

Chapter 1

Constance 500 pushed through the air-swamp, following a tree-of-life etched on the pavement. She had a faint recollection from babyhood of air tickling her body – a reminder that, once upon a time, it came in different consistencies. But gloopy air was normal now in Harmony. She had learned as a girl about different climates throughout their great state, but she hadn't yet been awarded a permit to visit anywhere else in Sisterland. The pavement pattern led Constance past Beloved Park, with its giant statue of Sisterland's founder. A good Sisterlander would detour in, and pay her respects to Beloved, but Constance was on a mission. It led her to Moe Express.

Outside, she paused to watch the hologram sign change colour, as it did every twenty seconds to follow the palette of the rainbow. Just now, it was shading from indigo to violet, and she took a moment to admire the transition. Fearless use of colour was a celebration of nature: that's what Sisterlanders learned in girlplace, and practised in their dress code. Except they all wore uniforms at work, and working hours were long, so platforms to showcase personal preferences were rare. Still, the uniforms were tasteful.

The shop door split horizontally across the middle, one

half lifting and the other lowering, at Constance's approach. A perfume of roses wafted out. At least, it was the fragrance which represented roses, because flowers no longer produced their own scent. Sometimes, Constance wondered if the smell of pink roses had differed from white back in the Pre-Sisterland Era – the PS days. Once, she had put the question to a memory-keeper, who had stared at her before admitting that she didn't know.

So, the true memory of rose scent was lost. What Sisterlanders smelled now was an approximation. And if that was the case with roses, perhaps it applied to other flowers. Such doubts overtook Constance occasionally, even though nobody was supposed to feel sceptical any more. It was counter-productive. Its *moe*¹ certification had been withdrawn.

Inside Moe Express, a flicker waited behind the counter. At Constance's approach, she smiled brightly through her glossy skin – the mask moulded precisely to the contours of her face. Constance could tell this was a cheap skin: the smile quality didn't convince. It took an expensive skin to pull off a smile.

“How may I help you, sister?”

“A U, please, sister.”

“Excellent choice.”

The flicker pulled on a pair of elbow-high gloves and approached a tall unit, from which a background hum flowed. Like all who practised the flicker trade, her movements were nimble and economical. Her fingertips pecked at a keypad on the left side of the unit, and its front changed from ice-white to smoky. A diamond-shaped cavity appeared at eye level, with a corresponding holder an arm's length below. A whoosh was followed by a thud. Into the padded holder was deposited a jar, also diamond-shaped, and glowing.

The flicker set it on the counter, and took up a close-woven silk net attached to a length of bamboo. An air of concentration transfigured her. She pressed the lid of the container, which

¹ See glossary at end for explanation of words such as *moe*

flew open, and out floated one of the tiny clouds causing the jar to shine. It shut tight again at once. With a fast-forward jump, the flicker gave a spin of the wrist and trapped the cloud, dropping a flap over the top of the net. Still holding the net, which had taken on a luminous primrose tint, she replaced the jar in the holder, tapped another code into the keypad, and the moes were whisked back into the unit.

“One portion of U, sister. Such a pretty moe.”

Simply looking at the U almost made Constance feel its Upbeat lift – impossible, of course. Moe spontaneity had withered away. Moes were reined in and managed.

“I’d be worried about letting them float away if I did your job.” Constance nodded towards the net.

“I’m careful. A friend of mine let her attention wander, and an entire jar of Exes flew into the street. They caused mayhem. Some kids on an educational trip inhaled them, and their teachers couldn’t control them. They wouldn’t sing their obedience song, or march in step, or stay in pairs. They wouldn’t do anything they were told.”

“I suppose the moes wore off after a couple of hours.”

“Took longer than usual – the kids were underage. My friend was re-assigned. They sent her to Brown Convolution.”

“Ouch!”

“At least it’s a middle belt. She was landed with boyplace duties. Doubt if I’ll ever see her again. Don’t get me wrong, I’m sure she’s proud to do it for Sisterland. But I don’t envy her spending all day surrounded by boy-men!”

Another twist, and the U was transferred from net to bag, and sealed airtight. Constance admired the dexterity.

“Remember to use this within four hours for best results. Can I interest you in anything else? An N, maybe? A new batch was just delivered.”

“Better not.”

“Of course. Unchecked moes held us back for centuries. They’re an indulgence – we can enjoy them best in

moderation.” The flicker parroted a lesson from *Beloved’s Pearls*, the small, circular book with a pearlised cover given to every newborn Sisterlander. “I see from your sig you’re a shaper. What an honour to be chosen.”

