

## THE SHOP

Angela touched a glossy pink fingernail to the smiling golden face that floated before her. As her finger tip occupied the same space as the consume icon, it sent out a train of small ripples, recalling a stone dropped in a pool, and the five notes of the ConsumeMORE corporate jingle gathered themselves together from thin air. It was a sound that was rarely far away; a sound intended to make her feel safe, warm, wanted. Instead, it was a sound that made her want to smash things, to stamp on someone's head, to get the hell away from there. It had formed the backbeat to her shelf life. There when mama and papa pick-and-mixed her DNA, when papa maker passed his use-by date and ascended with ceremony into the golden halls of Abundantia -- praise be her beneficence -- and when she opened her mind to the mailworm informing her that Harvey had traded her in for a credit note. Now, she'd had enough.

After her co-consumer had moved out, she had put a bar on all comms, but Harvey had soon found a way around it. One of the many perks -- she guessed -- of belonging to the tech-hood. Yesterday, she had woken to find his avatar leaning over her; plump, hairless, face split by a wide, gloating smile that never reached his almost black, piggy, eyes. He rejoiced in telling her that he had cashed

in his credit note for a raven-haired young widow; a beauty for whom the golden halls were still a distant prospect.

Something had snapped inside her then. There was no anger, no tears. On the surface she had taken the news with her signature outward calm and equanimity, flawless face cast in its usual half-smile. But deep down, she had boiled with barely controllable rage. It wasn't the first time. In the thirty-nine years since she was quickened there had been a number of occasions when aberrant behaviour had revealed that things were not quite right, that emotionally she deviated too far from the norm for her own good -- and for the good of others. There was the time she had embedded a pair of scissors in mama's hand. That alone would have bought her a one way trip to level zero -- damaged goods -- if her makers hadn't been high flyers. The 4000<sup>th</sup> level no less; consumer royalty. Then, in the second year of their two-for-one pact, she had hurled a mug of hot coffee at Harvey's head. She couldn't remember why, but she would never forget the look of pure loathing he had given her, as he looked up from splashing his blistering face with cold water. Harvey had rejoiced in informing on her. She had been lucky to get away with a warning, no doubt her distinguished lineage counting in her favour again. But this time it came with a proviso. If she stepped out of line once more, the rest of her shelf life would be spent on level zero, mixing it

with the rest of the defectives. Other than myth and whispers, she knew nothing of level zero, but she knew she really didn't want to go there.

It had taken barely a month for her to realise that Harvey had been a big mistake. Mama and papa had warned her, to be fair, but she had sneered at their objections, putting them down to pure snobbery. OK, so Harvey was a lowly who hailed from the Mire, deep down on the 500<sup>th</sup> level, but he was much younger than her, fun to be with and good-looking - well, from certain angles and in a favourable light. More than that, he was a techie, and that brought both perks and a certain frisson of power. She had always had a thing about uniforms, and Harvey filled the black one-piece beautifully. But the fun had dried up within weeks, and the cachet of the uniform quickly wore thin as his baseborn origins shone through and he treated her increasingly like a piece of shit. Perhaps she should have got in first, traded him in for a mellower, more pliable co-consumer to dote on her for the short time remaining before she was summoned to the Halls.

She guessed that Harvey had been making plans for a payback ever since the coffee incident. If she thought about it, it wasn't a surprise that he had checked her in for something younger and more manageable or -- to be frank -- less fucked-up. Even so, she couldn't help wondering; why now? She had passed her best-before date a couple of years

back now, and in a few months she would be forty, her shelf life up, so he would have been rid of her anyway. It had to be sheer spite, pure venom that he had been hoarding up; cultivating. Well, whatever the reason, it had tipped her over the edge.

The gene recipe that her parents had concocted had been vetted and tagged alpha-prime-two; almost as high as it got. By rights she should have been the perfect by-blow, physically attractive, sweet and good natured; a mind that scored low on inquisitiveness and independence, but high on malleability. The perfect specimen for life in the Emporium; impulsive, gullible, easily impressed, content. But she was nothing like what it said on the tin. Somehow, nurture had intervened, stoking a seemingly inoffensive epigenetic tweak that, at a stroke, had scrambled her near flawless genetic make-up. Hence, she questioned everything and believed nothing. Hence, she was precisely the wrong sort of person for life in the Emporium. And now she wanted out.

