

Galactic Geographic

Stephan Michael Loy



MID-WORLD ARTS
Indianapolis, Indiana

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The maglift accelerated to Mach .5 within three seconds, but Charlese Tilbrenner felt only mild pressure in the balls of her feet thanks to the humming inertial dampers. She imagined what would happen if that hum cut out in mid-ride. Since the maglift cruised after the first few seconds, she'd have plenty of time to panic before the brakes kicked in. After that, they'd be scrubbing her stain off the overhead for hours.

But the hum hardly ever failed. Huh! Hardly ever. The two most sinister words spoken by engineers.

She stared into the transparent steel wall of the lift, beyond which the skyscrapers sank beneath her. The Sears Tower fell away at her left, tiny as a Lincoln Log house. She thought she could see the Hancock Building, but it was too far away, too short and buried in the shadows of more majestic buildings. In seconds, even those towers were gone. They became glitter in the blanketing dusk and she could pick out little beyond her own reflection in the wall.

Objectively, Charlese took stock. She noted the tall frame, the erect posture and the blonde hair just growing out of its customary buzz. The hair capped the lay of her dark silk suit, the jacket, blouse and skirt so smooth she had a niggling feeling they'd slide right off and leave her naked. Well, not quite, but there wasn't much to underwear that could hide beneath silk.

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Charlese wasn't a silk kind of girl. It showed despite her minuscule ribbons of high-heeled shoes. Her body was too hard, too muscled, too used to grueling labor. She didn't even stand like the silk suit set. Too wide, her stance, too butch. But then, nothing was as it should have been. Skyscrapers reached beyond breathable atmosphere, cars with wheels were quaint, nostalgic things and Kansas farm girls forgot the feel of dirt between their toes. Nothing was as people supposed it should be, not since the Grays fell to Earth.

How long had it been since everything changed? Thirty years? Long enough for the world to transform but too soon in the past for her middle school history book to have printed word one. A brave new world. They were all, everyone, strangers in a strange land. And Big Brother had been watching for long before 1984.

She felt a lightening of pressure on her feet. She turned and glanced at the panel by the door. The digital indicator signaled a stop at the third tier above three hundred. What was that? The lounge?

The door slid open. A sack fell in, a big sack, maybe 180 pounds of sack. It thumped against the floor and spread in disarray, tossing out arms and legs from its wrinkled center of khaki and leather. The sack was a man.

"Disrespectful barbarians!" a furred voice cried from within the wad of clothing.

"Have a safe trip, Mister Oldman," sang the two diminutive bouncers at the door.

The wad of clothes tried to straighten itself, turning to prop its back against the wall. "Disrespectful! Unaccommodating!" it protested. "You act as though I were nothing to this establishment. Don't you know I'm short?"

"We know you tried to cop a feel, Mister Oldman," one of the girls said sweetly. She was a tiny thing, brunette and with sharply defined muscles. She also wore the traditional blue skinsuit of the Professional Venue Security Association.

"Not just that, but you copped a feel on the bouncers, Mister Oldman," said the second, a twin down to the Lycra molded to every square inch of her body. "That's us."

The wad of clothes, the ungainly sack, the drunken bastard resolved by stages into a middle-aged man. He straightened, his legs splayed, his curly brown hair tousled and his bristly chin stuck out in

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a cartoon of indignity. "The ancient prophet was wiser than Solomon--" he began while combing his hair with his fingers. Then he stopped, felt his scalp as if it were a melon and glanced around the maglift box. "One moment, one moment... Oh, hello!" He smiled at Charlese, an engaging, confident expression, then continued glancing this way and that while feeling around the floor. "Ah! Here we go!"

He hauled a bent, stiff leather cowboy hat from behind him, then pressed it securely onto his head.

"As I was paraphrasing, with apologies to the prophet, 'No man is without honor except in his native place and in the supposed sanctuary of his favorite bar!'"

"Yeah," said one of the twins, "especially when he gets handsy."

The other girl had retreated from the door but now returned, a martini in one hand, a guitar in the other. "Here's your drink, sweetie," she purred. "Just the way you like it: stirred, not shaken." She placed the guitar gently against the wall.

"No hard feelings?" The other girl smiled as her partner tapped the "close" button for the lift.

"You'll hear from my attorney!"

"Oh, goody, he's cute!"

The door closed and the lift rose again. The man sat on the floor, looking silly with a martini in one hand and a cowboy hat crooked on his head. Charlese stood in her corner of the box, glad that the last six miles of the ride wouldn't take more than fifteen seconds.

"The nerve!" the man said, and cocked back his martini. "And I'm short!"

"Well, they were bouncers," Charlese volunteered. "They were wearing the duds and everything. You shouldn't mess with bouncers."

The man looked up at her through clouded eyes. Considering his vantage point, Charlese narrowed the width of her stance.

