

PIT PLANET

by

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To Leonore

ONE

Benton's work hours increased because of the contract with The Jacksonite Corporation, but his social life improved.

It was starting from a low baseline, though. He had always been of a solitary nature, had always concentrated on his work, had never made friends easily. His older coworkers were married and very settled. They didn't socialize with each other and had never shown any interest in seeing him outside the office. Their families occupied their time after work.

This new batch he was hiring for the Colliery project were different, though. They were younger and livelier, and partying was much more important to them than building software. All of a sudden, Benton found himself being invited to parties every weekend. True, he would be introduced by some deferential subordinate as "the boss," and that was dampening. In fact, some of these subordinates were older than Benton, but they all treated him as though he were older than they. Sometimes he wanted to protest that he was still young, less than thirty in Earth years, but he had to admit that the automatic respect had its appeal, too.

Once the novelty wore off, he began to find the frequent parties pleasant but not involving in any way. They provided a break from the hours of work and pressure, but little else. The conversations tended to stay safely shallow.

At one party, it all turned very serious very suddenly.

Benton was chatting with a girl who seemed to know as few of the other guests as he did. She was short and slender, with a nervous intensity that bothered him even while it attracted him. In a period when most young women on Farandhazy were changing their appearance, and especially their hair, every other day and using everything cosmetic technology offered to disguise their true appearance, this girl was remarkable for being so obviously undisguised. Her straight black hair, cut simply just below her shoulders, was obviously her own. No lenses changed the dark brown of her eyes, and her face, perhaps too thin to be considered attractive by most men, was innocent of cosmetics.

Her name was Augie Syen. When they were introduced, not able to think of anything else to say, he said, "That's an unusual name." She grimaced and said, "I had unusual parents."

She was Benton's physical opposite, and he supposed, looking into his drink to avoid her intense, searching stare, that that explained his sudden, strong physical attraction to her. Nothing like this had happened to him since he had come to Farandhazy five Earth years earlier, fresh from college, to work for Contco.

Was it the physical difference, or that intensity of hers, the way she concentrated on one thing to the exclusion of everything else? A touch neurotic, perhaps, but right now she was concentrating

on him and he was having some difficulty breathing. Unfortunately, she insisted on talking about Colliery and the contract he was working on.

“It’s immoral,” she said. “If you help The Jacksonite Corporation in any way, that’s immoral. It’ll just increase their stranglehold on the Galaxy.”

“No, I don’t think that’s right,” he insisted, hating the argument, or rather hating arguing with her. He hesitated, not quite sure how much of this he should talk about to a stranger. But then he looked at his less-than-sober subordinates around him and decided that it was probably far too late to worry about keeping any details of the project secret. There were bursts of loud laughter and slurred speech. Drinks were being spilled. Couples who had not arrived together were leaving together. Company secrets had probably been shared long ago. If any of them are thinking about company secrets, Benton told himself. “What we’re doing for them has no connection with how they market the stuff. They contracted us to build a system integrating underground sensors, communications networks, computer monitoring and control, automated mining equipment, ventilation balancing . . .” He trailed off at her blank look. “Making things safer, that’s all,” he said. “And more efficient. We’ll help them increase their productivity, and that’ll reduce the stranglehold. Also, we’ll help them raise their efficiency, and that’s sure to bring down the price of jacksonite, which will be good for everyone.”

Augie snorted derisively. “The demand for jacksonite is so high now, and the supply is so low, that what you’re doing just won’t have that effect. Better efficiency will just mean higher profits for those bastards, not lower prices. They’re probably already as efficient as they want to be. How’re you going to increase that?”

He had wondered about that himself when first discussing the project with his boss, Charlie Gabbro. Surely The Jacksonite Corporation, with its breathtaking wealth, must already have in place the most advanced automation hardware and software. Its mines must be a technological marvel. Why did the Corporation need what a small, obscure company like Contco could provide?

