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CHAPTER ONE

Frederic Dainig hurried out of his sixtieth-floor apartment, heading for the elevator. The single thought on his mind was the need to hurry and not be late getting to Peter, but even that intense purpose was interrupted when he passed Mrs. Jenkins's door and saw the *Vacant* sign squarely in the center.

So, old Mrs. Jenkins had died. It must have happened in the night, the sign posted as soon as her body was rolled out on a wheeled-stretcher. She had become a fixture of his personal routine during the two years he had lived in the building. Now, he would never see her again. His only reaction to that grim fact was to hope her apartment would stay empty and relieve his floor of some of its rush-hour congestion. Such a chance was weighted in his favor because, oddly enough, living quarters weren't being grabbed the instant they were available anymore.

He hurried on, his youthful stride springy enough to make his brown forelock bounce with every hollow-sounding thump of his heels. But he couldn't manage to beat the morning mob. Doors were being slammed up and down the corridor, and there was already a clutch of people at the elevator.

He rode down the sixty floors with his fellow tenants, and, when the elevator stopped, waited his turn to exit.

The knot of passengers unravelled in front of him, a jumble of tailored coveralls. The only sign of individuality was in the variation of colors each person wore. He could distinguish the women from the men by their more

elaborate feminine hairstyles and their slightly different walk. When his turn finally came, he smoothed his own blue coverall as he strode into the cool summer-morning sun.

He was walking the sidewalk in rhythm with the ever-present crowd when a harsh panting broke against his ears and something hit his shoulder, shoving him sideways. He found himself arm-to-arm with a frantic, rumpled-looking woman. Her blue eyes rolled wildly and whimpers came from her mouth as she searched for an opening through the flow of pedestrians.

"What's wrong?" he shouted.

Her face was contorted with fear and desperation, her eyes streaming tears. She grabbed him, her fingernails sharp crescents on his arm.

"Help me!" she begged. "I only laughed and cried. *Please!* All I did was *care!*"

A sharp whistle shrieked far behind him as Dainig quickly realized what he was facing: a *Re-Emerger* in the process of being run to ground! The sidewalk crowd dispersed as the whistle repeated, leaving him alone with her clutching hands. Above the noise of the retreating crowd, he heard the slap of booted feet.

The Special Police! He dared not be found in her company!

Just as he wrestled free, her left hand clapped onto him again.

"Let go of me!" he yelled, bashing at her forearms, but unable to free himself completely.

"*Hide* me! Help me!" she pleaded in a hoarse caricature of sound. "*Stay!* They're all running away!"

She meant the pedestrians hurrying by, their faces turned aside.

Dainig wanted no part of this. "Get away from me, Re-Emerger! I can't help you!"

"Please—I *need* you."

"I—don't—*care!*"

Three big bodies bumped against him. The woman was jerked away, terrified, betraying raw emotions that disgusted him. Two of the men jostled her into a gray vehicle marked *Re-Emergence Special Police*. Her screams were silenced with the slam of the door. The vehicle drove away. Dainig sighed in relief but was instantly aware that one of the big officers was still standing beside him. Was he under suspicion, then? It hadn't been his fault.

"I was only walking here—on my way to the Anti-Emotion Conditioning Center," his words spewed out too fast, anxiety-ridden, but he couldn't halt them. "I'm Frederic Dainig. I had nothing to do with that woman. I swear it."

"Take it easy. You're not in any trouble," the officer said. He shook his head, adding, "It's a terrible thing to see one of 'them', isn't it? That's why I stayed behind. To make sure you're all right. Being that close to a Re-Emerger is a shock, and I want to be certain you've weathered it."

"I don't care about her one way or another," Dainig protested, not happy with the undertones of this conversation.

"Of course, you don't. But the kind of emotion she was spewing out is hard on everybody and you were caught with the full force of it."

This man wasn't going to leave him alone until he appeared normal, so Dainig set his entire focus on an effort to calm his jumping anxiety.

"I'm fine. Really."

The man's gaze was still on him, noting the twitching fingers that moved in spasms as they hung by his trouser seams. As Dainig consciously stilled those fingers, the officer said, "You appear to be getting your anxiety under control, but it pays to be cautious. Re-Emerging is some-times infectious. Take some Equilibria and give yourself every safeguard available. All right?"

"I will, sir. But I won't forget the sight of her very soon. That fear and all of those tears were *real*? Not drug-induced?"

"Real. It's monstrous to witness, but the Re-Conditioners at the Lab will set her straight. She'll suffer, but she'll come out all right. Try to forget what happened. It's not likely you'll ever see it close up again. Although—"

"Although what?" Dainig needed the rest of the sentence to be sure.

The officer sighed. "We've been real busy lately. It's almost like the start of an epidemic. That's why I was so careful with you, just in case confronting a Re-Emerger was too big a trauma for you to come through whole."

At ten o'clock, every seat in the auditorium was occupied. People waited expectantly, their whispering sounds becoming a steady drone. Attention seldom veered from the wall that would soon "melt" away and show them the interior of Peter's playroom.

Dainig stood near the front, one earphone of his headset pushed behind his ear, while the other rested firmly in place, sensitive to the noises inside the playroom. He was the only human being in the world privy to those sounds at the moment. It was his job to set in motion the spectacle. With a hand signal, he would alert the engineers who would transform the solid wall into a transparent shell, revealing Peter to the audience and the TV world.

He didn't understand how the "melting" was accomplished. While it rendered Peter naked to the audience, it left the blank yellow wall in his playroom unchanged for him. The boy had no idea that he was put on display three times a day.

Dainig waited restlessly, still shaken from his experience with the Re-Emerger, but remaining alert for his cue. Until he plunged his signalling hand down, the wall wouldn't "melt" nor the cameras record. That signal depended on the desired reaction in the boy. Peter always flashed before the public in full-blown emotion. Only Dainig, Dr. Cooper, and Dr. Mattison knew what it took to bring that emotion about. Despite his youth, Dainig was good at his work. So good he had been plucked prematurely from his training as an Anti-Emotion Conditioner to take over the position with Peter.

A flurry of voices, louder than the general hum, caught his attention. He traced it to two women in the front row. They chattered noisily and he walked closer to catch their words, relieved to have the diversion.

The woman in blue was in mid-sentence, "... *prove* you're Peter's mother? It's easy enough to say!"

"I tell you, I am. Just look at the lines on my face if you don't believe it. The things I suffered with that boy! He didn't go to AEC and start to Turn-Off when he was three like normal children do. It was no pleasure to live four extra years with an emotional child in the apartment. Peter was a pure trial for me."

Dainig recognized her now. She was Peter's mother, all right. She came to the Viewings often and never failed to tell everyone who she was.

The woman in blue replied, "But it's such an honor! That must repay some of your hardship. To actually be the mother of the Viewing Child!" Her interest increased as her curiosity turned morbid. "What did Peter do when they came to take him away?"

"He didn't understand. But then, he seldom understood anything. He'd never been without me, you know, so when they pulled him away, he carried on until he put himself into hysterics."

"Really? Right in the room with you? A shock like that could have put you into Re-Emergence."

"I'd been warned about it. I'm a strong Nine, but just the same, when the door closed behind him, I took a big dose of Euphoria. When the drug wore off and I was *still* relieved to be rid of him, I knew I was all right. I've had some peace since then. The doctors can handle his emotional excesses now. I'm free to enjoy watching him when I choose."

The other woman sat back in her seat. "I hope they get him to cry today. He's been happy all week and I'm bored with it."

"That's why I made the trip down," Peter's mother said. "I figure it's about time they gave us a Crying Viewing and I intend to be in the front row. I'm proud when he puts on a good show. After all, I gave him to the world!"

Dainig shook his head. She was proud of bearing a child with a low-moron level IQ. Anyone else would have considered it a failure. But her son had been selected and held in "storage" in her home to replace the previous Viewing Child when the day came that this child caught on to the tricks the doctors used to force her into feeling emotion. By the time Peter's chance came, he was seven years old, so Dainig supposed Peter's mother did have a solid complaint. As Peter's Companion, Dainig himself

complained about spending six hours a day with the boy's unfettered feelings. She had spent years of constant exposure.

Both she and her friend would get their wish. Peter would cry today. He had been happy at breakfast, but Dainig had glimpsed the seed of the child's recurring worry—that he was bad and had caused his parents to abandon him. Peter had nearly worked himself into tears over it, but Dainig had skillfully redirected his attention to games.

Later, he reported the Crying opportunity to the doctors and left the rest to them. The report was all they needed. They knew how to manipulate Peter's mind.

At the crack of new sound in his earphones, Dainig rushed to his assigned position. Up to this moment, there had been only the echo of Peter at play as he bounced his big red ball and hummed a tuneless melody. Now the thump of footsteps signalled Cooper and Mattison's entrance into Peter's playroom. Dainig stiffened, ready to signal the technicians.

"How are you today, Peter?" he heard Dr. Clara Mattison ask.

"I'm playing ball. Do you want to catch it?" Peter's voice was frail against hers.

"We're here to talk to you," Dr. Cooper's deeper tones came through. "We want to talk about your Mama and Daddy."

"No, please. I want to play with the ball." Peter was shying away from the subject. A good sign.

"Did you tell your Mama 'No', too? Is that what made her stop loving you, Peter?" Dr. Mattison asked. "Were you a bad boy?"

"Never. I was always good. I love her."

"But, she doesn't love you, does she? If she did, she would be here with you. You must have been a very bad boy."

"No, I wasn't!" Peter denied. Dainig could visualize the small, pointed chin sticking out defiantly. "You just be quiet, Matty, because you're not nice to say that. I got lost from her, from Daddy, too, and I can't find them

anymore. But I'm good. I'm special! Danny says so."

Cooper took over, reinforcing Mattison. "Do you remember your Mama, Peter? Do you remember what she looked like? How warm she was when she held you?"

There was a brief silence, which Peter broke, his tone higher, "I remember the way she smells! I like that. I want her to come back. Will you tell her where I am?"

"She doesn't want to know," Mattison spat. "You're lost, and she's glad of it. You can't ever see her again, because you were bad."

"Was I? I'm sorry, Mama. Please, Matty. I want her. Tell her to love me. I need her to."

The child's voice was starting to break. Dainig imagined the tears wetting his eyes, and for some ungodly reason, he hated his *own* eyes for remaining dry.

Mattison edged in the final knife. "Do you want her to hold you in her arms again? To cuddle you?"

"Oh, yes—please!" Peter cried, eager with the visions Mattison was planting in his head. "*Can* she, Matty?"

Dainig raised his hand, preparing to give the Viewing signal. The audience leaned forward in anticipation.

"Can she?" Peter begged again. "Will you tell her to come, Matty?"

"Well, if..."

There was another silence, and Dainig knew Mattison was eyeing the boy, her face impassive as she measured the seconds to give him time to believe she was going to say, "Yes."

Her voice emerged harsh and brittle. "No, Peter! You can want her with all of your heart, but you'll never see her again. Do you understand? *Never*!"

"But she *has* to love me, and—" Peter was drowned in confusion, his moron's brain tangled in itself. At last it gave way to the only thing it

possessed—Emotion. The cry that carried his last, "Matty! *Please, Matty!*" was a broken wail.

The doctors' footsteps rushed away. Just as his hand arced down with the Viewing signal, full-throated sobs filled Dainig's ears. The wall "melted," and there was Peter, bent double on his knees, shoulders racking, his hands clutched to his face, and his sobs of "Mama! Please come and find me, Mama. Please want me," now coming through the loudspeaker to every ear in the auditorium, to every TV receiver eavesdropping on his pain.

The audience murmured. "Look how hard he's crying. Poor Peter."

"And without drugs!" another murmur answered.

Dainig pulled off the earphones and watched the spectacle. The crowd strained forward, absorbing Peter's emotion avidly, fascinated, envious, held by a touch of something too intense to explain. Peter was on his feet, now, swiveling in a futile attempt to find Mattison and Cooper. They had retreated at his first deep cry. His face ran with tears, and his pale yellow hair separated into damp straggles across his forehead, making his delicate skin florid from the paroxysms of despair and wanting. His hands had nowhere to go and grabbed at the air in impotent fists.

An unsought image of Peter at breakfast jumped into Dainig's mind. Thoroughly happy, the child had bounced about the playroom, flinging himself against Dainig, and experimenting with chanting, "I like you, Danny," then "I love you."

Dainig had to give Mattison and Cooper credit. They played Peter expertly. Their years of erasing childrens' emotions were now turned into tools for stimulating Peter's. Dainig provided them with the keys to Peter's moods, but they triggered the emotions. And they never failed.

But, is it right? Since Peter has the capacity to be happy, is it right for us to torment him into unhappiness? Dainig twitched at the intrusion. What had engendered that question?

He knew without asking a second time. It came from his own anxiety, the anxiety that had been dogging him for weeks. It came from a job that demanded twelve hours a day. It came from too much time spent with Peter.

He deliberately set his conscious mind to a self-lecture. "Peter's entire reason for being alive is to perform Emotion. There is no right and no wrong to it. Even if there might be, it's Peter's life and Peter's problem. I don't care one way or the other."

But the lecture was little help, because it shouldn't have been necessary in the first place. These odd attacks were cropping up too frequently. He knew he needed some time to himself, but taking a leave was impossible. Since Peter enjoyed no vacations, neither did his Companion.

Dainig retreated by turning his back to the Viewing wall. He would see Peter in the flesh all too soon. He would even have to hold that quivering, little body in his arms while he somehow dammed up Peter's emotions during the time between this Viewing and the next.

He closed his ears to Peter's cries and gave his attention to the audience, satisfied from their expressions that they were receiving what they deserved, a good performance.

CHAPTER TWO

Three days had elapsed. As Dainig entered the child's three-room complex by way of the concealed door in the bath, he balanced Peter's breakfast tray gingerly. He set the tray on a table in the tiny bedroom, then switched on the lights. Peter was a little hump under the covers, lying deathly still in a pretense of sleep so he could play his favorite game of "Fooling Danny."

Dainig played along. "Morning, Peter! Let's have those sleepy eyes open before I count to three. One—two—"

Peter heaved himself upright, his pale hair making a fringe over his brown eyes, his mouth wide in a triumphant grin. "I wasn't even asleep! I fooled you again, Danny!"

To sustain their running joke, Dainig plopped on the bed and wrestled the boy around until Peter squealed, then shooed him into the bathroom for his morning scrubbing, all the while marvelling at the boy's thin body and short stature. A boy of eight should be bigger than this. But Peter's body remained as backward and limited as his brain. He looked like a particularly winsome six year old.

When he was at last dressed in a bright red coverall, Peter swooped down on the breakfast tray and lifted the metal covers, yelping, "Eggs! Danny, did you see I got eggs?"

"I did. And you'd better eat them fast, or I'll do it, myself. I don't taste real eggs very often."

Peter was willing, and Dainig felt relieved. The child had suffered through two days of Crying Viewings now, and these always robbed his frail body of the strength it needed. But Peter ate quickly this morning, chattering as he always did when his world was good. "Danny's" presence seemed to be the necessary ingredient.

"My Mama used to make food like this in the kitchen. Do you have a kitchen?" Peter asked him. "I had one. I even had a window. In that other place I was. I could look out and see the street and all the people. Have you ever seen the street, Danny?"

"I have."

"Is it still there? I think maybe it went away. I can't see it, so it went away. It died, just like my fish, and I can't see it anymore."

"Whatever you say, Peter. Now, if you're through eating, let's go to the playroom and find some of your toys."

He trailed after the boy's awkward run, satisfied to see it. The last two days of calming Peter's tears had worn on him. Today, since the child was happy, he might not have to do it again.

The playroom was brightly decorated with brown carpet, orange floor-pillows, and yellow walls. Even the front "wall-that-wasn't-a-wall" appeared to be yellow, although devoid of any pictures or ornaments. Peter's toys were piled neatly in their box, and the two chairs and low table were dusted and gleaming.

The first half of the two-hour play period passed normally. Peter tossed his big, soft ball, then drew pictures of his fish and tried to color them. He couldn't stay inside the lines and as his enthusiasm ebbed, he began to peer at Dainig, wanting to say something but backing off.

"What's wrong?" Dainig asked when one of the brown stares had lasted

an uncomfortably long time. "You can tell me."

Peter sighed. "It's just—I like you, Danny. Mostly, I feel lonely, but when you come, it's all right, and I love you. Can't you be here with me more? I don't like to be alone."

"I'm here six hours every day, and you have Coop and Matty, too."

"I don't like Coop and Matty. Sometimes they're mean. My Mama never left me all alone. We looked out the window. And then Daddy came, and we played."

"Things have changed, Peter. I've told you before."

"I know. I'm a special boy, now. You said so, but I don't see why."

Dainig had explained it a hundred times, but did so again, aware that Peter never understood half of what he said. "You're special because you're different from everyone else. You have the ability to *feel* things, Peter. You have emotions, and no one else has those. You can laugh and cry and love."

"That's easy, that's not special," Peter objected. "You can do it, too. You can laugh, too, can't you, Danny?"

"Have you ever seen me do it?"

Peter thought for a long moment. "No. But you could if you wanted to."

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"No, Peter. I can't. Not on my own. I have to take drugs to bring it on, and then I know that the drugs are causing it, so it's not real. You cry and feel unhappy without drugs. That's why you're special."

"I don't like to cry," Peter said, soberly. "I'd rather laugh."

"Of course. But you have to do both in order to demonstrate full human emotion."

Peter didn't understand the large words, but shrugged his inability aside. "Is love one of those things? I love a lot. I love you, and Mama and Daddy. Only—I never see them anymore, and..."

Dainig moved fast. The boy was heading toward tears, and that kind of

emotion would be wasted without a Viewing audience. "Don't think about your parents if it makes you unhappy. Think about something nice."

"I don't *have* anything nice. I can't remember what bad things I did to make Mama stop loving me." His brown eyes were moistening.

"Stop it!" Dainig commanded. "She would love you if she could, but I've told you over and over again why she can't. And why your Daddy can't. They're dead. Like your goldfish is dead."

That statement proved to be a mistake. Peter's tears were more imminent than ever. Dainig grabbed the first thing he could bring to mind. "How would you like to have another goldfish?"

Peter immediately turned eager. "Could I? Is there another fish?"

"Lots of them. I'll see if Matty and Coop will let you have one."

"Will you really ask them, Danny? I love my fish. Will you? So they'll quit being mean to me every day?"

Dainig stared at him, weighing the good of it, then made up his mind. "I promise, little boy. I'll ask them."

Peter rushed against his legs and clung like a two-pronged magnet. "Will you *make* them do it? For me?"

"I'll give it everything I've got in me, Peter. I'll even argue for you."

There was no way to battle the child's excitement, so Dainig rolled with it, lifting him off his feet to twirl him in a circle, then plopping him on the floor where he tickled the boy until Peter giggled. As Peter quickly wore himself out, Dainig switched the child's mind to a new subject. "That's enough noise for now. Let's play with your Jack-in-the-box. I'll bet you can't tell when it's going to pop up."

* * *

When his two hours with Peter ticked out, Dainig distracted the child and effected his own exit through the concealed door in the bathroom. He started down the corridor to give his morning report to the doctors, tensed for a possible argument.

He didn't dare let it show. The doctors had to believe that everything was normal—for more than one reason. His position as Peter's Companion was important to him but there was another motive. One he failed to pin down. One that warned "*Don't try.*"

Both doctors were waiting in Cooper's office, Cooper's fifty years visible on his empty face, his gray hair lending him a badge of experience. Clara Mattison was dressed in her usual somber-gray coverall. She was a plumpish woman who, in an earlier time, might have been considered "matronly," but there was nothing of warmth in Peter's Matty; only aloof science and devotion to her work.

At the first sight of Dainig, she said accusingly, "You are five minutes late, Dainig. We expect you to wait for *us*, not the other way around."

"Yes, Dr. Mattison. I'm sorry."

"Is something wrong with Peter?" Cooper asked, anxiously.

"Peter is fine. A bit tired, but fine. He's actually quite happy this morning, except," Dainig grabbed his chance, "except for the fact that I think he's too lonely."

"That's preposterous," Dr. Cooper said. "You're with him six hours a day."

"A day is a great deal longer than six hours, sir. He was never left alone before he came here. He had his parents, and a pet goldfish."

"This bothers you, does it?" Mattison interrupted before he had reached his purpose in bringing it up.

He dodged. "I only wondered if loneliness couldn't be bad for his emotional health. It might deaden him."

"You have it entirely backwards," Cooper said curtly. Neither of them were patient teachers. "He is quiescent when he's alone. That makes his response more vigorous when we approach him before the Viewings."

"But he's such a *little* boy, sir. Mentally, I mean. Shouldn't even a normal child have more than six hours?"

"You're saying we should pamper him," Dr. Mattison snorted. "By no means. It is our responsibility to care *for* him, not about him. We see to his physical needs, and that is all. I'm amazed that you require a lesson in this, Dainig. Peter is deliberately kept lonely so he will react when we assault him with kindness or abuse. Our presence focuses his attention and shocks him. Why do you think you are excluded from the Viewing warm-ups? It's simply because, as his Companion, you cannot elicit the shock-response we force out of him."

Her gaze fastened on him harshly; too harshly to be the result of what he had said. She harbored some hidden reason. He didn't duel with Dr. Mattison. She was too avid, too sharp. The two of them had never struck an easy relationship. He always edged around her by feigning deference, and he followed that route now.

"Of course," he said. "I'm sorry I showed my ignorance."

"Nonsense," Cooper stated. "How else can you learn, young man? But get on with your report. You were telling us about Peter's mood."

Dainig cleared his throat and plunged in again, determined to lead them his way. "He's lonely, as I said, but totally contented otherwise. The two factors offer us a good way into him. If we fill that loneliness for the moment, we can produce a fine performance. I propose we give him a goldfish like the one he owned at home. He had only three things in the world to call his own, and the goldfish was one of them. He held it as dearly as he did his parents."

"You're advising us to turn him Happy again?" The edge on Mattison's voice didn't match her placid face. "After we've worked so hard to set him crying?"

"We've shown him crying for two days," Dainig pointed out.

"Not nearly long enough," Cooper sided with Mattison. "The audiences aren't yet sated."

"Is there *no* opportunity to keep him in the depressed state?" Mattison demanded.

"I can only report what I see. He has overcome his grief for the moment. You know how suddenly his moods change." He threw in an

extra stumbling block, remembering his promise to Peter. "Getting him to cry today would mean a lengthy warm-up. On the other hand, if we go *with* his mood, he'll come back to his parents as a matter of course. He always does."

Cooper fell silent, weighing the extra time against the result. Dainig sensed victory.

Mattison cast her empty gaze on Cooper and insisted, "Happiness will not do! The audience deserves its full measure, Doctor. I know how you dislike using pain to force tears, since it reveals 'reaction' and not emotion, but I insist on *sobs* out of that Defective while he still has water enough in him to cry."

"You're right. He owes the people a good performance," Cooper parroted his partner.

"But he was so contented this morning." Dainig's voice gave out as he felt the clutch of Mattison's eyes. She stared at him without blinking, probing deep.

"What is it that you want from him, Dainig?" she asked. "If Peter does not have this special use in the world, then he has *none*. He is defective. His only alternative to performing is destruction. That will come soon enough when he outgrows our manipulation. So, what is it you want? His death?"

"Hardly, Dr. Mattison. I'd be out of a job. But why does he have to continue to cry right now? We'll have him back to it soon enough. Why can't he enjoy—? I told you he's lost weight. Can't we leave him alone for a few days?"

Her eyes slitted. "What sort of question was that, Dainig? It verges on concern for the boy."

Dainig's very skin contracted. "No! Of course not! It..." He nailed for an excuse. "It was actually selfish. When Peter cries, it's harder on me. I'm particularly tired right now." He was squirming, and she knew it. Her stare wouldn't relent, so he admitted his discomfort, trying to guide her away from the truth. "I certainly didn't intend to put myself under fire."

"I'm not saying anything as drastic as that. Yet. I'm simply checking on

you, Dainig. Your Sensitivity Score is low or you wouldn't be a Companion in the first place. I have explained this before. It requires a low score to bestow the special insight needed in your job—an insight the boy senses and fantasizes into believing that you can 'feel' right along with him."

"I'm aware of that," Dainig sighed. "Then you also have to consider that you spend six hours every day with raw emotion, and that can have insidious effects on a man. Even—pray not—Re-Emergence. Therefore, it is my duty to keep a sharp eye. You have to admit that your behavior is aberrant this morning. You were late, you brought up that strange notion of loneliness, and you have an overall attitude of—"

"Weariness," Dainig hurried to defend himself. "I just confessed to being tired. I'll try to correct it."

"We have no time to fret about Dainig," Cooper inserted. "There's a Viewing schedule to be met." He sighed oddly, and looked to Dr. Mattison. "The last suggestion was pain, so it's only a matter of what kind, and what instrument."

With the threat of pain rushing at Peter, Dainig forced his brain to find a solution—for both of them. "I don't want to see that," he opposed the doctors. "And I'm not being out of order. I just have a better idea. The goldfish can be used two ways, remember. *For* Peter, or *against* him. All you need to do is remind him of how much he loved his pet, and that it was his only friend. He really thought it was, you know. Then, when you have him deep inside that warm memory, hit him with the fact that he'll never see it again. He'll give us our performance."

Mattison's lips fairly smacked at the notion. "Fine! We will work in that direction then, Dr. Cooper. And, Dainig. Be prepared to earn your allotment today, because it is going to be a Crying session, whether you agree or not."

"Whatever is best for the audience," he said, docilely. "I really don't disagree, you know."

He left the office. There was nothing more he dared to say. He was defenseless against her ferreting brain. She had abruptly changed from his watchdog into a terrier, holding and shaking him to uncover any possible flaw. His anxiety said he might have such a flaw.

As he joined the crowd of students in the halls, he spotted the attractive, orange-clad figure of Laine Todd in the mob coming toward him. She noticed him, too, and was about to wave when he swerved sideways down a side corridor, rudely avoiding her. She had become his shadow lately, popping up here and there for small talk. But she was a shadow he avoided, because she was also a Re-Conditioner, and he had nothing to do with her kind. Nevertheless, she hovered at the fringes of his life, intruding on him. Yet today the sight of her accomplished something for him. It convinced him that the whole idea of endangering himself because a child was lonely reeked of foolishness. He had no foundation for thinking he understood how Peter felt when he couldn't "feel" anything himself.

* * *

Peter cried about the goldfish for two days. More of the same was planned for the third. Dainig came close to damning the boy for letting the doctors hack him to pieces over a bowl of water with a scaly carp inside it. So Peter "loved" his fish! Just what was Love? Dainig didn't know and had no inclination to find out. All he could see was that this new day promised him no relief.

So when his former classmate, Sam Richmond, collared him before Peter's breakfast, he surrendered his free hour and let Rich lead him off toward the Anti-Emotion Conditioning Clinic. He was sure it would be a futile trip, but he needed something to fill his mind besides the anxiety that threatened to consume him. Worst of all was that the anxiety had no specific focus. Since he couldn't find its cause, he had to escape it.

The corridor swarmed with students heading for early classes, and the bump of their bodies was an unexpected annoyance. Normally, he didn't notice it as anything more than a part of everyday living. Displeased by the commotion, he edged closer to Richmond, shouting to be heard over the noise. "I don't think I should take time for this after all, Rich. It sounded good, but I need my hour of quiet in the morning."

"No arguments, friend," Richmond replied. "You're *gray* this morning, Dainig, and I think you need the Clinic's stimulation. I'm going to see that you get it. How long has it been since you've stopped in to observe?"

"Too long," Dainig admitted. "I don't have time. Work comes first." He wanted no discussion of his down-mood, of his intensely personal

problems. They were his secret, although it seemed that other people were beginning to notice. "Being Peter's Companion eats up my days."

"Not this one." Richmond walked on, stubborn and determined. "I have a hand in this one, friend."

Dainig wished the man would stop using that term. They had been competitors once, but never friends.

They reached the bank of elevators that blinked with Up and Down lights. At this time of day, almost all of them were Express-Up, since the classrooms were located on the upper floors. When one finally blinked Down, and gaped open, they were the only two who entered.

"We're out of the mob, at least," Dainig said gratefully.

"You don't like crowds anymore? It's only been a few weeks since I've seen you, but you make it seem like a year! I can't anticipate any of your reactions."

"I have the same trouble with you," Dainig confessed as the car started its slow trip. "Since I dropped classes to take over with Peter, I don't even know how to make conversation with you. How far along are you in your classwork, anyway?"

"Practically finished. I've started in the Clinic, itself. Working with the children."

"You're a Technician's Aide already?"

"If you'd keep in touch, you'd realize that's normal progression. I didn't accelerate or anything. I'm only an Aide, but it's close to the real thing, so I'll catch you up on what I'm doing. My case right now is Affection and Love removal in a four-year-old girl. She's in the middle of her course, so she's still being motivated with her favorite doll. By the time she left yesterday, she didn't even want to *touch* that doll. After today's session, she won't care if we tear it to pieces. And it used to be her prized possession."

"You'll start on animate things next, I suppose."

"Probably tomorrow. She has a puppy, so we'll use that. Plus her

parents, naturally. She won't have any Affection left in her by the end of the month."

"You've gone so far. I envy you, Rich. My training was cut off so abruptly."

"Don't envy me until you've tried it for yourself. I'm not all that satisfied, anymore."

The final stop of the elevator spared Dainig from delving into that statement. Richmond strode forward and he tagged along behind, through the empty hallway.

Richmond swiveled to stare back at him. "I tell you, Dainig, you're in bad condition. Are you coming to the Clinic, or aren't you?"

"Maybe it...." Dainig backed off.

"I say you *are*," Richmond was suddenly authoritative. "If you'll make the effort to move your feet."

Dainig increased his pace and joined him, wondering where Richmond had learned this self-confidence. Or had Rich always been this way? Had he, himself, once been Richmond's match? If so, something had happened to him.

One of the Clinic doors loomed beside them, marked "Age Four." Richmond touched the handle and glanced over his shoulder to ask, "Ready?" He scowled. "Why the look of apprehension?"

"You're misreading exhaustion-caused anxiety."

"Well, here's your remedy." Richmond opened the door a crack. "The best cure for exhaustion is stimulation. You're going to use this hour to get back into your career and change some of this gray-mood into pride in yourself."

Dainig nodded dully. "You sound like Doctor Cooper."

"Someday I may *be* Doctor Cooper." With that coded remark, Richmond led the way inside.

* * *

The vast room was a maze of wide aisles spaced between double rows of cubicles. It was alive with sound. Four-year-old children sat in the cubicles, one to a unit, their heads fitted with electrode-caps containing brain-wave sensors, their small bodies dripping wires measuring heartbeat, blood pressure, skin temperature and respiration.

Some were viewing full-color pictures that flashed on screens in front of them—pictures of their parents, their siblings, their homes. Others faced low tables that held objects; sometimes a doll, sometimes a stuffed toy, and sometimes a pet animal—any especially loved or feared object that was part of their lives.

Technicians strode up and down the aisles, checking the Read-Out rectangles beside each cubicle and replacing an object here and there. Sometimes a technician halted to deliberately tempt a child to reach for a doll or react to a picture. They were the mobile, skilled hands of the Monitoring Computer. The Machine itself was responsible for the constant sound in the room.

It was a sound composed of gasps, of startled cries, of brief pain, and often of wails for "Mama," as the Computer sent its measured sonic and electric shocks into the small bodies, washing them clean of Affection, Hatred, Anger, and Love. A significant change in brain waves, a rise in pulse rate—any giveaway sign of emotion—was answered by shock. Gradually the child learned to curb oncoming emotions and eradicate them from his soul.

If the child didn't learn, the lessons went on, their frequency increased. Emotion was shock-conditioned out of them, as it must be, to insure their survival in a world that otherwise could produce only nervous collapse. None of the AEC process was painful to the point of actual suffering. It was based on Fear; one emotion the child could keep forever.

Dainig paced beside Richmond and watched the children undergo the procedure, but he failed to achieve the change of mental direction he had come to find, AEC's purpose was wholly humanitarian, and he appreciated that fact. He even experienced a renewed sense of awe at its operation. It was so delicate and precise that it could turn out a child capable of feeling nothing except Anxiety, Pride, Irritation, and Fear—the four emotions necessary to keep a citizen safe, on his toes, and productive.

Yet, today, his mind obstinately refused to focus on the good. Instead, it

made him sorely aware that every one of these children carried the potential of Peter, minus Peter's crippled IQ, of course. Before they began their sessions, they had all been laughing, crying, smiling human beings. They never would be again.

That's all for their own good, he reminded himself, wondering why he thought about it at all. He didn't *care* that they were losing their inborn abilities. He didn't have it in him to care. Not since he himself had passed this way when he was four years old.

Without warning, Richmond stopped walking. He stood still in the aisle, sweeping his gaze slowly back and forth.

From this particular spot, they could see into four cubicles at once, watch four children doing four entirely different things, see them jerk with the shocks. The sight affected Rich in some odd way.

When he finally spoke, his voice was confidential. "We both have problems, Dainig. Mine is disenchantment. I don't find what I need here, anymore. Since I actually started working, I've come to think the Technicians are nothing but cogs in the Machine and *it* runs the Clinic. They're only secondary memory-tapes, or scanners to check the Read-Outs. I want to be more active. To take more pride in what I do."

Dainig stared at him with as much amazement as he could ever muster. "How? You're talking impossibilities. The AEC method is locked-in to a tested procedure. A Technician can only do limited—"

"I mean Re-Conditioning."

Dainig stiffened. He didn't like that word. "You're not serious."

"Entirely. Re-Conditioning is active. You set the gauges yourself and measure out the pain yourself. All the Machine does is indicate when it's needed. The roles are reversed."

Dainig stepped a pace away from him. "I don't believe this! You could never consciously inflict that kind of pain. The stories I've heard about the Re-Conditioning Labs—uh-uh."

"The stories are true. I've spent time there observing, so I know from experience. You don't hear gasps coming from those cells. You hear agony!

It's severe, and it's fast, and it's active, and the more I see of it, the less I'm fulfilled by this place. Once I saw the possibilities of actually doing the work, sending the shocks... I"

"How far has this gone with you?"

"I've filed a tentative application for transfer."

Dainig walked on down the aisle. "You're talking about sadism. You've gotten your values confused."

"It is not sadism! Putting a Re-Emerger on the right track is a higher form of humaneness than what is going on around us right now."

"But it's done so brutally. Brainwashing. Pain!"

"Naturally it's brutal. You can't handle an adult the way you do a child. It's painful, but fast. And the faster the better. You'd understand that if you'd ever seen the hell-ridden people waiting in those cells for their next treatment. It would only be sadism if you extended their condition for months. Mankind cannot live with emotion."

"All right, Rich, I can't argue. I've never gone near the Lab. But, I'd think it over very hard, if I were you."

"I've done just that. I think I've already made up my mind. Anyway, I'm not asking for your approval since I didn't expect it. I remember the fool you made of yourself a couple years ago when you were so hot for Laine Todd and then dropped her the minute you heard she was a Re-Conditioner. You simply don't like the breed."

They had come to the far wall of the vast room, and Richmond hushed until they were outside. Then he switched the topic entirely. He peered at Dainig with bright, probing eyes and said, "You don't look any better for your trip through the Clinic. Didn't it do you any good?"

"Not when you throw plans like training to be a Re-Conditioner at me."

"My ears say that's only an excuse, friend. There's something on your mind. So, how about a cup of coffee and a talk?"

"I don't have time. Peter needs his breakfast."

"Afterwards, then. I'm determined to resurrect the Dainig I used to know, and I won't listen to excuses. In fact, if I hear any, I'm going to leap to some strange conclusions."

"What do you mean by that?" Dainig jerked with anxiety.

"Meet me later and find out. If you need to talk, I have a willing ear. If you need to be talked *to*, I have the words. Are you going to say 'yes'? Or do I start digging for those conclusions?"

