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opening extract from

White Time

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Margo Lanagan

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White Time



OCCUPATION-TASTING REPORT

Student:	Sheneel Carpenter
Occupation:	General process walk-through
Workplace:	Commonweal White Time Laboratories
Date:	Spring term holiday

'Bugga.' Sheneel crumpled the hard copy, tossed it bin-wards and banged her head a few times on the desk.

'What's up?' said Dalma, taking a break from her victory dance with Keanu.

'It's not fair! You two *always* get what you want. You both

get to go on release-party tasting, and I end up at the bloody White Time Labs!'

'White time? What'd you put that down for, dope?'

'You had to put down a second choice.'

'You just shouldn't've! Keanu's brother said, don't you remember? You don't give 'em any *choice* but what you want!' She danced off again.

'White time'll be *interesting* . . . won't it?' said Liv Morrow. She hadn't even opened her letter. She already knew she'd be tasting her dad's fashionorium, making antique musical instruments, which she did in her spare time anyway, but being paid for it and doing it to fixed hours.

'It'll be boring as hell,' moaned Sheneel. '*They* get to choose dance music and do celebrity bites and put out gazines. We were all going to do it *together* – that was the *whole idea*.'

'Yeah,' said Liv, 'but tasting's supposed to be about the sort of job you want to have after school. I mean, you want to end up some terrible *ageing groover*?'

'Come on, Liv – I'm only in Year Ten!'

'And release parties are pretty seasonal – like, six weeks at the end of every school year. And you have to be right there, like, in *front* of the cutting edge to make any kind of a living.'

'They're pretty *fun*, that's all I know.' Sheneel pretended to weep.

Liv smiled and patted her on the shoulder. 'Never mind. White time could be fun, too.'

'Yeah, right. Fun like menstru*ation* is fun. Fun like tidying your room is fun.'

Liv laughed. Leaning confidentially against her, she said in a soft, super-reasonable Sir-voice, 'Well, both of those things can "be their own reward"—'

'No,' said Sheneel severely. 'Don't start.'

Sir was doing a tour of the classroom. 'And you, Keanu?'

'Release party too, Sir.'

'*Another* release party? They're taking a lot this year, aren't they?'

'Not enough,' said Sheneel.

Joey Fitzardo sniggered. 'Yeah, poor old Sheneel copped the Commonweal Labs. Hoot!'

'Really?' Sir brightened. 'Thinking about a career in time theory, Sheneel?'

'No, *Sir*!'

'Pushing the envelope in ethical hazards, maybe?'

'Oh, don't be cruel, Sir.'

'Never mind, Sheneel. I'm sure you'll find something there to interest you.'

'I think it's going to majorly *suck*, Sir,' said Sheneel, and was gratified at the general laugh she got.

Sir's eyes went bland again. 'Well, I look forward to reading your report.'

Taster's general remarks:

This was a very interesting assignment. I got to see all the interesting things White Time do in the white time reservoirs, met lots of interesting people and learned a lot.

'A what?' said the guy at the terminal.

'An occupation-taster,' said the reception-guy patiently.

'Like I said, a what?' He hadn't stopped typing since the reception-guy had brought Sheneel in.

'All you have to do is take her with you, Lon, and show her what you do, what it entails. Your job.'

'Ah. What we used to call work experience,' the guy brayed, 'back in the old days before the work/leisure dichotomy became politically incorrect.' What was he *talking* about?

'And try not to turn her into an old cynic like you.' The reception-guy winked at Sheneel and abandoned her there.

The place was a mess. Everything was grey – not dirty, but made of grey plastic. Cables and plugs and dead computers and bits of nameless equipment. *Stuff*, piled on the grey tables and in all the grey corners. Nowhere for anyone to sit, except him. Mr Keyboarding. Mr Whistling-to-Himself. Lon.

' 'Ka-ay,' he said finally, eyes still on the screen. 'Looks like we've got one or two for you this morning. For your viewing ennertainment.'

A few random white spots showed on the screen, on a grey ground between two elaborate toolbars. Lon blanked the screen without explaining anything. 'C'mon, then.'

The elevator took them *way* down. There was nothing to show how far, just an intercom in the metal wall.

'I better give you the tourist spiel, I guess,' said Lon.

Not once had he met eyes with her.

'I didn't know tourists were allowed in here.'

'They're not. Curious bureaucrats, I mean; historians; people who've got business here, or think they might have.' He inspected the top four corners of the elevator ceiling. 'OK. What I am, is a field officer. Meaningless name. I used to be called a redirection agent, but someone decided that was too straightforward.'

This guy is *a sour old bucket*, thought Sheneel. *This is going to be fun, I* don't *think.*

'You know what white time is?' He sounded dead bored.

'Sort of . . . We did it in school, a bit . . .'

'Time out of time, people call it, but they're wrong. It's all time, like white light is all colours, or white noise is all pitches of noise coming at you together. White time's all over the place, blobs and puddles of it, some just hanging in space, some buried in planets, like ours here. This one's quite a big reservoir. Took a bit of clearing – I wasn't here, back when they first happened on it. It keeps one field officer – *moi* – occupied full-time; plenty of eggheads clack-ulating behind

the scenes, too. All very interesting, if you like number and time theories. Do you?' He shot Sheneel a look so sharp she flinched.

