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WHITE TIME

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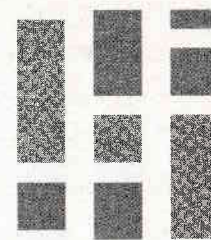
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WHITE TIME



OCCUPATION-TASTING REPORT

Student: Sheneel Carpenter
Occupation: General process walk-through
Workplace: Commonwealth White Time
Laboratories
Date: Spring term holiday

'Bugga.' Sheneel crumpled the hard copy, tossed it bin-wards and banged her head a few times on the desk.

'What's up?' said Dalma, taking a break from her victory dance with Keanu.

'It's not fair! You two *always* get what you want. You both

get to go on release-party tasting, and I end up at the bloody White Time Labs!

'White time? What'd you put that down for, dope?'

'You had to put down a second choice.'

'You just shouldn't've! Keanu's brother said, don't you remember? You don't give 'em any *choice* but what you want!' She danced off again.

'White time'll be *interesting* . . . won't it?' said Liv Morrow. She hadn't even opened her letter. She already knew she'd be tasting her dad's fashionorium, making antique musical instruments, which she did in her spare time anyway, but being paid for it and doing it to fixed hours.

'It'll be boring as hell,' moaned Sheneel. '*They* get to choose dance music and do celebrity bites and put out gazines. We were all going to do it *together* – that was the *whole idea*.'

'Yeah,' said Liv, 'but tasting's supposed to be about the sort of job you want to have after school. I mean, you want to end up some terrible *ageing groover*?'

'Come on, Liv – I'm only in Year Ten!'

'And release parties are pretty seasonal – like, six weeks at the end of every school year. And you have to be right there, like, in *front* of the cutting edge to make any kind of a living.'

'They're pretty *fun*, that's all I know.' Sheneel pretended to weep.

Liv smiled and patted her on the shoulder. 'Never mind. White time could be fun, too.'

'Yeah, right. Fun like *menstruation* is fun. Fun like tidying your room is fun.'

Liv laughed. Leaning confidentially against her, she said in a soft, super-reasonable Sir-voice, 'Well, both of those things can "be their own reward"—'

'No,' said Sheneel severely. 'Don't start.'

Sir was doing a tour of the classroom. 'And you, Keanu?'

'Release party too, Sir.'

'*Another* release party? They're taking a lot this year, aren't they?'

'Not enough,' said Sheneel.

Joey Fitzardo sniggered. 'Yeah, poor old Sheneel copped the Commonweal Labs. Hoot!'

'Really?' Sir brightened. 'Thinking about a career in time theory, Sheneel?'

'No, Sir!'

'Pushing the envelope in ethical hazards, maybe?'

'Oh, don't be cruel, Sir.'

'Never mind, Sheneel. I'm sure you'll find something there to interest you.'

'I think it's going to majorly *suck*, Sir,' said Sheneel, and was gratified at the general laugh she got.

Sir's eyes went bland again. 'Well, I look forward to reading your report.'

This was a very interesting assignment. I got to see all the interesting things White Time do in the white time reservoirs, met lots of interesting people and learned a lot.

'A what?' said the guy at the terminal.

'An occupation-taster,' said the reception-guy patiently.

'Like I said, a what?' He hadn't stopped typing since the reception-guy had brought Sheneel in.

'All you have to do is take her with you, Lon, and show her what you do, what it entails. Your job.'

'Ah. What we used to call work experience,' the guy brayed, 'back in the old days before the work/leisure dichotomy became politically incorrect.' What was he *talking* about?

'And try not to turn her into an old cynic like you.' The reception-guy winked at Sheneel and abandoned her there.

The place was a mess. Everything was grey – not dirty, but made of grey plastic. Cables and plugs and dead computers and bits of nameless equipment. *Stuff*, piled on the grey tables and in all the grey corners. Nowhere for anyone to sit, except him. Mr Keyboarding. Mr Whistling-to-Himself. Lon.

'Ka-ay,' he said finally, eyes still on the screen. 'Looks like we've got one or two for you this morning. For your viewing entertainment.'

A few random white spots showed on the screen, on a grey ground between two elaborate toolbars. Lon blanked the screen without explaining anything. 'C'mon, then.'

The elevator took them *way* down. There was nothing to show how far, just an intercom in the metal wall.

'I better give you the tourist spiel, I guess,' said Lon.

Not once had he met eyes with her.

'I didn't know tourists were allowed in here.'

'They're not. Curious bureaucrats, I mean; historians; people who've got business here, or think they might have.' He inspected the top four corners of the elevator ceiling. 'OK. What I am, is a field officer. Meaningless name. I used to be called a redirection agent, but someone decided that was too straightforward.'

This guy is a sour old bucket, thought Sheneel. *This is going to be fun, I don't think.*

'You know what white time is?' He sounded dead bored.

