

Strata

A Short Story by John W. Allie

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The roller truck came to a grinding stop and the tailgate screeched open automatically. George Montgomery took hold of the massive air filter module and dragged it forcibly from the truck bed, letting it fall onto the floor with a metallic ringing. The truck's tailgate swung back into place and it rumbled off down the tracks to perform another delivery. George watched it go, then he hefted up the filter module and began slowly making his way back to the Air Processing Terminal.

It was only a short walk away, but the module was heavy, and George's progress was slow. He stopped for a moment, breathing deeply to renew his strength. The scent of lubricants and fuels was thick in the air, but he had become accustomed to it long ago. He tensed his muscles again and continued onward down the corridor.

The Air Processing Terminal resounded with the constant throbbing of the intake fans, but their sound was but another sensation which George had long ago become immune to. He had lived his entire life in the terminal, changing modules and performing maintenance since he was fourteen. Life was as regular as the air system itself. Nothing unexpected had happened since the goose had been sucked into Intake 14C-North and become stuck. It had been the only memorable occurrence in his entire career, and he hadn't even been a part of it.

He lugged the filter module across to a service elevator and set it down gratefully on the platform. Licking his lips, he held down a small contact and gripped the railing tightly as the metal platform slowly ascended into the distant heights of the terminal. He got off at the third landing and picked up the module, hesitating only a moment before finding the correct catwalk.

At the far end of the walkway, George deactivated one of the large filter engines and waited as it wound down. Once it had come to

a full stop, he pulled off the cover, removed the old filter module and set it down beside himself on the catwalk. George suspected that he might have installed the old one, but he couldn't say for sure. He picked up the new module and swung it into place inside the engine. After checking that it was seated securely, he replaced the cover and reactivated the engine. As it roared back to life, he pried open the old module.

Even after being in place for only a week, the interior was already caked with dust and grime. Coughing, George pulled out the filter pad, sealed it inside a plastic pouch, and delivered it into the nearby disposal shaft. Swiftly he sanitized his hands with a small spray bottle from his pocket, then leaned down and replaced the module cover. He hefted up the old filter and continued back down the catwalk again.

He had to bring the used module down to the truck stop to be sent to the Recycling Terminal, then he had two more module changes and an intake maintenance job before it was time to sign off. He pressed the contact on the service elevator, and waited in silence as it descended back down to the floor.

George pulled aside the thick canvas privacy curtain and stepped into his meager quarters. Maura was sitting against the wall, holding their small reader pad in one hand. She smiled as he came in.

"You're early today," she observed.

"A bit less work than usual," George said. "Only one intake fix. Where's Jenny?"

"She's in South Sector," Maura said absently. "Playing with a friend."

"South Sector?" George asked.

"Her friend's father works in a water pump terminal."

George nodded. "South Sector is a good distance from here." Maura shrugged. "A good twenty-minute walk. But it's good for her. It lets her get out of the Terminal, see more of the Tower."

"I'm not sure I've ever been to South," George said

thoughtfully. “Not for a long time, at least. When is she getting back?”

“Before dinner hour,” Maura said, glancing at the clock. “I brought her down there, her friend's mother is supposed to bring her back.”

“One of these days,” George said, “we really ought to take her Up.”

Maura smiled at him from behind the reader pad. “Do you think she's old enough?”

“I think so. We wouldn't go very high. To the arboretum, perhaps.”

Maura frowned thoughtfully. “Isn't there a zoo somewhere?”

“Maybe.” George frowned thoughtfully. “I'm not sure. Ask the pad.”

Maura poked at the small buttons for a moment, then nodded. “There is a zoo. It's at 600-level.”

George frowned. “That's a bit higher than I'd like. We'll stick to the 120-level arboretum.”

“When?” Maura asked, turning back to the pad.

“I'm not sure. I'll talk to her about it when she gets back.”

