

mARk FeLL



VICTORIA

Victor

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“Ahh, *shit!* Worthless piece of kipple!” I kicked the flitter’s side angrily as its coils rattled and clanked, the last of the superconductive coolant leaching into the scut of half-ash, half-sandy grit that passed for earth in the Western Zone. Kicked it again and again and again until my leg was sore. “Shit shit shit shit *shit!*”

Looking back along the fitful rut it had gouged into the clay in the last few moments of my flight, I considered, ironically, that perhaps I was a bit lucky — a high range of basalt peaks stood not too far before me, where the flitter could have landed (actually impacted head-on at flight velocity), while a little farther back was a dense patch of cactus and scrub, some of which would have hurt to climb through and the rest surely begun to burn, had I landed there too.

That did not change the fact my ship was grounded, I was pretty much precisely in the geographical center of Buttfuck, Egypt, and I had no way to leave.

I slumped disconsolately in the shade of the cracked chassis, listening to the final powering-down of the EM inductors, feeling the hairs on my arms stand as the energy drained into electrostatic discharge, then looked up at the utterly cloudless sky, a sky that until ninety seconds ago I had been coasting through in the flitter’s cabin before every system had crashed and it had dropped on emergency thrusters, a victim of one of the new Asian Bloc viri they kept sending out into the grid. It was too hard to stay on top of them; they had something like two hundred fifty million crackers working on it all the time, dedicated to finding and exploiting new security holes every second, every day, never giving up. Many died as counterpulses and black ice took them out. More took

their place. Plucky bastards. You just had to sort of hope, and gamble. And I'd lost the draw this time.

I was at least five hundred kilometers away from any decent human population, had almost no water, was grounded in a zone where the daytime high easily topped over fifty degrees, and, with the passing of the flitter's power systems, no way to contact anyone. They knew where I was going but didn't know where I was, and without comm it could take over a week to actually locate me.

I was beginning to feel seriously sodomized.



I looked up, startled, into a human face.

In the heat I'd dozed, or become vague, or simply had lost awareness, and realized as I woke again that I'd been spotted in my fall by scavengers. They had a ragged train of pack animals — mules, I think — and one of them was looking down on me. He stepped back in surprise. "You're not dead," he said in WBloc, something like English, Spanish and Portuguese combined. I knew the language but spoke it with an accent. It pegged me immediately as an outlander.

I shook my head. "Just hit," I answered. "Water?"

He looked at me distrustfully, then gestured. A boy scuttled up, bearing a skin lovely and bulbous in its fulness. I slurped at it greedily, feeling its blood-hot warmth course over my lips and tongue, into my parched throat. "Thank you," I said.

"What are you doing here?" He was still aloof.

"I didn't mean to be. I was on my way to PacRim and I got hit by a virus." I gestured at the hulk of my ship, then scuffed one flat palm against the other, simulating

the collision. “Bam.” I spread my hands helplessly.

Stared at a few moments more, I went on. “Look, whatever you take from the flitter, whatever you want, you can have it. I just need to get to a city, get back to where I need to go.”

He eyed me tersely and I recognized the absurdity of my offer. Of course he owned the flitter. He could easily kill me any time and just have everything. My offer was hollow. *Oh shit.*

“Papa,” the boy said — the one who had watered me. He tugged at the man’s arm. They went off together and conferred, the boy gesturing, the man arguing — and then he came back.

“Wiktur thinks you can teach him computers,” the man said. “Can you?”

It was once my job. “I can,” I said certainly, realizing that for the next little while at least I wasn’t going to die.



What I do is create datadimensional forms. Used to be called computer programming, but since implants and cybergoggles it’s lost its original, algebraic or logical structure. To do my thing I typically wire into a console, get my mind onto its blocks, and start building.

But to do that I need an infrastructure. A console, a link to the dev tools of the grid, connection.

What I saw before me in the little ragged settlement was nothing like any of that. It was a true antique. So old it even had an *ethernet jack*. I was supposed to work on that?

I was.

Ah hell. I tried to dredge my C++, thinking I'd be doing a lot of hand coding. I wondered if a modern holograph publisher, suddenly confronted with a Gutenberg press, might have felt similar.