But Charlie Gabbro’s concern was with the project’s success, or more accurately with the beneficial effect that success would have on his own career. Other concerns were beyond his ken. “Focus,” Charlie liked to say. He also liked to call Benton “Jamie me boy,” which Benton was sure he had picked up from watching some costume drama set in ancient Scotland. He referred to Benton as “head honcho” on the project — another term Benton assumed he’d picked from a costume drama. Charlie also liked to repeat “Ten billion barnards.” That was the sum — more than ten times Contco’s current annual revenues — being held out by The Jacksonite Corporation for the follow-on contract, should Contco’s work on the current one impress them sufficiently. “Don’t be tense, Jamie me boy,” Gabbro said often. “Just do your work. You and your team. Ten billion barnards if you succeed. If you fail, we’ll blacklist you.”

Benton wrenched his mind back to the present moment. Augie was saying, “Even if you could somehow increase their production, so what? Just because they can dig more of the stuff out of the ground, that doesn’t mean they’ll send more of it to market. They already mine more than they market as it is. They keep the excess in safes somewhere. They release jacksonite slowly in order to keep prices high.”

“You can’t prove any of that,” Benton said, feeling exasperated and even feeling a stirring of loyalty toward The Jacksonite Corporation. Ten billion barnards, after all. “I’ve heard those charges before. Hell, you sound as though you hate The Jacksonite Corporation personally!”

There was a long and awkward pause, as if they had both suddenly remembered that they were strangers, as if they were both embarrassed by the quick frankness and heat of their conversation, by its degeneration from social banter into argument, into something real.

Benton had been feeling involved, drawn in. He had thought there was a real connection. Now he suspected that had been an illusion.

“Except for you, this has been a boring party,” she said suddenly. “I’d like to go back to my place.” She waited expectantly.

And that’s that, Benton thought. He said lamely, “Uh, well, goodnight then.”

A look of great surprise crossed her face, followed by a flicker of anger. She spun about and headed for the door.

Illumination arrived, not quite a moment too late.

He charged across the room, pushing between conversing guests, oblivious to their glares. He caught up with Augie at the door. “Say, could I give you a ride?”

She was surprised again, but this time her surprise was followed by a grin. “You’re a prize! Come on.”

* * *

It was a wonderful night.

Benton kept congratulating himself on having done something right for once in the social realm. In the city, he was only one of tens of thousands of young, affluent, single, mobile technical people. He had often enough overheard other men discussing their frequent affairs, and he had always wondered why he had been left out of the wonderful game. Maybe he was finally learning to play it.

From Augie’s reactions during the night, he assumed she was as pleased as he. Over their late breakfast, both of them deliciously exhausted, he said, “Now I’ll be especially sorry to have to spend time away on Colliery.”

Augie smiled and put her hand gently on his. “I know. How long will you be gone?”

He shrugged. “Hard to say.” He thought for a moment. “It’s almost a week’s travel each way, so probably something like eight or ten weeks total.”

“How long before you leave?”

“Four weeks from today.” He smiled at her. “That gives us some time, anyway.”

She grinned back. “And we can use every second of every night of it!”

They laughed together, almost shyly. The smile faded from Augie’s face, and she frowned worriedly. “You won’t have to go down in the mines there, will you?”

Benton shivered. “I doubt it. They don’t seem to want anyone down there except their own people. We wanted to have own technicians install the underground part of our equipment, but they said no. They’ll take care of all that. No outsiders allowed, I guess.”

“Not in their precious mines,” Augie said with a bitterness that puzzled him. “Or messing around with their precious jacksonite.”

“Precious is the word.” He didn’t know why the tension had just crept into their conversation, but he wanted to chase it away. “It’s fine with me. They can do that part, and I’ll spend my time above ground, making sure the data’s coming in properly and the computers are processing it correctly. I’m the head of the design team, so that’s really more my proper area anyway.”

He wanted her to admire him and suspected she wouldn’t if he admitted to physical fear. He had no wish to go into a mine, whether on Colliery or anywhere else. He had once made the mistake of going underground with the technicians who were delivering some mining equipment, and he still hadn’t gotten over the experience.

Mining wasn't made for men, as someone had once put it. He remembered vividly the ear-smashing noise, the dust and fumes, the shivering, vibrating rock floor and walls and his constant fear that they would collapse on him. Above all, he remembered the dangerous unmanned machines roaring invisibly in the dark. The machines had known where they were and where they were going, and where the other machines and the human intruders were, but the small group of men hadn't known where the machines were. Benton still had nightmares about it.

Later, after he had helped her clear away the breakfast dishes, Augie said, "Could you do me a favor while you're on Colliery?"

