. The thought of Saintjohn being pushed around like a baby in a stroller was vastly satisfying, and I couldn't help but feel a little exhilarated. With a wave of his hand Wetherall had made the job and the people I spent most of my days worrying about dissipate like a cloud of smoke.

On the other hand, I felt annoyed that, for a pile of cash and a pop-culture sinecure, the university would release me from rules they had never stopped telling me were inflexible. Here was a lesson in where I rated in relation to the world of money.

I set the avatar authorization aside for the time being and glanced at the next document. There was a cash card attached to a personal services contract. I separated the card and checked the balance. It was twice my annual salary.

"Wait a minute. I thought this was going to be a quick little consultancy. I'm a teacher. I'm not giving you more than six months, tops."

"I'm not asking you to," he said. "Six months should be more than enough. This is your first month's pay. In advance."

"You can't buy me, Wetherall," I said weakly, even though he knew that I knew that he already had.

The raft bumped against a waiter's station, guided by some unseen system. Our waiter stepped aboard briskly, set a plate in front of me and uncovered it with a flourish. "For you, Madam, Tranches de Jambon Morvandelle. And you, sir, a Mochalicious Jolly Freeze." He topped off our glasses. "Enjoy your meal."

* * * *

After dinner we strolled through the lobby of the Zones. Wetherall wasn't in his usual hurry to be off to some other appointment. After I'd signed his contracts, our dinner conversation had shifted to pleasantries. Until Wetherall mentioned my parents.

"Was it hard growing up without parents?" he asked.

"You know about that?"

"Yes."

I wasn't about to tell him any more than he needed to know. Especially since I didn't know what he'd spied out about me already. "Lots of children survive without parents. You grew up without a father, didn't you?"

Everyone knew the story of the impoverished childhood that had preceded his rise to wealth.

"Mother was resourceful. We didn't live too far from here -- in Colorado."

So we parried evasions for a while. Not that I cared about his childhood. I could see we were about as compatible as mustard and motor oil. We were standing near the doors when Dr. Blaine Thorp found us.

"Ah-hah!" he said, sticking out his hook accusingly.

"What's he doing here?" I said to Wetherall.

Thorp ignored me and turned to Wetherall. "So Professor Cobble has superseded me in your plans," he said. "I didn't realize that your work required the imprimatur of drab officialdom -- I thought you were a visionary!"

"Well, Blaine," said Wetherall, "even visionaries need something solid

to stand on. Liz here is of the opinion that your science is rather shaky."

"You liken yourself to the jewels, and everyone else to the pile below!" thundered Thorp. "I wonder how Professor Cobble feels about that comparison."

"Oh, please," I said.

A reporter who'd been staking out Thorp as he staked out the lobby wheeled, his spex trained on us.

I turned to see Wetherall's reaction. There was none. He was gone.

* * * *

"You lunatic," I said to Thorp. "Why do we have to be in the same field? Why do we have to be on the same planet?"

"You suffer from what Freud called the 'narcissism of minor differences,' my dear," said Thorp. The reporter's spex reflected the overheads. I'd anticipated being linked with Wetherall in tomorrow's papers. Now it was going to look like I'd put on this gown for a date with a chiropractor with delusions of grandeur. I could already hear the laughter of my colleagues.

"I don't know that one." I glanced around the lobby, wondering if I'd really lost Wetherall. "But I'm sure you'll explain." Maybe he was lurking behind one of the marigold trees.

"Simply put, we most intensely dislike those with the greatest similarities to ourselves. They threaten us. Hindus hate Muslims, not Chinese, et cetera. Therefore, you despise me because I reflect your real choices: eccentric science, bizarre alliances."

"Where's the narcissism?"

"Have you glanced in a mirror recently?"

"More recently than you'd imagine."

"So, you feel undue love for those minor characteristics that define your difference from me -- primarily your academic sinecure -- while ignoring the central resemblance." Noticing the photographer, he struck a triumphant pose with his hook. "The irony is, your replacing me in Wetherall's regard was part of my plan."

"How can we replace you when you won't go away?" a voice broke in.

It was Wetherall, back again, trailed by Murk Janglish. Something was going awry with Wetherall's smartwig, and the hair was climbing up around his hat like a many-tendrilled octopus. Meanwhile Janglish was tugging awkwardly on Wetherall's elbow -- elbows seemed to be the lawyer's specialty. "Ramsdel," Janglish said, "Please. This isn't necessary. Your presence will only focus attention on this situation."

The reporter had that glazed look of deeply-gratified desire. The red light glinted in the corner of his spex.

"I'll go away when the secret of the jewels is revealed," Thorp said to Wetherall. "And you and Ms. Cobble are just the ones to do it for me. You'll work from the inside while I guide you from without. Together, the three of us -- "

"Together, the three of us will do nothing," Wetherall said.

"Mr. Wetherall," I said. "It's okay, I can handle him -- "

"I've no doubt you can, Dr. Cobble," Wetherall said. "But you're working for me now, and I stand by my employees. Dr. Thorp," he said, "if you have any complaints about your treatment, take them up with Mr. Janglish here." Wetherall held out his arm, I took it, and pushing past the photographer, we went straight to the elevator and up to my suite.

Once inside, Wetherall seemed to get an attack of shyness. He wrestled the petulant wig from his head and eyed the door nervously.

"You can wait here while things cool off downstairs," I said.

"That's not the way the paparazzi work. The longer I wait the more of them will gather." He handed the wig to me. "Would you take care of this?"

He slipped out of the room before I could ask him what to feed it.

So I plopped onto a chair the size of a subcompact car, kicked a Donya Durand shoe at the mirror and then stared into it, trying to find the simple,

boring Professor Liz Cobble who had gotten out of bed that morning. At least my hair didn't crawl all over my scalp.

* * * *

Sometimes I blamed my aunts for turning me into that boring Professor Liz Cobble. Aunt Lindsay was Professor of Vertebrate Semiology at the University of Wisconsin, and Aunt Kym ran the only sensory deprivation spa in Madison. Growing up in their purple and pink Victorian house had been much more of an adventure than I'd wanted after my parents died. Although I knew I could never be normal again, I could at least seem normal. But the outside world was certain that I was living with a pair of lunatics.

The fact that Aunt Lindsay and Aunt Kym loved me only made things harder. For their part, they were open minded when I insisted on wearing clothes to school and dating outside of my gender, although I could tell they thought I was being oppressed by the patriarchy and commodified by the Bank of America. I became a little reclusive, and a little prickly about challenges to my own way of doing things. I spent a lot of time as a child watching myself for signs that I would end up like them, and in reaction I became Ms. Dutiful Grind.

But I still remember the smell of the scented electrolyte that always clung to Aunt Kym like the oddest of perfumes, eau d'inconscience collective. And Aunt Lindsay teaching me to read as I sat on her lap and she took me through her charts of the seven stages of courtship in the lesser cetaceans.

I suppose exobiology wasn't a surprising career choice for somebody with a seeker of primal truths in place of one parent and a student of the sign language of animals in place of the other. But I'd intended to be entirely more sober about the way I lived than my aunts.

Except that here I was, rattling around in a new jar of mixed nuts. Fanatic Blaine Thorp and pathetic Ramsdel Wetherall, soft Nguyen O'Hara and hard Murk Janglish. And me.

I had only myself to blame.

* * * *

One day after my dinner with Wetherall, Nguyen O'Hara and I started for Eastline aboard Laputa, which was being towed by the base truck on its electromagnetic tether. The guestrooms aboard the lifthouse were lavishly outfitted, if not exactly up to Zones standards. Wetherall had arranged to have my office chair and desk moved overnight so I would feel comfortable in my work environment. I chatted briefly with one of his jolly avatars, who said he'd gone ahead to coordinate the arrival of equipment and supplies.

We cleared the Wasatch Range by midday, and the wastes unfolded before us. The dwarfing effect of the expanse always catches me by surprise, no matter how many times I visit the desert. The absolute white and flat of the evaporated salt plains takes ordinary vastness to the level of the conceptual: Earth's tabula rasa. The human mind flinches from the blank page. All we can do is build scrawny highways through to the next inhabitable place, out from under the hammer of weather, off the edge of the table of the possible. Whatever their reasons, the shitdogs had chosen the loneliest place on earth.

Ordinarily the loneliest. For, by the time we arrived at the rendezvous point, we weren't alone. The combination of the Wetherall angle, the Laputa photo op, and the public confrontation with Thorp had rekindled interest in the Eastline site. Two kilometers west of the shimmering piles and dark entrenchments of shitdog territory, a sprawl of vans and campers and bubbles had sprung up; it was almost the size of the army of reporters that covered Holy Joe Jolson on his pilgrimage to Bayonne. Wetherall's people had marked off the boundary of his property, and the media had nested just outside it, on public land.

I had no doubt one of Wetherall's avatars was negotiating for its purchase even as we watched.

As we approached the encampment, the base truck shortened our tether, until we hovered only fifteen meters above the salt flat. I wondered what

Nguyen was doing. I wasn't in suspense for long; the truck parked between the Time/Pepsi compound and the _NewsMelt_ van. Laputa was to be the star attraction of the media circus. The truck began to reel us in for boarding.

* * * *

I found Nguyen in his office. "You're docking right in the middle of the feeding frenzy?"

"Indeed," said Nguyen. "Someone has to be the story -- why not us? It was Wetherall's idea, actually. He asked that we stay here to divert attention. He wants to discourage fly-overs at the worksite or the piles. Wise, I think."

"But I'm allergic to cameras," I said. "My tongue swells up and my IQ drops." Nguyen didn't hear me. He peered intently down at the crowd that was gathering around his truck. I thought he might be taking a head count. "You like this, don't you? The publicity?"

"Whether I like it or not is beside the point. It's part of the business. I'm an architect, Liz. Do you have any idea how many of us are left?"

I shook my head.

"Any computer can design a building these days. All I have to sell is style. If people don't know who I am, then how will they know that I have it? If you're not comfortable with reporters, let your avatar handle them. That's what Wetherall does. He's famous for his accessibility, which is nice trick considering he's a recluse."

There were at least a hundred people beneath us now. Most were pointing cameras at the stairway that was extending toward the lifthouse from the rear of the truck.

"But if we're in the middle of everything, how is Wetherall going to get on board? They'll spot him in a minute."

He glanced up at me, surprised, then nodded as if he had just discovered an interesting secret. "But Wetherall isn't staying here, Liz. That was never the plan." He showed me the sly O'Hara smile. "Sorry to disappoint, but it's just the two of us."

