

OPTIMATE

By

Gil Liane

"thair r those with the fashion of slugs, steaming of the
downline leaving a trail of badd, bad visuals across our I-line
{need i mention you O blueberry girl staining the face of
demons last eve??} its enuff to make an optimate jump from
the hiest roof of the coolest club now wouldnt that B a
headline?"

River, Social Martyr,

Words of Eve Online

>>>>>>>>>> I kepe moving insyde the sounds... inside
A solid dreme of hard moments & slender bites... our world
underneath... lite shifting skin over rock... going hard so
much furthur... keep tunnelling in10sity youre in our zone
now BABEE [optimum overload]>>

fLOW, Onlyne poet

"Wat if A club was created that was Xactly lyke a street or
yor own room? youd never no if youd ever gone out - if you
were just playing or realee living. I-ther way itd be a ride."

Talk It Up, Room Specifica

"any1 fynding my mynd please E it 2 me at this address"

Fantasia@uplinepartychildhedonist

"breethe illusion the chip rulz ALLLL*****"

Anonymous Posting, Clubline Four

Of course the force field is still on.

I clench my jaw hard to stop from screaming. For the tenth time I ask myself, why did I even try to use a doorway listed by Fry? Was there ever any chance it would actually be connected?

Swallowing a rising tantrum and ignoring tempting visions of Fry stuffed in a disposal unit, I try to get some serious focus happening. Tonight's mood's definitely tech-lazy. Since there's no way my brain is up to crashing systems, it looks like a pedestrian excursion just made the schedule.

I start off quick pace for Quadrant Alley, shoving past the Downliner hovering next to me.

"We have to walk? I'm getting so tired of breathing Upland."

I try to ignore his whining drawl. It's actually surprising I've kept a pickup from Nebula. The place is way Lowerland and totally not to my taste. I never travel there unless I'm in the mood for Queen Hedgerow, a wild, wild chip that overlays every club with the Gardens of Buckingham Palace. Sounds sane, but the visuals have a 2.5 second delay skip, the sound a 0.7 pitch throw and an 87% distorted reality input. On top of this, you get a cerebral kick every time you reach the palace. It's cyfry hot but not something I touch too often, since I don't plan on frying my inputs completely. I mean, I am an Upline girl.

Tuesday saw Derrida and I risk the Downline trip, and to cut it short, somewhere in the night I picked up this drawling little Downline piece from Suburban Six, one of the No Cash kids. Their best chance for a sublime taste of quality clubbing is if an Upliner treats. It does happen, but usually they only get a free ride or two, mainly because decent conversation isn't an option. Their brains are cross-wired from the crappy formatting Downline chips use. It's pretty safe to say there's not a lot of power thinking going on, if you know what I mean. As Silver would phrase it, the circuitry's el loco. Definitely not the same wave.

But then conversation wasn't what I had a taste for. Like a lot of Downliners, when it comes to the sack, this kid is hot. And he knows how to sell the merch. Silver eye lenses, a spiky, luminescent red hair weave that catches the UV light, tight black polarene top, ankle length blue kilt falling from extremely slender, extremely attractive hips, black nails, slender bod, red lips, good teeth, hot smile...

You catch the drift. Every clubber likes a nice piece to come down on, and I'm no exception. And this guy, well, he's exceptionally talented. I even missed clubbing last eve for simpler, more savage pleasures.

But that was yester eve. Tonight I'm well bored, burning hot for some serious chip action. Fry left an E-info saying Red Disk Four's are Online at Demons, which is definitely news, since they've been out of circulation for months now. I feel like I should take the kid (I can't remember his name, something boring and Downline) just 'cause it's been fun. Call me sweet, but I think he deserves a little Upline entertainment after last eve's efforts.

To be honest, I have to admit he's beginning to bore me, since he isn't so quick on the uptake. I get the feeling he used to be a Dazzler, addicted to cheap highs. Good chip wiring's high tide expensive, so Downliners use a lot of old fashioned chemical shit to get their kicks. The dodgy side effects mean, long-term, they suck as company.

Looking up, I suddenly realize the stars are already partying. This makes me nervous. I get edgy being Upground when eve's started; I should be tunneling by now. Since Fry screwed the directions (surprise, surprise), I'll definitely have to find a way in through Quadrant Alley if I want to get below anywhere near on schedule.

It doesn't take long to reach the derro street we're looking for. Dingy and deserted, just like all the Upground places linked to tunnel slides. No one wants to meet Normals when

you've just crawled out of a chipping trip. Way too weird.

"Here."

I lean down and reach behind an old fashioned silver trashcan. I can feel the control board under a rusty piece of steel piping.

"Help me move it."

We roll the heavy piece of junk a little to the left. I kneel down and enter an old validity code. Hopefully it'll still be Online.

Happy days, I'm cleared. With a flash the optical force field de-illusions and a small dark hole appears. Doorway to heaven.

"We're in, we're in!"

Downliner's jumping up and down like an excited little kid. I have to smile. He's just so easy to please. No wonder some clubbers keep Downliners around for a while. They're like pets.

"See you inside."

Putting my feet in and wriggling the rest of my bod through, I grab the handles, take a deep breath, and push off with a long, echoing, lung-ripping, glass-smashing, bloodcurdling psycho scream to kick start a hot, hot chip burning night.

"AAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!"

Time to club.

The tubes are crowded when we finally fall through. Comes of running late, you always catch the different crews cross sectioning. No one talks, since we're all in too much of a hurry to reach the clubs.

Downliner's attached to me like an Old World leech, which isn't surprising. If you get lost in here without a legit Upline ID the Blue Brigade hook you, and that's not a pretty sight. I grab his hand and he looks surprised, before giving me a radiant smile. His teeth are seriously pearlescent. The kid

must have saved a whole year to afford a job like that.

I check out the mob sliding by. You've got to admire his ingenuity; not many other Downliners have managed to hitch a ride tonight. You can always tell them somehow. Silver thinks it's their fundamentally feral nature. She says no matter how cleaned and sheened, Downline dirt just sticks to them. Diar says Silver's an Upline snob.

I think it's more elusive. They don't totally understand the language of club, so it's as if all their clothes aren't built right somehow. The message they give off with their fashion output is a little blurred, like they can't spell or something.

I guess it's almost impossible to click right if you don't have the Online connections. I mean, sure, anyone can access Free Net, but total clubbing is only possible if you're keyed in to a whole heap of different closed lines. Most you pay for, some you're given just for being an Upliner, and some are super Optimate. Others are available only if you crack them yourself, just for the hell of it. Fashion, the latest chips, the coolest club locations, all this kind of stuff is hidden in the wires somewhere.

Doesn't take us long to reach a lead-in gateway. There's an even flow this eve, no one's freaking. Lowshow's working the glass cube tonight and he grins when he sees me, his whole face crunching up. It always seems so weird to see those wrinkles in the blue light. I asked him once why he keeps his skin folded like that; it's just so eccentric. All the Gatekeepers are fossilized, the only Olds allowed in the Tube, but most get peeled and pulled so they end up looking pretty smooth anyway. Not Lowshow. When I asked him about it he just laughed and told me growing old was beautiful, which makes him living proof there are some strange people loose in the world. I mean, where did he pick up a loopy idea like that?

"Got a passenger tonight sweet Angel?"

Yep, that's my name. Painful isn't the word for it. "Sure do. He's sliding through with moi, headed for Demons."

I slash my wrist across the ID block till my Input registers. The no-go blue light quickly weaves its way into the green

clearance zone. I wait while Lowshow gives the Kid With No Cash a Temp ID.

"You know the way. All in all, lookin' hot tonight Angel baby."

I have to laugh. The man is pure sugar. "Always stylin', you know that Lowshow."

He gives me another massive grin and nods at the kid. "Nice accessorizing." He leans against the glass, checking him out all over. "Definitely nice."

I grin as the gate folds open, dragging Downline through with me. His eyes are a little wide, but other than that he's playing it cool. Lowshow's right. The No Cash Kid looks hot.

Of course, I burn even higher. In fact, I'm way up there in the style charts, but that's to be expected. I am an Optimate. In everyday terms, this means I'm so smooth it's almost dangerous. Me, Silver, Derrida, Diarmuid and Fry, we're generally known as the Wanderers, because we don't like staying in one club. We keep moving, up to five or six times a night. Nomadic, that's our motto. You've got to bleed the scene dry if you really want to reach an edge. Most clubbers stay put, or keep a general favorite place (or three) to rotate between. Except for us, of course, and a few others who want to be us. We're the crew everyone wants to have in their club. I think it's amusing, Diar hates it, Silver loves it (no surprise there), and Derrida and Fry, well, to tell the truth, I don't think they even notice.

"This is cool." Downline's voice is low but excited.

I guess the tunnels probably do trip him out. They're lined with wires and glass and weird freaky pictures, mirrors and illusions not good for you if you look too hard. Each club gets to decorate the tunnel space nearest them. At the moment we're passing through Rain, which definitely seems to have had a revamp. Making a mental promise to check it out later, I take the turn to Demons.

The walls here are frying my mind. Little ugly creatures seem to be creeping all over them. Optical illusionism is definitely getting too good.

Sauntering past the two Blue Brigades on door duty, I give Downline an encouraging smile, step through the shimmering electro field that passes for a door, and enter the club.

"Where have you been?" Silver's voice is agitated. She hates it when I'm late to club.

"Probably getting ready, by the look of her," says Fry.

I've gone pretty all out in a long red Oriental dress made of a mixed silk and plastic weave. Slits up the side show I'm wearing knee-high heat boots (they change color according to your body temp). Around one wrist is a black PVC bondage cuff. On the other I've put a diamond cover across my input band.