"Bring you back a shipload of jacksonite so you can get your own stranglehold on the Galaxy?"

She didn't laugh, didn't even smile. Instead, her face again took on that hint of neurotic tension and need he had noticed the evening before at the party and which had both disturbed and intrigued him. Now it was clearer, less disguised.

"Look someone up for me there," she said. "My uncle, Ben Coquina. He's really more than my uncle. He pretty much brought my brother and me up. Anyway, he went to Colliery with his wife a few years ago and never came back."

"Ben Coquina? I've heard his name somewhere."

"Yes. He's famous in his field. Geochemistry. Or was, before he disappeared."

"You think he's still there? On Colliery?"

"Of course he is!"

She was close to shouting. She bit her lower lip and turned away from him. When she spoke again, her voice was at a more nearly normal level, but Benton could hear the barely suppressed tremor in it that told how frantic she really was.

Still not facing him, she said, "Last time I heard from him was about three years ago. He was still on New Albion. He wrote to say he had almost succeeded in producing synthetic jacksonite, but the finishing touches would require some very expensive work, and the university refused to fund it. They couldn't afford to. The Jacksonite Corporation had heard of his work somehow and offered him whatever he needed if he would go to Colliery and do it under their auspices. He and his wife, Diori, would be leaving for Colliery in a couple of days and he would write again when he got there. But he never did write again."

"Perhaps he didn't get there," Benton said gently. He didn't know what else to say.

She spun around and clutched at his arms. "He must have! They made him a prisoner, or maybe they killed him. That's what they do, you see, to protect their damned monopoly. They wouldn't want anyone coming up with synthetic jacksonite."

This time, he could think of nothing at all to say. Of course the Corporation wouldn't want anyone to develop synthetic jacksonite. They had no reason to fear that anyone would, though. It was an illusory goal that eccentrics had been pursuing for decades, and none of them had succeeded. He had to assume that Augie's uncle was another such eccentric. From what she had said, the man's eccentricity had apparently risen to the level of severe self-deception, even of lunacy. How could Benton take this story seriously? He began to wonder if Augie Syen were delusional herself.

She said, "After I had talked to you for a while last night and found out you were going to Colliery, I knew you'd be willing to help me." She stared at Benton urgently, compellingly.

Understanding dawned at last. "That's why you did all this?" He nodded toward the bedroom. "Just to bribe me?"

"Oh, Jim, of course not!" She hesitated, then said, "All right, last night at the party I was mainly thinking about getting your help. But now you mean more to me than that."

He shook her hands off and looked at her coldly. "You were using me. Use someone else."

He stalked to the door. As he opened it, he heard her say in a soft and mournful tone, "There isn't anybody else. I need you. Please."

He hesitated for only a moment, then left, slamming the door.

* * *

During the following few days, she called him frequently. Each time, he shut the comm off as soon as he heard her voice with its undertone of insistent need. He took to leaving the comm at home, turned off, when he went out, even though that gave him an uneasy, isolated feeling. At last she stopped trying.

Benton threw himself completely into the details, professional and personal, of preparing to leave.

On his last day on Farandhazy, just as he was about to leave for the spaceport, a small package was delivered to his apartment. The first thing he found inside the package was a picture of a serious, middleaged man standing next to a beautiful blonde woman perhaps twenty or twenty-five years the man's junior. On the back was written, "To our dear niece, Augie. From Uncle Ben and Diori." Furious, Benton threw the picture in the trash.

Also in the package was a small, dark, heavy object, rectangular and attached to a chain. The greasy-feeling surface was characteristic of field-effect generators, but he could guess no more about it than that. A note taped to the object said, "Never mind what this is. Wear it around your neck like a good luck charm. It might be of use." It was signed Augie Syen.

For a moment, he almost threw the object and the note into the trash as well, but then he changed his mind, although he could not easily have said why. He put the chain around his neck and stuffed the gadget inside his shirt. It did indeed look like nothing more than a good luck charm.

And it was time to go.

He stood in the open doorway and looked around his apartment. How little of him was here! How little mark he had made on places or people, and how little he left behind. He had let others use him for various purposes but had not used anyone else. Those who had found him of use would forget him once he was gone. No one would have reason to remember him. He had passed and left no mark, like the faintest breeze drifting over desert sand without disturbing a single grain.