I was surrounded by pretty much everyone in the little caravan party, all waiting expectantly and skeptically to see what I'd do next. I lifted the lid — it was a white rectangular portable, the casing scuffed but in fairly good shape — and read the machine name. *iBook*. The logo showed it to be a really ancient Apple unit. With luck that would mean at least it was a UNIX system. A small power lead ran to a solar accumulator outside, so I assumed it was getting juice at least. Whatever battery it might have had was long since gone.

After a few moments studying it I hit the power button and there was a melodic tone that emerged from the system's speakers. God, this thing actually did a POST instead of a simple vector checksum — well, that was to be expected. Holographic storage was still largely a dream when this box was brand new.

The boot process seemed to be taking a long time, just a grey field with a slate apple cutout in the middle. I wondered if the machine had died, but then a little circle cursor appeared on the screen, showing some kind of activity. Regular tickings and whirs from inside the unit told me it was reading its hard drive. *Reading its hard drive*. What was next, gerbil power?

After the circular cursor the wait was even longer. Finally, though, I was presented with a loading screen that ran through the processes starting up — and then nothing. For far too long, this time. System hang. Something was wrong somewhere and I had no way of knowing what or where. I might as well have been asked to repair an internal combustion engine.

I sat back. “I don’t suppose you have any system disks, do you?” Blank stares, some hostile, answered me. I shrugged. “Without that I’m not sure I can get this thing to do anything at all except what it just did.”

“Then,” the clan leader said, “you are of no use to us.” At his gesture two very large men, scarred and mean-looking, made as if to grab me.

“Wait,” I said, cold sweat all over me. “I said ‘I’m not sure’ — I can try.”

“Try then. You have until the power runs out.”

He meant sunset, of course. By my best guess, about an hour.



Okay, I thought to myself. *Think*. This thing used a keyboard and some kind of pressure-based pointing input device; that much I knew just by looking at it. There were special keys, keys with no regular alpha or numeric purpose, so I began pressing them in different combinations to see what would happen, since those were often set aside for emergency purposes on these old machines. Gratefully I noticed the crowd around me thinning — but two remained behind, guarding the exit. No escape.

And anyway, where would I escape to?

Wiktur was also there, looking over my shoulder. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“Trying to see if I can get this thing to restart.” Sometimes these systems had built-in recovery and diagnostic tools that could repair disk or system damage on boot, but you generally don’t want to just cut the power and start all over or the damage could get worse.

“I can make it do that,” Wiktur said. “You push these.” And he pointed to a key

labeled *ctrl*, a key with a weird black loopy thing on it that looked sort of like a hash mark with its ends connected, and the system's main power button.

I glanced over at him. "You sure?" He nodded certainly. "All right, what the hell." And I pressed the key and button combination, then let them all go at once.

The screen went blank, and then I heard the POST chime again. He was right.

I looked him over appraisingly. Young, maybe ten, really scrawny, with large luminous eyes and tangled hair of indeterminate hue. Bright, attentive. "Not bad, Wiktur."

"Victor," he answered. "They can't pronounce it right but the name's Victor."

"Okay, Victor. Sorry."

"It's all right."

We waited as the system ran through its boot load again, only to hang as it had before. "Shit, the damage is too extensive for the OS to really get going. But there's got to be another way in." Victor stared at me as I thought aloud. "This thing must have had one of the transitional UNIX kernels, still with command line when the GUI crapped out. So there's got to be a way to bypass the GUI and get a prompt..."

"What's a gooey?"

"Graphical user interface. Gee You Eye. Everything has 'em now. It's how you do ... well, anything." Victor nodded thoughtfully. I barely remembered the 2D GUIs. He would have lived all his computing life in three dimensions, not even aware there was an interface between him and the machines he used. "But before GUIs were built into the hardware like they are now, they had to load from storage into active memory. Make themselves available. And for that to happen a lower level OS — operating system — had to get the process going. That would have been a keyboard driven OS, something that was just words on the screen and a place for you to type things in. A command prompt."

