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Quiet Post

A TALE OF THE QUASIVERSE

Stephen Goldin

**Darsina
PRESS**


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Dedicated to L. Frank Baum and Lewis Carroll
pathfinders to Oz and Wonderland

“Qua-si-verse”: often pronounced kwah-zee-verse by outsiders.

Settlers often pronounce it as in, “You kwazy wabbit!”

—*The Imbecile’s Guide to the Quasiverse*

PROLOG:

Somewhere in the Quasiverse

The light entering the snow globe mine was dimming as dusk darkened the amber sky. The mine's owner peered out with growing apprehension. He was dressed in plain brown work clothes and heavy boots. His unevenly trimmed beard had just a few touches of gray. "This is what I was worried about. Jean-Claude Slipovitz has found us and we're trapped in here. There's only one way out. What are we going to do?"

The pale-skinned woman in the mine with him, seemingly in her late twenties, was stick-thin and in constant motion as she paced the confines of the tunnel like a hyperact

ive leopard on speed. Her clothes were brilliant hues of orange and blue, and even in the mine's dim light they glowed with a phosphorescence of their

own. Her bright red topknot resembled a fountain of hair shooting out the top of her head.

“I was in a similar situation once in Vermilion,” she said. “Trapped by myself in a butter mine with an army of fifty bad guys outside, screaming for blood.”

“What did you do?” the man asked her.

“Called in my posse of a hundred good guys to wipe them out.”

The miner sounded exasperated. “But we don’t have a posse.”

The woman brushed that objection aside with a broad wave of her hand. “Scarcely relevant. I don’t have a phone, either.”

“Look, I hired you to protect me and the mine from that claimjumper.”

“You and the mine are both still here,” the woman pointed out.

“Not for long, unless you do something.”

The woman considered. “We should take stock. The *Handbook* says that’s always a good thing to do.”

“What handbook?”

“*The Scout’s Handbook*. All the Quasiverse scouts use it.”

“It give good advice?”

The woman only shrugged. “Not always. I wrote it.”

“What’s to take stock of, anyway? There’s you and me and some drilling equipment.”

“Maybe we could drill him.”

“We’d have to get him right at the drill point. He ain’t that stupid.”

“Well, how stupid is he, then?”

The miner sounded even more exasperated. “They told me you were the best, but all you’ve done so far is eat my food and drink my liquor. Now, when Jean-Claude shows up, you’re useless.”

“Speaking of liquor, have you got any stashed in here?” the woman asked.

“You drank the last of it three days ago.”

“What about drugs?” the woman with the erupting red topknot persisted. “I could really use some outers about now.”

“Useless,” the miner said, throwing up his hands. “Absolutely useless.”

“Which ‘they’ were you talking to about me? I know lots of ‘theys,’ and some of them aren’t as informed as others.”

“Come on out of there,” Jean-Claude Slipovitz called from outside. “No need for anyone to get hurt. I promise not to kill you if you surrender peaceably.”

“That’s one solution,” the woman said. “This isn’t a very good mine, anyway.”

The miner bristled. “Whaddaya mean?”

The woman stopped pacing and leaned against one wall of the mine tunnel. Her elbow rested on a snow globe of Santa’s Workshop. She pointed to a snow globe beside it showing the Hollywood sign. “Low quality product. Look at this spelling.”

“What’s wrong with it? It’s spelled right.”

“But the real sign doesn’t have a lower-case ‘d.’ And this elf in the workshop here has three legs.”

“Elves are mythical,” the miner snorted. “They can have as many legs as they want!”

“Plus, the globes lack verisimilitude.”

“Very what?”

“I don’t think it snows *inside* Santa’s Workshop. Bad for the toys. And I don’t think it snows much on the Hollywood sign, either.”

“I spent four years diggin’ this mine. I ain’t givin’ it up to no claimjumper,” the miner told her. “Besides, Slipovitz’ll kill us the instant we set foot outside.”

“He will?”

“Slipovitz never kept a promise in his life.”

The woman pondered. “Oh. Not an optimal solution, then.”

“That’s the first smart thing you’ve said.”

“Do you have any suggestions?” the woman asked.

“Yeah. Shoot ’im.”

“Well I would, if you could get him to hold still.”

“He’s standing perfectly still.”

“He is?” The woman peered outside the cave mouth into the evening gloom. “Oh. Maybe he is. Then I guess that proves the other hypothesis: It’s the *Earth* that’s moving.”

“You *did* bring a gun, didn’t you?”

“Of course.” The woman reached into a pocket and pulled out an object just three inches long.

“What kind of a gun is that?”

The woman stared analytically, turning the weapon over in her hand. “Looks like a popgun to me.”

The miner practically spat. “What the hell good is a popgun?”

“I’ll assume you’re not just asking rhetorically,” the woman said. “If you want something to pop, it’s

perfect. Watch.”

She braced her right arm against the cave wall and held the arm steady with her left hand. She bent her head down and squinted along the three-inch barrel, taking aim at the figure of Jean-Claude Slipovitz. Her index finger moved only slightly as she squeezed the trigger.

“What happened?” the miner asked.

“I shot him.”

“No you didn’t. He’s still standing there.”

“Is he?” The woman peered out at the figure of the still-standing claimjumper.

“Your little popgun didn’t even make a sound.”

“Oh,” said the woman. Then, “Pop.”

“I expect a lot more for my money than you saying a little ‘pop.’”

“Okay,” said the woman. “BANG!”

“Look, that crook’s not going to fall over just because you say ‘pop’ or ‘bang.’”

“Of course not,” the woman agreed. “That would be silly. It’s a certifiable fact that the sound a weapon makes has no bearing on its efficaciousness. Or is that ‘efficacy?’” She began pacing around in the mine shaft some more, bouncing randomly from one direction to another. “You sure you don’t have any drugs in here?”

“I’d ask for my money back,” the miner grumbled, “but we’ll both be dead in a few minutes anyway, so what’s the point?”

Outside, a small red hole appeared on Jean-Claude Slipovitz’s shirt. He jerked backward and fell over, dead.

“Cosmic!” the woman exclaimed happily.

The miner's jaw fell open. "I don't believe it! What happened?"

"I told you. I shot him."

The miner looked incredulously at the tiny weapon in his companion's hand. "What kind of ammo does that thing shoot, anyway?"

The thin woman with the red topknot and colorful clothes looked at him triumphantly and said, "Slow bullets."

Chapter 1

Departure

The Secretary of the Quasiverse Settlement Administration sat in his New York office, trying to project measured confidence. The surroundings radiated calm assurance: rich walnut wood-grained walls; a large, though not ostentatious, desk with inset monitor; a dignified pen set with totally unnecessary blotter. There was a picture of himself, all chummy with the president, hanging strategically on the wall behind him. People seeing this image were supposed to be reassured, and maybe a little intimidated. The Secretary was obviously an influential and important man.