Constance glanced down at the signifier embedded onto the outer wrist of her right hand: Constance 500 φ – the φ stood for thought-shaper, and had been added last year. She read the flicker’s wrist: Fidelity 81026 \Leftrightarrow .

“I dreamed of going forward for shaping but I wasn’t selected,” continued the flicker.

“I was fortunate to be singled out,” said Constance.

“What’s it like to travel outside Harmony? I don’t suppose I’ll ever earn a permit. I’m glued to the entscreen when there’s a travel programme shown.”

“I haven’t been sent on a posting yet.”

Constance couldn’t admit that she wasn’t working as a shaper, despite her qualification – she was among the first intake on a new training course. And she was forbidden from talking about it. Recruits to the programme hadn’t even been allocated a replacement symbol for their wrist stamp. “Time enough when you take up your new roles,” they were told. “The fewer questions, the better.”

She changed the subject. “Do you have a favourite moe? You must be a connoisseur.”

“I find a Co helps me to relax. Much more efficient than old-fashioned aids like alcohol, with all those harmful side-effects.”

What a pearl, thought Constance, who liked the odd glass of sunset wine. Silence had been fond of it, too. Don’t think about Silence, cautioned a voice in her head. With an effort, she concentrated on what the flicker was saying.

“That blast of contentment is a treat worth waiting all week for. Forty els, please.”

“Forty? Last time it was thirty-five.”

“They’re becoming trickier to manufacture. When you’re

ready, sister.” The flicker turned the pay console towards Constance.

Constance held up her wrist, sig side out, and her image appeared on the screen. A twang of authorisation, the purchase was debited from Constance’s elements’ account, and marked on her moe chart.

A light, inexpressive voice spoke. “This uses up your moe quotient for the next seven days. You have eighty-five elements remaining. Kindly practise economy.”

Constance pulled a face. She intercepted an admiring glance at her skin from the flicker – although high-sheen, like all skins, it was a flexible model, and had been expensive. “I’m on a spending spree at the moment,” she admitted. “As a distraction. I had some bad news recently.”

Dutiful, the flicker said, “We must guard against mindless consumption.”

That’s enough of *Beloved’s Pearls* for one day, thought Constance.

She slipped the purchase into her leggings, and stepped out onto the street. The U had to be inhaled someplace quiet, where its buoyant properties could be absorbed fully. There was nothing worse than losing part of a moe before it was ingested properly. She looked left, towards the twoser she had shared with Silence. Not there. It had a lingering sense of emptiness. Was emptiness a moe? Not exactly. But it penetrated like one.

She looked right, towards Eternity Square, where Shaperhaus stood. It was some distance off, but easy to spot. Above the building soared a pair of giant wings, studded with pieces of glass which trapped and reflected the light. These wings, added for aesthetic reasons, lent it dramatic impact. They also meant space had to be left around it: the architectural equivalent of a pair of elbows sticking out. Constance had graduated from there as a shaper almost a year earlier, but instead of being sent out into Sisterland to

promote approved thoughts, she had been chosen for additional training. A new role, and patriotic. But confidential. Just thirteen newly licensed shapers had been selected to participate. Now, they were nearing the end of the theory stage, and a practical apprenticeship was due to follow soon. Today was their weekly rest day.

Constance had been flattered when the Shaper Mother had told her she was to be groomed for new duties. But the reality of what Sisterland proposed disturbed her, a shadow-moe increasing in intensity as the course progressed. It wasn't that she had reservations about the job itself. She understood why alternative arrangements were necessary. But what she was learning to do seemed manipulative and – she hardly dared to let herself think it – dishonest. Constance was becoming infected by misgivings which she could not express openly.

Doubts about Sisterland itself.

Chapter 2

Constance decided to go to Beloved Park to ingest the U. It was choreographed round a pearlised statue of Beloved – all images of the founder were pearlised, because she had expressed a preference for it in life, and over time her wishes had acquired the status of commands. Her vision and charisma had guided Sisterland in its formative years. Sisterlanders left flowers at Beloved's feet, so that there was always a festival of colour surrounding the statue's base, sometimes blocking the lettering: *Not me but US*.

Already, Constance was fired up from the moe throbbing in her pocket. After she took it, she might dance through the streets. No, of course she couldn't – it would be frowned on as unruly. The peers would tick her off. Perhaps she could buy a hoop of little bells and shake them – their sound pleased her. Silence had worn an ankle chain with a bell which tinkled when she moved, like the bell that used to hang from a cat's collar.