“I know what that is!” Victor said excitedly. “I’ve seen it!”

“Where, on this hulk?”

“Yeah! When you start it up, push those.” He pointed to the loopy pound sign and the s.

Well, he had been right before. I rebooted again, holding the keys, and lo and behold was presented with a command prompt. He’d been playing with the machine for a while, I realized. And was clever.

Okay. Now what? I leaned back and thought. “What’s wrong?”

I glanced over to Victor. “Well, there are utility programs I can run to try to get this thing to work, but I don’t really remember what they’re called.”

“How can you find out?”

“The programs should be stored in the system. I need to get a list of them. Umm, let’s see.” I typed *dir* and hit return. *Command not found. Display. Same. List. Same. Show. Same. Catalog. Same. Cat. Aha!*

No. Just a blank line. Cat — that was an old input command. Some of my history was coming back. Concatenate. Okay, I didn’t want to concatenate anything; I just wanted a list. I tried a few key combinations to cancel the cat input command, finally discovering *ctrl* and *c* did it.

I wanted a list of files. List. Why was that so familiar? Think. Sun’s heading for the mountains now. List. UNIX. UNIX systems were terse, minimal feedback platforms because they began in the day when it could take minutes for even a short piece of plain text to be transmitted, my grandfather remembered those days, so they had very brief commands, truncated like cat or —

“Abbreviated!” I said aloud. Victor watched puzzledly as I tried *lst*. *Command not found. ls.*

And the screen flooded with text. That was it. `ls` was how to find out what files were where. But this system had a tree structure — and the directory I was in did not happen to contain programs. I needed to get to the root directory and start probing from there.

On a hunch, playing a wild game, I tried *help ls*. Help: Command not found. Then I remembered RTFM from my school years: Read the fucking manual. Manual. Shrugging, I did *man ls*, and was gratified to see the console read *Formatting page, please wait*. Then the screen filled with text again, this time a manual page on the `ls` command. I was starting to get the hang of this, and began reading.



After taking careful notes and finally figuring out *q* quit the man page, I was ready to probe more. I entered `ls -al` and got a wide-format screen displaying the full contents of the current directory, including a `../` reference, and that's when I remembered how UNIX delimited directories. To get to the top level of the tree I had to find `/`, but I wasn't sure how I could get there. I sighed. I wanted to move from one directory to another. Change directories. Okay. I typed `cd /` and the machine just sat there. Was no news good news?

Feeling very nervous — the sun's disc was just beginning to touch the distant mountains' peaks — I did `ls -al` again. Success! I was at the root level of the drive and faced with some abbreviated directory names. Hmm.

Programs, in that day, were very different from what they are now. Rather than being dynamic, fluid, self-modifying structures that interact with user, data and hardware all at once, they had been cordoned into separate status. What were they

called? They had to be made in machine code, which was basically binary, and —

“Aha,” I murmured, typing in `cd bin`, followed by `ls`. I had moved into the binary program directory, but nothing there seemed right. It all looked like user level stuff, text editors and such. `Cat` was in there. Nothing to help with disk repair.

I went back up to `/` again and looked more closely at the directory listing. One I noted was `sbin`, which could just be *system* binaries — including perhaps diagnostic tools. I quickly moved into it and my `ls` showed I was in the right place — but which program to use?

```
SystemStarter  fsck_msdos  mount_cd9660  mount_webdav  restore
autodiskmount  halt        mount_cddafs  newfs          route
badsect        ifconfig   mount_devfs   newfs_hfs     routed
clri           init       mount_fdesc   newfs_msdos   rrestore
dmesg          ipfw       mount_ftp     nfsd           rtsol
dump           kextload   mount_hfs     nfsiod        service
dumpfs         kextunload mount_msdos   nologin       shutdown
dynamic_pager  mach_init  mount_nfs     ping          slattach
fastboot       md5        mount_smbfs   ping6         tunefs
fasthalt       mknod     mount_synthfs quotacheck    umount
fsck           mount     mount_udf     rdump
fsck_hfs       mount_afp  mount_volfs   reboot
```

Some, I knew, wouldn't help much. Many were incomprehensible to me. A few I could guess at, such as `reboot`, `shutdown` and so on. `Restore` looked promising, and I almost entered it before I realized: `Restore` from what? Damn. Where was the “repair system” command?