'Um . . . *number*'s OK, I suppose.'

'Huh. Gal after my own heart. I can't stand time-theorists. Bane of my existence, them and their "spiritual dimension". Bloody god-botherers. Anyway! What I do. I redirect . . . entities, we call 'em. They're actually bodies. Physical beings.' He frowned and fell quiet.

Sheneel thought he might be trying to protect her delicate sensibilities. 'D'you mean corpses?'

He looked startled. 'Bloody hell, no.' He really had quite OK eyes. He'd probably been good-looking once. 'What gave you that idea?'

Sheneel shrugged again. 'You said *bodies* . . .'

'Yeah, as in, *not*-bits-of-white-time, is all I meant. No, they're alive, all right. Just kind of stuck. Between heartbeats, if you know what I mean.'

She didn't. 'How far down are we going?'

'Coupla k's. Don't fret, it'll be a while yet. OK, so what we'll be doing is, we'll suit you up, put some pips in your ears. Then we'll head out and score us an entity or two. I have to warn you, it's gravity-free in there. You got any problems with that? No? Guess it's pretty ordinaire these days for you kids, with your arcades. Used to be hot stuff in my time. Tourists got a bit of a thrill, swimming out into "space" there.'

Sheneel smiled wanly. Dalma was probably talking to Dylan Lazzaro right this minute, giggling and getting him to autograph her cling-shirt.

How is a typical day structured?

Lon Klegg usually spends the morning redirecting entities in white time. He eats lunch in the very well-stocked canteen, talks to colleagues about what he found that morning, and in the afternoon does equipment maintenance.

The elevator's tone changed and Lon stood away from the wall. The cube shuddered and stopped, and the doors opened on another grey room, slightly less piled with equipment.

'Let's see if I can find a suit that fits you.'

The suit he chose had been profusely sweated in by the previous wearer. 'This *stinks*!' said Sheneel, glad she'd worn jeans and the long-sleeved drill shirt.

'Well, you can stink or you can flop around in a size one-oh-two.'

She eyed the monstrous 102 and kept pulling on the smelly suit.

Lon spent a long time finding pips her size and swapping batteries around. 'Finally,' he said. He fitted the left-hand pip into her ear; it was playing quiet, wandering music. He plugged in the right-hand one, and the other half of her head

filled with the sound of Lon's breathing, then his metallicized voice: 'Howzat?'

'Coming through loud and clear.'

He snatched his own right-ear pip out. 'Crikey mama, don't shout, girl. What's your name again? Sharelle?'

'Sheneel.'

'Oh, yeah. Remember that. When you talk to me in there, use my name: Lon. When I talk to you, I'll use yours. And if I get it wrong, tell me, OK? Or you might turn into a Sharelle.'

She laughed politely.

'I mean it.'

He put the suit's soft helmet on her, and strapped a squashy bag onto her back. 'Reserve oxygen,' he said. 'I've never had to use it, so don't get toey.'

'How long are we going to be in there?'

'No time at all, mate. Why?'

'Does it matter that I'm starting to need to go to the toilet?'

He shook his head inside his suit-helmet. 'It won't get any worse while you're in there.'

He led her into the transition chamber, a grey tube in the wall full of tech-head stuff, glass-sealed at both ends. It was a little small for both of them, and he was fiddling with the front of her suit, attaching tubes, growling to himself. She tried to think of some technical-type question to hide her embarrassment.

'So, when you say "redirecting", where are you redirecting the things *to*?'

He looked disconcerted. 'Well. How do I put it? These guys we pick up, they think they want to get to a particular point in time, right? Don't ask me why – it's just a phase everything goes through on its way up the evolutionary ladder, eh. Is time travel still *cool*, or has it gotten passé, too?'

'Well, there's lots of games about it, I guess, lots of movies . . .'

'Anyway, before they work out how to do it properly, they go through the stage of flinging themselves out of their own time and expecting to go to whenever they want, but to stay in exactly the same spot in the meta-universe as they started from. And, well, they do, but the trouble is, their planet or dust cloud or interstitial residence has moved on, see? What with your planets and galaxies orbiting, and your less predictable universal shifts. You following me?'

'So why don't they just die? Like, if they end up in the middle of a comet, or in dead space or something?'

'Well, possibly they do. "Evidence has yet to be found", as they say. But some of them, for some reason, end up in white time, in places like this.' Lon poked a thumb at the other door. 'The current theory is that the time travel process actually *makes* these reservoirs happen.'

Sheneel felt her brain struggling. 'So do they go to, like,

the bit of white time that's closest to their usual place in the . . . the meta-universe?'

'Another good question. You'd have to ask the number-crunchers upstairs that one. They're the ones looking at the "big picture". I only work on the local council. I only risk my life on a daily basis. Just kidding.' And he flashed her a pretend smile.

The chamber door swung outward into darkness. *Stupid question number umpteen*, thought Sheneel. *What made me think white time would be white?*

'Push out as far as you can, first off,' said Lon. 'Don't worry, you won't hit anything. There's nothing to hit.' He shot away.

'I thought we were underground!' she called after him.