"Poppycock!" the man said. "I've known those girls for years. Well, months, anyway. They can be very friendly. They have never rejected my advances with violence."

"But they have rejected your advances?"

"Of course! That's the fun of it!" He began a struggle to get to his feet. "Here, let me demonstrate..."

"Only if you want a broken arm," Charlese said in a tone that froze him half way up.

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The maglift started slowing again.

The man flashed his engaging smile, then finished his upward struggle. "I meant that as a euphemism. I rarely fondle women to whom I haven't been introduced. Oldman's Law Number One." He finally stood on unsure feet. He seemed to consider the guitar, perhaps imagining the challenge of picking it up without falling onto his face. Charlese sized him up and found herself unimpressed. No mystery there. His unruly hair was a used-up mop. He wore a black leather vest over a wrinkled, long-sleeved khaki shirt that was stained with sweat and only half tucked into his rumpled, loose-cut, khaki pants. The vest was a wonder, a mad platform for snapped pockets, zippered pockets, open pockets and pockets closed with buttons. All the pockets bulged on that full-body Batman utility belt.

Watery-eyed, with a stubbly chin and barely able to keep his balance, the man was a mess of half-pickled, middle-aged pathos. Charlese was almost a head taller. His middle had the look of too much pie. Except for that hint of blubbery softness, he looked like any of Charlese's friends in the last hours of a Saturday night binge. But it was Tuesday and just after twilight.

"You see, my dear," the man said, grasping the guitar by its leather shoulder strap, "there is an element of adventure in flirting with twin third-degree black belts in blue skinsuits at their place of employment--"

"Oh, look, the doors are opening."

They were at that, opening onto a curving white hall where a white counter closed off a white-haired, fat, black man in a gray suit. As Charlese and her inebriated companion exited the lift and approached the counter, the black man wiped away the holographics partially obscuring his face. He did so literally, with a sweep of his hand through the intervening air.

"Yes," he said with practiced boredom. "How may I help-- Oh, good evening, Mister Oldman. They've been screaming for you."

"Thanks, Johnson," the former sack said. "Here, don't say I never got you anything." He clapped the martini glass onto the counter.

"Oh, thank you so much," the man groaned. "I'll add it to my collection."

Mister Oldman leaned on the counter. He beamed a smile at Charlese. "Did you know," he said as if imparting a happy secret, "that Judo is known as The Gentle Way?"

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Charlese couldn't help either of her reactions. Mister Old Man or whoever he was looked so pathetic, so stupid and so unaware of his pathetic stupidity that he came across as cute. But Charlese luckily had autonomic responses to drunks, and none of them were pleasant. She compromised. "Did you know that a broken neck requires a first order response in triage?"

Mister Oldman didn't flinch. He hoisted the guitar across his back with great care for his balance. "How very nice. An intriguing thing for a pretty girl to know. Bye, Johnson!"

Oldman slapped the counter and started down the hall to the left, dancing or staggering, it was hard to tell.

"And how may I help you?" Johnson asked.

Charlese pulled the address card from the tiny hidden pocket at the right hip of her skirt. Charlese wasn't much for purses. She showed the card to Johnson.

"My name is Charlese Tilbrenner. I have an appointment with Mister Argenion at *Galactic Geographic*."

"Yes, of course," Johnson muttered, stifling a yawn. He indicated a padded bench by the maglift doors. "Have a seat and someone will come for you momentarily--"

"Oh, no! No, no, no!" The drunk, Mister Oldman, had suddenly reversed course. He careened toward the counter, falling forward more than running, and flailing his arms. "In the lexicon of all bad cinema everywhere: Nooooo!"

This was too much. Charlese wished she *did* have a purse; then maybe she could clobber him with it.

Johnson sighed and slumped against his counter. "Oh, Mister Oldman. You're back. How nice. The lady and I were just having a private business conversation that doesn't concern you, so naturally you might want to comment."

Mister Oldman braced his palms against the counter, swaying and breathing hard. He looked more or less from Johnson to Charlese and back again, but his focus seemed imprecise.

"Johnson, my friend," he said, "it's clear to even my pickled brain that you have a newbie here. Please, allow me." He pivoted his unsteady frame toward Charlese, throwing alcohol fumes her way. "Flight status," he said with exaggerated care. "That's what you have to tell these people. Unless you wish to waste away on that bench over there until receptionists evolve to a more efficient life form, you

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simply walk up to the counter, thusly..." He stood straight as a nutcracker soldier and placed both palms on the countertop. "...and enunciate with infinite authority, 'Flight operations, my good man. Want a souvenir from Venus?'"

He grinned at Charlese, all teeth and sparkling eyes. "Go on, you try it."