No sooner had he said this than his screen blinked: a call. I expected Wetherall, or a Wetherall avatar, but it was Murk Janglish.

"We need to discuss your contract, O'Hara," began Janglish, without saying hello. "You've lined out all the work-for-hire language. That won't do."

"My name is Nguyen. Say _Ngu-yen_."

"Say it? Why?"

"You and Wetherall are like good-cop, bad-cop." Nguyen smiled. "He entices, and you come along afterwards to punish."

Murk Janglish seemed taken aback. "I'm sending you a clean copy," he said. "You need to sign it. No changes."

"All right, Murk." Nguyen's expression was saintly. "But only if you deliver it in person."

"Why the hell would I do that?"

"Why the hell would I do that, _Nguyen_," said Nguyen O'Hara.

Janglish's screen went dark.

"I don't know whether to describe that as a bad personality or no personality," I said.

"Oh, it's a personality," said O'Hara.

* * * *

The first thing I noticed as I came down the stairway was the big stink. The piles were two kilometers away and the air was dead calm and still there it was, like a bituminous skunk in the next door neighbor's yard. Unpleasant, but not yet painful.

I had put on a Laputa uniform so that I could pass as one of the staff. I'd told Nguyen that I wanted to stretch my legs and he had told me that I was free to go as I pleased. That wasn't true exactly. Once the reporters figured out who I was, I'd be trapped in the lifthouse, unless I was willing to give

interviews. Which I was definitely not. I was going to let my avatar do all the talking, just as soon as Wetherall delivered it.

I wandered through the colony, listening to the journalists grouse. They complained about the big stink, of course, and the heat and the boredom and the bad food and the power rationing. Fox had ordered another Solelectric array from Salt Lake City, but it wouldn't be operational until next Monday. Several locals from Wendover were trucking in fresh water, which they were happy to sell to the fourth estate at champagne prices.

I discovered one vehicle I knew all too well: Blaine Thorp's "Dog Squad" car. I ducked behind an old school bus before anyone saw me and then sighted back on Laputa to get my bearings, so I could be sure never to come this way again. I wasn't interested in public debates with the lunatic.

It was about ten minutes later that I noticed the Billy Bar wrapper stuck to the flap of a trashcan. I lifted the lid; there were more inside. I knocked on doors nearby until a woman from Izvestia directed me to the Jolly Freeze van parked at the easternmost edge of the colony. The sides were dark; the pix of Judy Jolly Freeze sat in a chair, hands folded neatly in her lap, her eyes closed.

"Wetherall?" I walked around the van twice, hunting for some sign of life, then knocked at the rear door. "Wetherall!"

"Liz?" Judy opened one eye. "Ssssh!" She pointed. "Over here." I went around to the side of the van that faced the empty salt vastness.

At first I couldn't see Wetherall's avatar, because it was only half a meter tall and hiding behind Billy Bar's legs. "I want to talk, Wetherall," I said. "I just saw Thorp's car. Let me in."

"I'm not here," said the avatar. "And I can't talk right now."

"But you are talking. Where are you?"

"Not far, a motel. I'll see you in a few days." The avatar turned away from me and gestured at someone I couldn't see. "No, no, not you. Her. I'll be there in a minute."

"Wetherall, are you with someone?"

"It's just business. Stay right where you are."

"What do you mean, stay where I am? Where would I go?"

"Very good, Cobble." The avatar's voice was full of false camaraderie. "You do that, all right? Good night now." And then it faded. Where its image had cowered, there was only a smooth silver glow in the gathering darkness.

I told myself I didn't care who Wetherall slept with. I only felt sorry for her. So what if he had come back to save me at the Rain Forest? He'd called me Cobble, like I was some junior assistant nobody. I pounded the van with the side of my hand; I think I got Billy Bar right in his pudgy little chin.

"My friends call me Liz, asshole."

It was only on the way back to Laputa that it hit me: Why would the avatar have to be insulting, when it could spend as much time with me as necessary, while the real Wetherall was with his bimbo? Wasn't that the point of avatars?

Unless it had been the real Wetherall who answered my call. But that was even more inexplicable: why would he take my call if he were in a motel room with some other woman?

* * * *

I was back in control by the time I got back to Laputa. I had to be if I intended to pass safely under the quizzical arch of Nguyen O'Hara's eyebrow. And I had decided not to harbor any ill feelings -- or any feelings at all -- toward Wetherall.

"I'm back, Nguyen." I called, as I climbed the stairway to the living room.

"In here, Liz," he replied from the kitchen. He was sitting at the table with his back to me. I couldn't see at first what he was doing, but I could smell it.

"What's going on?" I asked.

He had a half dozen saucers arranged in front of him. "Ammonia-formula EasyWipe," he said, pointing. "Vicks Vaporub. Diced vitamins." Two of the saucers contained a scatter of burned remains. "Plastic and rubber," he said and then indicated a ruined something that might once have been an orange or maybe an apple if it hadn't been covered with a greenish, tennis-ball fur. "I retrieved this lovely from the bottom of the composter." There was a odd slackness at the corners of his mouth, a brightness to his eyes.

"Nguyen, we've got more stink than we can handle already."

"A very thoughtful man." Nguyen lowered his face dangerously close to the Vaporub saucer and breathed deeply. "A saint, actually."

"Who?"

"Our good friend Wetherall." Nguyen took a little brown bottle from his shirt and shook it. A handful of pills rattled inside. "Sent us a nosegay." He gave me a dreamy, very un-Nguyen-like leer.

I managed not to tell him just how Saint Wetherall was spending his time while O'Hara and I camped out in Laputa.

* * * *

The pills Nguyen had dubbed nosegays were prototypes of an anti-stink drug that Wetherall had commissioned. Since there wasn't any cost-effective way to purify the air of shitdog stench, the olfactory psychophysicists at Jolly Freeze R&D had instead attacked the brain receptors involved in processing smells. The pills transformed human perception of the big stink. The smell was just as strong as ever, but nosegay users experienced it as sweet and appetizing.

Of course, there were psychotropic side effects: the flood of smell-stimuli had a mild hallucinogenic effect. Certainly Nguyen was acting odd. It was several hours before I was able to talk him out of smearing himself with his own ... but never mind. Although Wetherall's avatar assured us that a simple dosage adjustment was all that was necessary, I was wary.

Nguyen was not; he couldn't wait for the new improved batch. It wasn't until I saw that he was able to control his stink tropisms that I was finally convinced to try the drug.

I was impressed. Nosegays transformed the fetid air of the press encampment. And the intoxication induced by the lower dose was mild and actually quite pleasant. It made me feel at once silly and happy -- like when I jumped on a bed.

I missed jumping on the bed. It just wasn't something you did in a lifthouse.

* * * *

Not only did Wetherall's money make unusual things happen, it made them happen fast. Just last week I'd been worrying about my course load. Now I was writing the handbook for the entirely new art of shitdog management. Meanwhile, though I hardly had time to stop and marvel at it, plasticians were already assembling Wetherall's house. While his avatars oversaw the project, the man himself stayed away. I hadn't seen the real Wetherall since he left my hotel room at the Zones. I imagined him holed up in some Ramada Inn with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

Maybe I'm a naive academic, but I was surprised at the ferocity of people's interest in what we were doing at Eastline. Sure, Wetherall's business, O'Hara's Laputa and the mystery of the shitdogs were each -- to varying degrees -- newsworthy in and of themselves, but the publicity surrounding the conjunction of all three was exponential. We always made the news; often as not we were the lead story. And not just in Vegas or LA, but in Berlin and Djakarta!

Profit Week reported that shitdog castings would provide heretofore unimagined materials engineering applications, and that Wetherall would soon roll out a line of casting-based superadhesives.

Hemisphere Confidential Report ran a story, complete with faked blueprints, which proved that Wetherall was building the lifthouse as a kind of degenerate love nest, where smelly and unspeakable sexual acts were to take

place.

No, said Channel Lore, the lifthouse was designed to be the most secure site on the planet; mercenary shitdogs would act as Wetherall's personal bodyguards against kidnapers and industrial saboteurs.

On NewsMelt, Blaine Thorp claimed he'd helped decipher the shitdog's language and explained that Wetherall was moving into the lifthouse to conduct secret negotiations for the establishment of a space-based utopia.

Eye offered this exclusive: Wetherall had devised a way to remove the jewels from the piles intact and had already contracted with Cartier's to turn them into the world's biggest necklace. Some insiders speculated he'd offer it as an engagement present to Dawn Zoftiggle. But "inside" insiders revealed that Wetherall had fallen head over heels in love with a woman he'd met while on location near the Eastline site. This mystery woman, it was said by those who really knew, would someday wear the alien jewels.

I credited none of this, of course, except the part about the mystery woman, whom I took to be the bimbo at the motel. But the volume and audacity of the false reports boded ill for his hopes of privacy, once the lifthouse was completed. Meanwhile, Wetherall's avatars gave cheery and innocuous interviews to whomever would listen. Only no one seemed to believe anything they said. Instead, commentators read sinister meaning into their PR platitudes.

Whenever he wasn't working on the project, Nguyen would personally lead reporters through Laputa. He was very disciplined in his approach: he would discuss himself, the lifthouse, the remoteness of the site, the problems of building around the shitdogs and then more about himself. He deflected questions he didn't want to answer with self-deprecating humor, and was gentlemanly about keeping me out of the spotlight, making sure I knew when tours were scheduled so I could retreat to my room. When questions about the shitdogs came up, he transformed me into an anonymous committee. It was always "My experts tell me that..." or "I've consulted my advisors on this..."

* * * *

I was grateful for Nguyen's discretion, because Wetherall had yet to deliver my avatar.

Murk Janglish tried to explain it during one of his visits to Laputa. "Never seen anything like it, actually," he said. "At first I thought it was your fault. Maybe you sabotaged the inventory or something, but the techs say no. There must have been some noise in the signal when your personality was scanned."

I was secretly gratified. I liked it that they were having troubles cramming me into their damned program.

"I'll be patient," I said. "But I'm not going public. Nguyen will just have to keep shielding me."

"Shielding you?" said Janglish icily. "More like throwing himself at every camera he sees."

Nguyen smiled.

"You're getting so much publicity out of this, O'Hara, you ought to be paying us."