The person at the other end of the line in Los Angeles, though, was not assuaged by these trappings. Daniel Rosenthal, an influential and important man himself, was pacing the room in a combination of

fury and panic. The Secretary couldn't see what was on the walls behind *him*; the camera tracked him, and never stayed still long enough. Rosenthal moved with such agitation the background was little more than a blur.

"She's just a little girl, for Christ's sake," Rosenthal was saying, running his hand through his hair for perhaps the fifth time this conversation.

"She's over eighteen, isn't she?" the Secretary said, even though he knew calm, reasoned tones wouldn't work on a distraught father.

"Twenty-four, and a college graduate," Rosenthal said, waving the Secretary's words away dismissively. "What's that got to do with anything? She's my little girl. You've got daughters. You know what it's like."

The Secretary breathed deeply and evenly, trying to set the tone of patient reason. *Yes, and I had the good sense to steer them into sensible careers. Lainie's a patent attorney, Julie's a pediatrician, and both are thankfully married and settled down with kids.* That was what he *wanted* to say, but he was too much of a diplomat to say it.

"How did all this happen, anyway?" is what he did say. "Last time we talked it sounded like everything was going smoothly. Didn't you tell me Martia had a job at one of your companies?"

Rosenthal chuffed. "Yeah, second assistant general manager at my central offices. Not so high it looked like nepotism, but on a firm career path, engaged to a good-looking boy rising in the firm. Her job reviews were excellent. I had my security vet the boy, and they thought he looked good. Everything

was perfect. Then bang! The boy skips back to Italy with a couple billion in company secrets, the engagement's broken, Martia's in tears, and the next thing I hear, she's signed up for the goddamned Quasi Corps. Christ on a pogo stick, how's a father supposed to keep up with a girl these days?"

The Secretary deliberately did not bridle at Rosenthal's slighting reference to his agency. Rosenthal was too big a contributor to the president and the party to allow that. "Can I do anything to help?" he asked calmly.

"You can get her out of this damned thing, that's what you can do."

"Sorry, Dan, but no." The Secretary spread his hands. "That's one thing I *can't* do. You know how bad it looks when a chief executive starts messing in petty personnel matters way below his station. Raises all sorts of hackles and red flags. Even something perfectly innocent starts to look sordid and tawdry."

"Well, what about a job in your office?"

The Secretary almost winced. He was already staffed out the window with home office jobs filled by appointments for friends. There weren't enough shoehorns in all of New York to squeeze in another, particularly for a young rich girl mooning over a broken love affair. "I'm well past quota there, Dan."

"Well, what good are you, then?" Meaning, *why did I donate all those millions?*

"You haven't been able to talk her out of it?"

"She says her mind's made up. I learned those code words years ago."

"Well, she's of age and supposedly knows her own mind. Yes, I know, what father thinks his daughter

truly does? Still, that's what the law says, and we have to abide by it. The QSA has trouble enough recruiting people as it is. We have to hold them to it when we get them, at least for the minimum three-year term."

"Yeah," Rosenthal said bitterly, "But how many ever come back?"

The Secretary felt on firm statistical footing here. "Don't listen to the exaggerations in the press, Dan. Fully sixty-eight percent come home from their first tour, and twenty-seven percent more either re-enlist or stay in the Quasiverse in some other capacity. There's a great settlement bonus, you know. It's a successful program."

Rosenthal snorted. "She doesn't need the pennies you'd call a settlement bonus. And there's a few percent unaccounted for, there."

"Four point eight," said the Secretary with a shrug. "Accidents and misadventures. They can happen anywhere, even New York or L.A."

"If five percent of the people who went to New York died in accidents, they'd call it a calamity."

"It's a frontier, Dan. Give me a break. If only five percent of the Old West settlers died in their first three years, it'd be the most successful settlement in history."

"So more than thirty percent of the people you send out never come back, and you call that a success. And that's just your employees. What about settlers? How many of *them* come back?"

The Secretary hesitated. "Well, they *intended* to go out permanently, so—"

"Right. And of the sixty-eight percent who do

come home, how many are the same as when they left? All body parts intact? More important, their minds?”

“It’s impossible to quantify statistics like that.”

“Jeez, you hear stories of nervous breakdowns, insanity, permanent psychoses—”

“You’re working yourself into a state over something neither of us can prevent. But there are some things we *can* do.”

Rosenthal stopped in mid-rant, blinking. “Huh? What?”

“There are two things that help someone survive out there. The same two things that help them survive anywhere, in fact—money and power. Martia has money of her own, right?”

“She got her grandmother’s trust when she turned eighteen, not to mention her shares in *my* companies. Last year she was ranked the thirty-fourth richest person under age twenty-five.”

“I thought it was something like that. Let me tell you what *I* can do. No, I can’t wrap her in cotton batting and keep all the bogeymen away, but I’ve got the next best thing. While we’ve been talking, I’ve been going through the agency’s records to find the perfect situation for her. We can send her to Burgundy.”

“France?”

“No, it’s a town in the Quasiverse. It’s made to order for you—probably the dullest place out there. Not a peep out of it since it was settled. The legate’s reports are all short and uneventful. He’s never requisitioned any extra help. Everything goes smoothly, never a hint of trouble.”

Rosenthal furrowed his brow. “Well—”

“And just to make sure nothing goes wrong I’ll appoint Martia the sub-legate. Second-in-command of a town where nothing ever happens. If anything drives her crazy, it’ll be boredom. She’ll be perfectly safe, it’s a quiet post. Trust me.”

“I still don’t see why you have to go to that horrible place,” Elaine, Martia’s stepmother, said with a sniff. She did not, of course, bother to meet Martia’s eyes.

Martia Rosenthal sighed. She’d been doing that a lot in the past few months since Carlo’s betrayal. “I told you what Dr. Shigeta said.”

“Yes, yes, you’re depressed over that Italian boy and you *have* to get away. But it’s easier to get away to Paris, or Tahiti, or even the *real* Burgundy. At least there they have good vineyards and decent wine. Not like that place that tries to fool you by taking the name of somewhere real.”

That wasn’t all Dr. Shigeta had said. He’d suggested she make a clean break from her parents for a while as well, to snap her out of the depression. But Martia wasn’t about to tell her stepmother *that*.

Instead, she tried to deflect the conversation. “They’re not trying to fool people, Mother. The U.S. names all its Quasiverse colony towns after colors, so they won’t offend anyone.”

“I swear, for the fortune you pay that quack, I could have found you a much better therapist.”

Why do you think I chose him? Martia wanted to say. And as for the “fortune” she was spending, she could have paid Dr. Shigeta’s weekly fee for a thou-

sand years without scratching the surface of the trust fund from her maternal grandmother. So she just shrugged and remained silent.

