

Haves and Have-Nots
by Lesley L. Smith

I'd barely made it to work in time for the daily pledge. I jogged down the hall, barreled in the door of my lab, quickly put my hand over my heart, and turned to face the camera. I didn't even have time to say hi to my lab assistant Kirsten.

"I pledge allegiance to the logo of the United States of America and to the corporation for which it stands; one company under Jesus Christ our Lord, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

As soon as the pledge ended, I strode around the room, sniffing. "What's that smell? Do you smell something?"

"Morning, Julia." Kirsten peered through a magnifier at the molecule-sized self-replicating robotic computers. "You almost missed the pledge. You need to be more careful--the last thing you need is another formal reprimand." She straightened up. "And no, I don't smell anything." She pointed at the sample. "But this is weird. There are more nano-bots here than there were last night."

I identified the odor. "Kirsten! The smell is natural gas. Do you feel all right?"

She looked up and the blood ran out of her face. "We better evacuate."

I issued a building-wide emergency via my implant. "Emergency evacuation of the Implant R & D Building! Gas leak! This is not a drill!"

Immediately, people started running past our doorway to the exits.

I followed Kirsten and the others to join the expectant crowd outside.

"You don't think the gas leak was because the containment field was breached, do you?" Kirsten whispered to me.

Our boss, Mr. Parsons, sauntered over to us, and checked me out. "Dr. Jones, I couldn't help noticing during the pledge that you were missing your crucifix." He leaned over me. "I've always suspected you have agnostic leanings."

My hand reached up to my throat. The chain was there, but my crucifix had disappeared. How odd.

Before I could reply, an explosion ripped through the roof of the building. Fiery orange flames shot up into the sky and everyone gasped.

"Oh, my God!" Kirsten muttered as her eyes filled with tears. "Julia what about the contain...."

"Not the time," I said, my voice like steel. My necklace hit the ground with a clink. I shoved it in my pocket.

Parsons' mouth hung open as he stared at the flames that continued to spew out of the nano-bot lab. Finally he turned to me and said stiffly, "Dr. Jones, if I find out this accident was due to incompetence in your lab, you will no longer be an employee of United States Incorporated."

Such a horrible fate was incomprehensible, but I was spared from answering Parson's threat as emergency vehicles landed, sirens blaring.

He rushed over to talk with the EMTs as the wind shifted, enveloping us in the sour odor of burning insulation.

Some emergency crews ran into the building lugging their heavy equipment, while others flew over the blaze, spraying it with flame retardant.

"Julia, I apologize if this was my fault," Kirsten whispered. "But I can't go Outside." She pointed in the direction of U.S. Inc.'s electric-fenced, barbed-wire border. "My mom told me stories, horrible stories. Please, I can't leave U.S. Inc."

No one should ever have to leave U.S. Inc.; it was the best company on earth. I put my arm around Kirsten's shoulder. "You won't be exiled if I have anything to say about it."

Once things settled down a little, the Director of Implant R & D, Mr. O'Brien, ordered Parsons and me to meet with him at the U.S. Inc. Midwest Regional Headquarters building.

Parsons led me over to O'Brien's transport and we took off, straight up. My ears popped as usual.

At regional headquarters, O'Brien marched us to his office and closed the door. "What the heat happened?" he demanded.

Parsons pointed at me. "It's Dr. Jones' fault."

I leaned toward O'Brien. "We need to implement countermeasures now." I scowled at Parsons. "As Mr. Parsons should know, time is of the essence. The longer we wait, the larger the area we may need to disinfect."

O'Brien flinched. "What do you mean?"

"It appears there was a containment breach in my lab, which compromised the natural gas line. The nano-bots are scavenging metals, trying to reproduce," I said. "We must drop the carbamide on the R & D building and the surrounding areas. I'll shoot you the data files." I searched my implant for the relevant data and sent it to his implant via the wireless network.

O'Brien was silent for a few moments as he scanned the information. Then he frowned. "Damn it! Parsons, why didn't you bring this up?"

