

The Guy Who Worked For Money

by

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There was a guy at the party who worked for money.

So naturally, Nera wanted to meet him.

None of her services knew if she would like him.

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Nera and Malka made their way through a forest of columns of fungus. The columns were crimson and magenta and burnt-sienna and smelled like sausage. They were as wide as trees. They filled the living room of 534a.tower5.love.slump.frankfurt.de.

When Nera used to crash here, months before, it had been spare, full of light from the big window, vintage Ikea daybeds and electric lamps and side tables. Jörg used to scavenge them, fill cracks in the pasteboard and pine with archaic wood-goo. Now fungus blocked the light.

"So he's Swiss, right?" Nera asked, about the guy who worked for money. That would make sense.

Malka rolled her eyes and flashed Nera the guy's page, again. The incoming winked green at the lower left corner of Nera's vision. She'd been having trouble with in-eye stuff for the past month: if she pulled it up that way, it would be blurry and jittery and give her a headache. She checked the guy out on her sleeve instead, stroking her fingers from elbow to wrist across the stretched display cotton, info whispering in her ears over Malka's theme song. Nera had Moody's Clamor service on audio, and its theme song for Malka was a peppy, sizzling cryohaka beat – up-to-the-minute, fun, not necessarily trustworthy. Moody's had their relationship pretty well down, in other words.

Sergei Balduri: nice-looking video portrait; 45 (three years older than Nera); born right here in Frankfurt. Tribes: the 135th vertical street level, the Gremptstrasse neighborhood, local water polo and catharsis clubs – nothing much, in other words. No lifebrand. He looked like a nobody. But his aggregate ratings were in the 500s at Moody's and Snopes and in the 700s at hUBBUB. Nera only had a 453 at hUBBUB.

None of the services could predict a weighting for Nera and Sergei on social enjoyment, intellectual stimulation, stabilized admiration – nothing, except that they'd be good in bed together. Predictions for that clustered around 85% compatibility (hUBBUB summarized, unhelpfully: "Run That Bunny Down!").

Nera felt like a depp standing there, nose to her sleeve in the middle of the party like somebody's grandmother.

A wave of younger men broke around them: six dark, buff, laughing, shirtless guys, who could have all been cousins, accompanied by forgettable pop fluff from Clamor. Past the breakwater of Nera and Malka, the wave reformed – hands across each other's shoulders and in each other's back pockets – fashionable pox-whirls decorating their backs, glowing lifebrand tattoos on the napes of their necks – and threaded between the columns. Following them, a woman in a sparkly blue chador, arguing in Bayerish with an old white guy in a top hat and tails. For those two, Clamor played a riff of something dark, ominous, and classical: they were trouble. Malka had gone on and Nera hurried to catch up with her. There was a little blond boy sitting at the base of one of the columns, stuffing strips of fungus into his mouth. He examined his hands while he chewed. For him, Clamor played turn-of-the-century pop: sweet and bouncy U.S.-Anglo music from Nera's parents' childhood. Because her eyes lingered on him, her infospace started whispering: Torsten Hughes, 6 years old, born in Edinburgh, Scotland –

Nera looked away to shut it up, resisting the urge to google his parents.

"When are you going to get your eyes fixed?" Malka said. "It's like going out with my Nana. You're not present anywhere, and it takes you hours to show up when someone mentions you. Everyone's talking about it."

"Fine, you can all de-rate me then," Nera said.

The cryohaka tempo ramped up a notch. "Oh porky jesus, no one is de-rating you."

Torsten was blissing on his mouthful of sausage-fungus, eyes closed. Nera's stomach rumbled again, and she pushed her hand into the column next to her. The fungus was soft and spongy, red as blood. She took a bite: it tasted like bratwurst, the texture of angel's-food cake.

A flock of nine- and ten-year-old kids pushed past them, chattering in Chinese, none of them Chinese: tongue-slaved to some server. There never used to be kids at these parties.

But who knew where kids went or why, nowadays? When Nera was a kid, before '33, you knew where kids were during

the day. They were in school. Or with their parents. Torsten Hughes's parents were probably across town at some other party. They probably had him on a kidcam. They probably just deputized whoever was dumb enough to stop and talk to him.

Through the kitchen: Schwarzwälder at the bar, Bavarians around the fridge, and Finns and Peruvians cooking something loudly at the grill. There was a purple flash at the corner of Nera's vision. Did she want to contribute some of her energy ration to the barbecue? No. She did not.