Charlese glanced from Oldman to Johnson, then back again. She felt embarrassed by the drunk's bold rudeness and had no desire to become his accomplice. "Are you nuts, or what?"

"Currently, about sixty per cent Or What, but still functional. Go ahead, say your line..."

"Please, miss," Johnson moaned. "Resistance is futile. If you refuse, there'll be no escape for either of us."

For Johnson's sake, Charlese gave in. "Flight operations," she muttered.

"Very good, miss, just down to the left there." Johnson's voice was theatrically perky. "And bring me something from the outer rim, if it isn't too much trouble."

Shaking her head, Charlese started down the hall. To her horror, the drunk fell in beside her.

"You did that grandly," he boomed. "In my not so humble opinion, you most certainly have the touch. I was inspired! I could hug you, you know."

"No. You couldn't."

"I know, I know, something technical about triage."

"And, if you recall--"

"I rarely fondle women to whom I haven't been introduced."

"In case you're following me hoping to get lucky, you ought to know I'm not much attracted to men who sweat alcohol."

"And why not? I should think that talent one of rare distinction."

"So's farting on command, but that doesn't weaken my knees, either."

"I'm sure the right fart would, though for the wrong reason."

"Don't you have somewhere to be?"

"Most definitely. I'm going there now."

Charlese tried to outpace her nuisance. Her heels speared the pale Berber carpet faster than most people jogged. But, he stayed with her, even while loose on his footing from drink.

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"Aren't there any offices in this place?" Charlese said without thought for her audience. The hall curved, featureless except for the pale gray carpet and white walls.

"Just the one, I'm afraid," the Oldman pest volunteered. "A colossal operation, that *Galactic Geographic*. From their offices here in Chicago they launch correspondents to every corner of the known universe, and some of the lesser known roach nests, too."

"I'm sure you're trying to be helpful," Charlese said, then changed her mind. "No, I'm sure you're intent on being a pest. But believe me, I don't make a very good tease toy."

"I don't know, you've been a good sport thus far."

"I have a terrible temper."

"No! I can't imagine!"

"I'm telling you the truth. I've been known to hurt people."

"What a coincidence. I've been known to be hurt."

Charlese bit her lip and slackened her pace. What was the point of running? He stuck to her like sap. "Okay, but I warned you..."

"About what?"

A door came into view around the curve. It was really two doors, French style, of frosted glass. They took up the width of the hallway. Words hung from the wall above them in deep brass relief:

GALACTIC GEOGRAPHIC

What's in your world?

"Ah," sighed the Oldman drunk, drawing his hands to his heart, "be it ever so humble, there's no place like prison."

Charlese stopped at the doors. "You work here?" she asked with dismay.

Oldman pulled open one of the doors. "Legally, I must say yes. However, it feels more like indentured servitude. After you?"

A secretary occupied a curvilinear teak desk in the outer office beyond the doors. She typed on a holographic keyboard projected onto the desktop, the words she created hovering before her in the air. She was pretty in a soft, active-as-an-old-dog way. Above her on the wall hung the same bold logo and slogan.

"Good evening to you, Connie," the drunk bellowed as he crossed the floor. "You look so beautiful I want to cry."

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"Tissues are on the edge of the desk. Mister Argenion's in Dispersal." The girl didn't flick an eye from her work.

"That's my dearest Connie, a goddess of accommodation. Fortune will bless you with all the riches reserved for wise, unselfish souls, etcetera, etcetera."

"Ayuh. Bring me back a rock if you go anywhere nice."

Charlese stepped up to the desk and opened her mouth by way of introduction, but her ebullient sap latched onto her arm and steered her from the secretary. He pulled her past potted plants, vinyl armchairs, a magazine rack and dead corporate art to another set of doors nestled in the corner.

"Hey! Rule number one!" Charlese said through her teeth.

"Superseded by rule eighteen," Oldman said as he pushed through the doors with Charlese in tow. "Never get bogged down in front office fiddle-faddle."

He released her once through the doors, released her into a chaos of screaming voices, scurrying bodies, jumbled multiple holographic playbacks and a cloud of airborne printed words. Charlese put on the brakes. She stood at the edge of that frantic riot and stared. It was Eisenhower's headquarters the morning of D-day, Napoleon's headquarters the evening of Waterloo, God's headquarters the day Eve stole the apple. It was frenzy incarnate, but it seemed somehow ... right.

This was the editorial department.

Charlese listened to a fight at her left. A fat, ruddy, white-haired man with his tie loosened and his sleeves rolled up traded shouts with a blue-haired woman in a tweed-skirted suit. Her hair wasn't blue as a badge of age or even bad taste; her hair was blue because it was blue. So was her skin, for that matter. Probably Arcturian.

"It won't fly, not as it is," the man boomed over competing screamers. "We need some serious re-write and some filler, I tell you."