His right hand clapped to his head. 'Shout like that once more, Sheneel, and you're up top with the number-crunchers for the day.'

'Sorry.' She pushed off hard into the nothingness. It didn't feel as if she was moving unless she watched the door-circle recede behind her, its light playing on the out-feed coils.

' 'Kay.' There was a clunk in her voice-pip. Lon twirled as he reached the end of his push. The light set into the chest of his suit lit up several – well, 'entities' was the only name Sheneel had for them – suspended like soft drink spilled in an anti-gravity café. They looked as if they'd suddenly lit up

from within, because there was nothing in the darkness between them and Lon's chest to create a beam of light.

'Now, Shanelle, I've got to—'

'Sheneel.'

'Sheneel, I've got to stabilize us. It's up to Rowan in the tap room to move us about, so you'll hear him and me swapping co-ordinates a bit. Say hello to the young lady, Rowan.'

'Hi, Sheneel.' A younger, brighter voice than Lon's was in her head.

'We'll do the biggest first, Ro. She's a monster, mate.'

They floated past two pale, person-sized sacs that pulsed like jellyfish in the darkness. Sheneel looked around for the bigger entity, but there seemed to be nothing more between them and the distant blotched surface of the wall . . . hang on, did white time *have* a wall?

Then she was scrabbling and pedalling on the end of her cable. '*That's* an entity? That bloody great— How big is it?'

'Whoa, whoa,' said Rowan. 'You're not in danger, Sheneel.'

'What *is* it?'

'Mind my ears, girl,' grumbled Lon.

She squashed her voice down. 'Lon! Is it *alive*?' She was still trying to fight Rowan steering her towards the thing.

'Well, as I said, it's not alive and it's not dead, Sheneel. Cool it, girl. It'll be gone in a sec. Hang in there and watch.'

Rowan stopped moving her, and she hung still, panting.

Lon floated on, a shadow against the gradually shrinking circle his chest-light threw. Then he hung still, a small knot of light and shadow applying himself to the entity's surface. There were growths and stains all over it, encrustations bigger than Lon.

'OK, give it to me, Rowan,' he said. 'This bit's just maths, Sheneel. Just punching numbers into a clack-ulator.'

'You've already made that calculator joke today, Sir – Lon, I mean!' It had nearly happened to her. She had nearly forgotten his name. 'Am I supposed to tell you stuff like that?'

'It can only help, girl.'

She waited. Her head was so *busy*, with the two voices blabbing numbers in one ear, and the music wandering in the other. It was annoying. She wanted to unplug everything and just hear for herself what white time sounded like. She was sure it would be a delicious, restful silence. She put her gloved hand to her helmet, and the two surfaces ran slickly off each other. The pips had been tiny, and had gone deep into her ears; she was stuck with the breathing and the blabbing and the tuneless tinkling.

And then the wall – the entity – was not there. It vanished without sound or vibration. Only the after-image of Lon's chest-light on the blotched skin burned out against an entity-free blackness.

'That was it? Lon?'

'Sheneel. That's what we do.'

'What was it?'

'Thing called a Whalan. If you think of the universe as an ocean, that thing is a deep-sea bottom-crawler. A big prawn, that's all. A space-cockroach.'

'You've seen one before?'

'I've heard of 'em. What's your name again?'

'Sheneel. And you're Lon.'

'Let's go back and get those two little fellas.'

The two jellyfish had become very like people, Sheneel thought. But a moment later they were like branching vein-networks, and then they were like branches, and then branches with leaves, and then like branch-less leaves clumped on the air.

'Oh, *these* guys,' said Lon. 'We get quite a few of them through here, Sheneel. They're big history buffs.'

'How come they keep changing?'

'They're similizing. Playing off our brains. Trying to identify themselves to us, showing us a few things we know, things they might be like. It's automatic; it's not like they're communicating with us or anything warm and fuzzy like that. I'll put a sucker on each one, Rowan; my guess is, these two are travelling together.' He attached two tiny suction cups to a leaf of each being, and keyed in numbers on a floating pad cabled to his belt. As he keyed, the two beings became stretched-out

birds, rather ugly, without wings. 'Am I right, Romo?'

'My name's Sheneel.'

'He means me, Sheneel – Rowan.' The birds vanished. 'And yes, Lon, they were together.'

'Geez,' said Sheneel. 'When's this music in my ear going to *do* something? When's a hummable bit going to happen?'

'Never,' said Rowan. 'That's the point – nothing repetitive. Your brain needs it to keep time going inside your suit.'

What is the aspect of the tasting that you enjoyed the least?
The way white time scrambles your brain.

In the suit-room, Lon drew the voice-pip out of her ear by its cord. She felt the weirdest alarm – would he stop breathing if she didn't listen? She had to restrain herself from snatching the pip back.

'Oh,' she said, and pulled out the music-pip herself. 'It's *really* quiet now.'

She followed Lon's example and unzipped her cumbersome suit. It didn't seem to smell so bad now. And it had been well ventilated. Why had the guy before her – the 'tourist' before her – got in such a sweat-bath?

In the elevator Lon sighed enormously and seemed to wake up a little. 'You doing a walk-through, are you? Well, you've seen the best bit. The rest's pretty technical: testing equipment, filling out bloody stats sheets.'