If she ever needed tangible proof she was depressed, she only had to look around her. She'd eaten here at the Garden Court of the Sheraton Palace Hotel many times when she visited San Francisco, and normally thought the place beautiful and refined. But today, the splendor of the arched skylight and the elegant golden chandeliers left her unmoved—and she'd barely glanced into the bar at the gorgeous Maxfield Parrish *Pied Piper* painting. Any therapist would have diagnosed that as depression.

Martia's father decided to enter the conversation. "But you have to admit, Princess, there are all those stories about people coming back from the Quasi-universe stark, raving crazy."

Another shrug. "A few. People go crazy in L.A. too, Daddy. And in Paris, and in Tahiti. If it happens, Mother can send me to one of those real psychiatrists she just bragged about." Elaine insisted on Martia calling her "Mother," as though trying to erase Martia's real mother from existence. Although, in truth, Martia's real mother was doing a credible job of that on her own.

"And as for taking that silly stuffed monkey along —" Elaine began.

"Excuse me," Martia said, standing. "I need to visit the restroom."

Martia sat in the stall for long minutes after she finished peeing, leaning forward with her elbows on her thighs, her head in her hands. How many more minutes would she have to endure before she got

away? Nobody could understand what she was going through, how stupid she felt about what happened. Not her family; her father kept telling her it wasn't her fault, even his security team was fooled by Carlo, while Elaine kept going on about how European men were slimy and couldn't be trusted. Not Ronnie, her best friend from college, who'd gotten married and popped out two babies in quick succession; she simply couldn't get her head out of the nursery. And definitely not May, who thought the answer to all problems was a long orgy of fashion buying at the most expensive boutiques-du-jour.

Oddly enough, it was her mother who suggested the path she took. Not directly, of course; she hadn't had personal contact with Mom in well over a year. But Shirley's latest blog on ways to save the world had been titled "The Quasi Corps: Making Sense out of Nonsense, Order out of Chaos." And suddenly, Martia knew what to do.

But sitting here wasn't doing it. With a sigh, she finished up and left the restroom.

When she got back to the table, she was composed again. "I think we'd better be leaving now, Daddy," she said. "I want to be sure we get to the station in plenty of time."

Both her parents rose. "You know I'd love to go with you," her stepmother said, "but I did promise to go shopping with Berta Feingold in Union Square today."

"I'll be fine, Mother," Martia said. Elaine's air kisses didn't even come close to Martia's cheeks.

The sun shone brightly outside the Contra Costa

County Quasiverse Tunnel Station, otherwise known as the Concord Quasiverse Tunnel Station, otherwise known as the Mt. Diablo Quasiverse Tunnel Station, otherwise known as the Herman C. Gutierrez Quasiverse Tunnel Station, otherwise known locally as the East Quasi Tunnel Station. For many, it was more than fitting it should be called so many things, given that it opened into an area of such high volatility.

This was the smaller of the two West Coast tunnels in North America. It accessed, at present, only thirteen active nodes—as opposed to the Mt. Tamalpais Quasiverse Tunnel Station, otherwise known as the Marin County Quasiverse Tunnel Station, otherwise known as the North Bay Quasiverse Tunnel Station, otherwise known as the James “Sunny” Corcoran Quasiverse Tunnel Station, otherwise known locally as the North Quasi Tunnel Station, which accessed no fewer than thirty-four nodes and seemed to be acquiring a new one a month.

If Martia had been in a jollier mood, she might have thought this was a very propitious day to begin her new life. The sky was blue and cloudless, the air was warm with but the light hint of a cooling breeze to keep it from being oppressive. The crowd at the station was busy, but not obnoxiously packed with people. The depot itself still had the new-building look of chrome and glass—lots of glass on three sides, with the fourth side abutting the mountain.

But Martia hadn't been feeling jolly for over three months. All days were gloomy, regardless of the weather, which she took no notice of; she was from L.A., where all days were supposed to be sunny and

temperate as a matter of course. All buildings worth visiting were new and shiny. And Mt. Diablo didn't look like a real mountain anyway. Mountains were supposed to be tall and conical, whereas Mt. Diablo looked from a distance like some enormous Bactrian camel that had knelt to rest and then stubbornly refused to get up again.

Martia's six large trunks—five packed with clinical precision by her stepmother and one, a little less precisely, by herself—had already been taken inside the train and stowed until she reached her destination. Her rolling suitcase—which she'd packed herself and had her day-to-day clothes for the journey—was by her side, handle in her hand. Her two-and-a-half-foot tall stuffed monkey—not furry, but blue and white gingham except for the red left arm that had been repaired years ago—clung to her left side with its long arms stretched around her right shoulder. As far as she was concerned, she was more than ready to be away.

"You're sure I can't talk you out of this?" her father said.

"Y-e-s-s," Martia said with exaggerated slowness.

"Well, can I at least talk you out of taking that silly monkey with you? I agree with Elaine, it makes you look like a little girl."

"Oh Daddy. I'm going to a new place. It's not like I'll be taking her out on the street or to the legation with me. She'll just be a private, friendly face."

Her father grimaced and looked about to launch into another of his litany of complaints about her choice. Martia looked up and decided now would be the perfect time to indulge her strategy. "Oh, look at

that line for inspections. Do I have to wait in that with all those people?"

Mr. Rosenthal followed her gaze, and scowled. "You most certainly do not," he said emphatically. "You're the new sub-legate for Burgundy. You don't have to stand around like riffraff." He stalked off toward the gate where the security guards were screening the prospective passengers.

Martia watched him go, and a tight smile briefly curled at the corners of her mouth. She bent her head down close to the monkey's ear and whispered, "I think it's going to work."

"I hope so," the monkey whispered back. "I don't want to get left behind."

"Shhh. We don't want anyone to hear you. That'd screw everything up."

The monkey went back to its silent clinging.

Mr. Rosenthal began talking to one of the security officers. Soon a second officer became involved. Then a third officer joined the discussion. Mr. Rosenthal never yelled; men like him never needed to yell at hired staff. But his body language became more animated. He waved his arms a couple of times. He showed the officers Martia's paperwork. He pointed three times to specific wording. The third officer took the papers, scanned them closely, then nodded slowly. She handed the papers back to Mr. Rosenthal and pointed to a door in the right-hand wall. Mr. Rosenthal nodded appreciatively, turned and walked back to Martia.

"Well, Princess," he said when he reached her, "they finally agreed that the sub-legate deserves diplomatic immunity and they have no right to

search you. You're to use the VIP boarding lounge over here, and no one'll bother you."

Fighting hard not to show the relief she felt, Martia dropped the handle of her suitcase, wrapped an arm up around her father's neck and gave him a heartfelt kiss. "Thanks, Daddy. You're terrific."