Nguyen laughed out loud. "Now what would my good friend Wetherall do with more money?" he said, refilling Janglish's champagne glass. "He has got far too much as it is."

* * * *

Two days later Nguyen and I stood out on the salt flat, our noses filled with the fragrance of shitdogs digesting. It would have been delightful except for the late afternoon sun beating on us. We were waiting for the driver of the prototype mobile base that the Jolly Freeze engineers had thrown together. I had ordered a test run to see how the dogs would react. At the moment they lay pulsing, looking as oblivious and lazy as ever.

They weren't, of course. Things were changing.

I'd spent the last two days confirming my discovery, and calculating the rate of change. I was trying to decide how much to reveal -- because here

I was, Wetherall's magnificently paid shitdog expert, the rational scientist who had replaced mooncalf Thorp -- and I didn't know what it meant. But then I wasn't sure what any shitdog behavior meant.

"The shitdogs are eating and excreting faster," I blurted out. "The third pile here is accumulating at almost twice the rate of the first two."

"Hmmm," said Nguyen. "Could it be that they're adjusting to earth conditions -- getting better at whatever it is they do?"

"They're showing no comparable changes at any of the other sites," I said. "I checked the international database earlier today."

"Maybe it's a response to our activities," said Nguyen.

"That's my guess, but don't quote me."

"Which activities? Our construction is taking place far from them. We're observing them, but they've been observed before."

I shrugged. "I don't know how this will affect the project," I said, "but it does represent an advance in shitdog studies. For the first time we can be certain that the piles are a product rather than a byproduct. If they were only concerned with getting enough to 'eat,' their rate wouldn't change. The fact that they've speeded up confirms that it's production."

"They feel acknowledged, perhaps," said Nguyen playfully. "They wish to encourage art appreciation. Fair enough. More jewels to look at. But if this news gets out, it's going to attract even more attention."

"It'll get out eventually," I said. "Exobiologists will take notice; shitdog behavior doesn't change often. And it isn't happening at the other sites."

"Hmmm," said Nguyen. "Maybe we should build lifthouses at all the other sites too. Then Eastline wouldn't be so distinctive."

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell this to Wetherall until I've figured out the implications."

I didn't tell Nguyen my suspicion that the configuration of the piles and jewels might have some semiotic significance. Aunt Lindsay had done her dissertation on how the shape of African termite mounds was evolutionarily designed to communicate to other termite colonies. If, as it appeared, shitdog behavior could respond to that of humans, then that suggested the possibility of a feedback loop -- shitdog behavior influencing humans, who then influenced the shitdogs. A kind of subliminal, semiotic communication. But this notion was so Thorplike I did not want to have to admit to it until I understood more.

Nguyen was gazing up at pile C. He turned and winked, as if letting me in on a joke. Only I didn't get it. Not all signs are so easily read.

* * * *

The base rolled up and stopped, clicking in the heat. The driver was dressed entirely in denim, his red-bearded face shadowed by a hat the size of a manhole cover. He motioned for us to enter; the cab had been fitted with first class airline seats. Nguyen climbed in first. When the driver reached out to help me up, his grip, cool as a Billy Bar, made me do a double take. It was Wetherall.

"Great to see you again, Liz." His big, oblivious smile flashed through the fake whiskers. There was no apology for humiliating me outside the Jolly Freeze van.

Nguyen took it in stride. "So I take it you've gotten yourself instructed on how to drive this from the crew."

"I arranged a private tutorial."

"You might at least have let us know in advance," I said.

"Then Janglish would've had to be here to make sure I didn't have any unscheduled fun."

"Oh, Murk's not that bad," Nguyen murmured, "for a stone-hearted workaholic. You took a nosegay? We'll be parking right next to Stink Central."

Wetherall slipped into the driver's seat in front of us and strapped himself in. "About twenty minutes ago. When I was a kid I used to grow orchids. I had this one cattleya, Bealls Red. It was dark as blood and had a

fragrance big enough to fill a room." He took a deep breath. "That's what I'm getting now." He leaned back in his seat, eyes glazing momentarily at the memory. "The nosegays are an extraordinary accomplishment. A shame we have to hold them off the market."

"You're not going to sell them?" I said. "But think of the applications."

Wetherall punched the code that started up the turbine. "Liz, the big stink is my fence; it's how I'm going to keep the world out. Why would I pull that fence down after I've gone to all this trouble to acquire it?"

The arrogance of the man made me momentarily dizzy. Or maybe it was the swelter in the cab. I could feel sweat tickle down my side.

"Doesn't that beard make you warm, Wetherall?" I said. "I thought you liked life on ice."

"It is a little close in here." Nguyen swabbed his forehead with a butter-colored handkerchief.

"Oh, my clothes are air-conditioned," he said. "I couldn't think straight without them."

* * * *

Wetherall, Nguyen and I giggled like kids as the shitdog chased us. Of course, Wetherall's nosegays had something to do with our delight. We sat strapped into seats underneath a nuglas bubble. The base roared across the salt flat on its six treads, kicking up scuffs of salt and sand and scraps of the low, dry junipers that grew here and there in the basin. We were headed away from the Eastline A pile; the shitdog galloped in its ungainly way behind us like a nightmare rocking horse. As we drove, we fired a simulation tracking beam up at a helicopter that was standing-in for Wetherall's future house. So far, so good -- no matter our position or speed, the beam remained unbroken.

Our initial approach hadn't aroused their interest. They ignored us as we zoomed around the pile, and they ignored us when we idled a few yards away from them. They hadn't even sniffed at the mobile base, let alone nibbled. That was when Wetherall brought out a smart lasso. As we pulled alongside one he opened the window, leaned out, swung four big loops and let it fly. The running noose slithered over the shitdog's head. Wetherall tied the end to the armrest on the door and then stomped on the brakes.

We lost the door but had finally provoked one into chasing us.

It smelled like heaven's own bakery. "Chocolate-covered raspberries!" shouted Wetherall. "Bittersweet chocolate, I mean."

"Chai tea, with plenty of honey and buttermilk," corrected Nguyen. "And perhaps a crumb of pistachio baklava, too."

Myself, I kept catching smell-glimpses of Billybars and Charley Chunocolate Cones. Why should activating my odor-pleasure centers recall Jolly Freeze products? Those were Wetherall's positive smell associations, not mine.

"Liz." Wetherall touched my wrist. "Do you think it's angry at us?"

I turned to the beast that galumphed patiently after us. "Who can say? We've hardly worked out their vocabulary of expressions -- short of barking at the Chileans that one time, they don't have any. It certainly seems more sporting than angry, though. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes," said Wetherall. "Though I could be projecting. That is to say, sporting is the perfect word for how I feel. Our mobile base is going to work just fine, isn't it?"

"All the data is not yet in," Nguyen said. He glanced at me significantly. I guessed he was waiting for me to mention the changes I'd observed. "Remember, the real base is going to be towing a house six times the mass of Laputa. That will reduce maneuverability significantly."

"Nevertheless -- "

As they debated, it occurred to me that we'd stumbled onto something that would make a tourist attraction if the word got out -- shitdog-wrangling. The nosegays added a certain essential elan to it all. I was sure a lot of people would pay handsomely for the fun we were having. The tickets we could sell would pay for a dozen Laputas. But with Wetherall's deep pockets and

craving for privacy, I doubted whether anyone but he would ever sample this novelty.

* * * *

That night, Wetherall stayed with us for the first time. Nguyen had Laputa towed to where Wetherall's lifthouse was under construction. Since this site was almost three kilometers closer to the piles, we had to double our dosage of nose-gays to cope with the big stink.

Over dinner, Wetherall was talkative and charming, Nguyen was taciturn. Finally he spoke. "Perhaps it's time to name your house, Wetherall?"

"How about Queen Jolly Freeze?" I said. "Pretend it's just a floating ice cream truck. That way no one will guess it's where you live." This time I wanted Nguyen to turn and wink, laugh with me at this ludicrous man. But he ignored me.

Wetherall was busy fantasizing about his house. "When we run the first test, I want to be on board," he said. "Let's take it over pile A, so I can try the viewing room. If we need to make any adjustments, I want them done as soon as possible."

"You sure you can steel yourself to look down from such a height?" said Nguyen.

"At least there, I'll have something worth looking at."

"All right," sighed Nguyen. "I suppose it's time I see these jewels for myself."

Wetherall looked shocked. "You haven't seen them yet!"

"I've been busy," Nguyen said. "Other matters required my attention."

"My god, Nguyen," said Wetherall. "The jewels are what this is all about."

"For you." He sighed. "Oh, I've looked at pixes. They're admirable.

"You may not be the sort of person they are designed for," I said.

Wetherall picked up on that instantly. "What do you mean?"

I did not want to spill the beans on my theory so soon. "Nothing. Just that the jewels seem to fascinate some people more than others."

"Like Wetherall and you?" Nguyen said.

"And Thorp," Wetherall added.

I laughed. "Let's leave him out of this."

"Why did you call them shitdogs, Liz?" Nguyen asked. "Aren't you embarrassed to be studying something called a shitdog?"

"The Marines named them. Nobody asked me," I said. It was a sore subject, so I changed it. "What about that name for your house?"

"If that's what you want," said Wetherall. "Queen Jolly Freeze will do nicely."

As dinner went on, Nguyen became increasingly quiet. He hadn't been eating well of late, he told us, because everything tasted like boiled potatoes.

"It's true," said Wetherall, digging a spoon into a melting scoop of Mintastic. "Even my private blend of Jolly Freeze has clearly suffered flavor degradation. But they tell me it's temporary. Don't worry, your taste buds will bloom again, Nguyen. Besides, it's a small price to pay for the jewels -- and all this emptiness."

"As rewarding as this project has been," said Nguyen wearily, "I begin to look forward to its completion."

At that, I felt a vague dismay. Without noticing, I'd gotten used to Nguyen O'Hara's company, his dark, ironic presence.

He stood abruptly, muttered something about running some simulations and was gone before either of us could protest. Wetherall and I looked at each other across the table, then I glanced quickly down at my plate. Being stranded for the evening with the Emperor of Ice Cream was not what I'd had in mind.

* * * *

Wetherall and I descended from the lifthouse and crossed the flat, our shoes crunching the packed salt. The temperature must have dropped thirty degrees --

it was Wetherall weather. Tonight the extra dose of nosegays made the big stink smell like the fruitcake cookies Aunt Lindsay makes for Bastille Day. A kilometer away, Pile A was a dark silhouette against the star-filled sky. The outcropping of jewels glinted at the top. One of the shitdogs circled the base, and in the distance I saw another lumbering toward the mountains.