'You do this every morning?'

'Every couple of days.' He watched her politely suppress a grimace. 'Why, what do you think?'

She *tried* to think, and shrugged. 'It's pretty strange . . .'

He was looking at her as if he expected her to say something more. Something clever, maybe. Something *insightful*, to use one of Sir's favourite words. She felt a flash of resentment; she wouldn't've *had* to be insightful on release-party tasting.

She smiled lamely and didn't say anything. And he didn't say anything back. And they rumbled on upwards, and at last came out into the labs, where she could sense other people – suddenly she could hardly wait to see other people.

Lon seemed to feel the same. 'Toilets are down that way, canteen's up the other end. I'll meet you there, eh.'

The canteen was thinly sprinkled with technicians, casually dressed. Something smelled yummy – lasagne. The server moved like a snail, pausing to chat with his colleagues, taking so long Sheneel felt like stomping in behind the bain-marie and serving her-bloody-self. *Finally* she had the food on her tray, and she was all shaky with hunger – she wanted to put her face down and take a big mouthful then and there.

Lon saw her making ready to sit a couple of tables away from his group. 'Here, Sheneel.' Grr. She'd really rather have a rest from him and his weird job, thanks. But she wasn't rude enough for that; over she went and took the seat next to him.

Everyone else had little snack-plates with half a cake or a

bit of salad on them – except Lon, whose meal-plate was scraped so clean of lasagne you'd've thought it just came out of a dishwasher.

Sheneel didn't want to talk, just eat. 'I'm so hungry,' she apologized through her first mouthful.

'Yeah, it does that,' said Lon.

The others were talking incomprehensibly. Lon listened intently, unbuttoning his checked shirt-sleeve. He pulled it up to his elbow and peeled off a patch there, pressed it under a broken foil in a cycle-packet on the table, broke out a fresh patch and took some care choosing a place on his inner forearm to stick it. Sheneel stopped chewing and stared at the circular imprints of previous patches, some livid, some just brownish shadows. Far out. A patch man – a 'person with a physiological dependency', that is.

The shirt-sleeve swooshed down like a closing curtain.

Lon was watching her. 'Go on, ask,' he said softly. Everyone else was still talking.

She pointed to her full mouth, chewed as long as she could, hoping he'd be distracted by something. He wasn't. But she wouldn't ask the obvious question, the one he wanted to answer – she wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

'You take that right out here in the open?' she said, nodding around at the publicness of the canteen, the bright, unsecretive light.

He slid the cycle-pack into his shirt pocket. 'It's allowed,'

he said. 'I'm allowed it. Special dispensation,' he added slowly, as if to a child – a really little kid, not someone nearly finished school, like Sheneel. He tapped the side of his nose stagily. She was filled with equal parts dislike and uncertainty.

Lon stopped mugging. 'It's so I can do the work. Anyone who does this for a while needs to go on patches. You've seen it: white time puts the screws on your brain.'

Then one of the technicians said, 'Anyway, we're not going to solve this today. Who've we got here, Lon? Someone who's been swimming in puddles, by the look of it.'

Sheneel tried to smile politely and take a fairly big mouthful at the same time.

'This is Sheneel. She's on a walk-through. Don't worry, you'll get a chance to drivel in her ear this arvo – don't have to do it now and bore the pants off us.'

'Hi, Sheneel. I'm Fare McCutcheon. I'm in Analysis.'

Sheneel reluctantly put her fork down and shook hands. Fare was partly being polite, partly showing off.

'And this is Rowan, whose dulcet tones you would have heard already.'

A guy who looked way too young to be working here gave her a shy smile. He had a nice face, but his haircut, or lack of, and that greenish knit vest, marked him as a hopeless style-munster. 'Hi, Sharelle-Shanelle-Sheneel,' he said.

'Hi, Romo.'

'OK, OK,' said Lon. 'That's enough, you two.'

'How was it, Sheneel?' said Rowan.

'It was fine. Weird, but fine.'

'Mind-broadening?'

Lon snorted.

'Mind-crumpling, more like,' she said.

'You wait till Fare gets ahold of you,' said Lon. 'This morning'll look like a piece a cake.'

Fare grinned at him, a grin full of in-jokes and layers of meaning. 'Ah, Lon, admit it. We need each other.'

'Well, *you* need *me*.'

Fare looked stung, gathered himself to strike back, then stopped and cast Sheneel a glance. He checked Lon's face and relaxed. 'You. You're just a big tease, Lon Klegg.'

Sheneel looked up at Lon. There was a ghost of something there, maybe, in the creases around his eyes. *Oh, so he* could *smile properly, if he wanted to*.

What aspect of the tasting did you enjoy the most?
The food in the canteen, especially on field mornings!

When Dalma saw Sheneel in the parkway, she flung out her arms. 'I'm niched! I'm well and truly niched!'

'Lucky you,' said Sheneel coldly.

'So how was the lab?' Dalma dropped her mini-pack on the grass and sat down.

'You don't wanna know. You're just being polite. You can't wait to show me where Lazzaro signed your shirt.'

Dalma edged her jacket slowly off her shoulder, growling some strip-club music.

'Oh, bugga,' said Sheneel. 'He did it. You got it.'