For as long as she could remember, she had inwardly scoffed at the unending pap that the Storekeepers fed them, day in -- day out. She had never thought to doubt that she and a million or so fellow consumers were doing a vital job in the maintenance of the global economy; that without them to consume, the billions of producers on the outside would starve and die. But the rest of the

crap; the consumption targets, the endless offers, the upgrades, the personalised ads, the insidious, unrelenting, nudging, they drove her nuts. She had considered bailing out on countless occasions, but nothing had ever come of it. Every time she had tried to imagine life outside the Emporium, beyond the reach of ConsuMORE -- The Shop as everyone knew it it -- she felt a surge of excitement; anticipation. But there was also a tingle of dread; of the unknown. So far fear had won out, but now she had nothing to lose.

Seeking a means of escape had never seemed a problem. Even when she was small, she had been aware of the graffiti daubed by the renegade *Tabu*. The rebel group proselytised against everything the Emporium stood for and advocated what they called repatriation to the real world. The group's crumpled flyers littered the corridors and lifts, and their illegal broadcasts frequently hacked into comms and the entertainment channels. There was no obvious way to make contact, but word was that touching a fingertip to one of their posters was sufficient. She had done so surreptitiously a while back, but had heard nothing. Maybe it was all just so much garbage.

She grimaced at the prospect, waved a perfectly manicured hand to banish the intangible screen and walked over to the curved window-wall. Far below, the surface was invisible, curtained by a veil of sparkling white cloud that stretched as

far as the eye could see in all directions. To her left, the setting sun hovered low above the curved horizon, its blinding glare subdued by the polarising clearplas. Above, the sky was an inky blue, a dusting of stars already visible. One flickering yellow mote marked the passage of a shuttle heading to one of the orbital colonies. Another, on the horizon, tagged the pinnacle of the nearest of the two hundred other Emporia that sprouted from the planet's surface like a hedgehog's spines.

She turned as a soft thud announced the arrival of something new -- its appearance reinforced by the ubiquitous five note chime -- and walked purposefully into the next room. She side-swiped right with her hand and the circular steel door of the cornucopia obediently withdrew to reveal a golden-lit interior, upon the padded floor of which rested a flat package. Wrapped in her paper of choice -- blush pink -- and tied with a blood-red ribbon, was the box of chocolate truffles she had just ordered; last port in the emotional storm she was struggling to ride out. But there was something else too. A small, plain carton of brown cardboard, with no embellishment or identifying features. Curiosity piqued, she ignored the chocolates, and picked up the carton. Hefting it in one hand, she frowned. It felt empty. Tentatively, she removed the lid to disclose a small plastic card and a folded sheet of paper. Lifting out the

card and turning it over, she gasped and put her hand to her throat, heart suddenly pounding. Tabu. It had to be. They must, after all, have decoded her DNA and ID'd her from the tiny particles of skin she had left on the poster. Somehow they had hacked into the delivery system and sneaked in the means of her salvation. It all seemed so simple, she was already wishing she'd had the gall to make a move earlier.

She looked at the card again. On one side it was blank, on the other there was an astonishingly lifelike holo of a human eye -- deep violet with flecks of gold and green. It looked almost like a work of art, but she knew it's purpose was purely functional; to allow her access to places she had no right or reason to be. Unfolding the paper she squinted at the unfamiliar text, which she assumed were instructions. It was handwritten -- something she was barely familiar with -- and she struggled to figure out the words. Her home buddy, Sirius, could have deciphered it in seconds, but she didn't want anyone, or anything, knowing about this. She crossed to the dining room, sat down at the table, and called up a virtual keyboard and screen. It was slow and laborious work, but eventually she had the words figured out -- well, just about -- and typed. She touched send and forwarded the instructions as a mailworm to herself. A small itch at her left temple announced its arrival, and she opened the file and scanned it mentally. The corners of her

rosebud mouth turned upwards in a small smile, calling into being the faintest of lines in an otherwise flawless complexion. Then she nodded once in satisfaction. Good. Her AI module had automatically tidied up and the thing made sense now.

With a minimum of words, the message informed Angela that the system had been hacked to permit access for her DNA profile to one of the five hundred or so service elevators that pierced the four thousand and two levels of the Emporium, and provided directions thereto. Down in the Mire, where the necessary functionaries lived out their vacuous lives, retinal recog still held sway, and the holo would get her where she needed to go.