The following Saturday George took Jenny Up. Reaching 120-level from their residence terminal on 14-level took a good fifteen minutes, but Jenny was young and excitable, and she'd never been to another level before. She was ecstatically impatient. Through dozens of stops, it was all George could do to stop her from leaping out of the elevator every time the doors opened. Maura hadn't come along (she worked in the Administrative Registry on weekends) but her absence had no noticeable effect on Jenny's spirits. She fairly danced through the entire ascent, and by the time the elevator announced arrival at 120-level, George already felt exhausted.

Jenny skipped out of the elevator and onto the platform ahead of him, and stood waiting as he climbed up the steps. Behind him, the elevator doors slid shut and there was a low rumble as it shot

upward on its way to 120-level. George checked the timetable to make sure he knew when to expect its return, then allowed his daughter to lead him into the main part of the elevator station.

The far side of the elevator station was completely glass, and through it one had a wide view of the arboretum. Jenny raced toward it and stood still, staring out at the panorama in awe.

“That's it, Dad?” she asked excitedly.

“That's only part of it,” he said, smiling. “Come on, let's go down and see.”

They exited the station and began descending a long, glass-enclosed walkway that led to the arboretum grounds. The air here was very still, and had none of the deep, hollow throbbing which was always present on 14-level. The quiet made George uneasy. Jenny, however, showed no sign of any disquiet; she was too preoccupied with the lush forest beyond the glass.

Finally they reached the base of the stairwell. George pulled open the large glass door and they stepped out onto the soft, moist soil of the arboretum. There was a gentle artificial breeze blowing. It was warm and humid, and carried a thick earthy scent of living plants. Jenny, for once, was completely speechless.

“The arboretum takes up about a square half-mile of 120-level,” George said, trying to make conversation.

“I know,” Jenny said cheerfully. “We learned about the arboretum in school. We learn about a lot of places in the Tower.”

“Really!” said George. “What did you learn about the arboretum?”

“It's got a lot of different kinds of plants in it,” Jenny said enthusiastically. “More than a hundred, I think. I can't remember how much. Did you know,” she said suddenly, “that there's a zoo in the Tower? A zoo is like a arboretum, except with animals instead.”

“There are animals in the arboretum, too,” George said uneasily, trying to draw her mind off the zoo. “Squirrels and lizards and things.”

“And birds,” Jenny added, watching as a colorful shape flew

from tree to tree. “Daddy, could we go see the zoo sometime?”

“Er...” George stammered uneasily. “I don't think so, honey.”

“Why not?” Jenny demanded to know. “Jimmy Bankworth went to the zoo.”

“He did?” George was surprised by that.

“Yes!” Jenny said indignantly. “Why can't we go to the zoo?”

“The zoo's on 600 level, Jenny.”

“I know that,” Jenny protested. “So what?”

“600 is upper level,” he said weakly.

“Why can't we go to upper level?”

“Jenny,” George said, trying desperately to be patient, “the upper levels... they're... they're *different* than the low levels.”

“Different how?” Jenny demanded.

“There's... different people up there,” he said. “Smarter people. Better people. Not like us, Jenny. We low-levelers, Jenny, we're... we're the tough workers. We do the hard work that keeps the Tower operating. The up-levelers... well, I don't even understand what they do.”

“Everyone on the Tower is the same,” Jenny said.

“Yes, I know that's what they tell you in the schools,” George said unhappily, “but that's not completely true. The people above, well, they're better than us. That's why they're up, and we're still down here.”

“We could go up there,” Jenny argued. “Just like we just went up to 120-level.”

“It's not the same,” George said. “120 is still lower-level. But once you get up to 600-level, it's just not the same anymore, Jenny. You need to trust me about that.”

“Our teacher said that anyone can do anything they want,” Jenny said. “She said anyone could eventually live anywhere in the Tower. She said some of us could even make it to 1100-level someday.”

“That may be true in theory,” George said. “But it just doesn't

happen in real life, Jenny. I wish it did.”

They walked through the trees in silence for a while. George looked at the small birds flying through the branches, and hoped that they would distract Jenny from her quandary. She was too young to be asking these questions. He shouldn't have taken her Up at all, he thought now.

“Look!” Jenny shouted. “A squirrel!”

“Sure enough!” George agreed, smiling silently.