I still wasn't sure why I'd agreed to leave Laputa for some after-dinner jewel-viewing. Perhaps I didn't want to admit how much Nguyen's abrupt departure had dashed some obscure hopes in me. At least in the dark I didn't have to look at Wetherall looking at me.

I stopped to glance up. There were billions of stars, one for every dollar of Wetherall's hideous fortune. The Milky Way flowed like a silver river across the sky. Off in the distance, the Pile A jewel outcropping gave off minor reflections in a hundred colors. I felt small.

"It's a big universe," said Wetherall. "One time my mother and I -- we were living in Telluride, I must've been ten or eleven. The sky was full of stars, like tonight, and for the first time I realized -- they were here a million years ago and they'll be here a million years from now."

He looked up into the night. I caught his scent as I walked beside him. He smelled like tears.

I felt sorry for him. Damn those nosegays -- what I wanted to feel was irritation. I wanted to tell him, of course you're mortal, bud. What you're talking about is the human condition, not some problem only you have.

I didn't say anything. After a moment he spoke again.

"So where did the shitdogs come from, Liz?"

"Howard at Cambridge speculates they come from a planet orbiting a star of spectral type B. He bases this on their skin color, and that third eyelid they have."

"That's a pretty elaborate structure to build on a foundation of air."

"You should know about building structures on air."

He laughed. His face was a white smear in the darkness, his eyes two shadows. He stood quite close. For some reason my heart was racing. He leaned forward, then suddenly pointed over my shoulder. "Damn media leeches! Quick, follow me."

I turned and saw jeep lights sweeping by.

Before I could say a word Wetherall dashed off toward a pile of rubble a few hundred meters away. I stayed put and watched the jeep pull up to Laputa's stairs. Murk Janglish got out and took the steps two at a time.

I went to tell Wetherall. The debris was tailings piled up at the entrance to a shitdog tunnel. The hole gaped black as a tar pit, six meters across. I couldn't find Wetherall among the heaps of salt and rock. "Oh mogul!" I called. "Here mogul, mogul, mogul. There's a good mogul."

"Shhhhh!" he hissed. His arm appeared from behind one of the nearer piles, waving me toward him. "They'll hear you."

"Don't worry. It's only your lawyer."

"Murk? What's he doing out here at this time of night?"

"Subpoenaing snakes? How should I know?"

"Come here for a second." He was standing at the edge of the tunnel. "How deep do you suppose this thing goes?"

"You've read my reports. We've sent drones down as far as six kilometers, but there's no reason the dogs can't go deeper. For all we know they cruise the mantle."

Wetherall tossed a pebble into the pit. It was a long few seconds before it hit and rattled. "And what are the chances a shitdog is going to pop out of this hole and eat us?"

"The shitdogs don't inhabit these tunnels, and don't revisit them after they've dug them. The average length of a tunnel is six point three kilometers, average depth two point five. The walls are covered with excreta chemically similar to the pile excretions, which forms a mastic to reinforce the tunnel against.... What's so funny?"

I could see his smile in the darkness. "You are so serious about your

work."

It was past time to tell him about the change in the shitdogs' behavior. I evaded. "At least I care about something besides money."

"Money? Me? You've got the wrong idea about me, Liz. I'm just the goose that lays the golden eggs. I don't bother with what happens afterward. It's people like Murk who sit on the nest."

"Watch out -- you might trip over that metaphor." I turned and started walking away.

"I didn't mean to make fun of you." He caught up to me. "Nguyen's right about us being alike, you know. When I look at you I see myself with an academic veneer. Those jewels speak to me, Liz, in a way nothing else ever has. The problem is that I don't understand them -- yet. I don't expect that the jewels are going to hand me the secrets of the universe." I tried to get away from him, but he matched my stride. "I'm not even sure that once I do understand them, I'll be able to explain. But I am certain I'll be surprised."

He got in front of me, made me stop. "I like being surprised," he said. "You surprise me."

"Right," I said. "And I didn't even sign the waiver."

He shook his head. "There aren't many people as strong as you are," he said. "Two hundred and thirty-eight billion dollars is like a black hole. It can crush the life out of everything that comes near it."

Me, strong? I had some trouble catching my breath. I thought I knew what was coming next, and I wasn't sure I wanted to hear it.

"What do you think of me, Liz?"

"I don't know," I lied. "I think you're rich."

"Is that good or bad?"

A part of me wanted him to like me. And I didn't want to hurt his feelings. Then I remembered the way he'd brushed me off for some bimbo in a motel room. Maybe it was the wine, the night, his self-absorption, but I couldn't take it any more. "I don't understand you, Wetherall. Good or bad? I suppose it wouldn't be so bad if you would grow up and do something with your money. But what do you do? You buy a company so you can eat ice cream all day long. You hide behind avatars. You wear disguises. You play with your lasso. You sleep with supermodels. You hire people so that you can deal with them only on your own terms. You build a huge toy house, float it someplace as far away from human contact as you can manage, take drugs to scramble your senses so you can ignore the stink of the pile of shit you're hovering above, and stare at the pretty jewels. Is that the best you can come up with?"

Wetherall didn't say anything. The silence stretched. Suddenly I wished he'd get mad, tear into me, tell me off for my perpetual smart mouth. He just stood there.

"Let's go back," he said. "I'm tired."

I felt as churned up as if he'd assaulted me. "I'm sorry," I said. "I don't know what's gotten into me tonight."

"Too many noseays."

"Maybe. I've said too much."

We walked in silence back to Laputa. Later, I lay awake trying to figure out why I had unloaded on him so mercilessly.

* * * *

The next morning Wetherall was gone. No farewells, no nothing. His avatars called several times in the days that followed, but none of them brought up our starlight stroll in the desert. I tried to justify what I had said -- he had asked me, hadn't he? -- and concentrated on my work.

The pattern of the three dark shitpiles on the white Eastline salt flats struck some obscure chord in my mind. I ran schematics of all five shitdog sites through my computer, trying to isolate some algorithm common to all of them. Surely all this was not without some meaning.

* * * *

Meantime, construction on Queen Jolly Freeze continued.

Three or four nights later, I was staring in a trance at recent pix of

the Pile A jewel cluster when Nguyen stopped by my room. "Knock, knock," he said, standing in my doorway. He had a winebell of Pommery & Greno tucked under an arm, two glasses in hand.

"If this is a joke," I said, "go away. If not, come in and open that."

He set the glasses on my desk. Self conscious about my woolgathering, I touched a key and the image on the screen was replaced by a graph of pile growth rates at each of the five shitdog sites. Eastline had shot well into the lead. Nguyen raised an eyebrow -- he knew I still hadn't reported the change to Wetherall.

But he didn't speak of it. "Have you noticed what nosegays do to champagne?" He opened it and filled my glass halfway, finishing with an absurd flourish.

I took the glass from him.

"What does it smell like to you?" he said.

I sniffed. "Shoe polish?"

"Not unpleasant, but probably not worth sixty dollars a bell either." He shrugged. "Smell is not something many architects bother with, you know. It's hard to design for, though every building has its own peculiar odor. A castle smells different from a grass shack. Laputa smells nothing like Monticello. I have a colleague, Utrini, who installs olfactors in every room that he builds. He claims a scent palette in the thousands." Nguyen paused. "What do we smell like to them?" He gestured out the window. "The shitdogs?"

"I don't know that they have a sense of smell," I said. "But if they do, the fact that they've created such an intense odor source and stay so close to it is suggestive."

"Maybe they think we stink?"

I touched my glass to his. "One man's champagne is another man's cod liver oil."

His grin was fleeting. "We're uncomfortable with scent," he said, "because it reminds us that we're animals. That's why we tend to repress all but a few more or less pleasant aromas. We don't like to admit how powerful smell is in our lives." He fell silent for a moment, considering. I refilled his glass. "I've spent more time thinking about smell in past few days than I have my entire life."

I wondered if he were flirting with me. "What's this all about, Nguyen?"

He gave me an odd, detached smile. "Have you considered the potential of nosegays as an aphrodisiac?"

"Now you sound like Wetherall." I felt my cheeks flush. All those bubbles in the champagne.

"You shouldn't believe everything you see on America, America. You've met the man. Did he strike you as any kind of ladykiller?"

"No," I said, "but then, we have no interest in each other."

"Ah, but that's my point exactly. For instance, I have no romantic intentions toward you, Liz. Whatsoever."

"You say the sweetest things, Nguyen."

"I'm not trying to insult you," he said. "I think you're charming and intelligent. I hope that I've earned some small measure of your friendship. But without going into grisly details, let's just say that you're not my type."

"I see. And why is it important I know this all of a sudden?"

Nguyen tugged at the cuff of his shirt. "I'm finding that nosegays stimulate my libido in a very unwelcome way."

I just stared.

"It's nothing I can't control. But every so often when I catch your scent I feel ... eroticized. Very unprofessional, but there it is. I just wanted you to know why, the other night at dinner, I had to leave so abruptly, for example. I wouldn't want you to think I was being rude."

I knew now my cheeks were burning. "And you think this has something to do with nosegays?"

He nodded. "I'm quite sure. I take it you haven't noticed any similar reactions?"

I shook my head.

"Then you are lucky." Again he raised his eyebrow, as if I wasn't quite getting the message. "Or perhaps it is only the male of the species."

"What if I switched soaps?" I said. "Or tried some kind of perfume? Would that help?"

"No," he said wistfully. "I believe that would make it worse."

* * * *

Nguyen left half a bell of champagne behind. I finished it for him without really intending to. I was dumbfounded by his confession. I turned it over and over, like a chipmunk with a long, lost acorn. Was it a come-on?

Finally I reached for the phone and punched in a call to Wisconsin. Aunt Lindsay answered. Her hair was done up in orange cornrows -- a new style for her, but then she changed styles just about every other semester. "Liz!" she said. "I'm so glad you called! Send me some money."

"You may think that's a joke, Aunt Lindsay, but he's paying me enough that I could buy your house."

"You couldn't afford the waterproofing." She peered into the camera. "What's the matter, dear?"

I told her all about Wetherall, the walk on the salt flats, my fit of brutal honesty at the moment he'd expressed a liking for me. And then Nguyen's bizarre revelation. "How could Nguyen be well within the bounds of what I consider my type when I'm not even remotely close to his? I drive one man away from me in terror while the other fights manfully to master his perverse attraction to me. What's wrong with me?"