She tapped her right temple twice to minimise the mailworm and looked around the apartment. Spotless and soulless, she knew she would have no regrets about leaving. It contained nothing of real value to her, nothing she felt she couldn't be separated from. In her mind, the place was already part of a previous existence, a slate she had mentally wiped clean. She shivered briefly with anticipation. No time like the present. Shrugging on an ankle-length cloak in dove grey, she clasped it at the front and pulled up the hood. She walked to the apartment door, sideswiped to open it, and - - for the final time -- stepped out.

There were few people in the wide, white-walled corridor. Early evening was the time the

great and the good promenaded beneath the colossal clearplas dome that towered above the Emporium's ultimate level -- at least the half that wasn't the private preserve of the Storekeepers -- there to pay homage to the sun as it sank from view, and to a firmament which, relieved of the best part of the atmospheric veil, blazed with stars. To see and be seen.

Angela tapped her right temple lightly to bring up the mailworm and check the route. She noticed, with some irritation, that the service elevator she needed was almost on the other side of the level. The area of the 4,000<sup>th</sup> was a tiny fraction of those far below, but her destination was still -- she reckoned -- a good half hour walk. She looked down at her feet, encased in dainty red court shoes. Probably not what she would have chosen to wear, if she'd thought about it, for the journey of her life, but they would have to do. She continued along the corridor, crossing half a dozen or so intersections, until the apartments were replaced by boutiques, showrooms and restaurants. No-one needed to leave home any more -- the cornucopias saw to that -- but the Storekeepers knew that nothing could beat the physical experience of shopping. In any case, people still needed people, if only to impress them with their buys. After a time, she reached the great hub; the colossal central tube that speared the Emporium from pinnacle to base; that carried its life blood;

power, water, people, stuff. The doughnut-shaped mall that enclosed it was rammed, mostly with lower level consumers come to gawp.

It took a while for Angela to circle through the melée to the opposite side of the hub and turn into another wide corridor. Gleaming stores gave way to exclusive apartments and then to utilitarian service areas. Here cleaners, mechanics and other functionaries whiled away the time between shifts in frowzy lounges and squalid galleys. Angela wrinkled her perfect nose at the pervading smell of cheap fried food, and tried not to catch the eyes of the overalled menials who followed her passage with surprise and some amusement. She had never ventured out here on the periphery before; why would she? The corridor narrowed and ended abruptly at a bulkhead, at the centre of which was a small door. Angela paused and tried to swallow, but her mouth was too dry. This was it. Slowly she raised an arm and touched her hand to the pad; half hoping that the door would remain shut. But the system accepted her profile and the door slid right to reveal a dingy tunnel, dimly lit, bare walls a mess of cables and conduits. For a second or two she froze. Her mind willed her to enter, but her legs wouldn't move. Then she heard a bubbling, phlegm-infused cough behind her, and stepped back to let through an exhausted looking mech in filthy overalls. He said nothing as he passed, but the look that mixed curiosity and contempt was

impossible to miss. Legs working again, Angela gave him a head start and then followed on. She held back until the man turned into a side room and then increased her speed. A few minutes later, another bulkhead loomed out of the semi-darkness. A yellow sign, made almost unreadable by a patina of filth, read Service Elevator 175, but the entry pad was clean and seemingly in working order. Once again she placed her hand on it. The entire bulkhead slid sideways to reveal a shabby interior of bare metal streaked with rust and covered in graffiti. It reeked of body odour and -- she shuddered at the thought -- something worse. The doors snapped shut the moment she entered and, as she looked in vain for a keypad, the floor dropped away like a stone. Her stomach briefly occupied the same space as her throat and she had to fight against throwing up. After maybe two minutes the elevator started to decelerate. Her legs began to buckle and she reached out a hand to steady herself against chill metal. Moments later, the falling box crashed to a halt and the door slid open with an ear-splitting screech to reveal another just inches away.

She looked around in vain for an access pad before spotting the retina scanner to one side. So primitive compared to DNA recog, but cute. She fished out the holo and held it up to the scanner. A violet light flashed briefly, making her blink, but the door stayed closed. Then she heard a series of small clicks that she guessed were servos

operating security bolts. No instantaneous magnetic locks here. She pushed at the door, wincing at it's icy, damp, surface, and passed through into a narrow corridor.

