

Part 3

u t o p i a

normal

Things were back to normal real quick. We went back to Earth, and we all rested up, and our moms brought us ginger ale in bed. We chatted all the time on the feeds and shared music and shit. We had this major debate going on because we watched the *Oh? Wow! Thing!* and there was this part where Organelle asked Jackie whether she had meg hips and he was like, "Since you ask, we both could work out more," and she was like, "You shithead, you should've lied," and so all the guys were saying, *no way, if she asked him this complete question he should answer it*, and the girls were like, *if you ever insult how I look then you're completely shallow*, and we were like, *but she asked*, and they were like, *omigod, you don't get it*, and Link said if they really didn't want to know how they looked, then how come they asked so much, and then I said this thing, and Calista said this thing, and it was like, *da da da da da, da da da da da, da da da da da*, all day. It was kind of fun. I like debates where you argue about different points of view.

My family, they were coming and going. I saw them on the landings, or sometimes, when I went down to the

kitchen, behind the counters. My dad didn't really talk to me except to walk up and check to see if I had a fever, which I didn't, because it was a software problem. My mother was always holding on to my brother, Smell Factor, like squeezing him like a doll. She was real busy with him and she went to peewee league games for him and even took him to work with her sometimes. When she wasn't around in the afternoons, he sat in his closet watching *Top Quark*, with it broadcasting all over the place, so I watched it, too, because there was nothing else to do really but watch *Top Quark* and eat Chipwiches.

*Cap'n Top Quark, that whole planet is so sad that I think they'll need a whole lot of good thoughts and hugging!*

*That's why, lickety-split, and we're on our way. Charm Quark, prepare the Friend Cannon. Boson, turn our biggest, orangest sails toward Cryos, on the planet Sadalia.*

*Aye, aye, sir! You've made me one happy particle, sir!*

Smell Factor had one of those birds now, one of the ones that didn't fly or sing, the metal ones, so I could tell they were meg yesterday. Stuff always starts with people who are cool and in college, and then works down, until when the six-year-olds get it, it's like, who cares? The birds must have been yesterday for a while, because I didn't see them in any ads, and even Smell Factor was leaving his around and not clutching it.

A few days later, I went out on errands, because really, there was no problem anymore. It felt good to get out and to see all of the upcars in tubes and in the parking lots, just normal stuff, like people walking and talking on their feeds, and kids hanging out and shit. There were all the suburbs stacked on top of each other, like Apple Crest and Fox Hollow, and I would just fly through the tubes in the suburbs in my parents' upcar, looking at all the houses and the lawns, each one in its own pod, and everything

was all like neat. Then I'd go home and sit on my bed and watch the feed, and everything seemed normal.

It's times like this that I'm real glad I have friends. They say friends are worth your weight in gold.

We had a party at the end of the week over at Quendy's, because her parents were off choking somewhere. That was when everyone was having those choking parties. I mean, it was completely midlife crisis.

It was the first time I saw Violet since we were on the moon. It was brag because she didn't have a ride, and I could borrow my parents' upcar, so I got to fly over and pick her up. I met her at a mall near her house. The mall was right on the surface, and you could see the sky through the dome. She was waiting there and looking up at the sun hitting one of the department stores.

Violet lived in a suburb that was a few hundred miles away from my suburb, so while we drove we had a little time to talk before we got to the party.

It was great because we had music on our feeds, and it was the same music, so I knew she was hearing the same notes that I was hearing, and our heads were like moving together, and she put her hand near the lift lever, so when I got to the exit tube and went to lift us, her hand was there, and our fingers closed over the lift lever, and we lifted it together, and were flung up into the sky.

We were going along pretty fast, and going around towers and shit, and she asked me, "What'll a party be like?"

"Like a party."

"I haven't been to many."

"You . . ." I shrugged. "You do this . . . I don't know. It's fun. It's a party. What do you do instead of parties?"

"My friends and I are all home-schooled, so we're a mixed bag. Bettina's mother has us come over and weave ponchos."

"You don't go to School™?"

"Alf's parents teach us how to breechload their anti-aircraft gun."

"Whoa. Can you show me?"

"Here's the surprising thing: It's all in the wrists."

"Unit."

"Yeah. Unit. God, I'm so excited to be going to a real party."

"Oh yeah?"

"Will it be like it is on the feed?"

I patted her hand. "Yeah. I mean, dumber, but yeah."

"Why, this makes me feel like a special girl. The speciallest girl in the world."

She raised up her hand, and we knocked knuckles together.