"Absolutely nothing."

"But what does Nguyen mean when he says he feels 'eroticized?' What grisly details? When he looks at me it's like my recurring nightmare where I walk into class naked and have to teach Kardashev's system for classifying extraterrestrials to hormone-soaked college boys."

"There is no other sort of college boy. Listen, does this Mr. O'Hara cross his legs when he's sitting near you? Does he stand with his torso canted forward at an angle of four to seven degrees?"

"I have no idea," I told her.

"How about the billionaire?"

"He seldom sits still long enough for me to analyze his kinesics."

"Maybe you should try. You seem confused about him."

"He's a confusing person."

"He didn't try to use that smart lasso on you, did he? Sometimes those rope boys don't know when to stop."

"Aunt Lindsay, please. I don't know why I got myself mixed up in this! My life was predictable. I was a respected professional in a stable environment. Now I'm on the net with madmen like Thorp, chasing lunatics like Wetherall across the salt flats, playing guessing games with egomaniacs like O'Hara. I've got a doctorate in exobiology!"

"You've always put too much store in the Ph.D., Elizabeth. That skanky Dr. Matthewson from your department called here the other day, asking odd questions about the sofa in the faculty lounge. Is that really the 'stable environment' you're interested in? You've been in universities long enough to recognize that ninety percent of everything is bullshit. 'Piled higher and deeper.'"

I guess I should have known better than to seek my aunt's opinion on normal behavior. "But what should I do?"

"As long as you make sure you are getting enough anti-oxidants," Aunt Lindsay said, "you should do your best to enjoy every minute of it."

* * * *

It was still dark when Nguyen woke me by pounding on my door. My head was pounding, too. "Murk wants to speak with you. He's very upset. Wetherall is missing."

"Nguyen, it's five-thirty-three in the morning."

"Please, Liz. He's suffering."

I stumbled out to the lounge vid center. Despite the early hour, Janglish was already in his power suit. He looked as if his collar were strangling him. "Cobble, what the hell have you done with Ramsdel Wetherall?"

"That's Dr. Cobble. And I haven't done a damn thing with him."

"Not for lack of trying. The naive act isn't going to fool me, Cobble. You were pretty slick about dodging the waiver. But just because you didn't sign, doesn't mean you can sink your hooks into him."

"You tried his hotel?"

"You know he was never at that hotel. He was just using the room to forward his messages. I began to get suspicious when it was always an avatar that answered whenever I called him there. Couple that with several reckless remarks he made about you, and I realized you must have him. I want him back now, do you hear me?"

"I believe they can hear you in Stuttgart, Mr. Janglish."

"Murk," Nguyen broke in, "you're way out of line, even for you. We haven't seen Wetherall since he left after the mobile base test. He hasn't made it out to the site in days. And Liz has been here all along -- I would certainly have noticed if she had been sneaking off to cavort with the boss."

"You're vouching for her, Nguyen?" sniffed Janglish.

"Why yes, I suppose I am." Out of range of the camera he drew a one with his forefinger for the favor I now owed him.

Janglish was only slightly mollified. "Well, then okay. For now. But I want you both to start looking for him. Give it your highest priority. Your project has got him neglecting his real responsibilities. There are ten transnational enterprises dependent on his input. I'm holding you responsible for distracting him. And if I find out that you've seen him and then let him get away, I'll have make you sorry you ever heard the name Murk Janglish."

"I already am," I muttered.

"Now Murk," said Nguyen, "you really ought to calm down. Wetherall is a slippery devil. Trying to catch him will only raise your blood pressure."

Janglish glared back at Nguyen. "It's a already hundred and eighty over ninety, and don't think you've helped it one bit." Then the screen went black.

"I believe I enjoy a special rapport with that man," Nguyen mused.

"What do you think?"

"What was he going on about?" I asked. "What reckless remarks?"

Nguyen squinted out the window at the spectacular sunrise over the Wasatch Mountains. The shadow of Pile C pointed toward Laputa like an accusing finger. "I'll try the construction base," he said. "Maybe he's has some hiding place I've missed."

"I'm going to take a Serentol," I said, and headed for the bathroom.

* * * *

I donned one of Nguyen's staff uniforms, took a jeep, and headed across the flats toward the press encampment. The place seemed unusually busy for seven in the morning, but then, reporters on assignment don't sleep much. I ignored the swarm headed for the press tent, parked the jeep near a sol-power unit and prowled down the aisles of truck, vans, and satellite uplinks. Nests of fiberoptic cables sprawled across the scuffed salt. Finally I found what I was looking for.

The Jolly Freeze van was parked near the edge of the camp. There was no one in sight. I circled around to the back and kicked at the door. Not only did it feel great, but I believe I may have dented it.

"Wetherall!" I shouted. "Come out of there, you weasel!"

The door opened. Wetherall leaned out, grabbed me by the wrist, and yanked me in. "Thank God you're here, Liz."

Unlike the van he had used to pick me up at the university, this one was outfitted as a camper. There was a teak bunk, a teak drop table, a compact but sophisticated media center, galley, head. Three smart lassos lay coiled under the bunk. On the pix was the Queen Jolly Freeze construction site. The

exterior of the house was completed, and workmen were entering and exiting through the balcony entrance.

"You've been here all along, haven't you? Even the other night when I was outside this van trying to talk to you, you were here, not in any hotel."

"Yes," he admitted.

I thought for a moment. "Did you even have a woman in here with you, or did you just invent her to make me feel used?"

"That wasn't why I invented her, Liz. I just wanted to keep away from Murk."

"Right in the middle of the biggest army of reporters in the country?"

"The Purloined Letter dodge. I'm sorry I deceived you."

"You're not forgiven. Do you know that Janglish has accused me of stealing you away from your 'responsibilities'?"

"Murk has a different view of my responsibilities than I have. He figures if he controls the women I see, then he controls me."

"Has it occurred to you that I don't give a damn about your women?" I was so angry at the man that I felt as if I had stepped aside from myself. What I did next shocked me. "Look, I've had enough of this. I quit. Hire Thorp, for all I care."

I turned and stalked out of the van. I tried to slam the door behind me, but Wetherall caught it. "Liz," he protested. "Please don't go."

I stormed down the aisle of vehicles, Wetherall following me, begging me to listen to him. There was some commotion in the press camp. Reporters were milling around the main tent, trailing cameras and cable. No one noticed Wetherall, even though he wasn't wearing a silly hat or a phony beard. I spotted Nguyen about the same time as he saw me and made a broad pointing gesture toward Wetherall. I've got him, I mouthed.

You take him, I thought.

Nguyen bumped his way over to us. There was salt dust on his butter-colored suit. His eyes were wide with excitement. "Big doings," he said. "You have to see this."

"Why?" I said.

Without replying, he ushered us over to the tent and picked up the edge where it had come loose from a stake. We ducked through.

Blaine Thorp was giving a press conference, only the sound system was so loud that I couldn't understand what he was saying. I heard him bellow the word "_convergence_". Nguyen pushed into the crowd to get a better look; I grabbed Wetherall by the sleeve and tugged him into the back corner of the tent, behind some sound equipment. Wetherall looked hunted. He was surrounded by reporters, the _enemy_, breathing the same sweltering air that they breathed. I had never seen him sweat until that moment.

I don't think it was because the air-conditioning in his shirt had failed.

* * * *

Convergence. Earlier in the day, it had been reported, the shitdogs in all four of the other sites had ducked their noses and begun digging. Every shitdog on the planet besides ours here at Eastline had simultaneously disappeared under the crust of the desert.

When it became apparent that the shitdogs weren't resurfacing, robot probes were sent in after them, to track their movements, and chart the direction of their digging, if there was any direction to it.

There was. All four sets of shitdogs were tunneling in a straight line directly for Nevada.

They were closing ranks, and Eastline had been declared base.

* * * *

Somebody adjusted Thorp's microphone.

"That's precisely what I'm saying, Darla," he told a reporter in the first row. "The Atacama Desert, the Gobi Desert, Ethiopia's Danakil Plain, and Lake Disappointment in Australia are all about eight thousand statute miles, as the crow flies, from Eastline. As the mole burrows, that's a little over

seven thousand miles. Assuming the shitdogs can burrow at a top speed of eight miles per hour, they'll be here in fifteen days."

"That can't be right," I said to Wetherall. "He's got the math wrong."

"So what happens when they get here?" Someone shouted a follow-up.

"Nothing right away, I hope. But that depends on stopping any further disturbance of the shitdogs, the casting piles or the jewels. The shitdogs are the advance wave for the race of aliens who sent them. Call these aliens the 'Big Dogs.' The casting piles are the power sources and the jewels the beacons. What we have here is an attractive nuisance set up by these superminds. A fire alarm. If we mess with it, thereby showing our intelligence, we set off the alarm. And Ramsdel Wetherall, with his construction activity, his wrong-headed advice from the academic establishment, and his obsession with the jewels, is intent on giving us away. Does he realize this? Of course he does! How could he not? It's common knowledge that pile C here in Eastline has been growing at an alarming rate, while there has been no change at any of the other sites. He's tripped the alarm, and wants to bring the Big Dogs down. That's the reason we've got convergence, and that's why we've got to stop him."

I couldn't stand it any more. I stood up and waved my hand frantically. Wetherall blanched and tried to pull me back, but it was like facing Matthewson at a Curriculum Committee meeting. "What a load of unfounded bullshit!" I shouted.

In the corner of my eye I saw Nguyen slip out of the tent. Thorp squinted until he made me out against the lights. "Dr. Cobble? I'm glad you deigned to show up. You have a better explanation?"

"What is this theory based on, other than your Ouija board? It sounds like the plot of some pre-millennial sci-fi movie. I've known about the growth in pile C for weeks, and you just figured it out!"

The reporters turned, Wetherall clutched at my arm, and I realized that once again my passion had carried me a little past the bounds of discretion. "Oops," I whispered.

"Let's get out of here," Wetherall muttered.

We made a dash for the outside. When the reporters realized the man next to me was Wetherall, they rushed after us, and nearly cut us off before we could leap into Nguyen's jeep.

As we sped across the flats toward Laputa, Nguyen spoke to Wetherall. "I believe we are faced with a moment of truth."