"Fuck, it's primeval down here," she thought. The rusting metal walls were cold, patterned with condensing water droplets that -- on reaching critical mass -- followed erratic trails towards the floor. One red shoe encountered a small pool of rancid water, splattering her calf with brownish spots. Shit. Hadn't they heard of dehumidifiers? There had been a two for one deal just the other week. After a time she turned a corner and faced another door that opened on presentation of the holo to reveal a vast hall, dimly lit and stifling. It contained nothing but row after row of machines - silent and somehow menacing. Above each was a chute or hopper of some kind that disappeared up into the gloom. There was no-one in sight. Tiny droplets of sweat beaded Angela's brow and her damp cloak steamed gently in the heat.

She wandered down one row and back along another, accompanied by the clicks and creaks of the cooling machines that must have only just stopped working. Following the Tabu instructions she made for another door she could just make out at the far end of the cavernous space. On the way she stopped at a row of enormous plastic skips and peered into one. For a moment she was bewildered by what she saw, then her mind made sense of it and

she realised it was full of shoes. She never could resist shoes. They had always been her biggest weakness. She stood on tiptoe, reached in and picked one out. It was low-heeled like the ones she had on, but blue and decorated with a little silver bow. She looked inside. Her size too. Bending down, she replaced one of her own with the new one. It fitted perfectly. She walked up and down a bit then reached into the skip again to find the matching shoe. The first one she picked out was the same foot; and the next and the next. After the tenth she swore, took off the shoe and hurled it into the gloom, putting her own filthy one back on. The skip, it seemed, contained nothing but size five left shoes.

She continued on her way, waved the holo at another door and pushed when she heard the locks release. Immediately, a wall of noise and a wave of heat battered at her senses. Another vast, gloomy, room full of machines, but this time working. Each was a blur of activity, hydraulic arms moulding, cutting, shaping, trimming, like giant spiders spinning webs. Every few seconds, a machine would disgorge a finished product onto a conveyor belt that wound back and forth many times before disappearing through a hole in the far wall. Angela couldn't make out what was being manufactured. Wary of their flailing arms, she kept her distance from the machines, but edged closer to the conveyor belt, hands clamped over her ears against the racket. She

couldn't help giggling when she saw what it carried; dildos -- assorted colours. For a while she watched, mesmerised, as the incongruous cargo rushed by in front of her eyes.

Turning away she spied a couple of battered chairs in a small side room, which reminded her just how tired she was. Walking was not something she had ever done much of. Her feet ached and her thighs and calves burned like fire. She slumped into a chair, took her shoes off and wiggled some life back into her toes. It was roasting and fanning her face with her hands did nothing to cool her down. Suddenly, she was overcome with exhaustion. The floor was filthy with dirt and lubricant, but she was past caring. Pulling up her hood and wrapping her cloak tight, she lay down and, despite the din, was asleep in seconds.

She awoke to silence. The machines stood idle in a variety of poses that made her think of the games of statues she had played when she was little. She lay still for a time, collecting her thoughts. The machine rooms were a surprise. She'd had it drilled into her that those in the Emporium consumed, while those outside manufactured. It was just the way things were; had always been. So, what was with the shoes and the dildos? She gave a mental shrug. Well, she had more urgent things to worry about.

She tapped her temple to review the mailworm instructions. They told her where to go but not

where she was. She guessed she must be deep in the interior of the Emporium, but on what level she had no idea. The fact that the instructions required her to head to another elevator suggested there was still some way to go.

Every muscle ached as she stood unsteadily and shivered. Now that the machines had stopped the room had grown chill. She pulled her cloak close and headed for a door at the far end of the machine hall. Beyond was another enormous space, this time hosting machines assembling sofas. After that it was holovids, then mattresses. And so it went on: tables, plates, bras, teddies, what looked like cut glass-angels, more shoes. Angela slogged on, legs numb, the successive manufacturing halls a blur.

In a daze, she proffered her holo to the reader guarding yet another door. How many, she had lost count. She snapped to when the door opened to reveal, not another manufactory, but a dingy and dimly-lit corridor and -- at the far end -- an elevator, doors open in apparent welcome. When she reached it, she was disturbed to discover that the light panels in its roof were not working, the interior only barely visible in the gloom. The dark had always made her feel uncomfortable; insecure, and she had avoided it at all costs. But now, she had no choice. She stepped inside and pressed the single button. Pitch darkness enclosed her as the doors slammed shut, and when the floor dropped away she screamed and held out an arm to steady herself

against the cold metal wall. The descent was shorter than the first and soon her knees buckled as the elevator decelerated sharply and came to a crunching halt.