No-one had seen a cat in years. Like dogs, they were extinct. Which meant a vermin-extermination patrol had to be set up to deal with the rat problem. Constance was relieved she hadn't been reassigned to those duties. She always admired images of cats in books, when she came across them

– attracted to their elegance and air of detachment. Silence called Constance ‘Kipling’s cat’ because she liked to walk alone. Silence was fond of poetry. Everyone in Sisterland was meant to be in favour of it, because it was not just beguiling but functional – verses promoting public spirit and cohesion had a purpose. But few people bothered with it. Silence had said poetry would be banned, too, if the Nine who ruled Sisterland realised how moe-rich it was. But hardly anyone read any more. Books were decorative objects rather than wellsprings of information. There were no buildings given over exclusively to books, as there had been in PS days.

“No more about Silence,” whispered Constance.

She looked up as a sleek, metallic Buzz train hummed overhead on its elevated tracks. Passing a flower-basket attached to a lamppost on the corner of Virtue Boulevard, the scent of jasmine enveloped her, and she picked up her pace to escape it. The gardening teams which injected the perfume daily sometimes laid it on with a heavy hand. She avoided the congested area near Beloved’s statue, instead choosing a bench beside the fountain. It spouted peach-coloured water, and a sign invited sisters to vote on the following day’s dye. She decided against voting. A dereliction of her civic duty, but so be it.

A man was sucking scum and algae from the fountain with a disposal unit, which vacuumed up objects and compressed them into molecules. Constance was resigned to his company. No woman in Sisterland enjoyed proximity to a man, but it was less unpleasant in the open air because his physical presence was diluted. Not that he was threatening – from birth, men were injected with drugs to reduce testosterone production, making them docile. It was for their own good, otherwise they were inclined to be disruptive.

She watched him working, while he studiously avoided looking at her. He was more blur than flesh, taught to be inconspicuous. His smoke-grey, hooded, one-piece garment

left only a few inches of face visible. The stiff collar reached up to the base of his nose, and the hood ended at his eyebrows. The patch of flesh exposed to the air had a scraped texture – no wonder, when men didn't wear skins. Only women slotted on the feather-light, transparent masks which covered faces from hairline to throat, protecting them from environmental damage. It meant even elderly women had scarcely a wrinkle.

When he moved away, Constance took out the bag containing her moe, lowered her head, and tapped the seal. It flew open, the U wafted upwards, and she inhaled. At once, a sense of possibilities suffused her. Optimism swelled, the way sunshine strokes chilled flesh, until a peak was reached. And retained. She raised her arms high above her head, face upturned to the sky.

How wonderful it was to live in such an enlightened community! One where all women were equal members of the universal sisterhood. *Not me but US*. She was lucky to belong to such an advanced society. And to be entrusted with a special job. She must forget her silly qualms, no more than the wheeling of a tired mind still struggling with what Silence had done. Silence's act of disloyalty shouldn't be interpreted as evidence of misgivings about Sisterland. After all, Sisterland was a perfect state, a state of perfection.

"I am a wave sweeping in with the tide," Constance sang out. *"I make a difference as part of the whole."* She laughed aloud, quoting Beloved, and the water splashed in the fountain, laughing along with her.

The following day, shadow-moes nipped at Constance. Experience had taught her that taking a moe released all sorts of shadow-moes, which might resurface intermittently for days. It was like seeing something you recognised, but through a misty windowpane. They ambushed her now as she descended the steps from the Eternity Square Buzz station,

and approached Shaperhaus – its frontage mirrored, like the iconic wings above it, to present a constantly moving surface. Many of Harmony’s buildings were mirrored on the outer façade, to lend an illusion of space – and because Beloved had deemed it beautiful.

Constance was reluctant to enter her workplace, uncertainties about the test programme fluttering. She knew she was out of step with her sisters: none of her fellow trainees ever betrayed reservations, by so much as a sidelong glance or an intake of breath. At least Constance had the sense to keep her questions to herself. Even to Silence, she had never said a word, and Silence had noticed nothing. But there had been an absence about her, in those final weeks, which Constance had attributed to babyfusion.

She passed through the main entrance, the comtel on her thumb, which covered it from nail to base-joint, chirruping to authorise entry and register her arrival. Once inside, she cut through the foyer to a staircase at the back.

SMILE ALL THE WHILE

was painted on the wall.

Her lips thinned.

As she began climbing, Constance wished she could be out in the field, shaping. Why did she have to be chosen for the new programme? Sometimes, she wondered at the waste of drilling her in the art of silkenspeak as a shaper – skilled at minimising the downside and maximising the upside of Nine policy – if the training was not going to be put to use. Her new role would mean working with children rather than adults, a drawback as far as Constance was concerned – she knew no children, and consequently was wary of them. But she had to do her best. After all, the initiative would safeguard Sisterland’s future, according to her teachers.