* * * *

On the ride back, I sat beside Wetherall and tried to melt into a puddle so I could soak through the floorboards into the salt flat. I should have told him about pile C days ago. He knew I knew. I knew he knew. Now Thorp was vilifying us both, and I'd handed him the means to do it.

Wetherall spoke first. "We've got to hurry up the launch."

"Listen," I said. "I screwed up. I let Thorp scoop me on the big story. But that doesn't justify all that garbage he's dumping on us. Don't let him force our hand."

"The shitdogs have forced our hand, Liz," said Wetherall, his voice flat. I tried to read him, but couldn't. It was probably because he was planning to send Murk Janglish over to lop off my head for what I had -- or rather, hadn't -- done. But why was I worried that he might fire me? I had just quit.

By the time we reached Laputa, Wetherall was already planning his counter-strike. He would hold a press conference of his own, float a raft of different but eminently plausible explanations of the shitdogs' behavior to defuse any panic Thorp might have aroused.

"Thorp's not a credible scientist," I protested. "We don't need to respond."

"We?" said Wetherall. "So we're 'we' again?"

"I'm sorry, Wetherall," I said. "For everything. How about a deal? If you don't fire me, I won't quit."

Nguyen's eyebrows arched but he said nothing. Neither did Wetherall. He simply offered me his hand and we shook. His hands were warmer than I remembered. He didn't seem angry or disappointed with me, only focused on our next step.

"Then we can proceed immediately. You'll speak for us, Liz. You carry more weight than Thorp. You can make him look like the eccentric he is."

A lot Wetherall knew about eccentrics. "But I can't face down an army of reporters. They'll nibble me to death."

"You don't have to," said Wetherall. "Your avatar is ready. She can do it."

* * * *

I sat with Nguyen in Laputa's media room to watch the press conference. Wetherall was holed up in his room.

On the pix, it looked just like a live press conference. Behind the microphones were Wetherall and I -- or rather our avatars. Wetherall's was the accustomed grinning, overenthusiastic barrel-of-quirks. I'd thought his avatars exaggerated until I met the man and learned they were actually realistic.

Mine was good. I couldn't complain about that. The avatar-modeling program had caught my edges, my impatience and sarcasm. Although I had never smiled that much in my life, at least it hadn't softened me to oatmeal.

There was only one problem.

"Cobble" and "Wetherall" were standing too close together. It looked like their hips were touching behind the podium. And they were flirting, bantering like teenagers, much to the detriment of the spin they were trying to sell.

They positively glowed.

I could see tomorrow's gossip columns as clearly as if they were etched in the air before me.

I opened the interface Wetherall had given me to move "Cobble" to a polite distance, only then she lost the train of her thought. If I was going to take control of my avatar, it seemed that I would have to do all the talking. I couldn't.

I ran up one level and pounded on Wetherall's door. I was doing a lot of that lately.

The door opened. "Hello, Liz -- "

"I thought 'Let's-not-and-say-we-did' was supposed to be a mutual decision," I said.

"Eh?"

There was a pix open on the bed. Murk Janglish glowered on it. "Who is it, Ramsdel? Not that Cobble woman again?"

"You're not watching our press conference?" I said.

Wetherall shrugged, "I've been too busy. Murk tells me that my money missed me while I was gone. Besides, we're not really saying anything important, are we? That's the whole point of a press conference."

"Ramsdel," said Janglish, "aim me at her. There's something she needs to hear."

"We may not be saying anything, but our avatars are practically in each other's pants," I said.

"Really?"

"Come down and take a look."

"Ramsdel!" shouted Janglish. "Wait, Ramsdel. Don't..."

"Hold that thought," said Wetherall, and turned him off.

Down in the media room, Nguyen had broken out the champagne. "This is really quite interesting," he said.

Wetherall watched for a moment. His response was blithe. "I'm sorry Liz, but I'm not at all sure this is bad strategy. If our supposed 'romance' becomes a story, then it will distract the reporters from Thorp. But if you want, I'll call the team leader and get your avatar tweaked right away."

"Mine? What about yours?" From where I sat, it looked like 'Wetherall'

was trying to peek down 'Cobble's' blouse.

"If you insist, I can have my avatars adjusted as well."

"What good is that going to do? The damage is done. The reporters are going to think I'm your mystery woman. We'll be the talk of the net tomorrow."

"They've got me in bed with any woman who gets within ten kilometers. I'm sorry -- I'm used to it. Maybe I shouldn't be. But I'll do what I can to spare you the indignity of being thought of as romantically linked to me. Now if you don't mind, Murk is having apoplexy."

Nguyen watched him leave with a detached air of amusement. I turned on him. "What's that smirk about. You look like you're hatching an egg."

"He likes you, Liz."

"Right."

"Liz, when avatars are well done -- and remember, it took some time to get yours exact -- they're more than just mirrors or puppets. They're out there doing what people are normally too busy to do anymore -- playing. Experimenting with possibilities. So these two fell in lust with one another. You can ignore it completely, or you can take note of it -- maybe your avatar is telling you something you ought to know. Personally, the chance that that might happen is what's kept me from having one. I'm sure there are some things about myself I would rather not discover."

He took another sip of champagne. "Now, assuming this press conference gets the reporters off our necks for a while, what we need to talk about is how we are going to get Queen Jolly Freeze up and flying before the convergence happens."

On the pix, "Cobble" put her hand up to touch "Wetherall" on the arm.

* * * *

By the end of the day everybody in the world knew that the Chinese, Ethiopian, Chilean and Aussie shitdogs were tunneling to Eastline. Seismologists rushed equipment to Nevada to try to anticipate their arrival. It was generally believed that Thorp's estimate for a simultaneous arrival in fifteen days was ludicrous; reasonable numbers ranged from eighteen to twenty-eight days.

There were calls in Congress to ban everyone from Eastline except for military, but the governor of Nevada -- whose hand was, no doubt, deep in Wetherall's pocket -- made fiery a speech about states' rights. The reporters vowed to stay right where they were to cover what many claimed was the biggest story in history. Perversely, Wetherall found himself allied with the media against the government in the effort to maintain civilian access to the shitdog site.

Ten days after the convergence had begun, Nguyen had the house ready for flight. There would be no test: this was the official launch even though the mobile base wouldn't be ready for another week. Wetherall had insisted, over Nguyen's objections, that we use the makeshift base we had driven on our shitdog-wrangling test. Queen Jolly Freeze had to be up and running before the rest of the shitdogs arrived.

* * * *

"When you're ready, Wetherall." The pix softened Nguyen's voice to a whisper.

Overnight the crew had tested all systems and inflated the balloons with helium. In the dawn light, through the skylight, I had watched them swelling over us like huge tumors. Now Wetherall and I were in the control room of Queen Jolly Freeze. Below us, Nguyen in the base directed the ground crew as they worked the mooring lines that had kept the house stable through the inflation. Wetherall's liftmansion was a brobdignagian version of Laputa, an elongated octagon rather than a disk, with four levels, an encircling balcony (despite Wetherall's acrophobia), a small gym, sauna, even a hot tub. Every room had its own escape hatch and ladder.

Wetherall decided that none of the crew was necessary. He knew as much about his house as anyone. This was to be a test run for his elusive solitude as well as for Queen Jolly Freeze. I was surprised when he invited me along.

Wetherall was as bright and excited as a kid with seventy million dollars worth of balloons. "I'm going to retract the boom now," he said.

"Go," Nguyen replied from the pix.

The stair boom detached from the base and retracted into the house. The mooring lines fell away. There was an initial jerk as the lifthouse broke free and found its equilibrium. It hovered, neither rising nor falling, ten meters above the base.

"Neutral ballast achieved," Nguyen said. "Electromagnetic tether engaged."

"I'm going to take it up to half altitude," Wetherall said. His hands moved over the controls. Through the observation floor I watched the base gradually shrink below us.

Wetherall stopped the house at sixty meters. In the light northerly breeze, it moved off thirty meters south of the base. The shadows of the big balloons, in the early morning light, were cast against the foot of Pile B a kilometer away.

"Let's have a look at the jewels," Wetherall said.

"Up there you see jewels," Nguyen grumbled. "Down here all I see is shit." He started the base crawling over the salt flats. As the wind was at its back, the house drifted into the lead. Wetherall peered intently at the piles ahead. I retreated to the observation deck on the opposite side of the house to watch for shitdogs.

It was almost over now, and looking down from the balcony, I thought about what the last months had meant. Since that night on the salt flats, Wetherall had treated me with punctilious correctness, retreating into formality like a hurt child. I didn't know why that should have bothered me. But it did.

It was a little chilly outside, and the wind blew back my hopeless hair.

* * * *

Of course, the media had noticed the lifthouse taking off. They scrambled a dozen copters in pursuit. Wetherall's private little launch party was going to be live on the net, very shortly. But I didn't have the chance to tell him. Below, a pair of shitdogs appeared, loping after the base. Nguyen began to turn away from it and the piles but then two more shitdogs approached from the west. Nguyen spotted them, sped up and veered back left. As he did, the left side treads of the base skipped a little ahead, spinning faster than the right ones, though the crawler didn't seem to speed up when it did. The mass of the house, in occasional gusts of wind, was threatening to pull the base off the salt flats. Nguyen had been right; the base wasn't massive enough for Queen Jolly Freeze.

I wondered about the way the four shitdogs had come at us from opposite directions. It was almost as if they were acting in concert. But that didn't make sense, because the effect of their actions was not to chase us away but to steer us toward the piles. Just then I noticed a cloud of dust being kicked up off toward the press encampment. Several vehicles had crossed the property line and were closing on us.

"Wetherall, we've got company," I said.

"I know. There's nothing I can do about the copters, but I'm having security turn those buses around."

"They better. You realize that if we make any sudden turns, your house is going to yank the base off the ground like Piglet in a windstorm."

"What about that, Nguyen?"

He sounded calm. "I told you the mass of this base was inadequate. Of course, a collision with either a shitdog or a bus voids your warranty. However, the shitdogs seem to be dropping back. As long as the wind doesn't pick up, we should be all right. But no heavy breathing, you two."

Copters hovered around Queen Jolly Freeze like gulls around a beached whale. I could see a commentator talking excitedly into his throat mike. I ran out to the rec room and turned on the pix. "...Floating pleasure-palace drifts toward the largest of the alien piles..." A telephoto close-up showed Wetherall at the controls; it made him look goofier than he really was.