I closed my eyes and rubbed my temples lightly, willing myself back in time twenty years, to another place, where I had been raised in Toronto. At my grandfather's house there. Sitting by him, almost as Victor was now, looking on as he hacked around

on his ancient Linux installation, a machine he was proud of — he'd been running the same basic system since ten years before I was born, he told me. I was eight. "Sometimes when it goes down I have to *something* it to get it going again. But mostly it works just like the day I installed it." Something. What was that something?

Okay, think a little more. It was a nice day, and we were going to go to the lake later. There were birds. Waft of honeysuckle? The clock on his bookshelves ticked mellowly. Rich scent of furniture polish and leather. House still filled with aromas from breakfast, the smell of my grandmother's biscuits and sausage gravy, homemade biscuits, not from a tin. My belly taut with them; they tasted so good. Creak in his chair as he talked. Mothball scent in the sheets they'd put on the daybed where I slept when I stayed there. Eighteen years that machine had been running — an impossible length of time to my mind then. Clack of fingers on the keyboard. Popcorn at night watching old movies like *War of the Worlds* and *ET*. A quiet prod to the memory I wanted. Hearing it. His voice graveled with age and cigarettes. "Sometimes when it goes down I have to effsick it to get it going again." *Effsick*. Effsick? That's not a word. I remembered, now, thinking it then.

I looked the list over again, then typed *man fsck*. A few moments after I typed *fsck -y*. Then I waited. The system ground away.



Twelve minutes later there was just enough daylight left to show the working GUI, trackpad pointer and icons, and I sighed gratefully as Victor beamed. We'd won this round.

I shut the machine down, wondering at its engineering — that it could still work

at all after so long, let alone self-repair, was really amazing — and was grudgingly invited to take supper with the rest of the small community. It looked like I was in, for now at least.

Victor kept close to me as we ate.

The community leader, Juan Sangre de Cristo, was a man hardened by years of desert life and deprivation; he had learned early and hard the lessons of living here and gave as much quarter as the desert itself. “As long as you work, you live,” he told me. “Maybe you’ll get back to your *people* someday, maybe not.” He spat the word like it was filth on his tongue. “But if you stay with us you work, or we drink your blood.”

I wasn’t sure if he meant that but I was in no position to question.

My work, he told me, was to teach “Wiktur” how to crack. They had it in mind to inject viruses into some of the freight blimps that coasted lazily overhead from time to time, the idea being they’d knock them down by overriding their computers, then loot them after they’d crashed. Simple machines really, their guidance systems were well protected and not readily crackable at all, to prevent exactly this kind of attack — but I wasn’t about to tell anyone that. But there were even more immediate concerns.

“You know there’s no way to get into the blimp systems without an antenna,” I mentioned. “You have to have a port to the grid to make it happen.”

Juan — El Jefe — simply shook his head. “You don’t need to worry about that. When the time is right it’ll be there. You just teach the boy. Yes?”

I nodded. “Sure, I’ll teach him everything I can.”

Victor leaned close to me as El Jefe nodded back. “You better. Or you both —” and he drew his flattened hand across his throat. Victor’s fingers tightened on my arm. I caught a ripe scent from him; he had not washed in quite some time. I looked into his face and noticed for the first time the heavy dark circles under his eyes; he was

exhausted, it seemed. And not in good health at all. Too small, too skinny. Tired. A little sore was growing at one corner of his lips.

I thought a little more as I chewed a mesquite bean taco. Victor eyed it hungrily and I offered it to him; he wolfed it. Later I'd learn of the rationing of food, that I had given him something of my own share, something more than he normally would have had for himself, being a minor component of the community, and what that meant. That night I knew only our fates were bound, and I wondered what kind of insane politics I'd landed in. Wasn't Victor Juan's son? How could he tolerate his boy's obvious misery?

I tented with Victor that night, next to the computer I'd resurrected. As he sank into sleep I noted the entrance to our little bivouac remained guarded. I had to get out; I knew that. But how?