As for makeup, my face is done up like these old fashioned women called Geisha. I've even blitzed with hair extensions, weaving red and black around the back of my head in an intricate plait before wildly teasing the ends. Overall, I look pretty stunning.

"How's the scene?" It's never done to admit how much you sparkle.

"Definitely high standard," Silver declares.

I check it out. The place is packed, the lights are wild, the dancefloor's flying. A truly wired zone. I like the music too; all earthy, dark beats wrapped in harsh electro echoes. Something to fly your mind to.

"Angel finally lands?" says a voice over shoulder.

I turn and smile at Diar. God, he's hot. Indescribable is the word. "Where's your sister?" It's usually Derrida who finds me first.

"She's moving with one of the regulars." He nods toward the dancefloor.

In-between flashes of strobe I make out Derrida's distinct style. She moves like water, flowing from one space to another. I've always wanted to be able to dance like that. Fry

says she pulls it off because she's dancing in her own head anyway.

It's true; Derrida doesn't seem to be aware of anything but the music. Derrida says she's pieces of rain caught in a human spirit. Loopy material's always been her language of choice.

"Is this yours?" Silver's voice has gone silky. She motions to Downline, her smile wide.

Uh oh. Downline just might be the hunted tonight. I turn to him and smile. He smiles back, flashing those nice teeth.

"This is Silver, Fry, Diar, and Derrida on the dance floor. The flowing one," I add. No mistaking that.

He grins lazily at the group. "Tears," he says.

That's right, the Downline name.

"A lot of people cry over you, yes?" Silver's smile is all sex.

He has to go for it. She is a hot one. Her silver white hair makes her look like the angel, not me.

"Mm," he says, stroking my back lightly.

I try not to grin. Me win, I think to myself.

"Alright, we've waited long enough, let's score some chips." Fry hates being lucid when he could be in la la land already.

"I'll grab Derrida."

Diar heads off and Fry scans the club quickly with his Finder. They're a neat trick I thought up about a year ago. Because of a particular material present in all the chips, if you use an adjusted thermalized lens, it shows as a red glow. I devised the filter to work the same way heat seeking glasses do. The wild thing is if the chips are operating, they don't glow, because a particular metal component in your input band stops the signal. Only inactive chips show up, meaning chip dealers look like a big glow in the dark toy.

"Got one," yells Fry.

He heads off to a dimly lit corner with the rest of us in tow. I nod and smile at a few clubbers along the way, especially this extra hot guy Free, one of the regulars at Demons. I like the way he holds himself, as if he knows slightly more than

the rest of us. And his eyes are lilac implants. I love lilac.

"We want some Red Disk Four," I hear Fry say.

The dealer's muscles are bulging out of his shirt. Yuck. Apeman.

"How many?"

He doesn't ask how we knew he was dealing. One look tells him we're Optimates. We're always in the know.

"Five."

"Six," I correct.

Tears gives me a grateful smile. Hey, the kid deserves it, considering how much he's going to get pawed by Silver during the night.

"Sorry," Fry apologizes, throwing a quick grin at Tears, "I meant six."

The guy reaches into his back left pocket, rummaging around a little before pulling out the chips.

Fry pays the credits, since it's his turn for a group shout. Apeman hands the goods out individually. How dumb does he think we are?

I lean over and make out with Tears, tongue and all. Diar whistles.

"Let's swap."

I take Tears' chip and give him mine. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Apeman stiffen. Throwing him a dazzling smile, I casually lift the catch on my input band, but before I can insert the electronic party piece, he grabs my wrist.

"Wait." He pauses, scared.

"Is something wrong?" It's fun playing the scene sweet.

"That one's no good," he says uneasily.

I keep smiling, moving slowly closer. Pretty soon I'm squashed against his chest. Diar stands behind me, a hand on my shoulder. As he speaks, his breath rushes past my ear like a lost breeze. "We said six, and we meant it. Remember us. Remember our faces. If you sell us dangerous substandard merch again, we'll have you canceled and you'll be back cleaning sewers Downline. You hear?"

Apeman nods. Reaching into his pocket, he gives me a

different chip, hand shaking. He must be stressing big time. I would too, if I were in his shoes. Optimates do not like to be crossed.

I give him another dazzling smile. "Have a good night."

Bitch, he's thinking. I can see it in his eyes. But fear makes him give me a watery grin in return. "Yeah."

I laugh and take Tears' hand. Everyone's loaded up, so hopefully it'll hit any second. "Come on, let's bail. I'm in the mood for Light."

"Mm, definitely," purrs Silver.

Derrida takes my other hand. Her eyes look huge. "Light's always beautiful," she murmurs in her soft voice.

"Yes," agrees Diar, "it is."

Crystals. The whole world is made of crystals. Flying. I'm flying through crystals, they're breaking, no they're folding, no, wait, they're swallowing me, but it's pretty white white white all down my skin my hands I'm an Angel, yes, see my fire? I'm glowing white fire. Silver's hair is all pretty flames but she's laughing, Derrida's eyes are big, there's water in them, oh God, I think I'm flying, beautiful sounds, sounds hum, glass in music, Diar's talking white and leaving bright shadows beautifully wrapped through my skin clear high, oh, too nice, all layered, I'm in love with the sound, kiss me Tears, you're crying, don't be afraid, there's a rainbow Fry, a rainbow, it's all white Fry it's all white, just keep singing Angels, just keep making me come with that beautiful, beautiful sound...

The God-forsaken going to die from this throbbing if someone doesn't help me headache, echoes through parts of my brain I don't even use.

Sitting up, I pause and wait for post-chip dizziness to pass. It's always the same; your senses have a few problems

readjusting after the chip's invasion. Keeping all shutters down so my poor abused brain isn't juggling visual input as well, I breathe deeply, think yin, yang, whatever, the color blue, until I feel kind of balanced on the inside. Back on schedule, clear the runway. Taking a deep breath, I open my eyes very slowly.

Surprise Number One. I'm in my own bed. The last thing I remember is flying through the air at Peaks, one of the trendy places a little further down the tube from Light. I remember the Downliner laughing. Tears, that was his name. Now why would I remember the Cashless Kid's label? A quick scan of the room comes up empty. Silver must have gotten her claws into the guy.

Poor Tears. She does like it rough. I know from personal experience, a night when we were both way too far out of our minds. She is one intense lady in the bedroom. Actually, I think I can safely say she put me off other women for life. And Sady Chip Six. I can't even try it now, it totally reminds me of her.

Crawling out of bed, I start the trek to Wednesday, my sweet, sweet baby laptop.

To_angel.pm.sta

Frm_fry.dz.sta

had A littl 2 much chip powR last eve u were still buzzing wen i put u 2 bed no harm dun catch u 2nite later with detales \$&*FFFRRRYYYY!!!!

That explains it. Some chips wear themselves out, or have preprogrammed timers that give you two or three hours of fun before cutting you cold. Other times your body eventually overrides the input, treating it like a neural virus. Of course, you could be unlucky and end up on a live one that only stops when you go to sleep.

It's risky to be so totally wired. When someone's still chipping at closing and they've lost their friends, if some

derro who wants to do it with an Optimate doesn't take off with them, then the Blue Brigade 'escort' the poor suckers back to their place of abode. Everyone knows what the boys in blue have on their mind, and, well, you're completely out of your mind, so, yeah. Hasn't actually happened to me, but you never know when Lady Luck will disappear.

To_angel.pm.sta
Frm_silver.am.sta

get up get up yu sloth i want 2 TALK 2 U?? wair is she silver here B alyve start breathing I'm waiting angel

replyangel//

cool timing do yu remember much? i got 2 Peaks & thats where Lady Memoree appears 2 hav left me FRY sent a note tho so I gess thats enuff 4 now Any detales?

replsilver//

didnt know Fry coud wryt! took tears home + yes he made me cry, lost Diar sumwear in Peaks derrida left with Lily remembR her hot chik with alabaster skin?

replyangel//

I swear her mothrs a peace of porcelain how wos diar lost

Forrest says-

***##REMEMBER WHERE YOU'RE WALKING

SEE MORE THAN SHADOWS

THE WORLD HAS YOU BLINDED

FORGET NITE FIND THE DAY

RULE YOURSELVES SLEEPWALKERS!!!!!!\$#@#\$\$@

replyangel//

silver?

replsilver//

god that gy sooo annoys me SUCH a wacko

replyangel//

smart tho he tappd into A privait interaction left a message totalli untraceable just lyke all the uthers hes left &disappeard into million zones of cyberspace >>definitlee a wiz

replsilver//

i dont care the guys an asshole i mean who cares about his holier-than-thou crap little dumb rym messages & forrest wat kind of name is that? a bunch of trees that gy is out of his tree anywai freak freek FREKE

replyangel//

geez Silver try breathing 1s in a wile forget forrest wait how do you know its A gy

replsilver//

Bcoz guys are allways doing dum things lyke being troubl + writing stupid messages girls talk interestingly lyk goss, wich happenz 2 B - gess who yu smutt-ttted?

replyangel//

O god break it 2 me as long as it wasnt the litl apeman chip dealr or sumthing

replsilver//

much better!that gy the 1 from Demons u always oggle, the 1 with purpl I's

replyangel//

they R not purple they R lilac ^I luv those implants^ u mean Free_well thats stylin

replsilver//

yeah poor silver does not beleev vibes in moshun u flying
so high u wood hav dun any1 & you smut /no get smutted by
was mor lyk it/ 1 of the hottest Optimates in the system angel
so smooth yet again

4377*>>AAINCOMING MESSAGE- PLEASE CALL
PARENTS IMMEDIATELY

replyangel//

woah

replsilver//

wats wrong

replyangel//

Ive got ta bail thers A messedge from my parents *I hav 2
call them*

replsilver//

your parents!?!?! on the fone?!?! did some1 die or
sumthing? whats rong??!

replyangel//

dont kno better dial see u tonite

replsilver//

lateR

I turn off Wednesday and just sit for a moment, thinking.
The Olds. What could they want? I try to remember if I've
done anything really illegal Online lately. A few dodgy
crashes into closed sites, but nothing drastic. Nothing that
would make The Parents take any notice, and anyhow, my
stuff's usually scrambled to hell. If anyone does try a
traceback it'd only lead to a telecard unit somewhere
Downline. Nothing worth phoning home over.