"Re-write my ass," the woman yelled back as she searched a database hovering before her. "We need a whole new story."

"Where will we find a whole new story? Deadline's in twenty minutes."

"I'm telling you, this piece won't fly. It's practically travelogue anyway. We can't print travelogue about a place that doesn't exist anymore."

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"Damned Marines!"

The exchange seemed typical of the room's steam valve atmosphere. Twenty or so men, women and at least one asexual, fin-headed Vegan shouted, stammered, roared, pounded, rent and tore through simultaneous crises. They sweated, trembled, ticked, raged, chewed, smoked and spat their problems toward resolution and generally seemed to enjoy the work.

So cool!

The blue-haired woman glanced through her wall of airborne words. "What are you staring at?" she barked at Charlese, then, "Hey, Bernie, set for the ride?"

"As set as I might ever be," the Oldman drunk responded. He bowed deeply to the woman. "I throw my body into the void, sacrificing breath and bone for the glory of my rag!"

Charlese watched as applause swept through the clutter of desks, momentarily interrupting the cacophony of yelling.

"Go get 'em, Bernie!" someone cheered.

"Three jumps and a wakeup!"

"We're dusting off your desk, Bernie!"

"Thank you, thank you," Oldman-Bernie called with abundant graciousness. He bowed and bowed. He even curtsied, all the time drifting toward the back of the room. He coaxed Charlese along with him with urging glances and frequent tugs on her forearms and elbows.

By the time they reached the single steel door at the back of the room, the applause had died and the yelling had resumed.

"Watch this," Oldman said in a theater whisper, his smile a showcase of teeth. He grasped the handle of the door, cocked it until the latch clicked, and pulled the steel slab open.

"Close the goddamned door!" the editors cried in unison, then turned back to their work.

Charlese had to laugh. She couldn't help herself though she knew it might be rude. The incident was so much a respected, mandatory ritual that it might as well have been a spoof of one.

She managed to choke off her laughter after a few unfortunately hearty guffaws. Then she was over the threshold and into a world that withered her humor.

"Welcome," Oldman said with a flourish, "to the lobby of Hell."

A ballistics launch station.

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Charlese should have known. The building was thirty miles tall, after all. But she had arrived in Chicago only six hours ago and had been on-planet only three days. Her only other Earth experiences were Lawrence, Kansas and Camp Lejeune. What did she know about ballistics stations?

A neat row of steel-framed glass bubbles lined a gray concrete strip about twenty feet in front of her and maybe a hundred feet long. She counted seven of the glass balls. A yellow circle painted on the floor isolated each sphere from its neighbors. That circle was bordered with red warning stripes. A crane rode on tracks above the line, a three-clawed arm drooping from its underside almost to the tops of the spheres. Men in coveralls fiddled with the bubbles and walked along the line, some of them holding databoards. The place seemed professional after the editorial room. It also had a Spartan, garagelike look from all the bare concrete, bare-bulb floodlights and the echoes of rumbling motors and shouted commands. Charlese breathed in the oil and ozone smell of industry. This was a busy place.

The crane rumbled along the line. Charlese watched as it clanged to a halt, reached down to the fourth sphere, and grabbed it.

"There he is, our fearless leader," Oldman shouted over the crane's thunderous gears. He slapped Charlese's silk-draped arm and pointed down the line.

Charlese noticed a man by the last spherical vehicle. He was not dressed in coveralls but black, loose-fitting pants, a white shirt and a tan safari jacket. Charlese couldn't tell from that far away, but the man looked short and stocky.

"That is the man you have come to meet," Oldman said. He planted the tip of a finger in the small of Charlese's back and started pushing her down the line, giving the spheres a wide berth. "Don't let his unassuming nature fool you. Don't be misled by his diminutive physique. The man you approach is a titan of travel, the Jehovah of Journalism--"

"The object of hyperbole?"

Oldman stopped orating. His eyes twinkled. "Very good, young new person. A tad short on alliteration, but impressive overall."

"Could you please remove your hand from my back?"

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"Shh! Where was I? Titan, Jehovah... Oh: He is the man who holds our hands, who kisses our owwies, who slaps us up side the head when we're bad. He is--"

"Mother?"

Oldman laughed.

"Hand?"

They had almost reached the man in question. The crane groaned by above their heads, carrying its sphere of glass, steel and two seated passengers. Two tall women in blue one-piece flight suits appeared from around the last glass bubble. One was brunette, the other blonde, and they both cowered into themselves. The short, stocky man waved his arms about, seeming to cast a spell over them. What little of his incantation Charlese overheard stank to the ceiling with expletives.

Charlese noticed that he really wasn't stocky. His two extra arms only made him *look* thick.

"Oh, most blessed and exalted Zeus!" Oldman called, throwing up his hands in a mockery of rapture. "Forgive us, oh Master, for we are but mortals who can only grasp at greatness, otherwise why would we work for this rag?"