Looking at the profile of the sleeping boy next to me, I realized that if I went, he'd have to go too, or he might end up dead. And that, I knew, was how El Jefe had me. He had joined me deliberately with Victor, making it impossible for me to think selfishly.

Clever fucking son of a bitch. I marveled at his strategic insight. So it was a chess game, then.

I dozed a while and woke when the boy stirred, his arm suddenly wrapping my chest. He was still asleep, and instinctively I put my own arm around him, not really awake myself, and then drifted off again as he snuggled against me, making little soft noises in his throat, my last conscious thought that night that his body's scent, pungent as it was, wasn't entirely unpleasant.



Morning began with our regime. We were awake with the sun's light and had a brief breakfast — more mesquite tacos — but our share was a little more generous than it had been the night before. Apparently there was more consideration for our position now.

I spent the morning inspecting the computer with Victor. The last user of it had not erected any security. The old personal-use systems behaved that way; they believed by default that if you powered them up, you owned them and had every right and privilege to do whatever you wanted with them. I breathed a silent sigh of thanks to that user's naiveté — if he'd been more paranoid I would have been locked out, and effectively dead.

There was a *Developer* directory that contained, incredibly, a complete suite of C++ and first-generation Java programming tools. The help and man files were still intact and there was enough of a breadcrumb trail to show the Mac's last owner had experimented some with them, but had not really done anything especially intricate. I sympathized. Those old tools were a bitch to work with.

Well, it was a start, and when we broke for lunch I already had an idea how I'd lead Victor into the works of the machine.

I started him with the basic hello world. He picked that up quickly, and I moved from there to file I/O operations, showing him how to read data from and write it to the system's internal storage. The progress was slow at first but he caught on quickly, grasping the idea of code libraries and references with surprising speed.

We ate our supper in the group and, after retiring to our tent for the night, Victor presented himself to me.

At first I didn't even recognize what he was doing. He stripped off his shorts — as

far as I could tell, the only article of clothing he owned — and knelt before me, down on his knees and elbows, butt high in the air. “You can, if you want,” he said.

“I can what?”

“You know.” He waggled his hips.

Oh. *Oh*. “Uh, Victor ... I don’t think so.”

He looked around at me, surprised.

“Thanks, but ... Umm, I’m not trying to insult you. It’s just this is pretty ... unexpected.”

“You don’t want me?” His voice was soft, a little broken.

“Victor, it’s not that. I like you. But I don’t want to ... use you.”

“You won’t be. It’s a trade.” I began to understand. This was an offer to repay me.

“Where you live maybe that makes sense. But where I live people teach kids because they want to, because they can, not because they want ... that.”

“We live together. I’m yours now.”

“Victor.” I pressed my palm to the small of his back, and finally he lay down flat. I pulled his shorts back over him, or at least parts of him. “That’s not why I’m doing this. We’re in this together and I’m here to work with you. Your learning what we need to know is more than enough, um, payment.”

“You think I’m ugly.” He hid his face in his arms and his shoulders shook. He was actually crying. Crying because I refused to ...

“No. No, you’re handsome. That’s not it.” I eased my hand along the curve of his spine, his bare skin warm and trembling slightly. “This is not something you have to do with me. All you have to do is learn. All I have to do is teach. That’s all we have to do for our partnership to work.”

“Partnership?” He looked back my way again, sniffing a little.

“Yes — you and me, together. We’re in this together. As long as we work well together, we’ll be okay. That’s all. Really. Partners.”

He rolled to one side, wiping his eyes and facing me propped on his elbow as my hand caught at his waist. “But you fed me.”

“So?”

“So when you feed someone it means you’re together.” His hand slid along my arm, a light touch.

“I don’t understand.”

“I don’t eat much because I don’t do much. I can’t do much. I’m too small and I’m weak. All I can do is carry water and think. And since I don’t do much I don’t get much food. But you fed me, and they gave you more food today, so you could give it to me. That means we’re together. Jefe sees we’re together and we get more because of it. All I did before you came was this —” here he mimed giving oral sex to a man, taking my hand and putting my finger into his mouth and moving it in and out a few times — “since they bought me.”

