63 / THE ONE WHO IS LOVED LESS

The launch of *Chordworld* is supposed to be less than three months away, and so things at the company are getting busy. Clark's been trying harriedly to repair the continuity errors, to work out the last Quests, to insure that there is enough World for hundreds of players to explore concomitantly. When she isn't working late nights at Perihelion, she's been giving her free hours over to Janine. All this business has forced her to cancel her normal weekly drinking session with Fletcher for the past two weeks, but tonight she has managed to get out to the Old Town Ale House to meet him.

She's been giving him the lowdown on work. —So, yeah, she says. —I'm still not convinced that we have enough material generated. The gameworld is supposed to feel sparsely populated. You don't want players constantly bumping elbows with other players. *Oops, excuse me.*

Fletcher nods. Actually, Clark isn't at all sure that overpopulation will be a real issue: the mutterings she's heard indicate that the current number of registered players lags significantly behind the numbers that the company had projected. But that isn't her problem.

—Whatever, says Clark. —I'm sure we'll work it out.

—So, Fletcher asks, after swallowing a mouthful of beer. —How are things with Janine? Going well?

—Hmm, Clark says. She hesitates, squints, sips from her bottle.

—Not going well? Fletcher asks.

—Hang on a minute, Clark says.

She's been spending a lot of time with Janine lately, but she wonders why. She wonders how much she's been doing it because she really *wants* to spend time with Janine, and how much she's doing it out of a sense of *obligation.* She doesn't *mind* going over there, it's convenient, pleasant, but she doesn't *long* to see Janine. Same with the sex. She likes being with Janine, but being overworked has dragged her sex drive down; she always sort of feels like she should be *getting something done* instead of dallying in the bedroom. She feels like she consents to it because that's what's expected of her—because that's her *role* here. She wishes that she could uncover a strong streak of lust within her, but she can find no trace of it, and its absence makes her feel ashamed, as though she might be deficient.

How much of this Fletcher needs to know is another question entirely.

—Let me put it to you this way, Clark says.

—I'm listening, Fletcher says.

—You know how, in every relationship, there's, like, one person who is the person who is loved *more* and one person who is the person who is loved *less*?

—Well, ideally, Fletcher says, —both people would love one another the same.

—Thanks, Sherlock. How often do you know *that* to have happened, though?

—I grant the point.

—So here's a question. Which do you feel more comfortable being: the person who is loved more or the person who is loved less?

Fletcher thinks about the women who have loved him more. He remembers going out with Lynn, in college, and he remembers the way he drew away from her when he began to find other women who shared her good qualities. She tried to hang onto him, but

eventually his distance made that impossible. After Lynn, he dated a sequence of younger women—college freshmen impressed by his meager accomplishments as a poet. He can remember how attentive they were to him after he had won them over. The feeling of suffocation.

Then he thinks of Freya, and Clark, women who he has had secret crushes on for years. He's certain that these crushes are unrequited, and yet he has never grown tired of the company of these women. And so he knows the answer.

—Loved less, he answers.

—Yeah, Clark says. She makes a pained face. —Me too.

—And with Janine you feel like you're… loved more?

She keeps the pained face up. —Yeah.

—Ah, says Fletcher. He sips his beer, swallows. —That's tough, he says.

—Yeah, Clark says.