"...identity of the woman is still unknown. We have unconfirmed reports that it's pix flame Daphne Overdone, spirited away from the set of the interactive spectacular Madonna by special black operatives of Allweather Security, Wetherall's Jolly Freeze subsidiary...."

"Whoa, Nguyen!" said Wetherall. "This is close enough."

The base skidded slowly to a halt. I ran back to Wetherall. We floated alongside pile B. The air was thick with the smell of strawberries and chocolate. Outside the window of the observation deck, twenty meters away, were the jewels that crowned the shitpile.

I hadn't been this close to a cluster since we had decapitated Pile A four years ago. Since there's no way to quantify beauty, scientists are supposed to ignore it. But the view of the jewels took my breath away.

There were three main groups. Each consisted of hexagonal rhombohedrons, the largest over three meters in length and almost half a meter in diameter. But the surface of each of the larger jewels was fixed with a myriad of smaller rhombohedrons, and each of those with still smaller ones, in a kind of fractal dance. The colors ranged from the liquid red of garnet, through a fiery gold, to azure, tourmaline and indigo. The morning sunlight reflecting off and refracting through them threw a thousand brilliant highlights.

"This is why I built this house," Wetherall said quietly. "I'm sorry I had to push you around to do it."

"They're beautiful," I said.

Wetherall was silent for a long time. I sat beside him and the two of us watched the jewels bloom as the sun rose. I wondered whether they had any intelligible purpose at all, or were just some chance production of a heap of alien shit. It would be a good joke on all of us -- but no more than the beauty of a spiral galaxy, or of the pattern of seeds in a sunflower. Was all this sound and fury, my career in the university, Thorp's career in the media, Nguyen's architectural commission and Wetherall's billions put in service of it, justified by a calm ten minutes at the apex of Pile B? In the end, Wetherall was a pretty sad character. And if he was sad, then what was I, with my academic infighting, the "shitdogs studies community" and coffee for Saintjohn Matthewson?

The light seemed to dance in the corner of my eye and I started to feel that odd feeling again, like I was standing next to myself. As I looked at Liz Cobble, I saw a woman who was very plain indeed -- nobody special. It made me ashamed to realize that I had spent my life tarnishing the brilliance I'd been born with. I did not shine. Who would ever be dazzled by me?

* * * *

Of course, I knew exactly when it had all begun. At the nurse's station in the ICU of St. Anne's hospital. The smiley nurse with the hair thick as rubber bands wanted to give me a lollipop. I didn't want a lollipop. I was eight years old and my mother was dying and I was going to have to live the rest of my life with my two aunts, who dressed strange and smelled funny and never had anything to eat in their house.

"Here, take it honey," the nurse said. It was purple. Of course she didn't know that I hated purple lollipops. "We only give them to special little girls."

"I don't want to be special," little Lizzy Cobble had said. "I want to go home."

She was such a stubborn little girl.

* * * *

"Liz, does it seem to you that they're glowing?"

Wetherall's words roused me from my orgy of self-reproach. At first I thought it was just the angle of the sun, then I realized that Wetherall was right. The jewels were beginning to glow.

"Has anyone spotted this phenomenon before?" Wetherall asked.

"It's not in the literature," I said. "We need to get closer. This could be a breakthrough."

"You think it's some sort of radioactivity?"

"I doubt it. There's nothing in their chemical composition that..."

Nguyen interrupted us.

"Wetherall, we've got problems."

"What?" Wetherall asked.

"Actually at least a hundred problems. Thorp has come to visit -- with some friends."

I ran out to the balcony to see. One of the buses had gotten through and had pulled up beside the base. A crowd was boiling out. People threw themselves on the ground in front of the treads of the base. Thorp, wearing a severe black suit and a wide straw hat, directed them with a bullhorn. When the base was surrounded on three sides he turned the horn up toward Queen Jolly Freeze.

"WETHERALL!" his amplified voice boomed. "MAKE THIS FOOL PULL YOUR HOUSE BACK FROM THE JEWELS. YOU DON'T REALIZE THE DANGER YOU'RE PUTTING US ALL IN -- THE WHOLE HUMAN RACE! YOU WERE CRAZY TO TRY TO REPLACE ME WITH THAT WOMAN -- SHE DOESN'T KNOW A THING ABOUT THESE CREATURES. PULL BACK BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!"

Nguyen had climbed down from the cab of the base to argue with Thorp. He gesticulated wildly, pointing off across the flats where the fifth shitdog had joined its four fellows. They crouched all in a line; I had never seen anything like it. Their pattern seemed deeply meaningful.

The copters dropped down low. Their backwash jostled the Queen Jolly Freeze. I could see telephotos on Thorp. This was his moment in the sun; I hoped the old loon was sweating.

Wetherall switched on the house's PA system and leaned into the microphone. "Dr. Thorp, you are trespassing on private property. Gather your people together and leave before we call in the authorities."

"YOU'RE TOYING WITH DISASTER. ALREADY, BECAUSE OF YOUR ACTIVITIES, SHITDOGS FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD ARE GATHERING HERE. NOW YOU'RE GOING TO SET OFF THE BEACON, AND BEFORE YOU KNOW IT THE BIG DOGS WILL BE HERE!"

I leaned over and grabbed the microphone. I decided not to mention anything about the jewels beginning to glow. "Thorp, you microcephalic poser! What are you babbling about? If you think -- "

"Liz," said Wetherall. He pointed.

Thorp, and Nguyen and the crowd of protesters all turned their heads in the same direction, as if they were connected to servos. The effect was impressive. Once they saw the five shitdogs that were marching in a line toward the base, however, the illusion of unity vanished.

Nguyen dashed for the cab. A dozen protesters did the same, crowding in with him as Nguyen tried to get the thing moving again. Those who didn't fit hung off the sides. But most of the others were still lying on the ground, and there was no room to maneuver. Thorp stood calmly in place while the panic-stricken swirled around him. He raised the bullhorn. "DON'T WORRY." His voice crackled. "THEY MEAN US NO HARM. THIS IS PART OF THE PLAN."

"What is he doing?" I asked Wetherall. "I'm going down there."

"With those lunatics? No. Besides we're too high."

"Then reel in the tether. I need to get down, Wetherall. Right now!"

"No, Liz."

I stared at him. Who did he think he was, telling me what to do? I ran down to the bottom floor, overrode the locks and popped the hatch. Thanks to the breeze, the house was floating to the south of the base, and forty meters below lay the edge where the castings pile met the salt flats. Off to the north thirty meters, the protesters boiled around the base truck -- most of them. Here and there in the crowd was one who stood stock still, like Thorp, as if dazed.

I threw the emergency ladder over the edge and it unrolled to within a couple of meters of the ground. Close enough -- I swung my legs over the edge, and, clutching the ladder white-knuckled, began to climb down.

"Liz, no!" I heard Wetherall shout from above me.

Derring-do is harder in real life than in the gropies. Looking down made me want to throw up, so I didn't. I tried to fix on the horizon. The breeze caught the ladder and I began to describe a long, lazy ellipse approximately ten stories off the ground. Meanwhile, the shifting of my weight as I moved from rung to rung made the ladder twist. I began to wonder if maybe I was as crazy as Thorp. At least he had two feet on the ground. A copter came over to watch me and my clothes flapped like angry birds. The base moved a few meters and then jerked to a stop.

I almost lost my grip. "Nice driving, Nguyen." I muttered, and looked down. Only it wasn't Nguyen driving at all. He had been thrown from the cab by protestors and was only now scrambling back on.

Just in front of the base truck, a circle of the salt flat was boiling and churning. The center of the patch fell away, and a pair of blue legs poked out. It was a shitdog, hatching from the desert like a baby dinosaur. But that was impossible; all five shitdogs were marching in formation on the stranded base.

I froze on the ladder. I was suddenly dizzy, and it wasn't only because I was doing a high wire act without a net.

Another pair of claws burst through the salt crust, then another. All around the piles shitdogs erupted from the desert.

Someone had forgotten to give them a copy of the schedule. Convergence was happening early. Within minutes we would be dealing not just with five shitdogs, but with twenty-five.

* * * *

Most of the protestors broke ranks now, scattering in every direction, throwing themselves onto the base, although quite a few still remained by Thorp's side. The base was backing away, or attempting to, its treads spinning against the resistance of the massive lifthouse. The ladder twisted and jerked. I wrapped my legs around the rung and twisted my arms in the rope, clinging for my life like Dejah Thoris, six stories above an approaching horde of alien creatures that smelled like lilacs. But the thing that surprised me the most was that I wanted to climb down more than ever. It was as if the shitdogs were calling me.

I wondered how long it would take before whoever was driving the base realized the only way they were going to get moving would be to kill the electro-magnetic tether.

Not long at all.

The house shot up about ten meters before it re-established neutral ballast. I yo-yoed beneath it on the ladder. We were drifting with the wind over the shitpile. Below, the assembled shitdogs bellowed up at me, and radiated in toward the pile.

"Hang on, Liz!" Wetherall's voice boomed from the house's loudspeakers. I looked up and saw him out on the balcony. He had gotten out his smart lasso and was twirling it over his head, legs bent and braced. The jewels were glowing so brightly now that it was hard to look at them. In the shadow of the house's roof, Wetherall's face was awash in their light. He threw the lasso at the jewels and missed, falling short by a meter or two. The electric rope snapped itself upward and hovered in the air like a cobra, awaiting its next command. The wind was blowing us away from the shitpile. Wetherall tried again, and this time the lasso caught the jewels. He lashed the other end of the smart rope to the railing of the house, and dashed inside, to reappear at the open hatch.

Wetherall gulped, then slid awkwardly over the edge and started down to me. His eyes were the size of eggs. I couldn't watch him watch the ground so I looked down again. All twenty-five shitdogs had formed two roughly concentric circles beneath me. A target. And they were calling to me. They wanted me, Liz Cobble, the queen of shitdog studies.

"Liz, don't move." Wetherall called. "I'm coming."

The only thought in my head was, he's trying to stop me. I had to get away from him. I made myself move down the ladder.

The base scuttled across the flats under a black swarm of protesters. Thorp's bus was gone, leaving a score or more protesters behind, among them Thorp. One of the pix copter pilots, braver than the others, landed and waved to the stragglers to jump aboard. But they ignored him. Thorp turned the bullhorn on him. "THAT'S OKAY. WE HAVE EVERYTHING UNDER CONTROL," he said. Then he dropped the bullhorn at his feet, and he and the others started toward the gathering shitdogs.