Constance was plucked from her shaper graduation class after a mindmap reading carried out by the Shaper Mother. But that was last year. She knew she would not pass mindmapping today.

She climbed past floors given over to administration and recruitment, floors devoted to operations, where shapers in the field were handled, floors housing lecture rooms. “A thought-shaper is permanently on message,” she heard spill out from the trainee shaper floor. Finally, she arrived on the ninth floor, reserved for special projects, and again used her comtel for admission. The device had gouged a groove in the fleshy place on her hand, between thumb and index finger, but she no longer noticed its weight.

Without stopping to chat, she nodded at a couple of colleagues drinking ocean tea at their workpoints – everyone consumed rivers of Sisterland’s national brew. She counted none of her workmates as friends. Constance was a loner. It was only with Silence that she had enjoyed true Togethertime. But Silence was gone. And she had to stop thinking about her.

Constance slid into her workpoint, where she took off her skin and set it in the container kept in a drawer. From habit, she ran a finger along her hairline where the skin rested, reclaiming her face. Next, she took a spray from another drawer and misted the plant on her desk. Everybody was allowed one personal item. Most chose images, but Constance admired her fern’s delicacy. Now to check her lecture schedule.

Just then, Patience 9603 approached. Like Constance, her progress-monitor was wearing the Shaperhaus uniform of hip-length turquoise tunic with lime-green leggings. “Good morning, sister. May I have a word with you?” She could have messaged through to Constance’s comtel screen, but the emphasis on courtesy in Sisterland made her put the request in person. *It’s Nice To Be Nice*, as *Beloved’s Pearls* put it.

Constance followed Patience to her elevated workpoint

with its clear view of the room, and a solitary personal item on the desk – a porcelain goosegirl which looked as if it would shatter should someone breathe heavily on it. She often wondered about that ornament. Patience didn't look the type. Even her rounded number didn't seem to belong to her wiry frame.

“The Shaper Mother wishes to see you at once.”

A pit opened in Constance's stomach. “Have I done something wrong, sister?”

“I've uploaded temporary entry authorisation onto your comtel. Don't keep the mother waiting. It's impolite.”

Patience was young to be a progress-monitor, and masked it with a stern manner. Constance knew better than to argue. Instead, she consoled herself by looking at her sig: Patience 9603. With 9602 Patiences who were still alive registered ahead of her, she wasn't well-connected.

Constance returned to the staircase to access the tenth floor: top of the building. Taller structures, inherited from PS generations, had been lowered – a ceremony made of the event. Cloud-scrappers had been a hubristic, male affectation. Just as lifts had been conceits, devised by men because they could, when everyone knew stairs were healthier. Sisterland declined to worship gimmicks. That didn't mean it was opposed to gadgets: everything in moderation. But unnecessary technology had a dehumanising effect. Sisterlanders valued the personal touch, as urged by Beloved. Between her *Pearls* and her entscreen chats, which continued to be repeated in a weekly show called *Make Time for Togethertime*, Sisterlanders were in no danger of running short on Beloved's advice.

Constance had been on the top floor only twice before, meeting the Shaper Mother. She saw her from time to time in the distance, naturally: the mother often strolled about, creating a crackle of electricity. After she passed, people felt capable of working harder, longer, better. Perhaps the mother

intended telling her there had been a mistake, and she was unsuited to the new programme? That would save Constance from asking to be excused. Which she lacked the courage to do. It would earn a blot she could never scrub out.

She couldn't even let herself think it in the Shaper Mother's presence. The mother was skilled at penetrating thoughts. Constance knew thoughts could be hidden from those able to decipher them – parked in the mind's curves – but it took singular reserves of willpower to engage in such a joust against a mother. She must be vigilant.

She stepped into the mother's reception area, which bore no resemblance to the environment on the floors below. Entering it, Constance was engulfed by a wave of sultry heat, along with a musky scent. Primitive wooden carvings lined the room, drums were remodelled as occasional tables, and the walls were papered in leopard-print.

The mother's assistant, Modesty 2724, was fanning herself with a thunderous air, stirring a flyaway scrap of ponytail high on her head. Modesty was stumpy. Her size in general, her nose and fingers in particular – all stubby. Even her earlobes were practically non-existent. Constance was convinced that was the reason for her ponytail – it extended her length, if only by a fraction.

“It's ridiculously hot in here. One day, I'm going to be the decision-maker and not the decided-for,” said Modesty.

“But we're all decided-fors. Apart from the Nine,” said Constance.

“Don't be such a pearl!” Modesty's dark eyes flared. “Of course there's a pecking order below them. The Shaper Mother has choices, doesn't she? You ought to mop off before you go in to her.”

