

THE PHILOSOPHERS “There’s been a pneumatic breach. That’s why the computer won’t let you open the door. That’s fumatory in there. You’d suffocate in a minichron.”

“Damn.” Orel peers through the tiny window in the door. It is completely dark on the other side. “Lights are out, too. What do you suppose happened?”

“Let’s find out.” Bernie unsnaps the cover to the manual over-ride and throws a switch. A thick, translucent web of plastic whips out from the doorjamb, stretching across the door in an iris pattern. Bernie and Orel unclip their respirators from their belts and attach them to their faces. “Ready?” Bernie asks, his voice muffled by the filter.

Orel nods, and Bernie hits one last button. The door behind the webbing slides open. The webbing bulges toward them, pushed by the pressure of the air behind it, then flexes as the strands react to the tension. When the web appears stable, Orel sticks his hand into the center of the opaque swirl of filaments. The webbing gives, then tightens. Cool, oiled plastic adheres to the skin of his fingers like the lips of some unnatural creature. He pushes further in, the membrane sliding slickly over his flesh, until his hand is completely through.

He waits for a moment, his wrist encircled in plastic. A guy he knows once gave himself second-degree burns by walking carelessly through a web right into the steam of a burst hot water pipe. But the air on the other side is only slightly warmer than inside. “Feels okay,” he says.

Laboriously, he works the rest of his arm through. He pushes his face into the web, the respirator pressing into the skin around his nose and mouth, and works his head through. He continues to push. Getting his legs through is awkward, but the tension of the webbing keeps him from falling over.

On the other side, he pulls his foot clear, and the webbing pops shut behind him, vibrating like a drum. His scarf still hangs limply from the center of it. As he yanks it free, it crackles with static electricity.

While he waits for Bernie, Orel works his jaws, letting his ears pop. If only the boys in Pneumonics would increase the pressure inside the buildings to equal or surpass the pressure of the great cavern outside, he thinks, breaches wouldn't be so dangerous. But no, that would make too much sense.

Bernie is through. He looks down at his hands. They are glistening with silicon oil, like the rest of him. "I hate doing that," he says.

Orel nods. The beam of his flashlight reveals scores of thick pipes, a pair of pumping stations, and a series of shallow, forty-meter long tanks filled with dark, motionless water. Even through their respirators the stink of algae is everywhere. The air in these rooms is normally kept high in carbon dioxide — Hydroponics serves the double purpose of food-production and CO₂ absorption — so the breach is not immediately a problem. Still, it should be fixed before the poisons in the fumatory damage the plants.

"Everything looks okay," Bernie says. "What do you think happened?"

"I was worried there might have been an explosion, but it doesn't look like it. We're pretty close to the edge of the city here. Maybe there was a rock slide."

"I hope not."

"Agreed." Their footsteps echo off the low ceiling. Somewhere water drips monotonously.

Orel's flashlight fixes on one of the thick cement pillars. The glowglobe on the side of it is broken. Slivers of glass protrude from the rim like jagged teeth. "Someone did that deliberately," he says.

He swings the light to the next pillar. The globe there, too, has been smashed. He moves the light further down, revealing the other pillars receding in the distance. Each globe is broken.

"Someone likes his atmosphere moody," Bernie says in a hushed voice, moving further into the darkness. The beam of his flashlight bobs and sways in the moist air. He kneels at the edge of one of the tanks. "Look at this."

Orel squats beside him. A bed of cultured algae three centimeters thick

floats on the surface of the water. A rough semicircle has been scooped away from the edge. Bits of algae have dripped onto the cement, where they are drying in clumps. Green fingerprints are smeared along the edge of the tank.

"You don't suppose someone's been eating this gunge raw, do you?" Bernie asks.

"Euugh. I hope not."

A small clanking noise echoes through the room. Both men jump up. Orel swings his flashlight about, but he sees nothing. Straining his ears, he hears a sound that may be running footsteps, but he can't be sure over the hum of machinery. "What the hell was that?"