“Who bought you?”

He gestured. “Them.”

“The group? Everyone?”

“No ... the men who bought me.”

“I thought you were El Jefe’s son — you called him ‘Papa’.”

“All of us call him that.”

I touched his hand with mine, my finger still damp with his saliva. “You were bought as a slave?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

He thought a moment, toying idly with my forefinger. “Two years ago.” He was completely matter of fact.

I caught my breath at what he was saying. “You were bought two years ago and they’ve been using you for sex?”

“Yes.” He seemed suddenly timid. Maybe it was a look in my eyes.

“And they’ve been doing it since then?”

“Yes...” Even more shy.

“By everyone?”

“No. Just the ones who bought me.”

“And El Jefe lets it happen?”

“Yes — he’s a good man. He takes care of us.” His tone was a little defensive. He could read my expression and knew I didn’t approve of what he was telling me.

“Has he ... used you?”

“No.”

“But he lets it happen.”

“Yes.”

“Well,” I said finally, “that’s not going to happen tonight. Go to sleep.” He looked at me, a little mistrustful, perhaps hopeful too, and I was not sure how to read either expression. “I mean it.” I squirmed up even with him, then lay down. Victor rolled against me immediately and as I held him I felt such anger.



After breakfast El Jefe had a conference with me; I left Victor to work on accessing networking sockets using the loopback to simulate connections. I was teaching

him the basics still and would get into more abstract concepts — such as databases — in a couple of days assuming his progress remained as good as it had been so far. Over the previous day my flitter had been completely cannibalized and all traces of the crash site were hidden. An aerial search would not disclose my location. I was going to be here a while, it seemed.

El Jefe bade me be seated in the shade of a makeshift porch in front of his tent, something constructed roughly of wooden poles and covered with tatters of rag strung together, too hopeless to serve as clothing or tent material. He got right down to business. “Is the boy learning?”

“Yes — he’s doing quite well. Actually he’s very bright. Picks things up fast.” I couldn’t keep the distaste out of my tone or my expression.

He misread my intent. “If you don’t like teaching him you can always leave.” It was an easy offer for him to make; we both knew I’d die in the open scrub.

“I like teaching him. It’s better than what he’s been used for.”

El Jefe’s expression changed from angered confusion to something a little like angry defensiveness. “What you do with him is none of my concern.”

“I suppose you felt the same way about the others, then.”

“What did Wiktur tell you?”

“He told me he had been bought two years ago by some men here, and that they’ve been using him since. For ... pleasure.”

El Jefe nodded thoughtfully. “And this angers you? Disgusts you?”

“It does. Children shouldn’t be slaves, and they sure as hell shouldn’t be sex slaves.”

El Jefe stared at me silently for a very long time. I couldn’t read his face. Finally he said, “Do you know anything about us?”

“I ... No.”

His voice lowered confidentially. “It’s nearly impossible for me to keep us going. There is a constant state of anarchy among all of us. There’s a lot of hunger and there is a lot of sorrow. I can’t push my people too hard or they’ll leave or revolt or both.

“Wiktur was bought two years ago; that is true. He has been used for sex by the men who bought him; that is also true. And right now those men are planning to kill you.”

I gulped. “Why?”

He leaned forward. “Because until you came along they could have him however and whenever they wanted him. Now they see that can’t happen any more. They see you as a thief.

“I’ve got men looking after you. You don’t need to worry. But later on I’ll show you three you really need to watch out for. Don’t let them get you alone — any one of them — or you’ll probably die.”

“I’m not having sex with him.”

“That doesn’t matter to them and, to tell the truth, it doesn’t matter to me either. To them property has been stolen. I let it happen that way because it is possible Wiktur could be taught computers — I’ve seen him work with that little white one before, and he is bright, just as you said — and that learning would be of much more use to us than his ass is to those men.”

“Why did you let them buy him?”

He leaned back once more with a sigh. “Life here is much harder than you think, or than you realize,” he advised. “You haven’t seen how hard it can be.”