Malka strode into the library and around a bookshelf. If Nera's in-eye stuff had been working she'd have had more social propinquity alerts up, but as it was, she had no idea Jörg was there until Clamor's theme song for Jörg-as-seen-by-Nera – brassy, sexy, slightly pompous Montevideo jazz – surged in her ears.

At two-meters-oh-five, Jörg towered over Sergei and Malka. He had shaved his skull except for a long blond queue, down to his hips. He was dressed in brown, a crisp new leather sleeveless vest – it must have come from a printer, too new to be vintage salvage, but it sure looked real – and leggings. On his hard, broad tricep there was a new lifebrand tattoo – the pyramid-eye of Illuminatus, above the steaming spoon of De Gustibus and the bicycle of Ergo. He was keeping up three lifebrands! With that and neighborhood stuff and leading the rez committee for this floor of towers, he must be clocking thirty contrib hours a week. He had to be in the 1100s by now. She would have rating-checked him if he wasn't already looking up, seeing her. Looking at her sleeve now would be painfully obv.

Her hands were stained red from the stupid sausage mushroom.

Jörg's eyes widened. "Nera!" His broad face spread into a grin, a cascade of wrinkles. Look at that grin, not a care in the world, the bastard. He saw her hands. "So what do you think of Tomas's garden?"

"It stinks," she said. "I'm going to smell like wurst for a week." She turned her attention decidedly to Sergei. Bristling eyebrows, dark eyes, a strong nose plummeting straight from a raised bridge – a Dravidian-Slavic mix. His hair was a black ear-length mop, his shirt flowing blue silk opening to show the softness of his throat. She couldn't read his expression. No predictions from Clamor, so no audio. When she focussed on Sergei, all she heard was the party around her.

Malka's hand drifted to Sergei's shoulder, they kissed cheeks. Nera's stomach clenched a bit. Their commenters mostly agreed that, of the two of them, Nera had a better body; but Malka had such energy and confidence, she wore her body better. She was in a short-sleeved ocean-video t-shirt (rolling waves, blues and greens) and matte black slacks. A good look for her, she had nice arms. Not that it was a competition or anything. Despite hUBBUB's insistence, Nera was not planning on running the bunny Sergei down at this party.

"Nera wanted to meet the guy who works for money," Malka said to Sergei.

"Oh, thanks, nice wingman work there, Malka," Nera said. Malka's hand still rested on Sergei's shoulder. "Make me look like a total banker." Jörg and Malka simultaneously strangled a laugh, and Nera's pulse sped. "What? Oh –"

Sergei inclined his head in a gracious nod and smiled. "You have gotten it in one."

"I didn't mean it like – you're a banker?" Nera sent an urgent message to her mouth to stop talking, but apparently it had to go by carrier pigeon. "Literally? Is that even legal?"

"Her eyes are broken," Malka said, apologizing. "She was trying to read your page on her sleeve, but I guess she didn't get that far!"

"It's more than legal," Jörg said, "It's necessary." This was the worst of Jörg, he was about to launch into a lecture. There he went. "The Free Society can't exist in a vacuum. Outlawing money exchange would lead to even more extreme distortions in our metrics than we've got." His fingers flicked, his eyes briefly on a point above her head, and more incoming green pinged at the corner of her vision. As if she was going to read his goddamn footnotes, probably references to some generative econ models, on her sleeve, in the middle of the party. "The Free Society doesn't compete on force or fiat, it outperforms on joy. Wherever there's a reversion to the money economy –" when his eyes refocussed on hers, she felt a jolt; he had that damned charisma, there was a giddy vertigo in being at the center of his attention – "that's a signal of a deficit of either trust, satisfaction ability, or information flow. Where a money economy reasserts itself, that's a signal of a problem." – The Montevideo jazz hit a brassy crescendo, and she forced herself to look away to damp it, her heart pounding. "It's better to let that signal manifest rather than suppressing it."

Oh, she was such an idiot, she should so not still be hot for Jörg anymore. He was a blowhard, a dogmatic do-gooder. Smelling like leather and sea wind, fine gold hairs glinting on his forearms. Could her commenters tell that she was still jonesing for him? She looked back at Sergei.

A brass flash at the lower right: the first comment on this incipient fiasco. At least it was not a diss – brass was for neutral comments. It was a blessing her eyes weren't working, so she wasn't tempted to read it right then.

"What do you even buy with money any more?" she asked.