Mr. Rosenthal blushed and smiled. He could almost forget how upset he was at his daughter's decision to go away.

Martia picked up the wheeled suitcase's handle with her left hand and gripped her father's hand with her right, then walked with him to the door of the VIP lounge. They stopped there awkwardly, and Martia said, "I guess this is where we have to say goodbye."

"I guess so," he said, almost sheepishly.

She stood on tiptoe and kissed him again. "Don't worry, Daddy. It's only three years. I'll be home before you know it. I'll make you proud, I promise."

Mr. Rosenthal gave a wan smile. "I know you will, Princess."

Martia went up to the door and showed her papers to the officer there. The man's brows knit. "You're MAR-tee-uh?"

Martia gave the smallest of sighs. "Like 'Martian,'" she said by rote, "without the 'n,'"

She turned back and smiled confidently at her father. Then she went through the door and vanished from his sight.

Apparently, not a lot of VIPs traveled from this station into the Quasiverse, because the lounge was pretty spartan. There were only three chairs—ad-

mittedly more luxurious than the institutional ones in the main depot—a large clock on the wall, a water fountain, and a door across the room from where she'd entered. So much for special accommodations. But at least she wouldn't have her belongings searched, which was the point of this exercise.

Martia settled into the green leather chair closest to the exit door. *The Imbecile's Guide to the Quasi-universe* was zipped into the outside pocket of her suitcase, but she didn't bother taking it out. She'd already skimmed it once and expected to read it a couple more times during the trip to Burgundy, but wasn't in the mood right now. She let the false shine of optimism slide off her face, to be replaced by the sour look of depression that had lived there for months. She sat unmoving for over an hour, until a bright young man, maybe a couple years younger than she was, appeared in the doorway and told her it was time to board. Listlessly, she stood up and followed him through the door.

"Welcome aboard, Madame Sub-legate," the young man said cheerily. "My name is Richard, and I'll be one of the staff serving you on this journey to Burgundy. May I carry your bag for you today?"

"No, thanks. I can roll it on my own."

"Very well. What a cute monkey you have. Have you ever visited the Quasiverse before?"

"No," Martia said glumly.

"I thought you looked pretty young. Well, be prepared to have your mind blown. You're in for a great adventure."

"So everyone tells me."

"I don't get to see very much of it myself, these

train runs keep me busy, but I hear plenty of stories.”

He led her down a pale green hall that ended at an open metal doorway. “Please watch your step over the gap. Make sure your suitcase wheels don’t get stuck. There we go. Your compartment is in Car Two, just a short trip up the passage here. Sorry it’s a bit narrow—they forgot the word ‘spacious’ when they designed this train. Still, it’s hard to get lost—everything’s either forward or back.

“Well, here we are. Compartment Two-A, your home for the next three days.” He took a keycard from his pocket and inserted it into the lock, then handed the card to Martia when the door light flashed green. He opened the door and stepped inside first, holding the door open for Martia to enter. “I’m sorry, I’m sure it’s not what you’re probably used to, but I assure you this is the finest compartment on the whole train. You even have your own bathroom and shower. No maid service, I’m afraid—”

“Not necessary,” Martia said. She was fishing through her purse. “I’ve got a lot of studying to do before we get to my new assignment, so I probably won’t be leaving the room. Can you please see that I remain undisturbed and have my meals served here?” She pulled out a fifty dollar bill and handed it to him.

Richard pocketed the bill with professional smoothness. “Yes, ma’am. And if it turns out you do need anything, I’m button four there on the wall panel. Press that and I’ll be here on the double.”

He showed her a notepad and pen on the dresser. “Fill out one of those slips and post it outside your

door to order your next meal. I'll provide room service for you and remove the dirty dishes when you're done."

With a professional nod, he left, and Martia was finally alone.

The designers of this room spared no expense at looking cheap. The walls, once brightly polished aluminum, had been scratched into dullness by many uncaring occupants. The bed was either luxurious twin-sized or a double for a pair of heroin-chic fashion models. A video monitor with a postage-stamp sized screen was set in the wall facing the bed. There were curtains sewn shut where a window might be expected. The dresser was built into the wall, and the drawers didn't pull all the way out. The accordion-door closet had no hangers, but she'd been prescient enough to pack her own. The carpet was just a shade too plush to serve as good sandpaper.

Martia could well believe this was the finest compartment in the whole train.

She waited a few seconds, went to the door and opened it. Richard had vanished down the hallway. She closed the door again and double-locked it.

She un-Velcroed the monkey's arms from around her shoulder and sat it down on the dresser top. "Well, Lydia, I guess we made it." Then she tossed the suitcase on the bed and unzipped it.

"I was sure you would," the monkey replied.

Martia didn't look at the stuffed toy, just took the already hangered clothes out of the case and shook them out, then hung them in the tiny closet. "I don't know. That 'no computers' warning sounded pretty strict. But I guess Daddy is good for something."

She paused. "But then, you're not really that much of a computer."

"I beg your pardon," said Lydia. "I'm an EG-13 AI."

"You're an ereader with pretensions," Martia insisted absently as she turned from the closet to grab underwear from her suitcase and stow it in the dresser. "You've got the intellect of a four-year-old with a giant vocabulary. You can hold up your end of a conversation, and that's about it."

The monkey gave a barely audible sniff.

Martia grabbed the figure and held it tightly to her chest. "But I love you anyway, you silly monkey."

"I love you too, Martia," the monkey said.

Chapter 2

Arrival

On her own for the first time in days, Martia found it all too tempting to lie on the bed and stare at the ceiling—but then images of Carlo intruded on her thoughts. Carlo with his laughing brown eyes and dark, curly hair; with arms not overly muscular but strong enough to hold her tightly against his chest; with a tongue that insinuated itself sensuously past her parting lips and into her eager mouth; with those hands and their incredible fingers exploring and exciting her body; and that tongue again, doing things that made her gasp just to think about.

But her hands were wandering downward of their own accord, and she quickly rolled onto her stomach, stifling those thoughts. Carlo wasn't a safe subject. That's why she was here, to get away. Her beloved Carlo had betrayed her. Not with another woman—

that she could have forgiven quickly enough—but by using her to reach a position of trust, to steal secrets from her father’s company, and then to dump her by running off to his homeland, leaving her to feel like all kinds of an idiot.

I should’ve known. I should’ve known. Why didn’t I know? All those trips to his “sick mother.” I’m not some lovesick fifteen-year-old. Sure, security cleared him, but I should’ve known.

That thought could not be borne. Better to run away from everything than live with the memory of Carlo’s treachery burning her mind. *I was an idiot. I should’ve known!*

She didn’t want to interact with other people, and there was a limited choice of things to do by herself aboard the train. The video library had a collection of nearly-new movies—but she’d have to settle for watching them on the tiny monitor in her cabin, and she’d already seen all the ones she’d wanted to see in first-run...and most of them with Carlo. She quickly shut down that line of thought. Watching videos was out.