He sighed, picked up his two suitcases, and left, letting the apartment's computer shut and lock the door behind him with its cold and final-sounding click.

TWO

Choosing his words carefully, Benton said, “I have to disagree strongly with you, Miss Hornsfels. That’s simply nonsense. It’s already impossible to do without computers. The Republic has been almost totally dependent on them for decades, and the Empire used them even more heavily for centuries. You know, it was the sudden widespread loss of computer capability that really destroyed the Empire.”

It would have helped, Benton thought gloomily, if Sadie Hornsfels had been ugly, or old, or at least pleasant. Instead she was stunningly beautiful and very aware of it, using her looks as a weapon to overwhelm men and cow women. She was condescending and conceited, and she was witheringly scornful except when she chose to turn on her charm. For the moment, she had decided that Benton was of sufficient interest to turn that charm on full force for him, and he was aware of a strong physical response in himself that he tried manfully to suppress.

Sadie opened her eyes a bit wider. Turning up the power, Benton thought bitterly, meanwhile gazing into her brilliantly blue eyes with fascination. “But I thought,” she said, “that the Empire collapsed because it was so old and worn out. I also read somewhere that their computers turned against them and tried to take over the Earth.”

“Oh, that stupid idea,” he said in exasperation, “That just can’t happen, either with our present-day technology or the way they built computers in the Empire. They’re just machines. They’re extremely powerful, but they’re also very stupid, and they always do exactly what you tell them to.” Just like men when you do the telling, he thought.

She pursed her lips. “I’ve heard that one before. But what did you mean about the loss of computers destroying the Empire?”

Benton felt remarkably intelligent, attractive, and strong. And willing to hold forth on any subject as long as it would keep the spectacularly beautiful Sadie Hornsfels so interested in him. For a moment, he suspected that she was playing a game, using him for some obscure purpose. Still, the longer he talked interestingly, the longer she’d stay there in front of him, letting him feast his eyes on her. A very different woman from Augie Syen. But Augie, he reminded himself, had been using him too.

“The Empire was an interstellar civilization, but they had achieved an extremely high technological level even before they spread out from Earth. Everything was computerized before they established themselves in space. Space travel was secondary. They never achieved our level of ability in interstellar travel. They didn’t even have anything like the Arrastra Drive. Interstellar trips took tremendous amounts of time. I’ll be at my destination in days. In Imperial times, it would probably have taken me months.

“We’ve taken a different route outward. Our civilization arose all over the place, on all the worlds that had been part of the Empire. Because we all knew that other human settlements were out there, we concentrated on space flight. Fortunately for us, the discovery of jacksonite gave us the Arrastra Drive and interstellar communications. Our civilization depends on that mineral.

“On the other hand, we haven’t put much effort into computer capabilities because we haven’t really needed to. So we’re far behind the Empire there. They had some sort of organic compound in which circuits could be formed at the submolecular level. Formed and reformed, changed constantly. Constantly optimized for the task at hand. That’s really why the Empire was able to reach such size and complexity, in spite of having a much more primitive technology than we have for interstellar travel. They made up for that with their amazing information-handling ability. All government power was highly centralized. In effect, computers on Earth ran the Empire.” He shook his head. “Even if we changed our governmental structure and concentrated everything in the Barnard’s Star system, we still couldn’t do as good a job of it as they did, simply because we couldn’t match their computer power. We have to stay decentralized.”

“We also don’t have to worry about our computers taking over and destroying us.”

“But neither did they! Apparently what happened was that some anarchist group worked up a bacterium that fed on that organic compound their computer technology was based on. The imperial government collapsed overnight, disappeared, along with all the computers on Earth. All the computers everywhere else in the Empire were based on the same technology, so eventually the disease spread everywhere along with the waves of refugees, and all the computers were converted into useless junk.”

“Yes,” Sadie said coolly, “and in the overreaction to the garbled news from Earth, what little remained in the way of computer technology was destroyed during riots and short-lived local tyrannies.” While Benton stared at her openmouthed, she went on, “A thousand worlds, half a million separate governments and sovereignties, and a new Dark Ages. Technology faded away, and here we are starting all over again. However, the bacterium is present on all those thousand worlds, so unless we can find a functional substitute for that organic compound, we’ll never be able to duplicate their hybrid computer. How fortunate for us that jacksonite can’t be destroyed the way that organic compound was. Thank you for a decidedly dull conversation.” She turned on her heel and walked away.