"Are you kidding?" Sergei smiled, his eyes hooding slightly. He cupped his hands, enclosing a swarm of mites. They glinted, swift and metallic; in the darkness cast by his hands, you could see tiny flares of laser communications. "Look at these mites. They give us surveillance, security, power-transfer, communications. All of them contain gallium, tantalum, rubidium... delicate nano components you can only make in orbit..." He opened his hands, and the mites wisped away. "Nobody mines rubidium in the Sudan just to impress their friends or make a lifebrand quota. Right? China doesn't send up taikonauts to low orbit to get a good rating at hUBBUB..."

"I thought the metals could be salvaged out of old gear," Nera said, shocked.

"Oh no," Jörg said. "Not enough of them, not for years. Probably every pre-2030 laptop and cell phone in Europe outside of deep landfill has been recycled by now, but we're way past that point, and back to extraction. There's a robust debate in the

import-export committee wiki..." Of course, more little green footnotes, flashing like the mites' lasers. He was such a prick.

"Always need more mites," Malka said drily. "How else are we going to be sure not to miss any neighbor picking her nose..."

"But that's —" Nera knew she should shut up, not make matters worse. They all knew more than she, and if she said anything really dumb, commenters would be all over her. Her savvy rating wasn't the best anyway; all she needed was a spike in buzz on a collapse in savvy. But what the hell had they had a revolution for anyway, if they were all living on the backs of wage-slaves in Africa again? Should she bring that up? As she hesitated, another brass flash heralded another comment; then a dark brown one, the first diss. Nera didn't have many regular followers — most of them were mutuals, plus some contextals (who usually were more interested in Jörg or Malka or others of her buzzy friends), a few tourists from overseas who'd picked her at random, the inevitable drive-bys when she did something truly bloated, and one persistent semi-troll with too much pull to ban, who'd been after her, on and off, for twenty years.

Malka could see her floundering, and cut in. "Did you know Nera's a signer of a construction RFC?" Of course that was right at the top of her page now, but it was an innocuous enough change of topic, and Nera knew what Malka was trying to say to her: keep your nose clean, honey, you don't need another ratings debacle.

"Oh yeah?" Jörg said. He grinned, raised his eyebrows, cocked his head to one side. Nera's heart went baked Alaska — clearly he thought it was great (warm flush), and equally clearly, he was surprised that Nera was doing something constructive (icy spike) — which meant he hadn't been following her at all.

She shrugged. "Yeah, it's for some space on the 300th, above Cambergerstrasse. Half residential squat and party space, half for historical music performance. Do you know Dagmar Otto Heuspross?" Jörg and Sergei's eyes both unfocused with the telltale drift-to-the-right of people who are about to google something; before they could, she rushed on. "He's like this major scholar in late-twentieth-century U.S. alternative music. He's one of the main guys in the project. Originally we wanted to do it specialized on Washington, DC punk, late 1980s? But we got major flak from the Niederrad punks —"

"Oh right," Jörg said, "you don't want to tangle with them."

"Yeah?" asked Sergei. "A lot of clout? I don't really follow recreationists..."

"They're not ~~exactly~~ recreationists," Jörg said.

"Yeah, that's the problem!" Malka said. "Punk is like a religion in Niederrad. They're the authentic inheritors of the true flame, they don't need any academic poseurs butting in..."

"So... we switched to Seattle grunge," Nera said. "Same general period, less contentious. There's an academy for original grunge ensembles and karaokeists in Stuttgart, but all we've got are neural reactors up here. I mean, so far. If we get approved — it ought to change."

"The 300th, though? Isn't it a little high up for a performance space?" Sergei said. "That's quite a climb..."

He was just being polite, Nera could tell. They were all probably bored of the topic now. She could go on, there was lots more to say — they had a guild of artisans who wanted to build some of the space with authentic 1990s techniques, steelframe and drywall; but that would mean some importing and energy budget overruns, compared to just printing bamboo and carbon thread out of compost, so that was a big debate. There was dealing with the people on lower levels that their structures would be putting into shadow, and getting agreement on nanowire anchor points, and safety, and access. There was trying to keep out of the ideological fight between the Big Frankfurt and No-Growth factions. There was the issue of whether they would have to yield the entire residential space to general squatright, or whether they could get away with reserving some of it to project committers for a few years — Nera would love to live there with the group for a while, at least some of the time.