She leaned back in her seat. She pulled some seat belt out and then let it roll back in. We were both thoughtful for a minute. There were some weather blimps in front of us. They were all yellow in the sunset that was spreading over the Clouds™. We flew between them. We could barely see the silver of their blimp-hides through the color of syrup. They were like a herd.

She asked, "Do you think things are going to be different?"

"From what?"

"From the way things were before."

I looked at her. She looked serious, suddenly. I shrugged. I said, "It's good to have people again, like all these people, talking to you in your head."

"We've all been through this big thing together," she said. "It's got to change us somehow."

She rested her arm along the back of my seat. I leaned my head back. I could feel my hairs rub against her arm.

Even to my hairs, her arm felt soft.

Unit, said Link. "Just get out of the way."

We got to the party and it was a pretty good party, but low-key.

When we got there, for a second we stood in the entryway, because Link and Marty were playing each other at this game, *The Cranky Tumble of Dark House*, one of the ones with zombies and mutants, and they were all spinning around and shooting their fingers like guns. They couldn't see anything, just the gamefeed, so when Violet walked in, Marty almost whacked her in the stomach with his fist. He and Link were swearing and hopping up and down on the marble tiles.

"Unit," said Link. "Just get out of the way."

Marty was like, "Out of the fuckin' way! We're—Oh, shit!—We're—oh . . . Unit!" He was all shouting at Link, who was like missing some shot at a spine-leech.

We went into the living room and over to the table where Quendy had all the drinks and beer. People were sitting around drinking, and some of them had music on their feeds and were sitting around talking to it, and some others had imported a feedcast of *Snowblind*, a

comedy about a young man who nothing ever happens to, until one crazy day when he crosses the mob at a ski resort and finds out what's really buried in those moguls—and then all hell breaks loose! (NC-17)

Violet looked kind of timid, now that we were there. She took a deep breath and went over to say hi to Calista. I stood around and talked with Quendy for a few minutes. Quendy was at first really nice and normal, talking about how it was good to see that we were doing okay, and how she was okay, and everything was fine. Then she started this glaring at Calista, and she was chatting me like, *Do you think Calista and Link are doing it?*

I shrugged and was like, *Yeah. I bet.*

*He's such a pig. He did it with me like—Oh. Never mind.*

Quendy glared at Calista and popped a popcorn shrimp into her mouth from way down below, with her thumb.

She was like, *I'm tired of just being the friendly one who everyone like steps all over.*

*Yeah, I chatted. How do you do that, with the shrimp and your thumb?*

*Okay. I'll show you. Hey, are you going out with Violet?*

*Yeah.*

*That's great. I think she's meg nice.*

*Yeah.*

*Calista says she's kind of stuck-up? But I don't agree at all. Like, Calista's the one who's stuck-up.*

*Calista said that?*

*Yeah. You want to try the shrimp on your finger?*

She showed me how to pop the shrimp. As she did it, I looked across the room and saw Violet talking to Calista, and both of them were frowning. I was worried that something bad had happened, so I m-chatted her, like, *Hey, beautiful. What's doing?*

*Heyyyyy, handsome. Just talking with Calista. Having a nice little chat. I made the mistake of saying we were back to the picayune grind. Now she keeps going, "Picayune'?!? 'Picayune'?!?" and pretending I'm French. I wish I hadn't said anything.*

I looked around me. Everyone was nodding their heads to music, or had their eyes just blank with the feedcast. It was just a party. Nothing but a party.

From one direction, I heard a kid say, "I think the truffle is like completely undervalued."

And from the other direction, a girl was saying, "But he never pukes when he chugalugs."

It was like nothing had happened. We were watching feedcasts as if our brains had never been invaded by the asshole. Loga was laughing with her front teeth showing, as if she'd never been different from the rest of us, the one left with the feed when the rest of us didn't have it. Some guy was pouring the beer. Link and Marty were doing like acrobatics in the entryway, fighting invisible demons.

And everything was completely normal.

The truffle was completely undervalued.



... which the President denied in an address early on Tuesday. "It is not the will of the American people, the people of this great nation, to believe the allegations that were made by these corporate 'watch' organizations, which are not the majority of the American people, I repeat not, and aren't its will. It is our duty as Americans, and as a nation dedicated to freedom and free commerce, to stand behind our fellow Americans and not cast . . . things at them. Stones, for example. The first stone. By this I mean that we shouldn't think that there are any truth to the rumors that the lesions are the result of any activity of American industry. Of course they are not the result of anything American industry has done. The people of the United States know, as I know, that that is just plain hooey. We need to remember . . . Okay, we need to remember that America is the nation of freedom, and that freedom, my friends, freedom does not lesions make." The President is expected to veto the congressional . . .