That left reading. She pulled the thick green loose-leaf binder out of her suitcase, the official QSA Legation Manual she’d been provided with—all the instructions, rules, and regulations to administer a U.S. settlement town in the Quasiverse. She’d glanced through it once at home, but she was so busy packing and getting ready for her new life that she couldn’t concentrate on it then.

She hefted it thoughtfully. It was weighty, and promised to be as dry as the Sahara in summer. And, like her most boring college textbooks, it proba-

bly had some very useful and necessary facts, buried amid piles of senseless garbage designed to put the most eager young mind to sleep.

She reached down and placed the thick binder carefully on the floor beside her bed. There'd be plenty of time for that nonsense. She'd be stuck on this train for three days, plenty of time to wade through bureaucratic jargon. Today, she needed to relax.

Walking over to the dresser, she reached behind Lydia the monkey, un-Velcroed the secret pouch in its back and took out the treasure she'd worked so hard to smuggle aboard with her—the ereader that, in addition to the AI Lydia, contained her entire library to maintain her sanity over the next three years.

For some reason she couldn't figure out, computing devices even as simple as handheld calculators were banned from the Quasiverse. Boarding instructions clearly said, in capital letters, to leave all computers and cell phones behind. Maybe there was an explanation buried somewhere deep in the loose-leaf binder, or even in *The Imbecile's Guide*, but it was not obvious on her first casual inspection. And if the security personnel had discovered it when she checked through the gate, her entire library—and Lydia—would have been confiscated.

She was glad she had her library of romance novels as her guilty pleasure. If it was chocolate, she'd probably end up weighing three hundred pounds. But no one could expect her to be parted from these books for the full term of her service.

First and foremost in her collection, the prize jewel, was the full set of Lydia Chastaine's romance

novels, all 112 titles published so far. Lydia Chastaine was, in Martia's opinion, the greatest romance writer who ever lived. Being bereft of those books would be an even worse blow than losing Carlo.

Next in importance was the "Lydia Chastaine Selects" line of romances by other writers, books personally selected and recommended by Ms. Chastaine herself. As of the day before Martia's departure, this line numbered 527 titles.

Below those came all the books Martia could download from the five other major professionally published romance lines that she found acceptable. About a third of these were historical romances (which Martia wasn't quite as fond of, but they did offer a diversion) and the rest were contemporaries. Not all the titles were currently in print, but Martia had managed to locate several thousand more of those, some of which she hadn't even read before.

Finally, there were the indie titles, and those were in numbers beyond reckoning. Self-published by romance fans like herself, Martia knew that some of them would be quite good, some ordinary, and some positively wretched—but she hadn't had time to weed through them before she had to leave. At least she'd have plenty of opportunity for discovery on her sojourn in the Quasiverse, and she could easily delete any books that failed to meet her personal standards.

All told, her book-buying binge had set her back an amount that would have made anyone who worried about budgets quiver, even including the ones that had been free online. Small price to pay, she thought, for books to keep her mind off her own

problems—and especially off Carlo. This collection would give her plenty of other men to think about. Of course, most of those men caused problems for their heroines, but those were *other* women and *other* problems. Martia could deal with those with impunity.

Martia skimmed through the list of titles and finally decided on *Hungry Heart*, Book One of Ms. Chastaine’s wonderful “Heart” series. Martia had already read it twelve times and knew it was a great settler of jangled nerves. She lay back on the bed with the ereader in front of her face and let the familiar text flow by her.

Day followed uneventful day as the train sped through the Quasiverse to their destination. Richard brought the meals she’d ordered and took the dirty dishes away, and other than that, Martia had no human contact. But she didn’t need any. She had her romance novels to enthrall her.

She fully intended to spend most of this time reading the official green binder, or even *The Imbecile’s Guide*, but after a few minutes with it, her mind would start spinning and she’d lose her concentration. Carlo’s voice would taunt her, his face appearing before her in a mocking grin, and she couldn’t take that. Lydia was, at best, a vapid conversationalist. That left her romance library—but fortunately, that didn’t fail her. She plowed through book after book of plucky heroines overcoming obstacles, and eventually finding love with the perfect men who could understand them and satisfy them in all sorts of ways. They reconciled her to the knowl-

edge that heartbreak was just a step along the path to love and happiness, and that true fate was out there just waiting for her to discover it.

Just after breakfast on the fourth morning, the P.A. announced the train would be reaching Burgundy in a couple of hours, so all passengers should pack their belongings and make ready to depart. Martia, who hadn't left her room the entire trip, had very little packing to do.

Her instructions had said the train would arrive late afternoon on Monday, and she was to report immediately to the legation. Accordingly, she was ready with clothing she hoped would make a good impression on the legation staff: a gray Imre designer pants suit, a white shirt, a small blue and red scarf, and a pair of gray Juan Lauran shoes with medium heels.

She examined herself critically in the small bathroom mirror. Just enough make-up to make it seem she wasn't wearing any. The faintest *spritz* of expensively subtle perfume. Shoulder-length brown hair whose bangs obscured most of her wide forehead. Well, the more of *that* she covered, the better she felt. Wide-set brown eyes that looked way too soft and innocent, no matter what she did. Rounded apple cheeks instead of the sharp, stylish cheekbones she yearned for. Broad mouth that appeared to cover half her face. She almost never used much lipstick, afraid of accenting it still further. And just the hint of a double chin. *I'm too young for a double chin, damn it!* she thought with a mental grimace.

But most of all, the nose. So short, with just the tiniest uprising at the tip. Way, way too small for

such a broad face. Martia knew most Jewish girls would kill for her nose, and those with any money at all spent small fortunes trying to acquire it. But when she looked at it, all she could think of was Daddy saying, “How did a Jewish girl ever end up with a nose like that? Shirley must have been screwing around.” She always meant to ask her mother, on those rare occasions when Mom flitted briefly through her life between missions to save the world, but somehow never got around to it.

But at least there was the Complexion. Martia tended to think of it with a capital C. It was her one unmistakable claim to perfection, the smooth, unblemished expanse of skin. Even Mother—actually her stepmother Elaine—complimented her on it. “Martia has such a beautiful complexion,” she’d say to her society friends, particularly those who might introduce Martia to eligible young men. It was as though, having said that, she was relieved of having to say anything else complimentary about her stepdaughter—or, often, of having to say anything at all. Martia usually felt wholly defined by her complexion.

When she’d repacked her suitcase, she sat on the bed with her back to the wall and read her ebook. When arrival was imminent, she sighed, book-marked her position, and took the ereader over to the dresser where the monkey was waiting patiently. “Sorry, Lydia,” she said as she secreted the device in the hidden compartment. “I don’t know if they’ll do another inspection here, and I don’t want to have you confiscated. Let’s just attach your arms snugly around me while you go into silent mode. Just re-

member how important you are to me.”