It was all thrilling stuff for her. She wasn't a major player, she didn't have any training or real contacts, it was just something she'd latched onto, almost at random, just surfing what was out there (following an allusion in a shadowplay to an orchestral cover of a track from a vintage band called Fugazi...). But she'd been pouring herself into it lately, doing a lot in person or at a screen, since her eyes were broken... and it was restful and fun, doing something big and good, something long-lasting.

She'd spent the last decade mostly just partying, media-surfing, and doing pick-up jobs pulled from the services, enough to keep her ratings out of the gutter. Couriering a package across town, stopping to help fix lunch at a buffet, visiting with some officially at-risk lonelies (work most people hated but Nera often didn't mind, so a big ratings win), getting babysitting-delegated, bit-part acting in flash dramas, gardening, or just hauling crap from place to place. Sometimes that life was soothing, waking up at one party, spending the day drifting and doing whatever Frankfurt told her to do, whatever her services predicted would help her ratings (and assured others she could handle)... ending up at some other party and going to sleep in some comfortable nook — with or without some new friend vouched for by hUBBUB.

But looking back on it was like looking back on a decade-long nap. Maybe she would have kept on that way if it hadn't been for hooking up with Jörg and getting drawn into his orbit, the loverslump crowd. One night the party she'd ended up at after her day of drifting was here, and the nook was Jörg's; and after that she'd started drifting back here more and more, until she'd been waking up every morning to the light from the big windows on the patched-up Ikea vintage furniture. Listening to Jörg and Tomas and Minal and Xavi and their projects and theories. In a way it was like being back at Uni just after '33 — the excitement, the caring about the big picture — except these weren't kids in the middle of a world falling apart and being reborn. These were grown-ups with stable lives, who planned next month and had their own to-do lists of practical details to handle. They didn't just bob along with the flow, picking up the next thing that looked interesting. They set out for a destination.

They didn't mind that she was such a bubblehead drifter. She "contributed in her way" — that's what they kept telling

her. But at some point she didn't want to just be a pleasant convenience, warming Jörg's bed when he was free. He had been free pretty often, back then; he'd probably spent four nights out of seven with her, and really that was about all that she could take nowadays. When she was twenty, sex every night had been a luxury, but after forty, solitude was beginning to have a competing appeal. So it wasn't that she'd felt neglected. It was just that they'd made her life seem small.

And it wasn't like Jörg had chased after her when she'd stopped showing up. He hadn't even commented in months.

To her, the grunge-hall/crashpad construction RFC was exhilarating. Compared to her old bobbing-along life, it was a big risk. If it was a big success, it would be good for the ratings and relationships of everyone on the project. But if it ended up getting classed as a showboating white elephant, a self-indulgent folly? They'd all get trashed. There were plenty of commenters saying that already. They had to prove them wrong.

But Jörg, of course, did things like this all the time. He had ten things the size of her RFC going at once, in five different fields, and he was central to them, not just a helper, gopher, cheerleader, sounding board.

She shrugged, didn't answer Sergei. There was an awkward empty beat in the conversation. Jörg's proud grin faltered a bit, and she was glad. The last thing she wanted to be was another serendipitous success of his. She could just imagine his commenters fanboying: "Ha, Jörg can't even sleep with bubbleheads without turning them into prosocial contributors! Our brother over here ejaculates impulsiveness suppressants!"

Let him feel a little uncomfortable, even if she took a hit on sociability. I'm not doing this to impress you, Jörg.

"Okay, so backing up," Malka said, "about the banker thing, Sergei, since Nera did bring it up. I've never actually had the nerve to ask this before. I get why you work with money -- it still makes a lot of the world go round, so someone has to take Frankfurt's various exports and patents and Swiss bank accounts and whatever, and buy us whatever we can't make here. I get that, and I get why it would be a high-rep job; necessary, hard to do, most people would find it boring. But you told me you worked for money -- not just with money." She crossed her arms beneath her breasts, as a school of zebra fish swam across their electric, shimmering blue. "Why?"

Sergei smiled the long-lipped, eyebrow-cocked smile of someone who is amused in advance at the reaction they're about to get. "I like money," he said.

"What, you mean, like, physical money?" Malka said. "Like you collect coins and bills? That's cool, I guess."

"No," Sergei said. "I mean I like money. I like exchange. Abstracted exchange. Simplicity. You give me something, I give you something. We're quits. You don't have to decide what kind of person I am, if you like me, how distant I am from you in social space. We could be masked strangers in a privacy zone. You want something from me, you give me money. I don't care who you are. I don't care what you want it for."