Dainig's anxiety unaccountably churned into fear. Richmond meant everything he was saying. Dainig was certain he shouldn't tarry with the man.

"There's no way," he insisted. "I go straight to Cooper and Mattison when I leave Peter."

"That shuts me out, then. Do it when you can, though, Dainig. You need it. Oh, before I forget, thanks for this last week of Viewings. Is he going to cry again today?"

"You, too?" Dainig sighed. "I'm doing everything I can to re-schedule some Happy Viewings. They make less work for me. I'd just as soon have him happy all the time."

"That would defeat his purpose. He has to give people what they need. Don't push too hard to re-schedule him, friend."

With that, Richmond strode away, leaving Dainig with the odd sensation of being totally alone. Was he the *only* one, then?

He forced his feet toward the kitchen where Peter's meals were prepared, reprimanding himself for being out of step. What Richmond said was not callous. It was true.

By the time he picked up Peter's tray, he believed it.

CHAPTER THREE

The next morning, Dainig was again standing beside an audience, waiting to signal the start of the Viewing. He wasn't uneasy about this one, for it was to be Happy. He had bought a goldfish and persuaded the

doctors to give it to Peter, promising them a full show of *Joy* in return. Their agreement carried a future barb, however. Mattison cleverly saw the fish as something to give and then take away, over and over again, perpetuating shows of delight and of grief.

The Viewing plan was to keep Peter in his bedroom, place the fishbowl on the playroom table, then send the child in alone. Dainig would signal at the first sound of Peter's awkward footsteps and let the audience watch him discover the fish and savor every moment of his reaction.

His earphones already alive, Dainig heard Cooper say, "Go along and play now, boy," and heard Peter's obedient reply, followed by the tap of his feet. He arced his hand down in the signal and fastened his eyes on the "melting" wall. This was one Viewing he intended to witness from start to finish.

Abruptly, Peter was there before him, headed in his perpetual path to the toybox. The fishbowl rested on the table where he was sure to spot it, the carp glinting in spurts and darts of lacey fin and sun-gold body. Dainig held his breath, waiting for the boy to see.

Halfway to the toybox, he stopped dead, turned full around, and stared at the thing on the table. In a hushed moment of still-life, the sight registered in his slow brain, then his face broke apart in recognition and he thrust out his hands, shouting, "My fish! You came back! My fish!"

Stretching out his arms, he rushed to the table and fell to his knees, touching the bowl with a two-handed caress, gently, his nose up against the glass as he peered at the bit of gold in the water. "You came back to me," he cooed in a strange, baby-voice. "I love you! I miss you!"

The joy was too much to contain. He scrambled to his feet and jumped up and down, hollering, "You aren't dead, are you? Mama and Daddy aren't dead, are they? They're only lost, too. I love you, fish! We can be together and—"

He broke off, the expression of joy vanishing from his face, the delight jolted into a bewildered stare.

"Who?" he whispered, backing away. Then he darted for the fishbowl and circled it in his arms, sheltering it defensively while he stared at the wall as though it threatened him.

Something was wrong! The boy was terrified! Dainig jerked off his earphones and dashed headlong out of the auditorium and around to the door in Peter's bath. When he reached the playroom, the crisis was explained in one glance.

The yellow wall was transparent from Peter's side, too! He could see the audience, row upon row of faces lined up like ominous blobs with eyes glaring out of them.

"Clear the auditorium!" Dainig shouted. "There's been a power failure!" He knelt and clutched Peter, trying to turn him away from the sight.

The people outside would hardly move. Ordered, and even prodded, they only edged away and Peter wouldn't stop watching them, all the while protecting his fish.

"Get out of the auditorium!" Dainig shouted again. "*He can see you.* Hurry!"

His anxiety almost equalled a drug-emotion as he felt Peter tremble in his arms. He had to take command. Peter must not be allowed to witness any more of this.

He scooped the boy up, fishbowl and all, and carried him into the bedroom where he continued to hold him. Peter was confused and shaking, his face as blank as the rest of humanity's.

At last, Cooper and Mattison arrived. Cooper barged into the playroom, berating the engineers, demanding immediate restoration of the wall, and threatening dismissals right and left.

Mattison was busy with a little bag she had brought with her. She took out a syringe, filled it with fluid, and aimed it at Peter's trembling arm. "A sedative," she said, as the drug stung its way through the child's skin. "Let me get the fishbowl away from him before he drops it and makes a mess."

Her efforts were fruitless as Peter clung to the bowl with a strength that surprised Dainig. But the boy's fingers slowly grew lax, and Mattison lifted the bowl away.

"Put him on the bed," she ordered. "He's too heavy to hold."

Dainig obeyed. He hadn't noticed whether Peter was heavy or not. Dainig laid him down, his white-blond head on the pillow, then sat beside him, letting Peter cling to him until the boy gave that up and fell into a fitful sleep.

"Doctor Cooper?" Mattison called. "What is the situation?"

Cooper came in, red-faced from shouting, but emotionless. "Under control. The wall is back to normal, but there are going to be lots of changes in personnel around here."

Dainig heard it all, but kept on staring at Peter's face, wondering what the boy had felt when his world suddenly opened into a nightmare. He had seen the bewilderment on his face, and had felt the shudders that racked Peter's body. But, how had it actually *felt*?

Mattison interrupted his thoughts. "Stay with the boy until he wakes up, Dainig. He won't sleep long. It's up to you to think of a way to get his mind off this so he will forget it by this afternoon's Viewing. I don't care what you tell him. Just do it."

"He won't forget that fast, Dr. Mattison. It was too traumatic. He'll never be ready by this afternoon."

She met him with her cold eyes. "If you prove to be right, we will forego the last two Viewings for today. But he has to begin again tomorrow. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Doctor. I'll do everything I can."

It was an hour before Peter roused. He didn't awaken slowly, but bolted straight up in the bed, his eyes flaring.

"Peter!" Dainig said sharply. "I'm here! Everything's all right." He wasn't sure how to calm the boy's agitation since he couldn't feel it for himself.

Peter slithered out the far side of the bed and raced for the playroom. "*Where are they?* Where is the window?"

"There is no window, Peter. You can see for yourself."

"Yes, there is! My fish came back and so did my window. I want to see out, Danny." He searched futilely along the wall. "Show me!"

"You've been asleep, Peter. You had a bad dream."

"No! I saw people. Just like I see from my window."

"*Saw* from your window," Dainig corrected for the hundredth time. "You don't have a window, anymore. Now, calm down, Peter. I don't want you all excited."

"I can't help it. The people are right outside and maybe my Mama and Daddy are there too!"

"Your mother and father are dead. I've told you that before. You understand what 'dead' means. You had a goldfish, and one morning it was dead. Remember?"

"It came *back*. My Mama and Daddy are out there, Danny, and I've got to look for them. I've got to see the street and find my Mama and Daddy. They're worried about me."

"They're dead, Peter. They can't worry about anything."

"They always worry. You show me, Danny, or I'll cry!" It was a solid threat. His eyes were already full of tears.

"Not now," Dainig said feebly.

"I will! And I'll never stop. I don't like this place, anymore. I'll cry and I'll never stop."

"Don't threaten me, Peter. No one can cry forever."

"Please, Danny!"

Sense and logic couldn't reach him. Peter was obsessed with the idea, and like the mental baby he was, would hold onto it until it faded from his unretentive brain. Dainig used everything he could muster. Nothing helped. When he realized that *he* was now searching for a non-existent window, he gave up. There was only one procedure to follow in such situations, so he followed it.

He told Peter, "I'm going to get your lunch. I don't want to hear another word about this, do you understand? When I come back, I expect you to be playing quietly, like a good boy. Then you'll eat. I'll see you soon."

Dainig left Peter still searching the wall. The only allies he had were time and Peter's feeble brain.

But when he returned, Peter was even more upset. The boy roamed the floor restlessly, pleaded and cried, and adamantly refused to eat. Dainig took the untouched tray with him to Cooper and Mattison to punctuate his demand that the rest of the day's Viewings be cancelled. For once they let him have his way. Tomorrow would be soon enough.

At supper, Peter refused his food, dissolving into a mass of tears and beggings, and it required an injection to make him sleep through the night. Dainig stayed by his bed, hoping for the boy's sake that the morning would bring a change.

It didn't. But the Viewings went off on schedule. In Mattison's opinion, this burst of emotion was a bonanza.

Dainig endured his time in the auditorium with his back to Peter's wall, concentrating on the audience. They quivered, drinking deep of Peter's hysteria. He had a notion that they watched the child in a state of near desperation, suddenly aware that they were witnessing a living human treasure in Peter and his soul-cries. Dainig didn't understand them any more than he understood himself, or the grating thoughts that shouted, *Is this right?*

* * *

As far back as the turn of the century it had become apparent that human beings with normal emotions could not survive the superfast pace of change and overcrowding. Neurosis and nervous breakdown were commonplace in everyone over the age of twenty-five. When it grew patently obvious that the only two alternatives left were nervous collapse or total apathy, the government scientists had moved swiftly, instigating Anti-Emotion Conditioning. If people couldn't survive with emotions, those emotions must be erased.

"*Why retain even a vestige of a useless, evil thing, even in the crippled intellect of a child like Peter?*" Dainig questioned. "To keep a link with our

Past," the textbooks said. "Emotion is an inborn human quality. Since we are human, we must not forget what emotions are."

* * *

Dainig doubted those quotations today, seeing Peter's purpose with new insight. A crippled child was used because people were afraid to risk a fully emotional adult. In other words, people were afraid of *themselves* as they were by nature.

He suddenly understood why the "watchers" left the Viewings filled with a sense of accomplishment. In spite of the necessity of AEC, they somehow sensed that they were only half alive. They *needed* Peter. Since they themselves couldn't feel, they needed to watch him feel.

Dainig stood in the auditorium peering into the faces in the audience, investigating his new insight. He needed to fill his mind with some degree of order and sense. The extra hours he had spent in the boy's company were getting the best of him. The effect of Peter's thundering emotion was overwhelming. Even though the child was sedated, in his mind Dainig could still hear his cries of, "I have to find my Mama and Daddy! Open the curtains. Let me see the street!"

* * *

The Doctors were obsessed, too—but with pride. These performances were stirring the world to comment. As yet another day swept by, the only part of Peter's state to rankle them was his refusal to eat.

Dainig stayed with Peter around the clock, seeing his body grow thinner and his eyes swell shut from crying. His throaty screams were hoarse, ugly sounds.

On the fourth day, Mattison threatened force-feeding. Dainig couldn't face helping with it, but had to agree, because he had no control over Peter. The child became a frenzied "creature" as exhaustion gained on him. Perhaps, Dainig thought, even death.

All the while, the public practised its emotional voyeurism. They saw Peter clawing against the wall, his hands reaching, pressing, scraping—as he searched for the window he couldn't find, his face contorted with dry sobs that no longer produced tears.

Dainig came up with one last idea, and unauthorized or not, acted on it, positive that Peter would die unless he obtained release from his hysteria.

He caught the child close in his arms and told him the whole truth about the Viewings, shouting to get it in over the boy's cries. His own *fear* was apparent as he talked on and on, waiting for Peter's reaction.

Peter started quieting down and eventually slipped to the floor where he sat deathly still, mulling over what he had heard. The new silence was overpowering.

He stayed that way for many minutes, but just as Dainig dared to be hopeful, a radically new idea roared out of the boy. He demanded to be let out! He now wanted not to have the window back, but to be released so he could search for his parents and be with the people on the street.

There was no restraining him. His new tack was worse than the old, since it added a wider dimension. Peter flew with it, and Dainig sat down, totally spent, letting the child's frenzy buffet him.

* * *

When the Doctors learned what Dainig had done, they called him in and pelted him with accusations of insubordination, stupidity, even with insinuations of personal deviation. He stood before them too defeated to worry about what they said, numb from the bombardment of Peter's emotions.

"I had to try," he said weakly. "He's going to die of this if something drastic isn't done. You two haven't succeeded, either."

"I suppose you're right in that," Cooper responded, "but you're adding up a shaky score, young man. From the look of you, I think you know it."

"Are you ill?" Mattison asked, her voice flat.

"Only from continuous anxiety. I'm experiencing it full force. But don't ask me to let someone else take over. If Peter's going to make it through this at all, he needs *me*."

"I wasn't going to suggest that. Nevertheless, give yourself some relief,

Dainig. I know you're already on Equilibria, but take a dose of Euphoria as well, and be happy for a few hours."

Dainig nodded in assent, knowing he wouldn't do it. Fake happiness wasn't going to buy him any relief. Nothing was. He was destined to watch Peter spread-eagled against that yellow wall, pounding on it, trying to shout it away, until the child's body grew too weak to hold him upright and dropped him to the floor.

With that mental image assaulting him, Dainig had a sudden, futile wish that he could *care*.

CHAPTER FOUR

By force of habit, Dainig plodded into the Center's cafeteria on the morning of the fifth day, collected a cup of strong tea and a sweet roll, and sat down at a secluded table. His mood was sour, and he wanted time alone. Time to build his courage toward the ordeal of Peter's force-fed breakfast. When he tried to eat his roll he choked on the first swallow and dumped the whole thing back onto his plate. The dry lump of it in his throat felt too much like a round, rubber tube.

He was slumped in his chair, brooding over the teacup, when a green-covered torso loomed into his vision and a too-loud voice assailed him. "I trust this is a *second* breakfast, friend."

Cursing silently, he straightened to acknowledge Richmond. "It's the only one, as a matter of fact. I can't face anything more."

"That's quite obvious." Richmond sat down, taking his welcome for granted. "You look worse than you did the other day. Didn't you ever shake that down-mood?"

"To hell with the down-mood, Rich! Can't you see I'm exhausted? Change places with me for a day and you'll know why."

"Edgy, too, I see," Richmond shook his head. "You're talking about Peter, of course. Well, you have nothing to fret about on that score, friend. He's giving some great performances."

"Sure, from your side of the screen. I see a different picture, and I see it

all the time, so if you don't mind, I'd rather not spend my one free hour talking about it."

"Sorry," Richmond wasn't sincere. "I think I know what you mean, though. What we're watching isn't normal Crying. It's *Hysteria*, right? And you look like you've been through it all the way with him. I labelled you gray the other day. Now I'd call you black! Is the pounding getting to you?"

"I can look after myself." Dainig took a sip of his too-hot tea to keep from speaking the words that bit his tongue. He was overly sensitive today, too aware of nuances. Richmond had an insinuating edge in his voice, but Dainig didn't want to probe the reasons behind it. "You're mistaking exhaustion for depression. Anxiety can be brought on by both, you know. You picked the wrong cause."

"No, friend. You've been dogging around under this mood far too long." As he spoke the next words, his tone changed to a clinical iciness that stole their innocence. "Be honest, Dainig. Is Peter's condition putting you off balance?"

"No!" Dainig's answer was too loud. It turned the other heads in the room. He continued more softly, "Although I can't think why it doesn't. That child is going to die if we can't pull him out of this, and no one else seems able to understand that fact. No one else knows him the way I do—his stamina, his..."

"I'm aware of your special position. But none of it should touch you enough to cause this erratic behavior. What's the real problem, friend? Your depression is starting to worry me. Are you positive that you're not...?"

"Not what?" Dainig glanced up quickly. "Finish your sentence."

"Forget it," Rich subsided. "Just be sure you search out the reason."

"There's no search necessary. It's exhaustion. Nerves."

"No chance that it's Peter, himself? After all, he hammers away with no relief. That could put the crunch on anybody, and when it comes to *you*—What is your Sensitivity Score, anyway, Dainig?"

An attack of trembling shuddered through Dainig, scaring him doubly because he couldn't account for it. Somehow Richmond had touched fire from his low-burning anxiety. "I'm a Two. Why?"

"Aren't you actually closer to a One?"

"You don't tell a friend that he's in a non-drug depression and then ask him a question like that! I'm not going into Re-Emergence, if that's what you're trying to say."

"Easy," Richmond soothed. "I only asked because I have some knowledge of the subject. If you notice symptoms, they're easier to straighten out when they first appear. Too many people stall around until they're forced into Re-Conditioning, the full, hard way."

Dainig was pinned on one word: Re-Conditioning. The physical pain and public disgrace of it was a terror that lurked in everyone who came out of AEC with a low Sensitivity Score. Because one day, through trauma, through an unexpected assault on their nervous system, they might again develop emotions and be imprisoned in the dark cells of the Lab to have those feelings wrenched out of them by force of agony.

He was pinned on the word but refused to flutter against it because it wasn't true of him. *His* ghost was unnamed. It wasn't called Re-Emergence.

He wanted no more to do with Richmond. The man was totally insensitive; a machete hacking him away, piece by piece. He snorted, "You and your Re-Conditioning! You're entering the work, so you're suddenly hunting down candidates." He faced the man, taking the offensive. "What is all of this, Richmond? Are you trying to undermine me? To edge me out and take over my job with Peter? You can't get it, you know. You were turned down before. Not enough insight, I think the report said."

"All right!" Richmond's pride was smarting. "But if *you* have so much, why don't you show sense enough to swallow a dose of Euphoria and get yourself above this thing?"

"I don't have time for games like that. I can't be on drugs when I'm with Peter. Especially not now!"

"Then, you intend to suffer through in this terrible state of mind?"

"Do you really *care*?" Dainig challenged. "You know you don't. You're incapable of it."

"And *glad* of the fact."

Dainig didn't acknowledge the knifing insinuation. He simply stood up. "I'm due back with Peter."

Richmond rose too. His hand came out to press hard into Dainig's arm. "Take my warning and do something about your depression, friend. It could be a sign of trouble. And, I've seen the Lab. I'd rather not walk in there and find your name on one of the cells some day. For God's sake, man, stay out of that place!"

Dainig met his blue eyes, aware that his own were stark.

* * *

He had barely returned to the hall when a woman called behind him, "Rick! Wait a minute, will you?"

He halted like an automaton, his own will too battered to do anything but give way to the desires of others. But when he saw who was descending on him, he was sorry. It was Laine Todd. After the bad moments he had just endured with Richmond, the last person he needed to see was a Re-Conditioner. To top it all, she approached too closely, stopping a bare two feet away, apparently intending this conversation to be private beyond necessity, since there was no one else in sight.

She was wearing yellow, her body rounded and vital, and when she tilted her head to look up into his face, her dark lashes cast echoing shadows on her cheeks, startling him with the insane recollection of their first meeting, several years ago. He had been instantly attracted to her then and, aware that it was mutual, had been eager to initiate a relationship between them, until he learned that she was a working Re-Conditioner. Nothing less than that awful fact could have changed his mind. The attraction was still as strong today, but her official title repelled him even more. He didn't want to linger in her company.

"I know you have to get to Peter, so I won't keep you long," she said softly. "But I want to give you some advice, Rick. If you'll let me. I overheard some of what Richmond was saying."

"I didn't see you anywhere." Dainig's too-quick interruption betrayed his edginess.

"You were engrossed and I only came in on the last of it. It's not my habit to eavesdrop, but you've seemed out of sorts lately. Richmond has a way of irritating everyone he meets, so I was interested to find out what he was telling you."

Small lines furrowed her forehead as she peered at him too intently for comfort. When he dropped his own gaze under the pressure of hers, she started to reach out a hand to him but drew it back short of contact. She suddenly stood straighter and taller. "I said I had some advice for you, Rick, and it's this. Don't let Richmond hound you into the ground. You're having difficulties with Peter right now that make you vulnerable to suggestion. See that you don't give in to his. Richmond is an amateur. I'm a professional, and I say you definitely *shouldn't* consider going to the Lab for tests of your stability."

"I never did!" Dainig's reaction was too strong, but when a Re-Conditioner talked about tests for Re-Conditioning, he wanted out!

"At least you haven't yet. Tests like those can lead to trouble, and you mustn't let Richmond's egotistical playacting misguide you. He has you at a disadvantage, and if his is the only voice you hear, you're apt to go his way."

"What I'd prefer is to go my *own* way." Dainig let loose with whatever came. "Rich was bad enough but now I've got someone pulling me in the other direction, too! Why? *You* can't possibly care what happens to me. Not when you're a Re-Conditioner. You and your kind are a cancer in this world!"

Laine backed off, startled by his blast.

"Yes!" he kept it up. "My irritation level *is* extremely high. Can you give me a bewildering set of decisions to make about *that!*" When she didn't respond, he used her silence by smothering it with words. "If you knew what I'm facing when I go upstairs. If you had any idea of what's going to happen to Peter..."

"I've heard," she answered, her tone so calm it underlined his as all the more absurd. "Dr. Cooper has resorted to force-feeding. It will be a

terrible experience, and you're certain Peter will die in spite of it, so all the horror will do nothing but prolong his torture."

Dainig's chest heaved out his breath—breath that cracked on the way. She did know. She had laid it out in quiet, simple words, baring all of his dread. At this moment, she was the only other creature in the world who understood. But the name on her coverall, labelling her a Re-Conditioner, made her anathema to him.

She caught the nicker of his eye toward her name tag and said, "I'm sorry I intruded. You were at least decent enough to hear me out. Once you've weathered what's about to happen upstairs, maybe you'll have a chance to consider what I've said. Just don't judge yourself too harshly right now, Rick. A lot is being demanded of you and you can't expect to dance your way through it."

She was already walking away when he raised one question against his better judgement. "Why not?" he whispered, instantly glad that she didn't hear because beneath that question lurked the others, too dangerous to voice: *I shouldn't be this badly depressed. Why can't I shake it? Why am I reacting differently than Mattison and Cooper? What makes me afraid all the time?*

* * *

The initial force-feeding was accomplished. Blessedly, Dainig wasn't asked to hold Peter down. Straps served that purpose, and with the help of two nurses, a medical doctor did the work. So that his presence wouldn't become associated in Peter's mind with the gruesome procedure, Dainig was ordered to remain outside. He stood in the hall, clenching his fists against his ears to stifle the screams and the sounds of gagging. At last, the medical team filed out.

None of this was going to save Peter. No one could force enough nourishment down him to sustain his life when hysteria, like the crush of prolonged pain, was eroding his strength away.

He went in to Peter and offered his physical presence, but turned himself off to the rabid flailing at the wall. Peter's fate wasn't actually of much importance to the world, and he had to face that fact. There was a six-year-old retarded girl in Europe already waiting to take his place. It would hurt Cooper and Mattison to have the limelight shift from them,

but it would be a hurt of pride, not of remorse.

Everyone else was weathering this trial as stoically as always, but for some reason, Peter's torture was translating itself into a menacing knot in Dainig. His only remedy was to take action. To *do* something. Peter's fit had to be broken. The child must have a breather—time to calm himself and come back to normal living.

* * *

He shuddered through the remainder of the day with its three Viewings and a second force-feeding, which Peter vomited twenty minutes later. Then, in the pre-dawn hours of the next morning, he made his move. Leaving the boy unattended, he managed a secret trip home, and sneaked back again.

Carrying a small case close to his body, he took care to move silently as he entered Peter's Complex. But caution wasn't necessary; the child still tossed in his drugged sleep, restless against the medication, but unconscious.

Dainig stood still in the soft light and looked down at Peter's ravaged face, sensing himself as a granite man gazing down on pure vulnerability. When he realized the granite was cracking, he shook himself loose.

He picked up the knife and fork from his own supper tray, which he had deliberately neglected to return to the kitchen, and walked into the play room. Everything he did in the next minutes must appear possible.

The yellow wall was a fragile thing. If attacked properly, it could be broken. There was never any danger of such an attack, since nothing heavy or sharp was left in the Complex where Peter might hurt himself with it. Tonight, something had been left; the utensils from the supper tray, and a pointed metal pole from a children's game that Dainig had brought on the pretext of trying to interest the boy in something new.

Using those three flimsy weapons, he attacked the wall at a height Peter could have reached by himself. He scraped and jabbed, not worried that it took a fair amount of strength. Peter's frenzy had already proved that it gave him abnormal bursts of power.

In ten minutes' time, he had clawed out the first jagged hole. The rest

was easy. He ripped at it with his fingers, then rammed the table against it, reminding himself that it only had to be squeezing space for a small, thin body.

When the size suited him, he wriggled through feet-first and crawled out into the auditorium. Groping in the dark, he opened the hallway door, left it ajar, and returned through Peter's bathroom. He wanted no re-entrance marks on the sides of the hole to give him away.

In the dim light, he bent over Peter and removed the damp, sweaty pajamas, careful not to disturb him enough to rouse him. Next, he opened the brown case and dressed the child in a coverall he had brought—blue, and cut in the fancier fashion of a girl.

The brown case was now empty, except for the final, most necessary item. The wig. It was dark brown, and long—a girl's hair style. He placed it on Peter's head, holding the boy still with one strong arm. When he straightened up, he was trembling. But fear had become familiar to him.

Thrusting his forearms under Peter's prone body, he whispered, "Come on, little boy. You're not going to die from the very quality that makes you so treasured. Danny's here. Just be quiet."

Peter didn't wake with the gentle handling, and Dainig lifted him into his arms. He grappled up the case and carried the boy out through the bathroom door, closing it securely behind him.

CHAPTER FIVE

He took Peter to the apartment of one of his present sex-partners. She had chosen this particular time to take her vacation away from the city. With the child tucked safely into her bed, Dainig spent the rest of the night pacing the floor, denying himself the release offered by the vial of Euphoria tablets in the cupboard. It was crucial that he keep a close watch.

At sunrise, Peter started to awaken, and Dainig administered another dose of sedative to keep the boy asleep until there was time to explain things and introduce him to his new surroundings. Peter could make good use of the added rest anyway. There would be no Viewings for him to perform today.

Dainig left for the Center early, expecting to sound the alarm and invent fast excuses for his absence during the night. But there was already a crowd around the building. When he shoved through it, claiming priority, he found the Center's halls teeming with people who should have been at their desks. Someone shouted, "Peter's gone! Cooper wants you in Peter's Complex immediately!"

Cooper had been there before him then. Gulping back a new burst of fear, he made the dash, his face registering disbelief for everyone to see. When he entered Peter's rooms he pretended a thorough inspection of the broken wall, stalling the curses he was sure Cooper would lash at him. But Cooper only touched his arm and led him silently to his own office where Dr. Mattison waited.

"This is totally impossible," Cooper stated flatly. He would have been angry if he'd been able to experience anger. "The boy was sedated."

"Dainig reported he was restless for the last few nights in spite of the drug," Mattison said.

"Very restless," Dainig underlined the important point.

"I was always afraid he was going to wake up and begin screaming again."

"And you weren't with him last night." Cooper said it as a point of information, not a question.

"No, sir. He hadn't managed to shake off the sedative before, so I took Doctor Mattison's advice and spent the night with a Euphoria-drug."

"Looking at you, I can't see that it did much good," Mattison pointed out.

"Not in light of *this*!" Dainig methodically followed his plan. "He must have been completely wild to break through that wall. I have to take the blame. I was in such a hurry to get to the happy-drug that I left my supper tray behind. That must be what he used. My knife and fork."

"And the pole-toy you gave him," Cooper said.

"So, it's my fault from start to finish. But, where could he be? He's

bound to be terrified outside. He's never *been* outside. Why hasn't someone spotted him? Everyone knows his face!"

"Calm yourself," Mattison told him. "There is a general search in progress, and he'll be found. He can't have gone far. Although, who knows when he escaped?"

Dainig stood up, determined. "I'll go out and hunt, too."

"That's foolishness."

"But I caused it! Out of selfishness. Out of trying to steal a few hours of fake happiness while he was going through..."

"Enough!" Mattison commanded. "At any other time, I would agree, but looking at you... You're a shambles, Dainig. Your appearance is nearly as deteriorated as Peter's. We'll leave the summing up until after he is found. The blame has to be placed, but there were more factors in this situation than your stupidities of last night."

Dainig turned away, pretending humility and gratitude for her understanding. He meant neither one. He had counted on her cold, efficient mind to see all sides of the matter. "What do you want me to do, then?" he murmured.

"Go home," Cooper ordered. "Sleep. You're not needed until Peter is back, so you'd best use the time to pull yourself into some semblance of shape."

"I don't think I have the right to rest."

"You do as you are told, Dainig," Mattison spoke sharply. "When you have earned your own authority, then you can use it."

"Whatever you say, Doctor Mattison."

* * *

When Peter showed the barest sign of awakening, Dainig roused him deliberately. He wanted some of the sedative left in the boy's system when he opened his eyes to the new apartment. He told Peter the whole story, holding fast to the boy's hand in case the truth was too frightening. Peter

accepted it without a second's doubt. He could see for himself that the bedroom was different, and he had no strength to make a fuss, anyway.

When Dainig finished, Peter pointed to the side wall. "Is that really a window then? Do you mean that?"

"I do."

"Will all those people be outside it? Looking at me like you said?"

"No. This is a real window—like you had when you lived with your Mama and Daddy."

"And no one can look at me? And Matty and Coop can't be mean to me?" Suddenly, his arms were around Dainig's neck in a tight hug. "You let me out, Danny! I love you for letting me out."

"Thank you, Peter." Dainig returned the hug as he had learned to do, by acting it out.

"Can I open the curtains so I can see?"

"It's afternoon outside, and the light would hurt your eyes. You've been crying for so long that—"

"*Please* let me look," Peter interrupted. "To be sure the faces aren't there. Please!"

Dainig had to give in. "All right, but just for a minute. Then I want you to rest, eat some soup, and rest some more. You have plenty of time, Peter. All the time you need to recover. I only ask that you do exactly as I say, so I can give you that time."

With evening, and two bowls of vitamin-loaded broth inside Peter, Dainig administered another injection and put him to bed. He didn't like to leave him alone, but there was no choice. Peter needed several days to completely shake off the hysteria and be manageable. Until that time, Dainig had to be partially available at his own apartment to intercept calls from the Center.

He pre-set the apartment's communicator to link with his own home number and taught Peter how to press the one button necessary to reach

him in an emergency. That was all he could do for the present. As he left, he wished that the door wasn't operated by a panic-lock that could always be opened from the inside. But he trusted Peter, certain the boy would never try to open it. Peter was satisfied with the window, and had never opened a door for himself.

Once at home, Dainig called Dr. Cooper, pretending to be still anxiety-ridden over Peter's absence. Cooper only repeated his admonition to get himself in proper shape for Peter's return.

One day passed. Peter gazed out the window in fascinated silence, gaining strength as he lived in a state of emotional balance with no forced ups and downs. He was simply happy. Dainig saw it and envied him.

"You *do* have a special power," Dainig told him over lunch on the third day. "You've gone from despair to contentment so fast it's unbelievable. Maybe resilience is part of being able to feel. It's an interesting thought, anyway."

"Yes," Peter answered without understanding a word Dainig had said. "I'm special. I know it, now. I have my window back and the street back, and all I need is my fish. Where did it go this time?"

"I'll get you another goldfish. But, you must understand that it isn't the same one you had before. You have to get it through your head what 'dead' means."

"I know what it means. It means that something goes away for a while and then comes back again. Nothing ever stays away. Not my window or the street or my fish or my Mama and Daddy. Pretty soon we have to go out and look for them."

"No."

Peter's mouth formed a quick pout. "I'll cry."

"Oh no, you won't. I'm not going through that again."

"You just wait and see."

"Turn it off, Peter. I don't intend to watch it."

"Then say we can go out and look. I want to be with the people. I don't like it all alone."

"We'll see," Dainig half-surrendered because, childish mind or not, Peter was pushing him into a corner with his threats. The boy's strength wasn't up to another emotional attack. If he worked himself into one, he would die here just as readily as he would have died at the Center.

* * *

Dainig filled the next two days with ministering to Peter and making frequent trips to Cooper's office. On one of those sojourns, he was accosted by Laine Todd, and there was no way to avoid her when she placed a hand on his arm and began to talk immediately.

"You look too tired, Rick," she said.

"It's the pressure I'm living under. The anxiety."

"Are you sure that's all it is?" She looked at him with almost medical intensity.

"Of course! My job is at stake." Did she guess his lie? He took the offensive. "You don't look too well, yourself. I've never seen you in anything but bright colors, and the gray you're wearing doesn't suit you."

"What?" Her hand left his arm to touch the offending coverall. "For heaven's sake! I forgot to change when I left the Re-Conditioning Lab."

"You should never forget. That gray is drab." Using the half-insult and her surprise, he left her standing in bewilderment. But he returned to Peter with the impression that he had been stripped naked by her adept eyes. She was more astute than Mattison, and her profession was twelve times more hideous. Her sudden special interest in him was something he could not abide, in spite of the fact that he was still insidiously drawn to her.

In the safety of the apartment, he continued his routine of cooking for Peter, fighting off the boy's incessant demands to go onto the street and be with the people. Peter hadn't yet come to tears because Dainig's returned threats held him in check, but it wouldn't be long before he did. He was used to venting his emotions and wouldn't hold off forever.

The boy gained half a pound but Dainig didn't. Anxiety ate up all of his calories as he delayed the inevitable time when he must return Peter to the Centex and face whatever his own punishment might be. He kept on delaying it because something was happening in the outside world that put him off-balance. People were clamoring for Peter—a totally unexpected reaction.

Lethargy had settled over the city. The same people who had watched Peter's performances out of fascination, suddenly lost that fascination and valued him as a precious object. They missed him. They wanted him.

The news media put it dramatically. *The human heart is absent from the world. With Peter gone, Humanity is gone.*

This reaction had never occurred before. People normally abided the few days famine between the destruction of one Viewing Child and the initiation of another. But Peter was lost, and this held some special significance, some mysterious human meaning.

Even Peter noticed it. Looking out the window, he said, "The people seem funny, Danny. They walk different. Like they're tired. But it is true, like you said. Not one of them ever laughs. And you never laugh, either. Aren't you *ever* happy, Danny?"

Dainig only stared at him blankly. How could he answer?

"I wish you'd laugh with me, sometimes. When we wrestle or play games, it would be more fun if you laughed."

Tempted, Dainig took a Euphoria pill and granted Peter's wish.

By noon, Dainig's dose of Euphoria and Peter's natural joy had both worn off, and Peter insisted on being taken to the street. He talked about it all through lunch, and his threats changed into brief outbursts he couldn't control. "I have to go out," he begged. "My Mama and Daddy are lost out there."

"Peter!"

"Well, all right then, they're dead and they aren't lost. But I still have to go out and be with the people, Danny. Please. I never am. I never saw the street up close or heard the noise."

Dainig put down his fork and stared at the boy, trying to get inside his foggy brain with some simple truths. "You're not being fair to me, Peter. When I brought you here to let you recover, I never intended to take you out on the street. This is only a short visit so you can get well. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Peter answered, his expression downfallen. He actually did understand this time.

"I'm hoping Matty and Coop will forgive me when they see how much better you are, but if I go too far, they could send me away. And I couldn't be with you, anymore. Ever."

Peter grabbed his hand, frightened. "I want you to stay with me! I'll be *all* alone if you don't." His eyes were wild with confusion. "Oh, help me! I don't know what to do! I want *you*, and I want the street, too. Just one time, Danny? I won't ever be able to go again."

Peter was caught in his own trap. As his body trembled, and tears started in his eyes, Dainig sagged. No matter what he did for the child, it always led to a bigger decision, a larger crisis. Peter might work himself into a frenzy.

"Danny?" Peter asked, in a high quaking voice. "If I don't go now, I never can. Matty will put me back where people can look at me, and then I can't ever be on the street. You can go on the street. Why can't I ever?" He added desperately, "I love you, Danny."

Dainig shook his head to clear it. Everything Peter said was true. Once back in the Complex, he would never see daylight again. "You have a way of..." He gave up, slapping his hand on the table. "You picked the right man to wheedle. I'll take you out if you promise to do everything I tell you."

Peter raced around the table and threw his whole body onto him in an exuberant embrace. "I promise! I'm a good boy and I promise!"

"And I'm the moron," Dainig muttered. "But you have the right to see the world at least once." He thought to himself, *you'll detest it when you find out it's not fine and wonderful.*

Using the makeup he found in the dressing-table drawer, he darkened

Peter's face and hands from their normal translucent paleness to a healthy beige-brown, put the little girl's wig on his head, instructed him to hold tightly to his hand, and took him out.