Benton stared after her with his mouth open and his cheeks burning, his drink tilting so far that the liquid began to dribble out unnoticed and run over his hand.

He became aware of someone standing next to him and looked up to see a paunchy, middleaged man holding an empty glass and watching him with a cheerful smile — cheerful, but also cynical. As soon as he saw he had Benton’s attention, he said, “Ah! Another victim of the magnificent Sadie. Don’t worry about it. There have been and will be others.” He glanced down ruefully at his empty glass and added, “I’ve been telling myself that all day, but it doesn’t really help.”

Feeling like a fool, Benton shut his mouth at last. He grunted noncommittally.

“Oh, sorry,” the older man said, smiling even more broadly, “we haven’t been properly introduced, have we? I’m Brook Plasser, and you are?”

“James Benton.”

Plasser looked at his empty glass again. Benton got the point at last and gestured to a waiter hovering beyond the crowd. When both their glasses had been refilled, Benton, feeling he was obligated to make conversation, said, “You know Sadie, then?”

Plasser took a long, deliberate swallow which drained half the liquid in his glass before replying. “Not before this trip. However, I’ve spent a great deal of time observing her. A pleasant

enough preoccupation in and of itself, of course, but my purposes were, er, scholarly. She's a very accomplished mindpicker."

"A what?" Two drinks are too much, Benton thought. I'm hearing things.

"Some people pick pockets. She picks minds. You see, she finds herself making a long interstellar voyage, surrounded by very dull people like you and me. She's extremely intelligent, even more beautiful, and, if possible, still richer. For people like her and her friends, novelty — whether exotic experiences or new ideas and unusual information — is the only thing that provides excitement."

The room kept blurring out of focus for a second or two at a time. Bewildered, Benton said, "So I excited her?"

Plasser chuckled. "I rather doubt it. She thought you might provide her with something new and intriguing to tell her friends. Once she had picked your mind, she had no more use for you. She did the same thing to me on the first day out. Ah, well. I console myself with the thought that the existence of Sadie and her class is merely a symptom of the imminent decline of our civilization." He looked longingly into his glass, empty again, until Benton waved the waiter over once more. Benton was surprised to find that his own glass was also empty, and he had the waiter refill it, too.

Plasser swallowed a mouthful from the refilled drink, then licked his lips judiciously and said, "Each one is weaker than the last. I hope you're on an expense account. Otherwise I'd feel guilty at your having to pay for all those glasses of water. As for me — well, buying my ticket for this trip has consumed my available funds." He looked keenly at Benton. "What were you telling the divine Sadie that kept her interested?"

Benton shook his head, hoping that would clear away the fog that was filling his head. The effect instead was to create a small kernel of pain somewhere just behind the very center of his forehead, a kernel that grew slowly, pulsatingly, with every heartbeat.

Plasser repeated his question.

"Uh, sorry," Benton said. His tongue felt huge and stiff. Why was the alcohol affecting him so much? "I was telling her about computers. She wanted to hear about them, but then she turned out to know all about them already. Or it seemed that way."

Plasser made a face denoting distaste, as though his latest drink were indeed all water. "Computers! Awful things. They rob you of your identity, your uniqueness. Reduce a man to a number, so that wherever he travels, his past follows him electronically, the Furies in the form of bit patterns. Plug in his retinal pattern and DNA parameters, or whatever it is, and up pops his number. Presumably you feel otherwise. You're on your way to Wisteria because of computers?"

"No, no, I'm not going that far." The pain kernel had swelled until it filled his head. It was pressing outward against his skull — press, press, with each beat of his pulse — and he expected his head to burst at any moment. "I have a job on Colliery. I'll be getting off there."

Plasser looked surprised at the mention of the planet's name. "The Jacksonite Corporation hiring someone from outside! Now, that's unusual."

"Really?" Plasser's remark had scarcely registered. Benton's attention was focused on the pain in his head to the virtual exclusion of all else. He replied automatically, desperately trying to appear normal outwardly, to make conversation as though nothing were wrong.

"Oh, yes. Secrecy and security are the company's watchwords. Understandably, perhaps, since Colliery is the only world in the known Galaxy where jacksonite is found and the Corporation owns all of it."