Constance touched the damp sheen on her leggings. “Patience sent me up before I had a chance to do it.”

Modesty rummaged in her desk, producing a palm-sized vac-pump.

Constance selected the setting marked D for delicate, to protect the lime-green embroidery on the wrists and hem of her tunic, and passed it across her body. “Don’t you think it’s odd, Modesty, that our scientists haven’t come up with an anti-fungal solution by now? The life expectancy of clothes is getting shorter and shorter.”

Modesty lowered her voice. “Some think they’ve been diverted into a secret programme.”

Not more secrets, thought Constance. “Do you know what it is?”

“Maybe.”

Constance shrugged, still preoccupied by this unexpected interview with the mother.

Modesty leaned forward, whispering. “The ultimate phase of women’s evolution. That’s what I heard the mother call it. Something that overrides the mating process.”

“Mating is a necessary evil. We do it for Sisterland.”

Modesty snapped back to business. “The mother’s waiting.”

Constance returned the vac-pump, and approached the leopard-printed wall. The paper peeled back in a long curl, so theatrical it deserved a clap, to reveal the door. She stepped through, to find the Shaper Mother waiting on an ornately carved mahogany throne, its back soaring to an arch and its feet ending in hooves.

“Sweet child.” Leisurely, her voice trickled out. “You’ve been on my mind.” Arms extended, she shaped her mouth into a dazzling beam of welcome.

It sent a shadow-moe of trepidation quivering through Constance.

Chapter 3

The Shaper Mother was a statuesque woman, exuding a vitality that created a force field about her. Her head was shaven, its terracotta-coloured surface lightly coated in oil. She wore the same uniform as everyone in Shaperhaus, but her position as a mother allowed her to customise it. Over the turquoise tunic, a peacock-print shawl trailed its feast of colours, a match for the substantial earrings shaped into feathers which stretched her lobes out of shape.

Constance bowed her head, and remained standing, since she was not invited to sit – indeed, the throne-like chair appeared to be the only seat in the room.

“Constance, you’re one of our most promising students. Your teachers have high hopes for you. But lately, sweet child, you’ve shown signs of losing your focus. Naturally, there are reasons for it. Those charged with treasuring you are not blind to a recent event in your personal life. It’s understandable that your spark may have dimmed. What happened was so volatile. So violent. So vicious in its abdication of loyalty. Who wouldn’t be affected?”

She paused, and Constance realised she was expected to answer. “I try not to let it interfere with my work, mother.”

“Come closer, Constance. We’re not machines. It’s natural

to veer off-course sometimes. How could the loss of an other make no difference? When I lost mine, it was months before I could carry out my duties to the proper standard. Doubts must have cropped up in your mind, sweet child. And no wonder, in view of the circumstances. The manner of her discontinuation was particularly regrettable. It defies logic. You might almost call it –” she expelled a breath that set the metal feathers swinging – “moe-driven.”

Again she drew to a halt, waiting. But Constance was unable to respond. The mother stood and came towards her. Putting an arm about her waist, she led her to the throne-seat. One foot hooked out a footstool from underneath, and she pressed Constance onto it before resuming her previous position. This time, however, she leaned down, her face only two hand-spans away. Constance noticed it still wore its glossy, protective skin indoors – the mother was known to be forgetful. Equally, she could be shielding herself on purpose. Skins didn’t only protect against climate.

“Sweet child, I see you have an unusual capacity for shadow-moeing, just as your teachers guessed. You feel something approaching grief – some version of regret, perhaps? – for the loss of your other.”

Constance nodded. Let her call it regret, if it suited her, although she herself knew it was grief. Even if it was her first experience of it.

“Ah, you believe it to be grief? An unhealthy moe that’s been deselected by the Nine? I see you’re more receptive than we suspected.”

Constance steadied herself. She mustn’t let thoughts flare.

“I don’t mean to invade your privacy, Constance. But Sisterland has a clear policy on moes. The clampdown was necessary because some moes are simply too troublesome – they lead to morbid states of mind. You must have cared dearly for your other to feel the vestiges of such a disturbing moe.”

“I keep thinking I must have failed her in some way. I

should have been able to talk her out of it. Except I didn't know what she meant to do."

"It's not your fault Silence 1999 chose to discontinue. The report from the listeners said you'd come to terms with it. They said you didn't need advanced listening treatment. Perhaps you do require it, after all."

"No!" Constance collected herself. "I mean, please, no. I cooperated fully, mother. I was obedient. I listened. I'm sure advanced listening would help if it was recommended for me but I find keeping busy is the best way to deal with what happened."