The first blast of street noise sent Peter up against him, shaking. Yet he refused to give up and return to the building. As they walked slowly, surrounded by people, Dainig tried to see the street as Peter must be seeing it.

The noise from voices and roaring Commuters that carried passengers from one end of the vast city to the other augmented the roar of Air-Commuters zooming overhead. In a blur, Peter saw colors—churning and bouncing on clothing and painted signs; bodies—swarming clutches of them that pushed at him and knocked him about until he practically walked on top of Dainig's feet to keep from being stepped on; conversations—jumbled together until none of them were intelligible; and the overwhelming presence of faces, faces, faces, or from Peter's short vantage point, legs, legs and feet.

Peter clung to him but kept walking, showing astonishing bravery. His small, hot hands asked for something, but Dainig didn't know what it was, or how to give it. Was Peter asking for comfort? How did a man give comfort? He couldn't feel, so he couldn't give feeling. All he could do was stand straight and strong, and hope it was enough.

After ten minutes, he led Peter back, wary of confronting him with too much shock. When they entered the apartment, he looked down into the boy's over-large eyes, and said, "It wasn't such a wonderful thing, after all, was it?"

"I don't know yet," Peter answered. "I was afraid at first, but it started to go away. I don't know yet. I think I can like it very much."

Dainig was the one to register shock.

As he pulled the wig off Peter's head and washed the boy's hands and face, he finally reasoned it out. With his dull brain, Peter probably wouldn't experience the strangling sensation of the crowds and the noise. Maybe a man could keep his emotions and survive in this society, after all. *If* he had low-level intelligence.

* * *

He left Peter watching TV, which was now inundated with stories about his own disappearance, and checked in with Dr. Cooper. The news there wasn't good. He had missed three calls from the Center that morning and was informed that they weren't the first to go unanswered. Cooper was curious as to where he had been, but his curiosity was nothing compared to the glint of suspicion that flared in Mattison's cold eyes. His excuse—that he'd been out hunting for Peter like everyone else—sounded lame.

Anxiety mounted higher and higher but he was determined not to let it change his mind. Peter was going to have one more day free of his cage, and that was that. It was odd that he now thought of the Complex as a cage.

On a lucky hunch, he spent that evening at his own apartment, so he was there when Mattison appeared at the door. She pushed inside, investigating the empty rooms without an invitation. Although she found nothing, he was uncomfortably certain that her suspicion wasn't dampened when she left.

CHAPTER SIX

Morning broke with a heaviness that, if he'd been able to feel, he would have named *Dread*. It was Peter's last day. It meant seeing him locked away; then facing the doctors. He suppressed his thoughts. This was Peter's morning and his own problems weren't going to spoil it.

When Dainig returned to him, Peter was awake and ensconced in front of the TV. "Why aren't you looking at the street?" Dainig asked. "The curtain is open."

"Because. I can see people here, too—in the TV window. Only, it's not much fun." He faced Dainig, a question spread all over his face. "Am I being a bad boy, Danny? If all the people are sad because they can't find me, like the man in the TV says, then I'm being bad, aren't I?"

"You are not. Those people can't feel sad, anyway. They can't feel anything."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. Now, come and get washed for breakfast. I saved an egg for you. How do you like that?"

"Oh, I do!" He immediately began intoning words in their habitual rhyming-game. "I'll have egg and I'll have bread, and I'll have..." He faltered as he always did. "What rhymes?"

"I'll have butter on my head," Dainig finished the game, so simple, but too hard for Peter.

"No you won't, because I won't let you put it there!" With no breath in between, he added, "And after I eat, we can go in the street again so I can hear the noise."

"Why not?" Dainig had said it before he considered, but he couldn't make things any worse than they already were.

Peter cocked his head slyly. "I weebled you again, didn't I?"

"You what?"

"I weebled you."

Dainig hesitated, trying to translate. The meaning finally came through as Peter's mishmash of the word, "wheedled."

"Yes, you did," Dainig chuckled. "You're the best weebler I ever saw."

Peter was staring at him round-eyed, his face blank.

"What's wrong?" Dainig asked quickly.

"You *laughed*, Danny," Peter whispered, drawing the words out as though they were a miraculous secret. As Dainig's eyes flared, he added, "I won't tell on you. You can even laugh again, and I won't tell."

Suddenly the child's babbling didn't strike Dainig as innocent. He quickly gathered up the little-girl disguise.

They went onto the street again, and this time, within five minutes, Peter was walking a foot away from Dainig, enjoying the sights. Dainig wished he could erase the wonder and happiness from the child's face. Someone was bound to notice. No one else displayed such expressions past

the age of five.

People were moving more slowly than usual, their eyes raking the crowd and down the spaces between buildings, stupidly hunting for Peter in places that had been investigated hundreds of times. Dainig hung onto the boy's hand tightly, aware that he was the possessor of the person now considered to be the last human being in the world.

As they passed a dim walkway between two eighty-story towers, a voice called, "Peeterrr! Peeterrr!" It came from an old man who shuffled along, stopping beside every deep window-well to peer down into it.

Peter pulled up short, then started for the man. Dainig jerked him back.

"But, Danny! That man is calling for Peter," the boy complained. "*I'm Peter.*"

"Sssh," Dainig silenced him. "Never say your name on the street. Never. Now remember that."

"Yes, Danny. But I should answer when someone calls me. You always say so."

"Except for right now. Just keep on walking. We can't dawdle. Enjoy yourself, while you can."

They had been on the street for an hour when a Commuter stopped nearby, and Dainig recognized one of the men who stepped off. Richmond! The man should have been busy at the Center! He clenched his hand around Peter's and strode faster. If Richmond saw him, and the small figure beside him...

Peter stumbled with the pace, but Dainig pulled him along anyway, desperate to put the crowd between them and Richmond. Just as they reached another walkway between buildings, a shout blared out from behind him, "Dainig! Hey—Dainig!"

Dainig's legs demanded to break and run, but he held himself in check and turned to judge the situation. Richmond was quite a distance behind, so Peter must certainly be hidden from view.

"Dainig!" Richmond yelled again, and Dainig spotted the man's head craning to see over the crowd.

With one swift motion, Dainig lifted Peter off his feet and rushed him a short distance down the walkway. He plunked him down and whispered firmly, "Stay right here and don't move until I come back for you."

He raced back to the street and pushed through the crowd to intercept Richmond twenty feet away from Peter's hiding place. "I *thought* I recognized your voice, Rich. Are you searching, too? It's a futile process, but compulsive."

"Not for me. I never bothered with it. Since I was accepted at the Re-Conditioning Lab, I've been too busy."

"What? You've been accepted already?"

"That's what I was so anxious to tell you. I'm now a Technician Trainee, and I'm spending five hours a day at it." He waited for a comment that never came. "Aren't you going to congratulate me, Dainig?"

"Yes, of course, if it's what you want for your life's work. Congratulations."

"With reservations, right? You've already told me what you think about it, but I think it's a great opportunity."

For three eternity-strung minutes, Richmond continued extolling his good fortune while Dainig chafed to return to Peter, frantic to find out if the boy had strayed away. He finally managed to send Richmond off in the opposite direction and headed back to the walkway.

His stomach lurched when he saw what was happening. Peter was exactly where he had left him, but he wasn't alone! An old woman was bending over him, and they were talking.

As he neared, he heard her say, "—and that's why I'm looking so hard to find Peter. I'm anxious about him. I can't even eat when I think of him being lost and alone. Or, that I might never see him again."

"But you mustn't worry," Peter answered her. "You mustn't be sad. It's not nice to feel sad. You might cry and I don't want you to cry."

"I might *cry*?" The old woman straightened up. "You talk very strangely for a girl your age."

Dainig stepped in quickly. "Yes she does, right now." He circled Peter with one arm. "She's just coming out of a Depressant-drug, so she sounds odd. Please forgive her."

The old woman looked straight into his eyes and shook her head. "A drug for a child that young. It's gone so far, hasn't it?" She, like others, had counted the cost of AEC and found it too great.

She shambled off to continue her vain search, her legs scrawny and slightly bowed inside the coverall pants, her pale, bleary eyes hunting in areas where there wasn't even a chance of a hiding place. *Poor, poor old woman*, Dainig thought, then jerked up, wondering why those words had sprung into his mind.

He took hold of Peter and hurried him back to the apartment, the sensation of watching eyes following their progress all the way.

Peter was exhilarated from the experience. Once inside, he jumped around the room in uncontained joy. "I love it here, Danny! I love everything there is about it. It makes me so happy! I don't think I'll ever cry again. Thank you, Danny. Thank you for bringing me. We'll stay here all the time and go on the street, and I'll have a fish."

"You'll have your lunch," Dainig said gruffly. He couldn't help the gruffness. This outing had proved to be too much. It had shown him two things he didn't want to see; Peter's joy at being free, and Humanity's unfelt, but real, grief over its loss. When he returned Peter to his cage, Humanity would have what It wanted. But, at what expense? The peace and joy of a forever child.

He left Peter to the TV, and went to the kitchen. Facts had to be faced. And now. He had to search them out, weigh them, and come up with the right solution, impossible as that seemed in his present state of mind. The image of leading Peter back into the Complex blinded him. He would never be able to do it. Maybe he couldn't *feel*, but something inside him was *screaming!*

The whole decision became unbalanced, because the thought of returning Peter shouldn't affect him at all. That it did, pointed to a fault in

himself, filling him with terror. He stood there with the uncracked egg trembling in his hand, and admitted it.

I am beginning to feel!

His menacing Sensitivity Score had proved inescapable; he was going into Re-Emergence. He hadn't really been worried about his future livelihood at all. He had been developing an *affection* for Peter!

It's because of him, he told himself. *No one could withstand him*. But excuses wouldn't change the fact. He was beginning to feel, to care; therefore, he was a Deviant. There was only one solution: Re-Conditioning. Just as Richmond had warned. Re-Conditioning, with all of its agony, shock, and social stigma.

The moment his aberration was discovered, they would manhandle him into a dark brain-washing cell, give him to a stony-faced Re-Conditioner, snare him with sensor electrodes, and pit him against the paroxysms of sonic and electric pain until his soul was washed clean of illegal emotions.

He cracked the egg—shattering the fragile shell.

There must be a way around it. He could take Peter back, make Mattison and Cooper see that he had saved the boy's life by his action, and if he hid his aberration well enough, get off with no more than dismissal as Peter's Companion and expulsion from the Center's classrooms.

It meant living as a Deviant for the rest of his life, but if what was starting to awaken in him was emotion, he knew he could exist without too great a hardship. Feeling wasn't as uncomfortable as he'd been taught to believe. Once named, his "ghost" wasn't so formidable. All he had to do was take Peter back.

He slammed a fork into the egg and whipped it yellow. The idea of imprisoning Peter was unthinkable! His condition of dawning emotion made it repulsive. He *cared* now. Only a little, but he did care. Coming to a balanced decision was impossible when the scales had three sides.

He fought to clear the newly-awakened *emotions* away and use his familiar yardsticks: logic; human rights; justice for fellow human beings. The process calmed him, but inevitably led in only one direction—a way out for Peter and for himself.

He grasped the idea firmly and made a solid vow. Peter wouldn't be forced back into that cage to be abused for the amusement of people who were incapable of experiencing the tiniest twinge of what they demanded from him. He wouldn't have to cry on cue anymore. If he was normally unhappy, all right, but he would never again be tortured into tears.

The rest followed with easy logic. If Peter wasn't going to have to do these things, Peter had to disappear. So Dainig had to disappear, too, taking Peter with him.

It was obvious, but it also created a mountain he couldn't climb. Everyone required an identity number and a card, both of them direct links to the Population-Control Computer. He and Peter would be tracked down in no time.

Desperately, his brain sought answers. His final choice demanded a terrible risk. As a student in Anti-Emotion Conditioning, he was allowed access to the Computer's programming section. He could enter a false number for himself, leaving Frederic Dainig on record, but unused, and then fabricate a background for Peter. If he dared, both of them could escape their prescribed futures.

He set the final plate on the table and straightened, trembling. It hinged on whether or not he believed in his vow to save the boy. Even as he called Peter to come and eat, he had his answer.

He let his breath out, realizing that if he were practised in the art of emotion, he would be smiling.

Peter wasn't smiling. He came to the table, subdued.

"Where did your happiness go in such a hurry?" Dainig asked him.

"I was watching the TV window. The people are still sad, Danny. They're still hunting for me."

"They won't find you."

"Then, they'll stay sad? And cry? I don't want that lady to cry. My Mama never cried. Only me."

"You won't be crying from now on, either. I've decided things for us,

Peter. You don't have to go back to Coop and Matty. You and I will stay out in the world forever."

Peter's mouth fell open in astonishment. "Really? Truly? And I'll have a fish?"

"You'll have *two* fishes. One must get lonely all by itself. You can even have three! What do you think of that?" Alien as it was, he found himself with a wide *smile*. A spontaneous, natural smile.

"Gold ones?" Peter built on his excitement, jiggling up and down. "And orange ones? White?"

"Yellow and black and polka-dotted. Whatever is to be found." Dainig's entire body seemed warm and light.

"But mostly I'll have you, Danny. And Coop and Matty won't come. Will they? To hurt me?"

Dainig willingly relinquished his smile to say intently, "Never again. I'll watch out for you, Peter. I'll be there for you whenever you need me all the rest of your life." He reached out and stroked the boy's pale hair, silky and warm under his palm.

"I love you, Danny."

"I know! Isn't that wonderful, Peter? I actually do know! And I love you, little boy."

Peter stopped deathly still. "You never said that to me before. Not once."

"I've never *felt* it before, Peter. Everything has changed. You and I are alike now. I can feel things, too."

With one leap, Peter was in his arms. Whether or not he actually understood it, he realized that Dainig's transformation was miraculous and important. Between laughs, he shouted, "Then laugh with me, Danny!"

Dainig consciously tried, but it came weakly. Something stood in the way.

"That wasn't very good," Peter complained, hugging him harder.

"For heaven's sake, give me time to learn. To practise." The frail body felt different in his arms. For once, it fit; comforting and comforted.

Dainig absorbed the tumble of new feelings gratefully. It appeared that once emotions started to re-emerge, they came like geysers, erupting with rising frequency. He had experienced extreme fear, brief pity, and love, all in the space of a few days. What was next? Waiting to find out was going to be difficult. His worries would be heightened, too, but those were nothing compared to what he was experiencing right now.

He welcomed every twinge of feeling with an open alertness. He was soaring! Emotion was pure freedom. He was never going to let himself be chained again.

"Oh, Danny! This will be better than I ever thought it could be. You make me so happy all the time!" Abruptly, Peter's arms were off Dainig and the boy stood back, stricken. "But all the people will still be sad."

Dainig sighed. "Eat your lunch, little boy. I'll worry about the people."

CHAPTER SEVEN

After extracting Peter's promise to be good, Dainig left the apartment and caught a Commuter to the building that housed the giant Computer. He was sweating when he entered, and sweating harder when he came out. But it was done.

He now carried two identity numbers for himself; one for Frederic Dainig, and another for a non-existent man named Daniel Weber. Nestled with them was one for a boy named Peter Weber. That one would seldom be used. He intended to hide Peter as much as possible, letting him into the world only when he could walk with him and shield the nature of his dull mind. But, if it should be needed, the record of Peter Weber was duly registered. They would live in another city, and Frederic Dainig would simply disappear from this one.

The stir of non-drug happiness touched his skin from the inside out. He relished it. Not even the immense problems the future would bring, as his responsibilities with Peter grew, were so terrible when he had moments of

happiness like this to balance them.

* * *

When the elevator doors opened on the apartment's floor, Dainig stopped dead. Peter was in the hallway—coming toward him!

"What are you doing outside the room?" Dainig shouted. "You don't have the wig on!"

He heaved Peter into his arms and fled inside the apartment where he plunked him down roughly. "You promised to mind me! You *promised*. What did you think you were doing?"

Startled, Peter became defiant. "I knew you wouldn't let me, so I had to!"

"Had to what, Peter?"

"Go back alone. And you let me, Danny. I'm not bad. I can't make people cry, so you let me do it!"

Peter was standing away from him, cowering, and Dainig realized the boy was afraid of his shouting. He lowered his voice and proceeded calmly. "Let's talk about this, Peter. You have to explain it to me, because I don't understand what you mean. Now, come here. Be calm, and come here and tell me."

Peter edged closer, then closed the distance and threw his arms around Dainig's waist. "You made me afraid, Danny. Don't be mad at me. I have to do it. Help me!"

Dainig knelt and held him just far enough away to see his face. "I'm not mad, Peter. I only want you to explain. What do you have to do?"

"I have to go back where they can find me. I don't know the way by myself, but I have to be where they can watch me, so they won't cry."

"They are not capable of crying! Now, look. You can't possibly understand what going back would mean, but I do, so you have to trust me. Coop and Matty will find another child to take your place, Peter. But if you go back, you'll always be there. You'll keep on crying over a fish, or

your window, until the day comes when you finally comprehend that you're being tricked into it. That day will come, Peter, and when it does, you'll be..." The rest of the sentence dried to sand in his mouth.

"I'll be let out?"

Peter saw hope where there was none, so Dainig was forced to say it. "No. When that day comes, Peter, you will be dead."

As usual, the boy didn't respond to the word. To him, "dead" meant going away for a while and then reappearing. He said, "Maybe I'll come back to this place after I'm dead. Or maybe even back to my own window."

Dainig shook his head in frustration. The child had to understand. His cooperation was essential to their combined safety. "Peter, now listen to me carefully. If you go back to Coop and Matty, you will never get away from them again. You will be there for the rest of your life."

Peter's face darkened. "Always?" he whispered. "But, I don't want to do that. Please, Danny."

"You don't have to do it. You don't! I've fixed it so you and I can stay together in this big world, and you can have a real window, all the fishes you want, and me to love you—for the rest of your life. It's all settled."

Peter's dread flashed away, and he leaped into his highest gear of delight. "That's wonderful! You're wonderful, Danny! I love you!" He hopped around the room, his arms flung wide, the joy bubbling even in his feet. "Never go back—never go back—never go back."

"Not so loud," Dainig warned, shaken by the exuberance. "We have to stay quiet until we're out of here. I'll get what clothes I have in the closet, and we'll leave right away. I've picked a nice big city for us to live in, Peter, where no one will ever find us."

As he said the words, he felt lighter. Peter's freedom had become tangled in his own, and his terror of Re-Conditioning would vanish along with Peter's torment.

"I'll get that funny hair you put on me," Peter ran for the bedroom. He stopped in mid-stride. "No. If we're really going away, then I have to look out the window again. For the last time. You get the hair, Danny." He was

immediately at the window, craning down at the street, engrossed with what he saw.

Dainig gathered up the few remnants of his life he was going to take with him and shoved them into the familiar brown case. The course was set, and the sooner he started along it, the better.

Carrying the case, makeup and wig, he returned to the living room. His voice expressed his excitement. "All right, Peter, boy. It's time to make you into a little girl again." Eagerness was new to him, and he savored it.

Peter was still at the window, silhouetted against the glare. When he turned, his movements were slow. He came to Dainig almost unwillingly, then stood docilely, waiting for his makeup.

Dainig opened the tube, but his hands were stayed by the gleam of fresh tears on Peter's cheeks; silent tears that dribbled down and fell mutely off his chin.

"What is it?" Dainig asked softly.

"I don't know."

"Have you already forgotten our plans?" Dainig kept his voice low, oddly in awe of these tears, sensing something profound in them. "Don't you want to go away with me, Peter?"

"Oh, yes! I want to with all my heart," Peter answered. But the tears still fell. "Only—I don't understand. Can you explain it to me?"

"Tell me, and I'll try."

"I was watching the people on the street. Why can they make me feel so sad when everything is wonderful and I'm so happy? I want to cry all the time I'm looking at them. I can't stand to see them sad like that. It hurts me, Danny. Why does it?"

Dainig was silent, and as he stared into the reddened eyes, an unknown "something" pushed him slowly to his knees in front of the child. He reached out and grasped the thin shoulders gently.

"I see, Peter. I wish I didn't, but I do. I learned the word for what you're

feeling in one of my classes. It was once called *Compassion*, and it was considered a good emotion. Maybe one of the best. It means feeling another person's unhappiness, and doing it with love and understanding. It means knowing what another person is suffering, and suffering with him. I think you've just learned a new emotion."

"Then, if I learned it, I guess I'll always feel it, won't I? Even when I'm happy with you, I'll know the people are sad because they don't have me to watch. But I can't help it, Danny. I have to go with you, and stay away from Coop and Matty so they can't be mean to me. I want to be happy, too. We'll be fine, and you'll love me."

A sensation akin to feeling his life's blood ebb from his head washed over Dainig. Unaccountably he found his hands pulling Peter forward to enfold and press against himself. "I just now learned compassion, too, Peter," he whispered. "Only—I'm feeling it for you." He bent his lips to Peter's soft cheek, and their breaths sighed out in unison. Once.

Then Dainig was on his feet. Frightened!

He turned gruffly to the work at hand. "Let's put this wig on you and get out of here, boy. There's no time to waste. None!"

He dressed Peter quickly, detesting the full return of the child's joyful anticipation of their future together. Because there wasn't going to be any future. Dainig was back in his right mind and knew that, now.

There was going to be just one more sojourn on the street. Then Peter would be safely back at the Center. After that would come the confrontation with Cooper and Mattison, the admission of guilt, and surrendering himself for Re-Conditioning. He would lose his proposed career, but he doubted if anyone would press criminal charges. The agony of Re-Conditioning would be enough to satisfy even Mattison's cold heart.

For himself, he would face the process staunchly as he might face a friend willing to relieve him of a fatal, devouring disease. Because in that moment with Peter he had finally felt full, true emotion. And if that tearing, engulfing, throbbing sensation of body and soul was what emotion demanded of a human being, he could never live with it. It was a blight that had no place in human reality. Leaving the brown case in the middle of the floor, Dainig took Peter's eager hand and led him innocently out of the apartment. When he closed the door behind them, he brought

his fingers up to his own face and brushed aside the last, and only, tear he ever wanted to shed, then put the remains of it on his tongue and swallowed it, bitter salt and all.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The din of the street assaulted him more than usual, but he put this down to abnormal sensitivity and plowed through the crowds, determined not to let it touch him. Peter alternately walked and skipped by his side, holding fast to his hand, and Dainig made no attempt to quell the child's exuberance. No one would recognize this little girl as the lost Peter, and he intended to return the boy to the Center so fast that people wouldn't get a second look, anyway.

Still, he didn't dare let himself be run to ground and the boy wrenched out of his possession. He trembled at the idea of being shamed on the street. Mattison, Cooper, and the Re-Conditioners promised punishment enough.

He led Peter to the curb at the first Commuter Stop. The boy attempted to step off into the flow of traffic and only Dainig's quick jerk of hand held him back. "Are we going across?" he peered up into Dainig's face, his cheeks flushed with an excitement the makeup couldn't hide. "I've never been across, Danny."

"Better than that. We're going to ride on a Commuter. We're in a hurry, remember, and it's faster."

"One of those big *big* things? Ohhh! Will I be afraid?" Peter answered his own question, "No, I will love it. You'll be there and I will love it like I love everything else about the big world."

He began to jump, releasing his joy, and Dainig had to put a stop to it. Only an overdose of Euphoria produced that much glee, and children didn't take overdoses. "Stand still, Pe—child. Act like the other people and don't draw attention to yourself. Now, mind me!"

"Act like them?" Peter studied the crowd and immediately put on a caricature of an empty, grave face that started a series of spasms in Dainig. He suppressed a chuckle. "Is this right?" Peter asked.

"Not quite so much. Just stand still and think about good things. Quiet things."

"Like what? Like going away with you? Forever?"

"No! Think of naps, and eating supper, and..." His voice halted on its own. *Like going away with you? For-ever?* The boy was tearing him to shreds. If he didn't care about him so much, he knew he could hate him for it. A jolt of insight told him that hating and caring were two sides of the same unplumbed emotion. He didn't dare explore it. "Just behave yourself," he said gruffly. "I'm having trouble enough without you adding to it."

"How, Danny? I won't let you have trouble. Do you feel worried?"

"I don't feel anything!"

"Did it go away? Well, if it did, it will come back like everything else does. I'll help you practise again."

Dainig sighed. Other people gathered around them as the Commuter came rushing down the street, so he used its approach to change the subject. "Here comes the Commuter, child. Watch how it works. When we get on, I don't want to hear a word out of you. Try not to act surprised at everything it does, and try not to get excited over all the things you see as we go along. Will you promise?"

"I promise. And I'm a good—"

"Quiet, now!" Dainig intercepted Peter's giveaway word. He bent and whispered into the child's ear, "Remember, you're pretending to be a girl. Don't let anyone guess that you're not."

The little boy nodded his head, his mouth clenched tight in an act of keeping quiet. And even though the Commuter was hurtling to them at fifty miles per hour, Dainig damned it for not coming faster.

The ride was swift and Peter held himself dutifully in check all but four times. The glances he drew with those outbursts were easily side-tracked by Dainig's shrugging formation of the silently-mouthed word, "Euphoria".

When they reached the corner of the four-block stretch of blank wall that was the AEC Center, Dainig gratefully led the boy off the vehicle and across the swarming sidewalk.

"Are we going inside again?" Peter asked. "Yes, and we're still in a hurry. I'll be walking fast and you'll have to keep up with me."

"I can run if you want, Danny."

"We'll walk. If anyone stops to talk, don't make a sound. Do you understand? Everything depends on you."

"I won't even say hello then. I'll do whatever you say, Danny, because I love you and we have to hurry."

He was in luck. The Center's halls were alive with parents leading children to the Clinic rooms and peppered with students in their usual rush between classes. He pulled Peter along, heading for the elevator designated PERSONNEL ONLY. But even with the crowd, a girl noticed him and shouted over the noise, "Rick! How are you? You've been scarce around here lately."

He merely raised his free hand, saying nothing, hoping the gesture would convey the fact that he had heard, and the sudden turn of his wrist would tell her, "What's here for me to do without Peter?"

She was having difficulty standing still in the flow of people, but she held her footing and called after him, "Who's the little girl?"

That question required an answer but he didn't stop walking. "Just another candidate," he shouted and strode on, pulling Peter in his wake.

"She thought I *am*," Peter giggled. "I did good. She thought I am a girl."

"Hush!"

The crowd was thinning as they passed beyond the Clinic and Dainig had no time to praise the boy. His own heart was giving him problems enough. It hit against his chest and throat with batterings that must surely be visible. With the elevator in sight, he admitted he was terrified; of the pain ahead, of the time in the cells. The bitter part of it was that no

one would care. No one knew how. He had to suffer through this alone without a phrase of sympathy from any other human being.

He cursed himself for wanting sympathy. If he were normal, the need wouldn't have entered his mind.

He punched for the elevator and it opened immediately, the car empty. And after he touched the express button, it climbed with a speed Peter had never experienced. His gasps of excitement were too much for Dainig to endure. But he didn't allow himself the relief of turning stern because that required emotion and he wanted no part of it.

When the elevator doors slid open, Peter whispered in the hallway, "There's nobody here, Danny. We're all by ourselves."

"That's to the good."

"But where did all the people go?"

Dainig didn't respond except to drag the boy along at a speedier pace. His new feelings cried, "Go slowly. You're afraid," so he squelched them by doing the opposite, determined not to behave like an emotional cripple even if the truth said he was one.

He came to a halt before Cooper's office door.

"Are we going inside another place?" Peter asked. "I like to go inside. Can we?"

"You bet we can." Without waiting to knock, Dainig barged inside, no longer aware of Peter as anything but an extension at the end of his arm.

Cooper and Mattison loomed before him, startled by his loud entrance. He had intended to say the first sentences, to blurt it all out, but his throat constricted just long enough to give the chance to Cooper.

"Exactly what is this all about?" Cooper demanded.

He was cut short by a wail from Dainig's side. "No, Danny, we got the wrong place! We can't be here! Hurry!" Peter wrenched at him, jerking toward the door, desperate at the sight of the two doctors.

Mattison was on her feet instantly and her eyes arrowed in on the child.

"That voice. Let me see that child's face!"

Dainig held himself stony and did better than that. He grabbed into the brown wig and yanked it off Peter's head, baring the pale hair that returned the boy to instant recognition.

Peter's free hand flew up, trying to cover his head. "It came off! Put it back, Danny, or they'll see us. We can't be in here or Matty and Coop will keep us!"

"They already have, Peter," Dainig spoke as gruffly as he wanted to speak, now. "It's all too late."

"But you promised! You did!" Peter huddled against him, his free arm trying for Dainig's waist and, finding no hold, retreating to wrap itself hard about his thigh. "We went the wrong way, Danny, but we can go again. Say we can go again!"

"Calm yourself," Dainig continued to stare at Mattison while he answered the boy. "We're here and we're going to stay here. I don't want any more crying, do you understand?"

That was the signal for the crying to really begin. Peter clung to his leg like a hugging bear, emitting loud wails. Dainig shook loose of his hand, felt the other join it in the frantic clutching, and still staring hard at the doctors, said, "I've brought Peter back."

He could barely be heard over Peter's din, but Mattison picked up enough to shout,. "You found him, Dainig?"

"I took him! I kidnapped him, I hid him away, and now I'm giving him back. Do you understand?"

Cooper came over and raised the boy's face, pressing with his thumb to smear the makeup off his cheek. Peter winced away and hid his face in Dainig's pant leg as Cooper said, "Incredible!"

"Not as incredible as the Why of it," Mattison continued to shout above Peter's noise. "That's what we have to discover. And we certainly can't accomplish it with this ear-cracking din going on." She reached across Cooper's desk and opened the intercom, yelling into it, "Get some orderlies in here at once. Peter has returned and I want him back in his Complex

immediately."

Next she took ten pounding steps across to a medicine cabinet, pulled out a syringe and a vial of sedative, and descended on Peter. He threw himself out of her path, using Dainig as a shield.

"Danny, don't let her! Take me away from her, Danny. Please!"

She followed him relentlessly and Dainig felt the small hands all over his body as the child went round and round. "Don't let her, Danny. I love you and you love me and we're going to stay out in the big world together. Forever. I *love* you!"

"*Will* you take control of that Defective!" Mattison gave up the chase. "What's the matter with you, Dainig? Hold him still!"

Dainig saw her harsh face twisted in deeper lines of irritation than it had ever shown before, then saw the needle and heard Peter's gasping breaths. Something new in his heart commanded him to pick up the frail, little body and run with it.

He bent quickly and lifted Peter off his feet, hugging him close. "Do it now, Doctor. I have him."

The injection penetrated almost too easily and Dainig was suddenly standing with a struggling, flailing creature in his arms. He put the boy down and looked away, but not before he saw Peter rub at his arm and heard his accusations begin.

"You helped her, Danny. You held me and helped her. Why?"

Dainig overrode his high voice with the loudness of his own. "I have a lot to explain, Doctor Cooper, and I want to do it as fast as possible. I had reasons. It all started some weeks ago."

"Shut your mouth, Dainig," Mattison ordered. "This isn't the time. Not over that noisy Defective. He'll soon be out of our way."

As though her statement had been a signal, a rap came at the door and two orderlies appeared. At sight of them, Peter's eyes flew wide and he ran for the far wall, full speed, seeming to expect an exit to materialize. He smashed into it, clawed at it for a brief second, then turned, his hands

behind his back, ready to push him forward if he were too closely cornered.

"That child is Peter," Mattison told the orderlies. "Take him back to his Complex, wash the fake color off his face, and put him to bed. I've given him a sedative, but you're still going to have trouble for a while. I don't want him damaged, but I do want him confined."

The men started for him and Peter scooted sideways until he bumped into a bookcase that blocked his path. Helpless, he reached out one hand to Dainig, then thrust both of them forward like a baby, his eyes stuck on the men, but his beggings aimed the other way. "Help me, Danny. Help me again—like you did before." When Dainig didn't answer, he tried a desperate coaxing. "Did you forget what you promised? That's all right, only help me now. They're too big for me, and..."

One man lunged for him but he whirled away and raced around the desk to press against Dainig again, trying to climb up his height and secure the protection of his usually friendly arms.

"Go with the men, Peter," Dainig told him. "They won't hurt you."

"No, no! I'll never get away again. You told me so. I want to go with you, like you said." As the orderlies came around the desk, too, his voice skyrocketed, "Hold me, Danny, or they'll get me! Please. *I love you!*"

One of the orderlies began another lunge but Dainig raised a hand to stop him. He couldn't let it happen this way. It would be too excruciatingly cruel.

Instead, Dainig himself reached down and picked Peter up. The little boy's face was instantly buried against his shoulder, so he didn't see Dainig's head gesture to the nearest orderly to approach and accept his trembling little body.

With the rough hands on him, Peter's mind lost its sense, drowned in the confusion of its own retarded pathways. "Why did you... ? What's happening? *Tell* me, Danny. Was I bad? I'll eat all the soup you tell me to. I won't talk loud. I'll make you laugh, I promise. Keep Coop and Matty away!"

The boy's stricken face created physical pain in Dainig as he realized

that by giving him over, he had betrayed Peter totally. There was no way to soothe a harm as great as that, so he touched the child's face and said lamely, "Let them put you to bed, Peter. Take a nice nap. I'll come to play with you later."

The frightened brown eyes pierced into his one long moment more and then Peter gave up, accepting the hopeful crumb in lieu of the dream. As he was carried out of the office, unnaturally silent, Dainig added softly, "And that, little boy, was the biggest lie of all. Goodbye."

When the door clicked shut, he found he was trembling, and walked to a chair before his legs failed under him. "It's done. That pitiful, little... I'll be damned forever." Tears hovered on his eyelashes and he lowered his head even more.

"Right now is time enough for you to be damned. An experience like that was uncalled for, and unforgivably traumatic," Mattison accused. She was at the medicine cabinet again, and through the water blurring his eyes, Dainig saw her take out a bottle of Equilibria, offer two tablets to Cooper, and swallow two for herself. She returned to sit on the corner of the desk, one gray-clad leg swinging free, seeming ready to kick. "So. You stole the boy and hid him. Why?"

The question was unyielding. Dainig knew the answer but didn't have the heart to speak it out. Instead, he simply raised his head and let the two of them see the tears that had travelled over his cheeks and onto his collar.

"Are those drug-tears?" Cooper asked, too practical to see them as devious.

"No. And oh, how I wish they were." This was the moment to surrender himself as he had so willingly surrendered Peter. "I've suffered Re-Emergence. The tears are real and intolerable."

"Re-Emergence!" Mattison's mouth hung open with the nasty word. "Then I was right. You were shaky, and heading into it all through Peter's hysterics. Even before."

"Go ahead and take credit for being clever before you bother to consider the ramifications of what I've said," Dainig slammed out at her, surprised at the depth of his anger and astonished by the purification he experienced as he yielded to it. "I'm suffering it, but the important thing

to you is that you thought I might! Enjoy your moment of puny pride. It's the best emotion you have."

"Oh? And are you enjoying your greater ones?" she returned in kind.

Dainig paused, then admitted, "No. There were times— brief instants—" He shook his head. "No. I don't see how Peter survives under such terrible, shifting pressures."

"He's a Defective, and that is both How and Why he survives," Mattison said.

Her inflection drew Dainig up straight with an important question. "You won't *hurt* him. I mean, I counted on that fact. You'll just go on using him, but you won't hurt him for any of this, will you? He had nothing to do with it. He was a pawn and nothing more."

"Naturally we won't hurt him. But you'll never see him again, in spite of what you said when they carried him out."

"I understand that."

"We couldn't let two Defectives be together, and that's what you are now, Dainig. As defective as Peter. A Re-Emerger."

"I said I understand!" he roared. "Do you want me to say I'm hurting because of it? All right, then, I'm *hurting!* Worse than I ever dreamed I could. I also know what's facing me, but I chose my own course and I won't be bullied into enduring any more than I have to endure by Law! That means no recriminations from you!"

