

# Table of Contents

The Rite Stuff . . . . .	1
--------------------------	---



# The Rite Stuff

By David McKee

Jerrel is about to celebrate her twenty-first birthday. It's the special she's been waiting for all her young life - the day on which she joins the Hive, in body as much as in spirit. This is more than your average holy communion for young Jerrel - a surgically facilitated rite of passage from which there's no turning back. A short story by David McKee

the rite stuff Jerrel could not shake the paranoia. Walking from her building to the metro she felt eyes on her, peeling back layer after layer of skin and flesh and probing her, investigating her intent. The air seemed unusually warm for March. Sweat trickled down her back and soaked her armpits. She imagined she was caught in a warm ocean current, drifting along an immaterial stream through cold waters. Strange, predatory fish floated casually alongside her, eyeing her with hungry fascination and trying to guess how far she planned to drift. Trying to guess her destination.

It was probably just the medication making her loopy. The doctor had warned it had odd and unpredictable effects. At least she had not hallucinated like some of her friends had. She shook her head to clear her thoughts. Day dreams aren't hallucinations. I'm fine.

But they might be watching her. She turned twenty-one today. The all-important day. The infamous, if clichéd, fork in the road. Anyone with an array could ping her. And that meant anyone with an array could know her public record. And age.

There were very few luddite enough to refuse an array. It was virtually impossible to function in society without the tiny implant that let one connect to the Net with a thought. The most casual of thoughts could send out an ethereal feeler to her array, and without so much as a 'by your leave' she - her array - would respond with an identification. She had never really worried about it before. But today was different. Today it mattered.

There were no few people who would be very interested to learn she had turned twenty-one. And they would all be curious to know what she had chosen for her birthday present.

Approaching the metro entrance she laughed to herself. Who needs to hallucinate? A crowd was milling around, jostling for position in the queue. People of every variety. All perfect according to whatever aesthetic they lived by. Most had pigment alteration: primary colours were popular this year. Most were also completely bald, and had visible prostheses of various descriptions - some of no discernible practical use.

In a rush of warm, stale air the train arrived. Jerrel climbed in and took a seat. Watching the rest of the crowd board the train, she saw only one person without obvious body alteration. A man wearing what looked like a silver skull cap. Everyone else gave him a wide berth, and as he sat down a furry man with yellow eyes hastily vacated the bench. He seemed utterly unaffected. Draping himself across the now empty bench he closed his eyes and leaned his head back. Jerrel knew that if she sat next to him she would likely hear him humming. They did that when they connected. Something about the implants caused an involuntary vibration of the vocal chords when they went fully into the deeper Web. Because of this humming, they were called 'bees' by the changers. And the deeper Web was referred to as the Hive. The place where they joined the hive-mind.

They referred to themselves as the People, but used the term ‘the Hive’ to refer to the Web beyond the Web. The Hive was a world apart. A place with its own realities in which things like sociality, individuality, and personality took on whole new meanings. Better meanings, Jerrel believed, although she had, of course, never been in the Hive. Many changers argued that once a person wore the skull cap – actually a new skull that housed and protected the complex collection of implants necessary to connect properly to the deeper Web – they gave up autonomy and individual identity. Jerrel refused to believe that. Her parents had seemed independent enough to her, even if they did spend most of their waking hours and all sleeping hours connected. They also seemed, to her, much more in tune with the feelings and thoughts of others than did those who refused or were denied access to the Hive.

That was precisely what she had chosen for her birthday. She was now old enough to make the decision that would shape the rest of her life. Not that there had ever been any doubt about the choice she would make. The only question had been her ability to pass the tests. Everyone who chose to be one of the People had to take a battery of psychological and physical tests. If any of these had shown her to be a poor fit for the implants she would have had no choice at all. She would have been forced to settle for body alteration or nothing at all. Few, having taken the tests, ever took the latter choice. Most, set on joining the Hive, committed suicide if they failed the tests. Of course, they were unbalanced, most of them anyway weren’t they? Otherwise they would have passed the test. Then again, to Jerrel’s way of thinking, anyone who didn’t want to take the tests was at least a little suspect.

Jerrel pushed the thought from her mind. She had passed the tests. She had received the drug and hormone treatments throughout the past six months to prepare her body for the implants. She had done all the tutorials to prepare her for the Hive.

She was ready.

Soon enough the train arrived at her stop. Casting a final glance over her shoulder at the man reclining peacefully in the train car, she stepped down onto the walkway. Suddenly nervous, she hurried to her destination, eyes on the ground. Her paranoia grew with each step. The nearer she came to the offices where she would receive her implants the greater her certainty that she was being watched.

As she neared the address the walk became clogged with people, all changers. They were chanting and marching. Some carried signs with pictures of bees or other insects and slogans like “Smoke the Hive!” or “Human! Not insect!”