The first thing she noticed when the doors opened was the smell. It was arid, flinty and faintly metallic; quite different from the conditioned and scented air she was used to, but not unpleasant. She crossed the threshold to find herself in a small room lit by a single light panel that glowed a dull red and featureless apart from a small door in the far wall. Heading over, she looked for a scanner or DNA pad, but both were absent. There was a wheel at the centre of the door and she tugged at this without much hope, surprised when it turned smoothly and easily. After a couple of turns she heard a series of small clicks and a hiss, as of air escaping or more likely entering. The flinty odour was stronger now and the dryness of the air made her sneeze twice.

She pushed at the door with one hand, but it didn't budge. Putting all her weight against it, she shoved as hard as she could, and was rewarded by a scraping and creaking as it shifted a fraction. She could feel her heart pounding with effort and anticipation as the door continued to open slowly to reveal -- darkness; absolute and implacable. The let down was immediate and she stepped back, shoulders slumped in disappointment. She wasn't quite sure what she'd expected, but this wasn't it.

Gripping tight to the door surround she looked out again, willing her eyes to extract some detail from the blackness. After a time, she thought she could make out a faint light, and screwed up her eyes, better to resolve it. Yes. There was something. Pale orange, flickering in and out at the very edge of visibility. What it might be and whether near or far she couldn't say, but it gave her hope that there was something, someone, out there; that she wasn't alone. Tentatively, she leaned out a little and peered down. A wide metal ladder descended into the darkness, rusting but seemingly sturdy enough. She felt sick inside at the thought of climbing down, but there was no turning back now. She blew out her cheeks, and exhaled noisily. Turning, she gripped the door surround and reached out a leg. Once her wavering foot had found the first rung, she brought the other to join it. Another few rungs and her head was at floor level. Taking her hands from the surround, she gripped the ladder, flinching as a spiky shard of metal tore at a finger. Slowly, she descended, feeling with her feet for each rung. After half a minute or so, there was still no sign of the bottom. She stopped to rest and peered up at the dim red glow that marked the doorway. Horrified, she saw it was gradually diminishing. The door was closing, slowly but inexorably, shutting out her old life even before she knew what the future would bring. She thought she heard a faint clunk as the glow

vanished completely, bringing total blackness. Overwhelmed by terror, she closed her eyes, leant her face against the cold metal rungs and gripped the handrails so hard that the rough edges cut into her palms. After a time, her heart stopped pounding and the feelings of dread and panic subsided, replaced by -- what? Relief? Satisfaction? She wasn't sure, but she felt a little as if a weight had lifted; as if all the cares and worries of her previous existence had been wiped away. For the first time she had no consumption targets to meet; no decisions to take or choices to make. All she could do was carry on.

Angela continued down the ladder, taking her time to test every rung. When she stopped to rest a second time, she noticed a thin horizontal band of light that transformed the darkness into a twilight gloom. Looking about, she saw that it extended all around her, continuous except for eight, equally-spaced points, where the circle was broken or hidden. She had no inkling of what it might be, and with no idea of scale, she couldn't tell if it was near or far. Looking down, she saw now that the flickering light was much closer, off to the left. Her heart leapt and she almost cried out with joy. It was a fire; yellow and orange flames dancing, something black resting at its heart. She banged one hand on the handrail in jubilation. People! There must be. She increased her speed and soon the surface - sandy and littered with rocks - appeared

out of the gloom. A few more rungs and she was down.