Parsons' face flushed. "I was about to, sir. Yes, we need to douse the area with the kill-agent."

O'Brien immediately called the Safety Team and gave them their orders. Then he leaned back in his chair, considering us.

"This is her fault, not mine." Parsons pointed at me. "She should be expelled from U.S. Inc. Look, she's not even wearing her crucifix." He fingered the gaudy gold one around his neck.

"No crucifix." O'Brien frowned. "That is bad."

I knew Parsons would try to divert attention to cover his own ass. "What happened today was regrettable, but it was an accident. No one was hurt." Thank God. I took a breath. "I'm the best computer engineer in U.S. Inc. For that matter since you closed the engineering school I'm one of the only engineers left in U.S. Inc. I've developed three new implant manufacturing methods, each cheaper than the last. You can't afford to let me go." I smiled.

"The engineering school did not devote sufficient resources to religious studies," Parsons said.

"As I've said before, God doesn't have anything against engineering." I sighed. "Other companies such as Canada Inc. seem to realize that."

"Yes, we've heard your subversive views on science and engineering many times." O'Brien narrowed his eyes. "I hope you're not implying you would take your expertise to a competitor, such as Canada Inc., Dr. Jones?"

That was ludicrous. "I've lived my whole life in U.S. Inc., Mr. O'Brien. I was born here; I went to school here. I am loyal to U.S. Inc."

"She's a security risk. What with her 'scientific method', she might even be an atheist," Parsons said. "She should be expelled."

"That's crazy!" I said. "I'm a good Christian and I'm not a security risk. I love U.S. Inc."

Incredibly, after consulting my file, O'Brien agreed with Parsons. "This was your last strike, Dr. Jones. As of now, you are no longer an employee of United States Incorporated."

Within minutes I found myself outside U.S. Inc., south of St. Louis, with nothing but the clothes on my back. In shock, I stared at the muddy water swirling in the mouth of the Mississippi. I knew Parsons never liked me, but what in God's name just happened? How could they discard a loyal and valuable asset like me? It defied comprehension.

I called Kirsten via my implant in phone mode, but got 'Communication refused. You are no longer a member of the U.S. Inc. Network.' "Jesus Christ!" Then I felt guilty for taking the Lord's name in vain.

My tirade was interrupted by one of the guards. "Move away from the gate, atheist!" He gestured with his machine gun.

I didn't need to be told twice. I picked my way down the crumbling blacktop until I was out of sight of the gate.

Then I called everyone else I knew but got the same horrible message. I couldn't believe they threw me out; it wasn't Christian. Whatever happened to turning the other cheek? They didn't even let me say goodbye to my friends and family.

I sank down on a rock by the side of the weedy former road, and buried my head in my hands. I was going to miss a lot of people--people like Kirsten who depended on me. I prayed Kirsten would be all right without me around to look out for her. "Can anyone hear me? Does anyone out here have an implant?"

"Hello?" someone said to my implant. "This is Winston."

I lifted my head. Someone out here had an implant! Maybe there was some civilization after all. "Yes, Winston. This is Julia. I'm outside the South gate of the Midwest Region of U.S. Inc. Are you nearby?"

He chuckled. "Why, I'm only thirty miles away. Can I give you a lift somewhere?"

"You have a transport?" I'd always heard there was only chaos Outside.

"Sure do, little lady. You'd call it a car. I'll swing by and pick you up."

"Bless you, Winston. I'll see you in a couple minutes."

Winston belly-laughed. "You have just been hatched, haven't you? No, it will take more like an hour."

An hour to go thirty miles! What was I getting myself into? "Sure, Winston. See you ...soon."

As I waited, I worried. What was out here? The U.S. Inc. news had said it was a wilderness of warring tribes that would just as soon kill you as talk to you. All I could see was the mouth of the river, the ocean, lots of trees and weeds, and a cracked expanse of pavement stretching out in front of me.

I got more and more nervous. What if Winston was some kind of primitive, uncivilized brute?