"You mustn't blame yourself. Silence's behaviour was extreme. I agree, hard work is often the answer, it stops us brooding. I know that from my own experience." She rested a speculative glance on Constance, who trembled beneath its weight. "What troubles me is Silence had everything to live for. She was babyfused. Yet she chose to discontinue. It's baffling. Most worrying, though, is her betrayal of the Sisterland ethos. She discontinued in a way that sent a direct challenge to the State. We must assume the balance of her mind was disturbed. That's what the peers' report concluded. Don't you agree?"

Constance knew it would be easier if she said yes. Or even just nodded, if the word was beyond her. After all, Silence's discontinuation had cast suspicion on Constance. But unable to defend Silence, unwilling to criticise her, she remained mute and motionless.

"Ah, you continue to deny her mental instability." Constance's internal struggle had allowed the Shaper Mother to mindmap her.

"I don't understand them, but I believe Silence had her reasons."

"But why? It was such a drastic gesture. She allowed no room for compromise."

Constance hung her head. The mother stretched out a hand

weighty with rings, and laid it on her forehead. At her touch, the compulsion to speak was overpowering. Constance tried to keep the information terse. “Perhaps it was because she knew she was babyfused with a boy.”

“It’s natural to feel a sense of failure. But we need boy-babies, as well as daughters. It’s a dutiful act, whatever the gender – the Nine says so. If Silence couldn’t handle the disappointment, she shouldn’t have put herself forward as a candidate. No sister is forced to become a source. There are alternative ways of making a contribution. But once babyfusion was achieved, she had no right to retreat from her responsibilities to Sisterland.”

“She didn’t see it that way, mother.”

“Obviously. But, Constance, she had to be unhinged. You must accept that. All over Sisterland, women are struggling to become sources. Yet she babyfused, and rejected her sacred condition.”

Constance stood up, moving out of the mother’s reach, concentrating on controlling her thoughts. The mother’s eyes became needlepoints as she attempted to enter Constance’s consciousness, and was blocked.

Neutral, Constance met the mother’s gaze.

“I understand you told the peers she didn’t discuss her intentions with you,” said the Shaper Mother. “Perhaps you were protecting your other. But you can tell me, in confidence. Was it a spur-of-the-moment decision? Or did she plot it in advance?”

Constance had been able to fend off the peers, and the listeners, but the Shaper Mother was in another league. She had no choice but to answer her – the best she could manage was to be discriminating in her choice of words. “After Silence babyfused, she changed. Often, I found her sitting by herself, lost in thought. She wondered why she couldn’t raise her own child.”

The mother’s eyebrows shot up. “Leaving childcare to

sources is irresponsible. These women have no training. Children are our most precious asset – that’s why we send them to girlplace for communal rearing. We do it to help our girls reach their potential.”

“Silence’s baby would have gone to boyplace. She’d never have seen him again.”

The mother tapped her mouth, choosing her words. “But when she discontinued, she took away its chance of life. She could have waited till afterwards. But she chose not to.”

“Yes.”

The Shaper Mother cocked her head to one side, studying Constance. “So if Silence wasn’t temporarily insane, she must have been wicked,” she suggested.

Constance looked at the floor.

“I see you don’t wish to condemn your other, sweet child. Your loyalty does you credit. But Silence was in error. It wouldn’t be safe to leave a boy-baby with its source. A bond might develop.”

Constance couldn’t help herself. “Silence said it’s not a baby’s fault to be born a boy. Babies are the same, female and male. They don’t deserve to be punished for being one or the other.”

Incredulous, the mother stood up, grasping the arms of her seat. “Then perhaps it’s as well she discontinued. She could have corrupted our sisters. But jumping off the Hope Bridge in broad daylight? Hurling herself over, when innocent sisters were going about their business below it? How excessive!” She toppled back, hand pressed to her chest.

So, thought Constance, the Shaper Mother is prone to shadow-moes, too.

“I am,” said the mother. “Inevitably, when you learn to mindmap, you become susceptible. But I guard against moes. Your other’s treachery towards Sisterland made one rise up in me. It has passed now, I am composed again.”

The Shaper Mother struck Constance as agitated, despite

her claims. She had slid the earring out of her ear, and was rubbing furiously at the lobe.

“There is no violence in Sisterland,” continued the mother. “That’s why Silence’s public discontinuation is so damaging. Bad enough that she ended her own life, and that of a child! But the way she went about it is causing anxiety and uncertainty. The shaper cohort is working flat out, reassuring sisters. A deliberate public discontinuation is unheard of!”

“Discontinuations like Silence’s probably happen at home, though,” said Constance. “They’d be hushed up, wouldn’t they?”