Turning away from the ladder, she pulled at her cloak. It was cold and a gusting breeze had sprung up, riffling sand that almost covered her shoes and bringing with it another smell; the odour of decay; foetid and not at all pleasant. She wrinkled her nose in disgust and breathed through her mouth until she got used to it, then set off in the direction of the fire, careful not to trip on a rock and giving a wide berth to what looked to her like jumbles of bones. As she approached the fire, her nostrils twitched at a new smell, rich and meaty. Food. She hadn't realised just how hungry she was, but now her mouth watered and her legs increased their speed of their own accord. When she reached it, she saw that the fire was enclosed by a circle of large stones and at its centre, dangling from a frame of rusting metal rods, was a large, black, cauldron. It was full, almost to the brim, with some sort of stew. The aroma was heady and made Angela feel weak with hunger. She looked around for signs of life, but there was no-one about. Close to the fire was a collection of plastic dishes -- grimy, but clean enough -- some cutlery and a ladle. She grabbed a bowl, dished out some of the stew and sat down cross-legged in front of the fire. Now she felt like the girl in that children's story -- Goldilocks. She looked around furtively, but no bears loomed out of the murk. Anyway, she was sure that whoever made the stew --

someone from Tabu she guessed -- wouldn't mind. They, after all, were the reason she was here. Maybe they always had something on the go for those using their escape route. She took a mouthful, chewed and closed her eyes. She thought she had never tasted anything so good. Shovelling in more, she focused on eating to the exclusion of all else, so that the hand on her shoulder made her scream. Dropping the bowl, she scrambled to one side and stood, not knowing what to expect.

"My dear, my dear. Calm yourself. I won't hurt you."

Angela had to steel herself not to turn away. Facing her was an ancient shrouded in a filthy cloak, hood thrown back to reveal a pale face criss-crossed by deep furrows. Her eyes were hooded, but she was smiling; a toothless smile. As the apparition came closer, she felt the stew coming back up and had to swallow hard. She had never seen an ancient before -- well, only in the horror movies. There were none in the Emporium; not any more. According to hearsay, they'd been bad consumers; always wanting to hang on to stuff; to stick with the familiar. Got quite cranky about it apparently. Long ago, seeking company in her golden halls of plenty, Abuntantia - praise her beneficence - had welcomed the ancients to dwell with her forever. So now, every consumer -- at the end of their fourth decade -- followed the same path to everlasting fruitfulness. It was a kindness

really. Or so they said.

The ancient stood close now. Angela guessed -- more by intuition than the evidence of her own eyes -- that it was a woman. She was at least a head shorter than Angela and looked up at her through eyes like blue pebbles, set deep within wrinkled hollows. Her scalp was bald, barring a few wispy grey hairs, and mottled with brown scabs. She opened her mouth to speak again and the stench of her breath almost made Angela retch.

"My love. Don't be afraid. Come." A claw with blackened nails took Angela's arm in a surprisingly strong grip and she allowed herself to be led back to the fire.

"Sit. Please, sit. I know you've had a difficult journey and this," she gestured around with a bony arm, "is not quite what you expected at its ending. Am I right?" Angela nodded dumbly and sat back down on the cold sand. The crone retrieved the bowl, refilled it and, replacing the spoon, handed it over. Angela opened her mouth to thank her, but the crone put a finger to her lips.

"Eat. Then we will talk." She sat down nearby and made eating movements in encouragement.

For a few minutes, Angela focused on filling her stomach while the crone looked on, a faint smile playing about her mouth. When she had finished, the crone took it from her and shifted closer. The wind was getting up and both huddled down into their cloaks. It was clear to Angela, now,

why it was so cold. The Emporium squatted above the surface; its immense base supported on eight gargantuan buttresses rooted deep in the crust. No sun or warmth ever penetrated the darkness of its shadow, and the only light filtered in from the circular sliver of sky squeezed between the far distant edge of the Emporium's footing and the horizon. Momentarily, Angela was aware of the colossal weight above, bearing down on her, and felt a rising panic before the ancient's lisping voice distracted her.

"Well. This is nice," began the crone. "I don't get to talk much these days." She sighed and gestured upwards with her eyes. "The supply seems to be drying up."

Angela didn't understand so said nothing. The crone giggled; an odd, wheezing sound. Angela had noticed that laughter came easily to the ancient, "perhaps too easily," she thought, nervously.

"Tell me," said the crone, "Are they still peddling that old Tabu nonsense up there? I was always amazed that so many fell for it." She cocked her head on one side and looked at Angela as if seeing her for the first time.

"You didn't?" She opened her toothless mouth wide and gasped when Angela kept silent. "You did, didn't you," she lisped, "you fell for it?" She put back her head and cackled long and hard. Angela looked blank, but inside she was beginning to feel

edgy.

Eventually the crone stopped laughing, but she still took a while to catch her breath.