The wind ruffled my hair. It was only about eighty degrees, a pleasantly cool winter day. I guessed my situation could be worse, but I didn't know how.

I decided to assess my provisions, so I emptied my pockets. All I had was a crumpled tissue, a piece of gum, my ID/keycard and my chain. I took a closer look. The chain was much shorter than I remembered. Some nano-bots must have eaten my crucifix. That's what happened to it. And then they hitched a ride on the chain in my pocket. I was probably covered with the tiny machines--at least they couldn't implant themselves in my brain since I already had an implant. But things were worse than I thought.

What if Winston wasn't a brute? Ethically, I shouldn't let him or his technology get contaminated with the nano-bots. My stomach felt like a flock of fabled bald eagles was flying around in it.

Eventually I heard a roaring noise. I stood up and peered down the road. A normal-looking man approached riding in a metal box on four wheels. I hadn't seen a machine like that except on the holonet. How did he keep from falling out?

When he was about thirty feet away I yelled, "You better stop. I may be contaminated."

He screeched to a halt, and then said via his implant, "Say again. You're contaminated? Do you mean you're contagious? Are you sick? Why didn't you say so earlier?"

"No. I'm not sick. I'm contaminated by tiny metal-scavenging robots. They could destroy your car and any other metal you have."

Winston scratched his head as he sat in his car. "What's the purpose of these robots?"

I sighed. They were supposed to make computer implants, but now that U.S. Inc. kicked me out, they didn't have a purpose. "I don't think you would understand. Let's just say they're dangerous to your technology."

Winston sat silently for a moment. Then he said, "Let me get this straight. You possess tiny robots that can destroy metal?"

"Yes." I nodded. "That's what I said."

The car made a shrieking noise and started moving toward me. As Winston pulled up, he was laughing so hard, he couldn't talk. "Gaia!" He caught his breath. "Julia, you're our hero. We've been waiting for someone like you. Get in."

I shook my head. "But your car may be destroyed."

Winston grinned at me. "I have a feeling you and your robots are more important than my car."

I wanted to believe him, and was tempted to get in the car. There was nothing on the side of the road for me. "There may be a way you could save it. Just spray the most important metal parts with carbamide."

Winston must have consulted his implant, because his dark, hairy eyebrows rose into the middle of his forehead. "Carbamide? You mean urea?"

I nodded.

"Gaia!" He roared with laughter and pounded his palms on the wheel in front of him.

So far, it appeared people Outside were strangely cheerful.

When Winston stopped laughing, he had to wipe tears from his cheeks. "I think I love you, Julia," he said as he stepped out of the car. He jaunted to the front of his vehicle, opened some kind of protective cover on it, and unzipped his pants.

I averted my gaze and heard a stream of liquid hit the car. Presumably he peed all over the machine inside.

Winston closed everything back up and got back behind the wheel. "Hop on in, little lady." He pointed at the seat beside him.

I gingerly stepped up into the vehicle. "Is it safe?"

He smiled. "Probably not. But we have to take what we can get out here. It's nice to meet you, ma'am. I'm Mr. Winston Smith, at your service."

I admired his tan, round face, his messy graying hair, and his sparkling brown eyes. "Nice to meet you. I'm Dr. Julia Jones."

He jerked a metal stick near his legs, there was a screeching noise, and we started moving. "A doctor? A medical doctor? We need someone with medical training back in town."

The wind whipped past us as we picked up speed, and my hair flew everywhere. "No. I'm sorry. I'm a computer expert."

Winston nodded. "That may be even better." The rest of the journey he concentrated on avoiding the large holes in the road.

I concentrated on not being thrown out of the car as we swerved back and forth.

Eventually we pulled up in front of a ramshackle farmhouse and a falling-down barn. "Didn't you say something about a town? Why don't we go there?"

Winston's stomach shook as a laugh erupted from his core. "You're practically a baby!"

His laughing was starting to get on my nerves. "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm almost fifty years old."