'Sort of . . . We did it in school, a bit . . .'

'Time out of time, people call it, but they're wrong. It's all time, like white light is all colours, or white noise is all pitches of noise coming at you together. White time's all over the place, blobs and puddles of it, some just hanging in space, some buried in planets, like ours here. This one's quite a big reservoir. Took a bit of clearing – I wasn't here, back when they first happened on it. It keeps one field officer – *moi* – occupied full-time; plenty of eggheads clack-ulating behind

the scenes, too. All very interesting, if you like number and time theories. Do you?' He shot Sheneel a look so sharp she flinched.

'Um . . . *number's* OK, I suppose.'

'Huh. Gal after my own heart. I can't stand time-theorists. Bane of my existence, them and their "spiritual dimension". Bloody god-botherers. Anyway! What I do. I redirect . . . entities, we call 'em. They're actually bodies. Physical beings.' He frowned and fell quiet.

Sheneel thought he might be trying to protect her delicate sensibilities. 'D'you mean corpses?'

He looked startled. 'Bloody hell, no.' He really had quite OK eyes. He'd probably been good-looking once. 'What gave you that idea?'

Sheneel shrugged again. 'You said *bodies* . . .'

'Yeah, as in, *not-bits-of-white-time*, is all I meant. No, they're alive, all right. Just kind of stuck. Between heart-beats, if you know what I mean.'

She didn't. 'How far down are we going?'

'Coupla k's. Don't fret, it'll be a while yet. OK, so what we'll be doing is, we'll suit you up, put some pips in your ears. Then we'll head out and score us an entity or two. I have to warn you, it's gravity-free in there. You got any problems with that? No? Guess it's pretty ordinaire these days for you kids, with your arcades. Used to be hot stuff in my time. Tourists got a bit of a thrill, swimming out into "space" there.'

Sheneel smiled wanly. Dalma was probably talking to Dylan Lazzaro right this minute, giggling and getting him to autograph her cling-shirt.

How is a typical day structured?

Lon Klegg usually spends the morning redirecting entities in white time. He eats lunch in the very well-stocked canteen, talks to colleagues about what he found that morning, and in the afternoon does equipment maintenance.

The elevator's tone changed and Lon stood away from the wall. The cube shuddered and stopped, and the doors opened on another grey room, slightly less piled with equipment.

'Let's see if I can find a suit that fits you.'

The suit he chose had been profusely sweated in by the previous wearer. 'This *stinks!*' said Sheneel, glad she'd worn jeans and the long-sleeved drill shirt.

'Well, you can stink or you can flop around in a size one-oh-two.'

She eyed the monstrous 102 and kept pulling on the smelly suit.

Lon spent a long time finding pips her size and swapping batteries around. 'Finally,' he said. He fitted the left-hand pip into her ear; it was playing quiet, wandering music. He plugged in the right-hand one, and the other half of her head

filled with the sound of Lon's breathing, then his metallicized voice: 'Howzat?'

'Coming through loud and clear.'

He snatched his own right-ear pip out. 'Crikey mama, don't shout, girl. What's your name again? Sharelle?'

'Sheneel.'

'Oh, yeah. Remember that. When you talk to me in there, use my name: Lon. When I talk to you, I'll use yours. And if I get it wrong, tell me, OK? Or you might turn into a Sharelle.'

She laughed politely.

'I mean it.'

He put the suit's soft helmet on her, and strapped a squashy bag onto her back. 'Reserve oxygen,' he said. 'I've never had to use it, so don't get toey.'

'How long are we going to be in there?'

'No time at all, mate. Why?'

'Does it matter that I'm starting to need to go to the toilet?'

He shook his head inside his suit-helmet. 'It won't get any worse while you're in there.'

He led her into the transition chamber, a grey tube in the wall full of tech-head stuff, glass-sealed at both ends. It was a little small for both of them, and he was fiddling with the front of her suit, attaching tubes, growling to himself. She tried to think of some technical-type question to hide her embarrassment.

'So, when you say "redirecting", where are you redirecting the things to?'

He looked disconcerted. 'Well. How do I put it? These guys we pick up, they think they want to get to a particular point in time, right? Don't ask me why – it's just a phase everything goes through on its way up the evolutionary ladder, eh. Is time travel still *cool*, or has it gotten passé, too?'

'Well, there's lots of games about it, I guess, lots of movies...'

'Anyway, before they work out how to do it properly, they go through the stage of flinging themselves out of their own time and expecting to go to whenever they want, but to stay in exactly the same spot in the meta-universe as they started from. And, well, they do, but the trouble is, their planet or dust cloud or interstitial residence has moved on, see? What with your planets and galaxies orbiting, and your less predictable universal shifts. You following me?'

'So why don't they just die? Like, if they end up in the middle of a comet, or in dead space or something?'