It was late, but the throbbing of the intake fans still hung heavily in the air, and a dim light was burning in the Montgomerys' residence area. Jenny was already sleeping peacefully, exhausted after the day's events. George and Maura were still awake, sitting upright on their small cot and speaking quietly.

“She really wanted to,” George said miserably. “She wanted to go to the upper levels. They were giving an 'everyone's-the-same' lecture at school. She didn't understand.”

“Maybe we *can* take her up there sometime.”

“What? To the upper levels?”

“To the zoo, at least. She'd really like that.”

“Sure she would. But we just can't *do* that. 14-levelers just don't go to 600 level. It's just not heard of.”

“Jenny says that one of her classmates went up there,” Maura said. “He'd be a 14-leveler too.”

“I know, she told me that,” George said irritably. “I don't know what possessed them to go up there.”

“They thought it would be fun.”

“Fun?” George laughed. “That's an elevator ride several hours long. And regardless, they're still 14-levelers on 600-level. Does that sound like fun to you?”

Maura shook her head. “I really can't say. I've never been to an Upper.”

“I have,” George said quietly. “Once.”

Maura sat up straight. “You *have*?”

“Yes,” George muttered glumly.

“What for? What level?” Maura asked in astonishment.

“I have an uncle,” George said. “a brilliant man. He lives on 800-level North.”

“Laboratory zone,” Maura breathed.

“Exactly. Arcology Resource Allocation.” He hesitated for a moment. “When I was about eleven, my father and I visited him.”

“You went all the way to *800-level*?”

“Yes. A two-hour elevator ride.”

“What is it *like* up there?” she asked, fascinated.

George's brow furrowed uneasily. “It's different,” he said.

“It's brighter, and cleaner, and fancier. But the people... they're all... *reclusive*.”

“Reclusive?”

“They have...personal residence terminals. Whenever they're not working, they shut themselves up in their rooms, all alone. And they're all...great. They're important, every one of them. They're all smart and talented. My uncle was nice enough, but the upper levels were just... hostile.”

A low whistle hummed in the air. Eleven o' clock.

“I need to get some sleep,” George said, yawning. “It's been a long day.”

“And I've got Registry tomorrow,” Maura agreed.

They kissed briefly, then Maura shut off the light and their meager surroundings faded into darkness.

It had been a long day for George and he was grateful to return home for dinner. As often happened, he was entering the Residence Terminal at roughly the same time the food trolley arrived, so he picked up his family's ration package before going to back to his area.

Jenny was chattering excitedly about some incident that had occurred at the school that day when he entered. Maura was seated across from her, listening intently, but the conversation was too far

along for George to understand it. He nodded to his wife and set about unpacking the food.

The package was composed of three reusable plastic containers adhered to each other with a weak glue. They peeled apart easily and George popped them open one at a time and distributed them as Jenny talked. Each one contained two high-protein yeast cakes, a nondescript brown paste, and a small metal utensil. George sat down on the floor beside Maura and began eating slowly, savoring the strong, familiar flavor of the food. It was the same combination he ate every day. There was no other choice. All the ingredients were produced inside the Tower based on some laboratory principle engineered by the Tower's designers. It was uninteresting, perhaps, but it was filling, and supposedly very nutritious.

Finally Jenny's long-winded tale drew to a close, and she smiled happily.

“I guess you had a good day, then,” Maura concluded. “Now eat your dinner.”

“I'm going to be in the school play, Daddy,” Jenny informed him.

“Really?” George smiled. “What's the play?”

“It's called 'The Founding of the Towers,’” Jenny announced proudly.

“That's terrific! Are you going to do it on Founding Day?”

“Uh-huh.”

“What's your part?”

“Huh? Oh, I'm one of the narrators.”

“That must have a lot of lines,” George observed.

“Not really.”

“Well, want me to help you memorize them after supper, anyway?”

“Sure,” Jenny said eagerly. She chewed through the rest of her dinner in record time, ran off to her corner, and was back with the script sooner than George would have thought possible.

“I'll take the cartons back to the trolley,” Maura offered.

“Thanks,” George said, examining the script. “Where's your line, Jenny?”

“There,” she said pointing.