"Only a Re-Emerger could *feel* bullied, Dainig," Mattison refused to ease up. "And if you can't help your disgusting anger, at least be decent enough to spare us the brunt of it."

"I'll try. But I know you now, Clara Mattison. Once you begin to feel you also begin to know people. If you ever Re-Emerged, your life wouldn't be changed very much. I doubt if you'd ever be capable of feeling the gentle emotions."

She huffed out a breath of indignation, which was the farthest height of anger she could muster. "I'm a fool to be arguing with an emotional

maniac, so I'll stop. What did you expect from us, Dainig? *Pity?* Hand-holding?"

"Never. That could only come from Peter." His anger was gone as suddenly as it had come, and desolation filled its place.

"You'd obviously like to have it, anyway. Is that why you told him you'd come and play with him later? So you could cry on his shoulder? Well, you won't get any pity because, thank heaven, we don't have it to give, and neither does the Re-Conditioning Lab. That's your next destination, you know. The cells!"

"Yes." It was a despairing, but resigned response. "I thought you might want the how's and why's of the kidnapping first or I would have gone straight there."

Dr. Cooper finally spoke up. "Details aren't necessary. The boy is back, we know who took him, and since you've admitted to Re-Emergence, we also know why it was done. How you hid him doesn't matter unless you had an accomplice."

"I didn't. Who else would dare?"

"Quite right. I suppose, then, that unless Doctor Mattison has something more to ask... ?"

"Nothing," Mattison shook her head.

"Then I'll just call the Lab and have them send someone up to get you." He reached toward the intercom.

"I can go down alone."

"It's too late for that. When you first showed symptoms, you could have gone alone, but not anymore."

Listening to the call for Lab men brought the pressures of the last weeks crashing down on Dainig all at once. Events insisted on highlighting themselves: the moment he had laughed; the pull of his first natural smile; the touch of Peter when the boy was actually *Loved*. He was embarrassed when tears trickled down his cheeks, but had no control over them, so he turned his back to the doctors to hide his face.

"A disgusting display," Mattison mumbled.

Dainig agreed with her. He had said the same thing about the Re-Emerger he had seen. He realized only now that he had injured her by saying it, just as Mattison was injuring him.

He stayed where he was, praying that the Lab men would hurry, that they would move him through the Re-Conditioning process swiftly, because this depression was worse than an overdose of down-drug. It was worse because it was real. He felt he must hang onto something or sink into the ground. Peter refused to be put out of his mind. Peter's face and eyes and pleadings refused to let him breathe.

"I do love that little boy, you know," he heard himself saying, never intending to speak at all. "It might have worked out, and he wouldn't be back here waiting to die."

"He is waiting to perform his function as a Viewing Child," Cooper said from behind him. "Only that. Emotion is making you overly dramatic."

"You're wrong. He may perform for a while, but at the end is his death. As soon as he's of no use. Thank God he doesn't understand that part of it. It can't be right, because it's not decent." As his voice choked, he cut himself off, humiliated. Why did he have to learn that too? He was bearing too much already.

The knock at the door startled him, and he swept his sleeve across his cheeks to wipe away the signs of tears, but he gave up as new ones swelled to replace them. When only the Lab men came in, he faced them by himself and walked out ahead of them, aware of their strong hands on his arms yet oblivious of them as well.

* * *

They descended into the depths of the building. Dainig tried valiantly to hold himself impassive, but it was no use. His body leaped from remorse to terror, protective love to anger, shame to self-pity, and back to terror again. Always back to *terror*. He couldn't restrain himself anymore.

As the elevator went beneath street level, he asked the two men in a quavering, almost whining voice, "Is this the way it always is? I'm feeling everything at once. Is this normal?"

They paid him no attention, undoubtedly shielding their own Sensitivity from the trauma of him. If only someone would talk to him, just say one word—even his name— so he didn't feel so *lonely*.

When the car stopped, the door slid back. *This is the place, then*, he told himself, trying to be matter-of-fact about it so he could force his legs to enter into territory they had never travelled before. In all his years as a student, he had never ventured near this floor. This was the domain of dire tilings: of tortures, groans, and agony.

But, walk he did, proving their hands were unnecessary as he went forward willingly. Unwillingly.

The corridor looked no different from the rest of the building. To his left, it tunnelled away bare and brightly lighted, spaced by many doors. But to his right lay the dead end of a great, blank wall. Only one entrance waited there. Closed. The men bore him in its direction and the bleak finality of that wall loomed ominously.

Above it was posted the sign Re-Conditioning Laboratory, and below that, Admitting. As one of the men pressed the operating button, a gasping whimper arose involuntarily from Dainig's throat. When the way was clear to pass, he found his legs cemented to his piece of floor. This was a step he could not take alone.

So he was shoved. The strong hands held him so he didn't fall, and he closed his eyes, being towed along not so willingly anymore. He was determined not to look. If he didn't look, he couldn't see the horrors.

After twenty feet, he had to open his eyes, and his relief erupted in a tiny huff of breath. This place, too, was normal. It was only another corridor, inset with small offices. It was a dismal gray, like Mattison's drab clothes.

At the fifth door down, the men led him to the left into an eight-by-eight foot office, complete with hard-topped desk and a stern, straight-armed chair. The men edged him around it and pressed on his shoulders until he plunked into the seat, but didn't fasten the ready restraints to his arms. They stepped away from him, one carefully blocking the closed door, the other remaining close at his back. Dainig raised his eyes to confront the woman behind the desk, her fingers poised over a computer-tape machine.

Her coverall was brown and her hair was brown. He made note of every detail to sweep his mind from the things she might do to him. He didn't want to hear her voice, but she spoke, anyway. Not to him, but to the two men who were his guards. "Where did you pick this one up?"

"We didn't. He surrendered himself." The voice came from the man directly behind Dainig, the one he thought of as Guard Two. He felt its vibrations and the puffs of breath on his hair.

"Oh?" But the woman's face didn't betray surprise. Only her fingers moved, pressing out the buttons for Voluntary Surrender on the computer-tape machine.

"I came, myself," Dainig said. He had to say something.

She ignored him. "What's his name?"

"Frederic Dainig," Guard Two answered again.

"Peter's *Companion*?" Now she did look at him. Her eyes probed his face, alert with recognition. "Yes, I've seen him at the Viewings. But get his id card, anyway. Down here, we have to be positive."

"We got him straight from Doctor Cooper," Guard One told her, as the other reached into Dainig's pocket for the card.

"You don't need that," Dainig pushed the hand away. "I am Frederic Dainig—Peter's Companion—and a more unforgivable betrayer than his mother ever was." He was crying again.

"Give me his card," the woman repeated. It was taken from him. Glancing at it, she said, "Very well. But you're a caricature of the Frederic Dainig I've seen. Are you aware that your face is so contorted your own friends would have trouble recognizing you?"

It was probably a simple statement of truth but it cut into him as cruelty. "I'm trying to control myself. It's only that I don't understand what's happening to me, and I'm not used to feeling so helpless."

Her cold eyes poured ice into his soul and he began to tremble.

"This one's really going to take off," she told the guards. She pointed at

his card. "See here for yourselves. A Sensitivity Score of one-and-a-half. When *they* go, they put on a real display. Are you sure you shouldn't put those restraints on him?"

"He's all right for the time being," Guard Two said.

"If you think so. But be sure you both swallow some Equilibria after we put him away."

"Put me away?" Dainig asked.

Her eyebrows only glowered toward him as she bent to work, her fingers racing over the computer-tape buttons. Dainig kept silent. He had learned his first lesson already. Here, in this place, he was a No One. He was ignored, talked over, and talked about, but was as insignificant as the chair he used. Everyone he met from this point on would handle him indifferently. *Naturally* he thought. *They have no feelings to give.* For a fleeting moment, he actually felt superior, but the quaking of his body reminded him that he was the one out of step.

At last the woman ceased pressing the buttons. She took up an instrument that glowed white-hot at the tip. Dainig recoiled, sure it was going to be aimed at his skin, but she placed a thin strip of metal flat on the desk in front of her and used the instrument to engrave his name on its surface.

She thrust the metal strip at Guard Two, and said, "I've put him in cell number 208. You may as well deposit him."

Fingers came out over Dainig's head and the piece of metal changed hands. "Shall we put him under for a while?"

"Under what?" Dainig's question burst out against his will.

"That's a special kindness," she answered the guard.

"Under what?" Dainig repeated, more forcefully.

"A sedative," the woman surprisingly explained for once.

"Yes! Please! If I can regain control of myself, I can help you help me—work on—" His tongue got twisted, but he went ahead and slammed

out the fearful words in spite of it. "Help you—Re-Condition me."

"Why such a special kindness for him?" the woman was still only intent on the guard.

"Don't get any notions," he told her. "I'm not concerned about him. I just thought we sometimes do it for others in a lengthy pre-Total condition like his, and he did do a first-rate job as the kid's Companion. Maybe he deserves a special kindness on his first day."

Here was the touch of pity he had believed impossible, and it shot tears down his face in a gushing stream. Of course, it wasn't true sympathy. It was merely the man's sense of decency, but that changed nothing of its effect. "Thank you," he sobbed out. "I did try with my work— as hard as I could."

"By all means, give him a sedative if you choose. It won't alter a thing since he hasn't reached Totality yet. He's sure to when he wakes up, so delaying it won't matter." She scribbled quickly on a sheet of paper. "Take this to the Pharmacy. I've only put him down for two hour's worth because that's all he deserves. I don't see him the way you obviously do. He had a hard position to fill, yes, but he also had the world in his hands. He failed. And because of that fact—" she faced Dainig squarely for the first time, her gaze cold, "I'm assigning you to Re-Conditioner Bretton. It's logical justice to put the world's worst Deviant under the hands of our most brutal Manipulator." Her syllables hit him like stones. "Bretton will teach you, Re-Emerger. Count your tears well, because once he gets at you, he will expect ten screams for every one of them."

She swerved to the guards. "Take him out of here. I don't want to see his face again."

CHAPTER NINE

It was a short trip back up the gray corridor to the room marked Pharmacy where he was injected with the minute dose of sedative administered by the clammy, ungentle hands of a male intern.

For the walk to his cell, he held himself erect and restrained his emotions as best he could, anticipating the blessed second when the first tendrils of sedative relieved him of the need. He told himself to erase the

menacing concepts he had heard about being "put away," trading tears for screams, and above all, about Bretton. He centered his mind instead on his surroundings. This place might be gray and lifeless, but it was clean and brightly lighted. Nothing fearful lurked in the corners. He had expected visible horrors.

Their monotonously treading feet arrived at a double-door set directly in the center of a towering steel wall. Everything stopped there: the corridor, the side offices, the rooms. So did they. Guard Two stepped behind him and, with a fracturing grip, clamped into both of his arms as Guard One went to a brown box set on a stand against the wall. Something was about to happen, and Dainig's arm muscles tensed to equal the pressure of the guard's locked hands.

Guard One opened the box and thrust both fists inside. One emerged bearing a wide strip of black cloth. The other raised a dark plastic ball with a wide opening at the bottom.

He stalked back to stand in front of Dainig. "From this point on, you're not allowed to see. Since you're still somewhat rational, you have the choice of which way you prefer to be blinded: the black-out helmet or the blindfold."

Dainig's eyes fastened onto the two objects as Re-Emerger's fear set his muscles quivering. "I'm not allowed to see where you're taking me? To see what's behind the door?"

"Believe me, you're better off. Now, normal procedure demands the helmet." He pulled some long, attached straps from the inside of the plastic ball. They ended in locking-metal. "As you can see, these form a harness that fits onto your body and secures the helmet in place."

"Why?"

"To insure against the remotest chance of you breaking away from us and pulling it off. I'll tell you right now, we seldom use the blindfold. For obvious reasons."

"But why can't I see? What is there to hide?" His imagination instantly leaped to visions of torn bodies and blood, of groans emanating from agonizing shadows. He laid his visions bare. "I'll hear it, so why can't I see it?"

"Which method do you prefer?" the guard was impassive. "This is the last free choice you'll have until you come back through this door, so make the most of it. And quickly. We have other Re-Emergers to process."

He didn't want the engulfing helmet. How would he breathe inside it? The whole thing was archaic and brutal. His stomach lurched because it was actually no choice at all. "You people aren't even human! Why do I have to face what's behind that door without eyes?"

"Try to calm yourself or you'll work against the sedative," Guard Two said from behind him.

"Make your choice," the other commanded.

"The blindfold then. I don't want the helmet. I'll drown in the helmet!"

"Do you have yourself well enough in hand to let me trust you?"

Guard Two argued, "It's his choice, and he did get the injection. I can feel his muscles going soft already."

"The blindfold!" Dainig shouted when he had so wanted to sound rational enough to convince the man. "If you'll permit me the blindfold, I promise I won't try to break away. I couldn't! I won't know where I am or what things are going on around me."

The last, more sensible statement decided the guard and he put the helmet back in the box. Gratefully, Dainig watched it disappear, then the black cloth was lifted in front of his face and settled over his eyes. He was blind. He stiffened in rejection, but Guard Two was ready for it and held him immobile.

The nearly silent whisper of the door being opened registered on his ears and he was taken up by both men, one on each side of him. They pressed him forward and he went with them, unable, in spite of his efforts, to tell when they had passed from the corridor into whatever hell waited behind the wall. He strained his head high, stimulating his ears to pick up every possible sound. Murky silence, pierced by an occasional, muffled scream that turned his blood to powder, was all he could hear over the unisoned thumps of their feet.

It was a long walk. It seemed forever, as he imagined atrocities

sprawling just beyond his reach, and he thanked the stab of the sedative-needle for the lassitude spreading outward through his body. They turned corner after corner, weeding their way through a giant maze he had no prayer of escaping. He gave in to inevitability, reminding himself that he was here of his own will, ready to suffer in order to live.

But did he have to be this terrified? Finally his legs became almost too heavy to push forward. The sedative was overcoming even his fear. As he became more and more drowsy, he surrendered and let the guards support him.

At last they stopped. He dimly heard a door open, was hauled three more steps, and halted for the opening of a second one. When one leg crumpled as he attempted another step, hands shot under his knees and armpits and he was lifted across empty space and placed horizontally on a thin but slightly-yielding mattress. He merged himself into it. His shoes were pulled off and the blindfold left his face, but he no longer cared. Sleep was flowing through his brain.

With no sense of time, he awoke slowly and lazily and remained prone, enjoying the lethargy of his body. It was dark beyond his eyelids. Warmth surrounded him, and the quiet was deep. He had no worries, no anxieties. That was a rarity. But, of course, his life wasn't the same any longer.

At the exact second that thought registered, the mattress seemed foreign. It wasn't his own with its peculiar indentations. He rolled off it and onto his feet in one move, staggering to balance himself upright without any point of reference. Because there was none. The space around him was indeed black-dark and reeking with unfamiliar smells.

"No! Now use your head and calm down," he muttered aloud. "You know where you are and why you're here, and it's going to be bad enough soon enough, so don't ruin what good there is in it. Don't flush the sedative away foolishly."

But his racing heart would not obey. He could actually feel his blood pressure climbing. He inhaled a great breath of antiseptic air and groped his way back until his hands touched the mattress. Lowering himself onto it, he stretched out. Every drop of sedative was precious and fear mustn't snatch it from him. He reasoned that if he lay flat with his eyes closed, giving his body physical signals that he was safe and relaxed, it would respond with more equilibrium.

He was right. His heart-beat slowed to an above-normal, but tolerable rate and he felt blood creeping back into his face. "I'll simply wait," he muttered, letting his voice take the edge off the silence. "I'll keep my mind on pleasant things, and let it all float..."

Peter!—Pain!—Torture!

The three visions came simultaneously, in bewildering confusion. He slammed them down, and blessedly, they stayed down, leaving him with a little wedge of triumph. But he couldn't expect his mind to remain blank without it dredging up the exact recollections he wanted repressed. So, he would give it something different to ponder.

His environment? Hardly. All he knew of that was this mattress, the dark and the odors. Because of the dark, any search would wind up as futile groping and probably bruises from unseen furniture.

His privacy? Which was sure to end all too soon when he was taken to a Re-Conditioning room? Not that, either, because it led to forebodings.

He settled for his past experiences, deliberately going further back than his first encounter with Peter to avoid recalling the alien feel of emotion. But it wasn't any use. Everything he brought up, every association, every conversation with friend, co-student, or even woman, suddenly stood clearly as associations of puppet-fools. He only heard unfeeling and unfeeling mouthings, and since he had grown this new dimension, those mouthings were abominable.

Turmoil lay everywhere he turned; no hiding place seemed deep enough to escape it. He was trapped with himself; battered by emotions in every corner of his mind; imprisoned in, and with, his condition. And totally alone. This was what Rich had meant about tortured souls waiting in the dark cells for their next treatment. This was why forcing them to wait was more sadistic than treating them, however inhumane the treatment. Then how could he ever survive it?

* * *

Crawling days-hours-minutes later, he heard a soft sound. One he hadn't caused himself. His legs stiffened straight out and he grasped his arms across his chest. He was about to be attacked! The silence he had so hated, he now clung to, because as long as he was alone, he was safe.

Another sound! Closer this time and behind his head, to the left. Something rocketed into his eyes. Blazing light! His lids pinched together to defend against it, leaving only his ears operative. They picked up the sigh of breathing. He stayed wrapped in himself, ready for whatever blow might be struck.

"Dainig—Friend! It's only me—Richmond. Open your eyes and look. What are you expecting, anyway? Some kind of assault?"

It was Richmond's voice, but he wasn't sure if it was welcome. He didn't budge and the voice turned anxious, "You haven't hit Totality, have you, Dainig? Have you?"

Dainig slitted his eyes against the light, and craned his neck to see behind him. "Richmond," he said the name hoarsely, his throat dry from the sedative. It had come true. Rich had found him in one of the cells, after all.

The thought of the cell pulled him upright and now that he could see, he swept his eyes around to locate himself. A tiny room, about nine feet by eight, with the mattress on a low bed flush against the righthand wall. Blankness everywhere else. No other furniture, no window. A barely visible difference in the front wall to indicate where the door stood. He bent to check under the bed and found solid metal. There was no "under the bed." Of course not. A man might hide in such a place. He might even feel safe, enclosed that way.

Richmond was stalled at his last anxious question. "Thank heaven you're still rational. I was worried for a minute there. Is it all right if I sit down with you?"

"What? You're asking?" A croaking laugh came out of Dainig. Freely and surprisingly. "You walk into a prisoner's cell and *ask* permission to sit down?"

"Never mind," Richmond warily eyed the empty mattress beside Dainig. "I should stand up anyway. It's more fitting."

"Re-Emergence doesn't rub off, does it? I'm calm, Rich. You can see that. As a matter of fact, I'm quiet enough for you to do all the gloating you want without being in any danger."

"That was unnecessary, Dainig. I didn't come to gloat. I'm not supposed to be here at all—Technician Trainee, or not—but when I heard about you, I—"

"Just had to see the prophesied phenomenon for yourself."

"You always assign the worst possible motives to me, and they're simply not true."

"Why, then?"

Richmond hesitated, then admitted, "In your present condition this will sound nearly as nasty, but I wanted to find out which way you went when you Re-Emerged. How far off the track you strayed."

"All the way, 'friend'." The word was sharply sarcastic. "I've felt every emotion there is to feel, and all in the space of a few days. Love, Compassion—"

"We won't discuss such things," Richmond cut him short.

"You'll have to when you become a Re-Conditioner."

"I'll be given special training first and certain drugs to use. I don't have those protections, yet. As I said, I'm not supposed to be here at all. No one but Re-Conditioners are allowed to talk to Subjects, but when I found out that Bretton won't get at you until you've Totalled, I figured it would be worth the chance. Once Bretton starts on you, I'll be barred completely."

The constant references to Bretton "getting at" him and the idea that he was Richmond's own special case irked Dainig out of proportion. He responded with a biting, "Look me over carefully, then. Examine my face. Has it changed? Are there lines on it, or livid blotches of color? Am I frothing?"

"That's enough of that, Dainig."

"Is it?" He was smiling, but it was a different smile than he had experienced with Peter. This one was pulling and vicious. "I think this is your first opportunity to see a Re-Emerger up close, Richmond. You boasted about coming to the cells, but you didn't say you weren't allowed inside them. I know for a fact, now, that you never even got beyond that

first huge door!"

Richmond shot back with the one emotion he did possess—irritation. "If you want to know, Dainig, your face *has* changed. It's gotten flaccid, or something, Malleable."

"That's known as *Expression*, friend. To have it, you must first have emotion. Want to try?" He didn't know why he was badgering the man. Richmond wasn't worth it. But something hi him wouldn't let go. Annoyances, piled up over the years without any means of being expressed; anger at being on exhibition for Richmond's benefit; something forced him to lash out.

Yet, if he drove Richmond from the room, the light would vanish with him and he'd be alone again. Finding a new deviousness, he changed his tone and asked almost helplessly, "Do they feed people, in here, Rich? Or is starvation part of the method?"

Richmond accepted his change of direction. "I can't tell you anything about it."

"Not even that much?"

"I'd be breaking your routine and Re-Conditioner Bretton would have me thrown out of training if he found out. He may not be starting on you right away, but he took time to set your schedule."

"You frighten me with those phrases," Dainig was astounded at himself for confessing it. "Routines and schedules that I know nothing about. It's like facing a crisis blind. I've already done that once today."

"I know. You used the blindfold. That took courage."

"Only determination. I came here on my own initiative, remember. I had a second choice. Right now, I could be miles away with Peter." His breath grunted and heat swelled in his eyes, blurring the room around him. Turning away quickly, he muttered, "I'm sorry, but it gets out of hand. I think it always will."

"And all because of that defective child."

"Don't call him that! He's not defective in his soul. Leave Peter out of

this or I'll fall to bits. Please!"

"You'll soon be over it. Bretton can set you straight in just a few weeks. Be thankful you were assigned to him, because it could have been longer."

Dainig turned back to him, needing help. "Tell me how to cooperate with him, Rich. I can't stand weeks of feeling this way."

"I don't know how," Rich said, his face calm.

"But you must know something. You've begun your training, so you must have some information! Just tell me a snatch of it. Please!" He was ashamed to see his hand reach forward, palm up, pleading.

Richmond backed away from it. His next words were as coldly uncaring as the words of everyone else in the world. "This sort of thing does you no good, Dainig. If I'm the cause of your present upset, I'd better leave. This might be the start of your Totality, and I don't care to witness it."

"You'll turn out the light," Dainig's voice was deep with futility.

"Of course."

"Then stay just a little while longer! I was doing pretty well before you interfered, and you can't leave me alone with what you've done to me."

"I didn't do it, Dainig. You caused it yourself. And you're becoming too unpredictable for my safety. Stay on the bed so you'll know where you are when the light goes out." He drew a small object from his pocket, touched the section of wall that formed the door, and was outside in one quick move, catching Dainig in mid-jump.

When the door shut, the light blotted out, and he had to feel his way back onto the mattress, wondering how Richmond had stayed so impassive when a man was pleading for a mere few minutes of his time? He couldn't have responded that way. He would have given the time. He might even have taken the pleading man's hand and tried to reassure him.

Of course, that was the reason why he was shut away in the black-dark while Richmond was safe outside in the light.

* * *

It remained dark, so Dainig couldn't guess at the passage of time. When the light came on, overly bright, he was still without a gauge because, being windowless, the cell cast no sun-shadows. During an early interval when the light was glaring, he spotted a circular variation of texture in the floor and, kneeling down, discovered two finger-sized indentations that allowed him to lift it. Beneath the dislodged cover lay the answer to his basic sanitation needs. His physical environment consisted of bare walls, the handle-less door, and that lifting-lid—all of it grim, gray, and hard. Except for the mattress. Its softness was his sole comfort and its friendly touch accepted his body readily. He clung to it and fought with his demons, finally understanding what Totality meant as he was caught up in wheeling spasms of remorse, fear, and grief for the loss of love so newly learned. He yelled and gibbered and whooped, battering the walls with his soul-cries, trapped in a vacuum of silence with the crippling emotions he had thought erased in the AEC Clinic when he was five years old. Food was never offered. Nor water. He wouldn't have noticed if it had been. All he had for security was his bed, and he held it dear.

* * *

The light was glaring when a slight sound sent him crawling across the mattress to huddle at its far end, one arm pressed hard against the wall beside him. A second sound —nearer this time—justified his retreat. The door was opening. Something was coming. The hand he had on the wall turned palm-down, ready to impel him away.

But in anti-climax, the door merely opened and a man stepped into the cell, stopping still for the half-second required for the wall to close at his back. He was a man of proportioned stature, a good four inches shorter than Dainig, with sparse blond hair and a rough-cut face. Dainig concentrated on his eyes. Eyes, he had learned; *spoke* to emotion and gave secrets away. But these eyes were a clear blue, and empty of everything save curiosity.

"Frederic Dainig?" The man paused for a response, received none, and without reacting to the rudeness, continued, "I am Re-Conditioner Bretton. From this moment on, I will be your sole contact with the human world. Remember my name."

This was Bretton. He wasn't physically imposing but his matter-of-factness, his cool self-assurance blew him into a giant. For some

reason, Dainig didn't utter a word.

"I've brought you some water," Bretton said. His left hand stretched out bearing a gray plastic glass that surprised Dainig because he hadn't noticed it until this moment. "Maybe if you swallow it, you'll regain your voice."

Dainig wanted the water yet didn't dare reach for it. It was held in a Re-Conditioner's hand and he was afraid to accidentally touch the man's skin. He sat unmoving, commanding himself not to even look at the glass.

"Come now, you have to be thirsty. You've been without water for seventy-two hours."

"No," Dainig's throat produced a mockery of sound. "One day. No longer." He insisted on it because one day without water couldn't harm him and made it unnecessary to take the glass from this man's hand. "I've been—here— one day."

"Which seemed like five or six, am I right?" Bretton had expression in his voice, but none was reflected in his eyes. "Believe me, it has been three days; therefore you're in need of fluid. I wouldn't have brought it otherwise, I am not kitchen help." He held it out still further and Dainig crept another two inches away. Pursing his lips, Bretton offered, "Very well. I'll set it on the floor between us where you can take it for yourself. I do insist that you drink it. Do you understand me?"

He bent to place the glass, then straightened, his waiting-stance so determined that Dainig edged his body from the wall and lifted the water out of self-defense. He had understood. He either drank it or he would be forced. As Peter had been forced to eat.

The liquid wasn't cold—not even cool—yet it was pure relief running over his tongue and down his throat. Physical relief only, because even as he drank, he wondered what had happened to him in the dark to make him afraid to reach for a necessity that he craved.

"Much better," Bretton watched him set the glass back on the floor. "And don't go back to huddling again. I realize you're terrified of me and I want you to be. You have reason. But, huddling on the mattress is no help. We are alone here, Frederic Dainig, and will continue to be alone. You may as well accept my presence and free us to take our next step."

Bretton was deliberately trying to heighten his fear and Dainig wasn't about to allow this. He might feel it but he was damned if he would let it show and give this man satisfaction. He sat with his feet on the floor, not deigning to huddle, but not answering, either.

"Come on, Dainig, *talk* to me! Or are you afraid words will betray you? Let your feelings out, man. I'm aware you have them and I don't mind one whit. I've watched you off and on these past three days, tossing on your bed, exploding into tears, digging your fingernails into your palms, biting your own hands bloody. You have nothing to hide and nothing you can hide."

As Dainig's attention swept over the bare cell, ferreting for some notion of how he had been watched, Bretton explained nastily, "There's a camera hidden in the wall. Don't waste time trying to find it because it's undetectable. All you need to realize is that you're never free from observation. Never free from me. The moment your name went down on my roster you became mine, Dainig. My lump of body—soul included—to observe, to handle, and eventually to rip clean of emotions in whatever way proves necessary."

"You use sweet words," Dainig felt rebellion in him that could easily change to hatred. "Rip, terror, torture—"

"Did I say torture?"

"If you didn't, it was what you meant! But I'm not paying attention to your words, Bretton. You're selecting them for a reason and I'm deaf to them."

He expected the Re-Conditioner to spit back, but he was wrong. "That's all right, too. At least you've begun to speak. We can now get to our business, and since you are ignorant of the procedures, I'll show them to you as we go along. First stand up."

"Why?"

"Because I say so. What's wrong, Dainig? Can't you face me standing up?"

"Easily. But there's no need for orders or caste distinction between us. I'm not someone your Police ran down in the street. I came voluntarily. I

only need to know the reason for doing something and then I'll do it willingly."

"All the better." Bretton's eyes didn't change, but Dainig sensed surely that the man was humoring him. "My reason for asking you to stand is that we have to remove the mattress."

"Again, why?"

"You'll see as we go. And I'm very pleased to hear you'll cooperate. Everything will be much easier that way. Will you stand up now?"

Dainig couldn't very well do anything else after his show of bravado, so he took to his feet, remaining close to the bed but free of it and its haven-like solidity.

"Next, we'll pull the mattress off and put it on the other side of the room," Bretton said. "I'll help you. It's not really heavy, but I'll help you. This time."

He had the strange reaction of wanting to shout, *Keep your hands off my bed!* but the idea registered as stupid, so he lifted the mattress-end closest to him. Still, in the process of moving it, he managed to handle most of it, himself. It was his and Bretton had no right to foul it.

When he turned back to the bed, seeing it bare, he froze where he was, shuddering in recognition. It was shiny, solid metal, seven feet long and three-and-a-half feet wide. In its sides were sections that waited to be pulled up and over—sections to transform themselves from bedstead to body-restraints!

Bretton stooped to touch a spot at the head and a two-foot platform rolled out and up to the level of his waist: a platform holding dials and a red switch, ready for his ringers to flick.

The bed itself was the shock table! The tool the Re-Conditioner used to administer electricity and sonics in currents that produced agony! His supposed "haven" was also to be his rack!

"Lie down, please," Bretton said, his tone calm and cool, as though a monster hadn't just sprung to life. Dainig's answer was to retreat against the far wall. "You must do it, you know. Will it help if I tell you the reason?"

Perhaps it would, since you're rational enough to understand what I say. I won't lie about this, Dainig. My surgery consists of pain. Not the nudgings of a child's AEC, but Pain! At any intensity I choose."

"And the table is your instrument," Dainig accused.

"Exactly. A remarkable one. Its entire surface is a gigantic sensor that will register every change in your body temperature, heart rate, and perspiration, then record the level of that change on the dials I have on my console. I'm trained to interpret those dials. To differentiate between acceptable fluctuations and the evil stirring of Emotion. When I see Emotion, I will administer the pain-shock. Every time, and again and again, until your unconscious reflexes remember their AEC training, re-learn Cause and Effect, and shunt the Emotion away without my help—before it touches you. That, Dainig, is Re-Conditioning."

He was a sudden coward in the face of it. Now even his comforting bed was gone. Stolen! His fear was ripe, and showing.

"You will please lie down. Now!"

Frantically looking from the blue eyes to the bed and back again, Dainig felt his last controls give way. His muscles shivered against his will as he cried out, "I can't have any place of safety, then? Not even one? You can walk in here any time you choose and turn my bed into a... ?"

"Any time I choose. I see you've followed the route so many of your kind take. You've come to cherish your bed as a rock to cling to in the dark. I'm sorry, Dainig, but it won't be such a peaceful place, anymore. You'll always know what you're lying on, and how it can change with the flick of a switch. Give up the notion of security. You're not allowed to have it."

Dainig waited, searching himself and his new feelings for an answer. He wanted to sink down and give way to something he couldn't quite name, but he was determined not to do it in front of this man. With his battle almost lost, he grabbed the bit of anger still ricocheting inside him and let it lead him to sullen cunning. "Then I simply won't lie on it, will I? Never without the mattress under me."

"Yes, you will," Bretton was fast falling out of patience. "And you may as well do it of your own volition because I left two superbly over-sized men waiting outside to assist you if you give me any trouble. They aren't

gentle."

"Maybe I prefer to use them, anyway." Dainig was sure he had Bretton on the run and intended to use this edge to prove the kind of man Frederic Dainig was.

Bretton's hands thrust down at his sides in a gesture of irked impatience. "You're going to make this as difficult as possible, aren't you! You can't see that your fancied wiles are illogical—created by emotion and nothing more. Your association with Peter has formed you into a half-headed expert and now you're trading roles with him, viewing me in the same light as you view Cooper and Mattison. As a Manipulator. Well, I'm not, Dainig. I'm a Do-er. I *act*, I do not maneuver. And I won't appreciate anything less than cooperation from you since I know you're more than the average, untutored subject." Without a pause to warn of his change of direction, he added more reasonably, "Why put on this show of belligerence? You came in voluntarily. You asked for Re-Conditioning."

"I did. But I expected to find some degree of decency in the process. Instead, I'm thrown in here and not fed, blinded by the dark or by the light, and now you tell me that my one comfort—my very *bed*—is the Machine! That is not decent!"

"You'd have to be a fool to expect better. Since you're not, the indecency of the procedure isn't the reason for your resistance. You want Re-Conditioning, yet you don't want it. I'll give you my diagnosis. It's Indecision, due to emotional swings which leave you bewildered. The belligerence is simple Fear, of course."

"You name it. You're the expert."

"In that, you're entirely right. I'm also 'up' to you, no matter how you fight me."

"Maybe not." Dainig kept straight on his line. "I've seen Manipulators at work, remember. I watched Mattison and Cooper badger Peter nearly to death. I know how playing-on-emotions is accomplished!"

"So you do. But don't be proud of it, because your knowledge will only stand in your way and result in difficulties the average man doesn't begin to face." He advanced three steps. "Even with those handicaps, assure whatever sane mind you have left that I'm capable of breaking through

your imagined experience and washing you clean. Accept the truth of that while you still can, and behave yourself."

Dainig didn't budge except to raise his head higher and let hostility spread across his face. The expression sent Bretton back the way he had come, moving slowly, cautiously alert. Out of reach, he didn't seem such a threat.

Bretton stopped near the bed-that-wasn't-a-bed and said in a persuasive, reasonable voice, "What if I told you that our first session entails no more than conversation to give me background on how your Re-Emergence occurred? On what caused it and how you coped?"

"I might be foolish enough to believe you because it's logical. Except, why do I have to lie on the table to do it?"

"Getting the feel of the table and your relationship to me are necessary steps in Re-Conditioning."

"Then I can't believe you, and you know it."

"I shouldn't argue with you, Dainig, but it's a novelty and I'm trusting you're worth the trouble. Getting the feel of the table is the second step in the Re-Conditioning process. The first was coming face to face with me. The second is the table. Lying on it produces effects of its own. Necessary emotional changes."

"Like learning how helpless I am under you—prone and fastened down—while you have your hand on the switch? I told you I'm experienced enough to be beyond maneuvering, Bretton."

The Re-Conditioner stared straight at him for the count of three, then grunted, "Very well, since you've come to your decision, I'll come to mine." He headed for the door, then halted mechanically, warning, "The Technicians outside will use crude force—another action you'll regard as indecent—but since you insist on taking a beating..."

He waited and Dainig waited but Dainig's inaction wasn't from choice. His body had stopped. It stood immobilized, echoing the blankness of his mind, and he felt the moments stretch as he struggled for a decision that wouldn't come.

The sudden jerk of the Re-Conditioner's arm toward the door jolted him out of suspension, and he half-shouted, "Don't call them, Bretton!" As the arm fell back and the danger was past, Dainig sagged and admitted what was now clear. "I've been manipulated already, haven't I?"

His words hung in the silence with no answer. He had been met, matched, defeated, and shown to be a prime fool in the bargain. Limp from the exertion of pretending courage he didn't have, he pushed away from the wall.

"Which end of the table is for my head?"

CHAPTER TEN

Naturally, he was told to lie with his head toward the console since, once he was in position, it effectively made him blind to Bretton's movements. On Bretton's command, he stripped himself of his clothing, then protected only by his brief undershorts, climbed onto the table—slowly—not ready to hurry his way into this particular future. Once he was prone, he discovered that the table was slightly contoured, compelling his body to lie where it directed.