The four-armed, safari jacket-wearing wonder cut off his fiery harangue of the women and turned to face Oldman. He had yellow eyes with jaundiced whites, gold irises and dark brown star-shaped things that might have been pupils. His brown hair stuck out like the needles of a frightened sea urchin. He had no lips, just a hole with teeth and gums. His ears were covered by skin sacks, like those of a frog. Where did an Earth girl begin to stare?

"Can you believe it, Bernie?" he groused in a perfectly at home Chicagoan huff. "These two boneheads switched fuckin' partners like this was a dick-fucked sorority house. They thought it didn't matter, like parts is goddamned fuckin' parts, can ya believe it? Fuck me! Fuck me with a stick!"

"Chief," the brunette woman pleaded, "we thought--"

"Shut yer hole, for fuckin' Chrissake. Am I talkin' to you? Huh? Am I?"

"Well--"

"Shaddup, I said!" He put two hands on his hips and pointed a finger on a third at the women. The fourth hand held a glowing databoard. "I ask ya, Bernie, what the fuck's the matter these days?"

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You can't throw a rock without hittin' a dipshit, y'know what I mean?"

Oldman bowed gallantly. "Miss Tilsomething, Mister Argenion," he said. "Mister Argenion--"

"Whatever the fuck yer sellin', you can shove it up yer dick-fucked ass!"

He said this last straight to Charlese. He had taken one look up and down her person before letting loose that less than cordial greeting. Charlese took it. She leaned away as if struck by a noxious gas, but she took it with a set face. So, this was Ali Menkalin Argenion, the quadrant editor for *Galactic Geographic*. This was the er, man... who wrote such engaging and folksy editorials, every month available at the front of the magazine, right behind the contents links. Charlese had read the *Geographic* for years. She had always counted its quadrant editor a hero of hers. But she had imagined someone pleasant, not a four-armed, yellow-eyed, lipless sociopath apparently raised by sailors.

She stood there and took his vitriolic attack, feeling nothing more than a resigned shrug of her disappointed hopes. This was the real world, after all. And she had imagined meeting whom, Captain Kangaroo?

The other two women backed away, glad their boss had found fresher meat. Oldman the Incurable sidled up next to Argenion and grinned at Charlese like a mischievous chimpanzee holding a turd behind its back. That son of a--

"You hear me, sweet tits, or are yer ears plugged with shit? I'm too goddamned fuckin' busy to babysit some dipshit sellin' bullshit holoinfusers and fuckin'--"

"Sir," Charlese interrupted, "I don't give a flying fuck what pile of bullshit you don't want to buy. I'm here to fucking interview for a shit-fuck fucking job and I hope it isn't a jack-off, limp-piss copy girl spot, either."

The air so burned from shock and expletives that even the crane's commotion was forgotten. "That's what the fuck I'm here for," Charlese finished lamely, "sir."

The two women in flight suits had frozen in their escape attempt. Their eyes bulged and their mouths hung open. Oldman, too, showed signs of shock. His grin had collapsed into a toothless black "O" and

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his eyes darted between Charlese and his boss, nervous with the knowledge that this had been his introduction.

Argenion's face had frozen in the process of forming new obscenities. Now his yellow eyes narrowed and his lipless mouth opened and closed.

"Hey. You're that goddamned fuckin' Marine," he said.

"Yes, sir. Charlese Tilbrenner, sir."

"Damn, girl. You got one nasty mouth, don't ya think?"

"Just trying to fit in, sir."

Argenion stared at her through his narrowed, yellow eyes. Then those eyes softened. His mouth did something; widening, showing more teeth and gums. Maybe he smiled, who could tell?

"Ha!" he laughed. "I knew I'd like your jarhead ass. Put 'er there, Tilbrenner!" He tossed out one hand, slapped her shoulder with another, scratched his head with a third and still held on to the databoard.

Charlese shook hands.

"I didn't hire you for no fuckin' copy girl slot," Argenion said. "I hired your sorry ass as a goddamned correspondent, ain't that fuckin' A right, Bernie?"

Oldman still looked stunned. "You're a Marine?" he said.

"Correspondent." Charlese nodded. "That's what I thought." She was secretly gleeful she had surprised her unwanted escort into idiocy. "I couldn't tell for sure though, Mister Argenion. Your message to the outprocessing station was more than a little cryptic."

"Them cocksuckin' space stations are far fuckin' out in the goddamned 'verse, baby. Sub-space messages cost money to send."

"Understood. When do I start?"

"Right the fuck now. Meet yer dickless mentor, who will get you on yer feet." Argenion thrust out a hand, grabbed Oldman by the collar of his black leather vest and pulled him in close. Another arm put the rapidly sobering drunk in a headlock. Charlese worried for the guitar.