Comments were flashing in. For the first time since her eyes went off, Nera felt desperate to be able to read them on-the-fly; she wanted to know what she should think about this. Jörg looked like he was the proud owner of a performing dog; Malka, like she was equally disgusted and turned on. Or maybe a little more turned on.

"Huh," Malka said. "Masked strangers in a privacy zone"...? You know the 'raw swingers'?" Her eyes unfocused briefly, her fingers flexed: she was sending footnotes to Jörg and Sergei, skipping broken-eyed Nera. Malka could make that look seductive, somehow, like she was drifting into a private daydream; Nera knew she always looked like she was having a small seizure. "They hook up with strangers for sex with their services totally turned off. No peeking at comments or reviews or social map -- so they have no idea if it's going to be a total nightmare, right? That's the point, I guess, part of the thrill. They've got this whole thing about how it's so much better when it does work, because of the risk and the authenticity and whatever. So are you saying this is like that, Sergei? You do stuff just for a marker of hoarded value... you don't even know why. You don't know what the effect of your actions are, what you're contributing towards, or what people will say..."

"All you know is you want the money," Nera said.

Malka nodded. "Pure greed, no connections, heedless of consequences. That's it? It's a kink? Like a... sick thrill?"

Sergei laughed. To his credit, he looked a little discomfited. His teeth were white, with a little artful crookedness. "I guess you could look at it like that." His skin was the exact color of the beams the Elf Grove Collective was tub-growing for the Cambergerstrasse project. He was good to look at, and it kept Nera's eyes off Jörg. And the lack of a theme song was at once restful and mysterious.

"Oh, don't underplay it," Jörg said. "Sergei -- you've written about this. It's a philosophy." Nera glanced at him (just briefly enough to keep the Montevideo jazz from kicking in), and she recognized his expression. A year ago she would have called it an eager openness, an alert, interested embrace of differing views and differing kind of people. She would have said he was fascinated by picking through the unending variety Frankfurt's flow brought bobbing to his door, that he could appreciate and not judge almost anything. Now it pissed her off. She used to look at her like that -- the little bubblehead girlfriend the tide had washed up against his crotch. There was eager openness, but it was proprietary and patronizing too. Drifter Nera, banker Sergei, autie-genius Tomas, the Finns and Peruvians grilling in the kitchen, somehow they all ended up part of Jörg's menagerie, and by means of them all, he somehow ended up rating as a life-artist instead of a pompous, lecturing dogooder.

"Well," said Sergei half-grudgingly, "Okay. I think it's more than just kinky." He glanced sidelong at Malka. "Money is... clean. It severs connections. That's not always a bad thing. You say you know what the effect of your actions are. But you don't really know -- you don't trace them all in detail. You don't have time. You just go with the consensus. With fashion." He shrugged. A flurry of brass flashes in Nera's vision -- her commenters were engaged with this scene.

"Sure, sure, ratings and fashion are all we have," Malka said. "That's not a new argument or anything, and we are all concerned, I'm sure, with the plight of the low-rated. Nera has done quite a bit of visiting with at-risk lonelies, did you know

that? But money seems like a weird solution to that problem, doesn't it?"

"No," he said, and there was a little bit of a quiver in his voice that made Nera wonder what history it pointed to, "no, it doesn't. I know what you're going to say. Where money rules, there's also poverty. Of course there is. But the thing is, poverty is empty of meaning. It's not a judgement on your life and works. It doesn't mean no one likes you, that you're obnoxious or boring. If you're poor in a money economy, you know what you need to do: make money. It's not as... wounding."

"That's stupid," Nera said. Jörg and Malka turned to look at her, eyebrows raised – so maybe that was a little harsh. But her patience was fraying. "It's dead easy to get your ratings up when they fall. Your services tell you how."

"Your services tell you how," Sergei retorted. "You have skills, you're charming. You're rated as trustworthy. People want you to babysit their kids. Carry their packages. Cook their food. It's not that easy for everyone."

"Well I don't understand what you're saying," Nera said, flushing. "If people, or the networks, don't trust someone to watch kids or cook food – crunchy Hell, there's probably a good reason for that then! There are other things they can do instead that are contributive. This is ridiculous. You want to return to a world where you can – I don't know, push people off bridges and as long as you can steal some jewelry and convert it into cash, you get to have everything you want?"