'He did it!' Dalma exposed a scramble of tag-letters across her shoulder blade. 'It tickled like anything, but I got it.' The top half of her body did a little dance. 'Where's Joey? He was gunna meet me here— oh, there! Joey! Honestly, we've been having the bestest-best time, 'Neel. Haven't we, Jo?'

'What a place, eh? They work you to the bone! I'm dead!' Joey fell over flat on the grass.

'Oh, it's gunna be one great party, Sheneel. Guess who's going to be the opener!'

Sheneel played the game for a while, guessed and exclaimed and watched Dalma fizz. Keanu joined them too, and a couple of other release-party tasters, and Liv Morrow.

'But you weren't even there, Sheneel,' Liv said suddenly, after a burst of laughter. 'Where were you again?'

'Ooh, she was in white ti-ime,' said Joey. 'Floating around with the universal spookies!'

Liv laughed with the others. 'So how was that?'

Everyone was listening. Sheneel looked around and realized how unusual this was, the group's faces all being turned to her. And she saw quite clearly that Dalma, Joey and Keanu

didn't expect much from her, were just looking to milk whatever she said for laughs.

She tried for world-weariness. 'Thanks a lot, Liv – actually, I was trying to *forget* where I'd been.' Which was true enough. And it worked for getting the eyes off her: Dalma squeaked, 'Well, *we* don't want to *ever* forget where we were today, do we?' and there followed much cheering and high-fiving.

But, 'Why?' said Liv, under cover of all that. 'Was it scary, or just boring?'

Sheneel drew her knees up to her chest. She could smell the sweaty white-time suit in the cloth of her shirt, in the knees of her jeans. She tried for an answer but could only shake her head.

'Or neither?' joked Liv. 'Hey, choose your own description.'

Sheneel kept trying. 'I just don't understand,' she said eventually, 'how people can go back to some jobs, day after day, year after year . . .'

Liv gave her a funny look, smiling but with a raised eyebrow. 'What, you don't understand the jobbishness of jobs?'

'Mmph . . .' No, that wasn't what she meant. If a job drove you to *patches* –

'You don't get why all jobs can't be *fun*?'

Sheneel shot her a look. 'Now you're laughing at me.'

'Yeah,' Liv apologized. 'But I'll tell you – people go back to their jobs day after day because they have to.'

'Have to? Well, there's having to and *having* to, isn't there? I mean—'

'They need the dough and they're doing something they can do. Don't you think?'

But that flying thought was gone. Liv's needling had thrown her off; Sheneel didn't know *what* she'd meant to say. 'I suppose,' she said miserably, just to shut Liv up.

She had a day and a half with the number-crunchers, the brains on sticks. It was deadly dull. They kept *telling* her how interesting it was, but their jobs all seemed to be about feeding numbers into computers and getting different numbers out, and they never could quite tell her the point of it all. They tried, but they'd spent so long in these jobs that they talked in a kind of code, and couldn't seem to remember how to translate back to normal speech. She could feel Fare's intensity when he told her they were doing 'nothing less than building a composite picture of the face of God', but the words were a meaningless combination; the purpose was still a mystery to her.

The third morning she was rotated in with Lon again. He'd had the size 95 suit cleaned. 'Hey, thanks!' she said, surprised. He gave her a sober wink.

It was restful for her brain, just to float about and check out the entities.

'What's the weirdest one of these you've ever found, Lon?' she asked, her own voice metallic in her ear.

His breathing became thoughtful, and went on so long she thought his mind must have drifted off her question.

'Lon?'

'Sheneel. Just thinking.'

'That little guy last summer was pretty weird.' Rowan's tinned voice barged into her brain.

'Ah, yeah,' said Lon. 'Hard to get a fix on. Had to kind of scoop it up in the intake sucker, and then put the other one on him separately. He wasn't weird though, Ro. Just little.'

'He was weird when you went down the trail and looked at where he came from.'

'Yeah, well, I don't get to see all that. The weirdest, actually . . . Sheneel . . . are the ones most people'd think were the boringest. The humanish ones. That look like they could just wake up and walk out of here and start living along with us. But you know they couldn't. You know they'd go nuts, or explode, or die of some scratch or some food. The different-ness of things that seem alike – that's the wonder of the universe. Get us over to that CB-5 next, OK, Rowan?'

'You're on, Lon.'

Lon shone his chest-light on the dolphin-sized, tentacled vertebrate as they approached. This wasn't the first one Sheneel had seen him deal with.

'At school they always say it's the opposite way round . . .' she said, then fell silent, confused by her brain having sprouted such a thought.

'They do?' Lon breathed in her head.

'Yeah, they're always going on about patterns and similarities and the intertext of all things, and how basically you and I are . . . are CB-5s too.'

'Oh yeah, *basically*. Basically we're all gas and water, aren't we? That's *helpful*.' He reached out and touched the belt of her suit as Rowan positioned her at ninety degrees to him beside the CB-5. Her chest-light snapped on and Lon used it in conjunction with his own to choose two points along the creature's spine to place his suction cups. The CB-5 flinched a little as he placed them: 'He'll have a dream,' said Lon. He keyed in his 'clack-ulations', the CB-5 vanished and the cups again floated at the ends of their leads.