"*He's* my partner?" She gasped.

"You're a *Marine*?" Oldman moaned.

Argenion laughed. "I can see you dipshits are gonna get on. Now, I got fifteen fuckin' minutes--"

"Menkalin, you hired a Marine as a *writer*?" Oldman squealed from incredulity.

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"Bernie, get a fuckin' grip, for fuck's sake. You're fuckin' repeatin' yer fuckin' self." A third hand reached across Argenion's chest and gave his Bernie a noogie.

Watching her new boss knuckle rub her nemesis's head made it all worthwhile for Charlese. The six months of travel from the galactic rim, not sure what job awaited her new civilian life, the nervous hunt for appropriate interview clothes after four years of wearing nothing but combat gear. Her last half a year had been piles of stress topped by that drunk weirdo dumped into her maglift. She hoped Argenion would do the noogie thing again, maybe even go for a wedgie.

"Anyway, Tilbrenner," Argenion said, releasing Bernie to Charlese's regret, "I'm fuckin' glad you're here. Ya see, I can't send these two shitheads out-- Get back over here, you two, or I'll use yer heads to wipe my ass!"

"You'll excuse our fearless leader," Oldman said, straightening himself and his rumpled self-esteem. "When he gets excited, he tends to speak French."

The two women in flight suits scurried close to their boss's side.

"Like I was sayin'," Argenion continued, "I can't send 'em up because it's against the fuckin' safety protocols. Some of the shitholes we visit out there don't cotton too well to one or the other sex, so we always -- ALWAYS!" he shouted at the women, "send out correspondents in male-female pairs. Now I got me a fuckin' scheduled flight with nobody on it and a goddamned, big-assed deposit I can't get back. Anybody know what that means?"

The blonde in the flight suit raised a finger. "Umm, I guess--"

"Who the fuck asked you to open yer fuckin' pie hole, ass wipe? What it means, dipshits, is that *you're* gonna be on that flight, Miss Tilbrenner, and *you're* gonna be beside her, Mister Oldman."

He crossed all four arms, looking imperious in the face of the obvious and expected response.

"What?" Charlese and Oldman exclaimed together.

"Jump in the fuckin' bubble," Argenion said. "You launch in ten minutes."

"Oh no, no way at all," Oldman grouched. He moved around in front of the editor, incidentally beside Charlese. "You can't send me out there with a Marine, of all people. You know how badly I get on

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with the military. Last time we met, they threatened to neuter me and call me ma'am!"

"I'm not dressed for it!" Charlese wailed.

"And that," Argenion said, "is the better of two shitty arguments."

He spoke while tapping the keys on his databoard, then squinted critical eyes at the women in the flight suits. "You, dipshit," he said, pointing a finger at the brunette. "Take off your fuckin' clothes."

"Chief!" the woman protested.

"Miss Tilbrenner here will trade you her slinky new whore suit."

"Chief!"

"I will not!" Charlese objected.

"Get out of the goddamned duds, y'hear? Christ almighty, what's a bastard gotta do to get some cooperation?"

Charlese was shocked. She couldn't claim to be a prude, but to order someone to strip on a busy flight line? To order someone to surrender their clothes to a stranger? She had quit the Marines to get away from that stuff.

"This is outrageous!" she protested.

"Fuckin' A it's outrageous." Argenion had been tapping on his board. He now turned it to face Charlese. "Your federal employment voucher. See the salary there? Speechless?" One of his many hands whipped around with a stylus and signed the document glowing from his board. "You're hired, sweet tits. Strip."

"I quit!"

"You don't mean that. I see ex-jarheads like you on the street every day. They got nothin', not one fuckin' thing. Ain't much market for trained killers. Strip. You too, dipshit."

Incredibly to Charlese, the other woman started unzipping her clothes. Charlese wanted to say something, but the moment was too surreal. "But, but, but--"

"If you want to be a journalist, improve yer dick-fuck vocabulary."

That was enough, Charlese wanted to say. She had been kidded, toyed with, baited and teased by that little Oldman ogre. She didn't have to take this shit from--

"Hurry the fuck up!" Argenion exploded. His ear sacks trembled and his hair straightened to quivering spines. "We got less than seven minutes!"

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"Pervert."

"Gimme a fuckin' break! I ain't even yer pissant species!" He shoved the databoard at her face and pounded its time readout. "Seven minutes, God fuckin' dammit, then I'm out a shit hill of cash and you are out of a job."

The brunette already stood holding her flight suit out at the end of one arm. She wore nothing but panties, a t-shirt and combat boots.

Argenion was finished cursing and yelling. He stared at Charlese with his weird yellow eyes.