"Keep your arms at your sides, but don't press them against yourself," Bretton ordered.

Dainig obeyed. Since he had travelled this far, there was no sense in doing anything else.

"Now let your legs relax into the cradles of the surface."

"They already are."

"So I see."

Even as Bretton said it, a purr sounded beneath Dainig and he was startled as eight cold, thin bars pounced upward from the table to touch his flesh: one on either side of his head; one on each side of his chest; the last four protruding in two pairs—one pair outside his thighs and one between them, placed high, near his groin.

He instantly heaved forward to protest their touch, but was shoved

back by the bars he had seen in the side of the table. They rose up and over him, more in number than he had counted, four of them to pinion him at his head, chest, hips, and ankles. In each pertinent case, they also made contact with the thin metal which had first intruded on his flesh.

These were the purveyors of the pain-shock. They would hold him down and minister to him at Bretton's will.

"Relax for a moment and get the feel of the machine before we begin our talk," Bretton said. Dainig had no prayer of seeing his face.

"I can imagine the impact of that little suggestion when you have someone trembling on this table from fright." Dainig made the Re-Conditioner's plan of attack seem petty. "I'm not struggling, Bretton."

"Which is most pleasing to me. It's only because of your high anger, you know. I'm afraid you can't leave my care with *that* intact, either."

"You're also hoping it will disappear fast because your threats don't have much impact against anger, right?"

"Stop your constant analysis, Dainig. I am the master here."

Dainig was too well aware of that. To this blue-eyed, unfeeling practitioner, he was no longer a human being, only a lump of nerve-endings. He was clamped down *by* metal *on* metal, with cold fingers invading him at crucial tender spots. Being the only one present who could claim to have a soul, he was also the helpless, structured target for this mechanic's wrenching tools.

"Ahhh," Bretton whispered, "but you *are* registering the beginning of Fear now, Dainig. My dials tell me so. What thoughts just passed through your mind?"

He refused to respond.

"When I pose a question, I expect an answer. Every time. No matter what your condition, no matter how terrified or broken you are, I expect an answer. That is a prime rule, which you must understand right now. If you won't follow it, I'll be forced to use drugs to loosen your tongue, and their after-effect is most unpleasant." He paused for a second to let his threat seep in, then changed his tone.

"For this first day, I'll restrain myself from using drugs, because we're only here to talk together. If you're willing. *Are you?*"

"To talk? Yes. But I'll keep my thoughts private."

"Today—but not tomorrow." Dainig heard a sound like the start of a recorder. "Very well, then, we're ready and we won't waste time. Describe to me the events leading up to your first sign of Re-Emergence. What did you experience? When and where did you experience it?"

Dainig's mind flashed back to the anxiety-ridden days in Peter's Complex. The memory shot off quakes inside him today which had only been subtle rumblings then.

"You've set the dials spinning," Bretton said. "Verbalize, please!"

Obedying that order came easily. It was. time someone knew what had happened to him and how he had suffered it all alone. It was a relief to tell it and have someone listen. Up to now, no one had been interested. He verbalized the disaster of those days, and the rest came effortlessly: the plaguing of anxiety; the unnoticed rise of Conscience where Peter was concerned; the hysteria of Peter's battering emotion; the frantic kidnapping; and his first experience with pity for the old, bow-legged woman.

When he reached that point, coherency left him, and the rest was told through a leaping crowd of tears, concern, terror, and love. And back to terror.

"I *had* to bring Peter back," he finished, tears itching maddeningly as they ran down beside his ears. "I couldn't stand the feel of compassion! I couldn't bear to cry! I had to bring him back to save *myself*. But it was such a betrayal! And this place was so unknown—so unfeeling—"

"Enough." Bretton's hand came onto his shoulder, patting it in a "learned" manner, just as he had learned to pretend to comfort Peter. "Take yourself in hand, Dainig. Otherwise you'll be in this over-wrought state when I leave you, and it will make the night hard."

Comfort? Concern? Did the man care a little, then? Through years of seeing feeling, had he changed from disgust to at least casual concern?

Dainig believed it was true, so he tried to calm himself in order to assure this man that he would survive the night. Bretton gave him time. Astonishingly, he even came to the side of the table and mopped away the hot tears. With the blue eyes peering down at him, controlling himself wasn't so difficult. Someone was in this with him, so he had a chance to master his condition.

Bretton went back out of sight. "You're doing extremely well, Dainig. My dials are settling down admirably. You can be proud of yourself."

"I want to be proud. It's one of the few emotions I'm allowed to have, and I want it. But you must cleanse me of the others. I don't want the others!" He realized he was talking to the man almost as a protector. It was childish and degrading, but strangely enough, he wasn't humiliated. Bretton was reinforcing pride as an acceptable state of feeling but he didn't care how he was manipulated into being clean again, so long as he *was* clean.

His breaths came more slowly, and at last he was at peace on the table, oddly secure in its metal embrace. It had kept him from many things: from pounding his hands against the hard walls, from bruising himself in the falls he would have taken in the fit of emotion.

It came to his hearing-sense that the recorder had long ago stopped whirring, so it didn't surprise him when Bretton said, "We've finished for today. You're an unusual man and you did well. I have an idea that you've even come to trust me a bit and to see me for what I actually am—your way to survival. Am I right, Dainig?"

It was difficult to admit in light of what he had put himself through earlier, but Dainig let the admission serve as his apology for that behavior. He even used the man's merited title. "I have, Re-Conditioner Bretton."

"Fine. We will get along then. I'm going to leave you now, Dainig. I'll release you from the table when I'm outside in the hall. You may then replace your mattress and rest. Before I go, I have a few rules to give you. They all pertain to your well-being. You'll be provided with the means to wash yourself from time to time, and at varying intervals, two people will enter the cell to clean it and bring you fresh clothing. They will be a maintenance man in the company of a technician. When they appear, you are to put yourself on the bed with your face to the wall and never look at them or speak a word. I'm afraid the technician carries a metal club to

insure your obedience."

"I understand," Dainig said.

Bretton continued, "Food will be automatically supplied and I'll see that some is sent to you before the lights go out again. In the front wall, there is a small service compartment that slides open. The food will be there on a tray that is bolted to the shelf. It will be hand food—things that don't require utensils. But it's nutritionally balanced. You won't suffer physically while you're in my keeping. Not *that* way."

The table burred alive and *Pain* racked through Dainig's head, chest, and groin in a spasm too deadly to be sorted! His back arched but couldn't rise, and his body twitched as his throat gave vent to the agony.

At the exact moment unconsciousness seeped toward him, the burring ceased and he lay limp under the metal bands. Achingly. throbbingly limp, his shriek changed to whimpers. He knew Bretton was gone as the holding bands retracted and the electrical contacts slid back into the table beneath his body.

His head fell sideways to the left and his eyes lit on the mattress tilted against the far wall. The mattress! The protecting layer to put between himself and this monster-bed. It was free to clutch up and replace, but he lacked the strength to rise and go after it. He had been betrayed, and Bretton—trained, skilled Bretton—was the Betrayer.

* * *

He spent the rest of the day and night—at least what he estimated to be the day and night—nursing his body and drowning in depression. When food appeared as promised, he nibbled at it. He had never cared for sandwiches, and bread was impossible to swallow on a throat parched from screaming.

Sometime during the spell of aloneness, the depression shifted to other feelings. Nervousness ballooned into fright; self-pity sprouted into grief over Peter's inevitably-fated life. He even heard himself laughing once—a wild, maddened noise that had no place in this cell. Laughter had no right to exist at all.

When the light burned, he paced, and when the blackness returned, he

curled onto the mattress, blessing it for covering the evil of the bed.

After four sandwiches and ten glass tubes of water, his privacy was jolted by the reappearance of Brecon. Only, this time, two big technicians manhandled him onto the table when he refused to lie down willingly.

From that point on, his time passed in treatments, followed by long periods of aching in the dark and being assaulted by his own searing emotions.

Every treatment was the same: the unceasing questions designed to provoke responses in him, the emotions that jiggled Bretton's dial, and the pain from the table such as he had never known could exist in a man's body without killing him. As time went on, he wished it would kill him.

From his angry stance of the first day, Bretton broke him down to actual "seizures" of emotion, all uncontrollable, and all punished.

"Why do you tremble?" Bretton asked.

"I'm afraid!"

"Go ahead and be afraid. You're allowed to be, and have reason to be."

Desperately, Dainig tried to reason with Bretton.

"I wanted to cooperate with you. If you'll let me cooperate—"

"You can't do *anything* on your own, Dainig. You belong to me, now. I have a certificate that says I can use you as I please. Does that give you *deeper* shudders?"

It did, and Dainig shrieked in pain because of it.

"I found out the details of what you did to Peter. Did you enjoy lying to him? Do you feel happy knowing how you used him for your own ends?"

"I tried to save his life, Bretton! I *did* save his life. No one can say otherwise."

"You're still defiant, are you? We'll have to work on that. I'll make a note."

Bretton's note was another turn of the switch and another arc in Dainig's body.

"Did you really learn to *love* that little boy, Dainig? Cooper claims you said so. How did it feel to love him? Is it something you can describe?"

"I don't dare. Your finger's on the switch."

"Not today. You've progressed, so I'm giving you leeway today. I'm actually curious, because few Re-Emergers experience Love. I've never seen Compassion in a single one of them. Your peculiarity will help anyone who follows in your path because I'll understand what they're suffering. Describe this kind of Love for me. Let yourself relive the moments and verbalize it for me."

A special warmth started in Dainig, sparked by Bretton's words. He put it down, refusing to go soft. The main purpose of Re-Conditioning was learning to recognize his emotions and then ridding himself of them. He set out to accomplish it now.

"Did you actually hold him in your arms?" Bretton asked, disbelief in his voice. "Did you pat his head? Was he warm?"

With the descriptive phrase, "pat his head," Dainig instantly re-experienced the silk of Peter's hair under his hand, and with the feeling, lost his battle. He was quickly floating in a wistful, desiring place, reaching back for the feel of affection and wanting it.

The dial jumped, Bretton's hand moved, and Dainig's scream coerced his brain to shy away from Love.

* * *

"You're in better control today," Bretton stated.

"Because I'm finally on to your viciousness." Why did he invariably tell Bretton things he should keep secret? He was using the Re-Conditioner as people once used Confessors! "You play on me the way the doctors played on Peter."

"You're right. But I'm better at it because my job is harder. You are not a defective child. In fact, you're a man with some knowledge of AEC. It

doesn't matter, however. You may logically see my methods at work, but you can't hide your emotional reactions from me. No, Dainig, I will settle for nothing less than stable dials and no reaction whatever. As I've told you before, you're *my* body, now. Shall I prove it?"

And again the switch made contact, and again Dainig shrieked, and again and again and again...

He came to understand that the table and its shock-pain were inescapable. He no longer forced the two technicians to manhandle him because he didn't need their bruises adding interim pain to his abused body. It moaned without them.

* * *

Time passed. He didn't know how much, but any duration was too much. He was progressing. The treatments were sneaking up on him and insidiously working their way. More and more often when he began to feel, reflexes in his brain kicked over, warning, *danger—pain—stop!* The signals denied the stimulus and toned down the emotion.

Yet something else was changing, too. Bretton's sadism had re-formed his initial willingness to be cleansed into a stubborn terror that said, "Don't let him change you into a copy of himself. Don't let him erase your heart! For a moment there with Peter, you *knew* what it is to be Human. Hold onto it!"

Bretton's empty face now showed him as a travesty of a man. His pitiless eyes were stony and repulsive. Dainig realized, too late, that he had been a fool to reject the life-giving forces he encountered at his Re-Emergence. Hindsight convinced him, and he no longer wanted to be Re-Conditioned. But, of course, he had no choice. He would either stand up from that table as a re-born puppet, or he would die on it.

* * *

The intrusion came when he was lying in the black-dark, trying unsuccessfully to steer his mind from the raging pain of his body.

"Dainig?" someone questioned softly.

He lay still. Unable to see, he must not be seen, either. Yet the voice was

not Bretton's. It was a woman's huskier tone, modulated and somehow tentative.

"Dainig! Say something so I can locate you. I'd rather not turn on the light."

"You can't turn it on. Only Bretton orders my world."

"Ah—so you're on the bed."

Soft footsteps came close and then hands were on his chest, groping, being used as eyes. He twisted away. "Don't touch me!"

"I'm sorry if I hurt you. Just sit still and let me find a place for myself. Are you lying down?"

"No! And I won't! I can't see you, and I don't know who you are or what you're going to do to me, and I want you *out of here!*"

"Quiet, now. Quiet, Rick."

He hadn't heard that name in so long it echoed hollowly. "I'll stay on my feet, if you prefer," the un-seen shadow added, "but we're going to talk. First of all, you know me, Rick. I'm Laine. Laine Todd."

"Another Re-Conditioner? Are you and Bretton going to work in *shifts*, now? I'll never survive that."

"Be sensible. You're not even assigned to me. I failed you badly in that respect. I lost you, and I've come to..." She stopped. "Do you understand me at all? Do you recognize my voice?"

"I do. But I don't trust you."

"Of course not. I checked Bretton's daily charts and you've had a particularly nasty time of it. I also checked your progress, so I don't think I'm too late. I hope I'm not."

"Why are you here? Were you sent to rouse my sexual drives? Maybe Bretton thinks love and sex are the same thing and figures it's a good way to get me for Love again? Well, you'll fail, because they're not the same thing!"

She said slowly, scolding by carefully spacing her words as he had sometimes done with Peter, "Re-Conditioner Bretton does not know I'm here. He'd be within his rights to eject me bodily if he found out. Is that settled? I hope so, since we have very little time to talk and I have a lot of things to ask you."

"I don't answer questions."

He heard her sigh before she continued, placatingly, "It's true that I'm a Re-Conditioner, Rick, but I'm not *your* Re-Conditioner. The current in the table isn't even active. I simply want to find out how far you've progressed in your re-training and what you think about it. I was told you turned yourself in. Did Richmond finally convince you?"

"I Re-Emerged, and you know it. The news must have raced through the whole building."

"Undoubtedly. But, unfortunately, I wasn't in the building. I was on an enforced vacation. I needed the time off very badly, but I balked at taking it until my superiors insisted. My intention was to stay here. To *be* here when your crisis came."

"Why?"

"Because I'm as good as Bretton and I was certain I could have you assigned to me."

"You're better than Bretton. You hounded me, and even touted me off the stability tests when Rich advised me to take them. I wouldn't be here if you hadn't done that."

"You might have shortened your time in the cells, but you would be here just the same. I advised against the tests because they were sure to betray your condition and rob you of learning to feel. You were entitled to Re-Emerge. It's an experience no one should miss if it's offered."

Dainig was lost—confused. The things she said made no sense. "I wish I could see your eyes so I'd know if you're being honest. At least have a chance." He laughed a short, jerking laugh. "It wouldn't help. You're as blank-faced as the rest of the world."

"You won't talk to me in the dark?"

"I don't *like* the dark."

"Then stay where you are and I'll go out and re-cycle Bretton's pattern so the lights will come on. We don't have time to waste. Tomorrow may be too late for you, if today isn't, already."

He heard her move away, the door open and close, and then the light sent his eyelids pinching into each other. When he lowered his hands from his face, she had returned.

It was, indeed, Laine Todd, dressed in a drab, gray coverall to match all the colors of this miserable place.

"Does the light ease you?" she asked. "And will you answer *that* little question, at least?"

"It helps," he surrendered only partially, still suspicious.

She looked down at him soberly. "Your face is ravaged. I don't like to see that. You've had a hard time. Bretton has gone at you savagely, doubling and tripling your treatments and shock-levels beyond the limits of decency. All because he sees your case as his greatest challenge to date. I'm sorry for you, Rick."

Sympathy was being offered again and his eyes swelled with tears, hateful, because he knew the sympathy wasn't real.

She noticed it and latched on quickly. "Can you stop yourself? Can you keep from crying?"

"Just watch me." It required the use of belligerence, but he doused the tears before they escaped his lashes.

"Good." She was strangely fervent. "You're far enough along then, but I'm still not certain if you're *too* far. Are you able to control yourself most of the time?"

"I'm learning fast."

"Which means, 'not quite'." She drew back from her clinical musings to guide him again. "Since you finally answered one of my questions, you can answer another. What's your present attitude toward being

Re-Conditioned? Now—today? You surrendered yourself voluntarily, but quickly grew rebellious and haven't stopped fighting Bretton ever since. Your daily records tell me you may have changed your mind about coming here. Have you? Are you still so desperate to get free of emotion? Try to discount the pain you've suffered and be honest."

"You ask too much, Re-Conditioner. Bretton will read my answers in your nice, neat report and I'll pay for every one of them."

"You will anyway, whether you answer or not. What can Bretton do that he won't do in *spite* of what we tell each other? Please answer me, Rick."

Her sudden shift from irritation to near-friendliness threw him off balance and he fell instinctively into the Bretton-induced habit of speaking his mind. "I'd never surrender myself again. Not only because it betrayed Peter, but because my perspective has changed and I don't *want* to be emotionless, anymore. I've watched conditioned people work on me, torture me, and never even care! I've seen their blank souls, and I owned more than that. I'd keep hold of it."

Her response was to sit down, but he swore he saw the faintest flicker of a smile on her face. That was impossible, of course. "Then I have things to tell you, Rick. Crucial things which I only have time to say once. Is your mind clear enough to grasp what you hear? I'd give you something for your pain, but there's no safe way to do it."

"I'm at the point where pain is my way of life, so don't let that fool you. My head's clear enough to keep my defenses intact. You may be acting another part, but you're still a Re-Conditioner." It was an accusation.

"Very well, be suspicious if you have the need. I've opened you enough to get to my business and I'll do it under whatever rules you set. You've used up so much time that I can't even lay down a background for you, so I'll just hit this like a briefing. But be prepared, because the facts you'll hear are startling."

She leaned forward, her dark hair swaying with the motion, and her eyes took on a black glitter as she jabbed sentences at him in fast succession. "Fact Number One: Re-Conditioning doesn't work! Not anymore, and not on everyone. Once certain people Re-Emerge, we can do everything short of killing them on our tables and still only produce a temporary cure. They Re-Emerge again."

"That's not true," Dainig protested. "I've known people who—"

"You are not to interrupt me!" she blasted out with authority. "I'll qualify what I've said this once, but I won't stop to do it again. *Some* people stay Re-Conditioned, yes, but anyone with a low Sensitivity Score invariably comes back to us. You, Frederic Dainig, have a *very* low score.

"On to Fact Number Two. The world has been gradually changing around us, Rick, until it's nearly stable enough to tolerate emotion as a natural condition for human beings again. If you think about it, you'll find you've noticed it, yourself. Our population is shrinking, not expanding. The crowds grow thinner every year. The pace of change, and therefore the pace of stress, has slowed down drastically. It will soon be possible to exist with emotion—just as human beings were intended to exist. Yet we go right on stealing it from our children without giving them a chance to discover the truth." She sat back, silent for the space of two minutes, then asked, "Do you have those two facts in your head?"

"I heard what you said, but I'd never label it fact. It's unbelievable."

"Believe it. Next, I have some questions for you, and I expect to have them answered briefly, frankly, and willingly." No matter what she did, it seemed she was incapable of keeping the brusque attitude of a Re-Conditioner out of her manner. "What emotions did you experience when you Re-Emerged? What did you feel?"

"Everything," he answered automatically. "At least, the beginnings of everything. I laughed, I felt pity, I loved. Yes, I loved!" He spoke the last defiantly.

"And it was as revolting as you expected it to be?"

"It wasn't. It intoxicated me."

"Then explain why you surrendered yourself to this place. Everyone else runs from it, terrified. Why were you different?"

This question was one he wanted answered himself, so he considered before he spoke. "I think it was the compassion. I felt it once, and was drowned by it. Don't call me a fool for saying this, but compassion ballooned so big it was like a presence in itself, like another being engulfing my body and my soul."

"Compassion! Oh, you're so very fortunate," she said quietly, nearly with envy. "I've never known of anyone who felt compassion. You proved me right, Rick. You're definitely unique and worth saving."

The moment was intensely soft in spite of his bewilderment at her strange reaction. He had the sudden, insane idea that he was sitting beside another feeling creature. He had just begun to relax into this warmth when she destroyed it. Sharply.

"You're going soft. Don't, because the next part is nasty. A while ago, you claimed I hounded you. You were right. And I did it at what, to you, was the worst possible time— the time you were spiking symptoms and running scared. But I had good reason. You see, I made the decision to include you in this a long time ago—way back when I first suspected your breakdown—so I stayed as close to you as I could, even though you kept pushing me away. You can't shut me out, now, and the time has come to implement my decision. But first must come a preface. A penalty. And this is something you *must* fully believe, because the penalty protects secret and highly dangerous information. Are you ready?"

"No—I don't know," he felt fear tremble inside him.

"I say you are, so here is the penalty given in the words it deserves. You will not repeat a syllable of what I tell you in the next few minutes, because if you show so much as a sign of betraying me, you'll be putting an end to your life. I swear I'll descend on you in the dark, bringing two of my strongest technicians, and we'll bolt you to that table where I'll turn the voltage to its top limit. You'll die, Dainig, and Bretton will simply find you dead of an apparent heart attack."

"No! I don't want to hear this!" his voice shuddered. "You can't come in here and hit me with a threat like that. I won't listen to your secrets. I reject them!"

"An expected reaction. Every subject I've approached has cried the same thing, out of fear. But they listened and so will you."

"Now you've reverted to a Re-Conditioner's sadism, using my forced presence for your restraining table and your vicious threat as the shock."

"I have no choice. There are other lives besides yours at stake, so this is too important to let you misread my intent."

"I could hardly do *that*. Not after..."

"Good. Then you're ready to listen," she cut him off, then continued rapidly, giving him no chance to avoid the secrets or the penalty.

"Assuming you remember the two facts about the failure of Re-Conditioning and about the present state of the world, I'll go ahead with the rest. We've been aware of the relapses in Re-Conditioned people for several years, now. There has also been a parallel increase in the rate of initial Re-Emergence. All of this is documented, Dainig, but closely guarded except from the people who spotted it as they ran across it in their work: namely, the Re-Conditioners.

"Three years ago, this all erupted in our ranks and split my profession into two opposing factions. One side— Bretton's, incidentally—insisted on putting these wretched people back on the table as often as they relapsed, in spite of the changed conditions in the environment. The other side supported investigating ways to preserve them whole, with their emotions intact, and teaching them to live in the world as it is until the day when AEC is no longer necessary. It was a hard-fought battle, but the government agreed with Bretton's side, so the plans of the second were rejected. Not only were they rejected, they were ruled traitorous in order to restrain those particular Re-Conditioners from ever attempting to carry out their ideals."

She turned sideways on the bed to stare hard into him. "Right now is the time to remember what I said about the table, the pain, and the heart attack. This is where the penalty applies. Because, you see, despite the government's ruling, there is a growing, active group of Re-Conditioners and their technicians who refuse to let blind power destroy what is now possible for Humanity. Lab workers who *Re-Claim*, not Re-Condition. *I* stand with them, as one of them. *I save*—where and when I can."

Dainig was speechless from shock: not the punishing shock of the table but something much deeper.

"At least give me the courtesy of a response," she said. "Surely you realize what this confession means to me. My work is totally illegal and punishable by execution. Yet I told you freely because I'm here to offer you the option of Reclamation; to offer you *life*, Frederic Dainig. Feeling, caring, full life!"

Dainig pulled away from her eyes, his heart out of control. He lurched

upward and rushed for the far wall, hitting into it with bruising force. He slammed his palms flat on the wall and gasped for breath, caught in a maze of feeling with no way open in which to react.

Strong arms enclosed him, pulling his hands to his sides so his muscles stopped straining, and a body pressed close as a voice intoned, "Control—control—control. Reason and sense—reason, reason. You're frightened of these facts because you're afraid to feel guilty for turning me in. There's no need to fear guilt because you can't have any. I am responsible and I won't allow you to betray me. I am not Peter! Control, Dainig—control."

Laine was holding him! *Her* arms, *her* body, *her* voice. *She* was chanting "Control," and only chanting it, not underlining it with agony, but guiding him expertly, nevertheless. He tried desperately to obey her, setting his consciousness on what she said about guilt, and as he attempted it without a jolt of pain to coerce him, he found her method tested true. It focused his whirling emotion, brought peace back to his soul. Then humiliation cascaded over him in waves.

"I'm sorry," he half-moaned. "I'm like a child, and I'm sorry. I don't know what made me run, but I'm ashamed."

Her imprisoning arms let go and she eased him around to face her, placing firm but gentle hands on his shoulders. "You were trying to escape yourself, Rick. It was perfectly natural, but you don't know that, because according to Re-Conditioning practice, no one explains anything to the victim. He has no chance to help himself as you just did."

"But why did I feel everything and nothing? Both at once?" He couldn't look at her.

"Re-Emergers always do. When emotions return, they crash in over-blown, and they hit fast and hard. During Totality, it's close to insanity. It's always frightening but this latest panic was my fault, and I'm truly sorry. I expected you to match what other subjects give me when they hear my offer, but you're not like other subjects, Rick. You're overly sensitive. I should have considered that before I made my approach."

She kept on talking, explaining his motives to him, giving him time to take them in, understand them, and calm down. "I offered you something you want with all your soul, but I mixed it with danger and made you

uncertain. Your first thought was to betray me and save yourself, wasn't it? You didn't want the guilt—not added to the guilt you already feel over Peter—yet you weren't sure you were strong enough *not* to betray me. Bretton has done this to you, Rick. Wash him out of yourself and never be afraid of what you feel, no matter what it is."

He suddenly *felt* her words, and it was more than simply hearing them. They promised secure peace for him. He had the insane urge to draw her close, not as a woman, but as an understanding, "giving" human being. But he couldn't bring himself to do it, and said, instead, "Don't look at me, anymore. Let me sit down, away from you. I'm ashamed."

"All right, if you must," she released him entirely. "But you'll have to savor your humiliation and hear the rest of my story at the same time. I came to keep you whole, and if I don't complete my work tonight, I may not have another chance. Bretton doesn't have you yet but he has too much. Your response to my chanting proves it. You're becoming conditioned to things other than pain, Rick, and before he gets you back on his table, I want you firmly settled on my side. Our side. The next time he gets to you, you must be aware of *why* you're there and be armed with the means to fight him."

"I thought you were going to *save* me! Sending me back to that machine isn't—"

"It has to be done with everyone we Re-Claim. I don't enjoy pointing this out but I must be honest. What happened to you just now shows me you're not ready. You need a few more of Bretton's un-restrained treatments in order to control yourself to a level where you can enter our process."

Dainig was aghast.

"But you just said he has too much of me already."

"He won't get any more, I promise. Once you know why you're letting him supply the shocks, he can't win. He'll actually work for us by removing your "highs"—the peaks of your emotions—and leading you to the point where you'll be able to fool him."

"There's no way to fool a dial!"

"You're wrong. Once you're ready, my group takes over. We see to it that increasing doses of Equilibria are placed in your drinking water. With the uncontrollable highs gone, the drug will help you feign a state of non-reaction, and Bretton's dials will register you as successfully Re-Conditioned."

Dainig laughed, a sound of malicious glee. "That's setting him against himself! I can climb onto that table and lie to him all I..." He dropped off, finishing with a quavering mutter, "But only after I've let him abuse me some more."

"My insides hurt when you say a thing like that," her comment was strange. "But there's no way I can spare you. Just hold fast to this promise, Rick. After a few non-drugged treatments, we'll supply you with the appearance of what he wants you to be, drugging you gradually so he'll believe he's accomplishing it, himself, and eases up until he lets you go completely. You can stand the extra times with him when you have that kind of promise in your future."

"And after he certifies me Re-Conditioned? What do I do, then? Where do I go?"

"As one of our Winners, you'll go back into society. Naturally, you'll be denied re-entry into the Clinic and have to find other work. But you'll be free to feel, Rick!"

"And if I'm not able to conform well enough? What about the people who can't? There must be some. Do you just let them die on the tables?"

"Of course!" she was out of patience. "We're all heartless puppets."

"I'm sorry. I didn't think before I blurted that out. But if you don't let those people die, how do you handle them?"

"In special hideaways—safe villages we've chosen to shelter our so-called Losers among small populations of normals. They won't concern you, believe me. You'll be a Winner. I can judge your strength just by your stubbornness."

Dainig thought hard for long moments and she allowed him the time. Finally he said, "So, to gain this new life, I have to give myself to Bretton *and* to you. Then, once I'm free of him, I'll have the promise of protection

from your people for the rest of my life." He believed it might be true, but since he didn't trust his own feelings anymore, he had to check out every doubt he found. He faced her squarely and half-lied, "I'd like to get my mind off Bretton's table for a minute. So do you mind if I ask *you* a question?"

She checked her wristwatch. "Ask it, but don't waste time."

"Why were you able to help me when I panicked? To analyze my reaction the way you did. Is that something new? I thought Re-Conditioners were nothing but dials and switches."

"And you suspect you've just run across another part of our Re-Conditioning method. You're so very suspicious, Rick, and you're also wrong. Most Re-Conditioners are just dials and switches, unfortunately. The difference in me is... " she hesitated, then sucked in her breath and declared, "The difference in me is that *I* Re-Emerged, myself. I endured it, so I can understand it."

"You did not!" Dainig took to his feet again. This didn't ring true. "The government wouldn't let anyone with a low Sensitivity Score become a Re-Conditioner, so you couldn't have Re-Emerged, yourself!"

"You're only partly right, Dainig." She was irritated with him and had switched back to his last name. "My Sensitivity Score is a stable Seven, so I entered training with no trouble. It simply happened that two years ago I had one of my hardest rosters, topped by such a traumatic case that I was given a leave of absence when I finished with it. A four week leave. I was swallowing Equilibria day and night, but by the middle of the first week I knew it wasn't helping. I was wracked with anxiety. Fortunately, because of my training, I recognized what was happening to me and let it come. I fully Re-Emerged during the first weekend, experienced everything I could dredge up during the second week, and due to my professional experience and high Sensitivity Score, got myself into decent enough shape to hide the entire affair by the time I had to return here."

He stood mute, wondering where his trust had gone so quickly. But her story was preposterous! She couldn't have gone through this horror. Not Laine Todd. Not all by herself. Her tale was preposterous, so it followed that she had a sinister motive for telling it.

"You don't believe me? Why, Rick? Has Bretton ever shown the slightest

trace of the insight I have into your outbreaks?"

"*Bretton* hasn't had the need. He's never been alone with me when I wasn't locked down on the table. He hasn't needed tricks—just straightforward agony." He gave vent to his suspicions, "I'm sorry, Re-Conditioner Todd, but you made a mistake when you added that last eye-popping lie. It was overdone and it exposed your plot. All of the faked sympathy, so carefully balanced with death-threats, are part of my Re-Conditioning. *Bretton* sent you here to grind me into easier prey—to prepare me for his kill."

"How on earth did you arrive at that idea?"

"It wasn't hard. If I crawl onto *Bretton's* table believing it's for a *reason*, I'll be wide open to him. I've been fighting him off with hostility but if I follow your road, I'll drop the hostility and see him as my *tool*, allowing my emotions full play just to help him tone down the Highs you were so careful to mention. And I'll suffer for it and be thoroughly transformed into a puppet for it. You were honest in one thing, only. I am different enough not to be deluded."

"You're wrong, Dainig. All wrong. You're still blowing with every gust of emotion that touches you. You can't permit yourself that weakness, anymore."

"Get out of my cell and turn out the light again. I prefer to fight my monsters in the dark! I don't like to see them standing right in front of me."

She planted her legs firmly, refusing to accept this defeat. "Now you're flying with anger. Stop it! I've offered you life, and if you don't set the plan with me tonight, you won't have another chance. I want to save you, but I can't endanger myself too far. There are other people who need me, too. You may be a particularly good one, but you're still only one!"

"Out!" he pointed to the door. "It's only natural for a man in my condition to lose control of himself, even to the point of attack! You'd better remember that. *Bretton* hasn't touched my anger and it's getting bigger every second. Get out!"

She wavered between him and her point of escape. "Don't do this, Rick! Let me help you. Please let me help you!"

He took a menacing step toward her, saying nothing, but feeling hatred. With one last frustrated raising of her hands, she gave way and left him alone. Yet she had the last thrust, after all, because he saw her face in that moment of flight, and he almost swore there was a tear on her cheek.

The next time Bretton came to him, neither one of them mentioned Laine's aborted plans. Dainig had no need since she certainly had run straight to the man with the details. At least the heightened intensity of administered shocks pointed that way. Bretton was perturbed, and punishing him because of it. He survived by clutching his own victory close and being proud of himself, letting the pain erase memory of the tear he had imagined in Laine Todd's eye.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

How long had he been here? Food appeared irregularly, unseen people came to clean, but there was no way to tell time. One thing was certain. He was going to die, either on the savage table or alone in the barren cell, because some devil in him refused to capitulate to Bretton. Whatever it was, he was doomed to the emotional storms that dominated him when he was locked away and lonely, and he was fated to spend the rest of forever under Bretton's sadistic switch-finger.

During one of the shorter periods of light Bretton permitted him now, preferring to keep him blind to heighten his fantasies, two husky guards stamped into the cell. He remained where he was on the mattress as they stood staring at him.

The taller one broke the silence. "He's a mess, but as long as his coverall's clean, I guess they don't care."

"Wrong. They want him as presentable as possible. We'll have to comb his hair and shave off his beard stubble," the shorter one answered.

"Who are 'they'?" Dainig asked.

As usual, his question hung there, ignored, and the shorter guard posed one of his own. "Are you going to sit still for us, Dainig? Or do we have to fasten you to the table for the job? It makes no difference to us."

"Tell me what's happening," Dainig tried again. "If I understand what

you need, I'll cooperate, but you're scaring me with your secrets."

"Poor creature," the tall guard mimicked concern. "But then, why not? A situation has come up, Dainig, and you're leaving your cell. It's an incredible chance, so make the most of it."

"Where are you taking me?"

"Uh-uh. I've told you enough. You want to leave this hole, don't you?"

"Yes!" He changed direction, "And—no!" To see something other than these bleak walls was a deep temptation, but suddenly what lay beyond their blankness was Unknown and fearful. Who *were* "they"?

"All right, Redmond," the taller guard said. "He's not rational, so pull the mattress out from under him and we'll lock him down."

Dainig pressed his fists against the cushion. "No need— no need!" In the face of what was about to happen to him, he had no heart for adding the table's metal grasp to it. "I'll clean myself up, if you'll let me."

"You will sit still and that's all you will do," Redmond said gruffly. "This has to be finished quickly because you're wanted quickly."

The taller one left the cell and returned with a grooming kit and a mysterious box, which he placed on the floor with no explanation. Dainig closed his eyes and let them work. Snarls were pulled from his hair, then the tickling hum of the razor passed across his face.

"That's the best I can do," Redmond straightened, the razor in his hand. "They don't expect him to be un-marked, anyway. On your feet, Dainig."

He obeyed readily. That was one thing Bretton *had* taught him. His eyes homed-in on the taller guard picking up the second box. When he lifted the cover and Dainig saw what lay inside—a blindfold and a black-out helmet— he protested, "Why? I've *been* here, now. I don't need to be kept from seeing again!"

"He's defiant, so we'll use the helmet," the tall guard decided.

"He has the privilege of choosing," Redmond contradicted him. "So,

which will it be, Dainig?"

There was no use in arguing with heartless statues. His shoulders sagged with his decision. "The blindfold. I won't try to run."

He submitted to the blindfold and to the strong hands that immediately gripped his arms, and then they began to walk. Logic said this new place was no more than the exterior walls of row on row of cells, but his body trembled anyway, because his destination was once again unknown. He was fast approaching "they", and those four, intense letters might signify anything.