Stop hedging, I tell myself firmly. Dial and get it over with.

I hit the memory one button for the number. Derrida made me put it there in case something really bad ever happened. Kind of like if the leader of the Blue Brigade came and decided I was Forrest and chose to execute me on the spot. I guess I might call them then.

Only might, though.

"Redderson residence."

"This is Angel."

"Yes Miss Angela. One moment please."

Such disgusting hold music. When will they realize electro piano is over?

"Angela my dear, how are you?" Father's voice is as well modulated as always.

"I'm fine. You wanted me to contact you." Let's cut the crap.

"Yes. Sally, your Mother and myself have the extreme honor of dining with Senator Watson tomorrow evening. We were so hoping you could join us."

An order. Yes sir, of course sir, walk on water sir? Certainly sir. "Shall I show up around seven?"

"That would do perfectly."

The phone cuts off as I'm attempting to phrase some kind of polite goodbye.

"Angel!"

I hear Sally before I even enter the grounds of the house. She's probably watching me through the stargazer lens I bought her last Christmas. As sisters go, she comes under the category, 'Enthusiastic'. Keying in my personal code, I stand still for a retina scan. The laser gates open, allowing the standard thirty-second entry break.

The house looks as cold as ever. An architectural monstrosity that's the latest in pseudo electrode designing, a compositional mix of plastics and steels pared down to supposedly simple lines. In reality this actually means the

final structure resembles a big ugly plant, like one of those genetic engineering nightmares from the end of the twentieth century.

"You're almost late." Sally rushes from the front door and grabs my arm, dragging me toward the entrance. "Dad was busy pretending not to worry you wouldn't show, and mum's been twittering around. How do I look?"

She gestures to the pale blue dress draped down her frame. It looks like imitator silk, which costs about a hundred times what the real stuff does, thanks to the higher sheen factor and crease-free surfacing.

I pull a face at her. "Bland. Kind of like a piece of paper."

"I knew you'd say that. Mum picked it. It's meant to say money, but I think it just says ugly. And she's making me wear pearl earrings. I mean, pearls! They're so Old World it's embarrassing."

I try not to smile at her complaints. I was the same at thirteen; too young for clubwear, too old for pastels.

"Hello dear." Mum appears in a nearby doorway and glides toward us. She gives me a quick flutter across the cheek that I suppose is meant to pass for a kiss. "You're looking very thin these days."

"Thank you." I pretend not to notice the implied criticism.

She surprises me by reaching out a hand to touch the fabric of my dress. Her face takes on a faraway look I've never seen before. "This reminds me of something I once wore."

"Angela."

I look up to see Father standing at the top of the stairs. Mum's hand falls away, her usual remote expression back in place, and for a split second I'm so angry I could spit. Typical of him to show up now, just when it seemed like mum was going to be friendly for once.

I try to keep my face calm. How stupid does he look, standing there like some kind of egomaniac? And what is with the stairs? Suddenly it's all the phase for bored Upline families. Out with indoor gliders, hello replica wooden steps.

He's slowly descending now, trying to look like Lord of the

Manor. For a freaky second I feel like I've stepped into a reenactment; like I'm inside a simulation program of a typical Upline family, the kind that runs and runs until the system has no energy cells left and the characters eventually stop moving.

I suddenly get the creepy feeling I'm the only real person here.

"What an interesting ensemble my dear." Father's lazy tone fails to hide the fact he's definitely unimpressed.

Pretending not to register, I offer a vague smile. "Shall we go?"

Senator Watson's house is as cashed up as you'd expect. There are even human servants dishing out the meal. Way decadent. I'm itching to go clubbing, but at the rate we're eating, it doesn't look like I'll see the tunnels any time soon.

To make the night even more of a charm, the Senator has a creepy son called Jeff. He's older than I am by a few years, anti-clubber, and worst of all, a Captain in the Blue Brigade. I get to fully appreciate all of this because I'm sitting next to him. Fun, fun, fun.

"Tell me Angela, are we keeping you from your clubbing my dear?" The Senator gives me an indulgent smile, the kind you offer a two-year-old.

"Not at all sir. I'm always happy to spend an evening with my family."

"You're lucky John. A lot of these youngsters can't be torn away from their fun. But then we were the same when we were young."

I nearly choke at the thought of my father in some funky plastic pants, chipping off his dial. In desperation, I try to concentrate on something mundane before I burst out laughing.

"This is a lovely soup, sir. Is it a medley of vegetables?" I try to sound interested, but who cares? A few nutrient pills

and the occasional immune booster have pretty much been my total diet lately.

"It's actually sweet leek soup. A cross between the now redundant leek, and an old favorite, the sweet potato."

I try to remember what those vegetables look like. I think one of them might be orange.

"Do you enjoy traveling Online? You seem like someone who would understand computers." Jeff's tone is derisive. I'm glad I wore my iridescent purple dress with the circuit board print, because I'm pretty sure it's annoying him.

"Angel's a whiz with computers," blurts out Sally from his other side. "She even made a device that can locate a chip dealer straight away in the dark."

An uncomfortable pause follows. Sally hasn't learnt yet that you don't mention chip dealers in public. The older generation like to pretend we just stand around in dimly lit rooms all night with the occasional dance move thrown in.

"How interesting." Senator Watson gives me a small smile.

For a moment his eyes look predatory, but I figure I'm probably hallucinating. Terminal boredom, maybe? In a moment he's back to being the round cheeked old man who welcomed us about a billion years ago, somewhere near the beginning of this God forsaken meal.

I focus on my soup, ignoring the Blue Brigade dork next to me who's busy trying not to look like he's checking out my breasts.

This is going to be a long night.

To_angel.pm.sta

Frm_diar.uz.sta

wear R yu sweet flya? last eve wos emptiness without U all Clubberz wer crying pleas respond ^ can u reche the butt-ons from the bed wear yu R undoubtdly shagging sum poor un4tunate

replyangel//

arent u charming no I was not HAVING SEX i got stuk with A family job it was uglee forget about it enee nu sites I nede sumthing 2 wear

replydiar//

Alrite 2nite we R heading 4 Stomp if it sutes yor Highness, aftr we'll just float am sending 3 addresses attachd 2 R closed good luk crackin them havent had N-ee myself so ile B wearing rags but yu super ladee R sure 2 smash them watch out 4 the 2nd site i think its got a heavee tracer, youll have 2 fullee loop the relay

replyangel//

thanx 4 the tip am not an idiot ile see U in my nu bedazzlin outfit lateR U lost caus

I sign off before he can throw back a few jamming insults and check out the addresses. Number two looks the best, so I start in on that one.

I've got this thing for coding, it never gets past me. I don't know, maybe my brain's mutated, but nothing seems really difficult to crash into. Ditching the tracer is the hardest part and I'm always paranoid about that, so I've only been caught once or twice. Even then it was nothing serious.

The government taxes to hell all nuweave consumer goods to promote dodgy recycle wear, so overall, the actual manufacturer doesn't make a lot of money. There's also a delay between when something appears in catalogs and when you can buy it in store.

That's where blacklisters enter the fray. If you can hack into a fashion house and place an order, leave your address and skip the government tracer, they'll sell it to you at an exorbitant, but still okay, price. Someone shows up on your doorstep with the stuff the exact same day, you pay him or her hand credits, and it's all finito with a tidy profit.

If you get caught with the courier at your door, you just say you thought it was a present from a friend and that someone else must have hacked in and left your name. Since you lost the trace, there's totally no technical evidence. Product police never prosecute. It's a dead end situation for them, and fun for us, because beating the guardians on some of those sites takes a lot of ingenuity and brainpower.

I have to practically bash my way into this one. It's a tougher number than usual. The product, though, is worth it. Jeans and top, perfect for Stomp, which carries a more casual look.

I pick up a smooth black stretch shirt with a wide looped neck. On top of this a strip of gray cloth ties around the breasts with a simple knot at the back. Printed on it are these wicked symbols the blacklister calls hieroglyphics, apparently some ancient language. They look really fresh. The pants are gray, start at the hips, have two excellently large pockets, and roll back just below the ankles. I buy the sneakers too. They're made of three gray felt flips that intersect to a peak, have a black base, and a gray sole 4cm thick. I order and then bale, looping it around so not even an echo of my shadow is left Online.

To finish off the look, I go for gray extensions, twisting my own hair under till it sits in an Old World bob with the gray bits streaming out from underneath. Way ghostin'. Around one wrist I'm wearing a heavy mineral band. The rock's actually been carved out of the hillside in a circular pattern, so the only metal present is the hinge, which is tiny. I love the dark, non-reflective solidity, it's so edgy.

I decide to pike for an energy boost. I'm planning a wild night to make up for the infinity of boredom I suffered through last eve. Just thinking back makes me cringe. Tonight had better be live.

"Hey Superbabe." Lowshow's grin is as wrinkly as ever.

"Where ya bin last eve?"

"The Olds," I say, trying not to pull a face. "Where you bin?" I echo back, in a pretty good impersonation of his lazy tones.