Charlese tried to form a rebuff, something clever and biting to mark the end of a job-that-was. But, she admitted, she needed the gig. She needed something that paid money, something besides gangbanger security. Something that would keep her out of Lawrence, Kansas.

She noticed that Oldman had turned his back. He carefully studied the concrete wall behind the flight line.

Oh, whatever...

Her eyes hard with defiance, hoping Argenion could see her throbbing, chained-back wish for violence, she tossed off her jacket and started undoing her blouse.

"That's right, little Marine," Argenion said, almost in a whisper. His lipless mouth widened, a jack-o-lantern's evil grin. "Don't you revert to form now. Yer life's been fucked enough already."

"Leave the lady alone, Menkalin," Oldman said to the concrete wall. He plunged his hands into his pants pockets and rocked back and forth on his heels. "She's new. She doesn't know much. You ought to give her an honest break."

"I am, Bernie. I'm givin' her you."

"That isn't what I mean, as you're well aware. I think, just once in your long, Technicolor life, you ought to treat someone with an ounce of respect."

"Don't lecture me, dickhead. You're just a dipshit correspondent. You're short, yeah, but still a goddamned lowlife writer. You come back from this last run, then you can be editor and talk to me like that."

Charlese stood in a hint of panties, a shadow of bra and her abbreviated scraps of high-heeled shoes. Her clothes lay all around her. She probably didn't look terribly erotic with homicide on her face.

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"Don't stand there with your titties in a sling! Chrissake, I feel a fuckin' coronary comin' on! Get in the goddamned, shit-sheet flight suit and-- Christ almighty, those fucked up *shoes!*"

Charlese stared at him. The time had come and gone when the editor could get any goat out of her. What kind of misbegotten bug was he, anyhow? Admittedly, Charlese hadn't traveled the whole of the known galaxy, but how in the world had she missed *that* guy?

He ranted, cursing until the air poised a hair off flash point, waving his arms like a troupe of Italian cab drivers. He all but attacked the blonde girl while bullying her to surrender her boots. The flight line workers scurried about their business, or at least put on a good pretense while stealing glances at nearly naked women.

Charlese, in a sudden fit of bashfulness, grabbed the flight suit from the brunette's hand and hurried to stuff herself into it.

"ATTENTION ON DECK!" roared a voice from the PA system. "FIRE IN THE HOLE!"

A crack of thunder burst about thirty feet above Charlese, just beyond the ceiling. At that same moment, the building shuddered like a can in a paint shaker. In less than a second, the disturbance was over. Charlese wondered if it had really happened.

"That's it!" Argenion yelled. "We're next and we ain't even loaded! Bernie, you pisspot, get yer intern and get in the sphere! We got five fuckin' minutes!"

"I think you may have forgotten something," Charlese heard Oldman saying while she wrestled the one-piece garment up to and onto her shoulders. "What has a man gained through making launch if he loseth his very destination?"

"What the fuck you talkin' about?"

"Itinerary, Menkalin. We don't know where we're going."

"Here's where you're goin'. See that on the board? Then you go here, here and you fuckin' well go here. Got that, Mister Pulitzer? Think you can keep from gettin' fuckin' lost?"

Charlese zipped up her flight suit. The brunette was snatching up her silks, her beautiful suit that was two days old. Charlese crouched and grabbed at the skirt. The brunette grabbed back and projected such a look of malice Charlese expected a feral growl.

"I just want my stuff in the pocket," she said, slowly increasing the force of her pull so as not to excite the woman further.

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"Why, thank you very much," Charlese heard Oldman say. "My last run, and you arranged that it be a stroll to the park. How sweet, Menkalin. I didn't know you cared."

"It wasn't your fuckin' run, you dipshit retard!"

"Perhaps not, but still--"

"Get in the fuckin' ship! In the ship! In the ship!"

The crane had screeched into gear. Charlese retrieved her I.D., her credit card and her personal calendar card from her skirt, sighed, and passed the garment to the almost naked brunette. "Take care of it," she said. "It cost a fortune."

She stood and looked up to see the crane, free of its former load, creaking toward her. Where had that other bubble gone? It must have gone up the flue, so to say, and been launched on that last boom and shudder. Had Argenion so dominated the moment that Charlese had lost track of what moved around her?

Oldman stood at her elbow. "Are you all right?" he asked loud enough to be heard over the crane and Argenion's frantic bullying. His voice had a fuzzy concern to it, a softness not entirely due to liquor.

For that and the decency of turning his back, Charlese chose not to tear off his head. "I'm wearing a flame-retardant, pressure-rated, thermal-regulating flight suit. And high heels."

"That's okay. Kick off the heels and Lambert there will loan you her boots. Don't worry about the shoes or the clothes. You can wildly inflate their value on your first expense claim."

"I don't steal, even from him."

Oldman shrugged. "Revenge is relative. Come along, we only have seconds. He's right about that, at least."