Winston whistled. "You don't look it. I haven't met many old-timers. You are a very interesting lady, Julia." He waved his hand at the barn. "This is part of the town. The rest is down the road a spell"

"Maybe the word 'town' means something different out here?" I said.

"Nope. We have to keep it low-key because of the Sats." He honked the horn twice and we drove into the barn and parked.

A young man toting a gun stepped out of the shadows.

"Welcome back, Win. I see you found a new recruit."

Winston glanced at me. "That has yet to be decided. This lady is Julia." He pointed at the young man, "This fellow is Jon."

"Nice to meet you," I said, waving at him.

He nodded at me.

Winston walked to the door of the barn and gestured me over. "Come on, old-timer, this way."

"What was that all about? Sats? Recruit?"

He smiled broadly and shook his head. "Don't they teach you anything inside? The Sats, the Satellites." He pointed up in the sky as we stepped onto the sagging front porch. "They watch us all the time--at least when they can." He opened the front door. "Hi, honey, we're home," he called out in a singsong voice. Then he said more matter-of-factly, "The Sats can't see us inside. If U.S. Inc. had their way, they'd monitor all the implants too."

I froze, thinking of the upgraded implant specs that I'd received recently. "Well, if they did, I'm sure it would be for a good reason."

A worn woman wearing an apron stepped into the room. "Hi, Win." She gave him a peck on the cheek and turned to me. "Hello, I'm Beverly."

"This is Julia," Winston said. "And she's fifty years old."

Beverly's mouth dropped open, revealing several missing teeth.

"What's the big deal?" I asked. "You two must be in your forties."

Winston's face split into the wide smile that I was getting all too used to. "I'm thirty-one, and Beverly is twenty-two."

Beverly had closed her mouth and was nodding. "And Win is a town elder."

Darn it! I couldn't seem to get anything right anymore. "I apologize if I said something to offend you. I'm new out here and I guess I have a lot to learn." Hopefully, I wouldn't be out here long enough for it to matter.

"You didn't offend us," Beverly said. "It's an honor to be considered old. Will you join us for supper, Julia?"

"Yes," Winston said. "Please join us."

At the mention of food, I realized I missed lunch as well as breakfast today. "Yes, please." Maybe I wouldn't starve to death out here.

Within minutes I was seated at a massive, scarred wooden dining table with the young man from the barn. Beverly brought in a huge bowl of baby greens. Winston carried a large platter of something yellow, and a big bowl of some kind of brown stew.

"Winston, please say grace," Beverly said.

He cleared his throat. "Thank you for your bounty, Earth Mother."

I gasped.

Winston shot me a glance, but continued. "We appreciate the plants of the field and the animals of the forest that we share the earth with, by your good grace. We strive to be better stewards of this wounded planet. Bless this feast, Gaia."

Jon immediately reached for a platter and began piling food on his plate.

Winston said, "Was there something wrong with that blessing, Julia?"

"You aren't Christians? That's against the law!"

Winston shook his head. "We aren't in U.S. Inc. We don't have to obey their laws."

"But aren't you afraid you'll go to hell?" I asked.

Jon muttered, "Aren't we already in hell?"

Beverly chuckled. "Hell wouldn't have food like this. Please leave some for our guest, Jon."

He grumbled but passed the platters down the table.

Since every time I opened my mouth, I seemed to say something wrong, I decided to keep quiet and enjoy the meal. The yellow stuff turned out to be some kind of sweet paste made of corn. The salad was excellent and the stew was

also very good although I couldn't identify the ingredients.

I hadn't thought it possible, but we finished everything.

Beverly started clearing the plates. "Can I offer you some chicory, Julia?" I must have looked puzzled because she added, "It's our local version of coffee."

I nodded. "Yes, please."

"So, Win, is she a new recruit?" Jon asked. "It's been months since a stranger came to town."

Winston placed his hands on the table. "Let's wait and see what she has to say."

"You've mentioned recruit before," I said. Recruit for what?"

"You could say, a recruit for our town," Winston said.

"In that case, no thank you. I'm planning on going back to U.S. Inc."