She had known she would have to pass protesters to get her implants. They were here every day, all day and all night. Idiots, she thought. How could people who grew fur and prosthetically added new and alien body parts accuse the People of being non-human?

Jostling her way through the protesters she felt a hand grip her arm. A blue-skinned changer spun her around and yelled, “It’s her day! She’s come to cast aside her humanity!”

The crowd roared and surged up around Jerrel, crushing her. She screamed and flailed about, trying to escape. Hundreds of voices cried out in unison, “Save her! Save her!” Arms grabbed at her from every direction. She lost her balance, but the press of bodies was too tight for her to fall. She felt herself drifting in a tide of more or less human bodies. Gasping with exertion and fear, the smell of sweat and the breath of others choked her.

Then she fell to the ground. The chanting gave way to panicked screaming. Someone was hurt. Was there fighting? She huddled on the ground in foetal position, crying, terrified.

“You killed him!” someone yelled.

The rest was drowned out in the crowd’s roar. Strong arms slipped under her body, and she felt herself being lifted. Afraid to move, she kept her eyes closed, wondering what would happen to her. Would they force her to undergo body alteration? Would she be allowed to enter the Hive if that happened?

A harsh voice barked orders. The air became suddenly cooler, and the sounds of the crowd vanished. She was set gently on a couch.

“Are you all right, dear? Did they hurt you?” asked the voice.

Jerrel looked up and felt relief flood through her. Standing above her was a huge, massively built woman in a private police uniform. Her head gleamed brilliant silver under the fluorescent lights in the ceiling. “Are you hurt?”

Jerrel sat up, shaking her head. “I’m fine. A little scared. I had no idea...”

“They’re out in force today. It’ll be worse tomorrow. The other guards are dispersing the crowd. One of those changer idiots got himself hurt trying to snatch you away.”

Jerrel did not think the guard sounded very sympathetic at all. She looked back toward the door, but there were no windows to see through. The room, a reception area, was simply decorated. A few couches and tables were scattered throughout and expensive looking rugs covered the floor. A second door broke the wall.

“Who do I need to talk to?” Jerrel asked, scanning for a secretary.

“So you are here for your upgrade, eh?” the guard asked, smiling. “Just walk over to that door. It will ping you and let you through”

Jerrel nodded. She stood, wiping tears from her cheeks and patting down her clothes. Satisfied that Jerrel was all right, the guard winked, spun around and marched out the front door. Jerrel caught a glimpse of a suddenly empty street when the door opened.

Spinning about herself, she took a deep breath and approached the other door. It whispered open as she approached.

the rite stuff

Less than half an hour later Jerrel was lying down on an operating table. Anaesthesia washed over her, loosening her muscles, bathing her mind, stilling her fears. The room receded, and she embraced oblivion.

Jerrel’s mind exploded.

Every taste she knew – every physical sensation – coursed along like bright grains of sand under her skin. Her muscles twitched and jerked with the sensation. She wept and laughed and knew that Everyone wept and laughed with her. Everyone. The People.

They were all inside her. Or she was inside them. She felt them touching her, probing her, examining her. But not like before. She resonated with fright and contentment; this felt nothing like her earlier paranoia. Earlier? Was there a previous time?

Every touch on her, however tentative or bold, allowed her to touch back. Every gaze on her gave her sight. Every caress of her mind (her soul?) every caress of the something under her skin brushed the outside, caressed the others.

Then it was all taken away from her. In the moment before the dark, she felt herself die.

Jerrel lay on a firm surface, soaked in sweat and tingling over every inch of her body. Something was wrong. Different. Her head throbbed dully.

“Jerrel, the implant worked fine. You have been upgraded. You will find that your first few trips to the Hive are disconcerting, but you seemed to handle the first very well.”

She opened her eyes, then gasped, blinking at the harsh light of the operating room. A kindly, androgynous face hovered over her. “Jerrel?”

“I’m...I’m all right. I think. It worked?”

“It worked just fine.”

“My head hurts.”

The face nodded sympathetically. “You will have a headache for a few hours yet. It’s more from contacting the Hive than from the surgery.”

The Hive.

Memory, incomprehensible and sublime, flooded Jerrel’s mind.

“When your headache recedes you can contact again. Does that sound good to you, Jerrel?”

Jerrel closed her eyes and tried to feel the intensity the memories suggested. It was all a jumble. Hardly coherent. Her memories seemed pale and lifeless. She felt suddenly lonely. Her body seemed empty and oddly heavy.

“I want to go Home!” she cried, sitting up suddenly and grabbing the doctor’s wrist. “Let me go Home!”

The surgeon smiled, and Jerrel thought the glare from the ceiling lights looked like a nimbus around his silver head. He gently pressed her back against the table. “Just as soon as your headache recedes, birthday girl. We’ll go home together.”

**David McKee:**  
**Xdmckee AT uci.eduX**