A pause developed.

During it, Silence’s face floated into Constance’s mind. Once met, her other was not easily forgotten. The combination of pale angularity and a reserved manner had made her appear to be austere. But that had been her outer shell. Constance knew Silence had been warm – fully engaged with life. Her discontinuation had been out of character.

When the mother spoke again, her voice was wheedling. “I hope you don’t share your other’s prejudices. They can be contagious.”

“I love Sisterland, mother.”

“I’m delighted to hear it, sweet child. Of course, if you had any latent inclination towards unpredictability, you’d never have made it onto shaper training. Obviously, since Silence was accepted onto the signifier programme, its selection procedures must be less scrupulous. They’ll need to be overhauled.”

“Silence enjoyed installing sigs.”

The mother made a dismissive gesture. “Job satisfaction is a given in Sisterland, in any field. It doesn’t confer competence, however. Now, Constance, when the time comes for you to babyfuse for Sisterland, I take it you’ll accept all of our policies? Without letting your other’s exhibitionism corrupt you?”

“I’m not due to go forward as a source for several more years, mother. I’m still in training.”

“Come and sit beside me again.” The mother patted the stool at her feet, and Constance was obliged to accept the invitation. “Yes, the co-keeper training. That’s why I asked to see you. We think it advisable to interrupt it.”

“You mean I can leave the programme? I can start work as a thought-shaper?” Constance could hardly believe her luck.

“That would be a waste of your talents, sweet child. In time, we think you could become one of our most effective co-keepers. The work that’s being entrusted to this new division matters enormously for Sisterland. As you know, only thirteen memory-keepers are left. A number of them will not see out the decade. Already, more than half of our dear ones are too frail to travel.”

Constance nodded. Increasingly, long-distance memory-keeping was being used – she had sat in on some of the sessions. But research showed that everything, from shaping to memory-keeping, achieved better results in person. There was no substitute for Togethertime. The solution was for thirteen young shapers to be trained up as co-keepers, eventually replacing the original memory-keepers.

It was impressed on the co-keepers that theirs was an anointed position. When all of the keepers were gone, they would be responsible for feeding the flames of memory. With a key difference. Instead of simply passing on memories, as supplied by the keepers, they would construct memories. New data about the past, new insights, new interpretations. As supplied by the Nine.

Sometimes, keepers’ memories differed. Now, they would be smoothed into consistency. Muddled memories would be eradicated. It was this aspect of the strategy which troubled Constance.

“Memories are too important to allow random versions to confuse our sisters. We need uniformity of thinking.” The

Shaper Mother had mindmapped her.

“But won’t that create a uniform society, mother?”

“You might imagine so. But what it actually fosters is a calm society founded on agreement. Serenity allows us to flourish. It ensures our natural diligence is not disrupted, or diverted into counter-productive goals. Conflicting memories cause tangled thoughts, and those are as damaging as unregulated moes. You do see that, don’t you, Constance?”

“Of course, mother. Forgive me, I’m just a little edgy. Since Silence.”

“It’s natural. I dare say we all need a few sharp edges. Without them, there’d be no stars. But you must strive for composure, as I do.”

“I will, mother. I do.”

“I had a look at your moe chart – you absorbed a U yesterday. Admirable choice. But you’re strikingly liable to shadow-moe. Taking moes increases that tendency.”

Constance felt rebuked, at which the mother patted her shoulder.

“Each one of our co-keeper trainees has this predisposition: it’s why you were selected. But none, I think, with the charge you possess.” Just then, a bell pinged. “Covenant Time already.” The mother stood up.

Modesty entered, and took the mother’s hand. Both extended a hand to Constance, and the three formed a circle. The mother’s grip was strong, the skin dry. Her rings chafed at Constance, whose hand felt subsumed by the mother’s. She looked away, to Modesty’s child-sized hand, noticing the intricate henna patterns stencilled on its back. In unison, they chanted, “*Not the self but the State, not me but US. To the greater good: to universal sisterhood.*”

The mother cleared her throat. “See to that temporary permit we discussed, Modesty. She’s a suitable candidate.”

Modesty threw Constance a glance bubbling with curiosity, before withdrawing.

Alone again with Constance, the mother retrieved the threads of their conversation.

“Shadow-moe ability is essential to your work. A co-keeper must empathise on a profoundly intimate level with the keeper she’s destined to replace. Moe acts as a bridge between minds. But you’ve been left vulnerable by the Silence situation. You need to take a step back. We intend you to become a co-keeper, but not yet. I know it’s disappointing, but think of it as a pause, not a cessation. We need to be certain you’ve recovered from your other’s contamination. And taking you off the programme will give you time to concentrate on curbing your shadow-moe tendencies. You must learn to access them only when needed for co-keeping.”