"Always here, babe. Always here."

Something about his voice is strange, although the smile's as wide as ever. I slash my ID and while I'm waiting for the little green clearance, I really look at Lowshow. Something about him isn't clicking right. I hesitate a moment before going through the gate, but I'm not sure what it is I want to say. The guy behind me gives this loud impatient sigh, like he's going to fall down and die if I make him wait another whole second.

"Are you cool, Lowshow?" It's all I can think of.

"Always cool, Angel Lady, always cool."

He gives me another huge grin, but still, there's something wrong with that too. I hover a moment before stepping through the gate.

Screw it. Throwing Lowshow out of my mind, I try to get into the zone. I'm here to club, right?

I make it to Stomp just as Silver does. The flow's heavy tonight, so obviously this is a live spot on the evening's agenda. Diar's the best when it comes to undertime radar. Somehow he always knows which club is going to be 'it'.

Silver, surprise surprise, actually has my old Downliner in tow. What was his label?

"Angel, you remember Tears?"

Right. "Yeah. Hey." I give him a nod, but already I just want to throw him against the closest wall. He looks highly doable. It's the fashion that's affecting me.

He's wearing a dark blue wraparound top, the material almost metallic. It's so thin you can see most of it's one piece of fabric stretched across and around his chest, hooked together via a series of small silver hooks down the left side.

Another piece of the same fabric must be hooked to the back of the top, because it comes over his right shoulder and stretches in a diagonal across his chest, slimming to a single point that attaches to a silver hook just above Tears' heart.

An excellently artistic but still techno savvy effect. Underneath this he's wearing a thin black see-through number that covers his shoulders. The sleeves are high and short, showing a lot of toned upper arm, the kind I like.

Since Silver's wearing the exact same top but with colors reversed (undertop blue, wrap top black), I take it she's actually splurged and dressed him herself. Not surprising, really. She has this thing about all her accessories matching. I guess a whole Downliner isn't that different.

"Nice of you to show," Diar's voice whispers in my ear. "Is this going to be a regular thing?"

Spinning around to face him, I reply in a dry voice, "Very cute. Did you manage to make that up yourself, or is it a quote from Guide To Clubbing For The Young?"

"Oh, too harsh."

Derrida laughs in her light way. Guide To Clubbing For The Young is a site set up by the government that's totally obsolete, yet a lot of bad hacks have to use it in their first year 'cause they can't get into closed pages offering much more realistic clubbing advice. Stuff that's not, say, a few decades out of date.

"The Lady is smooth tonight. And very, very sexy," adds Diar, with a grin that hits me right where it hurts.

Stepping forward, Derrida reaches her hand toward the gray strip covering my breast. Her touch is very light, almost nonexistent, like a gentle wind across my chest.

"Hieroglyphics," she says in her soft way.

"Yes." I'm surprised. "How did you know?"

Fry interrupts before she can answer. "Come on, come on, I want to chip."

As per usual, his desperate tone has us all laughing. He looks cute in khaki camo pants and a dark blue synthetic hooded jacket with what looks to be about a million pockets.

Diar dresses him, since computing isn't exactly Fry's forte. But we've all known Fry since we were little, and if we have to carry him so that he can be an Optimate along with the rest of us, then that's cool too.

"What are we swinging for?"

"Tonight, my friends, we're saying hello to the Blue Boy," he announces.

"Oh no, not the Blue Boy," pouts Silver. "You know I like to be at Peaks when I do one of those."

"We can go there later," reassures Fry, "but for now, the goods."

Out of one of his many pockets he pulls six small chips. Derrida claps her hands as Fry passes hers over. The Blue Boy is one of her favorite chips, mainly because of the single aqua color overlay. She says it looks like everyone is living in an ocean. Me, I like the drone you get from the 9.5 pitch throw and the 2.2 delay skip. Silver's more into the high distortion rating (92.7). She's not a fan of reality.

"You got them already!"

"Yeah, well, I was eager, no one was here, etcetera, etcetera. Put it in and shut up Silver."

Fry hands her and Tears one each, before giving one to Diar, and then one to me. I watch as he puts his in.

Six chips.

"Fry?"

"Mm?"

"How did you know there were going to be six of us here tonight?" It's definitely not like Fry to check ahead.

"Lucky guess, I guess." He laughs. "Here Angel, get with the chip, okay?" He takes it out of my hand, deftly flips back the cover on my input band, and inserts The Blue Boy.

"But-"

"Give Fry a break Angel Lady. Don't you want to have some fuuunnnn?"

He yells the last word, and Silver whoops along with him. Even Derrida does something that sort of resembles a yodel. I laugh and let Diar drag me onto the dancefloor.

It's not a bad scene. The whole place tonight is decorated like a steel street, with dark bricks covered in random pieces of bolted metal. People are both leaning against and sitting on actual trashcans. The room is one large semicircle with a three level dance space. The floor is black marble that seems to swallow the light. It's a dark feral atmosphere and I find myself getting fully into it. The music is packed with scratches, these trippy Old World sound effects that have become popular again.

I dance in a sharp, jarring way, just like the music, moving my head from side to side so everyone flashes by in one smooth blur. Diar is dancing in front of me like the style child he is. His hair is black tonight, cut in a random series of jagged pieces, falling across his face as he moves in the slow, arrogant way that's all his own. He gives me a lazy grin and opens his mouth to speak, only to stop at something he sees over my shoulder, before mouthing 'bye' and bailing out.

It's Free. He looks sexy, with a silver high-necked top that stops just under his jaw. Down the front are a series of circuit board buttons, each one flashing a different runic symbol in fluoro green. His hair is blue tonight, but those lilac implants are still doing it for me.

"Hey." He gives me a sexy grin.

"Hey yourself," I reply casually, playing it low-key.

"Gotta grab a chip, but I thought maybe later we could go back to my place." He leans forward and gently kisses the side of my neck. "What'd you say?"

I draw back slowly till I'm eye to eye with him. "Sounds like an option," I reply coolly.

He winks at me and I can't help grinning back.

"A minute," he says, pointing at a dealer in the corner.

I nod and start dancing again, enjoying the electro.

"You're very beautiful," says a voice to my right.

"No chance," I reply without breaking step. I've already planned my post chip evening, and ménage a trois isn't on the menu.

"Do you want to come and talk to me outside of this

dance?"

The pronunciation is unusual, but I avoid the temptation to look. This guy needs to back off.

"Aren't you interested in learning why your arrogant friend had the fake eye boy distract you?"

Diar and Free? Something about that sentence makes me stop dancing and turn to face Mr. Admirer.

Oh God.

He's beautiful. Not handsome, or strong, or any of that crap. Truly beautiful, in the fundamental sense of the word. His hair is long and a hundred different shades of brown, an effect I wouldn't have thought possible until now. It sits in lustrous waves just above his shoulders, but appears to be a conglomerate of different lengths all layered together. A flashing light passes over him and I realize there's a weave of dark green color through the strands. Impressive styling.

Fashion-wise, the look is all black, to stunning effect. He's tall, taller than me, with the palest ivory skin. High cheekbones and a strong jawline make for a delicate but strong impression. His eyes are the strangest myriad of green I've ever seen. They've got to be lenses, I find myself thinking in a dazed way. They've just got to be.

"Well, shall we?"

His voice has the vaguest remnant of an accent, but nothing I can place. He puts his hand underneath my elbow and leads me over to a corner, the touch of his skin cool and dispassionate. The moment we reach the steel wall I round on him.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Fire," he says absentmindedly, brushing a hand against my cheek.

"You'd better explain quick what you're up to, or I'll call a Blue Brigade and have you ditched, so don't mess with me." I'm starting to lose my temper. I think the chip's about to kick in and I don't want to start journeying while I'm standing here with some stranger who might be loony.

He leans back against the wall and smiles. "The raven-

haired young man you were with likes you, maybe more, but there's a plan that doesn't include you, and the lilac boy has his role to play, easier too since he wants the taste of you. How does it feel to be so wanted, Angel Lady?"

He laughs at his own words. His vagueness is really starting to burn, but I'm also getting a bit freaked out.

"You sense a little truth in the shadows, do you not?" He fixes me with a strange, intense gaze that leaves me breathless.

Someone puts a hand on my shoulder. When I turn around and see Free, a really weird feeling hits. I don't know if it's a trick, or even what this strange new guy really knows, but the whole scene's off-kilter. Why would Diar want me out of the way?

"Sorry Free, but I'm unutterably fascinated by this new Elite tonight." I put my hand on the weird boy's thigh, giving him a smoldering sideways glance. He smiles widely, the way a cat does when you leave it a bowl of cream.

"But Angel-"

"It's cool Free, we can totally reschedule for later in the week." I move in closer. "I guess it's a little cold to cut you loose now, so I promise, I'll be totally co-operative next time I see you, yes?" I give him a slow, sexy smile before stepping back and turning toward the new boy.

"But Angel-"

He sounds fully stressed, way more than he should. I sense him hovering at my shoulder. Looks like the weird guy's right. There's definitely something going on.

"Angel." Free's voice is firmer now.

"What?" I spin around, letting him see how annoyed I'm getting.

"Are you sure you don't want to reconsider? I mean, I think we could definitely have a lot of fun."

"No thanks. Please back off."

Free puts his arm around me and twists my body so that we're facing each other. When he speaks, there's an edge of desperation to his voice that scares me a little. "Angel, you

promised. Now come on, we're both on the Blue Boy and most of your friends have moved on. It wouldn't be smart to lose each other now."

A quick scan of the room proves he's right. Derrida's still here, weaving through the cold strobe lights of the dance space, but Fry, Diar, Silver, and Tears have all gone.

"Where are they?"