Their feet pounded a steady rhythm until one of Dainig's steps caused a jerk backward on his arms and he stumbled as the guards led him to the right, through an opening door. After five more strides, the hands released him. Fingers touched the fastenings of the blindfold, and it was off.

Mattison and Cooper sat before him, shielded from his unpredictability by a large desk. The room was of a good size; in contrast to the constant gray he was used to seeing, its walls were tinted the palest of creams, and its floor space was dotted with two semi-easy chairs. There were even some books stacked in a midget bookcase.

Everyone was silent in the moment of encounter until Dainig's surprised eyes lit on the name-plate perched at the desk's edge. It read, Lawrenz R. Bretton. He made a peculiar, small sound and swiveled to look into the corners behind him.

"Yes, Dainig, I'm here," Bretton said from where he was lurking out of immediate sight. He spoke to the guards, "Put the Re-Emerger into the chair and wait by the door. Inside. I want you close. This man tends to go berserk."

Now the room was alive with movement and Dainig suddenly preferred it the other way—still. Bretton's presence made the difference. But he sat down willingly, his knees weak from the combination of people who surrounded him. As Bretton walked to the desk—remaining on Dainig's side—he almost wished the guards would leave their hands on him. At least they were known quantities.

"Doctors Mattison and Cooper have business with you, Dainig, but I do not intend to leave the room," Bretton was clearly irritated. "This is an

unprecedented circumstance. Re-Emergers are never brought from their cells. Therefore, I want you to understand that any damage it does to your progress will have to be overcome. By the two of us."

"That's not fair!" Dainig countered. "I was dragged here, I didn't ask to come."

"At least his voice is the same," Dr. Mattison said. "Otherwise he's a disaster. He's aged ten years. He will do, nevertheless."

"I'd like it better if he were useless to you," Bretton told her bluntly. "I opposed this from the beginning and should have had my way. This man is my subject, and—"

"We're aware of your objections, Re-Conditioner," Mattison even managed to override Bretton by following her normal pattern. "Our requirements are more crucial or we wouldn't have received the Board's agreement. We'll give him back to you in quick order."

"I'm not a piece of the furniture," Dainig inserted his voice. "If this concerns me, then *talk* to me."

Mattison levelled her gray gaze on him. "Your involvement isn't necessary, Dainig, since we merely need the use of your body."

"This will not be handled that way!" Bretton insisted. "I want him told what's going to happen to him word by word. That way, I may salvage something in emotional shock. I'm here and I'm listening, so get on with it."

"Whatever you say, Re-Conditioner," Cooper bowed to the man's authority. "Well, Dainig, we..." It had an upward inflection and was left unfinished. Cooper didn't know how to begin.

Mattison had no trouble. "We're here because of Peter. A crisis has come up, and—"

Dainig reared forward in his chair. "What's wrong with him?"

"Nothing you didn't cause," Bretton said savagely.

For once, Dainig ignored his Ignorer. "Does he still feel betrayed? Is

that it? I was sure he'd be over that by now. I mean, it's been so long."

"Four weeks isn't very long," Cooper said.

"It's more than that!" Dainig was certain. "I've lost track of time, but surely it's—"

"Four weeks," Bretton interrupted, assuming one of his faked smiles. They were so full of sham that they were effectively leers. "It will grow longer very soon."

"Forget your threats, Bretton, I only want to know about Peter," Dainig defied him. "You said a crisis, Dr. Mattison. Has something happened to him?"

Cooper answered, instead, "Peter is at the point where—"

"No!" Brett on cut him down. "Tell Dainig the story from the beginning. Circumstance by circumstance."

"What is the object?" Mattison demanded.

"The object, Dr. Mattison, is to let Dainig hear what he did, and *feel* what he did to his 'beloved' little boy. He is not to be treated as an equal. I will not allow you to consider trauma-effects, in his case, because I *want* trauma-effects. If repeating the story makes you uneasy, then I advise you to look to yourself."

Even Mattison squirmed under the prying glance of a Re-Conditioner. She spoke relentlessly, adding vivid words to satisfy the man who had so subtly threatened her. "You saw the way Petter reacted when you handed him to us, Dainig. You filled him with promises of living free in a world that can never belong to him. Worse yet, you returned his love—a thing he's never felt done before. Then you ruthlessly threw him at us and disappeared."

"You don't have to describe that day. I remember it to the point of hatred." Dainig fought down the vision of Peter reaching for him, crying for him. He held it at bay with the certainties he had built for himself in the dark of his cell. "He recovered from that. He never did remember anything for very long, so he must have forgotten that day and returned to his normal routine."

"He cried for three days," Cooper stated flatly. "But, yes, he did come out of his active grief."

"You used it for Viewings, naturally," Dainig accused.

"As a matter of fact, we didn't," Mattison took it up. "Crying was not what we required of him. You have to understand what your actions did to the general populace, Dainig. A peculiar apathy settled over them while you were hiding the boy, and it was imperative that we produce a Happy Viewing to set them right again."

"We announced Peter's return," Cooper explained, "and said he would be back on View within a few days. The announcement, itself, helped greatly. Sales of Euphoria tripled as everyone swallowed it to celebrate."

"Pitiful fools. Needing Euphoria to be glad over having Peter back is ridiculous," Dainig muttered.

"But Peter did not perform!" Mattison jerked him out of his gloating. "When he stopped crying, he turned morose —depressed, and stubborn in it. We can't get a smile out of him for the audiences, yet we've had to keep our schedule and put him back on View."

"You were wrong to use him again," Bretton put in. "Wiser heads would have started the girl-child in Europe."

"Not at all," Mattison stood up for herself. "The people need Peter and no one else."

"We've tried everything possible, Dainig," Cooper said. "We even gave him another fish—the method you pushed to get him to smile. He won't."

"Give him a chance!" Dainig suddenly wanted out. There was nothing he could do about it so he didn't see why he should be badgered. "He'll forget if you give him time."

"That is impossible," Bretton said. "What your former superiors have neglected to explain is that the boy's depression has caused a critical upswing in the Re-Emergence rate. A forty percent increase, Dainig! When the average citizen tunes in and sees Peter sitting listless on the floor, he gains no release for his own abnormal depression. A condition which you directly caused. Our cells are filling up with

Re-Emergers—every one of them led here by your hand—and that Defective is the only one who can remedy it. Two Happy Viewings—even one—will bring a cure. He must give it to them."

"I can't do anything about it!" Dainig shouted. "There's no reason for him to smile!"

Bretton nodded slowly, satisfied with the emotional display, but Mattison wasn't finished. "You are going to do something about it inside of fifteen minutes," she said. "You'll be taken directly from this office to Peter's Complex where the boy will see you, touch you, and if the Re-Conditioner has judged correctly, even feel your embrace.

You will stay with him until just before the Viewing signal is given and, coming fresh from you, Peter will flash across the world in a full state of Joy, ready to heal every person you injured."

Dainig sat frozen, his brain jumbled—panicked again. *See Peter? Touch him? The soft, pale hair? The brown, betrayed eyes? Give him hope and joy and then abandon him? Again?*

"Nooooo!"

He was out of the chair and behind it in one swift motion, lifting it from the floor, as protection, as a weapon, as anything events demanded. His stomach heaved and his throat congealed into a single pervading sound. "Nooooo!"

"Guards!" Bretton hissed, anxious.

They jumped for him and two hands tore the chair away while two others bit into his arms. He thrashed violently, digging, hitting, scratching, dripping in sudden sweat but strong with the power of panic.

"Floor him!" he heard Bretton shout, and a fist pounded in behind his ear. The carpet rushed at his face as he fell headlong toward it, instantly weak in every muscle, and sprawled, prone.

"Put him back in the chair and, this time, keep your hands on him. If you think you need more help, I'll send for it."

"We can manage," Redmond said.

Dainig's body was hauled, dragged, and shoved into place. When he looked, Cooper and Mattison were up against the wall and Bretton was dropping something into their palms.

"Swallow this immediately," he told them. "It's a large dose of Equilibria and you're both in bad need of it. I'm sorry for this display, but I warned you about the man. He belongs on my table and nowhere else."

"He can't help us, then," Cooper said, after he had ingested the drug.

"He can and he will."

"How? He'll do Peter no good by acting like a madman!"

"It won't happen again. When he recovers from the blow, he'll be subdued. He always is after a session, and that is exactly what he has undergone here: not physical shock, but enough emotional explosion to last him for hours. He'll do his part with your Defective."

Dainig realized the truth in Bretton's confidence, and as it settled deep into him, tears wavered his vision in blurry streaks. Because of his own weakness—just as before—he was fated to betray that little boy again. And, he *loved* that little boy.

"Look at him," Mattison said. "His constant blubbering is disgusting, and I don't trust it. Or him. Not when he's still untrained enough to cry."

"I'll put four guards on him."

"Guards won't do when he's with Peter. Give him a sedative."

"Absolutely not! He isn't allowed that kind of relief. I tell you, he'll move through this like a trained animal. He's spent right now and his emotions are close to the surface, so Peter will rouse him no matter how he fights against it. He's my subject, remember, and I can predict him."

"I'm still not sure," Cooper said anxiously.

His indecision rocketed Mattison back to herself. "We have no time to wait while you make up *your* vacillating mind, Cooper. His Re-Conditioner gave his prognosis, the Viewing is scheduled, and I'm not throwing my career away because of a raging Re-Emerger. Get him on his

feet, you guards!"

"Please? No? *Don't* force me to do this." It came from Dainig weak and pleading when it should have been shrieked. His only answer was the wrench of hands heaving him erect.

* * *

The bathroom entrance to the Complex waited across the dim hallway, and four guards had Dainig surrounded in a closed box of muscle. Bretton placed a fist under Dainig's chin and lifted his head so he had nowhere to look but straight at the man he hated.

"I want more brightness in your spirit, Dainig," Bretton said. "View what you're about to do as a good thing. If you can bring on Peter's smiles, you'll give him back his contentment. Go in there and save him from the unhappiness you created."

Bretton was right, for once. The child might stay imprisoned, but could at least be happy.

"Fine," Bretton said. "You look better already. I have a few orders for you, now."

"I thought I only had to stand where he can see me."

"Yes, Dainig, but conversation is bound to arise. Especially from Peter's side. When he asks where you've been, you're to tell him that you had to go away for a while. Someplace where you weren't able to take him."

"I'll agree to that because it's the truth."

"You will also say that you're merely going back to that place and will return to him very soon. Is that clear?"

"You mean, give him false hope?"

"How else can you leave him happy enough to perform the Viewing? When that begins, he must not be crying." Bretton switched from the persuasive stance to his normal one of Re-Conditioner. "Don't give me arguments or disobedience. If my orders aren't obeyed, I promise you my table will eat you alive. Am I getting through?"

"You want me to lie to Peter in order to save my own life. Well, what if I don't care that much about my own life?"

"That's your choice and doesn't matter to me. But I thought you were trying to save Peter's."

"You win, Bretton—part way. I'll go inside and stand like the stone you're working so hard to create—unfeeling and turned off. Completely remote."

"And when he asks you the key questions, you'll respond with the answers I've laid down, remote or not." Bretton clapped him on the shoulder. "For pity's sake, Dainig, use your opportunity. I'm aware that you still love the boy. This is the last time you'll ever see him, so *feel* it. Enjoy it!"

Bretton turned his attention to the guards. "When you go in, push Dainig into the bedroom with Peter, then stay in the bathroom so you can pull him out if he doesn't come on his own. You, Dainig—your signal to leave will be the ringing of a small bell. When you hear it, give Peter an excuse, and return to your guards."

"I understand," Dainig said.

"One last point and I'll be finished." Bretton again placed his hand on Dainig's shoulder in a confidential gesture. "Everyone forgot to mention the consequences of your disobedience, so I must take the responsibility. If you can't bring about this Happy Viewing, the boy will have reached the end of his usefulness. To put it simply— he will be killed." The hand squeezed brutally, then dropped away. "Take him!" Bretton told the guards.

Stunned, Dainig was easily pushed forward as two of the men herded him into the tiny bathroom. They stopped at the bedroom door but gave him an extra shove that sent him stumbling in with enough noise to draw attention. Even through his stumbling, he saw Peter sitting in the far corner, listless and sagging against the wall.

Peter looked up disinterestedly at the noise, but his dullness instantly changed to uncertainty. "Danny? Is that *you*?"

Dainig wanted to sink into the floor and not let one iota of himself

touch this situation. The sight of the boy pulled at him, but he was sure he could reject it and stay clear. Yet Bretton's threat still sounded in his ears, so he had to answer. He kept it to a toneless, "Yes, Peter." It wasn't a commitment.

Peter crept from the corner, his neck craned, checking. All of a sudden he made the connection and his hands clapped together as he sprang off the floor in a whoop of joy and ran at Dainig, full-tilt. Just as suddenly, he halted, and shrank back shyly. "Maybe, maybe you don't want to...."

"What, Peter?"

"I think maybe you don't want me anymore and I have to stay off of you." The child's hands and fingers reached for Dainig, then drew back, yearning, but not daring. "Do you like me even just a little bit, Danny?" he asked, his head cocked and his brown eyes hoping.

He had done this to the boy and he hated it! With a thudding jolt, he was down on one knee, his arms spread wide. "Come over here, you little demon. *Run* to me, my Peter."

The little body crashed into him, almost knocking him down, and Dainig's arms closed around it, feeling it fit against his chest as though it had never been away. His hands were alive on the child, stroking, caressing, almost eating him. Impulses flashed to his brain, registering two simple words. "You're home!"

Peter clung with such impossible strength that Dainig had a hard time moving him back enough so he could see his face. He found the brown eyes moist. "Why the tears, little boy? There's no reason to cry, anymore."

"Then why do *you*? Don't be afraid of them. They're only nice tears, Danny. Sometimes you can be so happy you cry. You don't know that yet, but I can teach you now that you came back. Like I was teaching you before." He rushed against Dainig again. "I was afraid you'd never come. I love you so much and I miss you. Why did you take so long?"

"It doesn't matter now. I'm here, and that's the only important thing."

"Yes," Peter stepped back on his own, but his hands never lost contact. "We have to be together because you love me."

"And don't you *ever* forget it. It's obvious that *I* can't, and I thank God for it. I think I love you more than I did before."

"I can tell! Oh, yes, I can tell. But you're the only one who ever does. Why is that so? Why don't other people love me, too? Because I'm too dumb?"

"No, little boy. It's because they're too foolish."

"Yes, they are, and I don't care about them. Not as long as I can have you. When we got caught, I was afraid, but I'm not now."

"Got caught?"

"When we went through the wrong door and Matty and Coop found us. I worried about you, Danny. What did they do to you?"

Dainig heard it but didn't believe, since it held redemption he didn't deserve. Peter had denied the betrayal out of his love for the betrayer; he had decided they had been captured, not that Dainig had turned him over deliberately. "You must never worry about me, Peter," he said.

"But I had to when you didn't come to play like you promised. I got afraid they put you in a place like this, too, where people can watch what you do and feel". Did they?"

"No, nothing like that." He used one of Bretton's enforced lies, "I simply had to go away unexpectedly." Remembering the boy's limitations, he added, "That means without warning and in a hurry."

"I'm glad they didn't shut you up because it's not a nice way to be." He took on a serious, important look. "And it's about time you came back because you have to practise laughing and it takes me to teach you how. You said so. I don't think you practised very much while you were away, Danny."

The child was scolding him in his own impish way, and Dainig told the truth. "You're right. I hardly laughed at all."

"I haven't, either, because I hate it when you're gone. My fish showed that when it came back. It wasn't any good this time. You said I could have a polka-dotted one, and besides, I only want *you*. The new man

doesn't even know how to play our games, do you know that? He just sits around." His eyes sparkled, elfin, "Can we play our games? Now? You can make me laugh, and practise for yourself..."

His sentence broke in a giggle as Dainig's fingers wriggled into his stomach and set him squirming on the floor, squealing with delight. Dainig wrestled the child around, enjoying his own laughter as it rolled out with ease, his enjoyment heightened by this proof that he could still "feel." He was eager to enjoy every second of it granted to him.

They played the grappling and tickling game and then Peter raced him to the playroom where they spent time bouncing the red ball, the activity interrupted only by their need to stop and hug each other now and then. In the back of his mind, Dainig was waiting for the chime of Bretton's retreat-bell, amazed that he had been allowed this touch time free with the one person in his life who meant anything.

Finally, Peter's energy sagged, and he walked to the over-stuffed chair and pointed into it, raising his eyebrows at Dainig. "What, now?" Dainig asked.

"I want you to hold me on your lap, please," Peter's look was completely disarming.

"You don't have to ask twice. I'm pretty well tired, too." It was astonishing how true that statement was. He sat down and Peter vaulted into his lap, arms around his neck. In this position, the child's weight fell on every tormented area of Dainig's body, but he didn't mind the pain. *This touch was good.*

"We can be quiet for a while and just tell each other nice things," Peter said, directing the whole affair. "Say you love me again, Danny."

"I love you, Peter. Very much."

"Good. Then I dare tell you what I'm worried about."

"I don't want you to worry about anything."

"I'm a good boy, but this is once I can't do what you say because what I'm worried about is *you*. It seems to me you're thin and tired-looking. That's why I almost didn't know who you were. Don't you eat your food?"

"I—I've—" Dainig found no way to continue.

"I don't like to see you tired. *I'll* just have to take care of you if you won't do it, yourself. I'm sorry you had such a hard time while you were away."

Here *was* pity and compassion, and Dainig crumpled under it because this pity was real! Jerkings began in his shoulders and stomach, wrenching his whole body. He was on the verge of sobs, and he couldn't let it happen. Not in front of the child! He mumbled, "I've only been—on a diet, Peter. Nothing more."

"Then don't be on it if it makes you cry. Why are you crying?"

The boy was alarmed and Dainig had to quell it. He clutched his soaring emotions and pulled himself together well enough to form a joke. "Maybe because I've been dieting so hard I'm turning all to water. But, see? I've stopped crying now. It was a silly thing to do, and I've stopped. We were having fun. Shall we play some more games?"

"Let's just sit here and hug each other for a long time."

"Amen, little boy. For a long, long time."

Peter snuggled into him, all arms and joyful body, surging warm and eager. His face, when Dainig managed to catch sight of it, was cut in two with a smile that wouldn't stop. And Dainig's face matched it.

"You feel so good to sit on, Danny. I remember your shoulders and your hands—but you don't smell the same. I don't care, though. You smell wonderful! I'll never be sad again, I think. I love you and you love me, so I can't ever be sad again."

They clung to each other and Peter told him stories about his new Companion, a man named Wellman. They were sassy stories that would have turned Wellman's ears bright red. According to Peter, Wellman didn't even know how to put salt on an egg, couldn't stay in the lines in the coloring book, and had big feet that clomped around like all the noise in the street. He also told how Matty and Coop had been acting very nice—giving him everything he asked for, even the fish. But the one thing *they* wanted—a smile—*he* wouldn't give.

"Why should I?" he said. "They never smile back. They pretend to, but

they don't really mean it. I can tell."

"That's no good, Peter," Dainig remembered his purpose. "I want you to smile and be happy. As much and as often as you can. You have to try to do it in spite of them."

"If *you* say so. I'm a good boy, and I do what you say."

"Even when I'm not here. Do it, then, too."

Peter grinned, "That would be silly, but I will if you want me to. I'll take a crayon and color a smile on my face in case my mouth gets tired."

Dainig laughed and ruffled his hair, commenting silently, 'You're too much for any of them to handle. You're bright, and—' He halted and repeated the last words aloud, starting a poem-game. "You're bright-eyed and you're charming, delightful and alarming; you're wistful and a devil, and—"

"I'm good!" Peter ended the poem.

"That doesn't rhyme, my boy."

"I don't care. It's the most important thing." He took his own turn at rhyming. "You are big and you are strong, you can laugh and—" He faltered, waiting for Dainig's help.

"I *belong*. That rhymes."

"And *it's* the most important thing, too."

Peter had no way of knowing the deep truth in what he said, but Dainig's response was to hug him again, loving, and accepting love. It filled his spirit beyond anything Bretton could hope to destroy, and he held onto the child, relishing the moments and becoming human with each one.

Until the sound of a small bell poured ice on his heart.

"What was that?" Peter sat up straight.

"It's a—a—" Dainig fumbled for an explanation. "It's a signal I set for myself. It's time for me to go again, Peter." At the boy's immediately

stricken look, he added Bretton's lie because there was nothing else to do. "I don't mean forever."

"Just until supper?"

"Longer than that, I'm afraid. But I'll be back. Do you really think I could stay away from you? Think about it carefully. Do you?"

"No—you couldn't!" Peter was instantly bright again.

"So, a little time without me won't make you sad. *Will* it?" Remember what I said about being happy. I've made arrangements so I'll know what you're doing while I'm away. People will tell me how you are, and I want to hear that you're happy. *Only* happy. You're too thin, little boy, and being happy can make you fatter."

"But I don't want you to go at—" He gave in. "All right, then, I'll keep happy so I'll look better when you come back. And you stop dyting so you look better, too."

"Dyting? Oh—dieting! I will, Peter. I promise. Now, hop off my lap so I can stand up."

Peter complied, but his hands didn't once break contact *with* Dainig's body, not even as they walked back into the bedroom. There wasn't going to be an easy way to reach the bathroom without him tagging along, and the sight of the guards would ruin everything he had just accomplished, which was the saving of the boy's life. He didn't want to face this moment, himself, but for Peter he could do anything, and he thanked Bretton for teaching him enough mastery to blunder through it.

"I really do have to go now, Peter, and you know you're not supposed to watch me leave. You never do. Just remember, I *will* be back again. Now, keep that happy thought in your mind and go into the playroom. Get out your Jack-in-the-box. I want—I *need* to be sure you're contented. Happy."

"You can be sure, Danny. I'm happier than I've ever been before, except for that one time, and that was when I was with you, too. I'll do what you tell me because I'm good, but first—" he looked shyly up the tower of Dainig's height, "will you give me another kiss? To keep until you come back?"

With a choking sound, Dainig bent and kissed the child on the cheek—lightly. Before he could stop, he had him squeezed close and was firmly kissing his neck, his hair, his eyes. When he finally straightened, he held the small face circled in his hands and soaked up the love that lay in it for him.

"Whew!" Peter grinned. "That was a good one."

"It was. It most surely was. And—the last one. Now—go get your Jack-in-the-box, little boy. I'll see you again. Soon."

Peter jiggled once in front of him, already anticipating that happy day, grinning so broadly that when he entered the playroom and the Viewing began, his smile would light up the world.

"Goodbye for now, then, Danny. Don't stay away too long." He ran dutifully away, keeping the smile clear and firm on his face.

"Goodbye, little boy. And—remember me," Dainig whispered.

He walked to the bathroom door.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The treatments remained stalemated and Dainig's life was counted in dark and light, in questions and bursts of agony. Once he wrung himself dry of misery over his visit with Peter, he came to cherish the dark because he filled it with images of his own choosing; dreams of Peter smiling, Peter skipping, Peter bouncing his red ball—always happy.

He was no longer part of the boy's life except as a joyous expectancy, an anticipated promise-of-return, but that anticipation had placed a smile in the boy's eyes and, with Peter, every promise lasted, born fresh each day. Dainig knew his own bright imaginings were true and enjoyed the happy phantoms he created to fill the dark. They became his whole existence and finally grew so real that he absolutely had to hear them confirmed. He had the right to hear, and was sure that once he did, he could release the last ghost and find quietness of soul.

Consequently, the next time the light flared and Bretton entered, Dainig didn't clear away the mattress and lie down. Instead, he stood tall

and met his Re-Conditioner eagerly. "I have a question for you, Bretton."

"Move the mattress and take off your clothes," Bretton ordered. "There will be time for that once you're on the table."

"I want to ask it now. What harm can it do to hear the answer standing up?"

"You have an odd glint in your eye, Dainig. If I didn't know better..." Bretton shook his head, cutting off his own speculation. "Very well, ask your mysterious question and be done with it."

"How is Peter?" Dainig was avid to hear. "No one has told me anything since I saw him and I've only been able to guess at how he is. I think I'm entitled to know."

"So you are. Especially since your fancies have been pleasurable enough to restructure your attitude." Bretton eyed him calmly. "Peter is crying. Constantly."

"You're lying!" Dainig instantly denied it. "I left him full of Joy."

"Of course you did. And he gave three days of Happy Viewings which did immeasurable public good. But then, the way I've heard it told, he started demanding to be released. When he wasn't, he turned hysterical. He hasn't shaken it."

Bretton wasn't saying what Dainig wanted to hear. He had asked for Smiles, not Crying.

"Are you so unsettled you can't open up to the truth? Perhaps I should let you see a Viewing for yourself. You wouldn't enjoy it. I've watched two or three, and he cries and claws at the walls like a frenzied animal."

That description forced the picture on Dainig, and since nothing in this whole business had come out properly since its inception, he accepted Bretton's truth. His eagerness fled with his contentment and he slumped, moaning, "He's still searching for his window. For a way to get to his mother and father. He never did understand, and I couldn't get through to him."

"Oh, no, Dainig, he's not crying for his mother and father. Not

anymore. He's crying for you!"

"*Me!*" Dainig's head jerked up.

"Why the surprise? It's a natural result. You respond to him with honest love, and he senses it. His parents were normal, so they only gave him pretense. When he manages to speak clearly at all, he cries, 'Why can't Danny be with me? Where did Danny go? He *isn't* dead. Let him come back. He promised!' He's thin, exhausted, and nearly beyond help because what he suffered for his parents, he's now suffering more intensely for *you*."

"But he can't. I *am* dead where he's concerned, and I didn't expect—I didn't intend... All he wants is to love me." He bent double. "Bretton! What have I done to him? Help me!"

He desperately needed hands to hold and reassure him, but Bretton's were a flurry of motion as they grasped and threw the mattress aside, then yanked down Dainig's coverall.

"On the table!" Bretton commanded. "*Right now!*" Dainig stumbled to it blindly, tripping on the coverall still attached to his feet, and collapsed against the cold metal, repeating, "Little boy—little, little boy."

* * *

Three treatments later, he was still doubled in the grip of self-hatred and remorse. He shunned the mattress as too soft for the monster he had become, and huddled in the corner, glad when the hard surfaces heightened his aching, intent on letting masochism lift its head and mate with Bretton's switch-finger to kill him. He no longer saw himself as a man, but as a conditioned beast who threw himself prone whenever Bretton entered, and who welcomed the physical oblivion of the shocks.

Exhaustion finally brought him relief. Lacking the strength to react, all he could do was huddle in the corner. In the stillness, sense returned to him. The turning point occurred in a bizarre moment when he was mentally seeing Peter's tears and they changed unbidden into the phantom tear he had placed in Laine Todd's eye.

From then on, *she* occupied the cell with him but her presence wasn't threatening. Rather, it resolved into hope. Once he felt it spring feebly to

life, his senses returned, and he worked through his latest episodic-reaction as she had done with his other one, confessing his guilt, his love, his frustration, and—his responsibility.

With his mind free, he began to form a plan. It was flimsy and perilous but it was a chance; once he discovered that hope was an emotion, too, he resolved to take it.

First he must determine if there was any need for him to survive as an emotional man: the only acceptable need was Peter. Without the child, Frederic Dainig's existence wasn't necessary. Laine Todd could answer that. She would know if Bretton's description of Peter's condition was, in fact, reality, and somehow he would coerce her into telling him. After that...

He returned to the beginning of his plan, working it through carefully. Everything hinged on whether or not Laine's tear had really existed. If so, she had told him the truth about her own Re-Emergence and had it in her power to liberate him from this cell.

For the first time in weeks, his mind settled onto one firm target: Re-Conditioner Laine Todd. She possessed all the keys—to truth, to freedom, and to Peter. It would demand cunning to keep her from guessing his real motives and to convince her that he was solely interested in saving his own life.

He had to find a way to lead her back into his cell, and with no human contact except Bretton, that challenge loomed up as impossible. He pledged himself to overcome it somehow.

* * *

His opportunity came through the coupling of Lab-routine with his own erratic habit of denying himself the comfort of his bed. During a light period when he was crouched in the corner, two men entered the cell. One carried a cordless vacuuming machine and a small pile of clean coveralls. The other hefted a four-foot metal pole. He had never looked at them before, obeying the rules to stay on the bed with his back turned, but he recognized them as the cleaning man and his guardian technician. They both stopped dead, startled to find him out of his usual place.

The Technician moved first. He came halfway across the floor, the pole

held high as a weapon. "Onto the bed," he ordered.

"Do you know Re-Conditioner Todd?" Dainig grabbed his chance, praying it was the right one.

"Get over there and stay silent."

Dainig stood up, but didn't budge. "*Do you know Re-Conditioner Laine Todd? Do you have any connection with her?*"

The big man was across the cell in three strides, raising the heavy pole to crack it down, on Dainig's neck. "No, don't hit me!" Dainig protested, and as the Technician hesitated, he slipped out of reach, talking fast. "I'll go where I belong. I only asked because she's a friend of mine. She *used* to be." He stressed the word, hoping this Technician was part of Laine's illegal group and would catch his meaning.

The man advanced on him again but with an overt frown, his eyes darting sideways to encompass the cleaning man.

That action prompted a threatening picture of Laine Todd creeping up in pitch darkness, and Dainig realized he was breaching her security. Backing from the pole, his hands up to shield himself, he struggled for another Re-Conditioner's name to mention. Surely he had known more than one. "Or—or Re-Conditioner Eberhardt? Do you know *him!* He was my friend, too. I used to— No! Don't hit me!" He flung himself on the mattress and turned his face to the wall, expecting the pole to bash into him. It didn't.

Instead, the Technician said, "We'll clean this cell later on when the Re-Emerger is rational. Get out fast before he jumps again."

The door shut and Dainig was left alone to wonder if it had worked. He plucked some hope from the Technician's restraint and his odd eye-signal toward the cleaning man but all that was left to prove the episode had even occurred were three clean coveralls scattered on the floor.

* * *

Waiting ballooned into frustration as he lived through another session with Bretton, followed by a short period of light plus a long, long pall of dark. And despite Bretton's skill, he learned a new emotion. Despair.

Soon after the light flashed on again, the door opened and Laine Todd marched in, highly agitated. Dainig jumped up from his corner, "You did get my message."

"That was a ridiculous chance you took," she ignored his cry as though it had never been uttered. "If you had collared almost anyone besides Technician Uzak, you could have had us all killed. You were incredibly lucky." She stood four feet away, her body ramrodded in stubborn irritation.

"I did my best to shield you."

"*After* the fact, and with a feeble attempt." She met his eyes, her own sparking black. "Well, you dragged me in here, Dainig, so what do you want?"

None of this was going the way he had anticipated. "I could use a bit less of the Re-Conditioner's posture. I expected you to be—"

"Grateful to be jeopardized?"

She wasn't ready to stop her accusations, so he sidestepped them. "I believe your anger is showing, Laine Todd, which means I guessed right and you *can* feel. What I don't know is why you're so angry. You were eager to gather me in before, and I didn't expect you to change your mind."

She hesitated, sorting through his words. Then she said in an excited voice, "Are you saying you've changed yours? You're asking to join us, now?" Her hands clapped together in an expressive gesture he had never seen except in Peter. "Oh, Rick! That would be pure glory for us because, whether you realize it or not, you're the most precious resource we've ever found! You felt compassion, and no one else has gone that far."

There was rapture on her face but she immediately doused it, turning wary. "But if you're plotting with someone, let me remind you that my penalty still stands. The table with you on it, dying in the dark."

His try at repressing the shudder failed. "All right, so I'm trembling. But you missed your chance with that threat, Laine. You should have done it right after I threw you out of here."

"I gave you time to condemn yourself, but you were too self-satisfied over figuring out my supposed 'scheme' to report me." When he didn't retreat under her attempt to demean him, she gave it up, and took on a sheepish look. "At least, those are the rationalizations I used to fool myself. The truth is, your silence made me hope you'd come to your senses." She sighed, impatient. "And now, you've made me tell you another one of my weaknesses. That I've learned how to feel hope."

"So have I. Without it, I think I'd be dead."

"Yes, I know. Bretton's daily records on you point that way." She instantly changed to concern. "I've been worried about you."

"Thank you, but don't be. All that concerns me is that you came when I called, and from what you've said, you still want me. Is my option open? To stay emotional and free of the cells?"

"Open and tied with ribbons. I won't let you escape us now if I have to put you on that table and force you to our side."

"Don't put that picture of you in my head. I never want to imagine you working as a Re-Conditioner. How do you stand it?"

"I stand it." Her expression said, "Don't touch." She had obviously fought her own battles with her profession, weighed the horrors against the good she performed, and stuck it out.

In the face of her silence, he leaped back to his main question. "What are the procedures I'm to follow, then? I imagine our time here together is short. Bretton—"

"Might come in at any minute. His schedule with you is highly erratic. So sit down and I'll explain our methods quickly." When they were close beside each other on the mattress, she began, "I've already told you about the Equilibria we'll put in your drinking water to help you outwit Bretton's dials. The rest is anti-climax. He'll release you as Certified and you'll return to society. From then on, you'll only need to control yourself well enough to pass unnoticed in public, which means no broad outbursts when you're with other people. At home, alone, you can enjoy every feeling the very process of being alive raises in you. You see, it's all simple and, once mastered, packed with rewards."

"There was more to it when you told me before. Something about Winners and Losers. You expected me to be a Winner and go the route you just described, but what about your Losers?"

"They comprise our mercy. They're people who Re-Emerge again and again and are doomed to spend great pieces of their lives on the tables until they die from pain-exhaustion."

"Where does your mercy come in?"

She explained quickly. When people returned to the Lab repeatedly, they invariably evolved into two categories; one group wanting to die as an escape from their emotions as well as their pain; the other group desperately wanting to keep their emotions intact, but unable to stay out of the grasp of the Special Police.

When it was apparent that they fell into the second category, Laine's organization enlisted them, administered the Equilibria-help, and then provided sheltered places for them on the outside. On release, they were sent to small, farming-oriented villages, each one carefully selected from among the thousands existing outside the cities. Village life was less crowded, therefore less susceptible to the anxieties that made city people overly aware of each other. Their native populations were made up of uncomplicated people. With such privacy, the Losers managed to live undiscovered.

"The term 'Loser' isn't really appropriate, Rick. Once established in the villages, they're all Winners since they're 'feeling' human beings. Some day they'll become the fertile ground for a new society, because they'll be able to raise un-conditioned children as they must be raised—by example-of-emotion. In the meantime, they can meet together and enjoy each other."

It was better than Dainig had hoped. "It sounds like a contentment I've never known."

"Don't set your goals there. The villages don't concern you because you're going to be a Winner. You'll stay in the city and help us by becoming part of our network."

"Unless I can't control myself well enough to survive in the city. That possibility scares me."

"Reject it. Right now. If you prove out that way, I guarantee you a place in a village."

"With another round on Bretton's table before I get there!" he protested. "That's the mean flaw in your scheme, Laine. I'll be living scared and expending all of my energy to keep from giving myself away as it is. Now you've placed a penalty on my failure and I won't have a chance of success."

"Bretton has made you cowardly, hasn't he? Well, other people have managed to make it, Rick, because we've allowed for your objections. Do you think we're just going to throw you out on the street to flounder? If you do, then you're still wrapped up in your old ways. You're forgetting that we can feel, too; that we care about you. You've never known people like us before, so you still expect everyone to be purely selfish. Start changing your attitude right now, Dainig, because it's not relevant, anymore."

Her anger twanged in him and drew forth a response. He was new at this business of exchanging emotions with anyone but Peter, and contrite for being unschooled. "You're right and I'm sorry I accused you. But how can you possibly help me once I'm out of this cell?"

"We have a network of what we call Contact Points—people who make themselves available to counsel our neophytes when their emotions get the better of them. I'm hoping you'll become a Contact Point, yourself, once you're acclimated."

"What good can counselling do for a man who's going berserk?"