"I don't think that's quite what Sergei means," Jörg said. The zookeeper interposing himself to keep two of his animals from fighting.

"I'm not saying we should go back to just having money," Sergei said, smiling uncertainty. "Not only. But it's – freeing. It's like – maybe sometimes you don't need to know what something's for. You don't always need to be beholden to people, to have all these tribes and affiliations. All these people arguing about what to do, imposing on you. Don't you get tired of the politics? Of being second-guessed, of... positioning everything? Maybe it's just that I've travelled quite a bit, and the world beyond Frankfurt and the Free Society Zone is different. Not maybe better, but... yeah, freer, in some ways. In China and the 'Stans, you know..."

"Yeah, I know," Nera said, "you can get baby hookers there with your precious money, and plenty of privacy."

There was a beat. Sergei's smile vanished, replaced by a look of concern. For her, Jörg lost, blessedly, that patronizing zookeeper look. He looked, for a moment, angry, then uncertain. Malka looked as if she'd bitten into something rotten.

A flurry of brown flashes in the corner of her vision. The vultures descending on her comment space.

Her ears burned. Fine. She'd lost her cool. She should apologize, she should make a joke out of it.

She was quivering with anger, and she couldn't open her jaw to say hey, I'm sorry, you don't mean that, I've had a bad day. The comments were splotching into her vision like shit bombs. But she couldn't open her mouth.

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Nera's dad was a florist. Her mom was a pharmacist, who moved up to managing process architecture generation for a chain of drugstores. They'd immigrated as kids, from the Balkans, to a rich, safe, First World, EU country: Germany. For their parents, Nera's grandparents, Germany was a hard and lonely heaven. Long hours, disapproving looks from the neighbors, the officious and unmusical language, refugee paperwork. But safe. No snipers on the rooftops, no landmines in the soil. Computers in every house, fresh fruit from South America and New Zealand in the shop on the corner. Fitness clubs and GPS cell phones, and softly humming, unhonking electric BMWs.

Nera's father used to tell her about their summer trips back to the Balkans: fields of sunflowers, dappled forests, bomb craters from the last century, villages of half-built houses. Parties long into the night, rich homemade food and aunts fussing over you. But he never took Nera back there.

He worked long hours. Her mother, once Nera was in school, worked even longer hours. Nera's prototypical memory of her: hunched over a tablet, late at night, in a curvy, designer orange leather chair by the front parlor window.

Her father, at least, had the flowers, which you could touch and smell, and the customers, who were sometimes – rarely – enthralled by the flowers' beauty. But those were brief moments in a day filled with sneers; with bitching coworkers and an angry, disapproving boss. His German was perfect, he was punctual and polite, he cheered the Frankfurter Fussballclub and drank Hefeweizen. But they acted as if he didn't understand, couldn't think, and didn't belong. He kept arriving every day to cut and bundle and ring up flowers, through an ulcer and graying hair and a permanent, heartbreaking, conciliatory flinch-smile. Because it was his job.

Her mother was more assertive, slicker, better at claiming her place in Germany. She rose through the ranks. She was rewarded with weekends shuffling numbers, running simulations, and playing office politics over instant messaging. She was proud of her work. She was glad when she could prove that her candidate process had evolved better than her rivals'. It was all ephemeral. At best, it meant a few more shoppers loaded a few more plastic tubes and bottles of chemicals into their shopping carts in a few more narrow, fluorescent-lighted aisles. She gave her life over to that.

That, and money, and a place in the system promised by the state. The state would educate their child. It would care for them when they were sick, when they were old. If they could not find work, it would feed and clothe them for a while, while they looked for work. The state would defend them from violence. It would protect all the things they acquired from theft: the tablet computers and phones and leather chairs, the shapely anodized aluminum pans hanging above the induction stove in their beautiful open-plan kitchen/living room. For this, they would feed the state with taxes. And for food, for electricity, for clothes, for videos, for the internet, for rented cars and ice skates and piano lessons, they would feed the market a constant stream of money.

It was a bargain. We will give you our lives; we will spend our lives obediently doing things we wouldn't choose, things that probably do not really matter to anyone. And in return we will get money. And money will take care of us.