“All right. I'll get you started. *The Towers were made--*”

Jenny squinted, trying to remember her part. “*The Towers were made with but one thought in mind: For people to live and leave-- and leave-- and leave bad things behind.*” She hesitated for a moment.

“Go on,” George encouraged her.

“*Each Tower a Paradise, the Founders decide, with freedom and happiness for all those inside. Was that right, Dad?*”

“Yes, that was right,” George agreed, skimming across the rest of the awkwardly-rhymed verses. He wondered briefly if the poem had been written by a computer, before concluding that a computer would have done a better job.

Jenny was still concentrating fiercely, muttering “freedom and happiness for all those inside” repeatedly as she struggled to memorize it perfectly.

The 14-level North Communications Terminal was a small, ill-used room with four comm booths. As George entered the ceiling lights illuminated reluctantly, humming slightly. He picked a booth at random and sat down. Nervously he flicked the switch on the console (stiff from lack of use) and waited a moment while it warmed up. The machine buzzed softly and the screen began to glow.

“State address,” the machine ordered.

George shook slightly and glanced over his shoulder to see if anyone was behind him. No one was.

“State address,” the machine repeated.

George took a deep breath. “Stan Montgomery, 800 level North.”

“Thank you,” the machine said. “Please hold.”

George waited uneasily as the machine worked in silence. The word CONNECTING glowed on the console screen.

With a suddenness that made him jump, the screen was filled with the image of a young, stern-looking woman. “Hello?”

“I want to talk to Stan Montgomery,” George said uncertainly.

“Mr. Montgomery is very busy at the moment,” the woman said uncompromisingly. “Who is this?”

“George Montgomery, ma'am. I'm his—nephew.”

She raised an eyebrow at that. “Really?”

“Yes,” he said, swallowing.

“I'll tell him you're on the line. Just a moment.”

The vision winked out abruptly and was replaced by the words, “YOU ARE STILL CONNECTED. PLEASE HOLD.”

After a short wait, the screen came on again. The man on the screen was older than George remembered, but quite definitely his uncle.

“George,” the man said, “is that really you?”

“Yes,” George said half-heartedly.

“I haven't seen you since you were eleven,” his uncle told him. His brow furrowed. “Why are you calling?”

“I'm not sure,” George admitted. “I've just been thinking of you lately.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Jenny got me thinking.”

“Jenny?”

“My daughter.” George smiled weakly.

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you. See, I took her up to 120-level a few days ago, to see the arboretum. She started asking why we couldn't go up to 600-level for the zoo. Then yesterday she brought this insipid play home from school, with all this nonsense about freedom and liberty and everything. All about how everyone in a Tower has equal rights and abilities.”

His uncle frowned uneasily. “There is truth to those notions.”

“That's what I don't understand,” George said unhappily.

“They teach all of us that in school, but our family has been on 14-

level for generations. You're the one exception. How did you get to 800-level?"

"George," his uncle said firmly, "There's no way to answer a question like that. It was more a decision of the Tower than my own. The schools put me here."

"All Jenny's claptrap from school," George said desperately. "It's all about hard work, and how anyone can go anywhere and do anything. Her teacher told them that they might even advance to 1100-level one day!"

His uncle sighed. "It is *possible*, however unlikely. It's simply a matter of determination. The Tower society," he hesitated, "it's tough, George, it's true. But if you're determined enough, you can use it to your advantage." He sat silently for a moment. Behind him George could see various parts of his research apparatus. "It was good to see you, George, but I have to go now," his uncle announced. "I have work to do."

"So do I," George said glumly.

The screen blanked.

George thought smugly that Jenny was the best-looking kid in the whole production. She looked to be the most confident, too. She obviously knew her part, and she was brave enough to stand up there on stage and say it. She looked proud herself, but she wasn't nearly as proud as George was.

He sat in the darkened auditorium with several dozen other 14-level parents, a few of them his co-workers from the Air Processing Terminal. Maura sat beside him, impatiently glancing over the program. The children performed on the stage with an amateurish delight, their enthusiasm making the play's dull nature somewhat more bearable. The entire script was written in extremely forced verse, but for now, at least, the parents seemed oblivious to its shortcomings as they watched their children act out the story of the Founders on the stage.