"All of it," Benton repeated mechanically.

“Yes.” Plasser looked at him intently. “You look quite done in. I’ll bet you couldn’t even make it back to your cabin on your own.”

Benton shook his head.

“My, my. Come along. Let us leave the celestial Sadie and her friends to their jaded pleasures and get you to your bed. You may lean upon me.”

Benton agreed inwardly with the wisdom of Plasser’s suggestion. Sleep was what he needed. His legs wouldn’t cooperate, though, and he leaned heavily on Plasser, stumbling from the room. He was vaguely aware of scornful laughter that sounded like Sadie’s as he lurched past a group of which she was the center.

Plasser asked him for his cabin number. Benton barely managed to mumble it. “I think I can find that,” Plasser said reassuringly.

Elevators, hallways, staircases. Benton had completely lost track of where he was. His greatest wish was to be allowed to lie down on the floor and sleep, or die. But Plasser kept hurrying him along, half carrying him.

Benton felt Plasser grasp his right wrist and press his hand against the plate beside the door. There was a long hesitation, as though the computer dedicated to this job were signaling its disapproval of Benton’s condition. Then the lock on his cabin door clicked and Plasser pushed the door open. Benton stumbled forward a few steps, fell onto his bed, and sank into unconsciousness.

* * *

When Benton awoke, it was morning by ship’s time. His headache was gone, but he felt exhausted, as though he had not slept at all for days. There was an awful smell in the room that he couldn’t quite place.

He sat up in bed and looked around, feeling confused. The place had been ransacked — drawers and suitcases opened and their contents scattered around.

Plasser, of course. He slipped something into my drink, Benton realized. That was why I got so drunk so quickly and then passed out. That gave him all the time he needed to search my cabin.

Benton forced himself out of bed and stumbled over to the dresser where he had hidden his small supply of ready cash. He’d not hidden it well enough. Plasser had found it.

What was that smell? It was awful. He had to do something about it.

He realized for the first time that he was naked. He threw on a robe and made a quick call to the purser to ask that Plasser be arrested. The response somehow didn’t surprise him. During the hours Benton had been asleep, a passenger’s illness had forced the ship to drop to sublight speed and make an emergency stop at a settled world along the route so that the passenger could be transferred to a local hospital. The passenger, of course, was Brook Plasser.

“I can contact the authorities there and have them arrest him at the hospital,” the purser said, looking professionally concerned.

Benton sighed. “Don’t bother.” By now, Plasser would no longer be in the hospital, would no longer be ill, would no longer be going under the name Brook Plasser, and almost certainly would no longer be on that planet.

I’ve been used again, Benton thought. I keep letting myself be used.

He needed to shower — to get clean, to wash it all away. He dropped his robe on the bed and walked into the bathroom.

The smell was almost overwhelming in here. He recognized it at last. He wanted to be wrong.

Words were written on the floor-to-ceiling mirror. The writing was a bright red-brown. The handwriting had probably been regular and smooth originally, but the letters were sagging and sliding down the mirror. Liquid rivulets, some brown, some clear, ran down the mirror from them. The words had been written in human feces.

Benton clapped his hands over his mouth and nose. Unable to tear his eyes away, he read, “Naïveté is charming but dangerous.”

He backed out of the bathroom and tried to breathe.

I should call someone to come in here and clean this up, he thought.

Then he thought, No! I don't want anyone to know about this.

Fighting the constant urge to vomit, stopping frequently to go out into the cabin's main room and breathe, he wiped away Plasser's message and then wiped the mirror clean. He used the bathroom's disposable towels, the big ones meant for use after showering. He wadded them up and threw them down the disposal chute, hoping that they would be destroyed or recycled entirely by machines, that no humans were involved in the process at any point. He wanted no one to be aware of his humiliation.

Then, despite the lingering smell in the bathroom, he showered, scrubbing himself desperately, repeatedly, all over.

He still felt filthy when he was done. He also felt exhausted all over again.

He stumbled back to his bed and dropped almost immediately into a profound sleep. Although he dreamed, he remembered only one of the dreams when he woke, and in that one he was alone in a small ship, speeding through empty space, rushing away from the part of the Galaxy filled with men, away into regions which knew no life.