“I’ll remember,” Lydia promised. “I love you.”

It was just a few minutes later that Richard knocked at her door to tell her they’d arrived, and ask her if she needed any help leaving the train. She let him escort her down the passageway as she wheeled her suitcase behind her.

They stepped off the train and, wonder of wonders, there was no inspection station to pass through. “Checked baggage retrieval is that way,” Richard said, pointing to the left. “Local time is 3:57 pm Monday afternoon. Have a pleasant stay in Burgundy.”

“Thank you for being so delightfully nonintrusive,” she replied, handing him another twenty. “Where can I get a cab?”

“There are no cabs in Burgundy. No cars of any kind, in fact. There are some private carriages, but nearly everybody walks here. Don’t worry, it’s a fairly small town.”

Martia frowned. No one had bothered to explain this before. Neither the official green binder nor *The Imbecile’s Guide* thought to mention it. The concept was almost alien. She’d traveled to other places and understood the concept, but she was born and raised in Los Angeles; no one walked on the streets of L.A. except to or from a parking lot. She was glad she’d used her exer-bike every day at home; at least her legs should be up to the challenge.

“Well, I’ll need some help with my trunks. I can’t carry them around by myself. Are there any porters or anything?”

“Oh, they’re always hanging around the baggage

area when a train comes in. The way you tip, you'll have no trouble finding help." Richard nodded, gave a small salute, and went off to help other passengers.

Martia looked around with a slight frown. This depot was nowhere near as shiny and new as the one in Concord. It was basically a large concrete barn with a ceiling that arched two stories above her. A big hanging sign said, in faded blue letters, "THE QUASIVERSE SETTLEMENT ADMINISTRATION WELCOMES YOU TO BURGUNDY." Other people were exiting the train talking to one another, filling the open space with boisterous echoes. There was lots of movement, sound, and chaos. The place felt grimy.

Well, she thought, if I'd wanted beautiful surroundings, I could have gone to Paris or Tahiti. I came here because there'll be no Carlo to clutter up my life.

She turned and walked to the left as Richard had indicated, then suddenly stopped dead. There, ahead of her, were the first Quasi locals she'd ever seen in real life.

She should have been prepared for almost anything, because she knew almost anything could happen in the Quasiverse. And, in truth, these natives looked more commonplace than many she'd seen pictures of. They were hard to miss, being bright cherry red, and at first glance, seeing them through the crowd of detraining passengers, they appeared to be drawing carts the same color they were. Then the crowd parted a bit, and she could see these creatures *were* the carts. The front parts of their bodies had

wheels like unicycles, while the back parts of their bodies had small flatbeds like pickup trucks. They had thick, brawny arms, no hair, and ugly flat faces with three eyes. They looked like nothing so much as bald, red, wheeled centaurs.

There were perhaps a dozen of the beings loitering around the baggage claim area. As Martia watched, one of her fellow passengers hailed a native, spoke to it for a moment, and handed it a large suitcase. The creature swung the bag around onto its back and took off following the man out the door.

Martia let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. Well, the system looked simple enough. She might as well give it a try. She tried waving at the creatures, but none of them seemed to see her. She reached into her purse and, after a moment's fishing, pulled out a bill.

She'd never quite realized before that the U.S. government printed twenty-dollar bills with ink pheromonally scented to attract Quasi natives, but the effect was nearly instantaneous. Within seconds, she was surrounded by a herd of the locals, all eyes fixed on her with rapt attention. She pointed at one of them who looked the biggest. "You," she said. "I have some trunks that need to be carried. Can you help me?"

"Yes, Mister Boss," the native said quickly.

"Miss," Martia corrected him automatically.

"Miss-ter," the native said.

Martia dismissed the correction. What difference did the gender misidentification make in the scheme of things? She looked at the cargo section of his back and saw it was only wide enough to accommodate

two of her six trunks, let alone her suitcase. “Those trunks are mine,” she said, pointing and speaking louder. “We may need a couple of your friends to help us.”

The native’s gaze followed where she pointed. He rotated his head in a strange way, flexed his shoulders and, with the ease of a man growing taller by standing up and losing his lap, his back simply expanded outward until, in a matter of seconds, it was long enough to take in all her luggage. “I can take it. You want?”

Martia laughed a little nervously. “Yes, I, uh, I want.”

The native, his torso easily able to swivel around more than 180 degrees, reached out, grabbed the trunks one at a time, and stowed them easily on his back. His arms seemed as extendable as his back, so he could reach all the way to straighten out the cargo without any help. Martia handed up her suitcase, too, and the Quasi easily found an appropriate spot for it.

“Uh, you know the way to the QSA legation?” Martia asked belatedly.

“I know.”

“Good. Take my things there.” She handed him the twenty dollar bill. He looked at it without reaction. Then, while he seemed to have no clothes or pockets, the money disappeared *somewhere* and he started off at a slow enough pace for her to keep up easily. They went through the broad doors of the depot and Martia confronted the town of Burgundy.

Although Richard had told her it was late afternoon, the sky was very dark, filled with heavy, pon-

derous clouds. It was pouring ferociously.

Born and bred in Los Angeles, Martia had never learned to plan for possible bad weather. To be sure, she owned some expensive rain gear. It was all packed securely in one of the trunks on her porter's back.

She grabbed the creature's shoulder to stop him. "How far is the legation?" she asked.

"Three blocks that way," he pointed.

Well, three blocks shouldn't be too bad, even in rain like this. Then a thought occurred to her. "Can I ride on your...er, back?" she asked.

The porter shook his head vigorously. "No. Only cargo allowed." His voice was as flat as always, but something in his body language indicated he was deeply offended, as though she'd violated some religious taboo.

She sighed. She'd wanted to come to a strange land, now she'd have to live with it. "Okay, let's go."

There were no street lights here, and the town was almost completely dark. She remembered the phrase from *The Imbecile's Guide*: "The wide, sunny Quasiverse streets..." She only had to go one step before she realized how wrong that was. She couldn't offhand see any sidewalks, and the streets of Burgundy weren't paved. They appeared to be hard-packed dirt—only, in this torrential rain, that dirt was already liquefying.

"Shit!" Martia exclaimed.

"Mud," her porter helpfully corrected her.

Taking a deep breath and resigning herself to the total loss of her Imre pants suit and, in particular, her Juan Luran shoes, Martia trudged onward

alongside her porter/guide. Within seconds, her hair was a wet, stringy mass dripping streams of water down her face, and her clothes clung to her body in a fashion some non-discriminating men might call sexy. Her eyelashes collected fat drops of water she had to keep blinking away. Each step she took made a *sloping* sound. The only positive development was that she'd chosen to wear her contacts instead of her glasses, so she didn't have water streaming down the lenses as well.