"Moved on, I guess. I told them we're going to chip together and then amuse ourselves later."

"They didn't even say any of the clubs they're going to trail?"

"No, they just said they'd connect with you tomorrow."

Now I realize something's definitely up. No way would they all leave without a word on where they're headed. It's a cardinal rule; always inform before you fly, in case an evening's entertainment goes sour.

I turn around and grab the beautiful guy, kissing him hard till I feel his tongue in my mouth. Then I break away, pretending to be surprised Free's still hanging around. "Back off."

I grab the strange guy's hand and head for the exit. Once outside, I pause and count to three, at which moment Free comes racing through. I thump him on the arm before he sees me. "I want you to turn around and head straight back into that club."

"But I'm flying for-"

"Don't want to hear it. You're staying here for the next hour. If you don't turn around and move back inside, I'm going to tap the shoulder of that Blue Brigade boy and tell him you tried to mess with me. I'll even watch while he beats you to within an inch of your life. I'm not kidding."

There must be something in my eyes that shows I'm not bluffing. I'm seriously angry something's going on, and I'm not included. Plus I'm way jacked off everyone else seems to be in on it, whatever 'it' is.

Without another word, Free turns and heads back into Stomp. No sucking up, no charming, nothing.

Definitely off.

It occurs to me I'm still holding the strange guy's hand. I look at him and he gazes back calmly with those gorgeous, freaky eyes. "What's your name?"

He pauses for a moment before answering. "You can call me Rowan." He grins suddenly, but it's a sly, feral expression that makes me momentarily uneasy. I let go of his hand-

-and the world falls. Blue, into blue, I'm an ocean. Strange sounds. Haunting me. My skin is floating. Water, I'm water, I'm-

"Angel?"

I realize I'm staring at the steely gray mosaic on the tubing covering the tunnel wall outside the club. Slowly it stretches out and then recedes, almost as if the walls are breathing. Neat trick.

I notice Rowan has a hold of my hand again. A spooky idea hits me. "I was chipping."

"Yes."

"I let go of your hand and my chip hit. Then you took my hand again and it-"

"Angel, I must admit I'm growing bored here. Do you want to keep playing?"

"Clubbing."

"Quite. What land are we off to explore, sweetness?" He weaves a silky laugh onto the end of his words.

Where would they be? And what is up with them? For now I put aside all the disturbing questions I have for this guy, because I can tell there's no way he's going to answer any of them. Instead I try to focus on the Diar issue, try to get it all happening inside my head. "Well, Silver always likes to be at Peaks when she's on a Blue Boy, so that's where we'll stroll."

Feeling determined, I set off tunneling with my sexy new mystery man in tow. As the lights and colors flash across my skin, I get a strange kind of feeling, like the whole world just flipped over and no one else noticed. Like there are shards of ice in my head.

"We'll go hunting answers, yes?" Rowan's voice is very

calm.

I look at him and he gazes straight back at me, a half-smile on those luscious lips. He's so magnetic, but it's a strange attraction, like something you know everyone else feels too when they look at him. Almost impersonal, really. Of course, that doesn't make it any less of a turn-on.

When we finally wander into Peaks, things are looking pretty quiet. I drag Rowan over to the South Corner where our crew usually floats.

Peaks is a freaky place. The walls have these live footage shots taken from mountaintops, but with an effect overlaid so it all seems three-dimensional.

Me, I'm not a big fan of Peaks. I don't enjoy standing on the edge of a cliff any time, much less when I'm chipping and can't work out if it's all an illusion, or if I've actually driven to a snow capped mountain somewhere and am at risk of stacking it into an abyss. Unlike most ordinary humans, Silver really digs it, which makes me think she's got a death fetish.

I almost trip crossing the room. Another element I don't like; the whole floor is made up of jutting layers of real rock. Artistic, yes, but annoying as hell when you're in a hurry.

I spot Silver sitting on an outcrop over in the snow section. She looks completely off her dial, swaying softly back and forth, crooning something under her breath. I kneel down in front of her, careful to keep a hold of Rowan's hand considering what happened to my mind the last time I let go.

"Silver, hon, where is everybody?"

She gives me a loose smile, almost as if she doesn't know how to work her face properly anymore. She's chipping pretty harshly. Where did Fry score such strong stuff?

"Waer."

"I know it's water. Where's Tears?"

"Waer."

"Tears?" I make her look me in the eye. From her view my skin's probably floating on top of my bones, but I really need her to focus. Why is she here by herself?

"Dee-arr." "

"Where's Diar?" She doesn't answer me, just leans to the left and starts crooning softly to herself.

I stand up, frowning at Rowan in frustration. "She's completely fried. There's no way she can tell me anything and I can't leave her here alone."

He gazes at me with a strange expression. "One question." Leaning down, he places a languid, pale hand on Silver's shoulder. "For your fire."

Silver's eyes clear. She gazes up at me with a confused expression, but more from the chip having lifted so suddenly. I can tell from her eyes she's pretty much as lucid as she ever gets.

"Where is everyone Silver?"

Her vision shifts from my face to Rowan's. She looks at his hand, but makes no attempt to move it. Silver's not the type who would mind someone she doesn't know touching her. A cute guy, even a stranger, is a cute guy. She gives him a sexy smile.

"Fry's over in Echo Corner," she says, not taking her eyes off Rowan. "And Diar, that bastard, had his tongue down Tears' throat just after my chip hit. They couldn't wait to get out of here." She frowns to herself. "Neither of them really looked as if they were chipping much, not like me. Guess I got lucky."

Silver's eyes shift back to me, vampy smile changing to a frown. "I can't believe you ditched us Angel. Diar told me how you said you were bailing with Free. You suck. I always club with you on a strong chip before I sack it with someone."

"Diar told you that?"

Silver opens her mouth to answer just as Rowan takes his hand off her shoulder. In a split second the glazed expression is back on her face. I wait another moment, but no luck, the girl's flying.

"I hadn't finished," I complain to Rowan, but he just laughs.

"The boon was one wish, Party Princess. What now?"

I turn around and take two steps so I can make out Echo Corner. There's Fry, dancing and yelling into the sky wall that loops your words back to you with minimal distortion. The set up means the echo passes by one ear and then the other, so it feels like the sound physically travels in a semicircle around the back of your head.

"Fry's here, so she'll be cool for the rest of eve," I tell Rowan. "Let's head for another destination so I can try and find Diar, okay?"

I set off toward the exit without waiting for an answer, careful not to trip this time on the rock floor. We pass the two Blue Brigades at the door and one of them gives me a wide smile. I resist the urge to gag. How foul.

Just outside the club I pause, thinking things through. Firstly, Diar and Tears? Too strange. For one thing, Diar doesn't do boys. He's as straight as an arrow, no way is he a swinger.

On the other hand, you could say Tears is an exceptional product, but still, I can't really see it happening in this lifetime. Yet Silver claims they left together. And what's more, I can't see her letting go of that hot little Downliner unless he was really going at it with someone else. I guess that means he and Diar must have been down each other's throats.

Okay, totally improbable, but apparently true.

So the question is, where would they head to finish the chip? And what else is really going on? Why was I so conveniently ditched?

I keep walking with Rowan in tow, deep in thought. Too many broken pieces. That whole charade with Free, for one thing. Why was Diar so eager to bail? And was Free supposed to keep me busy or something? My brain's starting to hurt from all the wondering. Looking down at the tunnel floor, I let out a tired sigh. What are you really spinning Diar?

"I searched everywhere for you. Who are you playing with?"

I look up from the tunnel floor to see one of the most beautiful girls I have ever seen standing in front of me. She's frowning at Rowan, but that doesn't mar the whole effect that is She. Her skin is as white as fine china, her eyes a soft green and so large you can feel them eating you. Slightly taller than I am, she's very thin, almost willowy. Her hair hangs in ringlets down to her waist, with quite a lot of green streaks woven through, from what I can see in the tunnel light. Looking down, I notice her dress touches the floor. It appears to be made of patchwork pieces of silk and pressed bark, sewn together in a geometric pattern.

I've seen the earth look tried before, but no one's ever pulled it off like this little number. She's so amazing it's depressing. I can't help wondering where all these beautiful people are coming from?

"I see you're occupied." Stunning Girl gives me a cool look. Apparently Miss Earth is not impressed at being ditched.

Rowan, however, is grinning. He seems to find this little tête-à-tête amusing. "Allow me to introduce Angel."

Great, but what's Miss Earth's name?

Rowan turns to me as if I've spoken aloud. "And this, of course, is my sister Ash." His tone changes, turning silky. "Did you miss me, my lovely?"

The two of them lock gazes. The look they're sharing is so private I feel like they've already walked away and left me behind.

"I was bored. The night was quiet. I missed the simpler pleasures with you." Ash moves closer to Rowan. As she finishes speaking, she reaches up and kisses him.

He kisses her back, taking his time, looking for all the world as if he's enjoying it. I catch a glimpse of her tongue slipping into his mouth. Close family.

Finally she steps back and they stare at each other so strangely I can't decipher it at all. The locked gaze is only broken when Ash's eyes flicker toward me. She takes Rowan's

other hand.

He turns to face me, his smile apologetic. "It seems our fun is over sweet Angel Lady. Goodnight." He gives me a soft kiss across the lips, more a light touch than anything else.

I grip his hand a little tighter. "But Rowan, if you leave me, the chip-"

"Yes." He leans forward till his face is almost touching mine. "Enjoy the blue, little Angel."