The United States of America defaulted on the dollar in 2026. The Euro Zone bet on propping up its banks the following year, and lost its bet. Martial law kept the shaken house in order another year, until the pandemics hit, and the soldiers fled the cities. Nera was ten the hungry year that super-resistant TB and goose flu kept everyone home. She was already on Tribes then. She already had people around the world and around the block who she could count on for help even if they'd never met, even though it was all guesswork and the crudest of relational metrics on Tribes, not predictive at all. Her parents, who had never made the transition from Facebook and LinkedIn, did not understand why strangers were dropping off food.

Nera's parents knew that the state had betrayed them. They knew that their savings had vanished, that the promises of health care and support in old age had turned out to be lies. They never understood that the market had betrayed them as well. Even though their money had stopped being worth anything, they kept looking for a money that would be worth something: yuan, or Swiss francs, or real solid gold, or the virtual-gold currencies of fantasy games which briefly, perversely, served as the world's lingua-franca medium of exchange.

They never understood what their grandparents had known: that the only thing you could trust was people.

They didn't understand why Nera was in the streets in '33.

They died looking for jobs and money, trying to find a way back, trying to find someone to sell their lives to.

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But Malka understood. In '33 Nera hadn't met her yet in person, but they'd cheered each other on. Commented on each other's video streams, that year when everyone was phoning in earring footage of eviction standoffs, food riots, praise-ins, convoys, patentbreaking spontos. Malka had been in Berlin when they unfirewalled the national surveillance network. She had driven party shuttles and done megaphone duty, matchmaker, and groupie work with union shop stewards and farmhands, in the Work For Love campaign to keep German agribusiness from collapsing.

Malka pursed her lips. She didn't look at Nera. The cryohaka beat hissed and rumbled, repetitive, slick, and meaningless. Carefully, she put her hand back on Sergei's shoulder and angled herself, slightly, towards him.

It was not '33 any more, Nera was not fifteen, she was forty-two and an embarrassment.

Nera didn't need her eyes fixed to read Malka's comment:

There are friendclouds of Thirty-three'ers in Frankfurt who live on recollected adolescent glory.

They're not at this party.

Nera turned and walked away. Her hands felt cold.

Flashes of brown, brown, brass, brown. One consoling flash of gold, a lone positive comment.

Maybe Malka was being merciful, helping her get out of this quick, while there was something to salvage. She walked through the library. At the door to the workroom, where a cluster of people in their sixties and seventies were playing with lathes and fab-boxes (Clamor played reassuring, mellow Turkish show tunes for them), she paused and looked back. Jörg leaned towards Sergei, laughed his abrupt booming laugh. Sergei said something, and his hands twitched out a footnote. Malka stood a little stiff, but intent, listening.

Nera watched Sergei for a moment. Sure enough, Clamor began, tentatively, to play something. It was harsh, hyped-up, almost atonal, like grunge guitars playing Schönberg. It was unpleasant. Apparently she'd given Clamor enough data, now, to figure her and Sergei out.

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She found a sofa and slouched into it. She pulled up her comment stream on her sleeve. She stared, numbly, at the flamfest, not really reading it. She would have to sooner or later. She would have to come back from this. Her hUBBUB rating had sunk to 402. Over fifty points for one stupid argument at a party.

She had queued incomings from random drive-by ratings advisors, attracted by her sharp plunge. They'd have suggestions for her; probably they'd want her to shift her friendships around, invest in relationships with other narrow-minded ideological assholes like herself. That would improve her numbers. Also in her queue: a lot of private messages from friends worried about her behavior, and a couple of random gig offers.

She scrolled to the one gold comment in her comment stream.

I read what you said on a kidfilter so maybe I don't understand it all. But I agree with you. Money was dumb. People shouldn't be able to make other people play with them just because they have points in that kind of game. I'm asking my parents to delegate you. I'm in the fungus room if you want to play.

Sure enough, one of the gig offers was a babysitting offer from Torsten's parents.

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Some cousin or uncle of Torsten's who was in the area had pinged her offering to pick him up, so she was waiting on a cushioned bench in a glass-fronted lobby at the summit of towers. Torsten, all played out and smelling of sausage fungus, was

asleep in her lap.

Frankfurt filled the night window with points and necklaces and blobs of light. The great towers from which the city's habitations dangled loomed, shadows on shadow, five kilometers high.

She'd turned her eyes off entirely, so there were no flashes. Her ratings might have recovered a little by now, but she didn't want to shift Torsten to check her sleeve.

He weighed less than a big sack of flour. He'd flung one limp hand around her neck, and his warm cheek was pressed against her shoulder. She buried her nose in his hair, breathed in, and closed her eyes.