Jon erupted in chortles of laughter.

Beverly came back in with the chicory. "What's so funny?"

Jon said between giggles, "She thinks U.S. Inc. will let her back in!"

Beverly smiled as she poured us all coffee. "I'm sorry, honey, once you're expelled, you can't go back. Winston's family used to live in U.S. Inc. He was born there; that's why he has an implant."

I wondered what horrible thing his family did to get expelled.

Winston took a sip of his drink. "No one has ever been allowed back in."

I gulped. He had to be mistaken. "No one? Do you mean no one around here, or no one ever?"

Winston put down his cup and peered into my eyes. "No one ever."

My heart fell down to the earth's molten core. Maybe this town of theirs was going to be my only option.

"You're scaring the woman." Beverly sat down. "Don't worry Julia, you can find a place to stay out here even if you decide not to join Winston's movement."

"Movement?" I was lost.

Jon interrupted, "U.S. Inc. has a monopoly on technology. They leave us out here to rot with no implants, no schools, no doctors, no nothing." He pounded his fist on the table.

Winston smiled at Jon. "You'll have to pardon my nephew; he's hot-headed."

"I must admit I'm not used to such straight talk," I said carefully, looking around the room for cameras. "But isn't that the way it's always been Outside? If people are expelled from U.S. Inc. it has to be for a good reason."

Beverly looked at me over the top of her cup. "Were you expelled for a good reason?"

I stared down at the table. "Well, no." It was starting to sink in that my company days might be behind me.

"As for 'the way it's always been', U.S. Inc. has only been in existence for fifty years," Winston said.

I set my cup down. "That's not true! Everyone knows we broke off from United Kingdom Incorporated and started a new company hundreds of years ago."

Jon snorted. "Somebody needs to visit the library."

"Yes, but not today," Beverly said. "It's almost sunset and we're hosting a meeting tonight after it gets dark. Jon, help me clean up. Winston, why don't you show Julia to the guest room?" She started clearing the rest of the dinner dishes.

"Please come this way," Winston said. "We've got a safe place you can sleep tonight."

"You've been very kind. Thank you." I followed him in the failing light to a bedroom off the front room. "I'm not sure how I can repay you. But I'd like to try."

"I'm glad to hear that Julia. Would you like to come to our meeting?" Winston crossed his arms in the doorway.

"Please tell me what it's about," I said.

"Some of us Outside think it is unfair for U.S. Inc. to keep all the technology for themselves." He sighed. "Some people think maybe we should ruin U.S. Inc. if they won't share it."

I stifled a gasp.

He lit a candle on the dresser by the door. "Maybe you and your tiny robots are just what those folks need."

I frowned. What kind of people had I gotten mixed up with? "I could never be a part of destroying a society. People might get hurt or even killed. That goes against everything I believe in."

Now it was Winston's turn to frown. "Suit yourself."

I lay down and tried to go to sleep, but voices from the other room kept intruding.

"I say we detonate the EMF pulse! They don't care about us, so why should we care about them?"

That had to be Jon. He truly was hot-headed. I cracked the door to my room. The candle-lit living room was wall-to-wall people.

A gray-bearded man said, "If we do that and they find out it was us, we have to be prepared for an all-out war."

Winston, shaking his head, said, "And if we don't knock out all their electronics they'll nuke us."

Would U.S. Inc. nuke them? I hated to admit it, but I suspected U.S. Inc didn't think these Gaians were real people.

Clearly U.S. Inc. had strayed from the path of true Christianity. But I hadn't. I couldn't stand by while hundreds or thousands of people were killed--Christian or not. And I didn't want my friends and family back Inside to be at risk.

Stepping into the room, I cleared my throat. "I have another idea. What if I gave everyone Outside an implant and we made a new network and restored doctors and schools and factories?"

Some of the people gasped. "Implants? All of us?"

"Yes. I can give everyone in this room an implant right now." I smiled and paused for a moment.

"Let me tell you about some tiny machines I call nano-bots...."