His hand slips from my grasp and a flash of blue light strikes me so hard, I'm blinded. For a second I make a groping stab where I know Rowan's standing, but nobody's there. I try to think, try desperately to hold off the chip, but-

-blue walking, echoes, oceans. Face. Blue shadows, all hungry. Pick me up. Washed, all washed, so blue, marine people. Warm hands, water, so much water. All the blue of a drowning sky, sweet breathings-

I wake up and see pink. Bright furry pink, actually. It looks kind of familiar.

I realize I'm staring at the top of my bubble chair, this funky piece of furniture Silver gave me. It has a seat inside what looks like a plastic egg. I must be at home, then.

Trying to get off the floor proves to be a bad idea. My head's killing me, and my stomach really, really wants to throw up, a plan only held back by the fact there's no food in it.

I try to recall last night. According to popular theory, it should have come before today.

Doesn't ring any bells. Closing my eyes, I sit and breathe for a while, letting everything relax. This lasts for about two seconds, until Wednesday starts making blippity noises.

How cute. Apparently I've woken up just when someone's

trying to talk to me. For some reason I find that really funny and I can't stop laughing as I start crawling toward my sweet baby laptop, a girl's truest friend in the whole wide world.

To_angel.pm.sta

Frm_silver.am.sta

get up sloth thers nu pages callin attenshun all fashuns wat R u doing I'm home and lonelee PLEASE TALK 2 ME!!#@%&

replyangel//

i am quietlee suffering post chip cant make sen10sus work wat did we do last nite???need help tapping old memoree boxes

replysilver//

no idea is my main answer. lost every1 except Fry spent a lot of time @ Peaks [i think] no sign of tears had the most intens Blue Boy chip ever O wait do remembR u were with sum strange but beautifull person veri tall amazing face eyes lyke green prisms. helpfool?

I think about what she sent. I don't remember Peaks, or anything else, but green eyes seem familiar. Whose green eyes?

Last night falls into my mind in a jumble of pieces and images. Fry yelling for echoes, Free watching me with a scared expression, Rowan's hand on Silver's shoulder, Lowshow's face as I went through the gate, the chip hitting so harshly, washing everything away... Now I remember.

Angel baby r u still there? waiting

replyangel//

yeah Online just remembered i've got sum stuf 2 do 2dai so i'll have 2bail onU pretti soon allways sorry silver but

Forrest says-

***## KEEP LOOKING DREAMER
MORE TUNNELS THAN TRUTH
ANSWERS BELOW YOU
CHIP TO THE KEY MY DARLING

TASTE FOR POWER - SLEEPWALKERS!!@#!!

replyangel//
yor friend silver

replsilver//
haha v funny i swear to god if i ever find that gy i'll
strangel him

replyangel//
a lot of em do njoy the old no air fixashun but U would no
that

replsilver//
B quiet u tart look whos talking

replyangel//
luv 2 stai & insult a wile longR but must fly wher 2 tonite?

replsilver//
did u forget? We R promisd 2death tonite 4 that loopi girls
birthdai i 4get her name possible a-ddresses @tached maik it
look good angel full gear required so diar sais

replyangel//
am i not always outstanding dont anser i'll catch U x

Cutting the cord before Silver has a chance to get in a
quick reply, I sit back and think things through.

Was Diar really messing with me last eve? Remembering

the whole episode with Free, I realize I need to find out. But there's no point asking either one of them since I doubt they'll tell me the truth. They're likely to try and pin it all on post-chip hallucinations. Time to get down and sneaky.

I start bashing away at poor Wednesday. This will take a lot of effort, but I think I'm up to it. Firstly, I bypass the governmental protection units that control our Online mail. Tricky. I have to throw a whole series of false trails behind me, creating a loop that should keep the tracers busy long enough for me to forge a temporary but highly illegal link to Diar's page.

Done. Now I add a few zone loops to that, which should drag anyone who notices through six departmental systems before dumping them somewhere in the legal records of the fishing industry. That leaves me with maybe two minutes to find out what I need to know before an Online system alert kicks in.

To_free.tk.sta

Frm_diar.uz.sta

how was eve with angel?

That should be ambiguous enough to get a reply. I'm not exactly sure how Diar would write to Free, so keeping it succinct seems like the best option. Then there's the fact I don't have a lot of time in this link.

replyfree//

i lost her look Im soree there wos sum nu Optimate who grabbed her wen i was scoring a chip.tryd 2 get her bak but she was realy jumpi about it cood she B on2 us? her reactions wer way heavy she threatend me with the blu brigade 4 gods sake but mayB no problem realy sins she disappeerd with sum gy 2 hit the sack & was due 2 chip hard I presume yu & Tears managed 2 slipout, yes?

replydiar//

how much do u think shes workd out 4 herself?

What's with the massive pause? Slow thinker, check the timer, I can't stay on much longer. Hurry up Free.

replyfree//

Wy didnt u type in the code Diar?

replydiar//

Sorree free, I 4got - so wood yu say angels on2 us all?

Another long pause. Hurry up. Will it work, will it work, come on Free, tell me something before I have to bail on the connection. Come on!

My screen folds in. He must have cut the line. I try reconnecting but he's already on a closed line with someone else. Bad sign. I head back to the wires and start disengaging my link from Diar's.

A tail. I've got a tail. Quickly checking the code, I'm relieved to learn it's not a government trace. Private, from what I can tell. Free's obviously set them onto me. I type fast, trying to cut the cord before they can get a direct link.

It should take him/her longer than this. She/he's already noticed the loop and is backlacing it. Not a lot of people can do that. Backlacing's highly illegal because it burns quite a number of wires, even cutting out a few main connections. When explaining to non-literates, officials say it's like being in a maze, but instead of working your way out, you go kind of backwards and then sideways through a wall to where the other person's hiding. Confusing, complicated, and not very subtle, but in the end it works.

I'm screwed, they're only a few lines away. This programmer's almost too good. I start bashing in a new doorway and quickly link my line through it, letting the coding mirror him/her back toward old weaves of mine. It's my neatest trick, apparently technically impossible, but

sometimes I manage to pull it off.

And yes, Angel takes the gold. You, my new friend, are lost in the web.

Sitting back, I try to relax a little. That was the roughest I've ever played in terms of coding. Whoever Free's friend is, he/she's no amateur, that's for sure. The panicky feeling slowly fades till I can almost breathe again.

I take a quick break before hooking up again to call on the fashion addresses Silver left. After my last adventure, losing these tracers is an easy laugh. I quickly style a suitably epic Death outfit, and, since she must be pretty exhausted, I put Wednesday straight to sleep once the order's in. Crashing seems like such a good idea, so I do the same.

"There is a visitor in attendance."

Oh God. I try to ignore the door's cheerful voice by shoving my head under an air pillow. It responds, of course, by repeating the message a billion decibels louder.

"Yes," I yell to avoid a repeat performance.

Checking the cam by the bed, I'm stumped to see two Blue Brigades standing at my door. What could they want? It's daylight already. Crossing the room quickly I hit the electrofield button to ensure there's a thousand watts between us during our conversation. This makes me feel a whole lot better about opening the door.

"Yes?" I try to sound flaky and slightly puzzled. The whole arrogant approach doesn't work with these guys.

"Angela Redderson, today is the day you've been allocated for testing. You're due at the Wesley Building in fifteen minutes."

I just stand there staring at them for a few seconds. Tested. I can't believe this is happening to me. Every clubber gets tested at some stage, but it's nearly always in their final year, and I've still got a couple left. I wasn't going to start worrying about that for ages.

Heading back into the bedroom, I look for something neat to throw on. The test is part of the Placement Assistance Program. It's supposed to reflect your IQ, general knowledge, hand/eye coordination, and overall computer skills. Basically it decides whether you're smart enough to hold down the kind of job your parents play at. Only the truly stupid end up Downline.

The problem is, if you're too smart, you get hotlisted; trained for a job in government, business leadership, or the nebulous 'research'. Nobody really knows what that is, but apparently it's quite intensive, from what I've seen of my friends' parents who've been bludgeoned into doing it. If that's not bad enough, your club time is immediately canceled and you have to join the Blue Brigade for a five-year compulsory term.

I can feel panic starting to kick in, because deep down, I know I'm too smart.

Of course, there are tricks for getting around the testing, but it's risky. I've heard of a few good hacks pretending to be dumber than they are and getting away with it. The down side is if you get caught trying to flub the testing, you're in trouble. Sometimes people end up in remand for a few months and then they're forced to join the marching blues anyway.

I throw on a floor length gray skirt, a blue high knit top with the shoulders cut out, and opt for bare feet. Grabbing the mass of tangles on my head, I twist and clip. A quick sonic clean of my face and I'm set for take off. Desensitizing the electrofield, I step out into the harsh daylight.

"I'm ready."

The Wesley Building is a calm place, from what I can tell. All the walls have a blue sheen to them and the floor's covered in huge tiles that are actually some kind of rubbery sponge, softening every step you take. Overall, the effect's

pretty tranquilizing, but maybe that's the whole idea.

"Hello Angel."

Yuck. Foul boy from dinner. "Jeff."

He stands in front of me for a moment. On his left is a tall blond haired guy who looks vaguely familiar. Personal shadow maybe? Jeff gives me one of his creepy stares. At least this time his gaze is on my face and not my chest.

"I'll take it from here." He nods at the two guys flanking me and the pair almost melt away down the corridor, apparently as eager to get away from Jeff as I am. "Your testing is on the twelfth floor, I believe. Shall we?"

He gestures for me to step in front of him. I do, and we wait for the elevator to appear, which it does almost instantaneously. The three of us trundle in and I ignore the fact Jeff's standing way too close. His shoulders are broad and chunky. I try not to notice, since I hate big muscles.

Overall, it's a way painful seven-second trip.

"Welcome to Level Twelve."

Thank you, I whisper to the bodiless electronic elevator lady. We all step out of the elevator.