I looked around me, at the extreme poverty and privation, thought of the meager food and drinkable water. El Jefe had a point, and I nodded. “I guess you’re right about

that.”

“Wiktur was bought from a group of slavers that purchase unwanted children from others. He was one of the oldest and, had he not been bought when he was, would soon have been allowed to die or been killed for his meat.” He let that sink in. “Alive and fucked is better than dead and eaten, isn’t it?”

I felt ill suddenly. To think of that was hard, very hard. Victor was a sweet kid. Shy and studious. He didn’t smile much but he didn’t have much reason to. And he definitely needed a good cleaning. But I liked him. I thought of images I’d seen in occasional newsfeeds, images of humans in desperate straits, of butchered small carcasses hanging by the ankles from frames, skinned and shocking in a nudity much more explicit than simply being naked could ever have been. I realized he could have been one of those bodies. That maybe he knew other children who had died that way.

“We don’t do that here. We give what we can to everyone, but everyone has to do something, his fair share. Buying Wiktur saved his life. I knew why they were buying him, but what could I do? That was the deal. With the purchase he became theirs but he also came under my protection.

“I know to your eyes it does not seem like protection. I ask again: What could I do? What would you have done?”

I thought. “Maybe you could have bought him yourself.”

“I have sons and daughters. Keeping them fed is all I can manage. Those men had none. They added some of their food and water together to give to him, kept him alive, and looked after him in their own ways.”

I sighed. “You’re right — I don’t understand any of this.” I rubbed my eyes. I was still angry but there didn’t seem to be anyone to be angry at. Just life.

“I understand you might not approve. You don’t have to. It doesn’t matter to me.

What happened was what happened, and the way things are is the way things are. Our group is growing, and the land won't sustain us much longer. But even so we try to help anyone we find.

“Am I glad Wiktur is with you now? Yes. Even though it makes it harder to keep order here, even though I have to protect your life now, even though if you had not crashed near us none of this would have been a problem.

“And not just because you're useful to me. They didn't treat Wiktur too roughly, but perhaps part of me feels as you do as well. I think if things were different here, if living wasn't so hard and dying so easy, maybe I could feel as you do.

“But we are not in your cities, we do not have your wealth — most don't even notice or care about us. We live and die anonymously. Before you crashed you probably didn't think about us either.”

I nodded agreement. “That's true.”

El Jefe stood, indicating the audience was ending. “You have spoken with me honestly and I respect that. I'd like you to think about what we talked about, and I'd like you to look around, and I'd like you to consider giving me some respect as well.”

I stood too, silent, staring off toward the horizon, shimmering already in the morning heat.

“Tomorrow is a bathing day. Wiktur has not had a bath since he came to live with us. That takes water, and if you want to share your allocation with him you may.”

“The others never bathed him?”

El Jefe shrugged. “They didn't want to share.”

I began to understand why Victor was so clearly undernourished. He'd been given the barest minimums necessary to keep him alive. Whether from selfishness or simple inability to offer more, his purchasers had not sustained him well.

Walking back to our tent I also realized why Victor had offered himself as he had. It was simply all he knew, the only way he had to repay me for a debt he felt he owed me. He didn't understand any other way of life. And I finally realized why El Jefe wanted to capture blimps. It wasn't piracy or social dissent — I had assumed naively his motives were sophomoric — rather, he wanted — needed, actually — the supplies in them to keep his people from starvation.

This complicated things hugely. As Victor continued working at the computer through the morning I tutored him distractedly, realizing that simple escape, which was my original plan, wouldn't do. They needed a cracker; the blimps were insured and the occasional downed one wouldn't impact too heavily on the global economy, but would mean feast instead of famine here. They were — El Jefe was — placing a lot of trust in the future on my and Victor's shoulders.

And that little computer could not even begin to do what he needed it to.

I heard around me the sounds of life barely keeping on the edge of living, infants crying, small children complaining of hunger, and knew that their mothers were giving them a little more food, food they needed themselves, because they could not see their children suffer. And I think I understood El Jefe's reasoning a little too in letting Victor be bought and used as he had. Leader, yes, tough, certainly; but also human and, in his own way, compassionate.