'Well, possibly they do. "Evidence has yet to be found", as they say. But some of them, for some reason, end up in white time, in places like this.' Lon poked a thumb at the other door. 'The current theory is that the time travel process actually *makes* these reservoirs happen.'

Sheneel felt her brain struggling. 'So do they go to, like,

the bit of white time that's closest to their usual place in the . . . the meta-universe?"

'Another good question. You'd have to ask the number-crunchers upstairs that one. They're the ones looking at the "big picture". I only work on the local council. I only risk my life on a daily basis. Just kidding.' And he flashed her a pretend smile.

The chamber door swung outward into darkness. *Stupid question number umpteen*, thought Sheneel. *What made me think white time would be white?*

'Push out as far as you can, first off,' said Lon. 'Don't worry, you won't hit anything. There's nothing to hit.' He shot away.

'I thought we were underground!' she called after him.

His right hand clapped to his head. 'Shout like that once more, Sheneel, and you're up top with the number-crunchers for the day.'

'Sorry.' She pushed off hard into the nothingness. It didn't feel as if she was moving unless she watched the door-circle recede behind her, its light playing on the out-feed coils.

'Kay.' There was a clunk in her voice-pip. Lon twirled as he reached the end of his push. The light set into the chest of his suit lit up several – well, 'entities' was the only name Sheneel had for them – suspended like soft drink spilled in an anti-gravity café. They looked as if they'd suddenly lit up

from within, because there was nothing in the darkness between them and Lon's chest to create a beam of light.

'Now, Shanelle, I've got to—'

'Sheneel.'

'Sheneel, I've got to stabilize us. It's up to Rowan in the tap room to move us about, so you'll hear him and me swapping co-ordinates a bit. Say hello to the young lady, Rowan.'

'Hi, Sheneel.' A younger, brighter voice than Lon's was in her head.

'We'll do the biggest first, Ro. She's a monster, mate.'

They floated past two pale, person-sized sacs that pulsed like jellyfish in the darkness. Sheneel looked around for the bigger entity, but there seemed to be nothing more between them and the distant blotched surface of the wall . . . hang on, did white time *have* a wall?

Then she was scrabbling and pedalling on the end of her cable. '*That's* an entity? That bloody great— How big is it?'

'Whoa, whoa,' said Rowan. 'You're not in danger, Sheneel.'

'What is it?'

'Mind my ears, girl,' grumbled Lon.

She squashed her voice down. 'Lon! Is it *alive*?' She was still trying to fight Rowan steering her towards the thing.

'Well, as I said, it's not alive and it's not dead, Sheneel. Cool it, girl. It'll be gone in a sec. Hang in there and watch.'

Rowan stopped moving her, and she hung still, panting.

Lon floated on, a shadow against the gradually shrinking circle his chest-light threw. Then he hung still, a small knot of light and shadow applying himself to the entity's surface. There were growths and stains all over it, encrustations bigger than Lon.

'OK, give it to me, Rowan,' he said. 'This bit's just maths, Sheneel. Just punching numbers into a clack-ulator.'

'You've already made that calculator joke today, Sir – Lon, I mean!' It had nearly happened to her. She had nearly forgotten his name. 'Am I supposed to tell you stuff like that?'

'It can only help, girl.'

She waited. Her head was so *busy*, with the two voices blabbing numbers in one ear, and the music wandering in the other. It was annoying. She wanted to unplug everything and just hear for herself what white time sounded like. She was sure it would be a delicious, restful silence. She put her gloved hand to her helmet, and the two surfaces ran slickly off each other. The pips had been tiny, and had gone deep into her ears; she was stuck with the breathing and the blabbing and the tuneless tinkling.

And then the wall – the entity – was not there. It vanished without sound or vibration. Only the after-image of Lon's chest-light on the blotched skin burned out against an entity-free blackness.

'That was it? Lon?'

'Sheneel. That's what we do.'

'What was it?'

'Thing called a Whalan. If you think of the universe as an ocean, that thing is a deep-sea bottom-crawler. A big prawn, that's all. A space-cockroach.'

'You've seen one before?'

'I've heard of 'em. What's your name again?'

'Sheneel. And you're Lon.'

'Let's go back and get those two little fellas.'

The two jellyfish had become very like people, Sheneel thought. But a moment later they were like branching vein-networks, and then they were like branches, and then branches with leaves, and then like branch-less leaves clumped on the air.

'Oh, *these* guys,' said Lon. 'We get quite a few of them through here, Sheneel. They're big history buffs.'

'How come they keep changing?'

'They're simlizing. Playing off our brains. Trying to identify themselves to us, showing us a few things we know, things they might be like. It's automatic; it's not like they're communicating with us or anything warm and fuzzy like that. I'll put a sucker on each one, Rowan; my guess is, these two are travelling together.' He attached two tiny suction cups to a leaf of each being, and keyed in numbers on a floating pad cabled to his belt. As he keyed, the two beings became stretched-out