"Just head through the doors and someone will arrange everything for you."

"Thanks." I start to walk away, but Jeff grabs my arm.

"I was wondering, when you finish, perhaps we could grab a bite to eat before you disappear for the evening."

I can't believe this. Is he actually serious? Behind him, Blond Boy's face is completely expressionless. I wonder if he practices in the mirror. I open my mouth to be really rude (like he even has a chance), then think again. I mean, he is a Captain in the Blues, and I don't want this to get ugly. On the other hand, no way am I digesting food alone with him (as if that would even be possible). In the end I opt for subtle diplomacy.

"I would, but I already made plans. You see, a friend of mine is celebrating her birthday tonight (I can't remember the Death girl's name, or I'd throw it in). Thanks for the offer, though." I start moving away before he suggests another

time.

"Bye," I yell quickly, waving to the shadow guy when it looks like Jeff's on the brink of saying something else. "Maybe I'll see you soon Jeff," I add with a dazzling smile, before practically falling through the section doors.

I take a deep breath as they swing closed behind me. Okay, so he's still rejected, but the ending was a soft one. I don't want Jeff too upset; disappointed, yes, but not mad. Nobody wants to be blacklisted by a Blue, especially an important one like a Senator's son who happens to be a Captain. You just can't club in peace when that happens.

The thought of being stuck under Jeff the sleazy loser's orders for five years makes me shudder. I'm definitely going to risk blowing this stupid test on purpose. No way am I wearing the Blue.

It's two hours later when I finally step out into the afternoon sunlight. I feel like my brain's been peeled, mashed, and shoved through a sieve, with all the heavy bits eventually falling over the side when they wouldn't go through the small holes. All in all, I think I screwed up believably. Not enough to end up Downline, but enough that I seem only passably clever; like I know where to find the computer's on switch, and can flick it the other way all by myself.

Squinting up at the sky, I notice the sun's not in the middle of the big wide blue anymore, but hanging down the side instead. Not too late to catch a little shut eye before the big eve.

I push all thoughts of the test I just did from my mind. Today was overloaded. I can't wait to club. I didn't really enjoy last night, what with freaky no chip tree boy, not to mention Diar's weird ditch-me game.

I decide to forget about it all for one eve and focus instead on the fun of the tunnels, heart of high fashion, electro

glamor, and hot, tech-sweet bodies. Club, here I come.

I'm hyped and ready to party by the time I reach Death later that eve. The line of uninvited curves all the way around a distant tunnel bend. A door Brigade Blue Boy slashes my wrist across his invite pad and my ID number flashes green for clear on his handheld miniscreen.

The moment I step inside I feel like the music picks me up and wraps me in a large, dark blanket of sound. I pause for a moment, looking down at the sea of faces.

Death is one of my favorite clubs, yet we hardly ever chip here anymore. You see, it involves a lot of heavy fashion preparation and you can't really club wander after you've been to Death. It's a scene you have to play all night, since you never succeed in shaking the feel of it until eve's over. It's a sharp, jagged, brooding place that brings out the poet in anyone, even me.

Scanning the crowd from above, I manage to pinpoint Diar and Silver's heads a little to the left. Following Death etiquette, I pause at the top of the entrance belt for the introducer to say my name.

"Angel."

The word rings out in heavy, echoing succession. Talk about vocal. A lot of clubbers glance up to see what I'm wearing, and from the looks on their faces, I'd say I've topped the market again.

Most girls wear black hair to Death. Tonight my strands are bright red and very long, hanging almost to the small of my spine. A thin wire headband pulls my hair back tightly, a sparkling frame of small black jewels glued along the hairline.

My skin's painted as white as a stone sculpture. This is a popular Death look, but while most clubbers define their eyes with dark shadow, I've added nothing to my own frieze. My lipstick is a pale, glistening white, rather than the standard

blood red. I look like a marble carving of a woman, come magically to life for one evening of pleasure.

Unlike everyone else, for whom corsets seem the go, my dress has a high Chinese collar. Made of the richest black velvet, it fits perfectly, flowing along my body in a smooth stream to the floor. Slashes are missing from the material, as if someone's been opening windows, razor-style. Open to public viewing is a piece of skin above my right breast, a portion of my stomach on the lower left, and a patch of my right upper thigh.

The effect is highly alluring, judging from the sweet glances I'm getting as I glide down the escalator. Stepping off the belt, I make my way toward Silver, who looks fantastic in a dark blue brocade corset with long wide sleeves that touch the floor. She's glittered the skin above her breasts and small, random flashes of silver light catch the eye every time she breathes.

"Am I early?"

"Of course you aren't, and fantastic as usual."

"You can talk," I say with a grin.

She laughs, and a passing Death regular gives her a smoldering glance. She watches him covertly as he glides away.

"I love being beautiful. Don't you?" She offers the statement to Diar.

"I rarely dwell on it, since I've been incomparable since birth," he drawls.

We all laugh as Fry's announced. Silver gives him an enthusiastic wave. She's definitely in a happy mood this eve.

"What are your tastes for Angel?"

Diar's smile is as relaxed as ever. I try to put last eve out of my mind.

"Nothing. You don't chip when you come here. Death's like one long chip you're trapped inside. I want to enjoy every moment."

I step a little to the left so a holographic monk doesn't pass through me. Around fifty of them are loose in the room. They

have the whole hooded medieval thing going on, but they don't look vaguely solid; they're not meant to. Transparency's an important characteristic of a ghost, right?

The workings of light and energy are designed to add atmosphere, constantly weaving through the crowd. Sometimes they walk right through you and this weird electronic buzz happens. Sure, it's all just a game, but I don't like that creepy feeling when the hairs on your skin stand upright for a second.

I head over to Fry, who's paused to look at some of the artwork.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he says softly.

I gaze carefully at the piece in front of me. It's a really old wooden carving of Christ on the cross. He looks like he's in pain. I turn away from it to face Fry, whose abstracted expression makes him seem suddenly vulnerable.

"Sad to think all this amazing stuff is just used for clubbing now," he mutters.

Glancing around, I realize it is a pretty epic ensemble. The whole scene's full of painted wall panels depicting some sort of story I guess (since they're all numbered), as well as a whole pack of Christ, Mary and various saint statues made from different types of stone and metal. Hundreds upon hundreds of candelabras also crowd the room; crystal, twisted black metals, shiny silver, singles, doubles, twined together on one stand like the branches of a tree. Of course, none of them are actually lit, the pale flames just an illusion, but they still look seriously real. In-between them are dozens of pieces of darkly tinted glass, huge displaced sculptures reflecting flashes of light, like a forest of darkened mirrors.

"Didn't the guy who set Death up buy the stuff cheap from those religions that went bankrupt?"

"Mm." Fry makes a noise but I can tell his focus is elsewhere.

I grab his right hand. "Come on man, snap out of it, we're clubbing, right?"

He looks at my face and finally smiles. Before he can say

anything, the lights suddenly dim and a strange throbbing fills the room, growing louder and louder till I can feel myself vibrating along with the floor.

"Showtime," Fry mouths at me, and I nod back. Together we turn and face the stage.

Death offers a unique entertainment on special occasions, a weird, lavish performance by Downliner companies that specialize in this sort of thing. They're always amazing, really strange moments that screw your brain better than a chip ever could.

More and more layers are added to the music until a dozen different beats throb together. Suddenly the stage is a shimmering wall as pieces of silver reflector begin falling from the ceiling. Cheap but effective; it looks like small bits of light are raining down.

As if on cue, the silver rain stops and five massive screens roll slowly across the stage. A sudden series of spotlights in rotating snowflake patterns illuminate each of the panels. There's just enough time to notice the panels are made of a thin, silvery material before the lights suddenly go out. The music pauses, and now the screen's lit from behind. Like a primitive puppet show, you can easily make out the harsh shadows of ten dancers behind the screens, their moving outlines etched by the spotlights.

The mood changes as the music becomes even more primal. The silhouetted dancers begin twisting and contorting to the hypnotic sound. Something long and loose hangs from their wrists to their waists, looking like amphibious wings as they move. Only the center screen remains still, a blobby, undefined shape sitting motionless behind the panel.

The music shifts once again, and urgent keens of high-pitched noise threaten to break the hypnotic spell. As if in reaction the dancers lean into the silver material, stretching it with their bodies, as if desperate to escape the difficult sounds.

Now the screens are lit from the front again. All you can

see is a distortion of bodies as the dancers lean into the web-like surface, faces and limbs making startling imprints against the fabric. Only the object in the center screen remains motionless.

Slowly the performers tear through the material, like insects breaking free their cocoons. They dance to the front of the stage like a pack of demented mutant moths, bodies painted shimmering silver.

Surprisingly, the mood of the music begins to lighten, a sweet rhythm weaving its way between the basslines. The dancers slow down, eventually frozen motionless in a variety of strange positions. Slowly the stage light fades away. Just before complete darkness, a soft blue light gently illuminates the center screen. Behind the panel, all that can be made out is a large, amorphous shape.

The sweet music begins to take over, the blue light becoming stronger and stronger. The big shape rolls gently forward into the screen, stretching it taut until the material seems to slide away.

The form is actually a giant closed flower, a lotus yet to open. The light changes, moving from a cold blue to a warm rose. The lotus sits still for a moment in the center of the stage, and the dancers turn ever so slowly, as if drawn toward it.

Suddenly the light deepens to an intense shade of red and harsh bass beats cut in loudly. The dancers move into frenzied action, contorting in a semi-circle around the flower. They push the lotus and it begins to spin slowly. Their dancing is more like a kind of worshipful spasm as the music builds. Eventually the dancers fall to the ground as if exhausted. The flower rises up into the air, spinning slowly at first, then faster, until a strange eerie keening can be heard. Above the mesmerized crowd the petals from the flower begin to open and the keening is suddenly tangled inside a whole series of weirdly distorted noise.