One thing she noticed was that her porter's wheels didn't seem much better adapted to the mud than her two-inch Juan Luran heels. The creature slogged slowly beside her, uncomplaining. as they made their soggy way through the storm.

In the dim evening light, Martia couldn't make out much of the town around her. The buildings all seemed to be low, dark shapes, indistinct shadows in the gloom. Some of them had lights in their windows, but their illumination made little improvement on the depressing surroundings.

She found herself counting eagerly. One block, two, three, four. She was beginning to doubt her guide. Either he didn't really know where he was going, or how to count, or he was measuring distance "as the crow flies." Five blocks....

"Legation," the native announced.

Before them was a fifteen-foot-tall stone wall running a full city block wide from side to side except for a ten-foot-wide metal gate in the center. The bars were thick steel, reminding Martia more of a prison than of the gates in front of estates that she was used to seeing at home. Behind the wall was a yard

separating it from the main building, which she could barely see through the downpour. A spotlight on the building shone down, illuminating the area in front of the gate and the yard between gate and building.

Martia gave the gate a tentative shake but, as she'd feared, it was locked. She peered around on the wall until she found an intercom button. She pressed it. Nothing happened. After a minute, she pressed it again. Nada. Again. Zilch. After the fourth try, a voice came from the speaker. "Go away. We're closed."

She did remember one thing from the big green binder. "The legation never closes."

"We do."

"It's open 'round the clock."

A pause. "We use square clocks."

"Ha ha. I have business in there."

"We open at nine tomorrow. Come back then."

"I have orders to report immediately upon my arrival."

"Come back at nine."

"Who am I speaking to?"

There was a slight pause. "Corporal Fuckoff."

"Yeah, you're a fuckoff, all right. Listen, I need to get in. I'm soaking wet. It's raining out here."

"I know. That's why I'm in here."

"Listen, corporal, I can make things very rough for you."

"Not before nine o'clock tomorrow, you can't."

He obviously didn't know he was talking to a sub-legate. She thought of informing him, in no uncertain terms. Then she thought again. She didn't want

to come in here and start throwing her weight around first thing. It would make a bad first impression. Besides, that was what her father did. She didn't want to be her father. Definitely not.

"I have nowhere else to go," she said. There was a slight quaver in her voice that she hadn't intended.

The corporal was quiet for a moment. "Try a hotel."

"What hotel? Where?"

"Try the Burgundy Grand. It's slightly better than the Burgundy Central." Was there the slightest tone of sympathy in the voice?

"Thanks," she said, but as far as she could tell she was talking to empty air. No more sounds came from the speaker.

She turned to her porter. "Can you take me to the Burgundy Grand Hotel?"

"Yes."

"Let's go then," she sighed.

They slogged off through the gloomy rain. None of this was going the way she'd expected. She tried to empty her mind and not think about the gloom and the rain. They'd only make her feel cold and wet and mad. She tried to think of herself as the heroine in a romance novel. Plucky and high-spirited, that was her. Those heroines never let tiny disappointments like this get them down. They strove through obstacles, and were rewarded with a handsome guy for their efforts.

Be brave, she thought. Be plucky and high-spirited.

But she didn't feel brave, or plucky, or high-spirited. She felt cold and wet and mad. And alone. Oh

so terribly alone.

“Lydia, I feel miserable,” she said to her stuffed monkey, a soggy mass around her shoulders.

“Remember, I love you,” the monkey replied. Her voice could barely be heard above the noise of the falling rain.

Martia didn’t respond. She just lifted one heavy foot after another as she followed the guidance of her sullenly silent porter.

After a depressingly long time, they reached the brightly lit entrance to the Burgundy Grand Hotel. Martia scraped her muddy shoes as best she could on the outer mat. She grabbed her rolling suitcase from the porter’s back. “Wait here for me,” she told the Quasi, since she didn’t see any immediate way to fit his width inside the door. The native gave a quiet nod. He didn’t seem to mind being told to wait outside, barely sheltered from the rain by the hotel’s awning.

Martia opened the hotel door and was immediately bathed in light and warmth and dryness. This was the way the world was supposed to be. She’d stayed in many hotels in her life. This was home.

The lobby looked like that of many small hotels, though not usually of the class Martia frequented. Half a dozen comfortable, though not luxurious, chairs were spread around the open area in pairs, with a conversation table between each pair. Each table held a large lamp, and there was indirect overhead lighting as well. A once-expensive but worn carpet covered the floor between the door and the

registration desk. The lobby was empty except for a woman in a chair by a front window, and a bearded young man behind the registration desk.

Martia walked across the lobby with as much dignity as she could muster, only too aware that her hair was dripping onto her face, her clothes were dripping onto the carpet, her monkey was a sodden mass around her shoulders, and her Juan Luran shoes, no matter how much she'd wiped them, were trailing mud across the floor—although she could see that other people had done the same earlier this evening. The wheels of the suitcase dragging behind her made a high-pitched squeaking she'd never heard from them before.

"Can I help you?" the clerk asked politely as Martia approached he desk.

"Yes. I'd like a room, please."

The young man switched to his professionally apologetic face. "I'm sorry, ma'am, we're all booked up for tonight."

"Nothing?" Despite her best efforts, she could hear the desperation in her own voice, so she reached into her purse for further inducement.

The clerk's eyes were not unkind. "I'm sorry, it always happens this way the day a train arrives. Every closet, every cranny booked solid. Would you like me to phone over to the Central and see if they've got anything?"

"Thank you, yes, that would be so kind." She pulled out a twenty and placed it on the counter between them.

The clerk picked up an older model voice-only landline phone, turned away from her, and spoke in

a low voice whose words she couldn't make out. After a minute, he hung up and turned back to her. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but they don't have anything, either." She noticed he pocketed the twenty anyway.

"I see. Thank you." Martia's voice was tiny and shaky. She turned and walked uncertainly away, like Marie Antoinette walking to the guillotine in clown shoes. The world seemed suddenly far away; sounds were distant and faint. She suddenly didn't know what to do.

"Hello," called a voice.

Martia stopped. It sounded like someone was talking to her. It certainly wasn't the desk clerk. She blinked a couple of times. Why would someone be talking to her? She didn't know anyone here. She stood frozen in a dim haze.

There was a motion in the corner of her eye. The woman sitting in the chair across the lobby was waving at her.

"What...?" Martia said in confusion.

"Care to sit down with me?" the woman asked.

Martia felt frozen in place. "I...I..."

"Of course, if you've got someplace else you need to be, I'd understand."

"No, I...I...that is, I..."

"Come on," the woman beckoned.

Martia found herself turning in that direction and walking over to the woman. The suitcase rolled squeakily behind her.