"It came from down there," Bernie whispers, gesturing with his flashlight to the far end of the long room. "It could be nothing."

"It could be whoever broke the lights."

"Maybe we should get out of here. Let the clops handle it." Bernie's face, almost invisible in the dark, is pinched with fear. "Bouncing trespassers isn't our job."

Orel thinks that that is an excellent suggestion. But the idea of looking tough in front of Bernie is hard to resist. "Let's just take a quick look around," he says. "We can call them later if we still think we should. It's probably nothing."

Cautiously, Orel walks toward the far end of the room. Bernie follows, his flashlight casting Orel's shadow on the wall ahead, creating the illusion of a giant lurking in the corner. At the end of the tank, a shovel harvester hangs from a runner in the ceiling. Every other day the machine travels along the track, its metal jaw bending down to scoop up the algae then spitting it upstairs where it will be processed into something edible, if not necessarily appetizing. It hangs motionless now, occasionally releasing a burp of steam. As they walk around it, their feet stick in a thin film of drying algae. Between the machine's housing and the wall is a narrow space littered with trash. The mold growing on the wall has been smeared away at shoulder level.

“It looks like somebody tried to squeeze through here,” Orel says.

Bernie’s respirator exaggerates his labored breathing. “You can’t honestly intend to go in there.”

Orel shines his light into the gap. The rumble of the great dynamos above reverberates in the narrow space. Far within, his flashlight beam glints off something shiny.

Turning sideways, he slides into the gap. He is embarrassed to note that he is only slightly less wide sideways than head on. Holding his flashlight in front of him, he shuffles in. Bernie takes a nervous look backwards, then moves to follow.

After about ten meters, they come to a dead end. The space widens somewhat where the machinery meets the wall, and there, pushed into one corner, they find a mound of torn paper and cardboard, large enough for a man to sleep on. Orel fishes through the shreds of paper with the toe of his boot. Tucked into the paper on one side are several pieces of glass, broken and polished into the shape of crude knives. There is also a smooth, shiny stone, just the right size to fit comfortably into a person’s hand.

“Weird,” Orel whispers.

“Look at this.” Bernie indicates a thick mylar tube. A hole big enough for a man to fit through has been ripped into it.

“The breach,” Orel says.

The tube runs into the wall. Climbing inside, Orel sees an air circulator with the grill broken off. Cautiously, he pushes into the aperture. There is barely enough room for his head and flashlight. The filters within have been torn apart and the fan disassembled. There is dried blood on the blades. Beyond that are more torn filters and the darkness of the duct.

Bernie’s voice sounds very far away. “What do you see?”

“It looks like he stopped the motor with his bare hands.” Orel pulls himself back a little too quickly, the jagged edge of the broken grill scraping his neck and jaw. He feels a trickle of blood run down his neck. He rubs it away as he crawls out of the tube. “I’ve seen enough. Let’s get out of here.”

They work their way back through the gap. “The sound we heard must have come from here,” Bernie says. “We scared the intruder, and he snuck out through the tube.”

“Let’s hope so.”

“But who in their right mind would want to live in Hydroponics?”

Orel takes a deep breath. “I think — and I know it sounds crazy, but it’s the only theory that fits the evidence — I think it has to be a Rat.”

“It can’t be! They’ve never come this far in. They wouldn’t dare!”

They squeeze their way out of the gap. “That breach didn’t look as if it was made by someone breaking out. It looked like someone forced his way in.”

They stand in the darkness for a moment. “Let’s get out of here,” Orel says finally. “We can comm a clop to investigate. Then, if it’s safe, we can get some equipment and repair the breach.”

“Good idea.”

They walk back past the tanks considerably faster than they came in. They are almost to the door when a piercing squeal erupts behind them. Orel barely has time to turn before the thing is on them, its limbs flailing, its long teeth bared.