"You're so blasted stubborn!" she spat with impatience, then reversed it. "Since you've already had the experience, I can explain. Do you remember how I analyzed your emotions when you panicked the first time I came to you?"

"I do. It was remarkable."

"No—it was merely a trained ability. I've been studying Psychology, Dainig. All of us have. Not Behaviorism, which underlies Anti-Emotion Conditioning, but the old science used when emotion was part of everyday life. We've dug out the old books, and even gone over case histories of people who broke down before AEC was adopted. We understand

emotion—motivation, causes and effects, defense mechanisms—all of it. We don't just feel, we know why we feel."

She leaned toward him, intent on making her point. "Do you see what I mean? If you need help after you're released, you only have to call one of your Contact Points to find someone who will help you sort out what's going on inside you. Someone who will become your friend, and know you as an individual with your own particular problems. The Contact Points are secret. No one knows the whereabouts of any but his own, and I can't inform you of yours until you walk out of here. But you'll have two of them, so someone will always be ready to give you anything you need, even if it's only to feel companionship, friendship, and comfort."

"And that's what you want me to be? A Contact Point for your organization?"

"After you put in some hard study, you'll be one of the best we have. With your compassion and empathy, you'll be invaluable."

He smiled back at her and it was a completely natural thing to do. "You've given me freedom and a goal, Laine, and I'm eager. So, how soon will you begin my Equilibria?"

Her expression sobered as though a hand had been dragged down across her face. She didn't want to speak the next sentences. "I know how much you want to be rid of this place, Rick, but I told you before..." She drew a long breath and spelled it out in a dispassionate tone of voice. "Your emotional highs are hardly down from the last time I talked to you. You're a tremendously difficult subject. Since we have to slice off those highs, you still require some undrugged sessions under Bretton's direction. I'm sorry."

She looked at the floor, but he didn't protest. Not now. That would come later, after he had finished gathering his information. For the moment, he let her believe he was taking the news bravely. "You'll begin as soon as you're sure of me. I know that, so let's not discuss it any further. I have something else to ask you. Against the rules or not, Laine—will you tell me about Peter?"

Her face fell, flowing into pity. "I heard what they did to you with the boy. I'm sorry to my bones, Rick."

"It doesn't matter, anymore. I just want to know what's happening to him. Bretton gave me a long story, but he's beneath my trust. Was he telling the truth? Is Peter hysterical? Is he crying for me?"

"He is."

Despite his determination, he began to shake. As she saw it, she asked, "Should I have lied to you? Perhaps it would have been more kind."

"Never. Keep to the truth. I'm learning to handle it." He clutched his hands together to quiet them, but it did no good. Needing to sound calmer and more clinical than he was, he asked, "Why does he always do that, Laine? Hysteria like his is beyond reason."

"I think it's caused by the combination of his sub-normal intelligence and his restricted world. He's shut inside a cocoon, and it's the only way he has to fight back. It becomes destructive because he can't call a halt after a certain point."

"How long has his hysteria been running?"

"For over a week."

"Then it's just like it was before," he turned away. "He's not eating, he's losing weight, he's exhausted, and helpless."

"He's being fed artificially," she went on, "but I doubt if he can survive more than another two weeks, if that long. Prepare yourself, Rick, because I'm going to tell you all of it so you can feel it through while I'm here to offer comfort. The decision on Peter has already been made. It went against him. The defective girl in Europe was pulled out of her mother's arms two days ago and is being readied to take his place."

This was too much, and he let it take him. "But Mattison and Cooper have *got* to want him alive! All they've ever been interested in is their spotlight, and with him gone... !"

"I'm told that the amounts of Equilibria being delivered to their offices has quadrupled. They're obviously afraid for their own balance now and want no part of him. Cooper was pushing for his destruction by euthanasia, but Mattison prevailed. She's irritated enough to simply let him burn himself out."

"Laine! That woman has always been a monster. If she Re-Emerged, she'd *still* be a monster. And Peter is trapped with her. Because of me!" He was suddenly shaking in spasms he couldn't subdue, pounding his fists against his knees and strangling on his constricted throat.

Laine immediately knelt in front of him and caught his hands in her own. "Hold onto me, Rick. Use me for strength and get clear of this once and for all. Don't be afraid of your feelings. They're natural. They're natural. Let them come, let them come—"

"Don't you dare start chanting at me!" he jerked away and paced the cell. "It's that *child who* needs comfort and relief. I killed him. He just hasn't stopped breathing yet. And he's so *little*, Laine!"

"Stop it, Dainig! Overcome this and quit tormenting yourself."

He stopped his reaction short by pulling himself back to his own plans. Peter was at stake here and he had new power to master himself. He lied, "I almost have overcome it. I've almost accepted his loss. Not because of Bretton, but because I know there's nothing I can do about it. Peter's life is out of my keeping. But the very fact that I *do* realize that, scares me. If I can shunt Peter away, then I'm right, and I'm turning cold. Pretty soon I won't care about anything!"

"What are you saying? That's not going to happen to you. Not anymore."

"Yes, it is unless we're careful. Get me out of here fast, Laine, and don't wait for my highs to tone down. Start the Equilibria right away, because Bretton is getting to me!"

"I can't believe that statement after what you just put through yourself. You're lying, Dainig. Don't do it. Not with me. Admit you're afraid to face Bretton without Equilibria and I'll understand, but I won't hold still for trickery."

"There's not a lie in me, Laine. Bretton is making headway. A little while ago, I would have been disabled by what you just told me, yet today I only reacted to the first sharp hurt. Bretton's reaching me, all right. Maybe it doesn't show on the dials, but I swear it's true. I have a strong premonition that when I switch back to being a puppet, it will happen all at once. It won't occur gradually. One session or another will break down

my defenses and I'll simply collapse."

He closed the space between them to underline his most crucial lie. "I'm close to it right now, Laine. Whatever resources I've been using to withstand Bretton are slipping away, so I don't dare take a chance on letting him hammer at me much longer. If I do, I'll be lost to myself, and to you. Don't force that on me. Please."

"It doesn't happen that way."

"Which proves nothing. It also doesn't happen that a man fights off Re-Conditioning as long as I have. For some reason, I'm a different breed. The emotions I felt when I Re-Emerged should convince you of that."

"Perhaps they do," she admitted. "But this changes the face of everything. You should have told me about it when I first mentioned the undrugged sessions. Instead, you accepted the news and switched the subject to Peter." Her head tilted as she thought she understood. "Oh—I see. The idea frightened you so much you had to shut it out of your mind."

"You almost have too much insight," he told her. "Does it mean you've stopped doubting me?"

"Should I stop, Dainig? A man in your condition can be sly." She inspected him closely, full of indecision. At last she said, "I believe you. You *are* a rare case, so I have no background for judging you, and I'm pressed by the fact that you're too valuable to lose. So, I'll give in to you. The next time you take a drink of water, there will be Equilibria in it. A small dose, only. We'll increase it as quickly as possible, but you can't turn up on Bretton's table drastically changed. Things must at least appear probable."

"Thank you." It was heartfelt, and all he could muster in his relief.

"You'll rescind that thank you later. Equilibria or not, you still have a hard time on your hands. The drug may soothe a Conditioned person down to zero-reaction, but it won't have that effect on you. The main thrust is still your responsibility. Forget you're even taking Equilibria, Rick, so you don't rely on it. Do your best to imitate what you recall about being a conditioned man. Otherwise, Bretton will be suspicious."

"What if I go too far with the imitation? I'm afraid I will, because the

points I remember are an expressionless face, dull eyes, and total boredom."

"All to the good. Behaving like a wooden man is exactly what's required. Re-Conditioned people invariably leave the cells as dispirited robots."

He shook his head in distaste.

"Too much reaction, Dainig!" she criticized. "You should have absorbed what I said without a flicker of change in your manner. You have *no* emotions. Remember that. You care about absolutely nothing except being free of Bretton's table, and even that tiny bit of caring only amounts to wanting relief from fear and pain. From now on, overplay your part and you'll be safe."

She stood up abruptly, the conversation at an end. "You won't hear directly from any of us again until you're on the outside, but don't fret about it. We'll keep track of you. I'll get busy arranging your Contact Points and you'll receive them on the day you're released. The delivery method is simple. After Bretton Certifies you, he'll send you to the Pharmacy to pick up a free bottle of Equilibria. Everyone receives it, only yours will be special because right on top of the pills you'll find a piece of paper with the names, addresses and Communication-numbers of your Contact Points. Memorize them when you get home and destroy the paper."

She started away, then came back. "I've ended this on a cold, procedural key, haven't I. You deserve better. You still have to combat Bretton without really being ready."

"Don't give me special consideration. I'll manage."

"But *I* won't. Not unless I indulge my own emotions for a blessed moment and unchain my Human side. I sympathize with you, Rick, and I want you to know it. We all do, and you can rely on us to look after our own. Use that knowledge for courage when you're with Bretton. You're 'cared about', Frederic Dainig, which is something no one else can say."

"Except Peter," he whispered, as she left the cell.

He lay back on the mattress, pleased with himself for carrying off his intentions so well. The groundwork was laid. It had taken the lie about

Bretton's impending victory to accomplish it, but that lie was puny next to his objective: Peter.

From his first swallow of drugged-water onward, he would be fighting his way nearer to the little boy, and no matter what it cost in pain and internal struggle, he swore to reach him in time to stave off Mattison's vicious, preplanned death. After that, Laine Todd would fall under his direction, too.

He was surprised at himself for proving to be such a plotter. There, had never been a touch of it in him before. But then, he had also never felt the need.

He stretched out on the mattress and closed his eyes. To build his strength, rest was in order, and he intended to take it from now on. There would be no more wallowing in twisted, ungrounded emotions because now he was a man with a purpose.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Dainig's life completely reversed itself. He no longer saw his hours of solitary existence as ghost-filled times because he had exorcized the ghosts. They weren't even respites from Bretton, because he *wanted* his sessions with the Re-Conditioner. With Peter's life on his shoulders, the dark-filled minutes became chafing durations of waiting, waiting for Bretton to descend on him again.

He carefully counted the shocks Bretton administered, and the count dramatically edged downward; the Re-Conditioner's attitude was a good barometer in itself, as the man's confidence soared higher after every treatment. The pain was harsh and prolonged as Bretton pushed his advantage, but Dainig held on, letting his shrieks have full play, and fighting hard to repress his reactions during the questioning between the racks of shock. As well as he could determine the passage of time, each day grew a bit easier. The Equilibria was doing its work, and so was he.

At last a session arrived when Bretton only pushed the switch four times. Then three. Dainig prayed for the dropping count to hurry, and it did. The day came when he cringed his way onto the table and experienced no punishing shocks at all. He hid his exhilaration with great difficulty but knew in his heart that he had passed the test. Yet Bretton

returned once more, just to be certain.

The table's strapping and shocking devices slid away from him as usual but this time, Bretton wasn't already gone from the cell. Instead he walked within Dainig's sight and said, "On your feet, Re-Emerger."

Dainig feigned confusion. It wasn't difficult because he wasn't sure what was happening. Pushing upright, he slid from the table and stared at the floor, letting his body cower before this man who had abused it so badly.

"Look me straight in the eye," Bretton commanded.

"Yes, Re-Conditioner," Dainig answered softly, and allowing himself to feel nothing but anxiety, raised his eyes to Bretton's. "Have I done something wrong?"

"I don't want to hear a sound from you. Just keep your eyes on mine," Bretton said, then shifted his, making them impossible to meet, as he inspected Dainig from head to foot—the dull face, sagging posture, well-taught cringe. His eyes flicked back, encountering Dainig's with an icy shock, staring so hard they seemed to be reading the pathways of his brain.

With no lead-in, Bretton hissed, "Peter is dead!"

Dainig's mind dredged up its own shock waves at the statement, but he held himself steady, not even letting the twitch of a finger betray him. He was a good, obeying, uncaring robot. He didn't believe it, anyway. It was simply Bretton's last excruciating test.

"How do you feel about it?" Bretton asked. "Are you sorry?"

"No."

"Are you glad?"

"No."

"You must have *some* thoughts concerning his death. Verbalize them, please."

Dainig shifted from one foot to the other as though he were afraid to

venture any opinion.

"Tell me!" Bretton ordered loudly.

"If it's all the same to you, I... I... If Peter wasn't doing what he was created to do, then it's only right that he's out of the way." Recalling Laine's description of the selfish wishes of Re-Conditioned people, he added quickly, "Are you going to let me out, now? There were no shocks the last two times, so are you going to let me go?"

"I will decide that, Dainig. Pick up the mattress and put it back on the table."

Dainig acted as though Bretton's refusal hadn't bothered him one way or the other. With the mattress in place, he resumed his stance in front of the man.

Bretton stared at him, owl-eyed and judging, for a full three minutes, then surprised him. "What color coverall do you prefer to wear when you leave? Most people want to get into something bright and do away with the gray."

Those words were the ones Dainig had to fight down. Relief was proper here, but not the eager joy that leaped inside him. "I hadn't thought about it," he hurried, to still his racing heart. "But—gold, I think. A deep gold."

"Still a subdued shade, I see." Bretton mused over his choice. "Did I go too far with you, Dainig? No," he answered his own question. "Where you are concerned, nothing would be too far."

Bretton made his exit with that nasty remark and Dainig was left alone, needing to vent his joy in some physical fashion, but aware that it could be fatal since the camera in the wall was still spying on him. Bretton might be watching outside his door. He sat down calmly on the bed to wait.

* * *

There was no more darkness. Instead, his waiting was interrupted by two guards, one of them carrying a blindfold. He didn't stand to meet them.

"What's the matter?" the one with the blindfold said. "Have you gotten

so attached to this place that you don't want to leave?"

"Where are you going to take me?" It was an allowable question.

"Back to the world. This is Certification day."

"I'm to be released?" Dainig gave them a bare inch of response. "No more of this...?" He pointed to the table-bed and got to his feet quickly, as though the mattress was suddenly hot.

"I told you he'd do that," the second guard said. "They'll be sitting right on it but once they hear they're getting out, they act like it's a monster ready to bite."

Their expressions were cruel in their disdain. He didn't care. He had guessed right and given the required reaction that time. "Do I just walk out through the door?" he asked.

"Not a chance," the first guard said. "There are required preliminaries. Come over here and we'll get started."

He held the blindfold forward, and Dainig went to it meekly. It was put in place, and they began another meaningless, black march through unseen corridors. But this time they stopped along the way and he was freed from the blindfold for brief intervals as grooming processes were carried out. He was given a shower and a shave; his hair was cut; and at last a gold coverall was put into his hands and shoes supplied for his feet. With each succeeding step, he sensed the outside world reaching for him until it almost had him in its grasp.

After another short blindfolded march, and with the smell of a clean body under fresh clothing radiating up from himself, he was led into another room. When the blindfold came off, he recognized the place as Bretton's office. The guards left him without a "good luck" or "goodbye," and he stood in the center of the floor awkwardly, wondering what would happen next.

Bretton was what happened. He came in and strode to sit behind his desk, motioning Dainig to the chair in front of it. Dainig held himself in a pose of feigned calm as he saw the Re-Conditioner pull a small card from a drawer and begin to fill it in by hand. It was a Certificate of Re-Conditioning—his pass to freedom and to Peter—and Bretton's

signature flowed out upon it in ink. It wasn't fair that at this so very special moment he was only allowed to cry inside his soul.

"It's true, then," he whispered his voice into the room. "I'm cleansed. You did it for me, after all."

"Did you really think I couldn't?" Bretton put the pen aside, finished with the Certificate. "No one has ever stood up to me successfully, Dainig."

"I believe that. You're very skilled," Dainig gave him the deference he wanted. Bretton and Mattison were very much alike.

His ego satisfied, Bretton leaned forward on his elbows. "I have the right to be proud, Dainig. I don't mind admitting that yours was the most difficult case I've ever encountered. Do you realize you came close to being one of the few *carried* from my table? Dead?"

"I think I knew that all along. But it didn't matter, did it, since I was no use to myself the way I was behaving."

"Quite right, and a most intelligent answer." Bretton picked up the card and held it forward. "This is your Certification. Carry it with you at all times. It's now an essential part of your identification papers."

Dainig took it from his hand, glanced at it, caressed it gently with his fingertips, and slipped it into his breast pocket.

Meanwhile, Bretton had scribbled something on a sheet of paper, He held that out, too. "This is a requisition for a bottle of Equilibria. Go down the hall to the Lab Pharmacy and they'll give you what I ordered up for you. I want you to take an overdose every day for at least three weeks. Is that clear? Don't let the adjustment you have to make undo any of my work. When the free bottle is gone, see that you have another one purchased and waiting to take its place."

Dainig accepted the paper, fully aware of its irony. Bretton was sending him off with a large supply of the very substance which had beaten him at his own game, plus the names of the precious Contact Points Laine had placed inside the pill bottle to insure the victory. "I'm grateful to have it," he said.

Bretton came around the desk, visibly pleased with his puppet. "It's

time for you to leave."

Dainig looked behind himself, expecting to see a guard.

"No more guards, Dainig, or blindfolds. You're on your own. You're already outside the cell blocks, and a short walk down the corridor will put you in the AEC building. Leave it immediately and go straight home."

Dainig wanted to run for the outside but, sure he should pretend hesitance, waited to ask, "What date is it? I don't even know how long I've been here."

"Eight weeks, plus a few days. A whole month longer than most people have to face." Bretton opened the door and said impatiently, "If you're expecting an escort to see you home, you're wrong, Re-Emerger. You deserve no special privileges. As a matter of fact—and this is something you'd better accept—you're now listed among the dregs of society."

Dainig walked out on him, plodding slowly.

Once clear of the Lab wing, he increased his pace, then raised it further when he joined the crowds around the AEC Clinic. The jostling, forever-moving bodies produced dizzy confusion, as though he were inside a kaleidoscope where everything was unstable and fragmented. He had been encapsulated alone too long to plunge back cold this way. He tried to join the rhythm of the traffic but somehow stayed out of step and felt like an insect on display, open to every passing, curious mind.

The people all responded in the same way. Eyes raised here and there, spotted him, hung inquisitively for long seconds of befuddlement. The few who recognized him refused to admit it. He was a visible-invisible man. On the street, he strode along diligently, whispering reminders to himself: *Act numb, act wooden, act empty.*

But his legs soon began to plod out of a weakness he had forgotten to expect. The exhaustion joined with his anxiety, and when the tension built too high, he clutched at the only two life-lines he had; the Contact Points hiding in the bottle of Equilibria, and the small amount of money he had found in his pocket, either placed there by Lab routine or by the kind hands of his new friends.

He crossed a street and headed into the arcade of a hulking building,

aiming for a sign which read, "Conovant's Cafe." His intent was to use the dimness of that place as a refuge and to procure water to swallow some Equilibria while he secreted out the names of his Contacts.

It proved to be the perfect spot. Quite small, it was dimly lit by candles burning on the tables and muted lights spaced across the ceiling. He eased himself into a secluded booth against the back wall and spoke softly into the table-to-bar intercom. "A pot of tea and a sweet roll, please. And, water. A glass of water."

He checked the people closed inside the room with him. There were only eleven, and the scene was nearly motionless except for the facsimile of life playing out across the large TV screen perched at the center of the service counter, its audio tuned low. It held no interest for him.

The sudden appearance of the waiter startled him. He counted out his money with shaking fingers; then safely alone, opened the Equilibria bottle and, palming the tiny bit of paper, gulped down two pills. Only then did he open his hand and unfold the paper. Two lines of letters and numbers were printed there:

Hugo Warner, 1447 Kelmont Building,

Com. Number 3097892

Lodie Kaiser, 2086 Benzol Building,

Com. Number 4982678

Two precious names, his new and future friends—and tools! He held the paper curled inside his hand and committed the addresses and numbers into his memory, then held them to the candle flame where they turned to flaring yellow and fell into a wisp of crackling black dust as he fingered them.

Not used to eating sweet foods, he chewed the roll slowly and sipped at his tea, then focused on formulating plans for the dangerous, joyous action he planned to undertake the next night: saving Peter. He must plot this step by step and overlook nothing that might rear up to befuddle his frail emotional balance.

When he was through here, he would go home and spend time

collecting strength and learning to live in spaces bigger than Bretton's cell or on Bretton's table. Then, tomorrow night, tomorrow night....

His mind blanked out, and he realized it had happened only when he jerked back to awareness. Astonished, he excused it as the result of exhaustion and his eight-week habit of drifting into fantastic reveries. But he must not let it happen again. To activate his brain more thoroughly, he glanced about the cafe, picking out details. But the only thing of interest was the movement of the waiter's hand toward the audio knob on the TV set, so he settled back into his plotting.

Tomorrow night, he told himself, *I'll wait until it's dark, and then I'll...*

A strangled, croaking gurgle jerked him straight. "What?" he asked aloud. "Who?"

His startled question was ripped by a repetition of the sound. It grabbed his ears and eyes and dragged them around to the picture flickering on the TV screen.

"*No! No—don't!*" he shouted, and reared up from the seat, lurching against the table in blind panic. Hot tea scalding his calf was unheeded as his attention stayed cemented to the screen. Every shred of hard-held control burst away as the picture pulled him inside a yellow playroom where a livid-faced child arched against an invisible wall, his eyes swollen almost shut, his lips cracked from salty tears, his body weakly gasping out the gurgles which translated into, "Da—uuhhnn—nee."

He was a skeleton, lost inside his bright blue coverall. He was monstrous and horrible, and the sight of him spurted acid hatred into Dainig's mouth, hatred so overwhelming that he grabbed up the first thing at hand—the teapot—and hurled it into the picture tube, imploding it in smokey sparks of broken circuits.

His brain writhing, he stumbled across the room, knocking tables out of his way, and grabbed the broken set and thrust it to the floor where he attacked it in a frenzy of rage.

He was blind to everything else, until he suddenly found himself panting on the floor beside the wreckage, his arms embracing the battered machine with possessive gentleness and heard his own throat moaning,

"Peter—little boy, hang on. Danny's here."

"Re-Emerger!" a shout exploded in the room. "*Re-Emerger!*"

Fingers were pointing at him and the eleven people veered backward, cut off from escape by his proximity to the exit door. He crouched, facing them and ready to defend himself as they swayed in a semi-circle. Not one of the strangers edged an inch in his direction. It was a still-life moment: one he couldn't shape into anything sensible.

A second shout broke the tension. "Call the Special Police! Waiter!"

Dainig's trance broke, and with an incoherent roar, he dashed full speed for the exit. He was halfway down the arcade before he was rational enough to duck sideways and pull up short inside the entrance to a clothing store. He huddled there, counting out the seconds with his breaths, waiting for the noise of chasing footsteps. None came. But they *would* come. As surely as Bretton had always descended, the Special Police would crash down on him, too.

He drew long, calming gulps of air, wiped at his cheeks, and clamping a wooden expression on his face, re-entered the sparse flow of traffic in the arcade. People accepted him without notice as he wove among them, alert for shouts of recognition in case a cafe customer was nearby.

At the street entrance, he immersed himself in the sunlit crowds flowing down the sidewalk and lengthened his stride, keeping it steadfastly below a run. Hurry was one thing; flight another. But his clothes were sticky with the same sweat that burgeoned on his palms, and he couldn't draw in enough air to fill his lungs. Panting and sweating grotesquely, he reached the curb, crossed the street, and started down another block, unconscious of where he was going, only sure that he had to keep moving.

He was a quarter of the way along a third block when the deafening klaxon of Special Police vehicles reverberated in the street behind him. The crowd hesitated, waiting to see where the cars stopped. Dainig's instincts shrieked, *run!*, but he refused them and paused with the others.

The Police weren't coming for him. Not yet. Common sense said they were only arriving at the cafe and still had to pick up his description. For the moment, he must make use of the crowd and cower inside it, following its signals so he didn't point a finger at himself. But time was short. The

Police would come quickly, some on foot, others cruising the traffic lanes close to the curb, and all of them zeroing in on his gold coverall and his brown hair.

He walked forward again, obeying the crowd's movement but his panting turned to gasps as the klaxon's ugly noise seemed to take up his name, "Dai—nig, Dain—nig."

He thrust his head back to stretch his throat and allow a freer passage of air to his lungs. As he did, his eyes fell on the massive shape of a building looming one block ahead of him. The AEC Center. The Clinic!

His body strained forward. He clenched his fists and held himself firm, but then the klaxon's noise died and a machine-augmented voice, harsh and male, sounded in the street. "Clear a path on the sidewalk! This is the Special Police. Clear a path on the sidewalk!"

With hot blood pouring through his brain, he saw the way to handle his escape. People were still walking abnormally fast, fearful of being close to whatever Re-Emerger the Police were chasing, so he used their unnatural speed against them, bumping first one and then another in ways that made them fall against someone else until he created a domino-jumble that had no chance of being centered on him.

He shoved a woman into a man and growled, "Watch what you're doing!" to the man, and hurried on. He pulled two others roughly against each other, said, "Who's doing all the pushing?" and huffed his way around them.

It worked. Even the people *ahead* of him—people yet untouched by his commotion—began to start and stop, causing accidents of their own and allowing him space to hurry by.

When he reached the curb, he rushed across the street, heading straight for the AEC Center. No one would think to hunt him down there. Re-Emergers never ventured near it no matter how berserk they were, because it also housed the object of their terror, the Re-Conditioning Lab.

He shoved in among the streams of people entering and leaving and made it inside, but couldn't shake the sense of being spotlighted. The gold coverall proclaimed him as **a** target. If he could somehow be rid of it...

On an impulse, he turned right at a seldom-used staircase and ran down one flight. This corridor was empty, and he darted along to the door marked "Locker Room," opened it cautiously, and, finding it empty, threw himself inside. Lockers stretched in rows; lockers used by the technicians from the Clinic. He slammed into the nearest line, opening and banging doors, hunting for a coverall—anything that came close to his size that wasn't gold. He found a royal blue one at the end of the first row, grabbed it, and donned the garment. Then holding the discarded coverall, he pivoted frantically. He didn't dare stuff it into the locker or the owner would find it, report his own suit stolen, and the Police would realize their quarry had been here.

Muttering under his breath, "Please don't let anyone come in," he ran back to the door and plunged the gold coverall deep inside the giant bin waiting there for trash, took hold of the door, but collapsed against it, tired and empty of mind. He had managed this much but what was yet to come? He ached to go for Peter now, but the Viewing was still in progress; besides, he needed the city streets dark when he walked them with the child. His situation was still precarious. He had to hide. *Where?*

He accepted the first answer that jumped to mind. The AEC Clinic! Using the rail to steady his jellied legs, he fled down the hall and up the staircase and emerged back in the crowd, willfully sedate, to make for the Clinic entrances. The first one he came to was marked "Age Three." He didn't question it, but simply entered.

He was immediately thrust back into his past by the huge room full of children spaced in their separate cubicles, wired into Sensors and being manipulated by strolling AEC Technicians. As the atmosphere wrapped around him, he felt safe. No one would notice him here if he pretended to be just another student on an observation tour.

Wandering the aisles with false calmness, he ignored the passing technicians as they ignored him, and halted by a child now and then, pretending interest in the AEC procedure. But each halt hurt him, and soon he was whispering silently to the tiny bodies being shocked free of emotion, "Soon—maybe soon. I'm sorry, child, but I'll try to change it. Forgive us, and—wait." When it became hard to restrain his hands from reaching out in comfort, he didn't watch anymore.

At one frightening point, he overheard a newly arrived technician murmur to another, "I saw the Special Police in the hall. They're after a

man in a gold coverall."

"Inside the Clinic?"

"Peculiar as it is, yes. When they start looking in *here*, things must be getting pretty bad."

Dainig's heart jumped three beats. In here? Were the Police even now searching the rows of cubicles in this big room?

The second technician asked the question for him. "They won't disrupt things in *here*, will they?"

"No, they've already left the building. The Director let them comb the halls from top to bottom but stopped them short after that. But I tell you, Harry, something's up when they start chasing Re-Emergers right inside the building!"

Dainig moved on. He had the information he needed. The Police had left the building, so his hideaway was secure for the moment.

Then the worst happened. Without warning, the overhead lights flared to normal brightness, the children's gasps and groans halted, and the loudspeaker announced, "The Clinic is closing for the day. You children will stay in your seats until your technician removes your electrode leads, then file out in an orderly manner. Thank you for a good session. We'll see you again tomorrow."

The workday was finished. And they were all going to leave! Inside of fifteen minutes, he would be standing in this room alone, a sure and positive object of suspicion. He cursed the Lab for taking away his watch and never giving it back, and then damned himself for not checking the time of day when he was in the cafe. He had supposed the Viewing he saw was the midday broadcast because the sunlight was still so brilliant on the street. The city itself had misled him by hiding the position of the summer sun behind its high rise of steel and concrete. That Viewing had been the day's *last*. The Clinic would close, everyone would go home, and he would be culled from the normal people by virtue of being where he had no business to be.

He maneuvered his way through the thin line of children filing out around him, trying desperately to think of a new destination, restoring his

calm facade and making the charade true by remembering that he knew this building inside-out, even after working hours. Few others did but, as Peter's Companion, he had come and gone at odd times of day and possessed a mental map of which doors were locked and which ones were open, which, corridors were cleaned and on what hourly schedule.

Best of all, he knew Peter's own section, and vowing not to retreat one more step away from the boy, he left the Clinic and headed for the Complex. One fact was sure: an unemotional man would have no prayer of accomplishing the things he had already accomplished. Emotion imparted a clearness of mind he had never experienced before. Plans were clarified; despite the heightened fear and its shaking side-effects, he felt more alive than ever before in his lifetime.

He went in the opposite direction from the flow of people exiting the building, and passed the auditorium. It had given up its last occupant and now crouched empty, the wall-that-wasn't-a-wall solid and bare. Finally remembering, he glanced at one of the corridor clocks and checked the time. Seven o'clock. The Viewing had been over for an hour then, and Peter would be facing another force-fed dinner. If that horror was still in progress, the halls outside the Complex would be empty but if it was just beginning or ending, the medical team might be near the door and ready to spot him.

As he approached the final corner, he instinctively rose to the balls of his feet to silence the clicking of his hard heels. Just short of the turn, he touched the wall with his fingertips and let his eyes take the step for him, ready to walk straight on if people were in sight.

They weren't. He was alone. Throwing stealth aside, he ran full-out to Peter's secret door and eight steps beyond, ducking into the supply closet which serviced the little boy's rooms. The scent of fresh linens and cleaning powders burgeoned in his nostrils, but his hand was stopped from shutting the door the last few inches by the sudden sound of voices down the hall. He huddled against the wall, breathed through his mouth to quiet the huffing of his lungs, and listened.

The footsteps were translated into the sounds of two persons, and the first voice he picked out was female. It raised his hackles because it belonged to Clara Mattison. "... sounded a ridiculous false-alarm and dragged me down here for nothing." She was scolding.

"I won't apologize, Doctor Mattison, because there was reason for it," a young man answered. "I came back from supper expecting to help the medical team finish with his last feeding, and found Peter exactly where he was when the Viewing-wall closed down. Sprawled against it, half-unconscious. Naturally, I called for you. It's my duty to report negligence."

"There was no negligence. I ordered the feedings discontinued. We've given them up."

"Altogether? Then, why wasn't I told?" the young man matched her in irritation. "That particular decision means you're going to let him go, which also means *I'll* be going."

"You were never deceived about the length of your stay. You knew it would be short."

"But not this short! With force-feeding, I could eke out another week—maybe two. I have to consider my career."

"Which will never be as a Companion. You're not suited to the work, Wellman. With a Sensitivity Score of six, you lack the necessary insight."

"You'd rather have a potential Re-Emerger like Dainig?"

"I most certainly would. They often fall by the way, but they perform well until they run amok."

"But—what's my function from now on? Just to watch him die?"

"And to keep his body clean so we can still use him if the government demands more Viewings. We may have to fill a gap of a day or two between Peter and the girl-child in Europe."

"Well, of course, if that's needed, he'll be ready. I'll go back and put him to bed then. If it's agreeable to you, I'll administer a sedative tonight."

"Why?" Dainig imagined her suspicious eyes.

"For my own sake. If I'm to spend the night beside him, I'd prefer him unconscious. Or have you ruled against letting him rest, too?"

"I have. But go ahead and do it. No sedative will postpone his death,

anyway, and if it relieves you of trauma, Wellman, I will allow it."

Her heels stomped away. Closer to Danig, the only sound was that of the new Companion as he returned to Peter.

Dainig closed the closet door and let out his breath in the darkness; a breath he had held closely in check. He had arrived just in time. Peter's life had been measured in only a few more hours—or days.

The little boy was a mere fourteen feet away but a new and giant hurdle suddenly surrounded him: Wellman, and his continued presence throughout the night. What could be done about *him*?

Tremors quaked in his hands and he staggered to the rear of the closet where he sank to his knees. He must not give way to another fit. The crisis point was upon him and he had to meet it unimpaired. Here in the dark, he had a chance to fight free of panic, clear away every thought but Peter's fragile life, and ferret out a solution to Wellman.

First was the time element. If he was to get Peter safely away, he must wait until the child was asleep and unable to cry out. Wellman's selfish sedative would accomplish that. But he didn't dare wait too long or the cleaning crew, scheduled to come at eleven o'clock, would turn on the light in the supply closet and discover him.

Nine o'clock, then. He would set his sights on nine. It meant furtive peeks into the corridor to check the wall clocks, but he would be careful. As for Wellman... He didn't know about Wellman.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

At nine o'clock, Dainig crept out of the supply closet and tiptoed to the door he had entered every day for over a year. He edged into Peter's tiny bathroom quietly and paused, straining to hear any sound. Crying? Wellman's breathing? The turning of a page in a book?

With only the small night-light burning, the bedroom was dim, and he saw the humped form of Peter lying deathly still under the quilt. This time he wouldn't laugh, "I wasn't asleep at all! I fooled you, Danny!", because this time he *was* asleep, soundly drugged. And alone in the room.

The playroom was alive with light; Wellman was spending his time in there, away from Peter. That left Dainig's way clear. All he had to do was pick Peter up and carry him out the way he had come. The hurdle of Wellman could be side-stepped, not faced.

He crept to Peter's side, slipped his hands under the boy, and raised him from the bed, careful not to rouse him. But he forgot to support Peter's head, and when it fell sharply backwards, a cry of distress shattered the quiet.

"Uunnhh! Tube—no!"

Shoving one hand up to cradle Peter's neck, Dainig froze, waiting for a response from Wellman. None came. The man wasn't paying attention to nightmares. The terrors of a dying child didn't disturb him.

Lifting Peter higher, Dainig was just settling him against his chest when the brown eyes slit open and the delicate hands came up for his face. Peter's whole body jerked as he formed four damning syllables, "Daa—nee. You came."

With one swift bound, a figure was outlined in the playroom door. Wellman! Of medium height and dark, his appearance tore the breath from Dainig's lungs.

"What are you doing?" Wellman demanded, not wary yet, only curious.

"I'm—" What possible excuse did he have?

Wellman gave him no time to think. He stepped to the left and pressed a switch to shower the room with light, then advanced, squinting. His finger shot outward as he gasped in surprise, "You're Frederic *Dainig*! How? You're supposed to be..." He backed into the shelter of the doorway. "Put the boy down, Dainig. Right now!"

"There's no way I can do that, Wellman. I'm here to take my boy." Then Dainig plopped Peter back onto the bed in order to free his hands, and took a stand between him and his Companion. "How are you going to stop me?"

The man looked cornered, like a Re-Emerger run to ground without having Re-Emerged. His eyes darted left and right, and he clutched at the

door jambs. But his stable number on the Sensitivity Scores meant he could master himself, and he answered firmly, "I'm not sure, but I *am* going to stop you, Dainig. You have no right here."

"More than you'll ever have."

"Then why are you quaking, while I'm not? Look at you, a tower of shudders! You can barely stand up."

It was true, and Dainig quit trying to hide it. He was shaking from head to foot, tension and need compelling his body to move.