A strobe light focuses on the flower alone, the rest of the stage lost to darkness. The petals unfold amid a cacophony of

sound, and a slim silver mesh bundle is revealed in the middle of the stem. The silver splits, falling away to show a very beautiful girl standing alone. The metallic reflector pieces begin raining down once again.

She's all silver and begins dancing to a new breed of music, an addictive sound that has everyone below itching to move. The petals on the flower tilt till they're framing the girl, and slowly begin to spin. She continues moving rhythmically as the stand of the stem spins too. A beautiful silver strobe catches the highlights in both her costume and the silver reflector pieces. The music reaches a crescendo, and the lotus girl, flashing and blinding, twists elegantly as the petals spin wildly around her.

Suddenly the entire stage falls into complete darkness and all sound drops away. The show is over.

For a moment we all stand there in the stunned quiet that always follows a good performance. Then the clapping begins, continuing until the haunting dark beats of Death's music are up and running once more. Clubbers head for different dance levels, their own cliques, and nearby accommodating chip dealers. Fry still has a hold of my hand, and he drags me over to Silver.

"Was the show hot or am I blind?" She sounds happy and excited. Silver loves Downline display moments.

"Definite petal power experience. Are you chipped yet?" Fry sounds as eager as usual.

"Don't be mad Fry, I'm already up. You were late and I couldn't hold out, but there's no hit yet, which is down because I love to fly when I'm at Death."

"Oh Silver, tell me you didn't dip with Airborne again." I try to keep the grumpy tone out of my voice, but I don't think I can.

Last time Silver took the bird chip she spent all eve climbing on top of the tallest Mary statue and yelling 'Queen of Eagles' before jumping off into flight. Since she kept landing on very loud, unimpressed groups of regulars, it was a really long experience I definitely do not want to repeat.

Silver grins. "I promise, no leaping this time. I just want to have fun. And stop lecturing! Just cause you're clean tonight, Miss Holier Than Thou Anti-Chip Chick."

Fry waves a hand in front of our faces. "Look, I've gotta go find something special." In an instant the crowd has swallowed him.

"Where's Diar?"

Silver starts laughing. "Well, it's interesting you should ask. Right after the show, boom, no Diar. He evaporated." She laughs again.

I notice her left hand is fluttering by her side. Uh oh, a chip's about to hit. "I wish Derrida was here."

"So do I." Silver frowns. "I mean, why does she have to get all political about this place? Most of the best party times are here and it's just not the same without our water girl."

Derrida will never club with us at Death. At first we thought it was a coincidence she never made it out on the nights when Death was scheduled, but then it became a little too obvious. Finally we all hassled her into telling us why. Turns out she hates all the religious stuff. She ranted on about the worship of martyrs and the twisting of the spirit, and when Fry pointed out all the paraphernalia was in a club now, not a church, Derrida glowered at him and said the worship was just as present and just as polluted. In the end we gave up trying to persuade her. Actually it was Diar who told us to leave her alone. I think it was the only time he'd ever seen his soft-spoken sister so heated about anything.

What it meant in present moment terms was one less person to babysit Silver the human airplane. I glance around, but Fry's nowhere in sight. By the sounds of it he's on an elusive chip trail and won't be back for a while anyway.

I spot Diar's head in the crowd. Relieved, I grab Silver's hand, dragging her in his direction. Only when we're closer do I see he's with the girl who was dancing in the flower. I slow down.

"Well, he certainly moves fast," drawls Silver in my ear. "Come on."

Now she's dragging me toward Diar. As we reach them he looks up and smiles. He has his arm around the girl. She's leaning back into him, as if she already owns him, and for some reason this really annoys me.

"Hey, I was just looking for you two. This is Light."

I check her out. She's slim, but quite a lot shorter than I expected. Her contacts are white and the skin on her arms, legs, and chest has been dusted with silver powder. Her hair is true white and covered in a silver glitter that makes it shine. The makeup is seriously silver; silver eyes, silver lips, and silver cheeks. Her nails are painted silver and her dress is like a glossy piece of silver cloth wrapped around her that doesn't leave anything to the imagination. She has the same slightly Oriental cast to her features that Tears has, the kind of look that makes for a true knockout. Suffice to say, she's white hot.

Diar does introductions. "This is Silver and this is Angel."

Light glances in Silver's direction, before fixing her gaze on my face. She gives me a small smile but her eyes are all venom. This freaks me out, since I don't even know the little dancing Downliner.

"Light and I are leaving." Diar's voice breaks me away from that burning gaze.

"But you can't Diar. Silver's chipping on Airborne and Fry's off searching for a dealer."

"I loved the show," interrupts Silver. She's smiling at Light with that certain gleam in her eyes. "Do you dance often?"

I glaze out as Light begins a detailed listing of her practice habits and previous performances. Standing next to Diar, it almost looks as if they've dressed to match. He's wearing a floor-length thick black sarong, sheened so it reflects just a little of the light. He has a fitted white shirt on underneath a beautifully cut old-fashioned black frockcoat, but it's his cravat that catches the eye. The piece of material curled at his throat is the exact same shade of silver Light's whole look is based on. His hair is plain black, relatively short, and worked into a quiff style. Across his eyes are a series of small,

carefully painted silver cubes. They shade in and out of existence across his lids, a perfect color match to his outfit, and his new friend.

"We're off now."

Diar's voice breaks into my thoughts, leaving me definitely annoyed. No way am I babysitting Silver alone. "But Diar-"

"Just this once Angel. I owe you." He steps forward and gives me a gentle kiss on the cheek.

I look up to see Light's smile has slipped, which makes me feel a little better. "Alright, alright," I step away and wink. "Have fun."

Diar laughs. "I will." With that he takes Light's hand and slips into the crowd, heading toward the exit.

I turn to Silver. "Well, shall we find a little talent of our own?"

But she's not listening to me.

"I knew I'd heard that name before." Silver looks me straight in the eye. "Light is Tears' sister."

I feel like someone just punched me. This is way too coincidental. "Are you sure?"

"Definitely. You can trust me on this." She gives me a small smile. "Sometimes I do actually talk to the people I sleep with Angel."

Everything that happened last eve floods back, all the games with Tears and Free. Suddenly I need to know exactly where Diar's going. Maybe he's taking Light and hooking up with Tears, or Derrida, or even Fry. I realize I'm actually fullstream angry with him. No way I should be stuck here babysitting Silver while they're off enjoying some new escapade. Just what is their problem anyhow?

"Two seconds," I manage to throw in Silver's direction before setting off for the exit.

Diar and Light are traveling the center section, which is way packed, so by taking the emptier edge-of-the-room skim route, I get to the exit a moment after them, and they don't see me as I tail them out into the tunnels. Surprisingly, Diar removes Light's arm from around his waist the instant he

steps across the threshold, giving her a dark look. He sets off high pace down the path, with Light scampering behind.

I turn around and practically run into the club to find Silver. I'd love to just follow them and reveal the deal, but I owe it to Silver to tell her I'm bailing and make sure she's set up for the eve.

I'm traveling so fast I practically land at her side. "Silver, I'm sorry to bail, but I just have to go somewhere now. Please don't ask, hey."

Surprisingly, she doesn't. "That's cool, but my chip's just kicking in and I don't think I can be here alone."

Damn the clubs. I search the scene quickly for Free, but he's nowhere in sight.

"I'm sorry. There must be someone who can watch out for me."

We crowd scan quickly, but none of our own particular other-friends are nearby.

Silver reaches out an arm and grabs a passing clubber. "He'll do."

I check out her selection. He's young, probably still a teenager. The overall look is semi-okay, almost there but not quite. In a year or two he could have some potential. For now, he's just a baby.

"Do you know who I am?" Silver asks him.

He gulps and nods. "Of course. You're Silver." He glances across at me nervously. "You're both Wanderers."

"Look kid, Angel has to bail now and we can't find Fry so you're going to have to do. Are you chipping yet?"

"No, I was just looking for a dealer."

"Cool, very cool. If you promise not to chip this eve and look out for me instead, well, post-clubbing is going to be something very hot, you hear?" She gives him a sultry smile and moves a little closer.

I notice her right hand is moving gently over the back of the poor boy's pants. He's certainly noticed too. That's Silver, our universal corruptor of youth.

"Uh huh," he says, mesmerized by her.

I guess this is a young clubber fantasy, being seduced by one of the hottest Elites. Not that there's much of an age difference. It's more an experience thing.

Silver laughs and waves at me. "Bye Angel."

I find myself laughing too. "I never thought I'd see this, you with a newborn. Why this guy?"

"Easy answer. He has kind eyes."

We both look at the kid again. She's right; his eyes are kind. He blushes a deeper red under our stares.

"Alright, I'm off, but she better be okay when I call her tomorrow. She's chipping on an Airborne so watch out for her climbing the Mary statues and trying to jump off."

"I'll be careful," he assures me.

"If you keep her okay, your reputation's made. If you don't, if you wander off and get distracted, well, I'll make sure you never see the inside of a decent club again, set?"

"I'll make sure she's cool, I promise. Don't worry."

He looks me straight in the eye and I begin to relax. I think he's the kind of kid who will watch out for Silver precisely because his honor's now involved. That and the fact he's in for some serious end-of-eve bed action.

"Be gentle Silver," I throw over my shoulder as I head for the exit. After three steps I hear her belting out instructions at the poor kid.

"If this is going to work between us the first thing you have to do is get rid of that terrible choker. It is so wrong for you."