As Martia approached, the woman stood up. "Angela Yee," she said, extending her hand.

Martia self-consciously ran a hand through her hair, and winced as water flew off. "Martia Rosen-

thal. I'm, uh, afraid my hand's a bit wet." She tried to wipe it off on her blouse, which did no good at all.

"I'm used to worse," Angela Yee said good-naturedly. She didn't withdraw her hand.

Reluctantly, Martia grasped the other woman's hand. Angela Yee's handshake was firm and friendly.

"Have a seat," the woman said, following her own advice.

Martia looked at the proffered chair, then down at her own sopping wet clothes, then back at the chair. "Uh...."

Angela Yee seemed to read her mind, and laughed. "The hotel won't mind," she said. "*They're* used to worse, too." She looked over to the registration desk. "Albert, could you at least find some towels for this poor woman?" The desk clerk scurried away.

"Thank you," Martia muttered, and obligingly sat. She stared across at the other woman, appraising her for the first time. Angela Yee was a slender, beautiful woman, taller than Martia—well, who wasn't?—wearing a one-piece yellow dress, not expensive but immaculate. And dry. She had one of those Oriental faces that didn't reveal its age; she could have been anywhere between twenty and sixty. Her black eyes sparkled, and she had an attractive smile.

"You and your...uh, *friend* looked like you needed a moment to sit down and regroup." She nodded at the sodden Lydia clinging pathetically to Martia's shoulders.

"Lydia's a monkey," Martia said.

"I apologize, Lydia," Angela Yee said somberly. The desk clerk came rushing over with a small stack of towels, and Martia began eagerly rubbing one through her hair.

"Martia," Angela Yee continued, "you look like you could use a drink. That is, if you're old enough."

"Twenty-four. Need to see my license?"

"I'm the last person to card anyone. What'll it be?"

"White wine."

Angela Yee turned to the desk clerk. "Albert, two glasses of your finest *maison blanc*, *s'il vous plait*."

"*Merci*," Martia said.

"*De nada*." She looked Martia up and down, then looked again. Her eyes went wide. "My God, is that an Imre suit? And...and Juan Lauran shoes?"

"They *were*," Martia said dismally. "The only Juan Laurans I brought."

"If that happened to me, I'd be suicidal."

"What makes you think I'm not?"

The two women settled into silence until the clerk came back with their drinks. Martia started reaching for her purse, but Angela Yee waved her away. "This round's mine. You get the next one. Albert, put it on my tab."

"Thanks," Martia said. She took a sip and made a face. "This is inordinately average."

The other woman took a sip of her own. "Hm, yeah. Must've been a good month."

"Why are you being so good to me, Angela?"

The woman rested her chin on her hand and stared, assessing Martia. "I was wondering who the new girl in town was," she said honestly. "You're not

a factory hand or a settler. I wondered whether you might be potential competition.”

“Competition? What do you do?”

Angela Yee gave a long, loud laugh. “You’re no competition,” she said. “But why did you come to Burgundy?”

“I work for the Quasi Corps. Or at least, I’m supposed to. I went straight to the legation from the train, but they said they were closed. But they’re never supposed to close. I’m confused.”

“Welcome to Burgundy,” Angela Yee said with a snort. “Nothing’s ever quite what it looks like, or what it’s supposed to be. I’ve given up trying to figure anything out.”

“But I was told there’d be accommodations for me at the legation. If I can’t get in there, I have no place to stay. Are there any reputable boarding houses or places to rent until I can sort this mess out?”

Angela Yee looked thoughtfully out the window at Martia’s six trunks sitting on the back of the porter standing patiently in the rain. “If you travel that heavy, wearing Imre and Juan Lauran,” she mused aloud, “you’re obviously a young lady of some substance. No, nothing you’d call a ‘reputable’ boarding house. There are apartments to rent, I’m sure, but you couldn’t find them at this hour. You’d have to start in the morning.”

“Perhaps a house I could rent?” Martia persisted desperately.

Angela Yee shook her head. “There aren’t any single houses available in Burgundy. You’d have to settle for an apartment.”

“That’ll do, especially if I can find a place near

the legation. I'd like to live near my work. I hate long commutes."

"Same with me. That's why I live here."

"Oh, do you work for the hotel?"

"I freelance," said Angela Yee.

"Do you think I could find a nice apartment near the legation?" Martia repeated.

"What's your budget?"

"Oh, that's no problem."

"Lucky you," said Angela Yee.

"Or at least, it won't be, as soon as I can get to a bank. I brought traveling cash, but I'll have to get to a bank to deposit my letter of credit. Do you know a good one?"

"I use Burgundy Fiduciary. They're rock solid. Even honest."

"Thanks. I'll visit them first thing tomorrow."

A man entered the lobby from the street. He wore a yellow raincoat and rain hat. He was bearded, of middle height, and very stocky. He didn't seem to mind that his raincoat was dripping all over the hotel's carpet.

He saw Angela Yee and pulled a small notebook from a pocket of his coat. He checked it, then headed in her direction. Angela Yee gave a small sigh.

"Hi, Angie," the man said. "I see you ain't paid your tax this month yet."

Angela Yee reached into her delicate little purse and pulled out a couple of bills, handing them to him without comment. "Thank you," the man said graciously. "It's always a pleasure doing business with you. And speaking of that...."

"Now?" Angela Yee said.

“Nah, gotta do my rounds. You free tomorrow night?”

“I’ll look forward to it,” said Angela Yee.

The man looked over at Martia. “I ain’t seen you around before. You paid your taxes yet?”

Before Martia could reply, Angela Yee said, “She’s brand new. Just got in tonight. I’ll pay for her this time.” She took another couple of bills from her purse and paid the man. He thanked her and moved on to the hotel clerk.

“Is that how the QSA collects taxes here?” Martia asked, squinting at the back of the man in the raincoat.

“This is a more informal tax.”

“What’s it for?”

“The prospect of continued good health,” said Angela Yee. “Now, what were we talking about?”

“Oh. I was wondering whether I could find a nice apartment near the legation.”

“That’s about the classiest area of town. If you’ve got the cash, you’ll find a good place right away.”

“Wonderful. Now all I have to do is find someplace for tonight.”

Angela Yee looked out the window at the rain still pouring down from the gloomy clouds. She sighed. “Well, it’s obviously going to be a very slow night. Why don’t you stay with me? I’ve got a king-sized bed, plenty of room, and I wouldn’t mind hearing some news from the *real* world for a change.”

Martia’s eyes lit up. “Oh Angela, you mean that? Oh, that’s wonderful. You’ve been so kind to me, I hardly know what to say.”

Angela Yee waved the praise away with a dismiss-

sive gesture. “Don’t worry, honey. That’s just my heart of gold. We all gotta have one. Union regs.”