I saw him brush a hand along a aquamarine-colored flank, and I was jealous. It wasn't fair! Heedless now of the risk of falling, I scrambled down. Wetherall was shouting at me. I don't even know what he said.

Thorp came to the center of the shitdog formation, held his arms out and turned around twice, as if to embrace them all. A shitdog approached him and then settled back on its haunches. He walked toward it, smiling. The jewels were glowing so furiously now that their prismatic colors rained down on the shitdogs and Thorp's followers like God's own grace. My head swam with the scent of roses. God-damned Thorp! Tears welled in my eyes. I had looked into the jewels' heart. The shitdogs had called to me.

I was supposed to be special.

I was about to let go of the ladder and drop to the ground when Wetherall reached me and seized my arm.

The lead shitdog lifted up its front legs. Its arms extended outwards in an embrace, claws sliding from its feet like those of a cat. The embrace took in Thorp, who stood, arms lifted. Clumsy as a baby, the shitdog grabbed Thorp between its paws, lifted him to its mouth and bit his head off.

All I could think of was how lucky he was.

Thorp's followers were going where their leader had gone before them, falling into the eager embrace of the shitdogs, being torn to pieces and eaten. I struggled to get free of Wetherall, but he wrapped his legs around me and would not let me go. We twisted on the ladder. The wind bore the house around to the side of the castings pile, the ladder jerked downward, and Wetherall and I dropped the last few meters to the salt flats. I tried to get free of him, but was knocked dizzy by the fall. By the time I got my wind, the shitdogs were done feeding.

The jewels stopped glowing.

When I shook my head, little black mites twirled into nothingness. For a moment I couldn't remember who I was or why I was there. I watched uncomprehendingly as the shitdogs settled down among the bloody scraps of Thorp's followers and went to sleep.

"Liz, are you okay?" said Wetherall.

The sound of my name snapped me back from wherever I had been. "Why? Why did you stop me? It was supposed to be me, not Thorp!"

"I love you, Liz."

I blinked at him, the goofy billionaire. Then I looked up at Queen Jolly Freeze. Wetherall was afraid of heights. How the hell had he climbed down that ladder?

* * * *

Altogether, the twenty-five shitdogs consumed twenty-five of Thorp's people, twelve men and thirteen women. They then fell into a coma-like sleep.

During the next forty-eight hours, the world watched as they shrivelled and deflated. The Joint Chiefs advocated nuking them before they awoke. I was in the camp that said it would be a crime against the universe to destroy the aliens over what was clearly a human-caused tragedy. Wetherall pointed out that Thorp's people were trespassing on private lands, had been warned of the dangers involved, and had voluntarily offered themselves for consumption. He never mentioned that I'd been prepared to do the same, and I was grateful to him for keeping that quiet.

About the time Wetherall and I were being picked up by Nguyen and Janglish, Wetherall's smart rope lost power. Queen Jolly Freeze came unmoored, floated majestically across the flats before a stiff, hot breeze that smelled of fresh-baked oatmeal bread. Ten hours later it wrapped itself around Deseret

Peak in the Newfoundland Mountains of Utah and was totally destroyed.

The debate about what to do about the dogs was still raging when, three days later, they awoke.

* * * *

The report that the shitdogs were stirring came while Wetherall, Nguyen, Janglish and I were sitting in the lounge of Laputa, going over the wreckage of Wetherall's plans and trying to figure out what came next. Wetherall seemed surprisingly sanguine about the destruction of Queen Jolly Freeze. When I asked him about it, he only said, "I don't need it anymore."

Nguyen and Janglish had established some sort of alliance aimed at getting Wetherall back to his business interests. And they were holding hands. They made a strange couple; I wondered how they'd fare once the nosegays wore off. In any event, I guess I'd figured out the gory details of Nguyen O'Hara's erotic life.

Me, I was thinking about whether I could face going back to the university after everything that had happened. Back to bored undergrads and faculty meetings run by the likes of Saintjohn Matthewson. Much as I had complained, inwardly and outwardly, about the way Wetherall had deranged my life, I wasn't sure I wanted it to be ranged again.

Also, the shitdogs were the biggest news in the world of science since Playdough Theory. As the sapientologist with the most experience on the ground, so to speak, I wasn't going to leave until I knew what was going on.

"Let's go," I said.

"Uh..." Nguyen said. "Considering their last interaction with humans, I'm not sure I want to be there when they take up activities again, thank you. Besides, we have issues to resolve with Wetherall."

"That's fine," I said. "I don't blame you. But I'm a scientist."

"I'm coming too," Wetherall said.

"There's no need -- " I started.

"Considering your behavior during the last shitdog interaction with humans, I think there is," Wetherall said.

I didn't argue. We grabbed a jeep and motored over to Pile B. It was the first time we had been alone together since we'd been picked up on the salt flats. I felt nervous, as if we were both expecting me to say something. I took my eyes off the horizon to look at him. He squinted against the bright sunlight, the wind blowing his short blond hair. He looked his age, which I had discovered was forty-two.

"The place will be lousy with media," I said.

"I don't care."

I concentrated on driving. Amid the talk that he was responsible for the death of Thorp's followers, he had faced hordes of questioning reporters -- without his avatars.

"I haven't forgotten what you said when you stopped me from getting eaten," I told him.

"Please -- I don't expect you to say anything. You already told me how you feel about me."

"That was an example of the narcissism of minor differences."

"The what?"

"Never mind. Things change."

There were several seconds of silence. We were coming up on the cordon of weaponry and troop carriers the army had thrown up around the site. I kept my eyes on it, my heart thumping while I waited for Wetherall's response. Finally I snuck a peek at him.

He was looking right at me, wearing the same goofy, astonished smile his avatar had flashed during his first call to my university office. "Change is scary," he said. Then he laughed out loud. "Ask Murk Janglish."

We reached the checkpoint. Wetherall had brought enough financial and political pressure to bear to insure us a hearing when the time came; now I watched him discuss quietly with the nervous officer in charge why our presence -- in particular mine -- was appropriate at this crucial moment.

Wetherall seemed quite as adept at persuasion in person as he was by avatar. We passed through the perimeter to the place where the sleeping dogs lay.

In the days since what the press was calling the Big Thorp Massacre, the shitdogs had been undergoing some sort of transformation. They'd exuded fluids, and lost a considerable portion of their mass. Some were of the opinion that human flesh was poisonous to them and the dogs were dying. I wasn't convinced. The last confrontation had been so purposeful, on both sides. And I could not discount my own compulsion to converge.

The dog that had eaten Thorp was the first to rise. After baking in the hot sun for days, it shuddered, then staggered to all fours. Its legs had become more elongated and slender, and the paws more handlike, with three fingers and an opposable thumb. As it sat up, quivering, I saw that its neck was also longer, its brow higher.

The soldiers drew back. There was a clank of weapons brought to the ready when the dog rose onto its hind legs. It shook its head, opened its eyes, then looked down at itself, and raised its big blue paw before its face. "My God!" it said. "I've got my hand back!"

The soldiers prepared to fire. Wetherall pulled me back. The creature lowered its hand and regarded us with a clear intelligence.

"No need for the guns, boys," it said. "Dr. Blaine Thorp here. Let me explain to you what's going on."

* * * *

The shitdogs were biological message devices. They were sent by an alien race which the Thorp-creature still called the Big Dogs and which had been spreading throughout the galaxy for millennia. When the shitdogs landed their potential lay dormant -- they were little more than the feeding and excreting machines they had seemed to be. Their initial programming was to set up the shit piles and jewels. If intelligent creatures existed on a world they visited, such creatures would, the Big Dogs believed, be drawn to the jewels. Of course, other sorts of creatures might be attracted as well, and the Big Dogs didn't want to waste time on squirrels and turtles.

So the shitdogs were designed to analyze the local biology and produce the vilest smell imaginable. The assumption was that only intelligence would ignore a horrific stink for nothing more tangible than curiosity. Only intelligence would grasp that ten percent beauty was well worth ninety percent shit. And so only a long series of interactions, cumulatively proving the intelligence of the curious creatures, would trigger the next phase.

Attraction, first by semiotic manipulation, and at the climax by direct stimulation of the limbic system. Those most fascinated by the shitdogs would be the likely candidates for consumption. After they were eaten, the dogs would analyze the genetic makeup of those ingested, modify themselves correspondingly, and incorporate memory RNA from their supper.

So we faced a group of twenty-five Big Dog aliens, their own intellects fully activated, but incorporating the memories and knowledge of the humans they'd gobbled, and thus able to understand human society, to communicate, to function as participants in the human world.

Much to my dismay, the brand-new Big Dogs also got the personalities of those they'd devoured. So the world is being forced to deal with a set of super-intelligent aliens, with knowledge of the universe that dwarfs our own, led by a creature that just happens to have the character of Blaine Thorp.

He's been awfully nice to me, all things considered. And why not? He lost every battle and still won the war. He's the most brilliant chiropractor in the universe and he knows it. Thorp Dog has even asked me to head up the human liaison team. So obviously having his IQ boosted to Epsilon Eridani has taught him something.

I have Wetherall to thank for this, except that I still can't decide what to do with him. Murk Janglish was right, after all. I guess I've sunk my hooks into him.

I'm just not sure whether I should keep him or throw him back.

* * * *

Tonight on _Eye_, critic-at-large Dennis Ngomo takes a first look at architect Nguyen O'Hara's controversial plans for building Convergence World. Are the piles built by the former shitdogs an appropriate site for a water slide theme park? Dennis will put that very question to O'Hara and his lawyer, Murk Janglish, in a few moments.

Later today, _America, America_'s own Penelope Hunt sits down with alien leader Blaine Thorpdog, who reminisces about his boyhood in Iowa and explains the principles of faster-than-light travel.

This week on _ProfitWeek_ our panel of experts considers the future of frozen desserts in general and Jolly Freeze Corp in particular, in the wake of the biggest rollout of an ice cream flavor in history, Luscious Lizberry.

Coming up on _Hemisphere Confidential Report_: we bring you a shocking exclusive on Ramsdel Wetherall's latest sexual fetish. Our I-team of undercover nanobots have caught Wetherall with yet another unidentified beauty, believed to be gropie diva Jillian Jalapeno. Sources close to Ms. Jalapeno have denied that she has accepted the island of Grenada as an engagement present. Stay tuned for extremely unauthorized footage of the reclusive billionaire and his latest mystery woman _jumping on beds_.

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