

This is an excerpt from *Imaginary Year*, a work of serial fiction by Jeremy P. Bushnell. Visit the *Imaginary Year* website (<http://www.imaginaryyear.com>) on Mondays and Fridays for new updates.

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Janine walks past a fenced-in lot full of second-hand radiators and she stops, tries to remember the address that she got from that guy David over the phone, when he called to let her know that the job was hers. The neighborhood's a little more low-rent than she'd expected: it hardly seems like the kind of place you'd hide a company doing something as flashy as multiplayer video games. (Although the block is not without its signs of approaching gentrification: on the corner is a rather upscale-looking Italian restaurant, directly adjacent to a battered service garage.)

She digs her planner out of her purse and fumbles it open to the page where she wrote down Perihelion's address. She checks it against the address painted on the radiator lot's chipped metal sign. It seems like the place should be right across the street. She looks over there, and sees a small, nondescript building. She looks through the window and can make out what maybe looks like a conference room: maybe this is the right place. As she crosses towards the building, the trendier details of the conference room begin to come into focus: the chairs are of avant-garde Danish design, the table's surface is a single slab of glass. This is *definitely* the right place.

The door has a plate with the word PERIHELION engraved on it in small caps. She doesn't see any buzzer or anything, so she knocks, and after a minute or two she just pushes in. She finds herself standing directly in the conference room, which seems to double as the lobby. She looks around for a receptionist, but there is none. On the phone,

David had said *When you get here just report to me. My office is the one down at the far end of the hall; double doors; just come on in.* So she starts off down the hall, feeling, somehow, like she's doing something illicit, like she's going to get in trouble if she gets caught.

On her way down towards the double doors some unshaven guy sticks his head out of his office and says —Hello?

—Hi, Janine says. She clutches her purse against her stomach. —My name's Janine Tellier? I'm here to meet with David Czierwiensky?

—He's the door at the end of the hall, says the guy. He gestures the way with a ruler.

—Thanks, she says.

She gets to the doors and knocks, rather timidly.

—Come in.

She pushes her way in. There's a gangly-looking guy sitting at a desk, staring down into a file folder and frowning. Behind him hangs a poster-size reproduction of a Don Caballero album cover. The cover art depicts a person whose gender cannot be determined: his or her face is pointed away from the camera, so that you can only see long hair. Androgyny helps to make Janine feel comfortable.

The guy at the desk looks up and sees her and his face lights up into a smile.

—Hey, says David, —you must be Janine. Nice to meet you!

He extends his hand across the granite slab of his desk, and she reaches forward to shake it. She's surprised to see that he's so young—he's maybe five years older than her. (If that: her assessment of his age is more based on the fineness of his suit than anything else.) He sits back down and gestures at the chair next to her; she sits.

—Okay, says David. —How's your day going?

—Fine, Janine says.

—Great, David says. —Listen, this meeting will be pretty quick—in a little bit I'll have Paul take you down to your office; he'll really get you started on the paperwork and all that. Have you met Paul yet?

—No, sir, says Janine.

—Paul's a good guy; Paul's a good guy, says David. —He'll introduce you around. But I wanted you to meet with me first so I could see you face to face and tell you a few things about our project; help give you to get a sense of how things function around here. I guess we talked about this some in the interview?

—Some, Janine says. —Yeah, I guess.

—OK, David says. —So forgive me if I repeat myself, here, I can't really remember what we talked about and what we didn't. The important thing is that what we're working on is an online multiplayer video game, called Chordworld. But Chordworld isn't really your normal sort of video game. It's abstract, almost, uh, *theoretical*. Here—this is the “rant” portion of our program—here we believe that video games are going to be the preeminent art form of the twenty-first century. What film was to the twentieth century. It's hard to see the truth of that right now, since most video games on the market right now are being made for teenagers. Twenty years of progress in the field and you're still hard-pressed to find a video game that operates at above a high school level. We're trying to make a game that will appeal to adults. Sophisticated adults. People who go to museums, who think about art. Chordworld is being written and designed by people who know about more than video games. You saw this in our ad, I guess. We want people who know about film theory, music theory. The production is going well. We're planning to go live in September of this year. What I need, though, is someone who can design ads that will appeal to those

sophisticated adults. Ads that will get them interested in playing a video game. I've seen your work; I've talked to you about your interests. I think you can do it.

—Thank you, sir, says Janine.

—David, please, says David. —Anyway, the game has a story; it's complicated; I'm not going to go into it right now. You'll be meeting next week with Clark, she's our World Editor, she'll fill you in on all that. You can use elements of the story in the ads if you want, but you don't have to; I don't want the ads to try to, you know, do too much, you know what I mean? I want them to be kind of subtle.

—Sure, says Janine. —Sophisticated.

—Right, says David. —Ah, listen to me. I'm talking like I know how to do your job. If you catch me doing that again, just say *listen, David, leave the designing to me*.

—OK, says Janine, although she can actually envision herself saying no such thing.

—Great, says David. He stands. —Let's go find Paul.