The narrators stood in a long line, squirming nervously as

they waited to say their lines. Jenny was near the end of the line, wearing a bright yellow dress that George had requested especially for the occasion. It had taken two visits to the Registry before he had successfully justified it to the Tower bureaucracy, but they'd relented in the end, and the dress had arrived with the dinner cart the night before. Seeing his daughter on the stage now, glowing like a flower from the arboretum, he was glad he'd gone to the extra trouble.

She stepped up to the microphone now, and rushed through her short rhyme without a mistake. George swelled with pride. He wanted to applaud her, but the play wasn't over yet. He gave her a tiny wave instead, and she grinned at him from the stage. He sank back down onto the hard auditorium chair and waited for the production to finish, still smiling happily in the dark.

The last little boy stepped nervously up the microphone and closed the play with its final stilted rhyme. "All people inside the Tower now stand, for we are all equal, we move hand-in-hand. No one is above, no one is below, we're all on one level—the Tower is so."

The parents clapped heartily, the children offered a rushed bow, then poured off the stage and into the auditorium. The lights came back on with a buzz.

Jenny was running toward them, smiling widely. "Did you hear my part?" she asked breathlessly.

"We sure did," George said happily, bending down to give her a hug.

"Did I do a good job?" she asked nervously, suddenly uncertain of herself.

"You bet you did!" George said enthusiastically. "You did a great job, and we're going to celebrate!"

"We are?" Jenny said, stunned.

Maura raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"Yes, we are," George said. "Tomorrow morning, I'm taking you up to the zoo."

Jenny's eyes bulged.

“We need to get home so you can get some sleep,” George announced. “You’ll have to be up early if we’re going to catch the 7:00 elevator.”

They walked out of the auditorium, Jenny skipping ahead, filled with both the excitement of the play and the anticipation of the day to come.

“She won’t be getting much sleep tonight,” Maura observed. “When did you decide to take her to the zoo?”

“Just now,” George admitted.

They walked back to the residence terminal in silence.

They boarded the elevator with plenty of time to spare, and Jenny watched excitedly through the windows as the levels flashed by. It was a good thing that she was so excited, George thought, because they had something close to an hour-and-a-half ride ahead of them before they reached 600-level. He’d brought the reader pad with him, and was slowly slogging through a foolish mystery written by some new author from 231-level. Jenny hadn’t brought anything with her, but for now she seemed content to watch the levels pass by through the window.

“If you’re hungry, Jenny, there’s actually a food supply on board the elevator,” George told her. “Since you didn’t have any breakfast, you ought to get something to eat before we get to the zoo.

“I will,” she said absently, watching with interest as the trees on 120-level slid past outside the window.

George turned back to the book. It was a murder mystery set in -16-level, deep underground, nestled amongst the dense plumbing of the Tower. George himself had never been into the negative levels, and he never intended to. The people down there were barely human: it was said that many of them had devolved into a nearly Neanderthal subspecies, and that they were constantly at each others’ throats. In the book, a brave detective from 300-level descends into the depths of -16-level to investigate the foul murder of a valve mechanic, constantly risking his life and evading the savagery of devolved -16-

levelers. In reality, murder was an uncommon occurrence in the Tower, though the plethora of murder mysteries seemed to suggest otherwise. The book was uncommonly melodramatic, and George found himself wishing he had downloaded a medieval instead, the other genre most popular in the Tower.

“I’m hungry,” Jenny announced as 300 swooped past the window.

“Go get something to eat,” George said absentmindedly. “The food machine is down the stairs, I think.”

Jenny went off to get her breakfast and George turned back to the book, but he found he simply couldn’t make himself read any more of it. He flipped through the remaining pages without interest, stopping for a moment to read the author’s biography on the last page. She lived on 231-level with her husband and two kids, nothing especially exciting. Partway through, however, a line caught George’s eye. The author had been born on 43-level, and had moved to 231 after a few of her stories were discovered by the Registry. So Uncle Stan wasn’t the only one who’d ever jumped a few hundred levels. George smiled thoughtfully. The idea intrigued him. Perhaps the textbooks were right after all, and the Tower really did offer opportunities to everyone.