“I try not to give way to them, mother.”

“Periods of stress can trigger moes. This has been a challenging time for you, sweet child. Nobody is blaming you.”

The Shaper Mother’s kindness triggered a confession from Constance. “These shadow-moes make me unhappy.”

“I should think so. That’s why a previous Nine took control of them. I suppose moes provided solutions to problems facing our ancestors: they were gut reactions which allowed them to process information quickly, and respond. Fear, for example, was appropriate when confronted by a predator. But how necessary is it today, in a world without crime or violence? Many of these moes are obsolete now. Feelings cannot be allowed to dictate behaviour. You must continue to guard against shadow-moeing. Except when you need it for your work.”

“I will, mother. But what work am I to do, if I’m off the co-keeper programme?”

The Shaper Mother clasped her hands together, eyes sparkling. “How fortunate you are, Constance. There’s something else you can do for Sisterland, and yourself. Something that will distance you from Silence’s taint.

Babyfusion! It's time to offer yourself as a source." As an afterthought, she tacked on, "If you're willing."

Constance was surprised. "I'm two years below the minimum age to apply for a licence. Wouldn't it be against the rules?"

"Rules can be suspended." The mother's tone was careless. "In exceptional circumstances, I mean."

Beloved's Pearls taught that everyone was subject to the same set of rules – even the Nine.

Forgetting herself, Constance raised her eyes to stare.

The winning smile sprang open. "Our plan has symmetry, you see. Your baby will replace the life your other was carrying."

"Yes, mother."

"Splendid. Your mating licence will be fast-tracked."

Fast-tracking: another suspension of the rules. The mother gave a tiny shrug.

Constance bowed, preparing to withdraw.

The Shaper Mother held up a hand, palm outward. "Coincidentally, sweet child, I can tell you're ovulating. Go to matingplace tonight."

"But the licence won't be through by then, surely? Even if it's speeded up?"

"I have discretion to award a temporary permit – Modesty should have uploaded it to your sig by now. See? There it is already."

Constance's gaze flew to her sig. The pinkification of the ϕ symbol had happened already, changing from black to a disturbingly insistent shade of pink. It was official. She was licensed to attempt babyfusion. But she wasn't ready! "I haven't been briefed on mating, mother. I'm not sure what to do."

"The Mating Board runs regular seminars. Ask Modesty for a list of them."

"But you said to go tonight. There won't be time. Shouldn't

I wait until after my briefing?”

The Shaper Mother frowned. “Why delay? What happens during mating is somewhat humiliating, I admit. But the end is what counts. Not the process. The Mating Board has compiled a fact file – we’ll have that sent through to your comtel. Modesty will take care of it. And if you’re still unclear on anything, ask the Mating Mother. She’ll answer any questions before you mate.” The Shaper Mother stood. “Babyfuse quickly, if you can. It’s the ultimate act of sisterdom.” In benediction, she laid both hands on top of Constance’s head. “Know that Sisterland cherishes you, Constance. Always, at all times, we want what’s best for you.”

The door curled open, and Constance stumbled towards it.

Modesty was waiting on the other side. “Your mating permit’s been uploaded. Some people have all the luck.”

“I don’t suppose there’s time for me to squeeze in one of those Mating Board seminars?”

“No, I checked already. There won’t be another session till Friday. But I’ve sent you its handout. *Helpful Hints for Himtime*.” Modesty winked. “Informative little guide.”

Constance tapped her comtel, and a header with the Mating Board’s sleeping baby logo appeared.

Congratulations, sister! she read.

She skimmed the screen on to the next page.

You’ve been selected to attempt babyfusion!

Sisterland is proud of you!

She flicked forward.

It requires Himtime duties.

Below, you’ll find diagrams. These can be linked to your entscreen for moving pictures. First, a list of frequently asked questions.

Again, Constance moved the screen.

Will it hurt?

Some discomfort can be expected the first time, but you

will be given a medicinal drink to minimise it.

Will I bleed?

The drink prevents bleeding.

Constance kept scrolling.

Who chooses the man?

The Mating Mother.

Can a woman refuse a man?

Of course.

She looked up, to find Modesty watching her. “Himtime! It sounds so masculine!”

“Don’t worry, Constance, the mating urge will take over.”

“The mating urge?”

“It’s all in there. Just keep reading.”

“I still don’t understand why the mother wants me to do this. I haven’t been sent for vetting – either physical or psychological.”

“I guess the rules don’t apply to you.”

“I never knew rules were so flexible, Modesty.”

“Welcome to the real world, sister.”