"Get up against the wall!" Wellman ordered, assuming the tone of a Re-Conditioner. Somehow he knew how they maneuvered their subjects and intended to catch Dainig in the conditioned reflex of command. "No more arguments. Do it!"

The man faced him, imposing, and Dainig unconsciously edged for the wall, responding automatically to what had been seared into him for eight straight weeks.

When he touched the wall, Wellman commanded, "Lie face down on the floor! Lie *down*, Dainig. Do it now!"

Lie down. On the floor, the mattress, the table!

A roar tore out of Dainig and he threw himself across the room, rampaging into Wellman with the full force of his hatred. Wellman fell under his toppling weight and Dainig landed on him, his fists pounding into the man's face. Wellman cried out and struggled, but Dainig didn't stop.

He hit and slashed and hammered—bashing Wellman, bashing Bretton—before Wellman slithered out of his grasp, and he followed to pinion him again. Blood spurted from the man's lips and eyebrows, and his teeth knocked together hard, but Dainig revelled in the crack of bone hitting bone.

Wellman's head jerked back and forth, impelled by the blows, and Dainig finally came out of his rage enough to see that the blows were *all* that moved the man's head. Wellman's eyes were closed, his body limp.

Spitting in disgust, he staggered to his feet, dizzy from exertion, but exhilarated to discover that emotion engendered power as well as gentleness: physical power to overcome odds when the passion was strong enough. Emotion was glory. Emotion was what human beings *were*! He would cling to it with his life, and use that same life to protect Peter's right to feel.

Stepping over Wellman's body, he went to kneel by Peter's bed, only intending to check on the child. But his arms obeyed impulses of their own and stretched to surround the little boy and lift the blond head to rest in the bend of his own neck. Nothing but close contact would do, so he allowed himself the moments, rocking Peter softly back and forth, not even trying to stem the heartfelt, chanting phrases which murmured out of his mouth.

"At last I can touch you and keep you safe, and undo it all. I never believed it would happen for us, but it has, little boy, it has."

As the weeks of anguish ebbed away, erased by the satisfaction of possessing his child, he relaxed. He had no way to name it but the feeling was of wholeness.

A whisper puffed against Dainig's neck as Peter stirred. "Danny."

Dainig eased the boy far enough away to see his face. The swollen lids were drug-heavy, held open only by determination to be certain of the man he had glimpsed only briefly before. "It's me," Dainig whispered back.

"You're smiling."

"I know."

"To... see me?" Peter couldn't speak without gasping between words. "Matty said... you don't love me."

"Matty lied, little boy. I love you more now than I ever did before. You're safe now, Peter." Dainig laid the child back on the pillow but Peter's thin arms reached up to lie limply on his shoulders, afraid to lose his touch. "It's all right, Peter. Go back to sleep. You're safe, now. I'll take care of you."

"You'll go... away. Can't."

Dainig caressed the child's face. "I won't go anywhere, little boy. Never again. Not without you. I earned the right to you and now you're mine. But I want you to sleep and grow strong so we can enjoy each other. When you wake up, I promise I'll be holding you, and we'll stay together for the rest of our lives."

"Here?" Peter's whispering was fainter.

"Not here. I'm going to take you away with me while you're sleeping. Now, close your eyes and rest." He had to force the child back into unconsciousness so they could both have their chance at escape. A wakeful Peter would cause complications. He began to rub the hot, lined forehead with a steady rhythm, surrounding Peter with feelings of safety and comfort while he repeated, "Sleep now, Peter. Sleep... sleep... sleep."

It worked quickly as the drug took hold again. At last, Peter's hands fell back to the quilt, releasing Dainig's shoulders in spite of themselves. Dainig chanced one brushing kiss on the sleeping face and got to his feet.

The time was here, but he had the strange sense of having left a dangerous end dangling somewhere. Ascribing the doubt to his weariness, he went to pick up the syringe and the vial of sedative Wellman had left on Peter's table. They would be put to good use in the little boy's recuperation.

As his hand touched the vial, the loose end knotted into reality. Wellman! He was still lying senseless on the playroom floor, but how long would he remain that way? How long did the effect of a physical beating last? If he recovered too soon, he'd give warning too soon.

The sedative was the answer and Dainig rushed to use it. He drew forth enough to incapacitate an adult and injected it into Wellman's helpless arm, then pocketed the vial and hurried to gather up his happy burden. There were no ready disguises this time, so he draped the quilt over Peter's head to hide his ravaged face, and carried him out through the bathroom door. He sneaked the first part of the way down the empty corridor, then threw caution away and ran, Peter's legs bumping against him as a reminder of the real load he was fighting to bear.

The time of night was with him and the Center was deserted, but the main street outside would still be swarming, so he was barred from going that direction. Instead, he stopped-and-started his way to the back of the

giant building, creeping up on corners, then dashing deserted distances until another corner demanded stealth, all the time praying that the jarring run didn't rouse Peter.

He cut through the storage rooms, passing stacks of electronic parts and office supplies that joined to create a havoc of papery-metallic odors, and finally reached the closed entrance of the receiving dock. Nothing came in at this hour, but he was still careful as he opened the small door set beside the big ones and peered into the darkened city night.

The alley was empty. Clutching Peter more tightly, he sprinted down it to the street. There were scattered knots of people on it, but not many. The Center was too vast to bring them along its back since there were no amusement spots for two blocks in either direction on this avenue. But any people were too many since he was an odd sight, carrying the quilt-wrapped child in his arms.

The best thing to do was to act as though nothing was unusual. So he crossed the street, ignoring everyone and never meeting their inquisitive eyes as he paced out a brisk walk aimed at the Kelmont Building and Hugo Warner, his Contact Point and life-line.

He covered one block, going away from the lighted heart of town, but he was finally caught when a man stopped beside him to ask, "Is something the matter?"

"What?" Dainig's mind spun, searching for a route out.

"It's none of my business but you look like you're being eaten with anxiety. Mister. Is something wrong with your child?"

The stranger didn't care, of course, but Dainig blessed him for providing his needed opening. "Yes—he's sick. I'm taking him to a Medical Center, and the Commuter's due any minute, so I have to hurry." He moved on. Courtesy wasn't expected among Conditioned people, so he offered none.

"Look to yourself a little, too," the stranger called after him. "Anxiety like that could get you in trouble."

"I'm all right," Dainig hollered back, without breaking stride, setting a new destination now that he had discovered one. A Commuter, plus the

excuse of a sick child, could speed him to Warner and abbreviate his dangerous trip through the streets.

At the first corner bearing a Commuter-Loading sign, he stood and waited, watching down the street for the approach of one of the big vehicles. It shouldn't be long. They kept a close schedule all through the night. When one finally roared to a halt in front of him, he climbed aboard only to find he couldn't reach into his pocket for the fare. He hated to linger near the driver, but had no choice.

"Could you help me?" he swung his hip sideways, using his head to gesture toward his pocket. "I don't have enough hands."

The driver fingered Dainig's blue coverall as his hand dipped inside the pocket and came up with some change. He dropped part of it into the fare box and replaced the rest, as he asked, "What have you got under the quilt, anyway?"

"It's my son. He's had an attack of some kind and I have to get him to the closest Medical Center. You pass by one, don't you?"

"Five minutes from now. Sit down and calm yourself. Five minutes isn't very long."

"Only an eternity," Dainig muttered as he took a seat.

The trip seemed interminable but, even so, it was over far too soon since he was once again plopped onto the sidewalk in plain view of anyone who cared to look. He hurried from the Commuter, pretending to head for the Medical Center that towered in front of him, but by-passed it and pushed on to the next corner, dredging up a mind's-eye map to show him the fastest route to Hugo Warner. If he rode another Commuter from here, one more stop would put him right at Warner's building, and that was all in the world he wanted.

So he boarded a vehicle travelling a route toward the Kelmont Building, and this time told the driver that he was just bringing his son *home* from an emergency trip to the Medical Center. As he took a seat, he spoke silently to the child, *Just a bit more, Peter. A bit more distance and a bit more luck and we'll be free.* But would they? Would Laine Todd agree to his blackmail? Or would she betray him and protect herself from his loose tongue by carrying out her threat to kill him on a Re-Conditioning

table? *We won't think about that, Peter. We can't, or we'll shake so hard we won't even make it to Warner's.*

This ride lasted fifteen minutes and nothing but the faint radiation of Peter's body heat kept him from breaking into flight each time the vehicle slowed to pick up a fare. He sat spotlighted—naked for the wooden, uncaring eyes to discover and accuse. Perhaps Peter's absence was already known and his own pictured-face being flashed across TV screens throughout the city. If so, every stranger who glanced his way was a threat.

When the Commuter braked to a stop and his way was clear, Dainig took it in a hurry. The Kelmont Building was close enough to touch and he sought its protecting walls, never stopping until he was outside apartment 1447, where he stuck out a trembling hand and punched the buzzer. Three seconds later, the door opened, revealing a man's inquisitive face.

"Hugo Warner?" Dainig demanded.

"Yes, but who—?"

Dainig pushed inside and kicked the door shut behind him. "I'm Frederic Dainig, and I need your help."

The man facing him was startled. Six-foot-four and blond, Warner stood in his own livingroom as though he were entirely alien to it.

"Dainig? So soon? Isn't this only your first day?"

"Do you give help here or don't you?" Dainig gave him no chance.

"Of course, of course. Just take it easy." His blue eyes wrenched from Dainig's to zero in on the body-shaped quilt. "What do you have there?" He was plainly leery of the answer.

"I have Peter." Dainig said it slowly, one word at a time, making it defiant, definite, and above argument.

"You have *what*?"

"*Who*, not what. I have Peter! And he's heavy, so I'm going to put him down on your sofa." He shoved by the man, grabbing control of the situation before Warner recovered enough to oppose him. Emotional

people left room for manipulation. He had learned that already and intended to use it to his own advantage.

As he laid Peter down, Warner said from behind him, "I was told you'd be one to watch, but this is incongruous! Do you actually mean you've kidnapped that boy again? Stolen him?"

"If that's the way you insist on putting it, Warner. *I* say I've retrieved what is mine."

"And you expect me to—?"

"I only expect you to call Laine Todd and tell her to come over here. I have business with her." He faced the tall man, his determination plain, sure that Warner was well enough acquainted with emotions to read it.

"She won't stand for this, Dainig," Warner answered with determination of his own. "Neither will I."

"We'll see. I've already fought one physical battle tonight and I beat the man senseless. You're bigger than I am, but I can promise you some damage if you try me."

Warner shook his head, bewildered, and Dainig was half-sorry to do this to him because the man harbored the appearance of decency, sympathy, and willingness to help.

"My purpose isn't to fight you, Dainig. I volunteered to be your Contact Point because I wanted to help you. But now you break in here with... Who could have expected this? Who in his right mind could have even guessed at it?" He came forward, walking slowly and easily, his right hand extended, palm-sideways, as though ready to take Dainig's shoulder and guide him. "Let's sit down and talk this over—Rick, isn't it? You need time to get yourself in hand. Tell me about it. I'm here to listen."

"Stop right where you are," Dainig threatened. "Don't come near this child."

"I'm not even concerned with him. You're the crucial one here, Rick. Give me a chance to help you. Tell me what happened this afternoon—how you felt and what made you go after Peter. We can work it through together and understand."

"I don't need your psychology, Warner. I already know why I saved Peter. If you feel double-crossed, you have the right, and I'm sorry about it, but—just get in touch with Laine Todd. *Will* you?"

When Warner still didn't move, Dainig let go with his impatience. "Look at me, Warner. I'm not berserk. I'm not clawing at the walls in Re-Emergence panic. I know exactly what I'm doing, and I want to talk to Laine Todd. It's time you realized that your whole organization may rest on whether or not I get my chance with her."

Warner's blond eyebrows arced upward. "You're lying!"

"Test me."

Warner threw down his hands, sighing, "No, that's not my purpose, either. I'll call her, Dainig. You're going to break her heart, you know, but it's your decision."

He turned his back and went to his Communication center, reached Laine on the first try, and told her in sharp, short words, "Dainig's here with me." She said something, and he continued, "Yes, this soon, because you were entirely right and he *is* different from the rest of us. He has Peter with him, if you can believe it. And he demands to see you." Her response was again inaudible but Warner finished with, "Very well, but hurry, will you, because I don't quite trust your prize."

When he came back to Dainig, he said, "She's on her way. In the meantime, will you agree to taking some Equilibria?"

"No," Dainig was blunt.

"Will you have some plain tea or coffee, then? Anything to make this less of a confrontation."

"Again, no. I don't quite trust you, either."

Warner's jaw clenched, then strangely relaxed into a slight smile. "Is this what was described as a tiger defending its young? Where did you learn such emotions, Dainig?"

"Out of special training. I was in charge of a helpless, delightful, lonely little boy. He showed me the way."

Warner nodded in honest understanding. The man was willing, Dainig had to give him that much. "I could almost wish for the same experience, but I never would have mastered it. My Sensitivity Score isn't as low as yours," Warner said. He added, after a pause, "Well, since one of us has to behave rationally, I'll sit down over there and be quiet while we wait for Laine."

As the man lowered himself into a chair set somewhat apart, Dainig suddenly needed to ask, "Was Laine upset? Shaken?"

"Do you really care?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

With Warner removed as a danger, Dainig was left standing with no one to fight. For the moment. There were unanswered questions ready to arrive with Laine, but he didn't want to dwell on them in advance, so he eagerly grasped the chance to give Peter his full attention.

The boy was curled on the sofa, engulfed under the quilt, his face still partially hidden by its edge. Dainig lifted the material and went to one knee, examining that face in the bright light of the room. Although Peter was in worse shape than he had been the other time, he was not beyond recovery.

Dainig glanced to Warner, who sat watching him, pretending to be relaxed. "Do you have any kind of oil or protective jelly in the apartment? Skin cream, maybe?"

"For the boy?" Warner guessed right away.

"I want to soothe his lips before they crack so much they bleed. He needs attention, Warner. As a feeling man, yourself, you must see that."

"You're a complete contradiction, Dainig—threatening me one moment and asking for my help in the next breath. I don't like to say this, but from the look of him, you'll only be beautifying a corpse."

"Peter will not die! Not now. Not as long as I have him. I brought him through a spasm like this before. All it takes is care and patience and love."

"I'm not refusing to help, so calm down," Warner stood up. "I'll go and see what I can find. I remember his face, too, you know. He's given me some pleasant hours when he's been happy."

Warner left the room, and Dainig supposed he shouldn't resent that last statement. Peter had indeed offered people many hours of vicarious joy, and Warner had probably watched nothing but the Happy Viewings. He was ignorant of the Crying days. The realization drew Dainig even closer *to the* sleeping child, because the two of them were the only ones who had shared it all and still emerged loving.

"Here." Warner's voice startled him as it leapt into the silence. He was holding out a tube of lip balm. "You can use this. I've brought a soft pillow for his head, too. If you'll let me help, we can ease him onto it without disturbing his sleep."

"I can do it," Dainig said, too quickly.

Warner reacted as though he'd been slapped in the face. He straightened from where he had been leaning over and stepped back.

"I'm sorry," Dainig hurried to apologize. "I'm too protective. I didn't mean to step on your sympathy that way. To tell the truth, I forget you have it. It will take a while to get used to people like you—people who feel."

"That's a normal state of affairs. I understand it."

"If you still want to help me with him..."

"No, I'll leave him to you, Dainig. After all, he is yours."

Those last three words, coming from someone else, shot hot tears into Dainig's eyes and he bent quickly to tend to Peter's lips. But it was true. The boy *was* his.

He spread the balm on Peter's cracked lips, slipped the pillow under his head, then sat back on his heels to watch him sleep. Shifting positions had disturbed the stupor a bit, and at a slight sign of stirring, Dainig stroked the hot forehead, murmuring rhythmically, "Sleep, Peter, sleep, sleep. Danny's here with you. Sleep, Little boy."

Peter immediately grew quiet, but his face changed. His eyes were still

puffy and his cheeks gaunt, but there was no longer a clenched look, no grimace of distress. The little boy's muscles were relaxed and resting as he nestled into the security that emanated from Dainig's voice and hand.

"I know what you're feeling," Dainig whispered to him, "because you're doing the same thing for me."

This ability to give life and love was power, too, and the only kind Dainig wanted now. He stared at the sleeping face, experiencing the chapped lips as though they were hurting him, rehearsing the strangled cries which had wrung from the child as though they had come from his own heart, and all of a sudden, the strange and giant "presence" of compassion was with him again, pushing his head down to lie on Peter's fragile chest. But this time, he wasn't afraid. This time he wrapped himself in it, accepting it as part of himself: as his birthright, his future, his special talent. His, and Peter's.

"Forgive me," he cried into the blanket. "I've understood too late. We should have stayed together the first time and spared each other all—"

The door buzzer slashed his confession short and he jumped up as Warner went to answer. This would be Laine Todd, and Dainig rubbed the tears from his face, determined not to let her see anything but sense and resolution in him.

She came in noisily, her red coverall crisp and fresh, her black hair hitting against her shoulders with her angry strides. Dainig was the first target of her eyes, and she stopped dead ten feet from him, her gaze measuring, judging him even as she demanded, "What do you think you're doing? Did you plan this from the beginning?"

"I did," Dainig held his ground.

"And Peter was the reason you pleaded to be free of Bretton earlier than you should have been?"

"He was. And he's still my one and overriding reason."

"You took advantage, Dainig, but you harmed yourself immeasurably. Those extra sessions with Bretton were imperative, and even you must see the truth of that, now. I'm astounded and ashamed for you. I'm also prepared to put an end to your madness."

"Since it's not madness, there's no way for you to do that, Re-Conditioner Todd." She wasn't calling him "Rick" anymore, so he reverted to her formal name, too, glad to remind himself of what she was and how she might get the better of him. "Everything I planned to do is done. All but the final step, which involves you. You'll take it graciously, I hope."

She advanced toward the sofa, but he barred her way.

"Oh, very well, Dainig, if you insist on it, I'll hear you out," she said. "What are you plotting now?"

"I want a place in one of your Loser-villages. I'm going to set up residence there with Peter by my side."

She laughed in his face, and since the sound of it was non-drug real, it cut his confidence out from under him. "Loser is the proper word, Dainig. You're a Loser all the way around. If you really think my group will endanger any of our hard-won villages, then you were insane from the beginning and Bretton only added to it. There's no hiding place for that child. He's a retarded defective. What can he ever become but a larger version of what he is right now?"

"He's capable of being taught!" Dainig slammed back. "Maybe not to a completely self-sufficient level but he *can* learn. I've watched him do it. He simply never had an opportunity before I came into his life. His parents weren't allowed to teach him anything but language. Not even to dress himself."

"Teaching Peter to put on his own clothes is not reason enough to throw away your chance for freedom, or to ruin our long-range work. Hang onto your own chance, Dainig. Let him die."

He felt his face go white and knew his eyes were blank. She might as well have kicked him in the stomach.

She spoke more gently. "I didn't intend it to come out that way. You know me better than that. I just—" she groped for words, then gave it up, switching into a tone of voice he didn't like because it was "clinical" in its depths. "Forgive my thoughtlessness, and let's sit down and talk this through without anger." She swung to Warner. "Leave us alone, Hugo. Please."

"I'm not sure it's the safe thing to do," Warner didn't move.

"My judgment says it is, and Dainig's kind are the materials of my profession."

As Warner bobbed his head in acquiescence and left the room, Dainig pointed out her slyness. "I see. Now I have the Expert turned loose on me. Warner failed, so you're going to try. I'm not about to stand still for chanting or soothing or psychological probing, Laine. I have no time."

"I intend to talk, anyway. If you don't care to listen, then I'll simply address the walls." She brushed by him and went to loom over Peter. Dainig sensed strong rejection for the little boy welling inside her.

"Don't look at him if you can't do it with soft feelings," he stepped in beside her. "I admit, he's a pitiful sight right now and doesn't even seem worthwhile. You have to see him as he normally is to know the good of him—the free delight, the silliness, and the affection."

"I've seen him, Rick. I've always tuned in his Happy Viewings when I've had the chance."

"Even so, you don't know him. Structured glimpses, set up in advance, don't add up to a child. He's elfin and devious, giggly, and, and so very, very sensitive. I won't have hostility poured out at him, no matter what its cause. Not from your clinical eyes, or Warner's. He doesn't even need pity. Give him sympathy—if you have it in you."

"While *you* handle the compassion, I suppose," her sarcasm was strong.

"Yes," he defied it. "And the Love. Because I'm capable of them both. He taught me emotions you've never come near to learning."

"You're right," she surrendered, and went to a nearby chair to sit down. "And your tenacity where he's concerned is astonishing. That's one thing I noted every time I looked at Bretton's records. Your condition on any given day exactly coincided with your relationship to Peter. If he was well, you made progress. If he wasn't, you either fought Bretton or used him to provide the punishment you thought you deserved. I swear you would have flipped that shock-switch yourself if he hadn't obliged. You see Peter as 'belonging' to you, don't you, Rick? You consider him your *son*."

"I never said that," Dainig flushed red as she made the possibility sound foolish. He lowered his head, then raised *it* and stared straight into her eyes, calm with his admission. "Perhaps I do. Yes, I most definitely do! He's the only chance I'll ever have at one."

"That's not true. Your time will come to marry and create your own blood-child."

"Not one like Peter. Not a real, human being. Any blood-child of mine will be taken for AEC and never be quite human again. Peter has always been free to feel without hiding it. *He's* what I want in my child." He sat down, too, the confession heavy in his already exhausted legs.

"I'm glad you've faced it, Rick. It's easier to work with the truth than with rationalizations."

"And you have me sitting down, talking, just the way you wanted me," Dainig rose again. "You're skillful, Re-Conditioner Todd, but you're aiming at the wrong man. I'm not in need of that kind of help."

"You're tired out and frightened."

"Maybe so, but my brain is clear and resolved to have my way. Why don't you quit manipulating and try a little truth, yourself?"

"All right." Laine's expression said she knew they were back on an adversary basis. It also said she was ready to fight. "You won't like it, Dainig, but here it is. I called the Center before I left home, and this is how the situation stands. They know Peter is missing. The cleaning people found him gone and his Companion unconscious on the playroom floor. Covered with blood and bruises. What did you do to that man?"

"What I had to do. Don't worry about him. He doesn't even have it in him to feel sorry for *himself*."

She cocked her head, weighing his answer, then continued as though he hadn't spoken. "My impression is that the entire business will be officially ignored. Cooper and Mattison had decided to let Peter die, anyway, so they'll just close the Complex and pretend that he did. Publicly. Privately, they're going to push hard to find out what happened to him. Bretton is already—"

"Bretton!" Dainig jerked back a step.

"Yes, Dainig, Bretton is bound to put it all together sooner or later, and this time he'll be out for your *blood*. I promise. I know that man inside-out. He won't let you get away from him."

"But where will that leave Peter? If I'm taken again, who will be here to lead Peter through this crisis?"

Laine shook her head, astounded. "I hand you a threat like Bretton and your first concern is for the boy?" She sagged into her chair. "All right, Dainig, I'm sorry. I misjudged. You're not running with emotion this time. You're sincere."

"All the way to my soul—which is another thing **I've** gotten acquainted with during these past eight weeks."

"It's a remarkable experience to find it, isn't it," she understood and agreed. "And you're more in touch with yours than I've learned how to be with mine yet."

Her inconsistencies of emotional direction disturbed him. They were even capable of confusing him, and he must not let that happen, so he cut the soft moment off at its base.

"Don't waste time with that line of attack, either, Laine. I haven't told you my theories on how events will go, and since I think mine are better than yours, you should be interested."

It had the desired effect. "Most definitely, Mr. Dainig. And just exactly what are your so-called theories?"

"In my opinion, Bretton won't cause any commotion at all. Even if he realizes he was duped, he won't admit it to the authorities. That would be owning up to failure to Re-Condition me, and he values his reputation too highly ever to confess. If I'm never found and the authorities still name me as the kidnapper, he'll have a safe way out. He can put my behavior down to a traumatic second Re-Emergence—one that occurred ridiculously early—and get away with it because I was a ridiculous *subject*. His records prove it. If I'm not captured, no one can say he's wrong. I have no reason to be afraid of him as long as I'm outside the Lab's walls. Your people can't move against me, either. You're safe only as long as I am."

"How do you figure that?" she was listening now.

"*It isn't difficult. If you send me back—if I return with the truth on my tongue—*"

"Bretton will kill you to protect himself, and remove you as our problem," she showed him the weakness in his theory.

"Probably. But first, Bretton will exact some revenge." Dainig was exhilarated as he knocked her logic down. "He'll do it secretly if he has to, but he'll do it. And that revenge will jar loose some of my story, which he'll add to the suspicions he'll have already, and then he'll be hunting for *you!* Given the two options—one of shielding himself, and the other of uncovering a plot against the whole concept of AEC—which will he choose, Laine? With a laurel like that one in his pocket, he could be promoted to the Directorship of the Center, and you know it. He'll know it, too."

He sat down now, confidently proud of himself. He added the final argument. "In order to protect your organization, you have to protect me. Bretton must never get his hands on me again."

"Or you'll *expose* us?" There was shock in every line of her body. "You wouldn't—you *couldn't* do such a monstrous thing, Dainig. You can't trade the saving of one child for the saving of humanity, itself!"

"I can, when it's all I have for a weapon."

"You've put yourself squarely down as *our* danger, then. No more responsibility for you to shoulder except as a bomb planted among us." Her eyes left his face and travelled to Peter's quiet form. "And the trouble is, you mean it, and you're probably right in everything you've said." She was defeated. But before Dainig drew a half-breath of relief, it all changed. She riveted him to his chair with a dark stare, and her words were uttered with a sharp menace that betrayed deep, icy fury. "No! You're the one who made the mistake, Frederic Dainig. You didn't consider us carefully enough."

It was all he could do to answer her. "There's not a flaw in any of my statements. Not one."

"Oh, yes, there is. And it's based on your habit of self-glorification. I warned you not to forget that we feel, too."

That we care, too. Enough to keep Bretton from having you, and also enough to dispose of you ourselves."

"Dispose of me! You're talking about—murder?"

"I'm not, but you are when you threaten to expose our organization. Mass murder, which turns your own death into assassination—the removal of a destroyer. Since you've closed every avenue to us except disposing of you with our own hands, we'll just have to take that avenue. You will simply disappear. Bretton will be bewildered but safe, and so will we."

It was Dainig's turn to reel. He hadn't considered this. Murder didn't fit with her saving crusade. "How? You don't know how to kill a man without using your foul table!"

"There are many ways. Do you want to hear some of them? Injections would serve, for instance. If it proved too dangerous to procure the drugs, there is always barbarism—the old methods of strangulation, drowning, skull-splitting, beheading." As he cringed away, she assumed the triumph he had relinquished. "Yes, Dainig, you're right to be afraid. Studying old case histories informed me of violent crimes you've never encountered even in your nightmares."

He saw the shudder coming, tried to suppress it, and failed. He had the terrible sensation of feeling all the things she described actually happening to him as she glared with pure malevolence. He dredged up one more protest, as frail as the child who spawned it. "Peter would die, too—his free emotion with him—and you'd never have it back again. You'd be killing two of us. One an innocent. He can't survive without me, Laine. He won't be able to forget or to recover."

"Neither will our executioner. But one person's peace is a tiny price to pay for the whole of humanity."

Dainig looked at her without seeing. "I never dreamed you could turn so vicious. I thought I touched gentleness in you."

"Leave it alone, Dainig. My mind won't be changed by appeals to my emotions. I have a purpose in life, too. *One!*

To give the future back to Humanity. And I can kill for mine just as

readily as you can kill for yours. Don't say you'll back down now because you were only bluffing me, because I'm *not* bluffing. The only decision left to you is whether or not you're going to overpower me—and Warner—and run into the street to be hunted down and returned to Bretton, or if you're willing to let *us* have your life."

He whirled away, unable to bear the sight of her. How had he come to this? Why did she stand strong while he was defeated and weak? And so very, very tired. But he knew that answer. It lay before his eyes, asleep on the sofa in a peaceful oblivion that would soon burst apart again. Peter, and his burned-out hopes for the little boy. Neither of them were to possess their dream now, and Dainig hadn't learned how to weather such an absolute despair. He suddenly didn't care about his own death. Laine was promising him a swift end to life, but Peter's was bound to be more terrible in both duration and anguish. The little boy still had to linger. Alone.

Tears streamed down his cheeks, hidden from her sight, and they came without sobs. She couldn't guess at their existence since his shoulders didn't shake, so she hammered on, "The door is locked, Dainig, but I'll open it for you if you elect to go that way."

He was trapped in defeat he had caused for himself. And that defeat was total. "I'm not going anywhere." He faced around, unashamed of his flooding eyes. "I'd rather suffer your death than Bretton's, whatever way you decide. I've lost. Everything. And, so has Peter." Saying it, and realizing what must come next, exploded something inside him and sent him staggering until he slammed into a chair. He clutched it, bending over for support, his face livid.

Laine tensed. "Get control of yourself before you go into a seizure. Control, Dainig! Control!"

"I'm all right!" he yelled over his thick tongue. "Don't be afraid of me. If there's one thing I've learned from all of this, it's to know when I'm helpless. I won't fight you. Whatever you decide to do with me—I won't fight you. Just... just..." He raised himself to stand erect on shivering legs, letting the tears race unheeded. "There's one action you must allow me to take. One thing you *can't* refuse, because I have to do it. Let me see to Peter."

"That's already settled."

"No! *Listen* to me! He can't wake up and find me gone, or have me taken from him later on. There's no way he can survive without me, and if I'm not here, he'll *suffer* before he dies. Long days of confusion and starvation and of feeling abandoned. You have to let me see to him!"

As she started to speak, he thrust up one hand, calling her to a halt. He gulped in air and struggled to still his trembling so he wouldn't appear to be raving with what he had to say next. Lowering his hand to touch his pocket, he explained, "When I carried Peter from the Complex, I brought something else, too. A vial of sedative. I'm asking you for the right to—to—" The words clutched to silence in his throat.

"Dear God!" Laine's voice was husky-low, nearly in awe. "You want to kill him."

"While he's sleeping. Yes. There's enough in the bottle. They do it for animals, Laine, and he has the right to as much peace as they're given. I'm asking to have it done this way for him, but mostly I'm *begging* you to let *me* do it." He edged his hand into his pocket and dragged out the vial. It was cold and nasty to his palm.

Laine's hands covered her own cheeks, wet like his with sudden tears. "You're an emotional monster! You're eating me alive!" She turned back and forth, to him, to Peter, to the apartment door, wavering from the need to escape, back to the need to face the moment through.

Abruptly, her hands fell away from her face and one of them shot out to point at the vial. "Put that thing down! You've *won*, Frederic Dainig! I can't fight against that kind of love, and I'm certainly not going to destroy it by destroying *you*. You can have your child, and your place in a village. I'll even give you Torpela—our safest and greatest hope. But, please drop that vial and stop crying so I can *breathe* again!"

It took Dainig long seconds to understand what he was hearing, but when he did, he threw the vial across the room where it hit against the draperies and thumped to the carpet. He leaped to the sofa with an unsummoned shout of joy and relief and thrust his arms under Peter to hug him hard against his chest. Tears ran salty into his mouth as he bent his head to absorb fully the sight of the child-face that now truly belonged to him.

"We're going to Torpela, Peter. Wherever it is, it will be heaven."

"Sit down with him, sit down," Laine nudged him back to sense. "I'll tell you about Torpela, and even try to make my decision look sensible to myself."

When Dainig was secure on the sofa, Peter still tight in his arms, she explained quickly. "Torpela is a small village given over to shepherds. It's extremely isolated, so the natives live free of stress and don't worry very much about Re-Emergence or its symptoms. That makes it the ideal place for our toughest Loser category, and it's come to be doubly special because our own people are becoming the majority of the population there."

"So they'll understand about Peter, and let him behave as he wants to behave?"

"Yes, exactly. They'll even help you shield him from the others if it's ever necessary, which I doubt. You'll be given a flock of sheep, books and lessons on how to care for them, and you can take Peter into the hillsides with you and spend whole weeks free of everyone else. But, if you need support—Contact Point support—you'll have it ready and waiting in the village."

Dainig leaned down and placed a soft kiss on Peter's forehead. "Do you hear that, little boy? You're going to have a lamb to play with." He looked back to Laine. "He'll make a good shepherd, you know. He's gentle. And, I know he'll never have to manage without me. You see, I'm not lying to myself about his life-span. He won't outlive me, so we'll be self-supporting all the time we need to be." He came out of his good dreams. "But now, Laine Todd, what about your rationalizations? What made you decide to help me?"

"It's not a rationalization, now that I think about it. It would have been hard to find excuses *for* killing you. Your love for that boy turned me around, but I suppose I knew all along that you had me defeated before I began. You're important to us, Rick. As you pointed out, yourself, Peter's natural emotions must be saved simply because they *are* natural, and can serve us as a pattern. And you—! I've never seen a human being who actually loved a child, and in that moment when you begged to kill... The point is, no one else has seen such a thing, either. No one alive today, at least. It's beautiful to witness."

"And to feel."

"I'm not through explaining, Re-Emerger, so just keep quiet," she laughed gently. "What happened was quite simple, really. Once you reached me—once your emotion actually touched me and I saw that Love—I jumped forward in time and imagined a world where *everyone* loves children that way. And the imagining outran my grandest hopes, so how could I possibly harm you and Peter? What you two already *are* is what we're hoping to *become*. Don't you see? You're the Keeper of our future. You have to be kept alive and in front of our eyes to serve as models of our ideal. Suddenly you became a goal and not just a man. I had to follow my heart for a change and let you win."

He smiled at her for what seemed a very long time, then freed one hand to reach out and touch her arm. "Whatever your reason, I'm thankful. You've done nothing but help me from the beginning."

"That's enough of that," she pulled free and got to her feet. "Hugo!" she called. "You can come back now. We're through in here."

Warner's head immediately appeared around the bedroom door. He hadn't been far away.

"I've made the decision," Laine told him. "We'll go along with Rick. I've chosen Torpela for his village and we'll send him there immediately."

"To jeopardize the entire colony?" Warner's eyebrows shot up.

"I don't think he'll cause any problems. Naturally, I need your agreement, but this is what I want to do."

"*His* agreement?" Dainig asked. "You mean Warner's big in the organization?"

Warner smiled wryly. "I'm one of its leaders. I don't usually undertake Contact Point work at all. I volunteered to help you because we considered you so special. I wasn't successful at it, was I?"

Now, Dainig was embarrassed. "I didn't give you a chance. And I'm starting to look like a fool all around—threatening a man of your stature with a fistfight, refusing your expert help before you could even offer it! A total idiot."

"Hardly that, Frederic Dainig. You won! No fool could have carried it

off."

"No," Dainig corrected, "*Peter* won. It was always his fight, anyway. But he doesn't even know it, yet."

Laine moved close to peer down at the little boy in Dainig's arms. "He's very beautiful, Rick."

"Now? With his face swollen double its size?"

"That will pass, and it doesn't matter anyway. His spirit's all that counts."

Dainig looked at her in happy amazement. "You've just taken another big step in soul-finding. Get ready for a second one. Have you ever kissed a child, Laine?"

"Why no, of course not," she was wary.

"Then bend down and touch your lips to Peter's skin. I guarantee you'll stand back up with love."

She was hesitant, but did it anyway, and when she straightened, her eyes were glowing with a curiosity and softness they had never shown before.

"Was I right?" Dainig asked quietly.

She only smiled for an answer.

"Then, you should keep practising, you know—as Peter says. Maybe when you get another vacation, you can come to Torpela and visit Peter and his sheep." He was compelled to add more because there was nothing of the Re-Conditioner in her now—nothing repellent—but there was something powerful in him. "You might even manage to say hello to me. After Peter gives you *his* lessons, I—"

"I'll put it on my calendar tomorrow Rick." She actually blushed.

Dainig had never seen a blush, but recognized it instantly. "Be sure to come," he told her. "The rest will take care of itself, as long as Peter is there to show us the way."