"My oh my". She shook her head. "They took you in good and proper didn't they? Good and proper." Without warning, she shot out a stick-like arm and held tight to Angela's shoulder, gesturing with her other.

"Look around you, dear," her voice a rasping whisper. "This is all there is. No Tabu. No rebel group. She pointed at the band of light that marked their horizon. "No billions of workers beavering away out there for your comfort and convenience. Just me. Me and what's left of this shit-hole of a world."

Angela looked devastated and struggled to hold back tears. Her mouth opened, but no words came. Then, a whisper.

"I thought Tabu would be here to meet me. I thought there'd be people, lots of people." The crone had to lean close to hear, and Angela was enveloped in her putrid aura. This time she did retch, but the crone didn't seem to notice. She took Angela's arm and shook it gently.

"You must understand. This is all there is."

Slowly it dawned on Angela. She thought of the workshops; of the machines ceaselessly labouring. Now it made sense. There was nothing else; no-one else; just the Emporium and its sisters. Then another thought struck her and she felt dead inside.

"This is level zero isn't it?"

The crone nodded slowly and gently touched her arm again.

"Let me tell you a story." She crossed her legs and tugged again at her cloak.

"Once upon a time there was a woman. She was young, beautiful and clever -- very clever; too clever. She was a Storekeeper. She had everything she wanted, but everything wasn't enough. Through deceit, chicanery, coercion, she fought her way to the very top. And there she stayed, for a long time. Ruler of all she surveyed. But then, one day, she went too far. There was a young Storekeeper, a good man, popular. But she saw him only as a rival. Which is why she had him killed. She thought she had covered her tracks, but the man's friends were persistent and she was found out. She was stripped of her power and consigned to level zero; to the wilderness. And there she stayed for many years, growing old and mad. But she didn't die. Nothing is ever wasted in the Emporium, and neither was she. They sent her supplies, just enough to keep her going, and occasionally someone -- someone damaged -- was permitted to visit."

The crone paused and reached over to caress Angela's cheek.

"Just like you dear."

Angela said nothing. The account was clearly autobiographical and she had no reason to doubt it. The part she found most difficult to believe was

that the noisome thing in front of her could ever have been young -- or beautiful.

The crone leant back, peered up at the Emporium's base, hidden in the gloom, and whispered to herself.

"Humans. What fools we were; still are." She looked at Angela and shook her head.

"You have no idea? Why would you?"

Angela looked blank. A particularly vigorous gust of wind buffeted them and the crone pulled her knees up to her chest, better to try and keep out the chill.

"Maybe it isn't so hard to believe, when you think about it. It must have made perfect sense at the time."

She looked at Angela again, and smiled. "Another story." she said. It was a statement, not a question.

"Long, long, ago, our world -- this world," she gestured with arms outstretched - "faced catastrophe. It was dying. War and civil disorder were rampant. People were starving in their millions. Only the rich could still afford to consume; to afford luxuries, those fripperies that meant nothing to the masses battling just to survive. They could have used their wealth wisely, to tackle the terrible problems the world faced, but that has never been the way of the rich. Instead, they shut themselves away within enclaves, sucking in everything they needed and wanted from

those beyond the walls."

Angela's forehead creased as she tried, and failed, to make sense of what the ancient was saying. The crone knew this, but didn't care. It was a tale long rehearsed, long practised, and in truth, she told it for her own benefit. As if retelling might make it a little more palatable; less harrowing. But it never did. She went on.

"In time, it became clear that the fabric of civilisation was tearing apart; could no longer provide for the gluttonous needs of the elites. So the consuMORE corporation -- The Shop as you know it -- built the Emporia. New worlds within a dying world; self-sustaining, everything reused, recycled, even -- "The crone couldn't stop herself breaking out in a crooked, toothless, grin.

" - even human flesh." She said with relish.

Angela managed to look both shocked and baffled at the same time.

"I'm guessing you had doubts about the golden halls? Most do, who come to visit me."

Angela nodded.

"And you were right to. There are no halls my love, golden or otherwise. No eternity of consuming under the gentle eye of Abundantia, just the recycling vats, churning, shredding and squeezing the goodness out of those whose shelf lives have passed, so that it can be used again. Nothing wasted, nothing lost." She chuckled.

"That's what we always used to say." The

chuckle morphing into a wheezing cough.

"Its the cold," she apologised, "and the air -  
- so dry these days, so very dry." After a pause,  
she went on.