Lon looked at her in puzzlement.

'I'm Sheneel,' she said, before he had a chance to ask. She was getting used to the timing of his brain-scrambles. 'Here for work experience. Your name's Lon.'

'Ah, yes. Patterns. Sheneel. There's a reason why you look different from me. There's a reason why the stripes are different on every zebra.'

Rowan chuckled in her head. 'And you sneer when Fare goes on about spiritual dimensions, Lon. I can't believe I'm hearing this.'

'Believe what you like, button-pusher,' Lon muttered.

'I heard that.'

'You were meant to. Get us over to that sea cow.'

'That Third-phase Non-porous Intertemporal Vehicle, you mean?'

'Ah, shaddap.'

'So how's Miss Commonweal?' Dalma looked out from the release-party group picnicking under 'their' tree in the park.

Sheneel laughed and drew a halo in the air above her own head. 'Actually, I'm quite getting to like it.'

'Ew, is she now?'

'*Actually*, I think you're off your rocker.'

'Warning, warning – transformation to nigel-mode beginning.'

The whole group squirmed at its own wit.

'Are you *serious*?' said Dalma disgustedly.

'Well, I have to admit, it's kind of interesting,' Sheneel apologized. 'Seeing all the different aliens and so on.'

'"And so on"!' said Keanu. 'Like, what else is there? Prayer meetings? Proofreading number sheets? Woo-woo!'

'Is Liv around?' Sheneel asked the boy at her feet.

But he was too new. 'Liv? Who's Liv?' She could see he wasn't sure how much scorn to put in his voice.

Joey tossed her an answer: 'Liv got stuck at her dad's, finishing off some stupid crumhorn or something.'

'I might go over there,' said Sheneel.

Joey gave her a blind look – he was really listening to

Dalma, who'd started talking about what so-and-so had said to so-and-so today.

Timing was crucial; Sheneel mustn't hover there; it must look as if she'd always intended just to drop by and walk on.

Halfway to the old-town gateway, no one had called after her. She couldn't even hear their over-excited voices any more – there was only traffic, and birds in the park trees, and the breeze passing her ears, endlessly, arrhythmically changing the air around her.

She was in the elevator with Lon. It was her third morning with him and her last. If she didn't ask him now, she'd have to do it in white time, with Rowan butting in, or in the canteen, when she'd be busy eating.

'There are rumours about people who work with white time,' she said.

'Ah-huh. Wondered when you'd ask.'

'About the travel perks.'

'Yep.' He pulled his eyes down to hers. She waited for something further, but of course he gave her nothing. *That's your answer: yes.*

'You've done it?'

He nodded, his grey eyes drilling into her. She tried to think of a question that wasn't frivolous. 'Where did you go?'

He kept drilling. 'Lots of places. Or times, strictly speaking.'

She wasn't big on history, herself. 'Did you go . . . ahead?'

'Yup.'

The way he was looking at her! Like, daring her to go on throwing these lumpish, gawky, *teen* questions at him. 'How—' Her voice caught. 'Hrm. How far?'

'Oh, a good long way,' he said. His voice seemed to be getting softer. She wished she had a pip in, to hear him properly.

'Like, millions of years?'

'*Like*, thousands,' he said. 'No, not *like*. *Really* thousands. Really two thousand five hundred. Circa.'

In her head she heard Dalma say, *Did you really? This is* ultima *cool! Wow! What was it like? Tell me everything!* She could *see* Dalma, in this elevator, hugging herself, stomping and grimacing with curiosity, asking and asking, *flooding* out questions.

But what do you ask this man, those eyes? He's on patches, *for godsake – what did he* see *in that future?* The elevator rumbled and shivered around them. She could ask anything – that was part of the problem. She couldn't ask a Dalma question, and she didn't know if she *had* any questions of her own.

'Were we there?' finally she said, in almost a whisper, horribly afraid. 'People, I mean? Our kind of?'

He kept it up with the eyes. He swallowed. The elevator changed tone, whined down, stopped.

'Oh, people were there.' He didn't move from the rail, even when the doors opened.

Sheneel looked to the opening and then back at him. His

eyes were – dammit, she was so bad at this! Was he daring her, pitying her, laughing at her? That wasn't a real smile, but the eyes, they had real stuff in them. His head was chock-a-block with it; he was ready, more than ready, to pour it out his mouth the way he was pouring it out his eyes.

'That's all,' she said, in a little, light voice. Despite his eyes, she moved off the wall. ''T's all I wanted to know.' And she walked past him out of the elevator.

Now she was good at attaching the suction cups, using the moisture-patch at her belt and placing them where Lon showed her. And she keyed in everything they told her, figure by figure – with only the vaguest idea of what each figure related to, although Rowan reminded her every time. But that was OK; she *did* it, without losing her cool, and capsules and creatures disappeared as they should. She tasted the occupation. She had hands-on experience.

This last day she did it all. Rowan told her everything, and Lon just floated at her elbow and watched. Twice she chose not-so-great spots for the intake cup. 'You won't get a clear feed there, Sharelle,' said Lon.

'Sheneel, Lon,' said Rowan and she in unison.

'Looks like my job's on the line, Ro,' said Lon, after the third entity had disappeared.