Jenny came back up the stairs and sat down by the window again as the mid-300s rumbled by.

“Did you find something to eat?” George asked.

“Uh-huh,” Jenny said, peeling open the ration tray. “What are you reading, anyway?”

“Nothing,” George said without interest. He switched off the reader pad and slid it into his pocket.

The zoo was not nearly as large as he’d expected. The nature of the Tower’s delicate equilibrium dictated that no large animals could be present, the biggest creatures they had being a pair of dejected-looking zebras.

“It’s the same pair they’ve had since the Tower was built,”

another visitor told him conversationally. “They just clone them back to life when they die.”

George gave some vague response and looked around at the rest of the zoo's meager selection. There were few carnivores present due to the restrictions of the food supply, and not many animals larger than squirrels. They did have some parrots, though, and an ocelot as a half-hearted attempt to make up for the absence of tigers. Not surprisingly, there was a disproportionate number of reptiles, their increased reliance on warmth over food making them a valuable part of the collection.

Jenny came up behind him as he was examining a pair of small tortoises. “They don't look different to me,” she said bluntly.

George glanced at her, perplexed. “*What* doesn't look different?”

“The people,” Jenny said. “You said the people on Upper levels were different. The day we were in the arboretum. They don't look different to *me*.”

George glanced around and confirmed that the other people did indeed look much the same as everyone else he knew. Yet, the vast majority of the people here were from the Upper levels. He shrugged. “I guess I was wrong, Jenny,” he admitted.

Together they walked across to the next pen. The prairie dogs were popping up out of their tunnels constantly, glancing briefly at the world above before they ducked down into safety again.

“They're so cute,” Jenny said gleefully.

“Aren't they?” George agreed. “Cute and foolish.”

The prairie dogs, oblivious to the observers, continued their ceaseless motions as they popped in and out of the tunnels.

George was sitting up late, the light burning dimly in the family's small habitat. He was seated with his back to the wall, the reader pad gripped in his hands, a look of fierce concentration on his face. Maura rolled over and awoke, blinking at him in the dim light.

“You're still awake?” she asked with bewilderment.

“Yes,” George said through clenched teeth, jabbing at the buttons on the reader pad.

“What are you doing?” Maura asked. She slid out of bed and came over to him.

“I'm trying to learn computer programming,” George said uncertainly.

“Programming?” Maura asked in astonishment. “Why?”

“Because,” George said fiercely, “I want to.”

“Are you going to try to take a job in the Registry?” Maura asked.

“Maybe,” George said evasively.

Maura blinked slowly and groggily and turned back to the bed. “You should get some sleep.”

“I will soon,” he promised. He turned back to the reader pad and exited the programming textbook. A few more taps opened a small diagram of the Tower. George scrolled across it, looking for something specific. *400-level through 480-level*, read the diagram. *Computer Programming and Information Management*. Smiling with secret anticipation, George snapped off the reader pad and went to bed.

On the weekend, George went to the 14-level Computer Access Terminal. Like the Communications Terminal, the Computer Access Terminal was largely deserted. There were four lines of consoles across the room, but there were only two other people present, both of them high-school students doing some sort of research project.

George crept conspicuously across the room to a neglected console in a dim corner. He brushed off the keyboard with one hand and pressed the activation button, drumming his fingers nervously on the desk. The console awakened only reluctantly, it hadn't been used for years. The screen phosphors illuminated slowly and words glowed to life on its surface. George navigated uncertainly through the menus until he came to the command prompt. He stared nervously at the

blinking cursor as it waited impatiently for his input.

He pressed the keys slowly and uncertainly, unfamiliar with the counterintuitive layout, typing out the command dictated to him by the programming textbook. *tower-programming-shell*. He hesitated, uncertain what to do next. Finally he pressed the large Enter key and watched as the screen changed, displaying a small >>> before the blinking cursor. George smiled, remembering this from the textbook.