"It was the obvious solution, really, on a  
world that could no longer provide. Continually  
make the fresh and the innovative out of the old  
and the tired. Stuff used to make more stuff,  
tweaked by the Storekeepers to make new models, new  
things, that tickled the fancy of the consuming  
elites and kept them wanting more, kept them docile.  
A never ending cycle of consumption, with no point  
or purpose. Consumerism for its own sake and  
without end. For ever and ever, Amen." She chuckled  
again at Angela's obvious bewilderment. "Truly  
sustainable consumption at last -- but too late,  
too late."

They sat in silence for a time, the crone's  
head drooping as if fighting off sleep. Angela took  
the opportunity to try and make some sense of what  
she had been told, but struggled to wean herself  
off a lifetime's indoctrination. She did have one  
question, something she still couldn't get her head  
around:

"But Tabu; the posters; the broadcasts?"  
The crone's head came up suddenly, as if jolted  
from a doze.

"Ah, Tabu," she sighed. "One of my more  
imaginative schemes."

She extended an emaciated arm and gently

pushed a strand of hair out of Angela's eyes.

"Dear. As I said, there is no such thing, never was. Tabu is a contrivance, a device, concocted by the Storekeepers -- by me -- designed to stamp on dissent in the Emporium by sucking in the rogues, the malcontents, the misfits -- damaged goods all -- to answer to their need to get out; to build hopes of escape. And then to crush them."

Angela tried to speak, but her lips were as dry as dust and wouldn't obey. All of a sudden she felt desperately in need of something to drink. The crone seemed to have read her mind.

"You must be thirsty, my dear."

She stood and shuffled over to an upturned wooden chest on which stood a glass flask and a couple of brown-stained cups with the handles missing. She filled a cup and brought it over.

"Drink. It may taste a little strange, but it will really pick you up."

Angela took the cup and guzzled greedily. Then paused as the taste of the liquid made itself known. It was metallic, with a hint of strawberry. A bit tinny, but not entirely unpleasant. She drank down the rest and, almost immediately felt the effects, which were anything but revivifying. A warm glow, a feeling of contentment, slowly crept up from her toes to the top of her head. The aura of bliss quickly morphed into one of befuddlement then panic, as Angela realised she no longer had control over her muscles. Her arm flopped to her side, sending

the cup skittering away across the sand, and she toppled slowly backwards to lie supine on the cold ground. She couldn't even move her eyes, which stared upwards at the base of the Emporium, hidden by the gloom. She could still hear the crone muttering to herself and, after a while, the sound of metal scraping on metal; a rhythmic rasping that seemed to go on for a long time. Then the crone came into view, one hand holding a wicked looking knife, the other testing its edge with a thumb. If she could have worked the muscles, her eyes would have opened wide in blind terror.

The crone reached out a hand and gently caressed Angela's forehead.

"Ah, my dear. Relax. It won't hurt." She cackled away to herself.

"Well, nobody's ever complained."

Then, placing a hand behind Angela's head and lifting it towards her, she slowly and carefully sliced off first one cheek, then the other, cupping the bloody pieces of meat in one hand. Next she pierced an eyeball with the point of the knife, plucked it out and cut it free. As always, she would save the other for later. They had long been her favourite morsels. It was a shame that they only came in twos. Anyway, she really shouldn't think of complaining. The last scraps of her previous visitor were in the pot and she had begun to worry that she might have to dig up her emergency store. She grimaced at the thought and

then grinned. Now, though, she wouldn't have to worry for a long while. The latest was a bit on the bony side, but she figured it would last her for quite some time - if she were careful.

Angela's remaining eye stared upwards, giving away nothing of the excruciating agony behind its vacant aspect, nor the madness bubbling up as her future as a living food store dawned. The crone smiled.

"There's a good girl. Waste not -- want not. You know it makes sense".

She shuffled over to the cooking pot and dropped the goodies into the steaming melange. As an afterthought, she returned to Angela's still form, bent, and removed the red court shoes. They were filthy, but well made and, under the grime, looked new. She sat on the sand and pulled one on. A perfect fit. She put on the other, stood, and minced about in them for a bit, looking down at her feet as she did so.

"Very nice," she chuckled to herself.

"Very nice indeed." She never could resist shoes. They had always been her biggest weakness.

THE END