'Looks like it, Lon. She's got the touch.'

Sheneel tried not to feel pleased. They were just bored

and jollying her along; it would be childish to congratulate herself. 'What's next?' she said.

Rowan reeled off sector and subsector co-ordinates, and the entities glowed near and far.

She dispatched a tiny capsule no bigger than her head.

'A DONNY,' said Lon.

'You got it, Lon,' said Rowan.

'What's a DONNY?'

'Whew,' said Rowan, 'what's a DONNY, Lon? You explain to Sheneel while I get you over to that flagellate thing.'

'Dubious Or Not . . . not previously encountered or something. What are the other initials, Ro? Doesn't matter. Means it's new. Analysis will have to put their little thinking caps on. Here we are, Shania. A piece of string. Zap that.'

With some difficulty, she did.

'Won't be needing me around much longer,' said Lon. 'Looks like I can retire now.' Sheneel was getting used to his repeating things, too. She'd done it herself a few times.

Rowan spilled more numbers. Sheneel pointed her face towards where she thought he meant, and was gratified to feel the cable reorient her to face that way – the numbers were starting to mean something. She moved her shoulders to search with her chest-light. Something glimmered at her in response.

Then there was a loud hissing in her voice-pip. Through it, she heard Rowan swear. 'Lon, what the hell?' The pip was dead of Lon's breathing.

Rowan's rushed in to fill the space, loud and fast. 'Sheneel. I'm turning you to Lon. I want you to clamp hold of him with your legs and do whatever I tell you.'

Lon hove into view, spinning. 'What's happened? What's he done?' His cable was coming after him, the unsnapped end of it probing at his revolving middle.

'Grab him. You got him?'

She pincered Lon's knees with her legs. He didn't move. She couldn't see his face.

'The cable hole, Sheneel. Can you get the cable back in? You've got a little time with the reserve oxygen – heck, no you haven't! Why didn't I notice – What can you see through the cable hole?'

'Huh? Are you talking to me? Who are you, anyway? Where are we all?'

'*You* are Sheneel. *I* am Rowan. *Lon* is the man in front of you. *Look* in his cable port. What do you see?'

'Checks. Shirt. What am I doing here?'

'You're doing fine. Sheneel. Push the shirt aside. Output cup. Wet it on the belt-patch, Sheneel. Stick it on him. Stick it on Lon's skin.'

'*Skin*? What—? I'm confused here.'

'*That's* OK, Sheneel. *Out*put cup, Sheneel – *moisten* at the belt. *Lon's* cable port, Sheneel. See the shirt? *Pull* the shirt out, Sheneel. *Expose* some skin as quickly as you can.'

Skin? This isn't skin. Purple-silver, and finely, finely pleated,

like shrinking balloon-skin – Oh, a scar. The cup won't stick to it. I'll have to put it to one side – 'It's on.'

'*Stick* the— it's on? You're right! We've got him. Input this, Sheneel. Carefully.'

She keyed and keyed. 'This is a long calacku-curliculi-cation—'

'Seven, five. Repeat them back to me, Sheneel.'

''S, Sir!' And she keyed and keyed, until Lon snapped away, with a suddenness that made her reel and grope for balance, the suction cups flailing in front of her eyes.

'I'm bringing you in, Sheneel. Remember me? Rowan.'

'Rowan. Rowan? *Rowan!*'

'I'm bringing you in. You see the door, Sheneel?'

'I see the door. Rowan, where is he? What's hap—'

'I'm bringing you in the door. You'll feel better there. It'll be all right.'

Sealed in the transition chamber, Sheneel found the tabs of her helmet by touch and tore it off. There was easily room. Something was miss— *Lon* was missing! She slammed herself against the black door. Her chest-light caught something – but only an entity, one of those streaky patches of vapour. What had happened? Where had she been?

There was movement at the other window, a crowd of green-smocked people. 'Are they doctors?' she said dazedly.

'Yes. You'll have to stay in there, Sheneel, for transition.'

'And is that Lon's feet?'

'Yeah. He needs a bit of work.'

She watched the row of backs, the lowered faces. She thumped on the door and a face looked up. She made an asking face, and the woman put her hands together and looked up to the ceiling.

'She's saying *pray* for him? What happened? Tell me! Rowan? You there?'

'You'll be told. Don't worry. There'll be a counsellor—'

'I don't want a bloody counsellor! I want you, Rowan, to tell me, Sheneel, what I did, what went on, what you made me do!'

'Just . . . you shifted him forward a little, that's all. It's an . . . it's an Approved Emergency Procedure. It's written up on the wall here. I just read it off—'

'Procedure for what? How'd he come unplugged? How come no one *said* that could happen? How come no one told the *school* it was so dangerous? D'you people think you can—'

'No, no. Sheneel. Sheneel. He unplugged *himself*.'

She stopped thumping the chamber walls. She stood waiting for the sense of the words to come through. 'But he was always really fussy about seals . . .' She sat down with a thud.

'I know,' apologized Rowan. 'He just – it just happens sometimes. In the field.'

She watched the doctors. They were nothing but

green-coated backs. Rowan went off-line to manage other parts of the crisis; now only the music played in her head, aimless and tranquil and madly irritating. She snatched the pips out of her ears.