Painstakingly he typed his first one-line program, following the tradition of hundreds of years:

```
print "hello world"
```

He pressed Enter, and watched with satisfaction as “hello world” appeared on the screen. The cursor continued blinking.

Satisfied, he began to type again. He was off to a good start.

As the weeks went by, George continued to study the textbook by night, visiting the Computer Access Terminal every weekend to practice his newfound skills.

Months after his first simple program, George stumbled back into the Residence Terminal late, exhausted but happy. Maura looked up as he entered.

“That was longer than usual,” she observed.

“Yes,” George agreed breathlessly. “But I can *do* it, Maura! I can *program*! I learned every technique in the book! I've been creating all sorts of test programs. Today I finished building a simulator of the entire Air Processing Terminal. I can test all sorts of different configurations on it—I think I may even have found a process that's more efficient than the one we're using! I can do it!”

Maura smiled. “That's wonderful! But I'm still confused—what are you going to *do* with this?”

George looked up. Maura and Jenny were both sitting there, waiting eagerly for his response. This was the moment of truth—he

couldn't put it off any longer. George swallowed. “I'm going to take an examination,” he said, “and apply for a transfer into the 400-levels.”

There was a stunned silence.

“George!” Maura finally gasped, astonished. “Do you think you could do it? To change *levels* like that?”

“I'm sure I could,” he said assuredly. “That's where the Tower's programmers are. I know I could handle it—I've proved it myself.”

“400-level,” Maura mused. “That's a long way up. It's supposed to be nicer up there.”

“Much nicer!” George said enthusiastically. “There're little parks on those levels, and they're clean, and quiet. The residence terminals are more roomy, and it's easier to justify things! We could have anything we wanted!”

Maura blinked in astonished amazement.

Suddenly Jenny grabbed George's sleeve and asked earnestly, “Would I be able to have my own flower garden?”

George was taken aback by this unexpected question. “I think so,” he said uncertainly.

“When are you going to take the examination?” Maura asked.

“Tomorrow,” George said eagerly. “I'm taking the first elevator up to 400-level. I've already made an appointment.”

Outside they heard the food trolley squeal into the Terminal on its ill-greased wheels.

“The trolleys on 400-level,” George proclaimed, “are quieter.”

He arrived at the 400-level station exactly on time, and quickly made his way to the Registry office.

In the front room was a simple desk, attended by a young woman wearing a light pink coverall in place of the standard-issue uniform. George blinked momentarily at this conspicuous display of wealth, then regained his composure and stepped confidently up to the desk.

The girl looked up with professional disinterest. "Can I help you?"

"Yes," George said. "I'm George Montgomery. I'm here to take the Programming Aptitude Examination."

"Just a moment." She picked through a number of menus on the desk's touchscreens, then looked back up at him. "Yes. Take a seat; Mr. Sanders should be with you in a moment."

George sat down uneasily on one of the chairs and watched the door of the office uneasily. He had been confident the night before, but opulent reality of 400-level had made him nervous. He felt a small trickle of adrenaline begin to flow.

The door swung open and a middle-aged man stepped out and glanced around the waiting room. "George Montgomery?"

George stood up uncertainly.

"Are you George Montgomery?" the man asked.

"Yes," George replied nervously.

The man smiled and shook George's hand jovially. "I'm Ted Sanders. Come on, we'll get right to work."

He led George down a short hallway and seated himself behind a large desk. George sat down opposite him and watched as he sorted out several sheets of paper. He attached several of them to a clipboard and spread out the others on the surface of the desk.

"I just need to take down some personal information first," Sanders said, looking over the forms. "Your name is George Montgomery, correct?"

"Yes."

"Middle initial?"

"I don't have one." George said awkwardly.

Sanders hesitated for a moment, perplexed, then crossed out the box in question. "Current place of residence?"

"Residence Terminal C, 14-level North," George mumbled.

Sanders frowned visibly and copied down the information onto the form. "Current occupation?"

"Air filter maintenance and repair," George responded.

"Immediate family?"

"A wife and a daughter."

Sanders checked off the appropriate boxes. "Where did you receive your programming training?" he asked.