Charlese allowed him to lead her to the ship. What else could she do after suffering humiliation and debasement just to keep a job? Quit? Again? Still, she displayed a small chip of dignity. She shrugged Oldman's hand away from her elbow.

She rushed up the short flight of moveable stairs to the waiting bubble. Swinging up into the left-side bucket seat, she jammed her new/used combat boots into the space between her ankles. Charlese went through the motions in a red fury, muttering multiple scenarios that all ended with her new employer either squashed, drowned, strangled, fricasseed or force-fed to an obsessive-compulsive beast that tended to re-ingest its own upchuck. The cramped quarters,

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barely two meters across, stank of sweat and worse body odor. Did they even clean these things between uses? She tried to ignore the stink. She ignored the grinning, lecherous workmen who prepped the sphere for launch into space. She paid Oldman the barest heed. She almost didn't notice the secretary from the front office, so short she barely got her chin above the hatch seal after the stairs were taken away.

"Hello," she said in a bored tone as if Charlese sat across from her at a desk. "Boss thought you should have this stuff." She started tossing in palm-sized squares of plastic. "Press credentials, galactic standard identicard, sub-space locator card and your company credit card. I would hand you a databoard and say 'Sign here' but the nice man wants to seal up your hatch. Bye, now. Bye, Mister Oldman."

"And *au revoir* to you, precious, indispensable Connie." Oldman gripped his chest for effect. "I shall return to you with my heart, my dear."

"I'd prefer a rock."

Connie fell away from the hatch. The cerami-glass doors on each side of the bubble slammed closed. The crane became visible overhead.

Feeling trapped as well as steamed, Charlese looked down at the con--

"Hey! There aren't any controls!"

"Of course not," Oldman said as he fastened his safety harness. "Oh, I suppose you Marines, so supine in luxury, don't often travel by ballistics." He showed her his broad, engaging, naughty-boy smile. "Ballistics is the cheapest means of interplanetary travel. You don't fly ballistics; it flies you."

"But, who's in control after we launch? What if something goes wrong?"

"Relax, ex-Marine. Things hardly ever go wrong here."

"Hardly ever?"

"Hardly ever."

"Flight 0223kilo-6 for Mars ready for ballistic launch," someone said over a hidden intercom.

"Mars?" Charlese moaned. "Mars is a hell hole!"

"Launch control," Oldman called, looking up at the crane as it grabbed onto the sphere, "are you sure your coordinates are properly set? I would hate to wind up in the center of a sun. You know, the

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last time I wound up in the center of a sun was not, shall we say, a stellar experience."

"Let me check, 0223kilo-6. Uh, no, you are set for non-in-the-sun end-station. Sit back and have a nice trip. And remember, you're flying Blast-a-Ball, the latest in catapult space travel!"

"Heh-heh," Oldman said, looking at Charlese and grinning with embarrassment. "Not really. It's a joke we have."

The crane trundled to the end of the line, carrying Charlese and her sphere with it. Her ship -- her *spaceship* -- with no controls, was headed to the asshole of the solar system. This was not a good day for her. She had woken up nervous, but only at the prospect of what sort of pay she would earn. She had not expected to be stripped of her possessions, crammed into someone else's funk and flung back into space by the boss from the darkest pit of the id. Could things get any worse?

She fervently took that question back. The last thing she wanted was to tempt the fates.

She watched as the crane jarred to a halt by what looked like a plain concrete wall. Then a section of that concrete dropped away, leaving a round iris slightly larger than the sphere. A steel arm telescoped out of the hole, terminating in a nasty-looking three-clawed hand much like the one on the crane.

Oldman ignored the weird operation. He closed his eyes, interlaced his fingers over his belly and began breathing slowly through his nose.

The arm from the iris grabbed the sphere. The crane released it. The iris arm retracted, drawing the sphere into the dark space within the wall.

"Don't worry about it," Oldman said. "Relax. Sit back. Steady your breathing."

Ha! Easy for him to speak of relaxing. If he were any more relaxed, his blood would need a proof rating.

"I'm not one for giving up control," Charlese said as the sphere went dark. "The Marines are about *taking* control."

Oldman huffed, then settled deeper into his seat. "Then you have a problem, ex-Marine, because you can't have less control than this."

"I should have just quit, like I wanted."

"Exhale."

"Why?"

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Something fell suddenly in buckets over her body, a mucous-like substance, cool to the touch. Charlese couldn't see a thing. She panicked, but couldn't move. The stuff, whatever it was, had covered her, had thrown on weight and held her immobile. It oozed over her face. It thrust into her open mouth, up her nose, into her ears. It covered her and filled her in an instant.

Her last terrified thought before falling away from consciousness was the realization that she drowned in snot.

Yes, sir, things could always get worse.