She could only wait until transition was over. This was the last time she'd be in here – she'd better take notes. She stood up and ran her gloved hands around the curved grey ceiling and walls. Really, it was like being inside a front-loading washing machine; she wouldn't be surprised if the thing started to spin. She went to the dark side and made her hands into blinkers against the glass; now she could believe that the chamber did spin, just slowly, that her legs were sliding up over her head, and down the other side, and up again, over . . .

A synthetic bell dinged softly. Transition was over. Sheneel turned and freed the heavy door and stepped out.

The doctors all had their backs to her. Their murmured conversation came to her as if through a pip:

Is there a wife I should call?

A wife? Lon's not married!

He's not?

Hell, no. Don't you remember his last little excursion?

Jamal wasn't here then. But they've got a few like Lon down in your southern reservoirs, haven't they, Jamal? Time bunnies?

Don't tell me – he went forward? How far?

Forty-five hundred-odd. That was the limit, then.

Aargh, that's nasty stuff. That's the Sect Wars. We lost a woman there; she came back, she was just tatters.

Lon wasn't much better. Caught in some crossfire. Put him right off marrying, he said.

How come?

Women want children, he says, and then children *want children, and before you know it they're there in the fifth millennium, signing up for whatever battle did* him *over.*

There were indulgent chuckles all round.

Any next of kin, then?

Jamal, it's not that bad. She got to him good and quick, that girl—

And they turned and saw her, and started to speak too loudly, instead of slightly too softly.

'Just stretcher him up to Sick Bay.'

'I've already called them.'

The praying woman stopped rolling up fine cable and gave Sheneel a thumbs up. 'Don't worry, love. Strong as an ox, is our Lon.'

One of them still knelt beside Lon, holding his forearm. 'Don't worry, mate,' she was saying. 'We all make mistakes. We've got you back, and that's the main thing.'

'Yeah, for *you*,' came the croaky answer.

Lon's suit was cut open neck to belt, chopped electronics trailing and biologicals leaking to the floor. They'd slashed open his checked shirt; it lay sodden either side of him. His

chest was smudged with the pale-green sterile grease of some doctor-procedure, and moved without any rhythm that Sheneel could see.

She looked closer. One side of Lon's abdomen was chewed into detailed purple-and-silver knots. His chest was starred in several places with puncture marks the size of dollar coins, healed over shiny.

'Where's Sharelle?' he said.

'Sharelle?' said the doctor.

'He means Sheneel. That's me.' Sheneel squatted opposite the doctor, and put her face above Lon's.

'He's just had a heck of a jolt,' said the doctor. 'Don't take anything he says too seriously.'

'Ah, you,' said Lon. 'Yes.'

Now, on top of everything else in his eyes, Lon had illness – body-illness, not mind. It didn't stop the eyes doing that thing they did, though – asking, speaking, meaning stuff. Expecting her to *see*, to *know* – and she didn't. She waited for him to tell her.

'I'm torn three ways,' he said, then faltered.

'What do you mean?' said Sheneel.

'Between saying sorry and saying thank you . . . and saying bugga you.'

God, he was so pale, so grey, so *old*. So different from the Lon that had sealed her into her suit this morning. So . . . storm-tossed, and small.

A tear went *tick!* on the wrist of her suit. Her head jolted up in surprise. 'You don't have to do any of those things,' she said. 'I just happened along. I just did what I was told, whether it was a favour to you or not.' Babble, babble.

He put his hand on her knee and her wet sleeve, so close to her face he could have just lifted a finger and touched a tear. 'Don't get into this game, Sheneel.'

Breathe. Sniff. ''Kay. Like I would've anyway.'

'Promise me – make it a promise.'

'OK, I promise.'

'Because someone'll suggest it for sure, you've done so well. And your mind might change. Promise me *good*.'

Green-clad doctors were moving in on her peripheral vision, with a gurney.

'I promise you good.' It sounded like a joke, somehow – as if she were rudely imitating him – and she gave a little, uncomfortable laugh.

He didn't wink, or pat her knee and look away. He didn't crack any brave jokes, or say a neat goodbye. His eyes were warning beacons flashing darkness instead of light, and his hand was a stone hand.

Then they were lifting him, and he had to close his eyes with the pain. She stood back and watched him go, her heart thumping. For a second there she'd been a colleague, she'd been a fellow, and she wasn't ready to be the fellow of someone like that. She was too whole and healthy; she was

too *young* – couldn't he see that? She didn't know anything!

They wheeled Lon into the elevator, and the shining doors rumbled closed. Sheneel stood in her white time suit among the milling doctors, blinking back tears, all trembly with shock.

What was the highlight of your occupation-tasting experience?

Sheneel,

I was looking forward to a report that was not *about the release party, so I'm a little disappointed that there's such a lot of white space in this account of what must have been an absorbing and varied occupation-tasting experience. Your impressions of visiting white time would, I'm sure, have been valid and interesting, and I would have appreciated some insight into the scope and nature of the work undertaken at the Commonweal's lab – not to mention your feeling for the purpose and value of this aspect of the Commonweal's work.*

I hope your summer session on the programme yields fuller results.

– Sir