"Self-taught," George said, his voice carrying a hint of pride despite his unease.

Sanders raised his eyebrows. "Experience?"

"I've been practicing in the Computer Access Terminal," George said. "I've written a number of programs, many of them rather complex."

Sanders nodded. "All right. Now, I also have here a questionnaire for you to fill out. A bunch of questions about programming. Nothing too complicated." He handed George the clipboard and a pencil. "Is there any way I could take a look at any of your programming work?"

"Yes," George said. He scribbled out the address where his programs were stored on the Tower filesystem.

"Thanks," Sanders said, turning toward the small console at the edge of his desk.

George turned his attention to the questionnaire that lay in his lap. Most of the questions it asked were rather elementary, and he answered them all with relative ease. He looked over his answers one last time, made a brief correction, and turned to look at Sanders.

Sanders was still frowning at his console, typing in various commands and blinking with confusion.

"Is something wrong?" George asked.

"No, not at all," Sanders said, giving him a weak smile. "What does this program *do*?"

"It's a simulator," George explained. "It replicates all the functions of the Air Processing Terminal. You can use it to test different equipment configurations."

Sanders shook his head slowly. "That's. . . amazing. The arc-resource people use programs like this."

"I finished the questionnaire," George said, holding out the

clipboard.

“Thanks,” Sanders said. He dropped it to the desk and stood up. “That will be all for now, Mr. Montgomery. Thank you for your time. We’ll examine the forms and the evaluation and we should contact you in...about a week.”

“Thank you,” George said cheerfully.

“That will be all, Mr. Montgomery,” Sanders said firmly.

“Thank you,” George said again. Numbly he stumbled out of the office and into the waiting room. He waved weakly at the girl in the pink coverall, then stepped out the door and walked off down the hallway.

He didn't stop until he reached the station. The next elevator wouldn't be arriving for another half-hour, so he sat down in a chair to wait. Luckily he'd brought the reader pad with him, loaded with a new medieval novel. He read it with a sort of half-interested impatience. It was going to be a long week, but George was certain that he had passed the examination. The questions had been easy, and Sanders had obviously been impressed with the simulator. *Just one week*, George thought, *and I'll be living here in 400-level*. He could hardly wait.

The elevator screeched into the station and he boarded it silently, smiling happily to himself. The doors slid shut and the elevator rattled along its tracks, dropping downward to 14-level, hundreds of floors below.

The roller truck came to a grinding stop and the tailgate screeched open automatically. George Montgomery took hold of the massive air filter module and dragged it forcibly from the truck bed, letting it fall onto the floor with a metallic ringing. The truck's tailgate swung back into place and it rumbled off down the tracks to perform another delivery. George watched it go, then he hefted up the filter module and began slowly making his way back to the Air Processing Terminal.

The module was heavy, and George felt very weak. He'd aged

a lot in the past few months. His enthusiasm had been strong for the first week after the examination, but when still no word had arrived from 400-level, it was slowly sapped away by worry. Finally he'd gone to the Communications Terminal, unable to wait any longer.

The irritated face of Ted Sanders appeared on the screen.

“Yes, what is it?”

“I wanted to know how the examination turned out,” George said nervously.

Sanders' brow furrowed with annoyance. “You didn't pass,” he said hotly. “Not even close. Is there anything else?”

George shook nervously, unable to respond.

“If that's all,” Sanders said, “I will bid you goodbye. I suggest, Mr. Montgomery, that you direct your attention toward the air filters and be content with that.”

The screen blanked and left George sitting alone in the dark terminal.

How many times he'd replayed that scene in the weeks following, George couldn't say. And where had he gone wrong on the examination? He had no idea.

Wearily he lugged the air filter down the long service hallway toward the Air Processing Terminal. Founders' Day was coming up again, and a colorful banner was stretched across the wide doorway, supplied by some comfortable executive in the 1000-levels. George lugged the air filter onward, oblivious to his dismal surroundings. The banner rippled softly in the gentle breeze issuing from the Terminal, a subtle wave gliding across its cheerful message: “The Tower: A World of Freedom and Opportunity.”