

The [[v[ng End

by \$onyq Dormon

It wasn't easy to get up the long, shallow flight of steps to the big hospital complex, with my belly so big and heavy, but I made it by going very stowly. Went through the mesh helix of the entrance, down a broad corridor to the rear, and entered the Department of Checks and Balances.

I spent several minutes hunting for the Admitting Office, and then was waved to a chair by the lady at the desk. So I sat, waiting; the daily hospital activities went on around me as if I weren't there. They brought in a leg. A yellow ticket was attached with the donor's name and a code number on it. As if in response, the baby gave me a kick, and my knees jerked sympathetically.

A half hour had gone by, and I was bored, in spite of the exhibits. The main one, of course, was the heart in its wired box; pump-pump, fluids ran through from walltubes. A printed card explained that it was the only heart ever rejected by thirty-seven recipients in a row. In the center of the dark, pulsing mass, *Il[otlter* was tattooed in a semicircle.

"Miss?" I said to the lady at the desk, but she shook her head brusquely at me. I had to wait some more, which didn't seem right. Not even the holographs could attract my attention anymore. I'd already looked round and round the room staring at the sequence: the Marrow Fungus spores taking hold, little roots probing into the porous bone, extending, being nourished, the pale shelf extruding from a tibia.

The final holograph in the series showed the man, alive and well, with various bulges at brow, elbow, and knee, all of him well-kept with daily injections.

After the leg's number was filed by the lady behind the

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desk, who had continued to ignore me in spite of the fact that she knew I was in labor, an attendant came and removed the leg with speed and delicacy.

They brought in a pair of crossed fingers, ticketed. Entered, filed, catalogued, and removed.

"Be with you in a moment," the lady said, flicking me a glance. Her contacts must be old ones, for her lids were pink and her eyes bloodshot. Wouldn't you think she'd take better care of herself? With such excellent care available.

"Name? Address?" she asked me, running a new card into the machine which put it on a spindle and creased the pattern in. We went on through my references and code number. Tick tick, the machine made its record. The baby gave a final heave before another contraction squeezed it into temporary submission. A moment later I spread my knees a little and the child gave its unborn cry.

"Oh, shut him up," the lady said, pulling levers and punching buttons. "How can I be expected to work in such a racket? I don't know what they want; they could at least give me an office aide."

While she was carrying on like this, and I increasingly dilated, and the baby continuing to squall and gulp, unceremoniously helping himself to oxygen, two men came in carrying a head. It had no ticket, but the donor's name had been stamped in government purple across the forehead. The lids were shut, but the lips fluttered, and now and then it sounded as if a croak came out of them. At the first of these, the lady glanced suspiciously at me.

I said, "I never did that."

The head was catalogued, and removed.

"Lister," I said to the lady. "I really think I'm going to have the baby almost immediately, right here."

"Well of course you are, why else would you have come?" she replied crossly, triple-indexing my code number, not to mention my blood count, though they hadn't taken a blood sample.

"Doesn't it happen in another room?" I asked. I was

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finally getting nervous about it. It was my first baby, and after all the tales I'd heard, I didn't know for sure what to expect. They'd only warned me to look out for interns.

She rose from her chair, went to the blank-faced box on the wall directly in front of where I sat. She pressed its button, and the front lit up with a moving picture. A table. A huge central light like a sun. Around the table, an assortment of figures, male and female, dressed in pale green, and well masked. I lay on the table with my legs upheld.

"There you ate," the lady said, and added ungraciously, "Now that we've got that settled, would you like a cup of tea?"

Although my mouth felt dry, I didn't think I could swallow a thing, so I replied, "No, thank you very much, though."

I watched the screen, sliding down a bit more comfortably in the chair where I sat, my knees spread awkwardly apart. The baby gave a rip-snorthing screech, the figures on the screen reached down between my legs and lifted up a dripping baby boy.

I said, "Ooof," and pressed my hands against my belly. I took several deep breaths, still watching the screen where a female figure tied off the cord, cleaned the boy, and wrapped it in a cocoon of nylon.

The lady was back at her machine, one eye on the moving picture, her lips moving. I could hear her whisper, "One boy, normal, delivered in eight minutes," as the machine tick-ticked the information into creased cards on the spindle.

Slowly, I began to draw myself up in the chair until I was sitting up straight. I felt breathless, but relieved, after carrying that burden all week. After a moment, I asked the lady, "Is that all now?"

"That's it," she said. "Except for our usual advice: don't return before the end of next month. You must not use up all your privileges at once, no matter how many maternity pills you're tempted to gobble. After all, you've got five

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years of childbearing ahead of you. If that's what you want," she added the last with a certain sneer which I knew had been practiced on many others.

She got up from her chair to file the cards. I got up, pressing my skirt down over my flat stomach. "Look," I said, angered by her attitude, "as far as the law goes, I could come in here and have a baby every single week for a year. So don't threaten me."

She disdained to answer. I was on my way to the door when another woman came in, trusted, and plunged past me to the lady's desk. She said, "I'm in labor!"

"Do sit down, you'll have to wait until they clear the spools," the lady said.

I looked back as the woman sat down, balancing her belly in her l"p, and she caught my eye. *Did you have one yet?" she asked.

"Yes, a lovely boy. Good luck with yours."

She said, "Thanks, I'll need it. I'm having twins again."

*Greedy, greedy," said the lady disapprovingly to her, as I went out.

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